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The Aesthetic and Critical Functions of the Noun-Epithet Formula in *Beowulf*

A Master Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

American Public University

by

Dawn M. Walls-Thumma

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Arts

June 2016

American Public University

Charles Town, WV
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Bobby Walls-Thumma, whose ongoing support of my academic goals has made attaining this degree possible.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have played roles in helping me to reach this point in my academic career and not always in the expected ways. I owe tremendous gratitude to my professors in the Humanities Department at American Public University for supporting and challenging me and taking my intellect and imagination to parts of the universe I never knew existed. The library staff at APU has been invaluable over the years and especially during the time I was working on my thesis, especially the Interlibrary Loan librarians. My thesis advisor, Kathryn Broyles, has been an indispensible source of resources, feedback, and support over the past four months. I am also grateful to my classmate Bridget Lennon for straying far outside her comfort zone to provide me with feedback and questions on my project that were always incisive and helpful.

The support and encouragement my family has given me extends back decades before I embarked upon this project or even read Beowulf. My parents Sue and Norm and my parents-in-law Donna and Bob have always encouraged my interests and never doubted that I'd reach my goals. They put up with my "imaginary friends," learned far more about esoteric subjects than they probably ever wanted, and dutifully read my published work and watched my conference
videos. My sisters Sharon, Erin, Kirsty, and Amiah inspire and humble me with their brilliance and their strength. With their inspiration, I cannot but succeed. I am also grateful to my friend Janet McCullough John for reading my thesis, ferreting out those hard-to-find typos, and providing me with some much-needed encouragement in the final stretch.

Finally, my husband Bobby has made this achievement possible in more ways than I can list here. Whether taking over household chores when he knew I was overwhelmed with work or serving as my paper-passer and cameraman at conferences or reading my drafts and listening to my excited and one-sided discursions on my research, he has provided far more than the economic and emotional support perhaps expected in a marriage where one partner is a graduate student. His unwavering support over the years has made me dream bigger and achieve more than I ever could on my own.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Aesthetic and Critical Functions of the Noun-Epithet Formula in *Beowulf*

by

Dawn M. Walls-Thumma

American Public University System, 22 April 2016

Charles Town, West Virginia

Professor Kathryn Broyles, Thesis Professor

Oral-formulaic features of texts like *Beowulf* rely on the referentiality and metonymy of formulas to activate the reader or listener's knowledge of the larger tradition. Applying receptionalist theory to Old English poetry, pioneered by John Miles Foley, shows that these formulas signal traditional values. This thesis moves beyond Foley's ideas to consider the more specific function of noun-epithet formulas in *Beowulf* and the neuropsychological underpinnings of receptionalist theory. The distribution of noun-epithet formulas lends further proof to Foley's hypothesis about their traditional referentiality. Analysis of five noun-epithet formulas common in *Beowulf* shows that they not only signal a specific context but the poet appears to have employed them with that context in mind as a way to make meaning for his audience. Often, these uses show the poet is critical of traditional heroic institutions, simultaneously presenting
the formulas as heroic but also in contexts where dependence and peril are the norm, suggesting
the poet felt that heroic culture was inherently unstable. Finally, neurobiological research on
music and emotion and music and memory reinforces the hypothesized function of formulas as a
means to generate emotion in a listener and evoke specific memories of traditional formulaic
contexts.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction:

Poetic Dispatches from the Dark Ages

The term Dark Ages calls to mind an epoch of history devoid of major artistic and intellectual achievements. In British history—especially as historians have come to understand this term as a misnomer—Dark Ages could just as easily refer to our deficiency of knowledge about its history and culture. I have a vivid memory of staying with my sister in Newcastle and visiting a world-renowned used bookstore not far from where the Venerable Bede wrote his Historia Ecclesiastica, where the Lindisfarne Gospels were made, and where the first Vikings came ashore wreaking havoc. I had recently decided that my Master’s thesis would concern the Anglo-Saxons and Old English literature, and I assumed that if I could find relevant books anywhere, it would be in a bookstore in the heart of the great ancient kingdom of Northumbria. Compelled to the shelves marked British History, I found piles of books on the Romans and a heap on the Norman invaders and, squeezed miserably between them like a pair of sheep at a party for wolves, a meager two books on the Anglo-Saxons—and one of them a children’s storybook about Alfred.

I have, I realized, arrived in the Dark Ages—not because the people of the era were ignorant and primitive but because we know so little of them.

The Anglo-Saxons survive in our language—about 10% of Modern English's vocabulary originates in Old English—and survive as well in our political and legal institutions. If one utters a four-letter word upon being summoned to jury duty, both the concept of the jury and (most likely) the four-letter word are of Anglo-Saxon origin. But most of all, the Anglo-Saxons survive in our imaginations, and nowhere more so than in Beowulf, the Old English epic that narrates the
exploits of the awkward and slothful "bear boy" Beowulf, from his troubled youth through to his fame as a monster-slayer and into his old age and fated death as a renowned and generous king. Viking ships plying the whale-road, the monster’s perilous and bloodshot mere, the dragon crouched upon its gold—these images are familiar because of Beowulf. It is not a stretch to suggest that Beowulf is the only relic of Anglo-Saxon society recognizable to most modern English speakers, even if only because of its cinematic and televised tropes.

Scholars have felt an equal attraction to Beowulf. Early Beowulf scholars used the poem to wring out philological and historical details in their attempt to deepen their understanding of both Anglo-Saxon language and history. In his lecture "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," Anglo-Saxon expert J. R. R. Tolkien took his fellow Anglo-Saxonists to task for ignoring Beowulf as a work of art. In a memorable metaphor, he compared them to well-meaning but meddlesome entrepreneurs who, upon finding a ruin of old stones, are so interested in the individual stones that they fail to see what the stones once built (16). The metaphor must have resonated because Tolkien’s lecture renewed interest in Beowulf as a poem—not as the literary equivalent of an archeological dig—and literary criticism of Beowulf proliferated in the decades to come.

But like so much out of the dark ages of Anglo-Saxon history, more is unknown about Beowulf than is known. It survives in a single manuscript—and survives is a fitting word because a library fire left the manuscript badly burned, with parts of it unreadable. We do not know who wrote it. We do not know where or for whom it was written. We do not know when it was written, although two firm endpoints have emerged from the reams of scholarship written on the subject: Identification of Hygelac with Chlochlaichus sets a terminus of no earlier than 530, and analysis of the script suggests the manuscript was written by 1000 (Chase, "Opinions" 3;
Kiernan, "Eleventh-Century" 10). To draw a modern comparison, this equals dating a text possibly around the time of the birth of Elizabeth I or possibly during the dot-com boom.

Another of *Beowulf*'s many mysteries concerns its origins. Literate persons typically think of it arising in the way that literacy has taught us that texts emerge: passing from the mind of the poet who composed it (probably silently, in his mind), through pen and onto the page. This perspective betrays a modern bias, however. Anglo-Saxon society was far from universally literate, and poets transmitted orally much of what we today would call "texts." Orality without the crutch of literacy is difficult for the literate mind to fathom. Walter J. Ong asserts that exposure to and use of literacy alters the experience of reality and even cognitive structures within the brain. "Writing restructures consciousness," he claims, and a poem like *Beowulf* begins to look different if one removes reliance on writing from its composition (77).

*Beowulf* teems with the features of an oral poem. Its episode structure, its "heavy" type-characters, its agonistic and eulogistic elements, and its additive style are all, according to Ong, hallmarks of orality (38, 45, 69, 145). But it is *Beowulf*'s use of formulaic language that has captured the most attention from scholars and where this thesis finds its origins.

Beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century, oral-formulaic studies of *Beowulf* have been more productive than any other critical approach, and I begin with a review of oral-formulaic theory and its application to Old English verse (Olsen 564). Early work in oral-formulaic theory recast poetic composition not as a conscious form of individual *art* but as the mechanistic piecing together of oral formulas to meet the demands of ex tempore composition (Lord 45). This aspect of oral-formulaic theory inspired the most strident objections to the hypothesis. Chapter II below will examine how oral-formulaic theory changed many experts' views of how *Beowulf* was composed and what it meant for a poem to succeed as art. Oral-
formulaic theory did not go unchallenged, and while the popular Parry-Lord hypothesis dominated early work on oral theory and *Beowulf*, it eventually underwent criticism and eventually refinement to allow artistry of a different—but no less profound—type than that to which literate readers of the poem had become accustomed.

Since *Beowulf* scholars do not know the author or the date or the place of composition of the poem, determining how its audience would have perceived and reacted seems impossible, akin to landing on the moon when you have trouble backing out of the driveway. However, as oral-formulaic theory moved to accept oral poems as possessing deliberately cultivated aesthetic features, it came to seek a means to infer audience response. In the book *Immanent Art*, John Miles Foley uses receptionalist theory to suggest that an oral poet and his or her audience co-create an oral poem. The audience not only brings its prior knowledge of the people, places, and stories encompassed in a vast poetic tradition, but the poet employs formulaic language meant to activate traditional contexts in the minds of the audience. Chapter III discusses Foley’s theories and how *Beowulf*—a poem at the intersection between orality and literacy—provides fertile ground for understanding how a poet communicates meaning through traditional oral structures.

Foley’s theory offers a means to uncover information about *Beowulf*, its audience, and the culture both inhabited. If oral features activated a deeper traditional context in the audience, then careful study of formulas that appear at multiple instances in the poem should reveal something of that context shimmering beneath. Chapters IV and V discuss the theoretical framework and methodology used to detect the traditional referentiality found in the written text of *Beowulf*. In Chapter VI, I look specifically at noun-epithet formulas—an oral feature that occurs hundreds of times in *Beowulf*—and where they appear and where they do not. This
analysis verifies Foley’s theory that noun-epithet formulas in *Beowulf* signify the role of a king to protect and provide for his people.

With even slight knowledge of Anglo-Saxon culture, however, this aspect of the heroic value system should come as no surprise. I was hoping to catch our *Beowulf*-poet in the act of using noun-epithet formulas with a clear shared context in such a way that this context imparted meaning that otherwise would be missing from the text. In Chapter VII, I closely studied five specific noun-epithet formulas to expand Foley's conclusions about their heroic referentiality. I found the poet used each of the formulas in at least one context common to most uses. I also found, however, that in places where he deviated from the normal context, the traditional context would have contributed a deeper, more resonant meaning for the original audience.

Ultimately, the oral features of *Beowulf* should serve the larger function of crafting the poem as a work of art. Since Tolkien, critics have recognized *Beowulf* as an artistic achievement that no other surviving text from the Anglo-Saxon period can match. It is one thing to confirm that Foley’s theory applies to *Beowulf*, but I also wanted to show the metonymic referentiality of its formulas would have contributed to its audience’s understanding of the poem’s significance or meaning. While other researchers have proposed contextual referentiality of various formulas used in Old English poetry, no work has yet been done to explain the neuropsychological structures and mechanisms that allow a group of words to take on such strong emotional coloring. In Chapter VIII, I consider research on the psychology of cognition and emotion to demonstrate how the sound of the poem and the sound units of the poem—the formulas—would have triggered emotional responses and activated memories in its audience. Psychological research shows that a sound unit can receive multiple emotional and cognitive inputs, creating
the metonymic referentiality that Foley proposes and resulting in a poem that affects its audience through multiple, deep-seated neurobiological mechanisms.

Finally, in Chapters IX and X, I attempt to show what *Beowulf* would have meant to its audience. From the sound of the poem to its formulas (and their referentiality) to the broad themes the poem expresses, *Beowulf* speaks to a people at a time of great change. The poem shows traditional institutions—including the heroic culture so uneasily represented in the poem—collapsing so better, more stable institutions can replace them. The poem simultaneously expresses the need for change and the pain and loss it brings with it.

In that 1936 lecture that changed the fate of the poem, Tolkien advocated for seeing *Beowulf* as a cohesive unit where all aspects of its composition, from its language to its theme, worked together to make the poem a consummate artistic achievement (33). For all that "The Monsters and the Critics" influenced *Beowulf* studies, Tolkien's particular recommendation went unheeded, and in the decades that followed, critics of the poem more often than not retired to their respective corners in philology, literary criticism, historiography, and oral-formulaic theory. My application of receptionalism shows the truth in Tolkien’s claim: *Beowulf* succeeds on multiple levels, some of which strike so deeply into the human psyche that even Modern English speakers for whom the poem is written in a foreign language can detect some of them. Perhaps ironically, given all that we don’t know about *Beowulf*, this fact remains: *Beowulf* is a poem written by humans for an audience of humans. Even in the darkest depths of this so-called Dark Age text, this fact stands as a lantern to light the way.
CHAPTER II
The Clockwork Poet:
Oral-Formulaic Theory and *Beowulf*

The poet is a singular figure in the post-Romantic imagination: the solitary genius, converting the everyday and oft-overlooked into words as overflowing with sublimity and profundity as the teeming honeycomb; the artisan, forging novelty and beauty from the same words used to run an office meeting or order a sandwich. After J. R. R. Tolkien first advocated for *Beowulf* as a work of art, these notions of the poet projected effortlessly onto this anonymous figure long-receded into the mists of time.

The arrival and eventual domination of oral theory to the study of *Beowulf* changed romantic assumptions of the poet-author. Under the auspices of oral-formulaic theory, critics asserted that a solitary, precocious poet did not write *Beowulf*: The poem became a product of a tradition in which efficiency outranked artistry and poets had little concern for the aesthetic effects their words produced. Having only recently come to understand *Beowulf* as art, critics now faced a dominant theory that claimed the poet had no concept of literary art. For a long while, these positions occupied seemingly irreconcilable extremes. Oral theory as applied to Old English has changed over the decades, first to more accurately describe the formulaic content of Old English poetry and finally admitting the possibility that oral poetry can also be art.

**Oral-Formulaic Theory**

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the German Higher Critics, most notably Eduard Sievers, first observed the formulaic nature of Old English poetry and laid the groundwork for the inaugural work on oral-formulaic theory in the early twentieth century. Oral-
formulaic theory arrived in 1923 with the Master’s thesis of Milman Parry, which laid the groundwork for the decades of work to follow. Parry worked with the Homeric epics, but scholars would extrapolate his work to other traditions, including the Old English. Parry’s initial work not only described epic poetry as oral but positioned the poet as working within a tradition that included formulas, initially defined by Parry as "an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea" (qtd. in Olsen 561). Parry’s work soon expanded to include the living oral tradition of the Serbo-Croatian guslar, from whom he collected thousands of recordings of oral songs, with his student Albert B. Lord.

What came to be called the Parry-Lord hypothesis served as the genesis of oral-formulaic theory. In his 1949 book *The Singer of Tales*, Lord proposed two basic poetic structures that oral poets used to compose extemporaneously in performative settings: the formula and the theme. Formulas, Lord emphasized, were traditional. Most oral poets employing oral-formulaic composition would pass their entire lives without coining an original formula (44-45). The oral recitation of the poem was also less important than the mode of composition used (5). One can, after all, memorize and recite a poem or song; even in current, highly literate culture, to do so is commonplace, and most people can recite nursery rhymes or sing songs from memory. While oral, this is not formulaic because, according to Lord, "[a]n oral poem is not composed for but in performance" (13, emphasis in the original). The Parry-Lord hypothesis claims that singers combine themes to form the narrative framework of a song, and within that framework, these singers construct the lines of the song from formulas they learn from other singers. Extensive work with illiterate oral singers in the Serbo-Croatian tradition demonstrated their use of this mode of composition.
Parry also proposed a formulaic framework called the *system*; Lord compares the formulaic system to the substitutive grammar of ordinary language where, for instance, a noun in the nominative case can replace another noun in the nominative case without alteration to the rest of the line. A speaker of the language, then, does not need to learn much less memorize infinite syntactical constructions. Instead, the speaker learns several basic constructions and then substitutes grammatically equal words to produce an array of different clauses and sentences. The formulaic system functions similarly but, in addition to the ordinary syntactical rules of the language, adheres to what Lord terms the “specialized poetic grammar”: the requirements of meter, diction, rhyme, and other aural considerations (35-36). The concept of the formulaic system limits the number of formulas a singer must learn to use, much as learning common grammatical patterns unlocks seemingly infinite expressions for the speaker of a language.

