

“Beowulf Was Not There”: Compositional Implications of *Beowulf*, Lines 1299b-1301

Michael D. Cherniss

During the second night of Beowulf’s stay in Denmark, Grendel’s mother, seeking revenge for her son’s death, enters Heorot. When the warriors in the hall discover her presence, she takes flight, but on her way out she seizes and kills an unnamed warrior who, the poet says, was especially dear to his lord, Hrothgar. At this point in the narrative the poet tells us something we did not previously know (1299b-1301):

Næs Beowulf ðær,
ac wæs oþer in ær geteohhod
æfter maþðungife mærum Geate.¹

[Beowulf was not there, but rather he was in another place, assigned earlier to the famous Geat after the giving of treasure.]

Subsequently, the female monster completes her escape, leaving confusion and renewed suffering behind her.

Although so far as I am aware the lines about Beowulf’s absence from Heorot during the second attack in two nights upon its sleeping inhabitants have elicited no previous commentary, they have for some time struck me as being somewhat curious. My discomfort has little or nothing to do with the narrative function of the information that the poet supplies here. Obviously, if Beowulf were present in Heorot the poem’s audience would expect him to challenge Grendel’s less powerful mother just as he had previously challenged her son and, if the results were the same, instead of an exciting battle in the monster’s lair, we would very likely have only a much less interesting reduplication of the earlier hand-to-hand struggle. The lines explain why Beowulf fails to intervene at this moment in the story, and they prepare us for his second great fight. But why has the poet waited until the monster has attacked and is heading for the exit to tell us that Beowulf is not there? My own admittedly tainted modern sense of structure suggests that the poet should have supplied this essential bit of

¹ All references are to Klaeber 1950.

information earlier in his narrative, probably somewhere in the passage beginning at line 1232 in which everyone goes *to settle* (“to rest”). Surely anyone hearing or reading the poem for the first time would be wondering why Beowulf, who waited with his men in Heorot the night before, does nothing as Grendel’s mother enters and attacks. The information that he is not there certainly comes as a surprise, but not a particularly purposeful or effective one, and it intrudes itself into the midst of the otherwise rapid movement of the action.

One simple explanation for the placement of the lines about Beowulf’s absence depends upon the widely accepted view that the *Beowulf* poet works within a tradition that was at least originally oral-formulaic in character, and that he retains and exhibits compositional habits and techniques which derive from such a tradition. This view does not necessarily assume that the poet actually composed *Beowulf* orally; conclusive evidence in favor of this position does not at present exist (see, e.g., Benson 1966; Watts 1969). Still, over the years since Francis P. Magoun (1953) argued on the basis of its formulaic diction that *Beowulf* had been composed orally, research into Germanic tradition, its diction and its compositional techniques, has led many, if not most, students to conclude that an oral tradition underlies Old English poetry in general and *Beowulf* in particular.² One need only accept the possibility, if not the likelihood, that, in addition to his traditional diction, the *Beowulf* poet might reveal other compositional characteristics derived from pre-literate, oral, Germanic tradition.

I have suggested that the lines about Beowulf’s absence do not belong, or at least are awkwardly placed, in the description of Grendel’s mother’s raid on Heorot. Albert B. Lord, in his landmark book on oral-formulaic poets and poetry, *The Singer of Tales*, observes that an oral poet never goes back in his song to change words and lines, even when the song has been written down and he therefore has the opportunity to do so (1960:128):

. . . when an oral singer is through with a song, it is finished. His whole habit of thinking is forward, never back and forth! It takes a vast cultural change to develop a new kind of poetic. The opportunity offered in dictating is not sufficient.

