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STRUCTURE AND THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT IN *BEOWULF*

by

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In this monograph, an attempt is made to reassess the design of *Beowulf*. Though much has been done in the past thirty years to elucidate the themes and motifs which dominate the poem, the principle by which these motifs are developed has not been satisfactorily elucidated. J. R. R. Tolkien saw the poem as an 'heroic elegy' organised as a balance and opposition of end and beginning, youth and age, and informed by the central elegiac idea that *lif is læne*.[1] His was essentially an intuitive study of the poem's 'mythical mode of imagination', but those scholars who have since agreed with Tolkien's general hypothesis have as a rule not questioned his formulation of the poem's 'strategy', being content to show how his approach can be used to illuminate individual passages of the poem.[2] Some writers have, however, been radically dissatisfied with Tolkien's theory, and have continued to question the unity of the poem.[3] After their objections, it is clear that an acceptable argument for the unity of *Beowulf* must avoid the generalities of his position, and show how the 'strategy'

1. 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', *Proceedings of the British Academy* XXII (1936); reprinted in L. E. Nicholson, *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, Notre Dame, 1963, pp. 51–103. Reference will be made to this, the latest edition.
2. Cf. A Bonjour, *The Digressions in Beowulf*, Oxford, 1950, p. 70; *Twelve Beowulf Papers*, Neuchatel, 1962, passim; A. G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf*, California, 1959, p. 71; and C. L. Wrenn (ed.), *Beowulf*, revised ed., London 1958, p. 43. All quotations from *Beowulf* in this study are from Wrenn's edition.
3. Notably T. M. Gang, 'Approaches to Beowulf', *RES*, ns. III, 1952, 1–12; H. L. Rogers, 'Beowulf's Three Great Fights', *RES*, ns. VI, 1955, 339–55, reprinted by L. E. Nicholson, *op. cit.*, 1963, 233–56 (to which reference will be made); Kenneth Sisam, 'Beowulf's fight with the Dragon', *RES*, ns. IX, 1958, 129–140; idem, *The Structure of Beowulf*, Oxford, 1965, esp. pp. 17–28.

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of the poem, if coherent, is realised in each phase of the poem's structure. The central objection to Tolkien's 'balance and opposition' theory was stated by T. M. Gang over fifteen years ago: the symbolic role of the dragon, as a personification of the fate Beowulf must face, cannot be justified in a close analysis of the text.[4] Bonjour's reply to this article[5] makes its case only by ignoring Gang's important point, that Beowulf and the dragon are finally seen in the poem as alike the victims of the curse on the treasure.[6] Gang clearly shows that the personal opposition, in the Danish part of the poem, between Beowulf and God's enemies, gives way in the Dragon fight to an impersonal vision in which neither adversary is given a divinely appointed status, so that the Dragon fight cannot be said to form either a balance or an opposition to the themes of the Grendel fight.

Are the essentially different themes of the Danish part and the Dragon fight linked then by no more than 'the person of the hero?'[7] O'Loughlin and Brodeur have shown that the two parts of the poem are unified to some degree by the poet's concern with feuding.[8] This motif, important in the 'digressions' in the Danish part of the poem, gradually comes to dominate the central action. O'Loughlin, however, fails to make clear how the theme of feuding itself changes and develops from one episode to another, and how this development is related, by the strategic interweaving of the various episodes, to the other concerns of the poem. Brodeur ties the theme of feuding somewhat too closely to the relationship between Hygelac and his sister's son, Beowulf, and sees this relationship as the key to the poem's unity.[9] He points out that Hygelac's death while feuding must have been damaging to the *entente cordiale* between Danes and Geats which had been built up through Beowulf's first two fights. Thus, he sees Hygelac's last feud as the indirect cause of both the destruction of the Danish house (by Hroþulf and the Heaþobards) and of the Geatish nation (by the Merovingians and Swedes). But the very ingenuity of Professor Brodeur's argument suggests its weakness. He has had to reconstruct an historical pattern which is only very disjointedly described in the poem itself; and it would still seem a major fault in the poet's art if so much scattered material depends for its relevance on the fact that Beowulf is related to Hygelac, who after all enters the poem in person for only one brief scene.

In fact, it is dangerous to propose any single 'theme' as the controlling principle of the poem. H. L. Rogers shows how the central theme of the Grendel

4. *Op. cit.*, pp. 6–9.
5. 'Monsters Crouching and Critics Rampant: or the *Beowulf* dragon debated' *PMLA*, LXVIII, 1953, 304–12; repr. in *Twelve Beowulf Papers*, 1962, pp. 97–106, to which future reference will be made.
6. Gang, *op. cit.*, p. 7: 'an ancient curse of which the dragon is as much the victim as is the hero . . . there is no suggestion that the dragon is anything more than a mere participant in a tragedy that started many ages before—before even the gold was buried'.
7. Cf. Klaeber: 'The poem of *Beowulf* consists of two distinct parts joined in a very loose manner and held together only by the person of the hero'. *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, Boston, 3rd ed., 1950, p. li.
8. J. L. N. O'Loughlin, 'Beowulf—its Unity and Purpose' *Medium Aevum* XXI, 1952 1–13; Brodeur, *op. cit.*, pp. 71–78.
9. *Op. cit.*, pp. 75, 77.

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episode, Beowulf's unique might, is no longer central in the Grendel's Mother fight, and is practically abandoned thereafter. He concludes:

> . . . I do not believe that *Beowulf* can be regarded as an artistic unity in the modern sense, or that the poem has a higher theme than the life and death of its hero. Indeed, it may be doubted whether modern conceptions about artistic unity are relevant to a long Old English poem like *Beowulf*.[10]

I agree with Rogers that no 'higher theme' which can be abstracted from the poem can be said to be the organising principle of the diverse materials *Beowulf* contains. On the other hand, individual sections of the poem can be clearly seen to be concerned with 'themes' or ideas rather than with narrative interest, or even with narrative consistency. It is almost true to say that the poet had no choice in this matter: the very style of Old English poetry, highly idealised and dominated by words which express the essential qualities rather than the particular accidents of the things described[11] reveals the continual concern of the poetic tradition with the ideals of the heroic life and with the necessity for right action in the face of the central situations of a warrior's life.

Since the poet's motifs were, like his language, largely traditional, his attitudes to them are likely to have been largely 'natural' and subconscious. His conscious concern would most probably be with 'style'— and the *Beowulf* poet's sensitiveness to the word-patterning of his tradition, in his use of kennings and of variation, has been universally praised.[12] But the paradox posed by J. R. R. Tolkien remains:

> The high tone, the sense of dignity, alone is evidence in *Beowulf* of the presence of a mind lofty and thoughtful. It is, one would have said, improbable that such a man could write more than three thousand lines (wrought to a high finish) on matter that is really not worth serious attention; that remains thin and cheap when he has finished with it . . . Any theory that will at least allow us to believe that what he did was of design, and that for that design there is a defence that may still have force, would seem more probable.[13]

The procedure in this attempt to resolve Tolkien's paradox is unavoidably lengthy: the sections of the poem which seem to form clear rhetorical units are examined one by one, and the relations between these units allowed gradually to emerge. An attempt is made to isolate the ruling motifs, themes or ideas in each unit, and to see how they are changed or developed within it. I shall try to demonstrate that the poem's thematic structure, while being far more complex than Tolkien's theory suggests, is unified and well realised; and that the poet reconciled through his spacious and intricate design the various conflicting attitudes suggested by his widely-spread action and materials.

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10. Rogers, *op. cit.*, 1955; reprint *cit.*, (1963) 236.
11. Cf. A. G. Brodeur, *op. cit.*, (1959) 19–20.
12. Cf. for example, Brodeur *op. cit.*, Chapters I and II.
13. *Op. cit.*, (1936), reprint *cit.*, p. 61.

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While some illuminating studies of the relation between style, rhetorical patterning and theme in certain passages of *Beowulf* have already appeared,[14] no comprehensive study has to my knowledge been attempted. One reason for this is, no doubt, the absence of any general agreement among scholars as to where the various sections of the poem begin and end. In this study the stages of the rhetorical development of the poem are described as 'groups' of *fitts*. This is not the place to discuss the status of the sectional divisions which are a prominent feature of the four major codices of Old English poetry.[15] Klaeber [16] and Dobbie[17] have both realized that the divisions in *Beowulf* are not arbitrary, and it will emerge in this study that they are related closely to the rhetorical effects achieved by the poet. Nevertheless the main argument of this monograph does not depend on whether the *fitts* are decided by the reader to be of major significance: they are used here to relate the motifs of the poem very closely to their context, to show the unity of content and form in *Beowulf*. It is hoped to examine the larger question of the status of the sectional divisions in Old English poems in a later study. (Cf. fig. 3, fold-out).

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Group (*a*)

Lines 1–188, Prelude—*Fitt* II.

Exordium to the poem

The opening lines of the poem state the heroic qualities which are to become one of its dominant themes: *þrym* (power, glory) and *ellen* (valour). Scyld Scefing is immediately introduced as an example of the might of the Danes:

14. For example, A. C. Bartlett, *The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, New York, 1935; Brodeur, *op. cit.*, Chapters IV, V.
15. Cf. H. Bradley, 'The Numbered Sections in Old English Poetical Manuscripts' *Proceedings of the British Academy* VII, 1905, 165–87, B. J. Timmer 'Sectional Divisions of Poems in the Old English Manuscripts' *MLR* XLVII, 1952, 319–322, for denials of any real significance to the *fitts*. Cf. next notes. E. Carrigan 'The Sectional Divisions and the Structure of *Beowulf*' unpublished M.A. thesis, University College, Dublin, 1965, contains a *fitt*-by-*fitt* analysis of the rhetorical characteristics of the poem, and as an appendix a statistical analysis of the lengths of the divisions by A. J. Bliss.
16. *Op. cit.*, pp. c-ci.
17. *Beowulf and Judith*, ed. E. V. K. Dobbie, New York, 1953, pp. xxiv–xxvi.

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his campaigns are not told in a connected manner, but praised as completely reversing the previous misery of Scyld himself (lines 6b–7a) and of his people (14b–16a). The birth of his son is made to form a climax to the celebration of Scyld's prosperity—and having praised the young warrior's success in continuing Scyld's achievements the poet celebrates the complementary heroic virtue of generosity or magnificence. Lines 20–25 show the intimate connection between the virtues of peace and war, how the prosperity of a warrior depends on both kinds of *lof-dædum* (24). The fact that we have already been told that his virtues will live on in his son increases the 'impression of brilliancy and splendour'[18] given by the description of Scyld's funeral. Scyld's death is the finest instance of the glory that has been his since he rules the Danes, and a final reminder of how things have changed since he was sent

ænne ofer yðe umbor-wesende 46

serves to introduce the symbol of his royalty (*segen gyldenne,* 47),[19] and the warriors mourning their loss.

The short moment of melancholy and mystery which closes the celebration of Scyld's glory abruptly vanishes in the new *fitt* (53 ff.), when the theme of Beowulf's glory is restated. The ideas of the Prelude are still dominant here, and the importance of these themes as the guiding principle of the verse is evident even in the 'Danish Pedigree' passage which concisely brings us from the reign of Scyld to the period in which the main action of the poem takes place. An impression of objective chronicling is given by the style of the passage, for example by the ancient idiom of adding an epithet to the three co-ordinate proper names, *Heorogar ond Hroþgar ond Halga til*,[20] then our interest is distracted from the three brothers by the mention of their sister's marital happiness (62–3), and so the poet can immediately take up the theme of Hroþgar's bravery, and entirely omit to mention the reign of his elder brother Heorogar. The poet is as little interested in the details of Hroþgar's wars as he has been in Scyld's campaigns: they are relevant only in that they inspire Hroþgar like his ancestors, to match his glory in war with his generosity, and build Heorot, the greatest of mead-halls, in which to dispense the treasures he has won. The triumphant completion of the building is the signal for a sudden switch to thoughts of destruction and violent death (82b–85). Unlike the asides in the Prelude, this passage refers to a fate which lies in the future, and it is immediately followed by the first mention of the monster whose anger is aroused by the joy within the hall (86–89a). The joyful beginning of the hall calls forth thoughts of its fatal end, and these are 'answered' by the more immediate disaster to befall the hall. The poem progresses by such thematic contrasts and 'answers': until the end of the *fitt* we are concerned with realising the qualities of the inhabitants of Heorot and of its enemy, as defined by their widely different genealogies.

18. Bonjour, *op. cit.*, (1950), p. 9.
19. Cf. Klaeber, *ed. cit.*, p. 127, note to line 47.
20. Cf. Klaeber, p. 128.

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In his linking of the 'Creation Song', which gives the origins of what is beautiful on earth, to the passage describing Grendel's ancestry, the poet's method of construction is clearly to be seen. He moves to the contrasting theme smoothly, emphasising the antithesis (*oððæt,* 100):

> Swa ða driht-guman dreamum lifdon,
> eadiglice, oððæt an ongan
> fyrene fremman feond on helle. 99–101

The new theme is sounded in sudden contrast to the previous one; but as the glory of Heorot was balanced with its fate, so the origins of the Grendel tribe bring a prophecy of their end:

> he him ðæs lean forgeald 114b.

In *fitt* II, the verse continues to swing between Grendel and the inhabitants of the hall (115 ff.); but now it changes from genealogy and description to violent action: humans and monster are not merely contrasted, but clash. Now it is the humans who are dismayed, and Grendel exults in his prey (124). The themes of *fitt* I are reversed: Grendel, used to the fen and moor (103 ff.) becomes, ironically, the 'hall-thane' (142); and the humans, who have been rejoicing in their creation under the protection of the Almighty, (90b–98), are now driven to give homage to idols and to beg the slayer of souls for protection against Grendel's murders (177). As he had begun the poem by linking the Danes' power in war with their generosity in peace, now the poet links their temporal disaster with spiritual shortcomings[21] and loses no opportunity to drive home the complete hopelessness of their situation. Lines 178 ff. have been seen as interpolations:[22] they are however completely justified as the climax of *fitt* II and of the exordium to the poem, a passage on which the poet lavishes his skill in rhetorical heightening:

> Metod hie ne cuþon
> dæda Demend, ne wiston hie Drihten God
> ne hie huru heofena Helm herian ne cuþon
> wuldres Waldend. 180b–183a.

We move from *Metod* and *dæda Demend* to *heofena Helm* and *wuldres Waldend,* i.e., from the terrible to the loving aspects of *Drihten God,* the central appellation —a movement paralleled by the two members of the antithesis which ends the *fitt.* In this piece of virtuosity (183b–188) 'every half-line in one member [of the antithesis corresponds] to a half-line in the other (except that 186a has no half-line)'.[23] In fact the transitional half-line, 186a, both expresses the plight of the Danes and hints at the central structural principle of the poem's exordium: reversal (*wihte gewendan*).

21. The link between temporal and spiritual shortcomings is made so often in Anglo-Saxon writings as to become almost a convention: cf. Klaeber, *ed. cit.,* notes to ll. 175–188, for further references.
22. Tolkien (1936), reprint *cit.,* 101–103.
23. Bartlett, *op. cit.,* p. 44.

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GROUP (*b*)

Lines 189–498, *Fitts* III–VII.

'Danes and Geats'

In these five *fitts* the significance of Beowulf's expedition to Denmark is gradually realised both by the Danes and by the audience. At line 189, the poet returns from his general reflections on the dismay of the Danes, to the figure of Hroþgar completely overcome by Grendel's attacks and unable to find a remedy (189–193); the contrast is then all the greater when we switch immediately to Beowulf in Geatland:

> se wæs mon-cynnes mægenes strengest
> on þæm dæge þysses lifes,
> æþele ond eacen.[24] 196–98a.

Beowulf's orders are quickly given and executed (199b–200); he acts with the approval of the elders, and favourable omens (202–4)—a striking contrast to the fruitless counsels of the Danes (171 ff.). As the mention of omens indicates, this is not a specifically Christian world, but Beowulf's warriors thank God for their successful voyage (227b–28), the coast-guard commends them to the care of the Lord in their adventures (316–18a), and to Hroþgar they seem sent by God (381b–84a). The alienation and hopelessness of *fitt* II have disappeared.

The themes of the group—Beowulf's power and nobility, and the bonds between Danes and Geats—are worked out cumulatively. The tone of the group is set by the coast-guard's challenge: we have a series of *meþel-worda* (236b), formal and ceremonious. The progression is hierarchial: the significance of Beowulf's arrival becomes clearer as the people he meets become more important. The coast-guard is concerned with determining that Beowulf's intentions are friendly: he inquires in general terms whence, and from what race, the warriors have come (237, 252, 257). He is impressed by the external appearance of the Geats (247f.). Beowulf answers also in general terms: Ecgþeow is mentioned for the first time, but only generally, as *folcum gecyþed* (262b):

> hine gearwe geman
> witena wel-hwylc wide geond eorþan 265b–66.

Beowulf is almost silent about his intention: he says he comes to give 'advice' to Hroþgar:

> ræd gelæran
> hu he frod ond god feond oferswyðeþ. 278b–79.

24. Rogers, *op. cit.*, 239f., points out the supernatural overtones of *mægen* (which parallels Lat. *virtus*) in the poem, though he oversimplifies the poet's contrast between *mægen* and weapons, so misinterpreting the poem from the end of the Grendel fight onwards,

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The Coast-guard's reference to the distinction between word and deed for a *scearp scild-wiga* has been variously interpreted.[25] It is surely best understood in relation to this declaration by Beowulf: the coast-guard courteously points out that Hroþgar will need not merely advice but action.