Lord emphasizes that singers do not memorize formulas. Instead, they use formulaic systems to form lines. Illiterate, oral singers like the *guslar* have no concept of syllables, words, or lines; they register formulas as meaningful units of sound much as a child learning her first language learns—but does not memorize—words. Oral poetry develops organically from the rhythm of the poetry. Singers learn the sound and pattern of that rhythm through feel, not quantitatively or structurally the way that literate poets often learn to count syllables, mark stress, label patterns of meter and rhyme, and count lines in traditional forms like the sonnet or sestina. The Serbo-Croatian line contains ten syllables, but singers never count syllables; "he absorbs in his earliest years the rhythms of epic, even as he absorbs the rhythms of speech itself …" (32).

One of the Parry-Lord hypothesis' more controversial assertions states that texts containing many formulas are likely oral (45). Lord also, controversially, denied the existence of so-called *transition texts*: Texts that occupy the vast gray area between purely oral composition
and purely written composition, such as a literate poet that employs oral devices for stylistic purpose or an oral performance of a written text (128-129). A "breaking” of the traditional pattern, he suggests, is the natural outcome of written composition, and once the process begins, one has moved irrevocably from the oral to the literate mindset and concomitant mode of composition (130). As shown below, scholars would use these central tenets of the Parry-Lord hypothesis not as theories awaiting proof but as factual, undeniable evidence of a purely oral origin for Beowulf under conditions of composition similar to those discovered for the deeply studied Serbo-Croatian guslar. Scholarship based on these faulty and unexamined assumptions would set off a decades-long domino-fall of Beowulf scholarship that sent it down its share of lengthy blind alleys and often raised discourse on the subject to a frantic pitch. Francis P. Magoun’s article "Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," which appeared in a 1953 edition of Speculum, introduced oral-formulaic theory—thus far applied to the Homeric epics and Serbo-Croatian traditional song—to Anglo-Saxon studies, opening a realm of inquiry as vast and seemingly perilous as Grendel’s mere itself.

The Application of Oral-Formulaic Theory to Old English Verse

The concept of the formula in Old English verse originated under the auspices of the nineteenth-century German Higher Criticism. By the time of the Parry-Lord hypothesis, however, critics largely viewed German Higher Criticism as a sterile, timeworn area of scholarly inquiry long gone fallow (O’Keeffe, "Diction" 98). In his 1949 dissertation that would become The Singer of Tales, Lord undertook a basic analysis of formulas in fifteen lines from the scene commonly called Beowulf’s Homecoming (lines 1473-1487). Every single word in that fifteen-line section Lord identified as part of either a formula or a formulaic system (198-199).
Given these astonishing results, it is perhaps not surprising that Magoun sought to extend the investigation of oral-formulaic origins of Beowulf using Lord’s methodology. And Magoun’s results were equally astonishing. Looking at the first twenty-five lines of the poem, Magoun used the following procedure:

A word-group of any size or importance which appears elsewhere in Béowulf or other Anglo-Saxon poems unchanged or virtually unchanged is marked with solid underlining and is a formula according to Parry’s definition .... A word-group marked with a solid and broken underlining, or with broken underlining only, may be called a formulaic phrase or system; such groups are of the same type and conform to the same verbal and grammatical pattern as the various other verses associated with them and cited in the supporting evidence. (449, emphasis added)

Using these definitions and this procedure, Magoun’s study revealed that 74% of the lines examined were matched wholly or in part elsewhere in the Old English corpus (449). This revelation didn’t merely crack open a window into the stale air of Old English formulaic studies but presented a new panorama replete with aesthetic, philological, and cultural implications.

But Magoun based his results on the sometimes faulty premises of the Parry-Lord hypothesis, which had not yet borne close critical inspection, especially as applied to Old English. The Singer of Tales was still seven years from publication at this point, and Parry’s published work had been in the Homeric field, not Old English. For example, Magoun accepted without question that the presence of formulas meant a poem was oral, leading to statements like his claim that repetition of 15% of verses within the poem itself is "a phenomenon unthinkable in lettered tradition" (454). There are other reasons why formulaic language might appear in a poem that, after all, exists in written form, but Magoun didn’t consider them. Referring to the supposed
Magoun is forced to admit to the diversity of the attested words in the Old English corpus for the \( x \) variable in the system. This diversity violates the Parry-Lord requirement of thrift: that only one formula exists for a particular metrical situation, simplifying the poet’s task in recalling a valid formula for a specific poetic instance. Magoun concludes that the variety must exist to meet different alliterative needs—a concern of Old English but neither Greek nor Serbo-Croatian poetics—which is a reasonable assessment, but he then goes on to state,

> The singers are presumably concerned not primarily with some refinement of imagery produced by varying the first elements \( hran, segl, \) and \( swan \)—something for which an oral singer could scarcely have time …. It is hard to believe that they had much concern with possible connotative effects produced by passing mention of sails, swans, or whales. (452)

Magoun never entertains that this variety of expression might contradict his assertion that \textit{Beowulf} was orally composed. In his elaboration on the implications of such variety to an oral poet, he creates the image that would inspire such distaste in his critics: the clockwork poet working not out of a sense of aesthetics or more than bare denotative meaning but merely grabbing what was closest and most convenient at hand.

In quoting Magoun’s methodology above, I emphasized in his definition of formula the caveat that the word-group be "of any size or importance." Among the word-groups that Magoun identifies as formulas in the first twenty-five lines are \( hú þá æðelingas \) ("how then the lords"), \( eafora wæs \) ("the son was"), \( God sende \) ("God sent"), \( lange hwile \) ("a long time"), \( wæs bréme \) ("was glorious"), and \( on ielde \) ("in old age"). It is of course possible that these did function as formulas. It is hardly certain, however, that they did. Their repetition elsewhere in \textit{Beowulf} or the
Old English corpus could just as easily be a matter of utility: If one is an Anglo-Saxon, there are few simpler ways to speak of one’s later years than *on ielde*, for instance, whether one if composing oral poetry or merely holding idle conversation. Counting such brief and utilitarian phrases as formulas had the unfortunate result of inflating the number of supposed formulas in Magoun’s results. But tempted by the panoramas uncurtained by Magoun’s theory, many of the scholars that followed Magoun did not recognize much less challenge these shortcomings. Instead, many scholars began to discuss the oral-formulaic nature of *Beowulf* as a proven fact rather than a single possible outcome from the nebula of largely untested and unexamined theories advanced by Milman Parry and Albert Lord.

**Evidence for and Emerging Problems with the Formula**

Initial scholarly efforts sought to further prove the heavy use of formulas in the Old English corpus by applying Magoun’s methods. I will briefly discuss some of the major players and their findings before turning to the critical literature contesting the findings of Parry, Lord, and Magoun. My ultimate objective is to detail how the term *formula* evolved and to define it for my paper. As briefly discussed above about Magoun’s inaugural article—and in greater detail below—oral-formulaic theory met with challenges when applied to Old English that it hadn’t in the arenas of Serbo-Croatian song and Homeric poetry, where it was discovered and developed. These challenges—largely centered on the formula— influenced the understanding of oral theory as applied to Old English verse.

Robert P. Creed was working on a doctoral dissertation on formulaic language in *Beowulf* when Magoun published his influential article ("Singer" 49). Creed would later claim that 20% of *Beowulf* was demonstrably formulaic ("Making" 445). In the article "The Making of an.
Anglo-Saxon Poem," Creed attempts to replicate Magoun’s method of flushing out formulas from a set of lines—chosen at random in this case—taken from the poem. From Creed’s study, several shortcomings emerge that parallel those of Magoun’s study (and go equally unacknowledged). One is the increasing dilution of the meaning of the term formula in an attempt to force-fit it to Old English poetry, where evidence of formulaic language was not nearly as apparent as in Serbo-Croatian and Homeric verse. Creed allows a formula to be "even as small as a single monosyllabic adverb" (446). Similarly, Creed allows utilitarian phrases—he spends much time on the þær x sæt ("there x sat") system, for instance—certainty as formulas "because the singer has used each of these phrases in this same position more than once" (448). Possibly, these are formulas or systems—or it could be that they are the most direct way to communicate information, such as introducing a person or object sitting in the scene. Like Magoun, Creed’s analysis often becomes entangled by the alliterative requirement of Old English poetry (450). Two themes emerge from this article. First, alliteration posed a challenge to the Anglo-Saxon poet that made his verse more demanding than either the Serbo-Croatian or Greek, and alliterative demands explain some of the incongruities between the Parry-Lord hypothesis and Old English verse. Second, alliteration more than meter governed the choice of so-called formulas. The latter would become essential to the evolving definition of the Old English formula. Finally, echoing Lord and Magoun, Creed emphasized also the pragmatic function of the formula: It is not a device of aesthetics but of convenience, a tenet that would make oral-formulaic theory distasteful to many critics (446).

As implied above, the problem of thrift or economy would begin to challenge the perfect concordance between the Parry-Lord hypothesis and Old English poetry. Thrift demanded that, when the denotative and metrical needs were the same, only one formula would emerge.
Scholars had demonstrated thrift in both Serbo-Croatian and Homeric verse (Lord 144). No one observed thrift in Old English. In "The Diction of Beowulf," a study of kennings used for shields, ships, the sea, and Beowulf himself, William Whallon concluded that "the language of Beowulf lacks the economy expected from a formulaic language that is highly developed" (318). Whallon observed that myriad kennings "provide for nearly every pattern of alliteration; individually they participate in alliteration almost without fail" but did not fall back on alliteration as an explanation for his observations (317). Rather, he proposed the Anglo-Saxon was a younger poetic tradition than the Homeric and concludes that "further centuries would at least have cast many replaceable kennings into oblivion" (318). Again, the tendency to force-fit Old English poetry into the Parry-Lord mold emerges, as does the treatment of alliteration—perhaps the foremost defining characteristic of Old English verse—as an annoying aside, for of course the Parry-Lord hypothesis does not allow for it.

Donald K. Fry also treated the problem of thrift and took on Whallon’s conclusions head on. Fry concluded that the device of variation explained Beowulf's lack of thrift. Brodeur defines variation as "a double or multiple statement of the same concept in different words" and, following Klaeber, declares it as "the chief characteristic of the [Old English] poetic mode of expression" (66). Fry’s brief conclusion—that "the concept of economy is not applicable to Old English formulaic poetry"—began to intimate that it may not be possible to achieve a snug fit between Old English poems and a theory developed from Serb-Croatian oral songs and tested on Homeric epics ("Variation" 356). Skepticism about the applicability of theories across traditions became increasingly common and would shape oral theory as applied to Beowulf.

**Objections to Oral-Formulaic Theory**
As discussed above, oral-formulaic theory encountered several obstacles when applied to Old English poetry. The tendency of the theory’s adherents to try to force a fit between the Parry-Lord hypothesis and what they observed of Old English poetry did not help in overcoming these obstacles. As the key works by Magoun, Creed, and Whallon discussed above show, there was a tendency to assume the Parry-Lord hypothesis as settled. Many oral-formulaic scholars, as a result, interpreted the evidence to fit the theory rather than the allowing the evidence to call the theory into question. Neither the shortcomings of the original theories nor this tendency went unnoticed. This section will briefly discuss the major works challenging oral-formulaic theory’s application to Old English, the pressures of which shaped oral theory toward that used in this paper.

The major work in this category is Larry D. Benson’s 1966 article "The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry." Benson examined several poems known to have written, not oral, origins and discovered that they contained as many and sometimes more formulas than those poems labeled as oral poems by oral-formulaists (335). This directly challenged Magoun’s assertion of Beowulf’s oral origins because of its formulaic language. "To prove that an Old English poem is formulaic," Benson wrote, "is only to prove that it is an Old English poem …" (336). Benson’s study showed that, in Old English, the advent of writing did not cause the atrophy of traditional oral devices as predicted by Lord, and its writers continued to employ the same traditional devices used by their illiterate forbears. Benson arrived at two conclusions important for the evolution of oral theory as applied to Old English poetry. Firstly, he acknowledged the possibility of transition texts, proscribed by the Parry-Lord hypothesis (337). Secondly, he suggested the function of oral features in poetry as stylistic devices that served aesthetic and referential functions for an audience steeped in the tradition (340-341).
Marcia Bullard raised several concerns, including how to define the formula itself, an issue that would arise again and again as scholarship progressed in this area. Similar to my concern over whether Magoun’s analysis identifies formulas or merely utilitarian phrases, Bullard questions whether many of the formulas meet the Parry-Lord requirement for expressing "a given essential idea," contending that many do not express an idea at all but instead are "grammatical necessities [and] line fillers" (13). Writing nearly simultaneously to Bullard, H. L. Rogers makes a similar point when he observes that much language identified as formulaic fits common grammatical frames of the language in general; he identifies x ond x as one such "system" that is common in language both poetic and everyday. He also questions whether the high number of "form words"—prepositions, articles, and conjunctions—can reliably indicate a formula. Instead, he argues that mere concordance alone does not a formula make: Rather, it is the conventionality and stylization of the language that makes a repeated phrase into a formula (99-100). Rogers also objects to classifying single words as formulas, a practice that he argues "is to strip the term of all practical value," and disagrees that a a phrase must appear only once elsewhere in the corpus to be considered a formula (98, 95).

Rogers also challenges some of the statements made about Old English meter, namely Magoun’s assertion that adding alliteration to the metrical scheme makes impossible the thrift required under the Parry-Lord hypothesis. To the contrary, Rogers argues, Old English meter is less restrictive than the Serbo-Croatian decasyllabic line or the Homeric hexameter because it is not contingent on syllable count but on stress and alliteration. The Old English half-line permits a variable number of unstressed syllables; Rogers identifies as few as three syllables in some lines of Beowulf and as many as twelve in others. This also affects the requirement that formulas exist "under the same metrical conditions," since an unstressed position can contain one syllable
and remain metrically identical to five unstressed syllables in the same position. As with his objection to the "form words," these unstressed syllables are metrically unnecessary to the formula, and many examples of supposed formulas consist primarily of them (95-97). Rogers also observes that, if the Old English meter was so difficult because of the alliterative component, then one would expect that learning many half- and even whole-line formulas would become an expedient practice for poets. However, "the Old English poets resist the temptation exactly where, if Magoun is right, it must have been strongest" (97).

By comparing Old English poetry to a known oral poetry, John S. Miletich questions whether a meter that relies on stress and alliteration will necessarily produce a large number of formulas. He looks at the Russian bylina as an example of a known oral poetry with similar metrical requirements to Old English. The bylina contains three times the number of formulas as Beowulf and is even slightly higher than the original Serbo-Croatian songs studied by Lord (916-917). This suggests that the formulaic content in Beowulf is not as remarkable as the oral-formulaists claimed.