If we assume that the *Beowulf* poet, however he got his poem written down, was still oral traditional in his habits to the extent that careful revision was alien to him, an obvious explanation for the placement of the

² See, e.g., Chapter 5, “Some Remarks on the Nature and Quality of Old English Poetry,” in Greenfield and Calder 1986:122-33. This is certainly not the place to review the oral-formulaic theory of composition as it has been applied to Old English verse; such a review has been undertaken by Olsen (1986, 1988). See also Foley 1985.

lines in question presents itself: the poet, as he moved from his description of the celebration of Beowulf's victory over Grendel to the next large movement in his story, neglected through an oversight to mention a crucial detail—that Beowulf and his Geats did not sleep in Heorot after the festivities. A bit later, in the midst of his description of Grendel's mother's raid, he realized that he had failed to account for Beowulf's non-response to the threat posed by the new monster, and so he inserted his excuse for Beowulf's inaction where it now appears.

The foregoing reconstruction of the poet's procedure would make sense if *Beowulf* were in fact the written record of a single oral performance, regardless of whether it was dictated to a scribe or somehow the poet wrote it down himself as he composed it in an oral-formulaic manner. This reconstruction does, however, assume that the poet's orally based habits of composition precluded his going back later to "improve" or "correct" a lapse in his narrative, and I have no doubt that many students of the poem have already balked at the thesis that our text is in any respect an unrevised, unpolished piece of work. Indeed, Kevin S. Kiernan has recently argued at length that the *Beowulf* manuscript has undergone extensive revision, by its two scribes if not by the poet himself (1981). Moreover, I myself am not satisfied to dismiss the problematic lines simply as an uncorrected mistake. A more careful, closer examination of the *Beowulf*-poet's compositional habits will, I think, yield a more satisfactory account of the placement of these lines and, perhaps, some insight into his sense of poetic structure as well. These compositional habits are best accounted for as a legacy of the oral tradition, although they do not absolutely preclude the possibility of a literate poet.

While we do not know whether or not *Beowulf* as we have it was composed in whole or in part orally, it is a widely accepted fact that the poem's diction belongs to a tradition of alliterative Germanic verse with roots extending back into a pre-literate past.³ Patterned blocks of narrative are the materials out of which an oral traditional poet builds his poems. Within a particular tradition poets will, for example, employ the same or similar elements whenever they compose scenes of feasting or of battle, or treat the idea of exile. Another sort of compositional patterning, usually called "ring composition," has likewise been shown to be a widespread structuring device in oral traditional poetry. This device, originally identified in Old English verse as a rhetorical "envelope pattern" by Adeline C. Bartlett (1935:9-29), is characterized by the chiasmic repetition of words or ideas or both at the beginning and end of a unified group of verses, resulting in a pattern which may be diagrammatically represented

³ The presence of certain compositional patterns that are characteristic of oral traditional verse, "themes" and "type-scenes," has also been treated in Old English poetry, including *Beowulf*. See, e.g., Lord 1960:68-98, 198-202; Olsen 1986:577-88; Fry 1968.

as ABC . . . X . . . CBA.⁴ This type of patterning may not belong exclusively to oral traditional composition, but if one does treat it as a characteristic of such verse, as Eric A. Havelock has wisely pointed out with reference to Homer, it would be more appropriate to describe it in oral rather than visual terms, as “echoes” rather than visible “patterns” (1982:140, 177-78). A visual analogy to something like concentric circles radiating outward from a fixed center is useful, but it suggests a kind of geometric precision and balance which one is not likely to find in even the most tightly constructed verse paragraph. An oral structure of echoes, perhaps even a musical analogy to repeated notes or chords, would seem more accurate.

In order to account for the lines about Beowulf’s absence in compositional terms, I propose to examine two pairs of closely related passages in *Beowulf*, the introductions of Grendel and Grendel’s mother, and the attacks of the monsters upon Heorot. I hope to show how the poet employs particular kinds of identifiable patterns as he constructs these narrative units. The two introductions and two attacks resemble each other more closely than has been formerly noticed. Like any poet whose habits and techniques of composition derive from an oral tradition, the *Beowulf* poet, perhaps consciously, perhaps not, tends to repeat himself when confronted with similar narrative situations.