The central *fitt* of the group (V, 320–70) is taken up with the encounter between Beowulf and Wulfgar, and several significant shifts of emphasis should be noticed. Wulfgar, a senior official (336a), is described as famous for his heroic virtues:

> þæt wæs Wendla leod,
> wæs his mod-sefa manegum gecyðed
> wig ond wisdom 348b–50a.

He enquires after the *æþelum* (332b)[26] of the Geats, and in his first speech he specifically attributes this nobility to them. Like himself, they have left their lands, not as fugitives, but to prove their heroism (338–39): Wulfgar tells Hroþgar specifically that the Geats and especially Beowulf are worthy of the esteem of their peers (368–70). Beowulf now tells his name for the first time (343).

The last two *fitts* of the group (VI, VII; 371–498) show the impression the Geats make on Hroþgar. He does not merely have the Coast-guard's vision of them as mighty warriors, and Wulfgar's intuition of their nobility: he knows Beowulf personally (372), and sees a supernatural significance in his power:

> þæt he þritiges
> manna mægen-cræft on his mund-gripe,
> heaþo-rof, hæbbe. Hine halig God
> for ar-stafum us onsende. . . 379b–82.

To Hroþgar Beowulf discloses the full extent of his intention, in a speech where the art of the *meþel-word* is most plainly to be seen. Once more, as with Wulfgar, he establishes his credentials (407f.): his youthful exploits have been a good training for the present trial—he has already prosecuted his own people's feud with the sea-monsters (423). But Beowulf is careful to preserve the ceremonious courtesy of this series of exchanges: he has come on the advice of the Geatish elders (415) and he solemnly asks as a great favour (*anre bene* 428) to be allowed to cleanse Heorot. As a final proof of his fitness, he launches into a *beot* which shows his own daring, and his willingness to face death. This is the speech of a true retainer: since he had begun by defining himself as Hygelac's thane (407), the climax reaffirms his loyalty as well as his courage. If he must face death, Hygelac must receive his heriot (452–5).

Hroþgar now shows the full significance of Beowulf's action: it is a requital of Hroþgar's own generosity when Beowulf's father was exiled from his own country because of his feud with the Wilfings (459–72). Wulfgar's phrase, *nalles for wræc-siðum* (338) gains in meaning by this reference to Ecgþeow's actual *wræc-sið* (463). If Beowulf saw his success as in the hands of fate (455),

25. Cf. E. V. K. Dobbie, *op. cit.*, notes to lines 287–289.
26. Accepting Grein's emendation of Ms *hæleþum*.

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Hroþgar now for the second time sees Beowulf's coming as God's way of vanquishing Grendel and controlling fate:

hie wyrd forsweop
on Grendles gryre. God eaþe mæg
þone dol-sceaðan dæda getwæfan. 477b–79.

Hroþgar's vision of friendship between Danes and Geats culminates in the descriptive inset which acts as climax to the *fitt* and the group:

þær wæs hæleða dream,
duguð unlytel Dena ond Wedera 497b–98.

GROUP (*c*)

Lines 499–836, *Fitts* VIII–XII.

'Beowulf's Personal Valour'

The introduction of Unferð abruptly interrupts the celebration of Beowulf's coming to Heorot, and marks the opening of a new stage in the poem's rhetorical development. In this group of five *fitts*, Beowulf first triumphs over Unferð in speech, then over Grendel in action. The symmetry of the group is immediately noticeable. The central *fitt* X, marks the transition between speech and action, and it is flanked by two pairs of *fitts*: each pair balances the other, and there is a fairly close parallel in rhetorical structure between each *fitt* and its companion within the pairs.

In the figure of Unferð the poet seems to have used the heroic motif of a flyting to drive home Beowulf's two-fold excellence, in verbal as well as physical battle.[27] Unlike the courteous Wulfgar, Unferð is dominated by jealousy (503–5) and his whole speech is characterised as a *beadu-rune* (501), with its connotations of strife and battle. True to this description, he presents Beowulf's sea-exploit as a contest (*wunne* 506b, *flite* 507b, *oferflat* 517b) undertaken not merely *for wlence* 508a (a phrase which is not itself pejorative) but *for dol-gilpe* 509a, and opposed by all advisors (510b–12). Sarcastically the toilings of the swimmers are described in a long variation (513–17a): then comes the flat insult:

he þe æt sunde oferflat,
hæfde mare mægen. 517b–18a.

Then Unferð omits to tell anything about Beowulf's trials when swimming alone, but goes on (518b–23a) carefully to dissociate Breca from the unfavourable impression given in the opening lines of his speech. The contrast with Beowulf

27. This is surely the reason for the poet's ambivalent attitude to Unferð in the poem: one of his roles is to parallel Grendel and to be overcome by Beowulf; at the same time he is one of Hroþgar's followers and as such not to be condemned out of hand; he later shows the generosity for which the Danes are distinguished.

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is pointed: Breca is all-successful, Beowulf is defeated (523b–24). After this venomous speech comes the more ceremonious statement of the þyle's doubt, tempered by the acknowledgement that

> þu heaðo-ræsa gehwær dohte,
> grimre guðe . . . . 526–27a.

Beowulf's reply reverses Unferð's challenge step by step. Words describing co-operation between the youths dominate the passage (*gecwædon* 535, *gebeotedon* 536, *geæfndon* 538). This was no race: Beowulf declares

> no ic fram him wolde 543b.

The real enemies were external: the weather and the monsters. The heightening with which Unferð treated the toiling of the swimmers (513–17a) is answered by the parallel inset about the weather which drove them apart (545b–48). Then Beowulf tells of his solitary fight with the monsters (549 ff.): an episode which is presented first as a narrow escape, but in the new *fitt* (559 ff.) as a victory over the monsters, which gave safety and peace to all who journey over the sea:

> ymb brontne ford brim-liðende
> lade ne letton. 568–9.

Beowulf now turns the tables neatly on his adversary. It is Unferð who has fomented internal dissension, by his murder of his brothers (587 ff.); for a moment Unferð is seen to embody the lack of purpose among the Danes, which is Grendel's greatest strength:

> ac he hafað onfunden, þæt he þa fæhðe ne þearf,
> atole ecg-þræce eower leode
> swiðe onsittan, Sige-Scyldinga. 595–97.

This enables Beowulf to make the point inoffensively, that the Geats will now dispose of the monster (598–606). What Beowulf has done before, he will repeat before sunrise. Notice the repetition in

> sunne swegl-wered suþan scineð 606.

of the motif

> leoht eastan com
> beorht beacen Godes. 569–70.

Beowulf's verbal victory brings further acclaim; and the hierarchy of welcomers—Coast-guard, Wulfgar, Hroþgar [Group (*b*)] is completed with the appearance of Queen Wealhþeow. The type of the perfect queen consort (*cynna gemyndig* 613b, *mode geþungen* 624a, *wisfæst wordum* 626a), Wealhþeow embodies already that concern for stability and domestic peace which she is to make explicit later. She echoes her husband in seeing Beowulf's coming as a protection sent by God (625–28a) and Beowulf makes a personal pledge to her (632–38).

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Immediately after this comes Hroþgar's final commission which surpasses all previous references to the uniqueness of Beowulf's position. Hroþgar solemnly invests Beowulf with his own kingly role of protector:

> Næfre ic ænegum men ær alyfde,
> siþðan ic hond ond rond hebban mihte,
> ðryþ-ærn Dena buton þe nu ða. 655–57.

The transition *fitt* (X, 662–709)[28], contains several explicit endorsements, in the narrator's voice, of the supernatural significance of Beowulf's position (cf. especially lines 665b–67a). In his *beot,* Beowulf, having discarded his armour, appeals to God as the giver of victory (685b–87); the situation is seen continually on two levels, the physical, human action complementing and fulfilling the supernatural. Beowulf trusts

> modgan mægenes, Metodes hyldo 670

and the Lord has willed the victory *þurh anes cræft* (699a). The two levels of vision are combined in the final lines of the *fitt:*

> Þæt wæs yldum cuþ,
> þæt hie ne moste, þa Metod nolde,
> se scyn-scaþa under sceadu bregdan,
> ac he wæccende wraþum on andan
> bad bolgen-mod beadwa geþinges. 705b–09.

Klaeber has complained that the Grendel fight

> is very much interrupted by interspersed general reflections on the situation and by remarks on the person's thoughts and emotions which greatly lengthen it and detract from its effectiveness.[29]

In fact, these asides serve the purpose of developing the themes already so dominant in *fitt* X and the preceding group: the unique position of Beowulf (718f., 736f., 750f., etc.), and Grendel's alienation and malice (712, 731). They enlarge the significance of the action by making it the fatal climax of Grendel's long campaigns against the Danes. The archetypal opposition of the two figures is realized particularly in the juxtaposition of Grendel's gory triumph over the *slæpende rinc* (740f.) and his fatal hand-shake with Beowulf, the *rinc on ræste* (745f.). From this moment the roles are reversed: Grendel's greed abruptly changes to panic (750–57, 762–66) while Beowulf's *beot* is now translated into action:

> Gemunde þa se goda mæg Higelaces
> æfen-spræce, up-lang astod. . . 758–59.

The action is itself extremely stylized—a simple hand-clasp, and the poet at once preserves this stylisation and increases the emotional tension by switching

28. Distinguished in Klaeber's analysis (*op. cit.,* p. x) as a separate stage in the action: "The watch for Grendel".
29. *Op. cit.,* p. 154.

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our attention to the Danes and their hall (767 ff.). The images of the poem's exordium—the tearing-up of mead-benches (775 ff.: cf. line 5), the destruction of Heorot (778 ff.: cf. 82 ff.), the terror of the Danes (767 ff., 783 ff.: cf. 126 ff.) are recalled at the moment of Grendel's defeat. The circle of glory and misfortune has been closed, and this magnificent example of *amplificatio* leads to a triumphant repetition of the first words in which Beowulf was described:

Heold hine fæste
se þe manna wæs mægene strengest
on þæm dæge þysses lifes. 788b–90 (cp. 196–7).

The next *fitt* is an extended celebration of Beowulf's victory. Where his *mægen* triumphed, the Geatish swords are useless (794f.); the passage describing the tearing off of Grendel's arm (809–18a) recalls and reverses Grendel's last victory (739–45a) and provides the symbol of Beowulf's achievement:

Þæt wæs tacen sweotol,
syþðan hilde-deor hond alegde,
earm ond eaxle —þær wæs eal geador
Grendles grape —under geapne hrof. 833b–36.

GROUP (*d*)

Lines 837–1250, *Fitts* XIII–XVIII.

'The Glory of the Danes'

Beowulf's victory over Unferð was celebrated by a passage (607–61) in which Wealhþeow and Hroþgar honour the hero. His victory over Grendel is now celebrated in six *fitts* which exhibit an interesting development and transformation of the themes of the previous groups. This group ends with the words *wæs se þeod tilu* (1250b) applied to the Danes, and all the major episodes of the group contribute to the theme, including, it seems likely, the introduction of their hero Hroþulf,[30] and the Finn episode which on one level of meaning is a Danish victory. This theme is expressed not in opposition to, but in conjunction with that of *Beowulfes mærðo*: the chief Danish virtue is that they can match his valour with their magnificence.

The praise of Beowulf shows the same progression that we have noticed in his welcome to Denmark, group (*b*). Again we move from retainers (*fitt* XIII) to Hroþgar (XIV) and a mention of Unferð (lines 980–90). Hroþgar fulfils his generous promises of Group (*b*), in *fitt* XV: then, after the interlude of the Finn Episode, Wealhþeow is again introduced (1162f., cf. 612f.) to express her vision of domestic peace and happiness.

This parallel is not simple or mechanical. Here we have a progression in the themes and atmosphere of the poem which does not so much parallel as transform the themes of group (*b*), exploring their possibilities further and realising

30. Cf. Sisam, *op. cit.*, (1965) p. 36.

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their consequences. The coastguard and Wulfgar had accepted Beowulf as an outstanding warrior; now on the ride from the mere he is compared to Sigemund the dragon-slayer, and shown to have the gifts which Heremod, himself a Danish king, lacked. Beowulf is seen to have entered the glorious company *folcum gecyþed* (262). Hroþgar now sees as justified his confidence that Beowulf was sent by God (928–31); and if he had previously referred to his kindness to Ecgþeow, he now takes Beowulf himself as his son

> Nu ic, Beowulf, þec,
> secg betsta, me for sunu wylle
> freogan on ferhþe; heald forð tela
> niwe sibbe. 946b–49a.

—the union between Geat and Dane reaches a new intensity.

But with the paraphrase of the scop's lay of Sigemund and Heremod we can see yet another kind of progression, which is concerned at once with the technique and the meaning of the poem. We are told that the scop

> se ðe eal-fela eald-gesegena
> worn gemunde, word oþer fand
> soðe gebunden.[31] 869–71a.

The introduction of long passages based on *eald-gesegen* provides the poet with a means of calling up complex associations in the minds of his audience.[32] It is important to stress that these stories are assimilated in style and organisation to their context in *Beowulf*: the poet only utilises such aspects of them as develop or contrast with the theme which prevails at that moment. They are a new aspect of the 'asides' which we saw him using to drive home the significance of Beowulf's handclasp in the Grendel fight. So with Sigemund: the references to his *fæhðe ond fyrena* (879a) and to his relations with Fitela are obscure. Whether this is deliberate or due to the poet's ignorance is not the point: what is important is that the parallel with Beowulf's victory and his coming requital *is* stressed:

> Hæfde aglæca elne gegongen,
> þæt he beah-hordes brucan moste
> selfes dome. 893–95a.

The specific contribution which digressions like this make to *Beowulf* lies first in the richness of their possibilities: they possess at once the concreteness of actual figures and situations, and a clear thematic relevance to their context. Their actuality places the 'digressions' among the passages of greatest intensity in the poem, giving them an echoing quality which links them with other

31. For this notoriously difficult passage describing Anglo-Saxon poetic technique I follow Klaeber and Wrenn in taking *word oþer* as accusative plural, paralleling *eald-gesegena*, and referring to the 'new words' of the scop's account of Beowulf's conduct—now linked with traditional lays by being told in metre (*soþe gebunden*).
32. On the extent to which he could probably rely on knowledge of the lays by his audience cf. Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, Oxford, 1951, 34–70

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digressions and episodes, and finally with the central action of the poem. They possess the enigmatic clarity of image and symbol. Thus, when the themes prefigured in the episodes come to dominate the central action of the poem, they possess a quality of fittingness and inevitability which comes from having lain in the poem's 'unconscious' since the earlier digressions.

Thus the poem began with Scyld, who prefigured both the glory of Hroþgar's reign, and even more closely Beowulf himself as a champion sent by God to save the Danes when they are helpless. In the Sigemund-Heremod episode we have in germ both feuding, the dragon-fight, and the theme of 'responsibilities of kingship' (in the figure of Heremod), which are later to become central concerns of the poem.[33] J. Leyerle in particular stresses that the episode is a prototype of the Dragon-fight, where Beowulf 'combines Sigemund's exploit with the result of Heremod's'.[34]

This function of the digressions as symbolic statements of the ideas later to become explicit and central, is important. When overstressed, however, it can lead to serious distortions of the poem[35] for the primary function of the episodes is to contribute to their immediate context. It is significant that three of the four long 'episodes' which occur before the appearance of the dragon, and two of the three long digressions about the Swedish wars, are summaries or direct quotations of songs or speeches by characters in the poem.[36] The dramatic objectivity they thus possess is used by the poet to modulate and transform the themes which he has 'personally' developed in a cumulative manner through explicit statement. The new prominence of 'episodes' in this group of *fitts* marks it out as a transitional group: it modulates the atmosphere of the poem from the well-established and cumulative patterns of groups (*b*) and (*c*) to the fundamentally different concerns of the Grendel's Mother fight, group (*e*).

First, the Sigemund-Heremod episode translates the poet's approving comments of X–XII into the typology of Danish history and heroic legend: it preserves the opposition between good and evil figures, but marks a decisive change from the narrator's stress on supernatural factors in his description of the Grendel fight. The fate of the alien and doomed Grendel who

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33. Cf. Bonjour, *op. cit.*, (1950) pp. 46–48; O'Loughlin, *op. cit.*, 1952, p. 6 f.; Wrenn, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
34. 'Beowulf the Hero and the King', *Medium Aevum*, XXXIV, 1965, p. 93.
35. For example, J. Leyerle, *loc. cit.*, suggests that *hyne fyren onwod* 915b refers 'conceivably to Beowulf'. This interpretation is very unlikely; and Leyerle oversimplifies the poet's conception. When the potentialities of this episode are *realised* in Beowulf himself (who is no stock-figure like Heremod) the poem will have abandoned the relatively simple rhetorical structures (of black-and-white opposition) of this stage in its development: Beowulf is faced with a situation significantly different from Heremod's temptation to paranoia (as expressed here and in Hroþgar's Sermon, 1709b–24a): our response to his fatal choice, as we shall see, should be correspondingly more complex.
36. The word 'digression' is used here as defined in Bonjour, *op. cit.*, (1950) p. xi. If we exclude the Scyld 'prelude' and the Unferð 'Intermezzo', the Sigemund-Heremod and Finn episodes are summaries of songs and the Heaþobard episode a direct quotation of Beowulf's words. The main Swedish digressions are in Beowulf's speech before Battle (2426–2537) and the messenger's speech (2900–3027); this leaves the Offa episode (1925–62) and the account of Beowulf's exploits in lines 2354b–2396. The specific reasons for introducing these episodes will be discussed later.