H. L. Rogers raises further concern with the degree to which the definition of a formula has come to rely on an inference of the poet’s psychological process rather than evaluation of the text itself. Parry, Lord, and their followers sometimes used the cognitive process of employing a particular phrase as evidence of that phrase’s suitability as a formula. This multiplied the number of words or phrases meeting the definition of a formula (92-93). Whallon’s article discussed above provides a perfect example of this flawed logic in his discussion of a list of kennings for the word shield:

Because the briefer members of this group are so similar in meaning, and because the longer members differ so little in picturesqueness and suitability to a variety of contexts,
the poet’s chief interest must have lain in matters other than the coinage of rare and brilliant paraphrases for the shield. He would seem to have used these seventeen expressions with relatively little thought, and they may therefore be initially regarded as formulas. ("Diction" 312, emphasis mine)

Whallon uses the untested (in Old English verse) Parry-Lord presumption of convenience to make an inference about why the Beowulf-poet used a set of words, then turns around and uses that inference to defend a Parry-Lord definition of those words as formulas, even though the poet uses most only once. This circularity is troubling.

Other critics challenge the process of ex tempore composition proposed by the Parry-Lord hypothesis. Using improvisational jazz composition as a possible analog to oral poetic composition, Stevick observes that not only do jazz musicians incorporate complex devices into their performances, but they do so with an obvious aesthetic intent. The process of jazz composition is different from that proposed by Parry and Lord: "… any familiarity at all with successive jazz performances suggests strongly that performers (and particularly professional ones) repeat earlier performances as entities …. They do not build each performance merely a phrase at a time" (Stevick 386). Using a research basis in cognitive psychology, David C. Rubin theorizes that oral composition progresses sequentially, with poetic elements such as alliteration, rhyme, and meter restricting and cuing choices (176).

Finally, many critics simply objected to the mechanistic implications of oral-formulaic theory, which placed utility at the fore and all but obscured aesthetic considerations. Oral poets, according to the Parry-Lord hypothesis, constructed their poems in a manner much like putting beads on a string, following a pattern but allowing no space for artistry. Beauty or cleverness when observed in a poem was simply an accident of the tradition, or evidence of the reader’s
literary biases. As Stevick’s comparison of oral poetry to improvisational jazz shows, improvised art can be beautiful and profound and *deliberately* so. To deny that to the oral poets, many felt, shortchanged their skills and innovations within the traditions with which they worked and reduced their art to a mindless pastiche.

**The Evolving Formula**

As shown above, oral-formulaic theory began to amass its fair share of misgivings from scholars who challenged the appropriateness of the theory for Old English poems. Rather than throwing out oral-formulaic theory entirely, scholars began to shape the definition of the formula—and its growing constellation of related terminology—to Old English verse. This effort took two primary directions: altering the Parry-Lord definition to better fit Old English alliterative meter and hypothesizing connotative and metonymic functions for the formula. The latter brings the formula to the point where this thesis becomes possible.

In a 1967 article, Donald K. Fry attempted to refine the Parry-Lord definition of *formula* to accommodate some of the aspects of Old English verse unaddressed by the original definition. A formula became

a group of half-lines, usually loosely related metrically and semantically, which are related in form by the identical relative placement of two elements, one a variable word or element of a compound usually supplying the alliteration, and the other a constant word or element of a compound with approximately the same distribution of non-stressed elements. ("Old English" 203)

Fry addressed Rogers' complaint that the definition of *formula* did not prescribe a minimum number of words. Fry required a half-line (no more, no less) containing at least two elements,
one identical with others in the formulaic system. He addressed the matter of alliteration and loosened the requirement for metrical exactitude to accommodate non-colonic Old English meter. This definition relaxed the requirement for exact repetition, which scholars of Old English were finding uncommon in the tradition’s relatively flexible metrical system.

Anita Riedinger criticized Fry’s definition as "too protean to be fully useful" (306). She expressed her definition mathematically: "The repetition of one general concept + one system + one function = one formula" (305). Importantly, Riedinger’s definition required that formulas serve the same function in the text. She had observed that formulas often served a connotative or predictive function, interacting with themes in such a way that an audience well-versed in the tradition could likely obtain information from the formula that the poem did not express directly. In this way, she hoped to address the criticism expressed by Rogers that repetition even of exact words did not necessarily mean that those words were formulas. When the same words occurred within the same context, however, it was likely that they were formulas (Riedinger 309; Rogers 94).

Riedinger’s work reflected the growing de-emphasis on the formula as an exact repetition of a phrase and the growing consensus that it is instead a metrical and syntactical framework supporting a repeated word and with enough provision for variation to meet the alliterative requirements of Old English verse. She also began to speculate about the function of the formula for audiences. Rather than merely serving as a convenience for poets working in the crucible of live, improvisational performance, formulas carried meaning and aesthetic value for listeners as well. To an audience steeped in the tradition, the use of a formulaic phrase by an oral poet would summon these connotations and subtly color their understanding of the scene. For Riedinger, this shared context and potential for connotative weight elevates to the level of a formula an
otherwise bland line that could easily have existed solely for its utilitarian purpose. It also represents a growing scholarly concession to the aesthetics of oral-formulaic poetry.

Conclusion

The work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord—and Francis Magoun’s adoption of their theories into Old English studies—has undeniably had value in explicating organizational structures within oral poetry that make understanding and discussing that poetry possible. But there is also value in the backlash to their theories, which emphasize the compositional process at the expense of poetic meaning and art. This thesis finds its center in the work of a few scholars who refused to abandon the idea that traditional poetry often contains formulaic elements but also believe that oral poets make deliberate creative choices—including in their use of formulas—to foster aesthetic effects.

If we accept the critical consensus that Beowulf contains oral elements, then that invites the question of why? Beowulf, as many critics of its possible oral origins have pointed out, exists for us only as a written poem. Benson’s work showed that written poems often contained formulaic elements—again, why? One could claim that poetry was always done that way, and the poet was simply doing what he knew, but this edges perilously close to the clockwork poet of the Parry-Lord hypothesis: akin to the bird of paradise who does his elaborate dance for no better reason than that it has always been done that way. This defies the experience of generations of readers of Beowulf—the closest we can come today to the listeners some critics infer in its occluded origins—who hear a work of profound beauty in its words. To this final question I now turn: How elements of a poem that are by their nature traditional—implying the familiar, the
timeworn, the hackneyed, the clichéd—can function to impart that beauty and meaning that, more than a millennium after its writing, the keen reader can still detect in the words of *Beowulf*. 
CHAPTER III
Oral Palimpsests:
Transition Texts and Current Oral Theory

With oral-formulaic theory partly rejected in places and modified nearly beyond recognition in others by Old English scholars, the certainty of Beowulf’s oral genesis dissipated as well. Transcription errors and the early style of punctuation show that Beowulf is likely a copy of another manuscript, not a transcript of an oral performance (Neidorf 37; O’Keeffe, Visible Song 175). The Parry-Lord hypothesis proscribed so-called transition texts and most scholars believed the arrival of literacy eradicated the oral tradition, yet Beowulf contained oral features while simultaneously part of a written, not oral, tradition. How the two could coexist in a single text became a key question, one that ultimately drove progress forward on understanding Beowulf’s uneasy position within a hypothetical Anglo-Saxon oral culture.

That Beowulf contains oral devices—although whether those devices mean that Beowulf originated as an oral poem remains questionable—has become the consensus of most Old English scholars, as has the opinion that Beowulf is a transition text. This chapter will consider the relationship between orality and literacy, especially how viewing Beowulf as a transition text that occupies a liminal zone between these two extremes has liberated scholars to consider how oral devices can function within a written text as a vehicle for communicating meaning.

Transition Texts

Scholars began to dispute the Parry-Lord proscription of the so-called transition text almost immediately. In 1956, the year after Magoun published his groundbreaking article, Claes Schaar challenged the idea that, for no better reason than that they were now working in writing,
literate poets would abandon the formulaic language that had formed the basis of their oral tradition. Anticipating Benson’s revelation that written poetry is often more formulaic than supposed oral poetry, Schaar holds up the written—and at times formulaic—poetry of Cynewulf as proof of his claim (302-303). Schaar’s objections to some of the assumptions of the Parry-Lord hypothesis opened *Beowulf* scholarship to the possibility of a transition text: a text inarguably in written form that nonetheless uses techniques from the oral tradition.

Ruth Finnegan has dominated the scholarship on transition texts. Her book *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context* claims to "not to set up a model of my own" but to "provide a short guide to the study of oral poetry and its controversies" (272). Nonetheless, Finnegan not only presents robust evidence for transition texts but also asserts that some influence of literacy upon the oral tradition is more common than not (*Oral Poetry* 24). Using the cross-cultural approach popularized by Parry and Lord, she amasses numerous instances of literacy touching—sometimes heavily, sometimes lightly—upon extent oral cultures found around the world. Finnegan challenges the belief that oral culture is somehow synonymous with primitive cultures that exist at a far remove from present-day Western society. "Oral poetry," she writes, "is not an odd or aberrant phenomenon in human culture, nor a fossilised survival from the far past, destined to wither away with increasing modernisation" (*Oral Poetry* 3). Finnegan’s point here is so readily apparent that it is difficult to understand how the scholars who took up the Parry-Lord banner overlooked it. Even a cursory glance around modern Western society—easily the most literate society in human history—reveals that it is teeming with texts that exist primarily or wholly within an oral tradition: nursery rhymes, folktales, urban legends, ghost stories, jokes, riddles, song and rap lyrics, and commercial jingles. Schoolchildren continue to learn written content through oral mnemonics and songs that they never see in writing. Most
people can recite these "texts" even decades after hearing them and recognize references to them readily.

Part of the problem, according to Finnegan, is that scholars have tended to treat literacy as a newcomer to the cultural scene, almost an imposter upon the normative, natural, and purely oral culture. This, she asserts, is most assuredly not the case:

It is even more important to remember—since it seems to be more easily forgotten—that it is not just in the last generation or two that writing has gained significance as a medium for communication in the so-called 'Third World'. A degree of literacy has been a feature of human culture in most parts of the world for millennia. This has rarely meant mass literacy (a fact significant for the popular circulation of oral literature) but has meant a measure of influence from the written word and literatures even in cultures often dubbed 'oral'. (Oral Poetry 23)

Part of this tendency, according to Finnegan, comes from nineteenth-century romantic and evolutionist perspectives, which proposed what Finnegan calls a type-A culture: "small-scale and homogenous, 'oral', dominated by tradition at least and probably also by religion and ascribed kinship, unself-conscious, perhaps more organic and close to nature than ourselves, and certainly untouched by mechanization, advanced technology, and mass culture" ("How" 54). She points out, however, that the majority of examples of oral literature collected by scholars do not come from type-A cultures ("How" 53). Certainly this is true of the Anglo-Saxons. The Anglo-Saxons arrived into a land formerly part of the Roman Empire, presumably with vestiges of that culture’s literacy lingering; they had ongoing contact with the Celtic Church even before Boniface arrived; and they underwent their own conversion early in the sixth century. The Conversion brought the Church and literacy unequivocally to the lands of the English. This is not to say that literacy was
widespread much less universal but describes precisely the brushes between the oral and literate cultures that Finnegan documents among extant oral cultures. This contact debunks both the existence of the supposed "pure" oral culture and the idea that literacy obliterates orality. Finally and perhaps most definitively, the Anglo-Saxons had their own form of limited literacy, using the runic script known as the futhark for short inscriptions on objects (Page, *Runes* 32).

**Beowulf as a Transition Text**

Analyzing the *Beowulf* manuscript reveals several pieces of evidence that *Beowulf* is a copy of a copy of a text, making it a transition text: firmly situated in the literate tradition but employing oral techniques. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe looks at visual cues in Old English manuscripts compared to Latin manuscripts from England during the Anglo-Saxon era. Latin manuscripts routinely included lineation, initial capitals, and systematic punctuation that serve as cues to the reader for how they should read the text (*Visible Song* 23). Until late in the eleventh century, Old English vernacular texts do not routinely utilize these types of visual cues. According to O’Keeffe, residual orality explains these discrepancies. Simply put, readers were expected to be familiar enough with the language, its rhythms and conventions, and its formulas to be able to supply for themselves the information provided by visual cues in Latin manuscripts (*Visible Song* 4-5).

O’Keeffe applies her observations to draw conclusions about *Beowulf*. Although the poem has two scribes, it is punctuated consistently throughout, which would have been unlikely unless the two scribes were working off an extant text and following the punctuation of that text (*Visible Song* 175). The Nowell Codex, including *Beowulf*, is conservatively punctuated, however, which eliminates a date after the tenth century (*Visible Song* 179). O’Keeffe’s
observations place *Beowulf* solidly as a transition text: copied from another written text yet nonetheless containing oral features.

Mark C. Amodio also identifies *Beowulf* as a transition text by analyzing the descriptions of oral poets and singers throughout the poem. Depictions of the Anglo-Saxon *scop* in poems like *Beowulf*—often assumed by scholars to reflect reality and treated as the equivalent of an anthropologist’s field notes—are more likely, according to Amodio, "idealized and fictionalized accounts of how legendary figures composed vernacular poetry" ("Res[is]ting" 185). The accounts in *Beowulf* show several instances of contact with literacy and none that we can definitively classify as purely oral. For example, the opening song of creation and the dedication of Heorot by *scopas* connects the oral poetic activity to scripture and therefore literacy ("Res[is]ting" 192). Likewise, the songs about Sigemund and Heremod and the Finn episode exist elsewhere in written form, making it impossible to distinguish if the poet pulled from the oral tradition or copied these poems from another written source ("Res[is]ting" 199). Like Finnegans and O’Keeffe, Amodio’s study finds that depictions of oral poetic activity in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts show a society able to navigate both worlds, and the poem demonstrates that even written texts continued to employ oral devices.

Over decades of criticism, then, *Beowulf* has changed from a definitively formulaic and therefore oral poem (or a definitively written, literary production) to a transition text—the product of a society in flux between the extremes of pure orality and entire literacy—that employs both oral and literary features. This shifts the question from demonstrating alliance to one or the other polarities—oral or written—which John Miles Foley rather bluntly declares as irrelevant:
If we cannot in the present state of knowledge confidently pronounce a problematic text oral, then why not admit that inability and proceed from there? Scholars have shown us that the *Chanson de Roland* and *Beowulf*, for example, have oral traditional characteristics: both texts demonstrate a formulaic phraseology, an inventory of typical scenes, and so on. If that information is not enough to prove beyond doubt their orality in the specific Parry-Lord sense of a *guslar* singing in a *kafana*, then so be it; certainly the demonstration of oral traditional characteristics is not entirely in vain. (*Traditional 4*)

By bypassing the long-running, contentious, and unsettled question of orality or literacy, this approach opens inquiries. What is the purpose of the oral techniques used in *Beowulf*? What effect did these have on the poem’s audience? And how does the use of oral techniques—far from making the poem mechanistic, derivative, dull, or cliché—enable the poem’s success as a work of art?

**The Function of Oral Features in *Beowulf***

Given the variety and preponderance of evidence, it is possible to see how present-day *Beowulf* scholars speak glibly of the critical consensus on the poem’s oral features and possible oral origins. But why would the poet go to the trouble to do this? As Amodio points out, there is no solid evidence that *Beowulf* was intended to be performed ("Res[is]ting" 183-184). We have only a written text. We haven’t even the merest mention of a performance, much less a recording of that performance, so we cannot reliably state that the *Beowulf*-poet meant for his poem to be anything but privately read. Wouldn’t adding oral techniques to a text likely to be read privately and possibly never heard performed aloud be as futile as hanging a masterpiece painting in a room meant to remain darkened?
There is the possibility that the poet added oral techniques to the poem merely out of habit. As Ong documents, the transition from a purely oral to a primarily literate society is slow-going; the Anglo-Saxons, even somewhat late in their history as I believe _Beowulf_ to be, clearly stood at the beginning of that transition (2). If the _Beowulf_-poet understood "narrative poetry" as meeting certain oral-traditional structural and stylistic criteria, the fact that he wrote the poem may have had little impact on his including those criteria. Some might argue that he made the same unthinking application of oral techniques as he did the correct syntax. This viewpoint asserts that there is no function of the oral techniques of _Beowulf_ beyond their usefulness in documenting that the poem is at least residually oral. The oral features have no impact on the meaning of the poem.