The poet introduces Grendel’s mother into his story immediately after the Danes and their guests go to sleep on the night after Beowulf’s victory over Grendel. She enters the narrative in the sentence beginning at line 1255b: *þæt gesyne wearþ . . .* (“it was seen . . .”). Despite the apparent foreshadowings of approaching disaster at lines 1233b-37a and 1251b-55a, and despite the fact that after her raid we learn from Hrothgar that the Danes had seen her with Grendel on the moors (1345-76a), an audience hearing or reading the poem for the first time would have no prior knowledge of the female monster’s existence. We are clearly entering a new movement in the poem with her introduction. The sequence of ideas in this passage, lines 1255b-78, is as follows:

- A. An avenger, Grendel’s mother, still remained alive after the hated one (1255b-59).
- B. She inhabited the dreadful water (1260-61a),
- C. After Cain slew his brother and fled into exile; from him woke many fateful spirits (1261b-66a).
- D. Grendel was one of these (1266b-67a),
- E. He who met defeat at Beowulf’s hands (1267b-74a).
- F. Grendel then departed, humiliated, to seek his place of death (1274b-76a).
- G. His mother wished to journey to avenge her son’s death (1276b-78).

⁴ In recent years such patterns have been identified and examined in *Beowulf* by Hieatt (1975), Tonsfeldt (1977), and Niles (1979; 1983:152-62).

The passage forms a ring or envelope with a pattern of ideas and verbal echoes which can be represented visually as ABCBA (I have indicated key words within the pattern's divisions):

A. Grendel's mother as his avenger (1255b-59); "wrecend þa gyt" [an avenger yet] (1256b), "modor" [mother] (1258b), "aglæcwif" [female monster] (1259a), "yrmþe gemunde" [bore misery in mind] (1259b). Compare 1276b-78; "modor þa gyt" [mother yet] (1276b), "wrecan" [avenge] (1278b). Also "aglæca" [monster] (Grendel) (1269a), "he gemunde" [he bore in mind] (Beowulf) (1270a).

B. Cain's humiliation and exile (1260-66a); "fag gewat" [guilty departed] (1263b), "mandream fleon" [to flee the joys of men] (1264b), "westen" [wilderness] (1265a). Compare Grendel's humiliation and flight (1274b-76a); "hean gewat" [humiliated departed] (1274b), "dreame bedæled" [deprived of joy] (1275a), "deapwic" [place of death] (1275b).

C. The core of the passage summarizes earlier events; Grendel is named and his defeat is recounted (1266b-74a).

I take the introductory portion of *Beowulf* as a whole to extend through line 193, at which point the hero enters the narrative; the introduction of Grendel occupies lines 86-137, commencing immediately after the description of the newly-built hall, Heorot. The sequence of ideas in Grendel's introduction is:

- A. An unnamed monster waits with difficulty in the darkness (86-87).
- B. He hears the hall-joys of the Danes (88-100a).
- C. This "an . . . feond on helle" [one . . . fiend from hell] has an evil lineage (100b-14):
 1. His name is stated (102; compare 1255b-59).
 2. He dwells in the fens (103-5; compare 1260-61a),
 3. After God condemned him along with the race of Cain (106-7a; compare 1261b-63a),
 4. Whose killing of Abel God avenged (107b-8; compare 1261b-63a).
 5. God exiled Cain (109-10; compare 1263b-65a).
 6. From him evil progeny awoke and strove against God (111-14a; compare 1265b-67a).
 7. God repaid them for that (114b; compare 1267b-76a).
- D. Grendel attacks Heorot for the first time (115-25; compare 1267b-76a):
 1. He departs to visit the hall (115-17).
 2. He finds the sleeping Danes and siezes thirty of them (118-23a).
 3. He departs to visit his home (123b-25).
- E. The Danes lament this strife (126-34a).

- F. He attacks again the very next night (134b-37).

I have noted the parallels with the passage introducing Grendel’s mother: naming, dwelling place, condemnation through lineage, strife, and retribution. The idea of God’s repayment of Cain’s evil progeny as a group (114b) and Grendel’s first attack on Heorot (115-25) are conflated in the corresponding lines of the later passage (1266b-76a), where Grendel’s last attack brings God’s retribution.