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dreama leas
in fen-freoðo feorh alegde,
hæþene sawle; þær him hel onfeng. 850b–52.

is paralleled in the scop's song by that of Heremod

on feonda geweald forð forlacen
snude forsended. 903–4a.

The dialectic of the poem's themes moves from the opposition between God's champion and his enemies to the contrast between good and bad warriors—and to a new stress on the Danes' gratitude to Beowulf: for while Grendel is by nature alienated from mankind and

No his lif-gedal
sarlic þuhte secga ænegum 841b–42.

Heremod's failure is a perversion of his noble ancestry (*fæderæþelu*, 911a) and stands in direct opposition to Beowulf's fulfilment of his promise, which makes him beloved by all:

He þær eallum wearð
mæg Higelaces, manna cynne,
freondum gefægra; hine fyren onwod. 913b–15.

The progression of idea and atmosphere achieved through such juxtaposition of evocative images can be seen by contrasting the episode just examined to the Finn episode.[37] This is organised into two contrasting movements, and the central point where the movements meet is marked by a sectional division, XVII (1125). The movements describe the temporary success, and the final failure, of an attempt to avoid a feud. Like the earlier episode this is a paraphrase of a lay sung by a scop, and the immediate relevance of the lay to its audience in Heorot is that it is about a Danish victory. But the glorying in heroic action which dominates the Sigemund episode, its simple concern with the qualities of the warriors themselves, have disappeared. Hildeburh's grief dominates the first movement of the episode, which culminates as she presides over her *bearnum ond broðrum* (1074a) united in death:

Het ða Hildeburh æt Hnæfes ade
hire selfre sunu sweoloðe befæstan . . . 1114–15.

An important idea in the episode is the terrible fate which overcomes Hnæf (*se fær begeat* 1068) and his nephews (*on gebyrd hruron* 1074b). The provisions of the peace treaty (*fæste frioðo-wære* 1096) are given at length; but the oaths which Hengest finally fulfils are those not of peace but of death: the *woroldrædenne* (1142). Thus the terror is renewed,

Swylce ferhð-frecan Fin eft begeat
sweord-bealo sliðen æt his selfes ham . . . 1146–47.

37. The similarities in theme (feuding, loyalty) have been noticed by O'Loughlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–7. But the progression in vision between the two is equally important.

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and the treasure and property brought home by the Danes (1154–59) include Hildeburh, now returned to her people, but deprived of her nearest kinsmen on both sides.

The progression between the two episodes may be summed up as a realisation that heroic action involves not merely personal glory, but the fate of the women and the succession within a royal house. This progression is made clearer when we realise that as the Sigemund-Heremod episode is directly followed by Hroþgar's action in taking Beowulf as his son and rewarding him for his victory, the Finn episode is directly followed by Wealhþeow's reminder to Hroþgar to preserve the succession within the Danish family (1175–80). When she in her turn rewards Beowulf, she enlists him in this cause, and her speech culminates in a vision of domestic harmony, the true speech of a *frioðo-webbe:*

Beo þu suna minum
dædum gedefe, dream-healdende!
Her is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe
modes milde, man-drihtne hold . . . 1226–29.

One might sum up the progression by saying that if the first three *fitts* of the group are dominated by 'masculine' themes, personal glory and generosity, the last three are dominated by a 'feminine' vision; for in *Beowulf* the women are the bonds of peace and stability, the persons who above all try to ensure that the glory and power of one generation shall be continued to the next. Their vision of life is in the last resort wider and deeper than that of their men-folk who are more concerned with present action and their own fame in future ages. This progression is not harmed whether one accepts the 'subtle' hints of Hroþulf's treachery in lines 1015f. and 1164, or whether with Sisam[38] one dismisses them as them as a 'learned romance'. The exaggerated importance commonly given to such doubtful points is due largely to the practice of examining passages, and especially the 'episodes and digressions', out of context. The structure of *Beowulf* in no way *depends* on such subtle hints: the relevance of each episode is clear in its context, and depends primarily on a progression of atmosphere which is gradual but assimilated to the overall rhetorical symmetry of the poem.

Comparison of these episodes shows clearly the extent to which the poem's themes in this group develop in the space of two hundred lines or so; and it appears that the major 'digressions' serve as catalysts, marking the points where new developments become dominant and enter into the dialectic of the poem's themes. This dialectic is a continuous one, however, as can be seen by examining the descriptive passages which begin each new *fitt* in group (*d*). *Fitt* XIII begins with a description of the wonder caused by the traces of Grendel (841a): the chief of which, Grendel's claw, we had just seen described, (833b–36). In the transition between XIII and XIV (916–24), we return to the same moment in time[39] and to the same symbol of Beowulf's victory, which acts as an introduction to Hroþgar's speech of praise:

38. *Op. cit.*, (1965) pp. 33–39, 80–82.
39. *Loc. cit.*, 28–32.

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geseah steapne hrof
golde fahne ond Grendles hond. 926–27 (cf. 835–36).

This second *fitt* is again enclosed by a description of Grendel's hand—a much more detailed picture than before, (984–90). But in the passage which begins the third *fitt* of the group (XV, 991–1008a) we move from the moment of present rejoicing to the death which lies in wait for every man, and from the *wundor-siona fela* (995b) to the

gearwe stowe
Þær his lic-homa, leger-bedde fæst,
swefeþ æfter symle. 1006–8a.

This is the first example of a new emphasis on how harmony gives way to disaster. *Fitt* XVI has a similar introduction: we move from the rewarding of Beowulf's warriors through a reminder of the death of Hondiscio to thoughts of the uncertainty of life:

Forþan bið andgit æghwær selest,
ferhðes fore-þanc. Fela sceal gebidan
leofes ond laþes, se þe longe her
on ðyssum win-dagum worolde bruceð. 1059–62.

These lines serve as a fitting preface and motto for the Finn-episode which takes up much of *fitt* XVI. In the opening of *fitt* XVII, we see such a movement from harmony to disaster worked out in human terms, as Hengest agrees to break the peace treaty so that *sweord-bealo sliðen* befalls his host. The opening of *fitt* XVIII finally takes such thoughts of harmony giving way through feuds to disaster, from the past to the future (1192–1214). Wealhþow's gift is compared to the *Brosinga mene* possessed by Hama when he fled the *searo-niðas* of Eormenric: but Wealhþeow's necklace is associated not merely with a past escape but with a future disaster, Hygelac's death (1202f.). This is due, like the death of Finn, to a feud; but a feud willingly undertaken:

hyne wyrd fornam
syðþan he for wlenco wean ahsode
fæhðe to Frysum. 1205b–7a.

This, and the fact that Hygelac is a character already mentioned several times in the poem, makes this passage a definite development of the new sense of the limitations of heroic glory which dominates the Finn episode; a development in harmony with both Wealhþow's concern for her sons and the thoughts of the impending feud with Grendel's Mother which end the *fitt*:

wyrd ne cuþon,
geosceaft grimme. (1233b-34a: cf. last quotation)

Such thoughts, while gradually increasing in frequency and force throughout the group, are still seen as a contrast with present bliss and the unchallenged success of Beowulf; but the celebration of his victory has been qualified by these

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thoughts of feuding and death.[40] They modulate the atmosphere from that of joy at the defeat of Grendel to terror caused by his mother's attack: but in fact the poem's vision does not merely change but progresses: and the appearance on the scene of Grendel's Mother, avenging her son, merely brings one step further the vision of the Finn episode and Wealhþeow's speech: that an heroic action can never be seen in isolation, but often entails well-nigh uncontrollable consequences.

Group (*e*)

Lines 1251–1650, *Fitts* XIX–XXIII.

'*Beowulf and Grendel's Mother*'

The centrality of the Grendel's Mother fight in the thematic development of the poem is most important.[41] This centrality is evident in the first paragraph (1251–78), where we are both reminded that the Grendel tribe is descended from Cain, and told of the motive for this new attack, *sunu deoð wrecan* (1278). *Fitt* XIX therefore combines the themes of the exordium to the poem (*fitt* I) with the new stress on feuding progressively dominant in group (*d*). Feuding has ceased to be merely the theme of the 'digressions' and has entered the central action[42] although, until the Dragon-fight, the feud is still ultimately between God and his enemies. The attack on Heorot is no longer wanton, however: the terror caused by Grendel's Mother is less (1282) than that caused by her son, and she only kills one man, Æschere. It is clear that the issue is no longer simply between malice and goodness: both sides are overshadowed by a new compulsion. Notice the force of the verb in these lines:

> Ne wæs þæt gewrixle til,
> þæt hie on ba healfa bicgan *scoldon*
> freonda feorum. 1304b–6a.

The new element of feuding is accompanied by increased stress on the importance of heroic resolution and courage. Beowulf, before the Grendel fight, had displayed a suitably fatalistic disregard for death (455). His final

40. H. L. Rogers, *loc. cit.*, (reprint 1963) p. 246, rightly speaks of the 'atmosphere of worldly glory' in the group, but says that in all the episodes 'the treatment of the motives of weapons, treasure and society is similar'. This over-simplification explains his misinterpretation of the poem's progression from this point onward.
41. It is well described by J. Leyerle, *loc. cit.*, 90–91.
42. This progression between groups (*d*) and (*e*) is also seen by relating the introduction to *fitt* XIX to the series of introductions we examined in Group (*e*): in lines 1251–78 the security of the Danes in their *æfen-ræste*, is the signal for thoughts of the feuds, between God, Cain, and the Danes and Grendel, which are to cause the *edhwyrft eorlum* (immediate now, not safe in past or future). By *fitt* XX disaster has struck, and the *fitt* opens with Hroþgar's elegy for Aeschere (1321–44). Finally Beowulf's words accepting the inevitability of death and feuding (XXI, 1383–89) and his *beot* which centres on the idea of how near a possibility death is to him (XXII, 1473–91) are reversed by the opening lines of the last *fitt* in the group, with the appearance of the magic sword (XXIII, 1557–69).

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beot in *fitt* X paralleled the comments of the narrator at that point of the poem, seeing the issue as a balance to be decided ultimately by God. He emphasised this sense of balance by throwing off his armour:

ond siþðan witig God. . .
mærðo deme, swa him gemet þince. 685b–87.

Such a sense of balance between the contestants and between man's efforts and God's is quite alien to group (*e*): Beowulf, accepting Hroþgar's challenge to avenge his friend, makes a startlingly clear statement of the ethos of the blood-feud:

Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan
worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
domes ær deaþe; þæt bið driht-guman
unlifigendum æfter selest. 1386–89.

The awareness, however fatalistic, of God's providence is preserved by Hroþgar: he waits until the Almighty should remedy this new misfortune (1314–15) and thanks God for the declaration of Beowulf just quoted (1397–98). But Beowulf must now carry the war into the enemy's den: his emphasis is on a champion's responsibility to *make* his own glory, his own immortality in the eyes of his fellows: *dom gewyrcean* is his *idée fixe* in this fight, and this phrase is significantly repeated in his final words before battle:

ic me mid Hruntinge
dom gewyrce, oþðe mec deað nimeð. 1490b–91 cf. last quotation.

This idea is of a piece with the elaborate arming of Beowulf before battle, and the new style in which the fight itself is told. The single, decisive handclasp of the Grendel fight is replaced by a series of attacks and counterattacks.[43] The poet no longer emphasises the significance of the battle as an opposition of good and evil. His only comment before the turning-point of the fight re-emphasises Beowulf's motive:

Swa sceal man doan
þonne he æt guðe gegan þenceð
longsumne lof; na ymb his lif cearað. 1534b–36.

The significance of the turning-point in the battle is best appreciated when seen in the rhetorical pattern of the group as a whole. Like group (*c*) which included the Unferð and Grendel encounters, this is a group of five *fitts*. The first (XIX, 1250f.) is introductory: it ends with Beowulf's arrival, for the second time in the poem, as an answer to Hroþgar's hopes. Three of the following four *fitts* have in a more intensified form the same movement towards a climax which glorifies heroic action; the other (XXII) is equally significant: it reverses the process, moving from a confident *beot* to the moment where the hero is helpless in the grip of his enemy. *Fitt* XX begins with Hroþgar's lament

43. Bonjour, 'Grendel's Dam and the Composition of Beowulf' *English Studies* XXX 1949, 113–24; (Reprint *cit.*, (1962) 29–42) rightly points out the importance of the element of surprise in the Grendel's Mother fight. It is important that we are kept in suspense until the last moment: Beowulf's unaided powers are on trial.

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for Æschere, in which Hroþgar forcefully asserts the importance of feuding: it caused the death of Æschere (1333b–35; 1339–40) which in its turn places Beowulf under an obligation (not legal, but fairly clearly implied) of vengeance:

> nu seo hand ligeð
> se þe eow wel-hwylcra wilna dohte. 1343b–44.

The description which follows of the monsters and their den greatly heightens the tension of the speech, and allows implied obligation to become explicit challenge: *sec gif þu dyrre* (1379b). *Fitt* XXI loosely parallels this emotional gradation. It begins with Beowulf's acceptance of the challenge, where risking death is seen as a way to a kind of secular immortality (1383–89). A description of the grim surroundings of the lake[44] again heightens the tension, until Beowulf's courage and daring can be explicitly highlighted through a description of his preparations for battle (1441b f.) and a contrast with Unferð, driving home Beowulf's *dryhtscipe* (1470a) and *dom* (1470b). The fourth *fitt*, XXII, again begins with a determined *beot* by Beowulf, which once more juxtaposes *dom* and *deað* (1491). The previous *fitts* have built up a recurring pattern which in this *fitt* should lead through danger to Beowulf's victory. In fact, precisely the opposite happens: we get a progressive series of abrupt reversals. Beowulf is first made prisoner by Grendel's Mother and brought to her cave (1501f.); when he counterattacks there he finds that Hrunting fails him (1518f.); he next, as in the Grendel fight, trusts to his *mund-gripe mægenes* (1534a), but this gains him only a short respite. It is when Beowulf is at the point of being killed (1550) that the poet suddenly reintroduces the vision of *fitt* X, in which human and divine forces fuse:

> rodera Rædend, hit on ryht gesced
> yðelice, syþðan he eft astod.[45]

The instrument of the divine intervention, 'the old sword made by the giants' (1558) is the opening image of the last *fitt*, XXIII. Again a *fitt* begins with death—but it is the death of Grendel's Mother. The giants' sword has been turned against the last of the Grendel tribe, and this action inaugurates a progressive series of reversals from darkness to light, defeat to victory, sadness to joy, despair to amazement and wonder. This rhetorical pattern explains the sun-like light which now shines forth (1570f.), the reminder of Grendel's murders leading to Beowulf's triumphant beheading of the monster

44. The variation describing the discovery of Aeschere's head (1417b–21) not only increases the horror of the scene: it is a symbol of the victory of Grendel's mother, who had also recaptured Grendel's claw (1302–3); thus it is one more challenge to Beowulf, who is later to bring back Grendel's head to Heorot as symbol of his own final victory.

45. H. L. Rogers, *op. cit.*, 1955, reprint *cit.*, p. 248, and Dorothy Whitelock, *op. cit.*, pp. 68–9 are troubled that there is no description of how Beowulf got to his feet and reached the sword. Surely the reason for this lack of narrative clarity is simply that the poet is concerned to achieve the greatest thematic contrast possible between the two *fitts*: narrative explanation is subordinated to the rhetorical patterns. The effect of sudden contrast which the poet aims for here should be contrasted with the role of the sectional division in the Grendel fight (791). There the issue has already been decided, and *fitt* XII is simply a fuller development of the description of Beowulf's superiority in lines 750–90.

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(1572b f.); and the interlude of the despairing retainers, which acts as a prelude to the melting of the magic sword[46] and Beowulf's return to his followers and to Heorot. This *fitt* clearly reverses the themes of the previous one, and restores the movement common to all the previous *fitts* of the group. Grendel's head recalls and transcends, as a symbol of Beowulf's victory, Grendel's claw which formed the climax of the previous fight (1647–50, cf. 833b–36). In the resounding final variation Beowulf has achieved his aim: he is

dæd-cene mon dome gewurþad. 1645.

But it is clear that his glory has been brought about, not by Hrunting or Beowulf's strength, but by the magic sword—which melted the moment the bond of the ancient feud between God and the tribe of giants was broken. The *real victor* has been He who

geweald hafað
sæla ond mæla; þæt is soð Metod. 1610b–11.

GROUP (*f*)

Lines 1651–1887, *Fitts* XXIV–XXVI.

'Beowulf and Hroþgar'

GROUP (*g*)

Lines 1888–2144, *Fitts* XXVII–[XXIX].

'Beowulf and Hygelac'

Transitional *fitt*, XXXI, lines 2145–2220:

'Beowulf Retainer and King'

GROUP (*h*)

Lines 2221–2390, *Fitts* XXXII–XXXIII.