However, automatic recourse to familiar oral techniques does not mean the poet employed those techniques thoughtlessly any more than the unconscious use by poets of similes—a current, literary example of the formulaic system—means that similes are inherently artless. Similes are a commonplace part of present-day English poetic diction but can contribute to the meaning and resonance of poem nonetheless. While it is impossible to know for sure that the _Beowulf_-poet deliberated over his choice of oral features and that he wasn’t the clockwork poet who pulled techniques from his traditional repertoire solely because of convenience, it is hard to believe that _Beowulf_—the poetic paragon of an entire historical epoch of the English people—was composed so offhandedly.

In 1961, not long after the inception of oral-formulaic theory in Old English studies, Robert P. Creed wrote of oral poetry that "every time a singer performs the same theme he and his audience hear and appreciate that performance against the music of all other performances of that theme" ("On the Possibility" 101). This statement intimates the direction that oral studies
have taken in recent years. John Miles Foley portrays this as the long-needed discovery of middle ground between the oral-formulaists, for whom poems like *Beowulf* illustrate how traditional poets assembled their poems ex tempore, ignoring the poem as art, and the literary critics who subject *Beowulf* to the same kinds of analysis as they do texts unequivocally from the written canon, ignoring the poem as tradition (*Immanent Art* 4). Rather, current oral theorists posit, scholars can analyze *Beowulf* as art; however, they must take care to do so on traditional, not literary, terms.

In *Immanent Art*, Foley draws on receptionalist theory to propose a hypothesis about the function of oral features. His theory allows oral and formulaic features in a poem. More importantly, it also recognizes that these features had an aesthetic and connotative function for their audience and didn’t exist as mere conveniences for the poet. Receptionalist theory proposes that an author and his or her audience co-create the meaning of a text. Rather than an author delivering a text to a reader, the meaning of which the reader passively absorbs, receptionalist theory "insists on aspects of the text that call for the reader’s active invention (and intervention) in solving the problems they pose" (Foley, *Immanent Art* 41). Within this paradigm, the reader constantly searches for connections and prior knowledge that aid in making meaning from a text.

In oral texts, Foley identifies "signals and gaps" as features that allow the listener (or reader, in the probable case of *Beowulf*) to make meaning from that text. Gaps are "uncharted areas in the textual map where the reader is invited and indeed required to contribute an imaginative solution" that stays within the bounds of the tradition (42). Unferth is one possible gap in *Beowulf*. Unferth has perplexed critics, who struggle to fully understand his role (scholars cannot precisely translate the Old English word *þyle*) or his character. It seems he is some sort of advisor to Hrothgar, and he is at apparent liberty to insult his lord’s guest (and possible savior)
while possessed of a shady background that includes kinslaying and heavy drinking. He loses in
his attempt to verbally spar with Beowulf, later repents of his antagonism, and offers Beowulf an
heirloom sword that then fails the hero in the heat of battle against Grendel’s mother. It is hard to
know what to make of Unferth, much less Hrothgar, who despite Unferth’s flaws, nonetheless
clearly trusts him in some form of official capacity.

It is possible, therefore, that Unferth represents a gap: an instance where the poet does not
provide full information to the audience because he expects the audience to bring their prior
knowledge to fill a lacuna in the text. For example, the audience might know Unferth from
elsewhere in the tradition. An Anglo-Saxon audience might know his past, his personality, and
his relationship to Hrothgar whereas modern readers do not. To someone possessing that prior
knowledge, Unferth’s behavior in the poem might make more sense.

More relevant to this thesis, however, are what Foley terms "signals." He writes, "If
traditional phraseology and narrative are conventional in structure, then they must also be
conventional in their modes of generating meaning" (Immanent Art 6). Formulas, therefore,
become referential, summoning the entirety of the tradition with each use. Foley adds that skilled
oral-traditional poets could employ traditional oral features in their poetry in such a way that
they communicated meaning with maximum precision and resonance for the audience (9).

In an oral society where a poet employs a traditional feature at least every few lines, what
a literary perspective suggests is a simple, direct, and relatively artless text in fact summons a
vast underlying sea of traditional associations (Foley, Immanent Art 11). What appears blandly
stated to a reader unversed in the tradition becomes ironic, humorous, or suspenseful to the
listener steeped in traditional referentiality. Current literature can offer some parallels. One
thousand years in the future, the hypothetical scholar of the long-dead Modern English language
might look at a thesaurus and view the words *venerable* and *decrepit* as interchangeable synonyms for the word *old*. Speakers of Modern English, however, would find this laughable, even offensive. They bring to those words a traditional referentiality based on their experience of the usual contexts for the use of each synonym. Probably, no one has ever told them the differences in meaning between *venerable* and *decrepit*, but they know to use the former to refer to elders renowned for their wisdom and the latter for falling-down houses and junked cars. The hypothetical scholar one thousand years from now, through careful study of the contexts in which each word is used, can gain similar insight about their deeper meanings. Old English made use of connotation and referentiality, and expecting Old English poets to ignore these devices is similar to expecting a modern writer to assign synonyms without thought to connotative force.

Several scholars have observed the contexts in which Old English poets tend to use particular formulas and have extrapolated the potential meanings of those devices. Table 1 below summarizes some of the formulas of Old English literature where scholars have uncovered the contextual or connotative significance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Contextual or Connotative Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>formulas for swords</td>
<td>failure; tenuousness of existence in a hostile natural world (Sorrell 55-56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Geata dryhten</em> (lord of the Geats)</td>
<td>the king’s protective authority (Foley, <em>Immanent Art</em> 201-204)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hwæt</em> paradigm (as the first word of)</td>
<td>the authority of the tradition; recall of this authority as</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Old English poems) a collective act (Foley, *Immanent Art* 211-217)

*in/on X-dagum* (in [former] days) the authority of the past to bear on present actions (Foley, *Immanent Art* 221)

*n iht-langne fy rst* (a whole long night) time of anticipation before a battle (Riedinger 296-297)

*ofer cald wæter* (over cold water) before a scene of disaster (Riedinger 296-297)

*þæt wæs god cyning* (that was a good king) a character’s excellence as a king beyond his actions in a specific circumstance (Foley, *Immanent Art* 211-212)

*X peoden or peoden X* (chieftain of X) the king’s protective authority (Foley, *Immanent Art* 201-204)

**Conclusion**

In *Immanent Art*, Foley refers to the "magic of metonymy" as a means to bring the past into an oral performance firmly located in the present (20). I’d argue, though, that there’s nothing magical—in the sense of being unusual and provoking unexpected effects—about the metonymy or referentiality of oral poetry. As my examples in this chapter show, even in a highly literate society, artists lean heavily on the connotative meanings of the material they employ—whether an oral formula, a single word, a passage of music, or an artistic technique—to make meaning and generate a response in their audience. As the audience for a work of art, we always bring our culture’s artistic tradition to bear on our interpretation of any one piece. This is hardly unique to oral poetry.

In oral poetry, however, recognizing the metonymic force contained in traditional language bridges the divide between the mechanistic Parry-Lord hypothesis and reading *Beowulf* as a work of literary art. Neither are fully satisfactory, but as Foley notes, for a long while, it was
almost impossible to establish a middle ground between them. His theory does so by providing a means to interpret an oral poem as a work of art while not only allowing it oral features but recognizing that those features enable it to succeed as art. It also provides readers of oral poems who come from the literary tradition a means to understand a form of art that succeeds or fails on different criteria than those applied to literary art.
CHAPTER IV

Theoretical Framework:
The Art and Science of Sound

The study of Old English literature poses challenges that make it more difficult to study than newer texts in the English canon. Even the date of *Beowulf* remains unknown, with nothing approximating scholarly consensus; the place of composition remains similarly contentious, the poem’s author lost to the wreckage of time. As Chapters II and III show, the poem’s relationship to the oral tradition—if such a link exists—remains obscured beyond the meager consensus that the poem contains oral features. Scholars have yet to agree on what those oral features are, much less what they mean. The fact that the poem is written in Old English—a language that hasn’t served as a person’s native tongue for over a thousand years—creates complications. We can still only guess at the meaning of many words. Even the ubiquitous *Hwaet* paradigm discussed in Table 1 above eludes translators; despite its prevalence and place of importance at the heads of several major Old English poems, translators aren’t entirely sure what it means. When the bare meanings of words have perished, we can barely intimate the connotative meanings—the difference that lies between *venerable* and *decrepit*. Given the problems posed by understanding Old English, unearthing the connotations and referentiality of an oral feature such as a formula or a sound pattern seems an impossible dream, a laughable proposition.

Over the decades of research into *Beowulf* as an oral poem, however, scholars like Anita Riedinger and John Miles Foley have proposed methods that answer two major questions essential to this study. From the ostensibly written words of a poem like *Beowulf*, part of a corpus as limited as that of the Old English, how does one determine what was likely an oral-
traditional feature? And once one has done the work of pinpointing the oral features of the poem, how does one infer the significance and meaning to a long-extinct people?

**Oral-Traditional Features as Sound Units**

Scholars have devoted many hours of attention to the oral tradition and describing the features that distinguish oral texts from literary texts. This research has naturally involved Old English studies, but most of it has occurred outside this domain, much of it looking at extant oral traditions in traditional world cultures. While in the domain of Old English oral literature, oral-formulaic theory has commanded most of the focus, this theory hardly monopolizes the orality of poems like *Beowulf*. Scholars with a broader focus, such as Walter Ong, have done much to identify oral features that have nothing to do with oral-formulaic theory but are nonetheless applicable to *Beowulf*, despite the lack of scholarly attention given to these broader-focused theories.

Both Ong and Foley emphasize oral features as units of sound (Ong 72; *Immanent Art* 17). Lord likewise viewed formulas as sound units (32-33). On the surface, this seems a foolishly obvious statement: Of course audiences aurally perceive poetic features delivered orally. But to a nonliterate audience, a formula exists as a single unit, not a sequence of individual words joined together, as perceived by a literate audience. "Man without writing," wrote Lord, "thinks in terms of sound groups and not in words, and the two do not necessarily collide" (25). To use the example of *once upon a time*—an oral formula even for present-day literary audiences—even those literate listeners have probably thought little about the individual words in the formula. Yet, were a storyteller to replace *once upon a time* with *once within a time*—semantically similar, metrically identical—a listening audience would immediately notice the error: It is a
different—and incorrect—sound unit. It sounds instantly wrong and fails to summon the context familiar to the audience. To an audience that does not perceive the individual words in the formula, even a minor change produces a new sound unit and potentially different meanings.

This paper builds on the idea that oral features are sound units and considers how those sound units develop traditional referential meanings that the skilled poet manipulates to create an emotional reaction in an audience. In *Immanent Art*, John Miles Foley uses receptionalist theory to propose that oral poets and their audiences co-create the meaning of oral poetry: The poet provides the traditional materials and the listener interprets them according to his or her knowledge of the tradition. As noted above, Foley refers to oral poetry as containing "signals and gaps" that activate an audience’s traditional knowledge (*Immanent Art* 53). Signals prompt the listener’s consideration of the broader context in which traditional poets use a particular formula or other oral feature; gaps activate the listener’s prior and extratextual knowledge of a particular setting, person, or event alluded to in the current poem. Both allow poetry to be more meaningful to a listener possessed of this traditional knowledge and extend the frame of reference beyond a single poem to invoke the entirety of the poetic tradition (Foley, *Immanent Art* 7).

Building on Foley’s work, I will first look at the distribution of noun-epithet formulas across the entirety of the poem. Noun-epithet formulas, which are among the most frequently used formulas in *Beowulf*, identify a character by describing his or her role or characteristics. For example, in *Beowulf*, the poet often identifies a king as a *sinces brytta* or "ring-giver" in place of the king's name. I identify the fitts—or numbered divisions of the poem—where noun-epithet formulas occur at an above-average rate and the fitts where they are absent. From this, I hope to infer the general function of the noun-epithet formula in *Beowulf*. I will then examine several noun-epithet formulas found in three or more locations within *Beowulf* and use any shared
context to infer their traditional referentiality. In an attempt to avoid some of the pitfalls into which oral-formulaic theory has fallen—defining the term *formula* so laxly to permit a maximum number of formulas and lend support to oral-formulaic theory as a hypothesis of composition—I will use Riedinger’s definition, discussed above: "The repetition of one general concept + one system + one function = one formula" (305). This will form the basic formulaic sound unit from which I will attempt to infer context and, from that, how the formula communicates the meaning of the poem.

**Sound Units, Music, and Emotion**

Foley’s application of receptionalist theory to traditional oral poetry bridged the divide between theorists who wanted to read Old English poems like *Beowulf* as oral-formulaic and those who would read *Beowulf* as literary art (*Immanent Art* 4-5). Foley’s approach has been productive in providing a means for critics to infer the meaning and significance of a poem like *Beowulf* for its original audience. No researcher, however, has considered the psychological and neurobiological research on how aurally received poetry activates memories and produces emotion in listeners, much less whether these findings support the key tenets of receptionalism.

Living in a literate society means that we no longer listen to oral poetry like *Beowulf*. Although oral societies remain in the present day, Western experimental psychologists, based on a dearth of literature, have not embarked upon research about how modern oral poetic structures generate emotional effects in listeners. While oral poetry may have faded into obscurity in Western culture, however, oral texts and aural art nonetheless remain a major part of Western cultures, even those with near-universal literacy. Music, in particular, is nearly ubiquitous in
Western life: deliberately listened to for entertainment; an important component of television
programs, films, and advertisements; and in the background in commercial and public spaces.

Within the last decade, interest in how music influences and even produces emotion has
grown (Sloboda and Juslin 79-81). Considering the features of oral poetry as sound units invites
drawing parallels with music, and Foley’s application of receptionalist theory to oral poetry
dovetails with what psychologists know about the neurobiological mechanisms by which music
activates memories and produces emotion. One could rightly raise the objection, however, that
oral poetry is not music. Scholars of Old English do not agree on whether music would have
accompanied a poem like *Beowulf* in Anglo-Saxon society, with some scholars arguing stridently
for the separation of poetry and music (Opland 257-260). Oral poetry and music do share several
key features, however. While oral poetry lacks the full range of musical features—melody,
harmony, and mode, for example—studies on individual structural factors in music have shown
that those features also present in oral poetry—tempo, rhythm, and volume—exert the greatest
influence on the emotions the music generates. Psychological research identifies tempo as the
musical component that produces the strongest effect on the emotions generated by a musical
piece, and in some studies, these effects extend to spoken word as well as music (Gabrielsson
and Lindström 381-383). Furthermore, neurobiological research of emotional reactions to music
hypothesizes that the brain processes music along the same neural pathway used to process the
emotional content of speech sounds, further suggesting similarities between the abilities of music
and oral poetry to produce emotion in an audience (Peretz 116).

Given these similarities, research on music and emotion provides the most productive
avenue to pursue in determining how oral poetry activates memories and provokes an emotional
response in its audience. This research has taken two general approaches: establishing which
structural features of music produce a consistent, predictable emotional reaction in listeners and showing how music can activate memories with strong emotional associations (Juslin and Laukka 218). Both approaches are relevant when applying research findings to oral poetry, but the latter is particularly relevant to receptionalism: The distinctive sound unit employed in an oral poem or a song can activate memories associated with that sound unit, generating an emotional reaction the savvy poet can employ to create a more profound emotional reaction in his or her audience.