The introduction of Grendel forms a somewhat more elaborate ring structure than that of his mother in that it contains a sort of double center or core, and in that its echoes consist of contrastive ideas:

A. Grendel waits before attacking (86-87); “þrage gepolode” [for a while waited] (87a), “in þystrum bad” [waited in darkness] (87b). Compare his impatience to continue his raids (134b-37); “Næs hit lengra fyrst. . .” [It was not a long time . . .] (134b).

B. The Danes celebrate with joy in the hall (88-100a); “dream . . . hludne” [joy . . . loud] (88b-89a). Compare their lamentation (126-34a); “wop up ahafen” [weeping raised up] (128b), “morgensweg” [morning-cry] (129a).

C. Grendel’s lineage from Cain (100b-14).

D. Grendel’s first attack (115-25). This itself forms a simple ring structure:

D¹. Departure (115-17); “Gewat þa neosian . . . hean huses” [He departed then to visit . . . the tall building].

D². Attack (118-23a).

D¹. Departure (123b-25); “þanon eft gewat. . . wica neosan” [then left there . . . to visit his dwelling place].

Thus, the pattern might be represented as ABC[D¹ D² D¹]BA.

Obviously, the earlier introductory passage is longer and more elaborate than the later one, but given what we already know about Grendel, we should perhaps expect less information about his mother. Nonetheless, each passage by virtue of its ring structure forms a self-contained unit, and the later passage parallels the earlier one at what I have above identified as its center or core. The poet repeats in considerable detail Grendel’s lineage from Cain (100b-14) when he brings the female monster into the narrative (1260-67a) and, as noted, Grendel’s first attack on Heorot (115-25) is paralleled by the later summary of his final defeat (1267b-76a). We learn nothing new about Grendel or his lineage at the center of the later passage. Moreover, at the center of each passage, lineage and an event which took place in the past serve to introduce the character and to prepare for succeeding events which take place in the narrative present of the poem. Finally, we might notice that the sequence of lineage plus (relevant) past events serves an introductory

function elsewhere in the poem. For example, Beowulf introduces himself to Hrothgar (407b-9a):

	Ic eom Higelaces
mæg ond magoðegn;	hæbbe ic mærdā fela
ongunnen on geogoþe.	

[I am Hygelac's kinsman and retainer; I have accomplished many glorious deeds in my youth.]

Unferth is "Ecglafes bearn" [Ecglaf's son], whose pride in his own past "mærdā" [glorious deeds] prompts him to challenge Beowulf (499-505). Wiglaf is similarly introduced by his lineage and, though he has not before joined his lord in battle, remembers past favor bestowed upon him by Beowulf; the history of his old sword in battle seems a substitute for the battle-history which he lacks (2602-27).

The two monsters' attacks upon Heorot occur in the present time of the narrative and likewise parallel one another in significant ways, although some of the similarities may be easy to overlook. It also should be stated in advance that we doubtless should expect a degree of similarity between the modes of attack of mother and son; an Anglo-Saxon audience would know that members of the same species ought not to behave in completely different ways, one, for example, hunting nocturnally, another diurnally. Still, we are concerned here with compositional, not behavioral, habits.

The passage describing Grendel's mother's attack upon Heorot immediately follows her introductory passage. The sequence of ideas in lines 1279-1306a is:

- A. She comes to Heorot, where the Danes are sleeping (1279-80a).
- B. When she enters, terror sweeps the hall, though less than would be caused by a male of her species (1280b-87).
- C. The warriors scramble for their weapons (1288-91).
- D. She wishes to flee when her presence is discovered (1292-93).
- E. She seizes a single warrior who is very dear to Hrothgar (1294-99a).
- F. Beowulf is not there (1299b-1301).
- G. There is an uproar in Heorot; she takes her son's *folme* ("hand"); care is renewed (1302-4a).
- H. The exchange is not a good one when the lives of friends are traded (a maxim-like conclusion—1304b-6a).

This second attack passage exhibits a loose sort of ring structure, more echoic than visually schematic, consisting of reminiscences of and contrasts between words and ideas.