Exordium: *'Beowulf and the Dragon'*

From line 1651 to line 2390 three groups of *fitts* can be distinguished. Six of the *fitts* are taken up with the aftermath of Beowulf's victory: three in Heorot [group (*f*)] and three dealing with his return and retelling of his Danish adven-

46. In view of the sparing use made of religious imagery in this group, it seems justified to see the long variation on the melting sword (1605b–1611) as of special significance. It seems to refer to two aspects of the situation. With the cutting off of Grendel's head, the feud with the monsters has been accomplished—the frost and *wæl-rapas* of feud are broken. Secondly, the lines emphasise the uniqueness of Divine intervention in this fight (1607b). The sword, having done its duty, melts, leaving Beowulf with only its hilt: when the Dragon-fight comes he will again have to trust to human weapons.

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tures [group (*g*)]. In the third group (to which the transitional *fitt*, XXXI, acts as a prelude and bridge-passage) the stage is set for Beowulf's final fight. These three groups span the point at which the unity of *Beowulf* seems to many critics to break down. Tolkien[47] saw Beowulf's long recapitulation of the Grendel fights as 'the only serious weakness, or apparent weakness, in the poem.' To Sisam it seems that

> The 'Return' reads like the work of a well-equipped poet who has temporarily lost his inspiration, and drifts when he has not another adventure to tell of.[48]

I shall treat the three groups together, to emphasise how they follow consistently one from the other. The connection between them is primarily thematic: the ideas of the poem undergo, in these three groups, a further transformation comparable to the one we examined in group (*d*), lines 836–1250. This thematic progression is accompanied by several parallels, in structure and materials, with the earlier transition-group, which make it seem likely that the poet had it specifically in mind when composing this part of the poem.

First, let us examine the parallels and progression between the three *fitts* of group (*f*) and the first three *fitts* of group (*d*) (XIII–XV, 836–990). The most obvious change is that there is no episode about the reaction of the Danish retainers, no 'riders to the mere'. Hermod is reintroduced, but this occurs in the first of two speeches by Hroþgar which no longer merely praise the achievement of Beowulf as champion. In this group the stress has changed to the qualities needed for kingship, a theme which becomes explicit in the second speech, when Hroþgar says specifically that Beowulf has the necessary wisdom and strength to become a king (1844–54). The theme of friendship between Geat and Dane progresses also between the two groups: after the Grendel fight Hroþgar had symbolically adopted Beowulf, in a *niwe sibbe* (949a); now in his final words (1855–65) he sums up Beowulf's achievements in terms of the friendship he has made between the Geats and Danes (*sib gemæne* 1857). The third change is related to the new stress on wisdom, maturity and peace: the awareness that death is inevitable, which momentarily appeared in the introduction to *fitt* XV (1002–8a) is now the central theme of Hroþgar's speeches. Thus while *fitts* XIII–XV and XXIV–XXVI use similar material, with a similar stress on personal qualities, and on the power of a good hero (retainer or king) to bring about prosperity, their expression becomes more philosophic and contemplative, and human life and glory is seen primarily as transient.

Hroþgar's 'Sermon' (1700–84) is the point of the poem in which the ideals of the heroic life are expressed at greatest length, and related to Beowulf. Thus its interpretation is crucial in the interpretation of the poem; further, to realise how the poet defines his attitude to this expression of the kingly ideal, the speech must be placed in its context, its place in the poem's development. It is important, therefore, to realise that the Sermon is given in answer to Beowulf's

47. *Op. cit.*, p. 81.
48. *Op. cit.*, (1965) p. 45; cf. also H. L. Rogers, op. cit. p. 251.

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speech retelling his victory over Grendel's Mother. In this speech, God's intervention is given prominent place (1655–64): Beowulf makes clear that Hrunting and his own power have been useless:

ætrihte wæs
guð getwæfed, nymðe mec God scylde. 1657b–58.

Beowulf presents Hroþgar with the Magic sword, and the poet, by describing its hilt, makes clear the connection of the sword with the feud between God and the race of giants (1688b–93)—in other words, with the fact which made Beowulf in his Grendel fights unwittingly the champion of God as well as of Hroþgar. Hroþgar, of course, does not know the significance of the hilt's design, and does not comment on it. When he begins his speech by explicitly attributing wisdom to Beowulf, he is referring to the lack of arrogance Beowulf has just shown:

Eal þu hit geþyldum healdest
mægen mid modes snyttrum. 1705b–6a.

The symmetry of the speech is striking (fig. 1). The sectional division at once emphasises this symmetry and pinpoints the central theme, by bisecting the Sermon at its turning-point:

.XXV.
Oðþæt him on innan ofer-hygda dæl
weaxeþ ond wridað . . . 1740–41a.

The symmetrical pattern of the six sections of the speech effects an important progression in its meaning, so that the speech gropes towards, but does not explicitly indicate (because Hroþgar does not himself know) what the practice of wisdom and avoidance of *oferhygd* will mean for Beowulf. The first two sections (A_1, 1700–9a; A_2, 1709b–23a) stand in explicit contrast. Hroþgar is sure that Beowulf will long remain a protection for his people (1707b–9a) unlike Heremod whose niggardliness and slaughter of his retainers became his own undoing (1711–22a). Hroþgar explicitly warns Beowulf to take Heremod's fate to heart.

Ðu þe lær be þon
gum-ciste ongit! 1722b–23a.

—before going on to an *exemplum* of a more insidious temptation for Beowulf:

Ic þis gid be þe
awræc wintrum frod.[49]

The two central sections, which span the 'watershed' of the speech (1740) stand not in contrast but as development one from the other. The Fortunate Ruler at first possesses wisdom (*snyttru,* 1726b) but his worldly power obsesses him

49. These two verses refer either to the sermon as a whole, or to the following section to which they form a fitting transitional sentence.

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þæt he his selfa ne mæg
for his unsnyttrum ende geþencean. 1733b–34.

and so he falls victim to the darts of temptation (1747). His sin is similar to Heremod's—greed and avarice (1748–50a)—but a new aspect of these crimes is now prominent: they are a direct betrayal of what God had destined for the Ruler:

ond he þa forð-gesceaft
forgyteð ond forgymeð, þæs þe him ær God sealde,
wuldres Waldend, weorð-mynda dæl. 1750b–52.

The third pair of sections (C_1, 1758–68; C_2, 1769–84) consists, like the first, of an explicit comment and an *exemplum* to illustrate it. The *exemplum* now parallels the *sententia*; it begins with *swa ic* (1769a) instead of the contrast *ne wearð Heremod swa* (1709b). Hroþgar's advice is specifically homiletic: death is the inevitable factor which makes *oferhygd* meaningless.[50] But the *exemplum* which follows would have struck an audience familiar with Old English Christian poetry as strange and inconclusive. The second half of the Sermon has been dominated by poetic words which could bear specifically Christian meanings: Hroþgar is coming closer and closer to a Christian attitude to death and afterlife when he uses such phrases as *forð-gesceaft, weorð-mynda dæl, ece rædas:* the natural expectation of a Christian audience listening to his enumeration of the different kinds of death would be that Hroþgar should specify what he means by *ece rædas*. *The Seafarer*, after a similar passage, goes on to recommend warfare against the devil leading to *ecan lifes blæd* (79). But Hroþgar can only offer a secular parallel, his own peaceful reign, and how he was saved from his sorrow by Beowulf, sent by Providence:

þæs sig Metode þanc,
ecean Dryhtne, þæs ðe ic on aldre gebad,
þæt ic on þone hafelan heoro-dreorigne
ofer eald gewin eagum starige! 1778b–81.

The assumption behind Hroþgar's speech is that if a ruler is generous to his people and confines himself to defensive wars (1770f.), God will provide a remedy against those who attack him. This assumption is itself criticised implicitly in the last lines of his speech, when he refers to his ancient enmity with Grendel (*eald gewinna* 1776a) and to the feud now ended (*eald gewin* 1781a). He cannot understand the deeper significance of the feud (*fyrn-gewin* 1689a) or the reason for God's intervention. The narrator has made this clear to the audience in describing the magic hilt, by assimilating the Grendels (*Godes andsaca* 1682b) to the giants killed in Noah's flood:

þæt wæs fremde þeod
ecean Dryhtne. 1691b–92a.

50. The polysyndetic series of 1763 ff. reminds Klaeber of the rhetoric of a preacher such as Wulfstan, and the verbal parallels with *Seafarer* 68–71 have often been remarked; cf. I. L. Gordon (ed.) *The Seafarer*, London (1960) p. 43.

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Hroþgar's Sermon ends, as it had begun, with a compliment to Beowulf, *wig-geweorþad* (1783a). The rhetorical organisation of the Sermon thus expresses the tragedy implicit in Hroþgar's vision of life. Hroþgar cannot break out of the circular, temporal vision of the secular heroic tradition, and in the face of death he has nothing to offer. The poet highlights this by postponing the gift-giving until the following day (1784) so that it coincides with the parting of Hroþgar and Beowulf. The parting comes at the climax of a cumulative expression of the peace and concord between their two peoples. The raven, conventional harbinger of slaughter, participates (1801–2), the enmity of Beowulf and Unferð is finally healed with compliments (1807–12), Hroþgar's wishes are recalled in Beowulf's promises to help Hroþgar's people in future feuds and to offer hospitality to Hroþgar's son Hreþric (1818–39).[51] Finally Hroþgar praises, as the greatest proof of Beowulf's kingly *wig ond wisdom,* the fact that he has ensured peace between Dane and Geat (1841–65). The hopes of Hroþgar's Sermon seem well on the way to realisation—but the description of the parting movingly echoes Hroþgar's earlier fears, his realisation of the transience of life. The fact that Hroþgar's hopes and expectations in the Sermon and here necessarily remain on the secular level of peace, nobility and friendship (*bega wen,* 1873b–80a) greatly increases the pathos of the parting. The tragic transience of the friendship that has been achieved, and the essential limitation before the fact of death, of Hroþgar's trust in secular virtue, is expressed in the poet's final comment:

> Þæt wæs an cyning
> æghwæs orleahtre, oþþæt him yldo benam
> mægenes wynnum se þe oft manegum scod. 1885b–87.

The themes and atmosphere of the next three *fitts* stand in abrupt contrast to those of Hroþgar's court. A comparison with the last three *fitts* of group (*d*) (XVI–XVIII, lines 1050–1250) shows a striking similarity of material, but again a complete change of attitude. *Fitt* XVI began with the rewarding of Beowulf's followers, and the *wergild* paid for Hondscio (1054f.) introduced the theme of feuding and of 'precarious peace'[52] which dominated the three *fitts.* In the Finn episode, Wealhþeow's speeches, the reference to Hygelac (1202f.) and the forebodings of the attack of Grendel's Mother (1233f.) feuding was seen as something evil, to be warded off at all costs: Hama, who fled away from the *searo-niðas* of Eormenric, was seen to take the better course (*geceas ecne ræd* 1201b).[53] In contrast, group (*g*) is dominated by the speech in which Beowulf retells his adventures in Denmark. Those critics who malign the

51. For an analysis of the 'incremental pattern' in this speech, which points out how it moves progressively to a climax (and so prepares for Hroþgar's attribution of kingly qualities to Beowulf) cf. Bartlett, *op. cit.,* p. 57.
52. The phrase is that of A. Bonjour, *op. cit.,* (1950), p. 58.
53. I accept the emendation of Ms *fealh* to *fleah* (with Klaeber, Wrenn *et. al.*). The approval of Hama's flight remains true whether we translate 1201b in a specifically Christian sense or not: as we have seen the phrase can be put into the mouth of the pagan Hroþgar 1760a.

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speech[54] miss the crucial thematic development accomplished through it: for Beowulf now presents the Grendel fights simply as a successful national feud, in which he has won glory for his nation and treasures for his lord. In his opening words, we see the Grendels as members of a tribe which Beowulf has defeated:

> ic ðæt eall gewræc,
> swa begylpan ne þearf Grendeles maga
> ænig ofer eorðan uht-hlem þone,
> se ðe lengest leofað laðan cynnes . . . 2005b–8.

The supernatural overtones have disappeared, and with them the air of finality. Grendel is no longer God's adversary, and the fight becomes a *hond-ræs hæleða* (2072). Grendel, a creature of folk-tale with his *glof* (2085b–91a) is seen as *mægnes rof* (2084):[55] he is on a par with his adversary, and it is the honour of nations which is primarily at stake:

> þær ic, þeoden min, þine leode
> weorðode weorcum 2095–96a.

Beowulf does not dwell on the omnipresence of divine help. The slain retainers, Hondscio (2076–80) and Æschere (2120–30) are both mentioned, and now become if anything more important than before as motives for Beowulf's revenge. Beowulf fights in vengeance for the retainers of Hygelac and Hroþgar, and there is no hint of the *fyrn-gewin* between God and Cain—for there is no hint of the supernatural in the *eacnum ecgum* (2140a) with which Beowulf beheads Grendel's Mother.

The central change of theme is therefore that while feuding was regarded by Hroþgar and Wealhþeow as an evil which was sometimes necessary and always likely to lead to disaster, Beowulf (true to his sentiments before fighting Grendel's Mother, 1384–89) sees the willing acceptance of feuds as the condition of glory. The two parts of group (*d*), its 'masculine' and 'feminine' visions, were *complementary*: Wealhþeow simply added a new dimension to Hroþgar's sentiments by pointing out his responsibilities to his children (1175f.); and the Finn episode stands as a symbol of the feuds she fears. On the other hand, group (*g*) stands in direct *contrast* to Hroþgar's hopes and fears in group (*f*).

The poet has defined the contrast by making it into a contrast between the outlooks, not only of Hroþgar and Beowulf, but of the Danish and Geatish courts. In describing the return journey (1888f.) the poet returns us momentarily to the bright world and heroic deeds of *fitt* III. The coastguard is rewarded (1900f.), the sea-voyage is again told in lyric terms

54. Cf. above, notes 47 and 48

55. Rogers, *op. cit.*, pp. 240–1, points out that in the Danish part of the poem *mægen* is usually only attributed to Beowulf [to Heremod, once (1716), when he is compared to Beowulf] and that it has a 'distinctly Christian flavour'. But as he misses how the religious atmosphere of the poem is changed and qualified after line 836 (cf. above, note 24), 'the attribution in 2084 to Grendel of *mægen* is wholly unsuspected' by him. In fact, this vanishing-point of the difference of 'metaphysical' status between Beowulf and Grendel is the final stage in a long process.

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fleat famig-heals forð ofer yðe 1909.

—and in the episode of Offa and his queen 'the poet for once frankly admires the heroic'.[56] The important function played by this episode (1925–62) in defining the atmosphere of the Geatish court and the power of King Hygelac has been missed by critics who invariably stress the contrast between Hygd and Offa's queen[57] and largely ignore the passage which the poet makes an extended climax to the episode (and to *fitt* XXVII: lines 1944–62) —the power of the young warrior-king, Offa (*geongum cempan* 1948b). The reign of terror carried on by the young queen (1931b f.) is brought to an abrupt end:

Huru þæt onhohsnode Hemminges mæg. 1944.

Her change of heart is entirely due to Offa's power:

Forðam Offa wæs
geofum ond guðum, gar-cene mon
wide geweorðod . . .[58] 1957b–59a.

Hygelac is likewise a young, warlike king (*geongne guð-cyning* 1969a) distinguished for his wars as well as his generosity; he is introduced as *bona Ongenþeowes* (1968a). The Offa episode is used to present the Geatish court as one which depends on the young, active Hygelac. The relevance of introducing the queens to emphasise the warlike power of their lords becomes clear when we compare this passage with its parallels in group (*d*): Wealhþeow looked to the loyalty of the retainers (1228f.), of Hroþulf (1180f.) and of Beowulf (1175f., 1226f.) to ensure the succession, as the aged Hroþgar was likely to die while her sons were still children. In Offa's and Hygelac's courts, on the other hand, peace and harmony are directly ensured by the power of the king. Hygd is as *wis, welþungen* as Wealhþeow herself, but we are made to feel that, even if she were tempted to *firen ondrysne* (1932), Hygelac would be able to curb her, as Offa did his queen.[59]

The difference between the Danish and the Geatish courts is of central significance: group (*g*) is the moment in the poem where the 'masculine' values of heroism and feuding are seen to be all-sufficient, and decisively superior to Wealhþeow's trust in patience and peace. Thus when Beowulf, the fearless retainer, is reunited with Hygelac (*mæg wið mæge* 1978a) we feel that he has come

56. *Loc. cit.*, p. 256.
57. This error of emphasis is understandable in view of the difficulty of lines 1931–32. The best solution seems to be that of K. Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature,* Oxford (1953) p. 41n. and *The Structure of Beowulf,* Oxford (1965) pp. 49–50, 83–4: viz., that some lines, giving the name and lineage of the princess, are missing before line 1931b. *Modþryðo wæg* (Klaeber, Bonjour *et. al.*) would mean a transition of a suddenness unparalleled in the poem.
58. Klaeber rightly takes *Forðam* 1957b as a conjunction, 'because, since' rather than as an adverb 'therefore'; *op. cit.*, p. 333.
59. In fact Hygd's son Heardred is left fatherless as a child, precisely because of Hygelac's feuds: this irony is not however allowed to appear until later (2373f.).