**Conclusion**

In recent decades, research into the aesthetic function of Old English poetry and investigations of how music produces emotion have received greater-than-usual attention in the published literature. There are multiple possible points of contact between these fields that have not yet received investigation. Receptionalist theory provides a means to infer the aesthetic effects of poetry, like *Beowulf*, that is largely constructed using repeated formulas and themes. Oral theory's regard of these repeated phrases as sound units—an idea that goes back at least to Lord—rather than words, as understood by a literate audience, allows this research to intersect with research on the effects of sound, namely music, on emotion and memory.

Receptionalist theory and current ideas about music and emotion, when considered in tandem, allow scholars to infer the response of the original long-lost Anglo-Saxon audience to *Beowulf* with greater precision than before. Considering the function of oral features within the larger context of *Beowulf*, it produces insights into how the poet wielded oral-traditional language to produce layers of meaning and produce a profound emotional reaction in its audience.
CHAPTER V
Methodology:

Discovering a Metonymic Time Machine

Throughout the history of investigating the oral features—particularly the oral-formulaic features—of Old English literature, scholars have too often fallen into the unfortunate trap of loosely or vaguely defining terminology like *formula* to enable the concept to cover as much Old English literature as possible, making the poetry fit the theory rather than considering whether the theory applies to the poetry. I detail some of the critical pitfalls of oral-formulaic theory in Chapter II. This legacy necessitates taking extra care when investigating the oral features of *Beowulf*, so as not to make the same mistakes or succumb to bias.

Selecting Formulas

The definition of the term *formula* remains so contentious that compiling a list of Old English formulas would be politically fraught and an impossibility. Several scholars, however, have investigated specific formulaic phrases in *Beowulf*. One of the most important types of formulas in *Beowulf* is the noun-epithet formula: a noun, with or without modifiers, used in place of a character’s name. Noun-epithet formulas are a useful starting point for study for several reasons. First, they are common within *Beowulf*, negating the need to look at the formula in the broader Old English corpus. In his article "Formulas for Heroes in the ‘Iliad’ and in ‘Beowulf’," William Whallon compiles a list of noun-epithet formulas that are half-line kennings, appear at least twice in *Beowulf*, and refer at least once to a heroic character (96). Whallon identifies fifty-six different formulas meeting these criteria; combined, these formulas are used 185 times in *Beowulf*. Secondly, because they are so common in *Beowulf*, using noun-epithet formulas avoids
the problem of selecting a formula used only a few times in the poem. Finally, because noun-
epithet formulas also form a grammatical phrase, their use avoids some of the difficulties of oral-
formulaic theory identified in Chapter II, such as counting what Marcia Bullard terms
"grammatical necessities [and] line fillers" as formulaic (13).

I have used Whallon’s list of noun-epithet formulas from his article "Formulas for Heroes
in the ‘Iliad’ and in ‘Beowulf” to select the formulas I will investigate in my own study (97-98).
Conveniently, Whallon provides not only a list of the characters to which each formula refers but
the line numbers where the formula appears. As noted above, Whallon identified fifty-six
separate noun-epithet formulas. Looking at each formula far exceeds the scope of this study. To
select those formulas I would use in my study, I adhered to the following procedure:

1) The formula must meet Riedinger’s definition of the formula: "The repetition of one
general concept + one system + one function = one formula" (305). Because Whallon’s
list includes only epithets used to refer to male characters, usually heroes, then all the
formulas meet the requirement for general concept and function. The requirement that the
formula come from a single formulaic system allowed me to twice combine noun-epithet
formulas that Whallon considered separately: *sinces/beaga brytta* ("ring/treasure giver")
and *mære þeoden/þeoden mære* ("famed lord"). Riedinger’s definition also shifts the
emphasis away from requiring an exact match between words for them to qualify as the
same formula. Because Old English is a language of inflection, the syntactical placement
of a word can create variation in the word’s ending. It is difficult to believe, however,
that a skilled poet would always and only use a formula in, for instance, the nominative
singular case. Because Riedinger’s definition emphasizes the formula’s function,
formulas with different syntactical uses—and therefore slightly different endings—are permitted.

2) The formula must appear at least three times in Beowulf, and I gave preference to those formulas that are most common in the poem.

3) I next considered the characters to whom the formula applies. Whallon observed that noun-epithet formulas—among the most common in Beowulf—apply to a context rather than a character, a stark difference from Homeric poetry, where the opposite is true ("Formulas" 96). Whenever possible, I have preferred formulas that apply to a multitude of characters. Furthermore, I have attempted to select formulas that apply to seemingly disparate characters. For example, the hilderinces formula is applied to both Beowulf and Grendel, and the mære þeoden formula is applied to both Beowulf and Heremod, who appears in the poem as a negative exemplar of heroic behavior. This approach allows me to eliminate the possibility that the epithet was simply a description of a single character and increases the likelihood that the formula signals context rather than characterization of a specific person. Understanding the context in which the poet would have used the formula can provide clues about what contextual references the formula would trigger in the audience.

4) Finally, I have selected some formulas that present an obvious or interesting pattern even before deeper analysis. For instance, if a formula always appears in the first line of a fitt, or if a formula refers to the two characters eaten by monsters in the poem, then I have selected that formula in an attempt to further elucidate the context that explains these patterns.
Bias is a real concern in this research. It is tempting to select those formulas that demonstrate a common context and, therefore, confirm the theory that formulas summoned metonymic contextual associations for the audience of the poem. To avoid this, I selected the formulas I wanted to investigate before looking any deeper at the contexts in which they are presented. I have presented my results for each in this paper, whether they proved fruitful or not.

Finally, I will not be considering Old English texts other than Beowulf. Although this is a common approach in Old English oral-formulaic studies, I am interested specifically in inferring how the Beowulf-poet specifically uses formulas to communicate the poem’s meaning to a traditional audience. Because other Old English texts often come from different time periods and serve other purposes than Beowulf, even though studying the corpus as a whole provides many more examples of particular formulas in context, I have confined myself to looking only at formulas in Beowulf.

After applying these criteria, I have selected five formulas to examine closely: sinces/beaga brytta ("ring/treasure giver"), hilderinces ("battle man"), leofes mannes ("beloved man"), helm Scyldinga ("helm of the Scyldings"), and mære þeoden ("famed lord"). Using Whallon’s list to find each formula in the poem, I have first translated the line or lines (if the single line containing the formula does not provide enough context on its own) surrounding the formula. I have used the Klaeber edition of Beowulf—the standard edition used by Old English scholars—and completed all translations myself. I have also looked at the narrative content of the fitt in which the formula appears or, when an episode spans more than one fitt, the multiple fitts containing the episode in which the formula appears.

Inferring the Significance of Oral-Traditional Features

45
Old English is considered a dead language and the Anglo-Saxons a vanquished culture, both subsumed after the Norman Invasion of 1066 and ensuing centuries of Romantic and Classical influence that attenuated the Germanic origins of the English language and people. Given this, how does one gain an understanding of what a poem like Beowulf would have meant to a long-departed people? How does one infer the significance of such a creative act?

In a 1961 article offering advice on reading oral poetry, Robert Creed proposed a means by which critics could replicate as near as possible the experience of a living tradition without the benefit of a time machine to return them to the Anglo-Saxon era to hear its poetry recited:

So the critic of the present age, deprived though he is of innumerable performances of the long-dead tradition, can, when he seems to discover a thematic recurrence, flip the pages of his texts and glossaries and locate all the other surviving occurrences of that theme and compare them closely. This close comparison will be his substitute for intense and immediate responding to a living tradition. (Creed, "On the Possibility" 101)

Other scholars have followed Creed's recommendation through ensuing decades of research into the orality of Old English poetry, though expanding it to include all oral features and not just themes. This paper will take the same approach: after identifying a possible oral feature, to look at when it occurs elsewhere in Beowulf. A combined look at the contexts in which a feature occurs should, as closely as possible, conjecture what that feature might have suggested to an audience of the tradition. This is the context that we should expect a particular oral device to evoke, based on the existing corpus, and that we can assume added meaning or connotative coloring for the original audience.

Conclusion
Receptionalist theory offers something like a blueprint for a time machine through which we can recover the meaning of ancient texts like *Beowulf*. For decades, researchers have been attempting to elucidate the contexts underlying the use of specific formulas. This paper will continue that investigation, looking specifically at noun-epithet formulas. The errors of oral-formulaic research necessitate care, both in defining the formula and in avoiding bias. As the rest of this paper will show, often in *Beowulf*, once one knows the traditional context of a formula, the poet’s use of that formula in a situation seems designed to evince a specific understanding or response in the minds of the audience. Uncovering that understanding or response explains how *Beowulf* functions as a work of art and as a cultural artifact at its particular moment in history.
CHAPTER VI
Æþeling Worda:
The Distribution of Noun-Epithet Formulas

Noun-epithet formulas are one of the more noticeable attributes of the Homeric poems and so captured the early interest—and fruitful inquiry—of Milman Parry in developing oral-formulaic theory. As in many other instances, the application of oral-formulaic theory to Old English poetry lagged a few steps behind the study of the Homeric poems but, ultimately, followed its example. As was often the result, critics quickly came to realize the Homeric and Old English traditions were not readily comparable. In a 1961 article, William Whallon observed that, unlike the Homeric poems—where the poet tends to append a single noun-epithet to a single character—Old English noun-epithets often applied to multiple characters. Perhaps biased by the view of the Homeric poems as a prototype and model par excellence of oral-formulaic theory, Whallon concluded that the generalization of Old English noun-epithet formulas to multiple characters proved the formulas were not used with "picturesqueness" or the "coinage of rare and brilliant paraphrases" in mind but, rather, were deployed "with relatively little thought" ("Diction" 312).

Whallon reassessed his own conclusion just four years later. Rather than noun-epithet formulas applying to a single character, they applied to a particular context ("Formulas" 98). Although application of oral-formulaic theory to Old English poetry was in its formative stages, this observation presages Riedinger’s observation more than twenty years later that formulas are linked to context and Foley’s theory that formulaic elements activate the entirety of the tradition surrounding a particular usage, including traditional context and connotation.
The heavily studied noun-epithet formulas are the æþeling worda: the prince of words. Beginners to the poem are usually introduced to its kennings, among them noun-epithet formulas like sinces brytta ("ring-giver"). In his follow-up article, Whallon identified all noun-epithets used for the male characters in Beowulf, the characters for which they were used, and the lines where they appeared. As I faced deciding which formulas to discuss in this paper, Whallon’s list was an obvious starting point, and I began using slips of paper to mark formulas that met two criteria: they were used three or more times in Beowulf and they could potentially reference more than one character. (For instance, I did not mark formulas like bearn Ecgþeowes ["son of Ecgtheow"], even though it appears ten times in the poem, because the poet was unlikely to ever use it for any character but Beowulf.) As I progressed deeper and deeper into the list, I began to notice that my slips of paper were stacking up in some sections of the poem while in others the pages remained empty. As I flipped through the poem, I became cognizant that the noun-epithet formulas I was investigating were concentrated in some parts of the poem and almost or wholly absent from others.

My question: Why is this? If Old English noun-epithets are generalizable to any character suitable to the context—and clearly they are, since the poet applies some of the noun-epithets to three or four different characters in the poem and to characters as opposite as Beowulf and Grendel—then it is not as though their usage follows a particular character’s involvement in the poem. If anything, their generalizability would suggest an even distribution throughout the poem: applied to Hrothgar here, Beowulf there, and Wiglaf later still.

As Figure 1 below shows, this is not the case. The number of formulas per fitt across the poem resembles a city skyline rather than a rolling plain, with four distinct spikes and several lulls with few or no noun-epithets at all. Analyzing the content and noun-epithets of each fitt (see...
Appendix A), one can observe correlations between the content of the fitt and those fitts where noun-epithet use is heavy and those where it is wholly or nearly absent.

Fig. 1. Distribution of noun-epithet formulas by fitt in *Beowulf*.

**Heroic Action and Heavy Noun-Epithet Use**

In his follow-up article, Whallon observed that noun-epithet formulas "stress many of the same qualities," among them the character’s lineage, nationality, and kingship (98). In *Immanent Art*, Foley analyzed the possible metonymic function of several generalized noun epithets and concluded that these phrases signify "the ideal role of king as protector and rewarder, as certifier of the properly dynamic social order; each of them adheres to, and in fact represents, values associated with the lord and his comitatus" (202).
Scrutinizing which fitts contain the most noun-epithet formulas further validates this function for the generalized noun-epithets as a whole. The mean average number of noun-epithet formulas per fitt equals 2.2, with a standard deviation of 1.8. I chose the mark of one standard deviation—or four noun-epithet formulas per fitt—as the cutoff point for determining which fitts contained an unusually high number of noun-epithets. I have summarized those fitts meeting this criterion as follows, with the number of noun-epithet formulas in the fitt indicated parenthetically. Fitt numbers follow Klaeber’s edition of *Beowulf*:

II: Twelve years of Grendel, grief of Hrothgar (4)

V: Arrival at Heorot, Wulfgar convinces Hrothgar to admit Beowulf (4)

XXII: Fight with Grendel’s mother (5)

XXIII: Death of Grendel’s mother, Beowulf’s return (6)

XXVII: Journey back to Geatland, tale of Hygd (4)

XXVIII: Counsel with Hygelac (4)

XXVIIII-XXX: Counsel with Hygelac (5)

XXXIII: Beowulf pledges to fight the dragon, story of Hygelac’s death (6)

XXXV: Tale of Hrethel, Beowulf goes forth and begins to fight the dragon, Beowulf is deserted by his men (7)

XLI: More on feuds, viewing of Beowulf and the dragon by the warriors (4)

XLII: Removal of Beowulf’s body (4)

These fitts include two of the three major monster fights in the poem: the fights against Grendel’s mother and the dragon. The fight against Grendel is conspicuously absent; as Beowulf prepares for and executes this first fight, the poet expends only a single noun-epithet formula across three fitts. With each fight, however, the number of noun-epithet formulas—and the
stakes—escalate. Grendel is a single foe, however formidable, fought with a home-turf advantage and the help of Beowulf’s band of retainers. Beowulf battles Grendel’s mother alone and on her own territory. The glory is greater and the achievement more crucial: Rather than merely eliminating a single foe, an entire race of monsters ends with her destruction. The poet includes eleven noun-epithet formulas in the two fitts describing the fight against her, her death, and Beowulf’s return to Heorot, bearing the head of her son as a trophy. The dragon fight stands for the climactic achievement. Beowulf fights alone in the close confines of the dragon’s barrow, his shield and weapons all but useless, bowed by old age, and deserted by his men. Tellingly, this scene is the climax in the usage of noun-epithet formulas as well: The poet deploys seven in this fitt alone, more than any other fitt in the poem. As discussed in Chapter IX below, the concentration of noun-epithet formulas identifies certain characters as fitting within the heroic culture.

The *Unhæled* and Low Noun-Epithet Use

Just as there are fitts with a conspicuously high use of noun-epithet formulas, there are fitts where the use of these formulas is nonexistent. Given the mean average of 2.2 noun-epithet phrases per fitt and the standard deviation of 1.8, fitts with no noun-epithet formulas fall outside the one standard-deviation mark established in the section above. Those fitts are as follows:

I: Hrothgar’s lineage, building of Heorot, arrival of Grendel

VIII: Flyting between Beowulf and Unferth

X: Beowulf prepares for Grendel’s arrival

XI: Grendel arrives

XVI: Finn episode
XVIII: Wealtheow bestows the neck-ring of Hama, pleas with Beowulf

XVIII: Grendel’s mother arrives, death of Æschere

XXXI: Presentation of neck-ring to Hygd, honor is bestowed on Beowulf; Beowulf becomes king

XXXII: Theft of the cup, story of the barrow’s builder

XXXVIII: Wiglaf rebukes the deserters

Sometimes, the lack of noun-epithet formulas is understandable. The arrivals of Grendel and his mother to Heorot, for instance, would offer no easily conceivable opportunity for using a noun-epithet formula for a hero-protector. Wealtheow’s gift of the neck-ring to Beowulf and her speech on behalf of her sons in fitt XVIII, likewise, offers few opportunities to use noun-epithet formulas, since most of the fitt is about or in the speech of the queen. However, as I will discuss in Chapter IX below, usually fitts that lack noun-epithet formulas are those that feature behavior that could be described as unheroic. Their absence reinforces the association described between noun-epithet formulas and heroic behavior established in those fitts with a high concentration of noun-epithet formulas.