A. The monster arrives at Heorot, where the Danes are sleeping (1279-82a); “Heorote” (1279a), “geond þæt sæld swæfun” [slept throughout the hall] (1280a), “edhwyrft eorlum” [a change for the warriors] (1281a), “inne fealh” [came within] (1281b). Contrast the commotion that accompanies her departure (1302-6a); “Hream” [noise] (1302a), “Heorote” (1302a), “under heolfre” [under darkness] (1302b), “cearu wæs geniwod” [care was renewed] (1303b), “in wicun” [in the dwelling place] (1304a), “gewrixle” [exchange] (1304b).

B. The terror was less, just as a woman’s strength in battle is less than that of “wæpnedmen” [armed men] (1282b-87). The evocation of a battle-scene in these lines finds an echo in the praise of the monster’s victim, *Æschere* (1296-99a), as a companion and “rice randwiga” [powerful warrior].

C. At the core of the passage is the abortive attempt of the Danes to defend themselves and the monster’s hasty retreat with her prey (1288-95).

The pattern suggested by this analysis would thus be rendered visually as ABCBA.

Grendel’s final attack on Heorot, lines 702b-836, is separated from the passage in which the poet introduces him by the remainder of the general introduction, summarizing the continual suffering he inflicted for twelve years (138-93), and by the beginning of the narrative proper, Beowulf’s journey, arrival, and reception (194-702a). This passage presents the central action of the first part of the narrative; it is, of course, more detailed and elaborate than the subsequent attack-passage, and its artistry has been widely admired. For purposes of comparison with the later passage, I group the ideas in Grendel’s attack as follows:

- A. Grendel approaches and enters Heorot, where the (Geatish) warriors are sleeping (except for Beowulf) (702b-24a).
- B. In the hall, Grendel rejoices in his prospective feast and, as Beowulf watches, eats a warrior (724b-45a).
- C. The fight begins: Beowulf seizes Grendel who, fearful, wishes to flee (745b-66).
- D. The noise coming from Heorot causes terror among the Danes. The hall suffers severe damage (767-94a).
- E. The Geats draw their weapons, but these are useless against the monster (794b-805a).
- F. Beowulf tears off Grendel’s arm, Grendel flees, and the victory is complete (805b-33a).

G. Grendel's arm remains in the hall as a token of his defeat (833b-36).

The ring structure of this passage has been discussed by John Niles, whose analysis I summarize briefly here:

A. Preliminaries: Grendel approaches, rejoices ("þa his mod ahlog" [then his spirit exulted] [730b]), and then devours Hondscioh. Compare the aftermath: Grendel slinks back to the fens, Beowulf rejoices ("Nihtweorce gefeh" [rejoiced in the night's work] [827b]) and remains behind with Grendel's arm.

B. Grendel wishes to flee ("fingras burston" [fingers burst] [760b], "wolde . . . fleon" [wished to flee] [755b] D. Compare Grendel forced to flee ("burston banlocan" [joints burst] [818a], "scolde . . . fleon" [had to flee] [819b-20a]).

C. Uproar in the hall; Danes stricken with terror [767-70]. Compare the later uproar [782b-88a].

D. Heorot itself seems in danger of falling (771-82a). Niles sees this as the "single kernel" about which the passage radiates.

Niles's analysis thus suggests a pattern, ABCDCBA, although he does not offer specific line divisions for most of the pattern's segments. He omits a few details from his discussion, but his analysis is generally convincing, especially so if one thinks of the pattern as being echoic rather than tightly geometric in character (1979:925-26; 1983:154).

I will now attempt to offer an account of Grendel's attack upon Heorot in which I have ignored or suppressed all of the elements that refer to or directly depend upon Beowulf. I acknowledge in advance the difficulty, and perhaps the absurdity, of the task of separating one of the two central actors from the scene in which he appears; my purpose in this curious endeavor is to highlight the narrative elements, words and ideas, which Grendel's attack shares with the later attack by his mother. The principal shared elements are:

1. A monster approaches and enters the hall, Heorot, where warriors are sleeping (702b-4, 710-17, 720-30a); "Com . . . scriðan" [came . . . striding] (702b-3a), "Sceotend swæfon" [warriors slept] (703b), "hornreced" [gabled house] (704a), "com . . . gongan" [came . . . moving] (710a-11a), "in sele þam hean" [in the high hall] (713b), "winreced" [wine-hall] (714b), "goldsele gumena" [gold-hall of men] (715a), "Hroþgares ham" [Hrothgar's home] (717), "Com þa to recede siðian" [came then journeying to the hall] (720), "Raþe . . . on fagne flor treddode" [quickly trod on the shining floor] (724b-25). Compare 1279-82a; "Com þa to

Heorote” [then she arrived at Heorot] (1279a), “Hring-Dene/geond þæt sæld swæfun” [the Danes slept throughout the hall] (1279b-80a), “sona wearþ/edhwyrft eorlum” [at once was a change for the warriors] (1280b-81a), “inne fealh” [came within] (1281b). In the later passage the female monster’s intentions and state of mind go unmentioned, but they are explicitly stated in the lines of the introductory passage immediately preceding line 1279: (“gifre ond galgmod” [ravenous and gloomy] (1277a), “sunu deoð wrecan [to avenge her son’s death] (1278b).

2. The monster seizes a warrior, 739-45a; “gefeng hraðe . . . rinc” [quickly seized . . . a warrior] (740a-41a). Compare 1294-99a; “hraðe . . . æþelinga anne hæfde/fæste befangen” [quickly . . . had firmly seized a nobleman] (1294-95a). The female kills (“abreat” [killed] [1298b]) but does not eat her victim while in the hall.

3. When challenged, the monster becomes fearful and wishes to flee to its home in the fens (753b-54a, 755-56a, 762-64a, 819b-21a); “on mode wearð/forhte on ferhð” [was frightened in spirit] (753b-54a), “wæs . . . hinfus, wolde on heolster fleon” [was . . . eager to get away, wished to flee into the darkness] (755), “on weg þanon/fleon on fenhopu” [to flee from there to the fen-retreat] (763b-64a), “þonan . . . fleon under fenhleoðu” [to flee from there under the fen-slopes] (819a-20). Compare 1292-93, 1295b, 1302b; “wæs on ofste, wolde ut þanon” [she was in haste, wished to flee from there] (1292), “to fenne gang” [went to the fen] (1295b), “under heolfre” [under the darkness] (1302b).

4. There is a clamor in the hall; the warriors are terrified (767-69a, 770b, 782b-84a); “Dryhtsele dynede” [the hall resounded] (767a), “Denum . . . wearð. . . ealuserwen” [terror came upon the Danes (767b-69a), “Reced hlynsode” [the hall resounded] (770b), “Sweg up astag” [noise rose up] (782a), “Norð-Denum stod/atelic egesa” [a horrible fear seized the Danes] (783b-84a). Compare 1282b-87, 1291b, 1302a; “se gryre” [the terror] (1282b), “se broga” [the horror] (1291b), “Hream wearð in Heorote” [there was an outcry in Heorot] (1302a). In the earlier passage, it appears that only the Danes, who are outside, are terror-stricken.

5. The warriors in the hall draw their weapons (794b-805a); “brægd . . . ealde lafe” [drew . . . old heirlooms] (794b-95b). Compare 1288-91, “wæs . . . heardecg togen/sweord” [the hard-edged sword was drawn] (1288-89a). The monster’s invulnerability to weapons (798-805a) is unmentioned in the later passage, but the weapons drawn there are clearly just as ineffectual.

6. The mood of the Danes in the aftermath of the attack is described, 823b-24, 830-33a; “sele Hroðgares” [Hrothgar’s hall] (826b), “ealle gebette,/inwidsorge” [all cured of evil care] (830b-31a), “þreanydum . . . torn unlytel” [distress . . . great suffering] (832a-33a). Compare “cearu wæs geniwod./geworden in wicun” [care was renewed in the dwelling-places] (1303b-4a).

7. The fate of Grendel’s arm is mentioned (833b-36); “hond alegde./earn ond eaxle . . . under geapne hrof” [hand, arm and shoulder lay . . . under the steep roof] (834b-36b). Compare 1302b-3a; “under heolfre genam/cuðe folme” [she took the famous hand under darkness].