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home spiritually as well as physically, to a court which lives by his own values.[60] In his triumphant presentation of the Grendel fights as a tribal feud he is 'bringing the tale of Grendel to Geatland'[61] in a sense deeper than Tolkien realized: the poet has made the fundamental lack in his poem of unity of place express two contrasting attitudes to the heroic code. In his narrative, Beowulf makes this contrast explicit, by **prophesying the failure** of Hroþgar's efforts to avoid feuds by alliance:

Oft seldan hwær
æfter leod-hryre lytle hwile
bon-gar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge! 2029b–31.

Again, comparison with group (*d*) is illuminating, for this Heaþobard episode is primarily the realisation of the warning contained in the Finn episode.[62] They are both examples of failure to preserve peace by means of queens, the 'peace-weavers' (*friðu-sibb folca* 2017). Such a method places all the strain on alliances: and alliances soon dissolve before the desire for revenge. Finn's care to prevent his followers referring to the feud, lest anyone

ðæs morþor-hetes myndgiend wære 1105.

is paralleled by the speech of the

eald æsc-wiga se þe eall geman. 2042.

Likewise the grim comment that Hildeburh had no reason to praise the good faith of the Jutes (*Eotena treowe*, 1072a) is paralleled by Beowulf's scepticism about the loyalty of Ingeld's tribe (*Heaþobardna hyldo* 2067).

All three major sections of group (*g*) —the Offa and Heaþobard episodes, and Beowulf's narrative—are expressions of a single coherent vision of the heroic life. To Beowulf and Hygelac, the strength of the king is all-important: it could transform Offa's queen into a true *frioðo-webbe* (1942), and without it the Danish kingdom can only expect disaster. Thus Beowulf's narrative culminates with a presentation to Hygelac of the treasures he has won, and a moving expression of complete dependence on Hygelac:

ða ic ðe, beorn-cyning, bringan wylle,
estum geywan. Gen is eall æt ðe
lissa gelong; ic lyt hafo
heafod-maga, nefne Hygelac ðec! 2148–51.

60. The Geats have been presented as especially warlike, in contrast to the Danes, as early as Hroþgar's references to Beowulf's father (459f.). The contrast between the two courts is however allowed to grow naturally from the fact that the Danish king is old, and the Geatish king given to feuds. The Heaþobard and Offa episodes are good examples of how the poet uses episodes to enlarge and give symbolic meaning to the données of his central material.

61. Tolkien, *op. cit.*, p. 82: Tolkien sees Beowulf's narrative as an effort to bridge the defect in the poem's unity of place: which is true as far as it goes, but misses how the poet transforms a difficulty into an asset.

62. The thematic parallels between the Finn and Heaþobard episodes have already been examined by Bonjour, *op. cit.*, (1950) 56–63. His intuitions are confirmed by the present argument, which tries to show how the thematic links are grounded on the episodes' parallel positions in the overall structural pattern of *Beowulf*.

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To appreciate fully the importance of this moment, its place in the poem's structure should be recalled. The words just quoted come near the beginning of a new *fitt* (XXXI, 2144–2220)[63] which spans the point (2200) where the Dragon-part begins. It is the seventh *fitt* since the end of the Grendel's Mother group (group (*e*), 1650). Now group (*d*), to which we have compared and contrasted groups (*f*) and (*g*), contained six *fitts* (XIII–XVIII). *Fitt* XVIII contained hints of a future calamity (1232–37a) which is realised in the seventh *fitt* after the Grendel fight ended, i.e., the coming of Grendel's Mother who causes *edhwyrft eorlum* (XIX, 1281a). After the six *fitts* of groups (*f*) – (*g*), this *fitt* XXXI isolates the culmination of Beowulf's exploits as retainer, and contains within itself its own *edhwyrft eorlum*. The earlier part of the *fitt* however centres round the solemn, almost ritualistic expression of Beowulf's loyalty and union with Hygelac. The necklace which Wealhþeow had given to Beowulf (XVIII, 1195–1214) is now presented to Hygelac's queen (2172–76). The moment of greatest solemnity is reached when Hygelac raises Beowulf from the status of retainer and gives him the rights of a chieftain (2190–99), thus fulfilling Hroþgar's intuition of Beowulf's fitness to rule. Hygelac solemnises his action by presenting the sword of his father, King Hreþel, to the seated Beowulf:

> þæt he on Biowulfes bearm alegde,
> ond him gesealde seofan þusendo,
> bold ond brego-stol. 2194–96a.

This presentation of throne and sword is enclosed by two paragraphs, one a sudden movement into the past (2177–89) the other a sudden change to the future (2200–2220). He who was to be presented with Hreþel's sword and *eðel-riht* (2198) was one time considered by Hreþel unworthy of a warrior's reward (2185); but

> Edwenden cwom
> tir-eadigum menn torna gehwylces. 2188–89.

If it were merely a contrast of joy and sadness, introduced to give occasion for a commonplace didacticism, one could agree with Klaeber that 'The introduction of the commonplace story of the sluggish youth is not very convincing'.[64] It has given rise to much futile speculation on the chronology of Beowulf's misspent youth.[65] The poet's purpose is more clearly seen, however, within the pattern of *fitt* XXXI. On one level, his intention is *reculer pour mieux sauter*, the violent

63. There is no sectional division numbered XXX in the MS; this seems to be due to scribal error in the numbering, as *fitts* XXIV–XXVIII seem originally to have been given numbers one greater than the ones in the text, and these were corrected. cf. Dobbie, *Beowulf and Judith, op. cit.*, xxv ; Carrigan, *op. cit.*, (note 15 above) pp. 131–4. Klaeber's hypothesis (*op. cit.*, p. c fn. 7), that a sectional division XXX has been omitted at line 2093, seems unlikely in view of the parallels with group (*d*) which contains only six *fitts*.
64. Klaeber, *op. cit.*, p. 207.
65. E.g. K. Malone, 'Note on *Beowulf*' *Anglia* LXIX (1951) 295–300; A. Bonjour, 'Young Beowulf's Inglorious Period', *Anglia* LXX (1952) 339–44, reprinted in *op. cit.*, (note 2 above) 89–93.

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changes to time past and time future balancing each other. But the passages are not primarily to be explained in terms of rhetorical symmetry but of a dialectic of themes leading to an *edhwyrft eorlum* far more serious than the death of Æschere at the hands of Grendel's Mother. This rhetorical movement places the ethos of the Geatish court in a perspective which at once shows its weakness. Beowulf's slackness was a personal misfortune, involving loss of honour and reward. This time is now safely past. Beowulf's investiture, his association with the Geatish kings leads however to another *edwenden* as the warlike Hygelac and his son, the focus of Beowulf's loyalty and his hopes, are wiped out in a single parentetic sentence:

> Eft þæt geiode ufaran dogrum
> hilde-hlæmmum, syððan Hygelac læg
> ond Heardrede . . . 2200–2202a.

The poet communicates his ironic vision through a sudden expansion of perspective, from the personal misfortune of a retainer to the fate of kings and the wars of nations. The tale of disaster is hardly lightened by the short mention of Beowulf's reign (2208b–10a), and we are immediately faced with the threat of the dragon (2210b). Through his violent transitions of mood the poet has made the culmination of Beowulf's exploits as a retainer a fitting prelude to the Dragon part of the poem.[66] *Fitt* XXXI prefigures the ruling theme of the Dragon part: the consequences of the ethos of the Geatish court, i.e. of the willing acceptance of feuds, and of complete reliance on the king's warlike power. One remembers the references to Scyld's childhood at the beginning: again the poet has 'yoked heterogeneous ideas by violence together' to span a hero's life and achievements; but the heroic world is now seen in far grimmer terms, expressed in the terrible swiftness of lines 2200–2220, and the final laconic comment:

> þat sie ðiod onfand
> bu-folc beorna, þæt he gebolgen wæs. 2219b–20.

Fitts XXXII and XXXIII clarify the situation introduced allusively in lines 2200–2220. Structurally, they are analogous to the exordium to the poem, lines 53–188. *Fitt* I (53–114) was a panoramic introduction of the figures of the ensuing contest: Hroþgar, Grendel and Heorot. The thematic issues were comparatively simple, between Hroþgar's glory and generosity and Grendel's

66. It is possible that the sequence of sudden transitions to past and future are related to the Hama-Hygelac passage which follows the giving of Wealhþeow's gift in *fitt* XVIII. Hama's unheroic virtue, *geceas ecne rœd* (1201b), is paralleled by the statement that Beowulf was not proud (2177–83a); i.e., that he avoided the temptations of Hroþgar's sermon (*þe þæt selre geceos / ece rœdas,* 1759b–60a): such prudence would, in the context of the Geatish court, suggest slackness (2183b–89): it is from this court that Hygelac's rash and fatal campaign was launched (1201–14) cf. 2200–1. The beginning of the dragon-feud (*þeofes cræfte* 2219a) also recalls Hama's theft. It is possible, granted that the poet constructed *Beowulf* with such attention to symmetry, that he added the Hama-Hygelac passage later, as a foretaste of the *edhwyrft* he had planned after the presentation of the ring to Hygd.

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malice. The three figures described in XXXII—the Last Survivor, the Dragon and the Thief, cannot so easily be opposed as embodiments of good and evil. All three are forced into their actions: they seem dominated by a malignant law which forces them, separated as they are in time, into fatal juxtaposition—and the fatal catalyst is the treasure. The thief, hoping through the treasure to escape one feud, begins another:

> Nealles mid gewealdum wyrm-hord abræc,
> sylfes willum, se ðe him sare gesceod. 2221–22.

The history of the treasure is governed by a new sense of oppressive, impersonal fate. Heorot had been created by Hroþgar in celebration of his power and generosity, but the treasure's history encompasses the lives of many generations, and it dominates those who would try to possess it. It is an *ær-gestreon* (2232b), and its history brings us on a great circular sweep into the past. The Last Survivor sees the burial of the treasure as his last action before death (2239–41) and in his lament his doomed companions are seen primarily as the guardians of treasure. The treasure is thus from the first seen to bring death to those who serve it:

> feormynd swefað,
> þa ðe beado-griman bywan sceoldon. 2256–57.

The dragon, like the treasure itself, is *wintrum frod* (2277) and he is drawn to the treasure by his very nature, as the gnomic verse makes clear:

> He gesecean sceall
> hord on hrusan þær he hæðen gold
> warað wintrum frod; ne byð him wihte ðy sel. 2275b–77.

What is significant is not only the use of the gnomic phrase, which lessens the element of personal choice in the action, but the way it is expanded. Here the emphasis is on the 'heathen' qualities of the gold, on its essentially 'alien' character. Though a *ðeod-sceaða* (2278), inimical to mankind, the dragon does not, like Grendel, act wantonly. He now is the treasure's servant and he attacks no-one for three hundred years until the thief arouses him by stealing the cup. The pardon obtained by the thief is dramatised, and the treasure seen momentarily as ransacked under the protection of God (2291–93a). This only serves to emphasise the terrible consequences of the theft: no divine power prevents the dragon's revenge:

> Wæs se fruma egeslic
> leodum on lande, swa hit lungre wearð
> on hyra sinc-gifan sare ge-endod. 2309–11.

The pattern common to the three stages in the treasure's history is clear: in each case, a period of happiness or satisfaction leads to disaster—the destruction of the Last Survivor's nation, the dragon's rage, and the disaster to befall the Geats in the person of their lord.

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Fitt II brought the Danes and Grendel into violent contact; in XXXIII, Beowulf takes his place in the pattern of fatal conflict caused by the treasure. The first half of *fitt* II swung between Grendel's actions and their effect on the Danes: XXXIII uses a similar technique to prepare for Beowulf's fatal decision to fight the Dragon single-handed.[67] That this decision will be a fatal one for both contestants is made abundantly clear. The dragon believes he is safe in his den: *him seo wen geleah* (2322–23). No God-sent champion is to save Beowulf's life—he and his enemy are doomed (2341–44).

The poet's attitude to Beowulf in these lines is crucial to our understanding of the poem as a whole. Hroþgar, in his Sermon, has already warned Beowulf

> ofer-hyda ne gym,
> mære cempa! 1760b–61a.

and now the verb which gave the abstract noun, *oferhygd* 'pride', 'arrogance'[68], is used to explain Beowulf's action:

> Oferhogode ðа hringa fengel,
> þæt he þone wid-flogan weorode gesohte. 2345–46.

But no easy equation can be made between Beowulf's dilemma and the situation imagined in Hroþgar's speech. Hroþgar's *exemplum,* the Fortunate Ruler, is guilty of avarice as well as pride: death overtakes him unawares, when he has transgressed the heroic code in the eyes of his followers (1748–57). The poet's presentation of Beowulf at the present point is far less simple. This depends, to some extent, on the nature of his adversary. Dragons are no ordinary enemies, and in determining to fight the Dragon alone Beowulf is fulfilling a task suitable to his own heroic stature. With his strength of thirty men, and previous victories against the Grendels, Beowulf is to be seen as a kind of Sigemund, who also

> ana geneþde
> frecne dæde . . . 888b–89a.

and for a similar motive, a great treasure (894). It will become increasingly evident that Beowulf's error is to combine the functions of retainer and king, thus exposing his people to the dangers of a lordless time. The poet places this decision in its setting by describing in the second half of the *fitt* how Beowulf came to the throne—how he avenged Hygelac upon the Hetware in the fatal Frankish expedition (2354b–68), and loyally protected young Heardred, only becoming king when Heardred falls in the Swedish feuds (2379b–90). The poet closes the *fitt* with the words *þæt wæs god cyning* (2390b), having made it clear

67. The first half of this *fitt* consists of four paragraphs forming a pattern analogous to Bartlett's 'parallel pattern' (*op. cit.*, p. 30): 2312–23, the Dragon's attack; 2324–32, Beowulf's reaction; 2333–44, the fate of the two adversaries; and 2345–54a, Beowulf's decision.

68. Cf. J. Leyerle, *op. cit.* pp. 95-99.

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that Beowulf has succeeded to a line of kings who have lost their lives in feuds they have brought upon themselves, Hygelac *for wlenco* (1206), and Heardred through his fatal generosity in receiving and abetting the revolt of Ohthere's sons against

> þone selestan sæ-cyninga
> þara þe in Swio-rice sinc brytnade. 2382–83.

By this long passage, the poet has raised Beowulf's *oferhygd* from a matter of personal morality to a criticism of the fatal, if heroic tradition in which he participates.[69] The issue is also clearly related to the placing of the poem on a non-Christian setting. Beowulf, like Hroþgar in *fitt* II, cannot understand why this attack should occur, what *ealde riht* (2329–32)[70] he could have transgressed. He does not, like Hroþgar's people, despair (171b–94): his tragedy is the tragedy of the Geatish people, whose glory in the past has depended on the willing acceptance of feuds by their kings. Thus with only vague premonitions of disaster to warn him, Beowulf becomes entangled with the treasure and its history of the doom of many nations. The matter is seen as almost outside the scope of personal decision, controlled as it is by tradition and fate: the verb *sculan* is again dominant, as when the dragon became the guardian of the hoard (2275b):

> Sceolde læn-daga
> æþeling ær-god ende gebidan,
> worolde lifes, ond se wyrm somod,
> þeah ðe hord-welan heolde lange. 2341b–44.

In the three groups (*f*), (*g*) and (*h*) the poet has shown how the two extremes of attitude to kingly responsibility can both lead to disaster. Each attitude is expanded in turn, and then overturned as the verse moves to the following group, which contains a criticism or reversal of the values of the group that precedes it. The ruling mode is ironic: Hroþgar's attitude (itself a criticism of the nearly fatal concern for *dom* which dominated the Grendel's Mother fight) is seen to lead to the feuds which he has sought to avoid. The central group, (*g*), a glorification of the freely chosen heroic action,[71] gives way to a world where actions are compulsive, where the actors are driven by their natures, their feuds or their fate. Thus Beowulf's ideal of the freely chosen heroic action is seen in the context of a tradition of freely-chosen but fatal feuds which becomes

69. The stress is still, at this point, on the heroism, though the fatefulness of the tradition is implied by the description of the deaths of Beowulf's predecessors. Beowulf's actions give primary importance to the fact that these rash feuds call forth the extremes of loyalty—a loyalty paralleled later by Wiglaf.

70. Morton W. Bloomfield, 'Patristics and Old English Literature—Notes on Some Poems' *Studies in Old English Literature in Honour of A. G. Brodeur,* Oregon 1963, argues convincingly that *ealde riht* refers to the natural law. (pp. 39–41).

71. Hygelac's recollection of his previous scepticism about the Grendel expedition *(Ic ðe lange bæd | þæt þu þone wælgæst wihte ne grette, | lete Suð-Dene sylfe geweorðan | guðe wið Grendel,* 1994b–7a) heightens this aspect of Beowulf's action. Beowulf's justification may be summed up as 'by this feud I brought glory to your people (2095–6a) and treasure to you (2148–51)'.

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itself a tyranny, however willingly endured. Heremod's paranoia, introduced in the first *fitt* of the three groups (XXIV), and Beowulf's *oferhygd*, explained in the last *fitt* (XXXIII), lead to death for the two kings and a lordless time for both their peoples, though Heremod failed to live up to the heroic traditions of the Danish kings, and Beowulf exceeds the heroism of his predecessors on the Geatish throne.

GROUP (*i*)

Lines 2221–2820, *Fitts* XXXIV–XXXVIII.