Conclusion

The distribution of noun-epithet formulas in Beowulf supports the ideas that, for a traditional audience, these formulas summon a wealth of references to the function of the king as a protector and benefactor. Far from an even distribution, the poem contains heavy clusters of noun-epithet formulas in some parts and no noun-epithet formulas in others.

Where they appear most often, we can observe Beowulf attaining or occupying his role as the primary protector of his people. As his heroic reputation grows with each fight—and each
fight escalates in its importance for the people he protects—the poet deploys increasing numbers of noun-epithet formulas. At the risk of circularity, we can also see in these scenes the poet establishing the very heroic context that gives these formulas their referentiality. Beowulf joins the legion of heroes who have, in the Germanic tradition, fought similar fights against seemingly unassailable foes and whose triumphs ensured a measure of peace for their people. The poet’s heavy use of noun-epithet formulas for Hrothgar, however, illustrate that they do not merely function to reinforce overt demonstration of the same values they summon. Hrothgar’s actions in the poem are not exactly heroic—he fails, after all, in protecting his people from the ravages of Grendel—but the poet takes pains to activate heroic attributes for Hrothgar using noun-epithet formulas. This shows how poets could employ traditional language to remind an audience that a character’s legacy extends beyond his actions in any particular scene and, furthermore, emphasizes the frailty of heroic triumph: a theme that recurs throughout the poem.

Similarly, scenes where the poet avoids the use of noun-epithet formulas overwhelmingly recount actions that are unheroic in nature. Some of these are whole fitts—the fitts about monsters, about thievery, about downfall, about betrayal—but even within certain fitts, where and how the poet uses noun-epithets reveals their metonymic function. For example, the poet tends to avoid attaching noun-epithet formulas to characters in the midst of engaging in blood feuds, even if he shows no hesitation in assigning noun-epithet formulas to the same characters, mere lines later, for acting in a more traditional role as protector and benefactor. This suggests the poet may have used noun-epithet formulas in Beowulf to subtly manipulate how the poem’s audience felt not only about individual characters—the increasingly heroic Beowulf, the despondent but steadfast Hrothgar—but also the traditions and institutions on which the poem offers commentary.
CHAPTER VII
The Fragile Hero:

Five Formulas on the Proximity of Triumph and Failure

A generalized look at how the Beowulf-poet uses noun-epithet formulas confirms the theory of Whallon and Foley that they refer to heroic values, particularly a king’s ability to protect and provide for his people. But do individual formulas serve a specific function within this general usage? In other words, would the poet have, for instance, used *sinesis brytta* instead of *secg on searwum* for reasons of meaning, not meter or alliteration?

This chapter takes a closer look at several noun-epithet formulas in *Beowulf* and attempts to tease out the more specific referential function beyond that of merely invoking a king’s duty to protect and appropriately reward his people. As noted above, in selecting formulas, I have looked only at phrases that meet Riedinger’s definition and occur at least three times within *Beowulf* to refer to potentially more than one character. Because this leaves more formulas to investigate than allowed by the scope of this project, then I have preferred those that occur well over three times in the poem, those that refer to a diverse range of characters within the poem, and those that occur in especially notable contexts. Appendix B shows each occurrence of the chosen formulas and the poetic context in which they occur.

*Sinesis/Beaga Brytta and the Venerable King*

The *beaga brytta* or "ring-giver" is one of the best-known kennings in *Beowulf*. With its formulaic-system companion *sinesis brytta* ("giver of treasure"), it appears seven times, referring to three different characters. The terms *sinesis brytta* and *beaga brytta* allude to the heroic function of the king as a provider. However, a closer look at where and how the poet uses this
term in *Beowulf* further underscores its function of reminding the audience of the king’s status, his generosity, and the relative dependency of his petitioners. It serves to communicate that, in a society that correctly adheres to the heroic value of kingly generosity, even the helpless—so long as they themselves do their duty under the heroic code—will be provided for and protected from poverty by a conscientious king.

Firstly, it is worth looking at the characters who receive this noun-epithet in *Beowulf*. Scyld, Hrothgar, and Hygelac are all identified as ring- or treasure-givers. Beowulf, notably, is never identified with this noun-epithet formula nor any phrase approximating it, even though Wiglaf explicitly mentions Beowulf’s openhandedness when rebuking the retainers who deserted him during the dragon fight: "se eow ða maðmas geaf" ("he gave you your treasure"; 2865b). Scyld, Hrothgar, and Hygelac are all venerable rulers; during the poem, we hear told of their accomplishments but also observe their declines and deaths. All have children, classifying them as ancestors; Beowulf, on the other hand, dies without a son to inherit his kingdom. Beowulf would belong to this group of characters, and that he does not is significant. I will discuss its significance below, in Chapter IX.

Use of the *sinces/beaga brytta* formula occurs in two major contexts, which often overlap: just after arriving from or before departing upon a sea voyage or in speech to a venerable king on a character’s behalf. These two contexts share in common that they present a stark power differential between the king and the supplicant and a dependence on the king’s generosity for a character or characters to survive or thrive. Sea voyages are a logical context, for a crew just arrived from a journey across the sea arrives with nothing but what they can carry in their ship—the provisions of which they presumably exhausted during the journey—and thus relies on the generosity of the king of the land where they disembark. The poet uses the formula
after Beowulf’s arrival, when Wulfgar persuades Hrothgar to admit the Geatish voyagers and again when Beowulf speaks on his own behalf (352a, 607b). Before Beowulf dives into the lair of Grendel’s mother, he uses it to plea for Hrothgar to care for his men and to send the spoils he has won to Hygelac, so that by it Hygelac might know his deeds (1487a). It is used twice after Beowulf’s return to his homeland under the rule of Hygelac: once as Beowulf orders his men to drag the treasure up the beach to Hygelac’s keep and again as Beowulf prepares to recount his deeds to his lord (1922b, 2071a).

In all of these instances, Beowulf depends on persuading a politically superior person to accept what he offers and provide an appropriate reward in turn. Cast upon the beach of Denmark, would Hrothgar turn him away, he and his men would be left with little in a strange and potentially hostile land. (It is Hrothgar who offered assistance to Beowulf’s father Ecgtheow in resolving Ecgtheow’s feud; Hrothgar owes Beowulf nothing, and Beowulf comes to Denmark as the indebted party.) Before Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother, Hrothgar holds power not only over the fates of Beowulf’s men but Beowulf’s reputation: an unpromising youth, Beowulf will go unremembered and shamed without Hrothgar’s help in securing his legacy. His return to Hygelac’s kingdom seems less dire—it is the homeland of Beowulf and his men, and they should receive basic provisions and safety if nothing else—but again, his reputation is at stake. Given his inauspicious beginnings, he depends on Hygelac recognizing his accomplishments, brought back in the form of treasure and tales of exceptional deeds. If he is to advance in Geatish society, he must convince Hygelac that he has earned that privilege.

Only one use of the formula occurs out of context with a sea voyage. In Heorot, after the death of Grendel, Hrothgar’s wife Wealtheow arrives and, serving as cup-bearer, bids Hrothgar to enjoy his company but, addressing him as sinces bryttan, also bids him not to forget his sons
(1170a). "Me man sægde þæt þu ðe for sunu wolde/hererinc habban," she says ("Men say that you would have this hero [Beowulf] for a son"; 1175a-1176a). Implied in her speech is that Hrothgar should not become so enamored of the Geatish prince that he forgets his obligations to his own kin. Here again, we see a character who lacks political power—Wealtheow, speaking for her young and equally powerless children—using the formula in a context where she depends on the generosity of a venerable lord for the survival of herself and her lineage. The scene is subtle—Wealtheow is too gracious to overtly advise her husband to neglect the Geats in favor of his own children—but it shows an instance where the use of the formula might have provided additional context for a traditional audience. Such an audience would know the *singes/beaga brytta* formula is used when a character is left in exigency because of the pressures of a journey. Such an audience would understand the character using the noun-epithet phrase is helpless and largely dependent on the king for succor. In this particular scene, Wealtheow’s use of the formula aligns her circumstances with those of the more typical wayfarers and likewise reminds the audience of her dependency.

Finally, another use of the formula stands out as slightly anomalous. In the poem’s prologue, the poet identifies Scyld as *beaga bryttan* at his funeral (35a). As the eponymous ancestor of the Scyldings, Scyld is a venerable patriarch as required by the formula. The formula also occurs before a sea voyage: that is, the release of Scyld’s funeral ship upon the sea. What this particular usage lacks is use of the formula to signal a power differential that necessitates the generosity of the more powerful party.

In this case, however, the usual formulaic context allows this specific usage to function ironically. Scyld arrived by ship, a mysterious foundling pulled off the sea, from where none knew. Beginning his life, therefore, dependent upon the care of others, Scyld rose to carry his
people to prosperity and glory, embodying the ideal of the beaga bryttan. At his funeral, in a reversal of his origins, he sails back out to the sea whence he came. The prologue concludes, ominously:

Men ne cunnōn
secgan to sōðe, selerædende,
hæleð under heofenum, hwa þæm hlæste onfeng. (50b-52b)

Men do not know
the truth, the ruler,
the hero under the heavens, who will receive that cargo.

Scyld in this scene occupies two roles. His identification with the noun-epithet formula beaga bryttan distinguishes him as a venerable king upon whom his subjects depended. Yet, by the end of the prologue, Scyld’s death has reduced him to the status of supplicant: released upon the tumults of the sea on a journey, the ending of which is unknown even to the wise. The powerful, generous Scyld—one of only a few characters worthy of the beaga bryttan epithet—leaves the earthly realm in the same manner as lesser men: a potent reminder of the poem’s theme of ephemerality, that even the sturdiest must eventually come to ruin. A traditional audience would have understood the significance of juxtaposing Scyld’s dual roles as beaga bryttan—traditionally one to succor seafarers in need—and as the helpless mariner dependent upon the mercy of one more powerful than himself as he departs within his funeral ship.

The Hilderinces and the Proximity of Death and Largesse

The noun-epithet formula hilderinces, which is a kenning that translates literally to "battle-man," appears four times in Beowulf. Three times, it refers to Beowulf; the fourth time, it
refers to, oddly, Grendel. It was this unusual usage that made me want to look closer at this formula, despite its relatively few uses.

At each of its four uses in the poem, the *hilderinces* formula occurs proximate to reference to the spoils of war. The first use—the anomalous one applied to Grendel rather than one of the heroes—occurs as Hrothgar’s men stare in awe at the hand of Grendel hung as a trophy in Heorot. Beowulf is called *hilderince* as he plunges into Grendel’s mere, immediately after beseeching Hrothgar to send his spoils of war to Hygelac should he perish. He is called *hilderince* again when he decides to take Grendel’s head as a trophy for the Danes, and a final time as his men pass into the dragon barrow to view the gold treasure that he bought with his life.

It seems straightforward to conclude that, for its traditional audience, this formula would have summoned the custom of commemorating a victory by taking a trophy. However, this does not carry an unequivocally positive connotation, exemplified by the use of the formula to identify Grendel postmortem, his own body serving as the trophy. Rather, the formula encompasses the uncertainty of battle by invoking a complex tradition of war trophies and the prices paid to attain them. In two of the uses, the poet uses the formula to refer to a living character—Beowulf—but even in one of these instances, he has only moments before concluded a speech about contingencies in the instance of his death. This suggests that battle trophies—and the *hilderinces* formula so closely associated with them—are far from simplistic symbols of victory. Instead, they stand for a more complicated symbol of interlaced triumph and sacrifice, the formula perhaps reminding the audience of the proximity of these opposite statuses to each other in heroic society and how easily triumph becomes sacrifice; how near a society’s largesse from a trophy or spoil stands to its ruin from the loss of an essential protector-king.
In the other two uses, the character identified by the formula—first Grendel and then Beowulf—is deceased when the formula is used. Both trophies come at the cost of their life but also catalyze repercussions that result (or will result) in further loss of life. The death of Grendel and the taking of his arm provoke the attack from Grendel’s mother, the death of Æschere, and her eventual destruction, which is synonymous with the lost of the Grendel-kind. Beowulf’s death foreshadows the renewal of the feud between the Geats and the Swedes with great loss of life for his people, possibly annihilating his kind as well: *Geat* is not an ethnicity readily recognized by modern readers, suggesting the Geatish woman’s despair over her people’s fate after Beowulf’s death was not misplaced. These identical contexts, applied to opposing characters, perhaps reminded the audience of how even the greatest battle-men of their kinds, through their actions, can offer remuneration or extinction to their people, the two fates sometimes lying little more than a hair’s breadth apart.

**Narrative Tension and the Loss of the *Leofes Mannes***

The noun-epithet formula *leofes mannes*, meaning "beloved man," occurs eight times throughout *Beowulf*. As with the formulas discussed to this point, aside from its relatively frequent use, its interest stems in a large part from the range of characters to whom it is applied: Beowulf, Hondsco, Æschere, and an indeterminate male in a proverbial context.

The *leofes mannes* formula occurs chiefly in contexts where a character’s safety is imperiled. The poet uses it five times for Beowulf. At its first occurrence, Hrothgar’s coastguard offers to secure Beowulf’s ship so "þæt þone hilderæs hal gedigeð" ("that it can pass through the battle-storm safely"; 300). It is used throughout the scene of Beowulf’s homecoming to Hygelac’s realm, first to describe the joy of Hygelac’s coastguard, anxiously awaiting Beowulf’s
return, and again by Hygelac himself, to express his misgivings over Beowulf’s involvement with the Grendel feud. In a parallel to its uses at Beowulf’s homecoming, it is used twice after the dragon battle, first to convey the anxieties of Beowulf’s people as they await the outcome of the fight and again by Wiglaf to pronounce his misgivings about Beowulf entering the dragon fight alone.

It is used three times for characters other than Beowulf. After Beowulf returns home, it is used in commentary on Hygelac’s queen, Hygd, to compare her to the queen Thryth, who used slander to justify executing "beloved men" for looking upon her. Finally—and again in the Beowulf’s homecoming scene—it is used twice by Beowulf in conversation with Hygelac to relate the deaths of both Hondsco and Æschere at the hands of the Grendels.

In several of these instances, the poet uses the noun-epithet formula to identify a character who has died violently. Therefore, the formula at least partly serves a eulogistic function, forming part of the praise of a character who has died during battle or been unjustly murdered. The anxiety attending its use by other characters, who are often waiting for the hero’s return, suggests the poet may have used it as a narrative device to build the audience’s suspense over the hero’s fate. By invoking a formula that metonymically resonates with the violent deaths of other characters within the tradition, the poet reminds the audience of the hazardous nature of life as a Germanic hero. Calling a character *leofes mannes* may well have forced the audience to contemplate his death and tinged a scene, even in a familiar story, with uncertainty about the outcome.