8. Closure is vaguely echoic (833b-36); “þæt wæs tacen sweotul. . .” [that was a clear sign]. Compare 1304b-6a; “Ne wæs ðæt gewrixle til” [that was not a good trade].

The second attack-passage contains a few details which are dissimilar to anything in the earlier passage. The poet’s observation concerning the relatively lesser terror caused by Grendel’s mother, together with the images of human battle (1282b-87), has no precise narrative equivalent in the Grendel passage, although as suggested above it corresponds to the praise of Æschere a bit later in the ring structure. The lines identifying the slain warrior (though not by name—1296-99a) have no equivalent in the earlier passage. The fact that Æschere had been a favorite of Hrothgar contributes to the king’s renewed grief a bit later in the narrative. Finally, the maxim-like statement at the end of the passage (1304b-6a) just barely echoes the more concrete statement about Grendel’s arm as a “tacen” (833b-36); it provides closure by generalizing upon the previous action, while at the same time recalling the earlier event in this “un-good exchange.”

The significant portions of the attack by Grendel which have no equivalents in the attack by his mother all have direct relevance to Beowulf himself as an active participant in the story. In the later passage we find no direct confrontation between a lone warrior-hero and the monster. Hence, there can be no momentous, prolonged struggle in the hall and no allusions to the monster’s fearful screams or to the damage done to the hall. The earlier portion of the fight with Grendel, when Beowulf first seizes the monster (745b-94a), precedes the Geats’ drawing their weapons (794b ff.); its only parallel in martial content and structural placement is the “lesser terror” passage and its reference to “wæpnedmen” [armed men] in battle (1282b-87), which likewise precedes the (Danes’) drawing of weapons. After the Geats’ abortive attempt to aid their leader, Beowulf concludes his fight by tearing off Grendel’s arm (805b-23a); in the absence of Beowulf and his Geats the Danes similarly draw their weapons, but once again experience defeat, not victory, as Grendel’s mother departs unhindered with her prey (1292 ff.). It is, I think, worth noticing that the lines that describe Beowulf’s victory themselves form a brief ring or envelope: (A) Grendel’s life (“aldorgedal”) on this day (“dæge”) should become wretched, and his spirit journey (“feor siðian”) into the power of fiends (805b-8); (B) he cannot break free, his arm tears away, and Beowulf wins “guðhreð” [glory in battle] (809-19a); (A) Grendel should flee (“fleon”) under fen-cliffs, seek (“secean”) a joyless place, knowing his life (“aldres”) had come to its end, his portion of days (“dogera dægim” [819b-23a]). This self-contained structural unit simply drops out of the later passage, where the outcome of the monster’s attack is quite different.

Each of the two attack-passages is a self-contained structural unit, a ring or echoic pattern of parallel or contrastive words and ideas in chiasmic form. The *Beowulf* poet also employs a pattern of narrative elements which he includes in largely the same order as he composes each scene in which a monster invades Heorot. Very possibly the overall configuration of narrative elements in the earlier attack-passage remained in his mind and generated the later passage. However, if we consider the two passages without regard for chronological priority, we can view them as instances of a single formulaic type-scene, “A Monster Invades a Hall,” perhaps. I am somewhat reluctant to label the two passages as “type-scene,” though, since I have found no comparable scenes elsewhere in Old English verse. If what we have here is a type-scene, it would appear to be one invented by the poet to express the far-from-commonplace events of his story. The more important point here is that, like other poets whose traditions are rooted in oral composition, the *Beowulf* poet at least at times thinks in narrative patterns. As our earlier examination of the passages in which he introduces his monsters shows, he is entirely capable of repeating such patterns when the narrative situation calls for them.