'Beowulf and the Dragon'

GROUP (*j*)

Lines 2821–3182, *Fitts* XXXIX–XLIII

'The Lamentations and Obsequies'

The remaining part of the poem falls into two logical groups, each of five *fitts*: one dealing with Beowulf's last fight and death, the other with the response of his people to the catastrophe. I shall treat them together, however, to emphasise the rhetorical patterning which transcends these individual groups, and which unites them with the 'exordium' to the Dragon-part of the poem, group (*h*). (Cf. fig. 2).

It is worth noticing that, after its exordium, the Grendel fight was, like this one, organised into two groups of five *fitts*, [cf. fig. 3], the 'contests' [group (*c*)], and the realisation by the Danes of the significance of Beowulf's arrival [group (*b*)]. But far more significant is the progression in the vision of the poem between the Grendel fight and the Dragon-fight. This difference is all the more noticeable because of the parallels in rhetorical organisation between the exordia to the two fights, which we have just examined. *Fitt* III saw the sudden transformation of the disaster which befell the Danes (symbolised in the despair of Hroþgar, lines 189–93) through the sudden arrival of the champion Beowulf, and began a cumulative series of encounters between Beowulf and the Danes, and Beowulf and Grendel, which progressively heightened Beowulf's status as God's hero and his glory as saviour of the Danes. The climax is only reached in *fitt* XII. In contrast, the organisation of the Dragon-fight is not progressive: the dilemma of the exordium is not transformed but worsened. Whereas *fitt* III began with the startling contrast between Hroþgar's despair and the power of Hygelac's thane (189–198), *fitt* XXXIV begins with a restatement of the thematic movement of the exordium, from confidence to foreboding: lines 2391–2400 summarise the triumphal ending of Beowulf's Swedish feuds, but only to lead us back to the inescapable feud with the dragon:

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Swa he niða gehwane genesen hæfde,
sliðra geslyhta, sunu Ecgðiowes,
ellen-weorca, oð-ðone anne dæg,
þe he wið þam wyrme gewegan sceolde. 2397–2400.

This return to the insoluble dilemma, this denial of the possibility that things can be transformed or disaster averted for more than a short time, is a microcosm of the broad structure the poet now builds to express the final stage in his vision. There is a parallelism between the rhetorical organisation of group (*i*) and group (*j*) which is missing in groups (*b*) and (*c*). On the most obvious level, the victory over the monster now comes in the middle of the rhetorical pattern,[72] not at the end of it as in the Grendel fight: and around the two central *fitts*, XXXVII–XXXVIII, is grouped a series of four speeches whose symmetrical pairing, essential to the poem's design, has not I believe been previously noticed. I will now examine the paired speeches, and the *fitts* which enclose them: *figure* 2 shows the place of each speech in the total organisation of the Dragon-part.

Beowulf's speech before the battle, and his reversal before the dragon's fire (*fitts* XXXIV–XXXV) is balanced by the Messenger's speech after the battle and the tableau of the scene of the battlefield in which the curse on the treasure is first mentioned (*fitts* XL–XLI). Beowulf's speech is introduced by a description of the Geats' advance to the Dragon's cave, led by the unwilling thief, which reintroduces the atmosphere already associated with the history of the treasure in *fitt* XXXII: like the Last Survivor, Beowulf momentarily sees himself in the grip of a meaningless fate (2419b–24). The part of his speech which falls in *fitt* XXXIV intensifies this atmosphere through dramatisation: Beowulf sets out to recall the *guð-ræsas* (2426) he had formerly fought, but in the present situation he first sees the hopeless last days of his foster-king Hreþel, faced with the death of Herebeald for which no compensation was possible. The figure of Hrepel merges into that of the old man whose son was hanged, who is in an even more helpless situation;[73] and this figure is itself momentarily forgotten in elegiac lament which, while dramatically appropriate to the figure of the old man, serves also as a direct expression of the coming disaster which Beowulf forebodes:

ridend swefað,
hæleð in hoðman; nis þær hearpan sweg,
gomen in geardum, swylce þær iu wæron.[74] 2457b–59.

72. Directly in the middle of the Dragon-fight as a whole: *fitt* XXXVII is the seventh of the thirteen divisions which make up the Dragon-part (counting *fitt* XXXI as its Prelude.)
73. Cf. Whitelock, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
74. Cf. I. L. Gordon, *op. cit.*, (note 50 above), p. 15, on this passage: ". . . as in the later elegies and lyrics of Middle English, it is the speaker's present mood and thought and external surroundings that are the main interest, and these have become stylized into conventional motifs." Some of this stylization remains into the new *fitt*, XXXV. The phrase *Godes leoht geceas* (2469b) is a distinctively Christian phrase which suggests that the poet is here thinking of mood rather than character. It expresses the new hope which comes with *fitt* XXXV, but is unsuitable to the pagan Beowulf. Cf. Tolkien, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

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These lines look back to the atmosphere of the Last Survivor's speech, and mark the most intense point of Beowulf's despair: with the opening of *fitt* XXXV, we return from impersonal elegy to the figure of the man who has lost his son (2460), and to the death of Hreþel, and this provides the turning-point of the speech:

> Þa wæs synn ond sacu Sweona ond Geata; . . .
> here-nið hearda, syððan Hreðel swealt . . . 2472–74.

Beowulf now sees the acceptance of feuding as an escape from the elegiac hopelessness. The wars break out on Hrepel's death, but in them Hæþcyn, whose slaying of Herebeald his brother caused the old king's death, is killed (2483); and Hygelac's thane, Eofor, ensures that Hæþcyn also is avenged in his turn (2484–86).[75]

The pattern in Beowulf's reminiscences is now emerging: through them he transforms his despair into a determination to undertake the present battle. The juxtaposition of the various episodes defines his dilemma: the death of Hreþel from sorrow caused by an unavengeable feud makes it clear that it would be fatal for Beowulf to acquiesce in the dragon's victory, and drives him to think of feuds which were avenged. *Fitt* XXXIV makes it clear that *some* revenge on the dragon is necessary; but the episodes of *fitt* XXXV, when 'the heroic strain comes again . . . with its narration of another aspect of the Swedish wars in which Beowulf resumes the part of an actor'[76] are not true precedents for the fatal decision Beowulf is now acting upon. Ongenþeow was killed not by King Hygelac himself, but by his retainer Eofor; and Beowulf's second example of heroic revenge is ironically his own greatest action *as retainer* to Hygelac:

> Ic him þa maðmas, þe he me sealde,
> geald æt guðe . . . 2490–91.

This Dæghrefn episode (2490–2509) is a good example of the complexity of response called forth by the use of such 'digressions' or *exempla* in place of explicit statement. It recalls once more the last expedition of the previous king of the Geats, undertaken *for wlenco* (1206)[77] —and so reminds us that like Hygelac Beowulf is undertaking a fatal feud. Secondly, victory over Dæghrefn, like victory over Grendel, was achieved with his bare hands—yet Beowulf is now forced to place his trust in a sword (2506–9). Thus the Dæghrefn episode comments ironically on the argument in which Beowulf has used it: and both aspects of its irony are taken up explicitly in the last section of Beowulf's speech. Beowulf's intention of combining the function of champion with that of king is made explicit in his *beot*

75. This incident will be expanded, and seen from a different point of view, in the Messenger's speech. Cf. lines 2922–98, and for discussion pp. 38–9 below.
76. Bonjour, *The Digressions in Beowulf*, p. 34.
77. Beowulf now explicitly refers to Wealhþeow's gift which occasioned the first mention of Hygelac's fatal action (2503–4).

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Ic geneðde fela
guða on geogoðe; gyt ic wylle,
frod folces weard, fæhðe secan.[78] 2511b–13.

But he realises the disadvantage of having to trust to his sword (2518f.)—he only makes this decision, which places him in the hands of fate (2526), because the dragon is no human enemy: only his own strength is a match for him (2532b–34). As the words just quoted above make clear, Beowulf intends to act *swa ic geo wið Grendle dyde* (2521b); circumstances and his code have forced him to be champion as well as king. But when he declares his aim in battle, *gold gegangan* (2536) the poet only comments *ne bið swylc earges sið* (2541): the series of asides which in the Grendel fight distinguished the champion of God from God's enemy are not repeated. Instead, the bare narrative resembles, in its phases, the fight against Grendel's Mother: the Dragon makes the first attack (2556f.) and Beowulf's sword fails him (2584). Thus, the actual fight abruptly reverses the movement of Beowulf's long speech, from despair to hope of victory; as *fitt* XXXIV had begun with the *wyrd ungemete neah,* the end of *fitt* XXXV brings Beowulf immeasurably nearer his fate, the death which awaits all men:

swa sceal æghwylc mon
alætan læn-dagas. 2590b–91a.

Now, unlike the Grendel's Mother fight, no hope of divine intervention is given: the only thing which can avert the complete hopelessness of Beowulf's position is expressed in the gnomic phrase which closes the *fitt*:

sibb æfre ne mæg
wiht onwendan þam ðe wel þenceð. 2600b–2601.

—this introduction of Wiglaf comes as a fitting climax to a section of the poem which has been unified by the tradition of loyalty between kings and their retainers.

The circular movement within the two *fitts* which contain Beowulf's speech, the return to thoughts of fate and helplessness, matched as it is by a progression from foreboding to actuality, is paralleled in the movement of the Messenger's speech, and the *fitts* which frame it. The Messenger's speech begins with a description of the battlefield (2900–10a), and when it is finished the tableau of the battlefield is again described, but is dominated now by the treasure which forebodes a terrible fate for the whole nation (3030–57).[79] Both Beowulf and

78. These lines explicitly recall the opening of Beowulf's reminiscences (2426–7), showing how Beowulf is made to see his present action as flowing from these previous experiences.

79. Beowulf's speech begins, and the Messenger's ends, with a journey to *Earna-næs* (2401–24 and 3030–3057). What Beowulf forebodes on the first journey—his own fate —has come to pass on the second: this progression from foreboding to fulfilment is an important feature in the parallel. In turn, the Geats on the second journey are also dominated by thoughts of disaster to come.

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the messenger express their states of mind through reminiscences; but where Beowulf thought of unavengeable feuds in *fitt* XXXIV, the Messenger thinks (1) of the Frisian expedition as causing the enmity of the Merovingians (2910b–21), and (2) of the Ravenswood battle as an example of the complete desolation of the Geats *hlafordlease* (2935) after the death of Hæþcyn (2925), until they are saved by the arrival of Hygelac, Hæþcyn's brother and successor (2941f.). The juxtaposition of these two episodes at once makes clear the danger of feuds undertaken by the Geats *for onmedlan* (2926) and, on the other hand, how this danger can only be averted by the spirit and leadership of a strong king. The episodes drive home the fundamental ambiguity of the retainers' situation: their fate depended on the enterprise of King Hygelac whose bravery (we have just been told) finally caused his own death and lasting enmities for his people.

Dr. Sisam, who says that Ongenþeow's last fight 'reads almost like a caricature of the practice of digression',[80] has missed the larger rhetorical and thematic symmetry served by such amplification of material. Beowulf has referred to the same incident in the second *fitt* of his speech before battle (2486), but had assimilated it to his pattern of successful revenge leading to his own feats against Dæghrefn and the dragon. Beowulf's point of view was that of the champion-king, the shaper of history. The Messenger now expresses the viewpoint of those whose history is shaped by such heroes, who are themselves subordinate dependants. Thus he sees Hygelac's death simply as a disaster, and for one very good reason among others:

> nalles frætwe geaf
> ealdor dugoðe. 2919b–20a.

This is why he dwells on a single incident, where Beowulf saw a tradition to be continued. The expanded and heightened encounter between Wulf, Eofor and King Ongenþeow is made to image the glory and prosperity to be had under a strong and generous king: it culminates in a gift-giving which is given the solemnity of extended lines (2995–96). But such deeds, now that the Geatish king is dead[81] are not only past and irrecoverable—they entail further disaster for the defenceless people:

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80. *The Structure of Beowulf*, 1965, p. 13. The poet, by beginning a new *fitt* with this incident, seems to have intended it as a contrast to the two incidents which end *fitt* XL (2910–45). It is interesting to compare the sectional divisions XXXV (2460) and XLI (2946). Lines 2946f. seem to be more directly paralleled by 11. 2472f.: *þa was synn ond sacu*. In the earlier *fitt*, the turning-point of Beowulf's speech only comes after eleven lines in which the deaths of the old man and of Hreþel are narrated. The sectional division may have become displaced from l. 2472 to 2460; but it is more likely that the poet wished to emphasise the importance of the elegiac lines (2455–59) by making them the climax of *fitt* XXXIV. Cf. *fitts* III and XXXIV, which begin with introductory passages which 'tidy up' the climax of the preceding *fitt*, and prepare the audience for the themes which are to dominate the new *fitt*.

81. One question is, why did the poet choose to recapitulate Hygelac's Swedish wars at such length? Could not, for example, Beowulf's vengeance of the sons of Ohthere (11.2394–5) be expanded into an *exemplum* of Beowulf's magnificence? In stressing Hygelac's victories, however, the poet makes the point that it is Hygelac who began both the Frankish and Swedish feuds: but it is only now, when Beowulf is dead, that these enemies can take their revenge. Beowulf's only fatal decision has been to fight the dragon.

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Þæt ys sio fæhðo ond se feondscipe,
wæl-nið wera, ðæs ðe ic wen hafo,
þe us seceað to Sweona leoda,
syððan hie gefricgeað frean userne
ealdor-leasne, . . . 2999–3003a. (Cf. 2910b–13a).

A comparison with Beowulf's speech is again instructive here. Beowulf's reminiscences did not contrast with, but prefigured his present situation. He made this connection explicit in his *beot* (2511–14): the reversal in *fitt* XXXV only comes when the dragon's attack makes Beowulf's *beot* impossible to fulfil (2570f.). The Messenger is all too well aware of the reversal: thus his final words, on the uselessness of the treasure Beowulf has won, are confirmed and given further sinister overtones by the two descriptions of the treasure which follow, one of which ends the *fitt*: in both the treasure is seen under a curse (3047–57; 3058–75). Beowulf's speech culminated in an explicit resolve to capture the treasure (2536): the Messenger's speech hinges on references to treasure-giving, and he drives home his prophecies of the fate awaiting the Geats by juxtaposing the scene in which Hygelac distributes the spoils won from the Swedes (2989–98) with the announcement that Beowulf's treasure won from the Dragon will be burned on the funeral pyre:

þa sceall brond fretan,
æled þeccean, nalles eorl wegan
maððum to gemyndum . . . 3014b–16a.

This powerful reversal of the motif of gift-giving after a victory is expanded by images of exile and defeat—wolf, eagle and the absence of harp-playing (3021b–27). Beowulf has, like Hygelac, won treasure: but this means exile, not prosperity for his people. The pyrrhic nature of the victory Beowulf has won could hardly have been more powerfully expressed than this grim realisation of Beowulf's intention to obtain the treasure. The reversal of the conventional motif in these lines is a microcosm of the greater reversal the poet has built up by counterpointing the Messenger's speech with Beowulf's.

The tradition of loyalty upon which Beowulf had based his action is used by the poet to introduce Wiglaf: his appearance marks a turning-point in the battle and a new *fitt* (XXXVI, 2602). As I have suggested, he intervenes when the battle has reached a stage analogous to the one at which the Magic Sword was given to Beowulf in the Grendel's Mother fight:[82] but now, instead of a reference to a God who 'puts things right', the cowardice of the other retainers is used to highlight the supreme loyalty of Wiglaf.[83]

There are no supernatural overtones to the sword Wiglaf brings to Beowulf's aid: as is inevitable in this part of the poem, its history is connected, not with God's feud with the giants, but the wars of the Geats. Its history is as relevant

82. Cf. lines 1550–1556, and the opening of *fitt* XXII (1557).
83. A good example of the way in which narrative consistency in *Beowulf* is subordinated to the rhetorical pattern: Beowulf in his last words to these retainers, had expressly forbidden them to tâke part in the fight (2532f.).

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to this struggle, however, as the history of the Magic Sword was to the fight against the tribe of Cain.[84] The direct intervention of God against the dragon is not to be expected; but Beowulf's kingly generosity calls up a young warrior through whose loyalty the dragon will be defeated. The description of Weohstan's sword heightens the expression of Wiglaf's love for Beowulf, by making it stand out against a background of tribal enmity and of family-feuding. Onela rejoices when his nephew Eanmund is killed

> no ymbe ða fæhðe spræc,
> þeah ðe he his broðor bearn abredwade. 2618b–19.

Further, he gives Weohstan this sword because of the disastrous defeat which Eanmund's death had inflicted on Beowulf's people.[85] Yet Beowulf's generosity to Weohstan and his son has transformed these old enmities: Wiglaf, whose family's glory has been won with Swedes as much as Geats, is now the person whose supreme loyalty turns Beowulf's defeat into victory; and we are reminded of the hatred within the Swedish ruling family at the moment of the most moving expression in the poem of *sibb* (2600) and of the bonds between lord and thane.

The pattern of loyalty which Beowulf's recollections had emphasised now reaches its fulfilment. The old king had twice referred to his exploits as a retainer as motives for his present action:[86] now Wiglaf, in his first battle (2625) enables Beowulf to fulfil the promises of his youth:

> Leofa Biowulf, læst eall tela,
> swa ðu on geoguð-feore geara gecwæde,
> þæt ðu ne alæte be ðe lifigendum
> dom gedreosan . . . 2663–66a.