Further supporting its use as a technique of suspense, we see it used twice in the poem as a sort of "I told you so" from one character to or about Beowulf. Firstly, Hygelac reminds Beowulf of his vocal opposition to Beowulf’s involvement in the Dane’s feud with Grendel:
Ic ðæs modceare
sorhwylmum sead,  siðe ne truweode
leofes mannes;  ic ðe lange bæd
þæt ðu þone wælgæst  wihte ne grette,
lete Suð-Dene  sylfe geweorðan
guðe wið Grendel. (1992b-1997a)

I grievances of heart
afflicted by sorrow,  I mistrusted this journey
of this beloved man;  I long asked
that you the murderous spirit you  not approach,
let the South-Danes  themselves decide
to war with Grendel.

It is perhaps salient to note also that it is during this scene, Beowulf’s homecoming, the audience learns of Beowulf’s unpromising youth, making it likely that Hygelac feared that his nephew would mishandle his attempt to win fame and bring humiliation upon himself and, by extension, Hygelac’s household. Beowulf’s involvement, of course, produced the best possible outcome, and Hygelac follows his misgivings immediately with, "Gode ic þanc secge / þæs ðe ic ðe
gesundne geseon moste" ("I say thanks to God / that I see you most sound"; 1997b-1998a). The use of the leofes mannes formula, however, would have communicated to the audience Hygelac’s anxiety over Beowulf’s fate. It would have placed the Geatish king in the company of the retainers we see throughout the poem, eagerly awaiting the hero’s return, but already in his mind resigned to the likely possibility of his death.
Later, in nearly identical circumstances, Wiglaf shares similar misgivings at Beowulf’s decision to fight the dragon alone. It likewise occurs after the fight has already occurred:

Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan
wræc adreogan, swa us geworden is.
Ne meahton we gelæran leofne þeoden,
rices hyrde ræd ænigne,
þæt he ne grette goldweard þone,
lete hyne lícgean þær he longe wæs,
wicum wunian oð woruldende;
heold on heahgesceap. (3077a-3084b)

Often shall many earls from the will of one
endure distress, as happened to us.

Nothing we could advise the beloved lord,
the guardian of the kingdom any counsel,
that he should not fight that guardian of gold,
let him lie where long he dwelled,
lived in his home for the world’s end;
awaiting his destiny.

This time, Wiglaf does not have the satisfaction of being wrong. Shortly after his lament over Beowulf’s recalcitrance, he employs *leofne mannan* in his request for the help of his companions in preparing a bier for Beowulf’s body. The parallel here between Beowulf’s homecoming and Wiglaf’s speech after his death highlights the precariousness of heroic success: It came, against the odds, to an unpromising boy who fought a battle in which he had little vested interest. It
failed the venerable king possessed of both experience and comitatus to battle the dragon. With the use of the *leofes mannnes* formula, the poet summons forth the vast tradition of heroes who have fallen and creates suspense and tension in his tale of those *leofe mannan* still living.

*Helm Scyldinga: A King Looks Back*

The poet uses the noun-epithet formula *helm Scyldinga* only three times in *Beowulf*, and all three times refer to Hrothgar. Based on my selection criteria, it was not a pressing formula to investigate. Use of the formula only in the first line of a fitt, as part of the larger whole-line formula *Hroðgar mapelode, helm Scyldinga* ("Hrothgar spoke, helm of the Scyldings"), caught my attention and caused me to select this formula for further analysis.

In each instance, it is used as a dialogue tag before Hrothgar begins to speak. In all three instances, Hrothgar’s speech looks back to the past in reminiscence: of Beowulf as a boy, of his aid in Ecgtheow’s feud, and of his memories of the deceased Æschere. The term *helm* implies both protection (as a helmet) and leadership (at the head of a people), but it is difficult to know if the particular context of reminiscence is normal for this formula or if it is unique to *Beowulf*. Perhaps the formula conveys—as I have shown of other formulas in the poem—the sense of looking backward, of having one’s best days in the past and a future promising only senescence and loss.

Initially, I considered whether it might be significant that a formula containing the word *helm* occurs only at the beginning or head of a fitt. This, however, would be a literary convention, and it’s not clear what the significance of the fitts would have been to a ninth-century Anglo-Saxon audience and whether the fitt divisions would have been perceptible to an audience hearing the poem read or recited aloud. (I doubt they would have been, based on
O’Keeffe’s finding that, until very late in the Anglo-Saxon period, manuscripts in the vernacular did not utilize visual cues to convey meaning to the reader.) More appropriate to an oral context, the formula occurs only at the beginning or head of one of Hrothgar’s speeches. This is chiefly significant in the contrast it offers: the leader of the Scyldings begins to speak and, in all instances, proceeds upon a flight of nostalgic remembrance for times gone and lost.

At this point, we see a pattern beginning to emerge: *Beowulf* is a backward-looking poem, a poem where triumph and joy lie in the past and the future contains uncertainty aside from the certitude of death. Critics have observed the poem’s nostalgic tone for decades. It becomes increasingly clear, however, that the poet likely used traditional oral poetic techniques to communicate the same ideas to a traditional audience that modern readers have uncovered through literary analysis.

**Mære Þeoden and the Dubious Value of Fame**

Most frequently of all the formulas I examined in this paper, the poet uses the *mære Þeoden* ("famed lord") formula. It occurs fourteen times, referring to four different characters: Hrothgar (seven times), Beowulf (five times), Heremod (one time), and Onela (one time). Because of its frequency of use, untangling its typical context was difficult, and there is no single context that describes all fourteen occurrences, although some patterns do show forth.

The most striking attribute of the typical usage of this formula is its negativity. It usually occurs in the context of death or threat to life; in nine instances, it is used in scenes that directly reference death or suggest peril in battle:

1) Hrothgar mourns after the attack of Grendel on Heorot (129b).

2) Beowulf’s men brandish weapons against Grendel (797a).
3) Hrothgar and his men begin to fear that Beowulf has perished in the fight against Grendel’s mother; Beowulf’s men keep the faith (1598a).

4) Hrothgar warns Beowulf against violence and greed, using the example of Heremod (1715a).

5) Hygelac speaks of his doubts about Beowulf’s venture to Denmark (1992a).

6) In the dragon fight, the odds are against Beowulf’s victory (2572a).

7) After the dragon fight, Wiglaf aids a dying Beowulf (2721a).

8) After Beowulf’s death, the dragon-gold is described as cursed by those who buried it (3070a).

9) The Geats prepare Beowulf’s funeral pyre (3141b).

On the other hand, with one exception—when Hrothgar gifts Beowulf with gold and horses after slaying Grendel—this formula is never used in a scene denoting victory or celebration, although such scenes are numerous throughout the poem. Its absence is conspicuous and counterintuitive: Would it not seem logical to reference a character as a "famed lord" during one of the scenes that made him famous? For Beowulf, the formula is used in scenes proximate to his victories but where his life is nonetheless still endangered and, in fact, seems likely to be lost: as Beowulf’s men rise to defend their lord against Grendel, as Beowulf fails to resurface in Grendel’s mere and all but his companions lose hope, and as his body and weapons weaken in the dragon fight. (In the latter, of course, his victory comes at the cost of his life.) When Hrothgar speaks to Beowulf and uses the formula, he uses it to refer to Heremod, renowned not for his bravery and generosity but for his violence and stinginess toward his own companions and presented to Beowulf as a cautionary tale.
The second most typical usage of the formula occurs during scenes that depict actions representing heroic culture: seeking fame, making the necessary introductions to gain access to the king, giving or receiving treasure, involving oneself in the exiles and blood feuds of other noblemen, and fulfilling heroic funeral traditions. There are seven such uses in the poem (some of which overlap with the first set):

1) Beowulf prepares to sail to Hrothgar’s aid (202a).
2) Beowulf introduces himself to Hrothgar’s coast-guard (345a).
3) Wulfgar addresses Hrothgar and asks him to give hearing to the newly arrived Beowulf (353a).
4) Hrothgar gives gifts to Beowulf for slaying Grendel (1047b).
5) Hrothgar warns Beowulf against violence and greed, using the example of Heremod (2572a).
6) Eofer and Wulf seek Hygelac’s protection from Ongentheow (2384a).
7) The Geats prepare Beowulf’s funeral pyre (3141b).

We should probably expect these uses from a formula that translates to "famed lord"; the words themselves, after all, allude to the heroic concept of *lofgeorn* or eagerness for fame. Entwined as these usages are, however, with the negative contexts identified above, they cast a pallor over the heroic culture invoked by the formula. Instead of an association with celebration and victory, the formula develops an association with death and peril.

The characters for whom the poet uses the formula lends further support to this observation. It is used overwhelmingly to refer to Hrothgar. Seven times, the formula alludes to the besieged king rendered helpless by Grendel’s depravities, simultaneously referencing Hrothgar’s fame and his failure. That one frequently referred to as famed—for what deeds, we
learn little, although this is likely one of the "gaps" the intended audience would have been able to fill with their knowledge of tradition—fails so spectacularly in his primary duty to protect his people questions the value of that fame. The past here has little bearing on the present. Even one whose former deeds have earned him renown across the sea—one of the speakers to call Hrothgar *maerum þeodne* is Hygelac—is as likely as any to be subjugated by a future enemy and reduced to bitter failure.

Once each the formula refers to Heremod and Onela: the former a promising king who falls into greed and violence against his own men; the latter a bloodthirsty king who drove his brother’s sons into exile and plagued the Geats in a battle where Hygelac's son died. Both of these characters are indeed famed, though not for reason of their heroic deeds. Attaching the *maere þeoden* formula to them serves as a reminder that fame is a value-neutral judgment. Those who inflict harm on their own people and kinsmen—as both Heremod and Onela were renowned for doing—achieve fame as easily as a generous and benevolent monster-slayer like Beowulf.

Finally, reference to Beowulf by the formula confers similar ambivalence. Of five allusions to Beowulf using variations of *maere þeoden*, two describe him imperiled during battle and three refer to his dying or death. In his victory and triumph, he is never a *maere þeoden*. For Beowulf, the mechanism of this formula is opposite that of Hrothgar. The formula vouches for Hrothgar's inclusion among the famed heroes, but the audience sees nothing of Hrothgar's heroic deeds. His present misfortune contrasts reference to his past achievements. Unlike for Hrothgar, the audience observes Beowulf performing the deeds that earned him his fame. When the poet uses the formula to refer to Beowulf during his fights with Grendel and the dragon, the audience understands that his present achievements are no guarantee of his safety. (The poet uses the formula during the fight with Grendel’s mother but refers to Hrothgar, specifically his doubt that
Beowulf has survived his second ordeal.) When the formula is used three times in close succession at Beowulf’s death, it takes on a bitter, pessimistic tinge: Unlike Hrothgar, whose deeds we must assume based on the formula, we have observed Beowulf earning his right to the epithet *mære þeoden*. Yet the outcome for Beowulf is the same as that of Hrothgar, and no matter the strength of the deeds on which that fame is founded, the outcome is the same, and the king’s people, so dependent on the strength on which his fame rests, are left vulnerable by his failure.

This interpretation veers away from Foley’s idea that a particular formula, existing as a sound unit, becomes invested with a *single* specific meaning because of the context in which it is traditionally employed. I am proposing that the *mære þeoden* had two typical contexts in *Beowulf*. Which of these was traditional—or whether poets used both, or whether neither applies in the corpus beyond *Beowulf*—is impossible to know from *Beowulf* alone. Other uses in poetry in the corpus may reveal more of what would have been a typical or traditional use, or may suggest the formula had no context and was little more than a metrical and alliterative crutch for poets. However, I do not think it is unreasonable, based on the denotation of the *mære þeoden* formula and the general function of noun-epithet formulas to convey a king’s protectiveness and generosity, as discussed above, to suppose the association with heroic values is the traditional context for *mære þeoden*.

**Conclusion**

Because I selected the formulas I would investigate before translating a single passage in the poem, I did not know what I would find once I completed translation and analyzed the contexts in which the formulas I’d selected appeared. I expected that some—perhaps (although I
hoped not) all—would show no distinct context whatsoever, especially since I made an effort to select formulas that were used broadly across the poem. Foley’s application of his own theory to Beowulf had yielded what I believed to be modest results, although his application to the broader Old English corpus and similar investigations by scholars like Riedinger generated results that were more robust. I tempered my expectations accordingly.

Given that, I was surprised when all the formulas I’d selected showed some degree of contextual similarity. Furthermore, for all the formulas I investigated, analysis of the contexts and individual examples continued to point back to the same ideas in the poem: ephemerality, fragility, and nostalgia.

All the formulas I investigated alluded in some way to the qualities of a good king identified in the work of Whallon and Foley: generosity and protectiveness. However, individual formulas said quite a bit more than that. Sinces/beaga brytta specifically invoked the power differential between king and supplicants and subtly reinforced the importance of a king’s openhandedness toward dependents to fulfill his obligations as protector and maintain social order. Hilderinces and its exclusive use in scenes involving trophies or spoils of war highlighted an idea that would appear again as I investigated other formulas, namely that triumph and failure stand close to one another, so close that a consistently triumphant hero should expect to fail spectacularly at some point. This questions the ability of heroic society to offer stability to its citizens. In fact, it suggests that heroic society is one of extremes, where the greatest of heroic deeds foreshadow the most cataclysmic of failures.

The leofes mannes formula operates similarly in its use predominantly in scenes of death or great peril. When it is used for a living character, it functions not only to build suspense but to remind the audience that failure is far more common than success. The helm Scyldinga noun-
epithet formula, which always signals the beginning of a speech by Hrothgar, also occurs only when this most venerable of characters in *Beowulf* is looking back at great times lost to the unrelenting march of time and old age. Finally, the *mærne þeoden* formula—probably the thorniest of the formulas I analyzed—occurs in two contexts that interlock to produce meaning: scenes of death and loss, and scenes showing heroic traditions. This association colors the formula—which refers to the high valuation of fame in heroic culture—with a somber hue of pessimism, seemingly reminding its Anglo-Saxon audience of the brittleness of their beloved heroic traditions and how near to failure even the greatest of heroes stands at any given moment.

My analysis of these five formulas also reveals how a skilled poet might utilize a traditional formula in an idiosyncratic context to, through the metonymic contextual associations it activates, express a given idea to the audience. The *sinces/beaga brytta* and *mærne þeoden* formulas are evidence of this. The former occurs almost exclusively in the context of supplicants on a sea voyage. When one of these two elements is eliminated, however—as with Wealtheow’s use of the formula in her plea to Hrothgar (while firmly on dry land) and Scyld’s identification with the formula on his funeral voyage—it is likely the formula still would have carried the resonance of its traditional use. An audience steeped in the tradition, therefore, would have understood Wealtheow’s helplessness and the uncertain fate faced by Scyld and his relative diminishment in the face of death. The *mærne þeoden* formula—which I suggest invoked a heroic context—is used thirteen out of fourteen times in scenes that are heavily seasoned with death and peril. This choice by the poet suggests the frailty and ultimate failure of heroic institutions.
CHAPTER VIII

Aural Alchemy?

The Mechanism of Metonymy

In *Immanent Art*, Foley credits the "magic of metonymy" for investing formulaic phrases with deep, evocative cultural resonance (20). Certainly, listening to an oral performance or reading a profound poem can feel like a magical experience. How can mere chips of sound uttered by the unremarkable human voice or represented as sterile letters on an empty page stir the imagination and incite an emotional reaction? Such reactions certainly seem like magic.

However, I am proposing just the opposite. Rather than *magic*, metonymy is a cognitive *mechanism* that can be explained by research on how humans process sound units in the form of speech and music and how these sound units generate an emotional reaction, particularly in interaction with memory systems. In this chapter, I will look at the evidence for how sound units excite emotions in listeners and allow access to memories that can create the metonymic referentiality that Foley describes. Using psychological research into cognition and emotion, I will propose a means by which formulaic phrases, such as those evidenced above, can amass emotional resonance and metonymic referentiality for a listener versed in the tradition. In other words, I claim the *Beowulf*-poet used formulaic language to summon the emotions and associations of the contexts common to each formula employed by the poet. This generates the meaning of the poem, which becomes especially significant in the Alfredian context in which I believe the poet wrote *Beowulf*.