In the second attack-passage, the location of the statement about Beowulf’s absence suggests that it occupies a particular place in a particular narrative pattern, that its function is not simply informative but compositional as well. The sequence within the description of Grendel’s attack is (1) the monster seizes (and eats) a victim (739-45a); (2) the hero reacts and the fight begins (745b-66); (3) a great commotion ensues—“Dryhtsele dynede” [the hall resounded] (767 ff.). Correspondingly, in the later attack on Heorot, (1) the monster seizes (and kills) a victim (1294-99a); (2) the hero fails to react (because he is not there) (1299b-1301); (3) a great commotion ensues—“Hream wearð in Heorote” [there was an outcry in Heorot] (1302a). Also, in a less precisely schematic manner, we can compare the victory in the earlier passage with the defeat in the later one. Immediately after Beowulf’s retainers draw their ineffectual weapons we have the simple ring structure in which Beowulf tears off Grendel’s arm and the monster retreats to the fens (805b-23a). “Denum eallum wearð/æfter þam wælræse willa gelumpen” [after the bloody conflict the wish of all the Danes had come to pass] (823b-24a). Immediately after the Danes draw their ineffectual weapons, Grendel’s mother escapes to the fens with her victim because Beowulf is not there (1292-1301). “Cearu wæs geniwod, /geworden in wicun” [care was renewed in the dwelling-place] (1303b-4a).

In a strictly narrative sense, lines 1299b-1301 explain the success of Grendel’s avenger; we read an implicit “because” into the caesura of line 1299. In a compositional, technical sense, I would suggest, lines 1299b-1301 actually replace the hero and his deeds within the pattern of elements

underlying both attack-passages. Put another way, Beowulf as an element in the composition of the later attack-passage is present, even though as an actor he is absent. The lines under consideration effectively subsume all of the description of Beowulf's actions and their effects in the earlier passage, thus filling a felt need on the part of the poet to provide an essential component—the hero—in the overall pattern of a comparable passage. These lines are not just an incidental excuse or explanation for the avenger's success, nor are they simply the poet's way of setting up the next movement of the narrative, the fight under Grendel's mere. They are a necessary part of a pattern of elements in the compositional unit in which they appear, the attack on the hall. The poet, consciously or unconsciously, wanted and needed these lines at the point where they now appear and, if he put his poem through a process of revision, he apparently saw no reason to move them.

University of Kansas

References

- Bartlett 1935 Adeline Courtney Bartlett. *The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. Morningside Heights, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Benson 1966 Larry D. Benson. "The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry." *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 81:334-41.
- Foley 1985 John Miles Foley. *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland.
- Fry 1968 Donald K. Fry. "Old English Formulaic Themes and Type-Scenes." *Neophilologus*, 52:48-54.
- Greenfield
and Calder 1986 Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel Calder. *A New Critical History of Old English Literature*. New York: New York University Press.
- Havelock 1982 Eric A. Havelock. *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hieatt 1975 Constance B. Hieatt. "Envelope Patterns and the Structure of *Beowulf*." *English Studies in Canada*, 1:249-65.
- Kiernan 1981 Kevin S. Kiernan. *"Beowulf" and the "Beowulf" Manuscript*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

- Klaeber 1950 Fr. Klaeber, ed. *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburh*. 3rd ed. with 1st and 2nd supplements. Boston: D.C. Heath.
- Lord 1960 Albert B. Lord. *The Singer of Tales*. Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1968 et seq.
- Magoun 1953 Francis P. Magoun, Jr. “Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry.” *Speculum*, 28:446-67.
- Niles 1979 John D. Niles. “Ring Composition and the Structure of *Beowulf*.” *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 94:924-35.
- Niles 1983 _____ . *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Olsen 1986 Alexandra Hennessey Olsen. “Oral-Formulaic Research in Old English Studies: I.” *Oral Tradition*, 1:548-606.
- Olsen 1988 _____ . “Oral-Formulaic Research in Old English Studies: II.” *Oral Tradition*, 3:138-90.
- Tonsfeldt 1977 H. Ward Tonsfeldt. “Ring Structure in *Beowulf*.” *Neophilologus*, 61:443-52.
- Watts 1969 Ann Chalmers Watts. *The Lyre and the Harp: A Comparative Reconsideration of Oral Tradition in Homer and Old English Epic Poetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press.