But in the fight itself Wiglaf's reversal is as complete as Beowulf's had been. In the Dragon's second attack, Wiglaf is forced to take to the protection of Beowulf's shield, and Beowulf's sword breaks—his strength is too much for it, or for any human weapon (2673–87). Wiglaf is unable to prevent the dragon, on his third attack, giving the now swordless Beowulf a fatal wound; and *fitt* XXXVI, like the preceding one, ends before the turning-point of the battle. The description of victory is postponed to the new *fitt*, XXXVII, and will be examined later.

Wiglaf is the first of the Geats to comment on Beowulf's death. The *fitt* which contains this second speech opens with a reference to Wiglaf's affection for Beowulf

> Ða wæs gegongen guman unfrodum
> earfoðlice, þæt he on eorðan geseah
> þone leofestan lifes æt ende . . . 2821–23.

84. Cf. lines 1688–93 above.
85. This is the war in which Heardred, Hygelac's son, was killed. (lines 2384 ff. above). Bonjour, *op. cit.*, 1950, p. 39, has suggested another (not incompatible) reason for the sword passage: Wiglaf has incurred the enmity of Eanmund's brother Eadgils, who will attack Wiglaf and the Geats after Beowulf's death.
86. Cf. lines 2426, 2511b–12a (*on giogoðe*).

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—which opens out into the first of a series of tableaux of the battlefield and the slain.[87] These passages, combining description and reflection in the manner of *fitts* X–XII (the Grendel fight) play an important part in the development of the poem's themes from now to its end. In this first tableau (2821–59) description and comment communicate a double level of vision: on one level Wiglaf's grief and loyalty is contrasted to the cowardice of the retainers who had failed their lord in his need (2845b–2854); but the comment on the battle as a whole places these values of the *comitatus* in the perspective of a fate which they cannot control—in the face of death, Wiglaf's efforts are puny:

> Ne meahte he on eorðan, ðeah he uðe wel,
> on ðam frum-gare feorh gehealdan,
> ne ðæs Wealdendes wiht oncirran.
> Wolde dom Godes dædum rædan
> gumena gehwylcum, swa he nu gen doið 2855–59.

This vision transcends the loyalties and enmities of the fight: a passage which showed signs of developing into a condemnation of the *wyrm woh-bogen* (2827), ends by seeing both adversaries united, through the gold, in death:

> Biowulfe wearð
> dryht-maðma dæl deaðe forgolden;
> hæfde æghwæðer ende gefered
> lænan lifes. 2842b–45a.

Wiglaf's speech, however, dramatizes the values of the *comitatus*: it closely parallels his speech before battle.[88] Again the first thought is of Beowulf's generosity (2865–72; cf. 2633–46); Beowulf's need for retainers (cf. 2646–50a) remained unanswered: but at least God enabled Beowulf to avenge *himself* upon the dragon (2874b–76)—a highly ironic use of the motif of revenge. Beowulf, having killed the dragon which killed him, has anticipated the duty of the cowardly retainers. Wiglaf, though he could not save Beowulf's life, at least has fulfilled his duty to help his *mæg* (2877–83; cf. 2650b–52). The themes of the two speeches correspond stage-by-stage: now Wiglaf recalls the last lines of his previous speech (2653–60), when he warns the retainers of the shame and punishment which awaits their families (*eowrum cynne* 2885) when the other Geatish warriors (*æðelingas* 2888) hear of their cowardice.[89] Wiglaf's

87. We have already seen how the 'tableau' will be used to confirm the Messenger's speech (3028f.). It also introduces Wiglaf's third speech (3058f.); and indeed *fitt* XLIII is best understood as a final tableau which displays the whole spectrum of attitudes expressed in its predecessors.

88. Even in length: the present speech, and the speech before battle (2633–60) excluding Wiglaf's *beot* (4 lines), are both of 28 lines.

89. The close correspondence between the two speeches seems to be decisive evidence for Professor Stanley's suggestion ('Hæþenra Hyht in *Beowulf*': *Studies . . . in Honour of A. G. Brodeur*, p. 142 fn. 5.) that *cynn* in 2885 refers to the retainers' 'families within the tribe, rather than to the tribe as a whole'; other evidence supporting this would seem to be Wiglaf's final gnomic phrase (2890–91, quoted p.42), and the parallel between *eowrum cynne* and *fleam eowerne* 2889. The point is important, as it means that the Messenger's speech, (esp. *11. 3010 sq.*), is a development, not just a repetition, of Wiglaf's fears for the future.

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cryptic acceptance of his duty in the earlier speech (2659b–60) is paralleled by a gnomic expression of the code which caused it:

> Deað bið sella
> eorla gehwylcum þonne edwit-lif. 2890b–91.

The two short *fitts* enclosed by this pattern of speeches, XXXVII (2694f.) and XXXVIII (2752–2820) encompass the two central events of the Dragon-fight: they begin with the killing of the dragon (2694f.) and end with the death of Beowulf (2819–20). The central section of each *fitt* is a speech by Beowulf: these two speeches[90] should be seen together: their themes are complementary, and give unity to these *fitts*, making them the pivotal point of the wide-spread rhetorical pattern of the dragon-fight.

The sectional division XXXVII marks off the final turning-point in the battle, as XXIII (1557) had done in the Grendel's Mother fight. The parallel is instructive: this is the third *fitt* to contain part of the Dragon-fight, and the isolation of this final passage (2694–2709a) emphasises that where Beowulf alone had failed (XXXV) and Wiglaf also had been forced to retreat (XXXVI) final victory comes with the third rally and the union of king and retainer. The closeness of the union is made clear by the action: Wiglaf enables Beowulf to dispatch the dragon, and the poet comments:

> Feond gefyldan —ferh ellen wræc—
> ond hie hyne þa begen abroten hæfdon,
> sib-æþelingas. Swylc sceolde secg wesan,
> þegn æt ðearfe! 2706–09a.

—Wiglaf is here explicitly praised for his subordinate role: the victory has above all been one of *sibb*, of the loyalty which binds chieftain and retainer.

The following passage (2709b–28), which abruptly contrasts with the celebration of the joint victory over the dragon, strongly and significantly echoes the atmosphere of *fitt* XXXIV, the introduction to Beowulf's long speech. After the elation of the victory over the Swedes, the poet turned immediately to the day when Beowulf's victories were to end:

> þone anne dæg
> þe he wið þam wyrme gewegan sceolde. XXXIV, 2399b–2400.

This fate has now come true, as the dragon's poison begins its work:

> þæt ðam þeodne wæs
> siðast sige-hwile sylfes dædum,
> worlde geweorces. XXXVII, 2709b–11a.

The progression from foreboding to actuality, which we have seen is an important feature of the grouped speeches, is very strong: if in *fitt* XXXIV fate was terribly near to Beowulf (2420b) he now knows what his fate entails: *deað ungemete neah* (2728b).

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90. 2729–51 and 2794–2816.

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In the face of this fate, however, Beowulf shows calmness and even joy. In *fitt* XXXVII he surveys his own reign in words which recall Hroþgar's righteousness:

> Ic ðæs ealles mæg,
> feorh-bennum seoc, gefean habban;
> forðam me witan ne þearf Waldend fira
> morðor-bealo maga, þonne min sceaceð
> lif of lice.[91] 2739b–43a.

Beowulf can die in peace, assured that he has avoided the violence of such as Unferð and Heremod, and the avarice of Hroþgar's Fortunate Ruler. After these words Beowulf orders Wiglaf to bring him the treasure he has won; his speech is only resumed in the next *fitt*, when he lies surrounded by the treasure. The sight of the treasure increases his joy: he has achieved his aim

> þæs þe ic moste minum leodum
> ær swylt-dæge swylc gestrynan.[92] 2797–98.

Though he sees his life as sold for the treasure (2799–2801), his one thought is for the people he leaves behind, which he entrusts to Wiglaf

> fremmað gena
> leoda þearfe! 2800–1a.

Beowulf desires that his barrow shall be built as a reminder to his people of what he has done for them (2804).

The pivotal change between the two speeches, and the two *fitts* is clear: in *fitt* XXXVII Beowulf's thoughts were on the past: he has crowned a good life with his victory; in *fitt* XXXVIII, he thinks what this fight will mean to his people in the future: with Wiglaf to protect them, they can enjoy the treasure and the glory Beowulf has won for them through his death. But the description of the treasure with which the *fitt* has opened has worked a more subtle and far-reaching change on the atmosphere of the verse which qualifies our response to Beowulf's joy and endows his speech already with a tinge of dramatic irony. This description has contained two references to the dragon: he too, like Beowulf, has given his life for the treasure (2771bf.). In fact it is the treasure itself which is the silent victor of the fight:

> Sinc eaðe mæg,
> gold on grunde, gum-cynnes gehwone
> oferhigian; hyde se ðe wylle! 2764b–66.

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91. Cf. Hroþgar's Sermon, ll. 1769–81: now that his fate has come to pass, Beowulf shows an acceptance of it which contrasts sharply with Hroþgar's fear (1774 sq.).
92. In the light of these two speeches, flanked as they are by Wiglaf's two *comitatus* speeches each of which emphasises Beowulf's generosity, it seems extraordinary that Beowulf, because he died for the gold, should be accused of avarice. Yet, cf. Stanley, *op. cit.*, p. 146; it seems clear however that the poet criticises, not Beowulf personally, but a whole way of life which cannot see beyond treasure and glory.

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This gnomic phrase has again pinpointed the ageless nature of the treasure. Again the poet uses echoes of past sections to control his effect, and the treasure is seen as

fyrn-manna fatu feormend-lease. 2761.

If one has been alive to these sinister overtones in the opening of the *fitt*, the last four lines of Beowulf's speech come with the finality of a prophecy fulfilled. This sense of sombre fittingness is increased by the fact that Beowulf began his speech in *fitt* XXXVII by saying that the time had come for him to leave his armour to his children, if he had had any (2729–31a): now he solemnly invests Wiglaf as Last Survivor of the Wægmundings:

Þu eart ende-laf usses cynnes,
Wægmundinga; ealle wyrd forspeon
mine magas to metodsceafte,
eorlas on elne; ic him æfter sceal. 2813–16.

To appreciate the significance of these lines, the two central *fitts* must be placed firmly in the wider pattern which unites the Dragon-fight. As the introduction to Beowulf's speech in XXXVII had made clear, the closest parallel to them is Beowulf's speech before battle, XXXIV–XXXV: in fact the themes of *fitts* XXXVII–XXXVIII can best be understood as the centre-piece in a triptych formed with Beowulf's speech before battle and the Messenger's speech (XXXIX–XL). The broad parallels are immediately evident. All three contain a turning-point, marked by a sectional division. In the speech before battle, this is a movement from despair to a determination based on past traditions; the speech ends by seeing the present as culmination of the past—a vision which the actual fight abruptly negates. In Beowulf's dying speech the movement goes one step further. The present fight, fatal as it is, is seen to close a life of just and glorious action with a great victory (XXXVII): and this present glory is seen to prefigure glory and wealth for Beowulf's people in the future (XXXVIII). But the new prominence given to the treasure in the description which opens *fitt* XXXVIII contains a tragic irony which again negates Bewoulf's vision: its words are made to echo *fitt* XXXII, and we are made to feel that in entrusting Wiglaf with the treasure and confirming his role as successor to the Geatish kings, Beowulf is unconsciously giving him the role of the Last Survivor, and passing on to his people the doom of the past guardians of the gold. Thus the atmosphere of the exordium to the Dragon-fight is made to dominate the moments of Beowulf's victory and death, suggesting themes of doom and communal disaster which are fully developed only by the last two *fitts* of the poem, when Wiglaf himself has the treasure buried once more. The poise and balance achieved in the central *fitts* between Beowulf's serenity and the ambiguous overtones of the treasure he has won is perfectly caught in the last four lines of *fitt* XXXVIII:

Þæt wæs þan gomelan gingæste word
breost-gehygdum, ær he bæl cure,
hate heaðo-wylmas; him of hræðre gewat
sawol secean soð-fæstra dom. 2817–20.

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The ambiguity would be as evident to an Anglo-Saxon audience as it should be to us:[93] are the 'hot, hostile flames' which Beowulf chooses simply those of the funeral-pyre? He seeks the judgement of those who cleave to truth—yet his last words have been about the impersonal fate which has lured his people to destruction:[94] the poet is as enigmatic about the fate of Beowulf's soul as about the double-edged nature of his achievement.

In the third part of the triptych, the Messenger's speech, the note of doom becomes explicit: the future is no longer seen as a continuation of past glory, but as doomed *because* of past glory and past ambitions; and the reversal comes no longer in the descriptions which frame the speeches but in the words of the Messenger himself, who realises the ambiguous nature of the victory Beowulf has won, and expresses this by the reversal, which we have already examined, of the conventional themes of treasure and gift-giving.

In his descriptive passages, however, the poet remains enigmatic. He is concerned with the effect of Beowulf's death on the Geatish tribe as a whole, and so the speeches of Wiglaf and of the Messenger, and their actions, are fully imagined and described. The fate of Beowulf himself is never made clear. The poet keeps the question before our eyes in *fitts* XLI and XLII, but his statements vary according to the atmosphere of the speeches which the descriptive passages introduce or comment on. Thus, the Messenger's speech has been concerned with battles, victory and defeat, not with questions of fate. In the concluding lines of *fitt* XLI the treasure's curse is first mentioned—but likewise in terms of victory and defeat. The curse prevented any man from opening the treasure

> nefne God sylfa,
> sigora Soð-cyning, sealde þam ðe he wolde
> —he is manna gehyld— hord openian,
> efne swa hwylcum manna, swa him gemet ðuhte. 3054b–57.

The poet here is thinking of Beowulf's victory, due in the last resort to the true King of victories. It is a mistake to give any deeper meaning to this passage; very similar words were used of the thief's success in *fitt* XXXII, where it is clear that no deeper meaning is intended than that all victories are due to God's protection:

> Swa mæg unfæge eaðe gedigan
> wean ond wræc-sið, se ðe Wealdendes
> hyldo gehealdeþ. 2291–93a.

In the new *fitt* (XLII) however the atmosphere changes and the meaning of the curse is expanded—another example of the technique by which potential meanings of motifs are gradually developed. The poet moves on from the

93. Cf. E. G. Stanley, on the ambiguity of *soðfæstra dom. op. cit.*, pp. 142–3; Marie Padgett Hamilton, 'The Religious Principle in *Beowulf*', *PMLA* LXI (1946), pp. 309–331, repr. Nicholson, *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, (1963), 133.

94. I take here Wrenn's reading *forspeon*: *op. cit.*, p. 224. The verb, common in homiletic literature, has overtones of 'to mislead' 'seduce' 'lure to destruction': the fate of the Geats is already seen as an evil one.

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Messenger's vision, in which life was seen as controlled by kings and champions —human forces—to emphasise the puniness of man's knowledge and power over death:

> Wundur hwar þonne
> eorl ellen-rof ende gefere
> lif-gesceafta, ponne leng ne mæg
> mon mid his mægum medu-seld buan. 3062b–65.

Beowulf's death is now seen as almost a historical accident—the fulfilment of the curse put on the gold by its previous owners, centuries ago—which determined that, though he could not know it, Beowulf's death was to coincide with his gaining of the treasure:

> næs gold-hwæte gearwor hæfde
> agendes est ær gesceawod.[95] 3074–75.

As Stanley points out, there is no 'loophole allowing Beowulf to escape the curse which, if it prevails, must commit him to hell.'[96] This is true—with the proviso that the poet is here interested primarily, not to condemn Beowulf, but to create an atmosphere of oppressive fate as an introduction to Wiglaf's speech. These lines (3071–75) would have specific associations for the audience:

> they correspond to the usual clause in Anglo-Saxon charters which threatens anybody who breaks the disposition with damnation, the companionship of Judas, of Ananias and Saphira, and the like.[97]

Beowulf has become the unwitting victim of a legal agreement made a millennium before (line 3050).

The last two *fitts*, then, begin with the moment in which the poem's universe seems not merely hopeless but meaningless. It is their function to place this

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95. I translate with G. V. Smithers, ('Five notes on Old English Texts', *English and Germanic Studies*, IV (1951–52), 75–85) and E. G. Stanley, *op. cit.*, pp. 143–6, 'By no means had he previously seen more clearly the gold-bestowing munificence of the owner.' Stanley (p. 146) convincingly interprets the lines as an example of litotes: 'Beowulf had asked to have a good look at the treasure, and, as a result of the curse, the first look he had of the treasure was a look as good as he was ever to have'. Klaeber (p. 227) emends the passage, taking it as 'a virtual declaration of Beowulf's innocence'. He cites the clause, which usually occurs in Charters, showing a way to avoid the threatened curse. [Cf. note 97 below.]

96. *Op. cit.*, p. 146.

97. Sisam, 'Beowulf's fight with the Dragon', *RES*, IX, 1958, 131. (who however sees lines 3069–73 as interpolated). Anathemas are found in Old English charters as early as the reign of King Æþelbald of Mercia: the following extract comes from an agreement dated by Agnes J. Robertson between 743–746. "If they (*sc* successors or tax-gatherers) will not agree they shall be excluded from participation in the body and blood of our Lord the Saviour Christ, and they shall be severed and sundered from all the fellowship of the faithful, unless they make amends for it here with intercession." (A. J. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, Cambridge, $_2$1956, pp. 2–3).

These anathemas became extremely common (and virulent) in the late Old English period: cf. D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, Oxford, 1955, nos. 103–4, 110, and 115–118 for examples from the period 926–1000. Anathemas are even more common in the Old English Wills during the tenth century. Cf. D. Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, Cambridge, 1930, nos. I, II, IV, XI, XIII etc.

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attitude in a spectrum of themes—themes now crystallized in a series of images and stylized figures. The associations of these images have been developed through the poem, and they are now juxtaposed to express the poem's resolution, the final reconciliation of its elements. The first figure is that of Wiglaf. He unites the exordium, the central climax, and the final resolution of the Dragon-fight, because these two *fitts* are, on one level, the description of how he carries out for the second time the function of the Last Survivor, a role given to him in the last words of Beowulf. He had proved his right to this role, and his right to take his place in Beowulf's tradition of loyal retainers who became great kings, by his *comitatus* speeches and his action in the battle; and now his last speech unites an awareness of the doom Beowulf's decision has caused—

> Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan
> wræc adreogan, swa us geworden is. 3077–78.

—with an unquestioning loyalty to his *leofne þeoden* 3079, *leofne mannan* 3108. Fate is accepted, though its grimness is recognised (3084–86); nothing can erase the fact to which Beowulf's barrow will stand witness, that he

> manna wæs
> wigend weorðfullest wide geond eorðan
> þenden he burh-welan brucan moste. 3098b–3100.

The change made in the atmosphere of the poem by Wiglaf's speech is noteworthy: he reverses the movement towards acrimony and despair which the verse has taken from *fitts* XXXIX–XLI, with their constant theme of the reversal of hopes; and the last lines of his speech are an elegiac recollection of a lord whose daring courage in battle was his greatest glory:

> Nu sceal gled fretan,
> —weaxan wonna leg— wigena strengel,
> þone ðe oft gebad isern-scure, . . . 3114–16.

The last lines of the *fitt* (3120–36) are the final consummation of Beowulf's victory, not a lament for its consequences: the hoard which for so long had dominated the action and become the symbol of a fate which controlled events, is now abruptly ransacked, and the unceremonious disposal of the dragon coincides with the final preparations for Beowulf's magnificent funeral.

The movement of the last *fitt* in the poem is similar to that of XLII, though from the personal elegy of Wiglaf we move to the actions and attitudes of the community as a whole, as his orders are carried out. The structural symmetry of the *fitt* is unequalled in the poem: a six-line introduction (3137–42) gives a last glimpse of the 'glorious prince' surrounded by his weapons. The three stages of Beowulf's funeral are then described in three paragraphs of almost equal length. In the first,[98] as the roaring flames consume Beowulf's body, the atmosphere of the Messenger's speech is recalled for a moment. As Wealhþeow

98. Lines 3143–55 (13 lines).

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had once feared for her sons, the 'Geatish woman' 'clearly sees, and grieves for, the destruction of [Beowulf's] people:'[99]

> þæt hio hyre heofung-dagas hearde ondrede
> wæl-fylla worn, werudes egesan,
> hynðo ond hæft-nyd. 3153–55a.

In the central paragraph,[100] the thoughts of the Geats are again on the future. Beowulf's barrow is built with great care over the space of ten days:

> swa hit weorðlicost
> fore-snotere men findan mihton. 3161b–62.

Beowulf's last wish for a glorious memorial is achieved—the barrow is

> weg-liðendum wide gesyne (3158, cp. 2806–8).

'The great Hoard that Beowulf won for his people is used to honour him . . . a great treasure to honour a great king'[101] is enclosed in the barrow. The poet now brings to clear statement and resolution the associations he has built up previously between the treasure and the impersonal fate which rules the Geats. Whereas a Christian people would be able to pray for the dead man's soul, using the money to provide Masses and endow monasteries, the Geats rely simply on fame among generations to come. The last lines of the paragraph catch at once the sterility of the Treasure (by emphasising the circular, self-enclosed nature of its history) and its lasting, brooding influence (by recalling the earlier lines about the *gold on grunde,* and its power for evil, *hyde se ðe wylle,* 2764b–66):

> forleton eorla gestreon eorðan healdan,
> gold on greote, þær hit nu gen lifað
> eldum swa unnyt, swa hit æror wæs. 3166–68.

The 'beacon of the man mighty in battle' (3160a) becomes in the central paragraph, then, a symbol of the ultimate ambiguity of Beowulf's achievement, of the ultimate sterility of the ideals for which he fights. But the funeral moves smoothly to its third stage[102] in which the events are seen once more in the perspective of the heroic code, and the time-sequence shifts from the timeless world of the treasure and fate, and the future of the 'Geatish woman's' fears, to the past. The poem closes with a celebration of the heroic deeds of Beowulf recounted in it. The sense of fulfilment, of fittingness in the elegy is increased by the completion of the symmetrical structure. The elegiac note echoes the final words of Wiglaf's final speech, and we return to the figure of Beowulf himself (*ymb wer sprecan* 3172b) with which the *fitt* had begun. The poet leaves aside his note of irony: the retainers are acting

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99. Brodeur, *op. cit.,* (1959), p. 131.
100. Lines 3156–68 (13 lines).
101. Sisam, *op. cit.,* (1958) pp. 139–40: he also correctly interprets lines 3166–68 as 'the comment of the Anglo-Saxon church, to be interpreted "it would have been better spent on prayers and alms" '.
102. Lines 3169–82 (14 lines).

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swa hit gedefe bið
þæt mon his wine-dryhten wordum herge,
ferhðum freoge, þonne he forþ scile
of lic-haman læded weorðan. 3174b–77.

But the sense of fittingness and fulfilment comes from the completion of a pattern far wider than the *fitt* itself: the poem ends, as it opened, with thoughts of *eorlscipe* and *ellenweorc,* (3173) and the valour and generosity of Beowulf the Dane, which the poet summarised by the word *lof-dædum* (24) are now celebrated in Beowulf the Geat:

leodum liðost ond lof-geornost. 3182.

The poem has however given us a deep realisation of the consequences of *wig ond wisdom.*

CONCLUSION

FORM AND CONTENT IN BEOWULF

Figure 3 indicates the well-planned rhetorical pattern which lies behind the poem. The symmetrical grouping of the *fitts* is so closely related to the poem's thematic progression that it can hardly be explained away as coincidence. The first thing to notice is that the fights themselves are described in groups of five *fitts.* In addition, the first and last fights each have a companion-group of five *fitts.* One [group (*b*)]—(describing what Beowulf's coming means to the Danes)—heightens our sense of Beowulf's *wig ond wisdom* in preparation for the Unferð and Grendel contests which vindicate these qualities. The other [group (*j*)] (driving home what Beowulf's death means to the Geats)—achieves the final equipoise between the heroism and the rashness of the Geatish tradition. In addition, each of these two fights is introduced by an exordium of three *fitts* [groups (*a*), (*h*)]. Yet a profound opposition underlies the apparent symmetry of organisation in the thirteen *fitts* of the Grendel and of the Dragon parts. This opposition in theme and atmosphere confirms Tolkien's intuition of the poem's essentially 'static' structure.[103] Tolkien has however overemphasised this opposition, as is made clear by his rather misleading analogy between the poem's structure and that of the Old English poetic line.[104] He underrates the function of the fight with Grendel's Mother. Though once more of five *fitts,* the central group (*e*) is flanked by two 'transitional' groups of six *fitts* [(*d*), (*f*)–(*g*)]. The first of these, group (*d*), modifies our response to heroic action by putting the celebration of Beowulf's victory against a background, first, of other stereotyped figures of successful and unsuccessful warriors (XIII) and then of the grimmer concomitants of heroic action: feuds and national disaster (XVI–XVIII). Thus the group leads us towards a fusion of the themes

103. *Op. cit.,* p. 81.
104. *Loc. cit.,* pp. 83–4. cf. Sisam, *op. cit.,* (1965), pp. 21–22.

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which dominate the opposed Grendel and Dragon fights. This fusion between successful heroic action, watched over by God, and the perils and compulsion of feuding, is achieved in Beowulf's glorious but nearly fatal victory over Grendel's avenging Mother. The six *fitts* of groups (*f*)–(*g*) then complete the transition from the ethos of Heorot, where feuding appears a fatal and uncontrollable invasion, to Geatland where feuds are willingly accepted. The materials of group (*d*) are recalled, but the pace of transition is greatly increased: each short group overturns the aspirations dominant in the preceding one. The shifts in perspective become increasingly violent, the irony more all-embracing and closer to Beowulf himself, until the meaning of the actions of generations of Geatish kings and heroes is made to pivot on Beowulf's 'high fate' in gaining the fatal treasure for his people.

The most important achievement of the *Beowulf* poet, and the most difficult for modern readers to come to terms with, is his objectivity. Not only does he grasp at once the glory and the weakness of both Danish and Geatish traditions; he develops the consequences of both from their common origin in the figure of Scyld Scefing (ancestor of Hroþgar and prototype of Beowulf) and the glorious world of *fitt* I, when the warlike Hroþgar builds the hall which attracts Grendel. Hroþgar attracts his fate to him, Beowulf seeks it out: neither escapes, neither can ensure lasting peace for his people. Hroþgar's desolation is however the occasion for Beowulf's glorious deeds, Beowulf's agony calls forth Wiglaf's *sibb,* and so creates a survivor with the power to carry on Beowulf's glory. It is a mistake to see the poet's irony as simply fatalistic, or to assume that the audience 'knew' (what was not in fact historically true) that Beowulf's people was doomed.[105] Wiglaf's final speech and actions, recalling those of the Last Survivor, bring to its climax 'the poetic representation of a people's grief and fears when their great king dies'[106] and show the Geats once more under the leadership of a young warrior who has proved himself in a great victory. It is significant that the poem ends not with the Messenger's speech which denied that the Geatish tradition could survive Beowulf's fall, but with the carrying out of Wiglaf's commands. Wiglaf explicitly chooses, and was chosen by Beowulf in his last speech, to carry on the tradition of Geatish glory: the poem ends as he has Beowulf's last wishes magnificently fulfilled. Yet, though *fitt* XLIII ends not with the despairing Geatish woman but with the solemn elegy of the *heorð-geneatas* (3179b), it centres on the ultimate futility of the use made of the gold (3163–68). The retainers themselves are not being ironic when they call Beowulf *lof-geornost:* to them it is the quality which above all has made Beowulf 'the greatest of earthly kings' and most dear to the Geatish people. The irony is there, however, expressed above all by the structure of the poem, by the way in which the secular tradition is made to return to its beginning, condemned to the treadmill of victory feud and death.[107]

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105. Sisam, *op. cit.,* pp. 51–59.
106. *Loc. cit.,* p. 58.
107. On the ambiguous connotations of *lof-geornost* cf. Stanley, *op. cit.,* pp. 147–149; Leyerle, *op. cit.,* p. 101.

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Richard Wilbur has well caught the tension between statement and implication in the poem's final lines:

> They buried him next the sea on a thrust of land:
> Twelve men rode round his barrow all in a ring,
> Singing of him what they could understand.[108]

The poet leaves the fate of the Geats untold: the circle of secular achievement has been joined, and to tell us whether Wiglaf repeated for the Geats what Scyld had done for the Danes could only destroy the final balance between the figure of young Wiglaf (XLII) and the funeral of Beowulf (XLIII). It is in these two *fitts* that the poet achieves his final reconciliation of youth and age, of ends and beginnings, by placing both in the face of eternity.

This study has been undertaken in the belief that while *Beowulf* is a unity, with a due subordination of parts to the whole design, the poem can never be reduced to an explicit 'moral idea in which the poet believed'[109] without doing violence to its very essence. Literary analysis has too often substituted for the poem's design a pattern of ideas abstracted from the poem, and so avoided the central task of seeing how the poet shaped his traditional themes into a unique work of art. A recent study has restated the ideal:

> A natural tendency of criticism has been to unravel the threads with the result that the design is lost. Consequently, the poem is commonly said to be structurally weak. It must be read with attention to the whole pattern, however great the difficulty. What emerges is a structure of complex, knotted unity, unparalleled in English poetry.[110]

I believe that the most important task confronting *Beowulf* scholars—one with repercussions on the whole of Old English poetry and beyond—is to reassess how the poem's rhetorical patterning transforms 'themes' into poetry. In such Old English poems as *Beowulf* where a coherent organisation of the poetic material exists, close study of such organisation is still needed. In seeing 'the whole pattern' the manuscripts themselves, carefully written and provided with enigmatic sectional divisions as they are, will, I believe, provide the vital clues.

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108. 'Beowulf' in *Poems, 1943–1956* (1957) pp. 68–69.
109. H. L. Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 237; cf. note 55 above.
110. Leyerle *op. cit.*, p. 97: this article begins with a very stimulating summary of the structure of the poem (pp. 89–91); its argument is later vitiated by the tendency to treat themes out of context: cf. the highly questionable practice of giving a 'connected review' of Beowulf's life, p. 91f., and especially p. 94.

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Figure 1

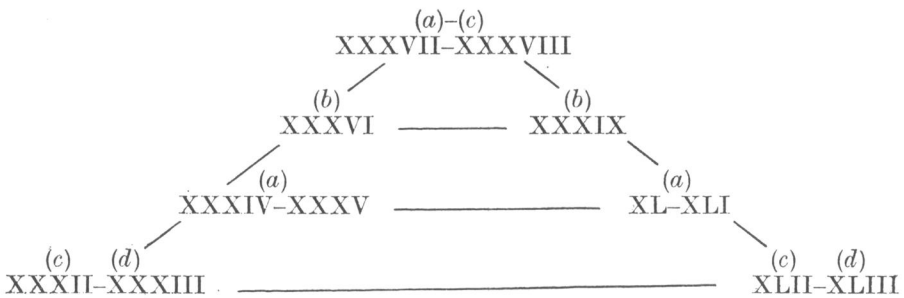
HROÞGAR'S SERMON

XXV
(1740)

B_1 (*exemplum*) (1723b–1739)	B_2 (*exemplum*) (1740–1757)
A_2 (*exemplum*) (1709b–1723a)	C_1 (*sententia*) (1758–1768)
A_1 (*sententia*) (1700–1709a)	C_2 (*exemplum*) (1769–1784)

Figure 2

DESIGN OF DRAGON PART, lines 2221–3182



CORRESPONDING THEMES

(*a*) *Beowulf's speeches before battle and before Death; and the Messenger's speech:* Past traditions, and their relation to present action (XXXV) future glory (XXXVIII) and future feuds (XLI).

(*b*) *Wiglaf's comitatus speeches:* the loyalty called forth by Beowulf's generosity (XXXVI) and the crime of betraying this loyalty (XXXIX).

(*c*) *Last Survivor:* a role (XXXII) to which Wiglaf is appointed by Beowulf (XXXVIII) and which Wiglaf fulfills at Beowulf's funeral (XLII).

(*d*) *Beowulf's reign:* recalled when he makes his fatal decision (XXXIII) and by the retainers at his funeral (XLIII). This theme is closely related to, and fuses with, theme (*a*) above.

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Figure 3

DESIGN OF BEOWULF

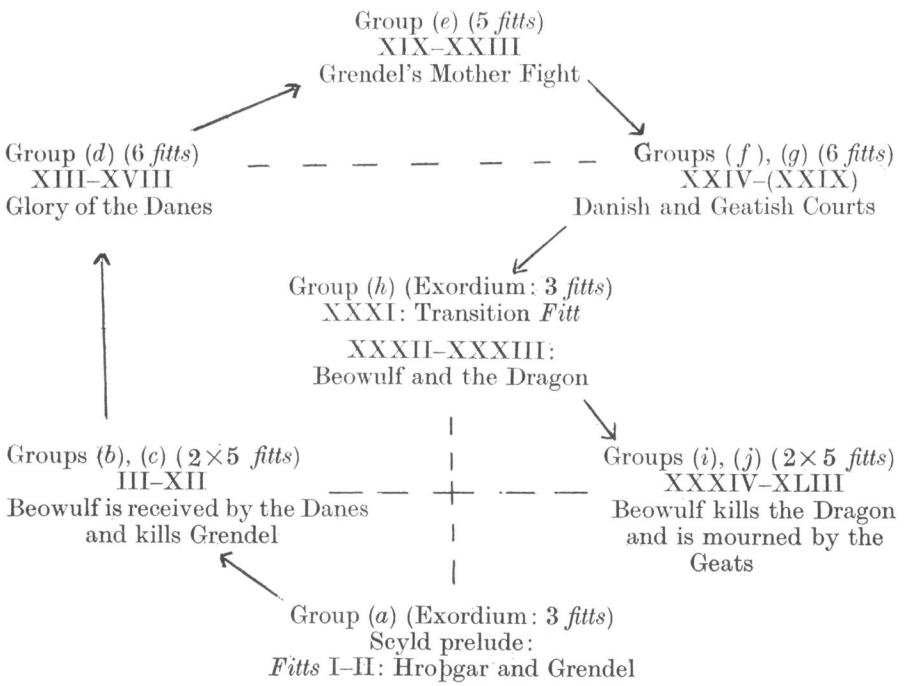


Fig. 1 see pp. 23–25

Fig. 2 see p. 34 and p. 44

Fig. 3 see pp. 49–50

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