Formulas and Sound Units
As discussed briefly above, it is difficult for a highly literate audience to perceive an oral poem as anything but words joined syntactically to form phrases, clauses, sentences, verses, and whole compositions. We typically see poetry presented as written text, complete with mechanical structures like punctuation, capitalization, and lineation to communicate how the poet intends us to see links between the various pieces. Even in an oral formula like *once upon a time*, we are capable of breaking that unit into individual words, defining each word independently of each other, and describing how the words are grammatically glued into a phrase.

Without the aid of written texts, though, the divisibility of language is less clear. What would prevent an illiterate audience from perceiving *once upon a time* as a single unit, much as they would perceive a word like *heretofore* or *aforetime*, single words with the same meaning that the literate listener could just as easily divide into component parts? The cognitive basis of speech, according to Rubin, is not at the word-, clause-, or sentence-level but at the level of the sound unit: the building blocks of oral tradition.

Of these sound units, Rubin notes, "Complete ideas are expressed in a few words, relying on the past speech and shared context of the speaker and listener"—a cognitive psychologist’s perspective that aligns neatly with Foley’s theory of metonymic referentiality (68-69). Noun-epithet formulas, according to Rubin, are an illustrative example of how a phrase involving several words can exist as a single meaning-laden sound unit (104). The meaning and associations become bound to the aural qualities of the sound unit itself, forming a cognitive schema: a single cognitive unit that contains information about poetic form, meaning, and imagery (Rubin 7). Schemas often exist as a sound unit rather than a unit of meaning and, through links to memory, can convey information that lies outside the poetics (Rubin 69).
Most speakers would easily accept that a word contains not only sound attributes and meaning but also takes on an emotional coloring in the form of connotation and can evoke a particular extralexical context or memory. For example, the words *plump* and *beefy* have similar meanings and neutral to slightly positive connotations, yet a native speaker would use *plump* to describe his great-aunt and *beefy* to describe his great-uncle. This native speaker would understand she or he cannot easily switch these words without insulting someone for reasons that are difficult to explain to a nonnative speaker. Words can become invested with memories as well. The word *terrorist* has taken on a deeper, more personal meaning for many Western citizens in the twenty-first century than it did in the late twentieth, and people using (or avoiding) that particular term often do so with the specific purpose of invoking those memories and their associated emotions. Understanding formulas as sound units allows them to take on a similar degree of connotation and referentiality. Much as we assume a skilled writer chooses her words with an awareness of their connotative and associative meanings, it is reasonable to assume that a skilled oral poet—or literate poet employing the language of an oral tradition—would have chosen formulas with similar evocative extratextual meaning.

**Concordances between Speech and Music**

Understanding how the sounds units—the formulas—of oral poetry might have generated emotion and evoked memory is difficult to do in a globalized, highly literate world. Cultures as isolated as the Anglo-Saxons and as firmly tied to oral traditions exist, but experimental psychologists aren’t studying them, and research into oral traditions in most societies is inextricably tainted by the vast cultural differences that exist between the one-time speakers of Old English and Modern English speakers.
As a result, much of my evidence for how formulaic language might have summoned emotion and memory comes from the study of music. This is not as far a reach as it might seem. Current research into the psychology of music and emotion suggests that, neurobiologically, the emotions conveyed in speech and music likely utilize the same neural pathway in the brain, making it possible to carefully extend the results of studies on music to oral poetry.

The ability to recognize emotions in both speech and music appears to be innate, and even young children can reliably identify the expression of certain basic emotions in speech and music (Peretz 103). Recognition of basic emotions in vocalizations would have served as an important survival skill that granted an evolutionary advantage. A shared pathway of emotional expression in vocalization and music would extend that innate ability to recognize emotions in music (Juslin and Laukka 224). Peretz further argues for the evolutionary "efficacy" of this model, as music co-opts the existing vocal pathway rather than developing anew a neural pathway between aural perception and emotional expression (118).

Evidence points to the involvement of subcortical structures—primitive structures located deep inside the brain—in generating an emotional response to music. This emotional pathway reaches the limbic system—the part of the brain responsible for emotions—quickly. This part of the brain also contains the structures that respond to primary reinforcers: stimuli that are highly motivating. According to Peretz, this means that "music may be as effective as food, drug, and facial expressions … in eliciting subcortically mediated affective responses" (106-107). However, other evidence points to the involvement of cortical structures—highly specialized and recently evolved networks that spread across the surface of the brain—leading Peretz to the conclusion that both cortical and subcortical pathways play a role in the emotional perception of music (112-113). This mimics the system used in perceiving emotion in speech, suggesting a
shared pathway between musical and vocal emotion (Peretz 116). According to Peretz, this shared neurobiological pathway explains the seemingly innate human ability to perceive emotion in music and speech and the near universality of music as an expression of emotions across cultures (118).

Experimental psychologists have tested this shared pathway in the lab as well. A study by William Forde Thompson, E. Glenn Schellenberg, and Gabriela Husain investigated whether musical training enhanced participants’ abilities to perceive emotion in speech. While they conducted several individual studies with complex results, their general conclusion claimed that musical training enhanced perception of emotion in speech, even in languages the listener could not understand (59).

Connoisseurs of music do not doubt that skilled composers and performers manipulate musical structures to communicate emotion in their music. That poets might select sound units that similarly convey emotion in the sound of the words themselves, apart from meaning, seems more dubitable—perhaps, again, because oral poetry is not a fixture of current Western culture—but, given the evidence, is certain defensible. In their questionnaire study of music and emotion, Patrik N. Juslin and Petri Laukka write, "It should be noted that many of the techniques used in synthesis of emotion in speech could also be used in synthesis of emotion in music" (220). This suggests the aesthetics of music and oral poetry might also travel the same road, as does the actual aural information on its way to the emotion centers of the brain.

**Music and Emotion**

Researchers recognize two primary means by which music evokes emotion in listeners. Music may arouse emotions because of structural characteristics in the music or associations
with emotional memories (Juslin and Laukka 218). The two means by which music generates emotion extends back to Carroll C. Pratt’s 1931 distinction between music that is autonomous—where the sense of the music is entirely contained within the music itself—and heteronomous, where the music develops associations with emotions and memories outside the music itself (Baumgartner 613).

There has also been a lengthy debate over whether emotions are merely perceived in music or whether music actually induces emotions. Juslin and Laukka review evidence showing the current consensus overwhelmingly favors the conclusion that music can induce emotion (222-223). Listeners also agree with this conclusion. In Juslin and Laukka’s study, 71% of participants claimed that they "often" or "always" experienced the emotion that they perceived in the music they were listening to (231).

Communication of basic emotions in music is fairly reliable. Juslin and Laukka identify five emotions that music conveys as reliably as vocal and facial expression: happiness, anger, sadness, fear, and tenderness. Music does not reliably express complex emotions such as jealousy or disgust (220). The emotion easiest to express in music is sadness, with ample evidence from multiple studies confirming this. According to Juslin and Laukka, strong emotional reactions characterized by "thrills and chills" are most likely for sad music (Juslin and Laukka 223). In their study, 91% of participants chose sadness as an emotion they believed music could express. The only emotion chosen more often was joy (229). When indicating which emotions were "felt most frequently" while listening to music, three emotions related to sadness occurred in the top ten: nostalgia (#5), sadness (#8), and longing (#9). Happy, relaxed, calm, and moved were the only emotions felt more often than nostalgia (Juslin and Laukka 231). Finally, the study by Thompson, Schellenberg, and Husain revealed that participants found it easiest to
distinguish between happy and sad emotions in music and speech, and participants identified sadness most readily in both (51).

Experimental psychologists have conducted many studies to identify the specific features of music that are most important in evoking emotion. According to a metanalysis of these structural studies compiled by Gabrielsson and Lindström, tempo is the most important musical factor in expressing emotions (383). Furthermore, they report on studies showing this holds true for both music and spoken text (381). Listeners perceived rapid tempo and high "event density" in music as happy; they perceived slow tempo and low event density as sad (Gabrielsson and Lindström 376). Rhythm is a less important factor in determining emotional content of music, but rhythms described as containing rubato and "micro-structural irregularity" tend to evoke sadness, as does a "falling" intonation (Juslin and Laukka 221). As discussed below, all of these have implications for the emotional content of Old English poetry.

Music and Memory

The relationship between music and memory is perhaps more important as a mechanism linking formulaic content with references to extratextual contexts. As a defining feature, music bears the enduring imprint of the emotionally charged memories with which it is associated. Research, discussed below, suggests that this is a common experience among a majority of music listeners. Most people have had the experience of hearing a song and remembering an event, person, or time period that previously attended it. Often, these recollections come with emotional content.

Poetic elements such as rhyme and alliteration are tightly linked to memory. Rubin uses this link to explain the stability of many oral traditions. As noted in Chapter II above, he also
proposes an alternative mode of composition to oral-formulaic theory where sound patterns—such as the alliterative requirements of Old English verse—narrow the choices available to a poet during composition and simultaneously cue the words to follow (11, 65, 75). For example, if a poet uses the *beaga brytta* formula in the first half-line, he narrows his choices for one of the stressed words in the second half-line to a word beginning with the letter *b*. His use of *b*-alliteration, however, also cues words that begin with the letter *b* and formulas that use the letter *b* in an appropriate metrical position. Rhythm functions similarly, to both limit and cue subsequent options, and serves as a memory aid (85). Rubin’s book did not investigate whether spoken sound units could trigger memories and context, but it seems more reasonable to make the argument that such links could develop than to claim that memory for associated information functions for some types of information but not for others.

Other researchers have shown a three-way interaction between music, memory, and emotion. Matthew D. Schulkind, Laura Kate Hennis, and David C. Rubin showed that all familiar music didn’t trigger autobiographical memories, but when the song moved participants emotionally, they were more likely to recall memories associated with it. The study also showed that older adults were more likely to have memories with especially emotional associations; older adults also tended to recall the time period rather than specific memories and experienced a more intense emotional reaction to songs popular in their youth (952). All of this suggests that human memory is more firmly impressed by songs that have strong emotional associations (953).

Juslin and Laukka claim the powerful association between music and autobiographical memory "may be one of the most common and powerful sources [of emotion] for music listeners in everyday life" (Juslin and Laukka 225). Twenty-nine percent of participants in their study indicated that "memories and personal experiences" were part of what created their emotional
reaction to music. From this, the researchers conclude that "the results suggest that the perceived emotional expression of the music does not depend solely on the music (which is often implicitly assumed by researchers) but depends also on highly personal associations to the music" (230).

Sloboda confirms this conclusion, reporting that "memory of valued past events" was one of the most common responses in a free-response questionnaire about music and emotion (497).

Likewise, in a survey by Hans Baumgartner about whether music can trigger autobiographical memories, only three of seventy-three participants did not respond with a piece of music and an autobiographical memory (615).

Alf Gabrielsson studies strong emotional responses to music and reports a study confirming that "personal and/or situational factors are more important than the music—for instance, if a piece of music is associated with war, with happy or unhappy love, with beautiful nature, [or] with certain ceremonies" (569). This suggests the emotional associations for a piece of music may even overwhelm the emotions generated by the structural elements discussed above; for instance, a joyful song may evoke sadness if it is associated with the loss of a loved one. Baumgartner’s research reaches the same conclusion: Music takes on the emotional coloring of the episode it recalls (618).

This phenomenon is perhaps best exemplified in the strong connection between music and nostalgia. As noted above, in Juslin and Laukka’s study, nostalgia was the fifth most commonly reported emotional response to music (231). Gabrielsson identifies music as a common trigger of feelings of "loss of time, place, sense, [and] self" (549). In Baumgartner’s study, music was associated with positively remembered past experiences 84% of the time (615). Baumgartner likewise notes the importance of nostalgia as an emotional reaction to music, and while he does not make an explicit connection between the participants’ overwhelming tendency
to impress songs with the memory of happy events and the nostalgia music often evokes, this seems a reasonable connection to make (619).

Finally, music may take on associations that aren’t related to memories of personal experiences. As noted by Juslin and Laukka, "there are also ‘associative’ sources that may affect how listeners perceive music (e.g., organ music might sound ‘churchy’ and ‘religious’)," although they observe that these possible effects have received little study (221). A present-day listener, for instance, might associate a Jazz Age song with the energy and excesses of the 1920s in the United States, even if she was not alive to experience that era. Cultural associations between a style of music and the context in which that music was most popular may even produce nostalgia for a time a person never experienced, such as longing for the seeming simplicity and innocence of the 1950s when listening to the popular music from that era.

Again, I am making something of a leap in my assumption that a similar relationship could exist between memories and sound units in the form of oral formulas. Unfortunately, in the blossoming field of music and emotion, no research has been done on precisely what creates the connection between memory and music. Perhaps it is an individual structural attribute of a song, such as the rhythm or melody, that binds it so tightly to emotionally charged memories. On the other hand, the precise combination of these structural qualities may form a sound unit that adheres to a particular memory and the emotions that memory brings with it. Oral poetry shares many but not all the structural attributes of music. It uses rhythm, tempo, pitch, timbre, and intensity, and it shares poetic traits such as alliteration with lyrical music; it does not contain melody or mode. The research described above, I hope, shows that those structural attributes found in oral poetry can generate emotion and form associations with memories and other cultural material.
A Model for Metonymy

We begin with a formula. Like a passage of melody or a rhythmic sequence, it functions as a sound unit. To break it is to cause it to lose its meaning, yet a poet can string it together with other sound units to make a poem much in the way that a composer can fit scraps of melody together to make a song.

This sound unit, like the scrap of melody, is always produced in more or less the same way. It has an identical meter and stress pattern each time it is spoken. The words are pronounced the same each time they are spoken. Individual poets may add their own timbre, pitch, and volume, but with each utterance, more is the same than different. It is the distinct sound of that formula that forms the basis upon which metonymical associations are built.

Firstly, there are the emotional effects created by the structures of that sound unit themselves. As noted above, a slower tempo and fewer stresses create a mood of sadness; these can be a direct effect of the language, something that is difficult to manipulate even by a speaker trying to create a happier mood. Next, various associative components adhere to the basic sound unit: memories of the contexts in which the formula is typically used, personal memories of hearing the formula or pieces containing it, and associations between the sound unit and other cultural materials. As shown by Figure 2 below, all of these create a sound unit that is laden with meaning for a listener steeped in the tradition and resonant even for a listener who is not.
Fig. 2. Structural and associative components of a sound unit.

**Conclusion**

Experimental psychology has not touched upon the world's rich extant oral traditions to discover how poets and storytellers create profound emotional effects in their audience using mere words. They cannot time-warp back to the Anglo-Saxon era and study these effects upon an Anglo-Saxon audience. Experimental psychologists have, in recent decades, embarked upon fruitful inquiry in another area—music and emotion—that makes the dearth of investigation into oral traditions irrelevant. Neuropsychological research shows that speech and music travel similar pathways to the emotional centers of the brain, making it possible to draw careful comparisons between music and oral performances. As this chapter shows, music exerts itself on the emotional systems in myriad ways: through structural characteristics that induce emotions and by forging connections with emotionally laden memories.

The effects may be subtle, certainly not the powerful evocation of emotion that comes from hearing a song associated with a past romance or a milestone moment in one's life. However, strings of those sound units make up an oral poem, and the cumulative effect of sound units chosen with a particular emotional or associative effect in mind—especially when they
reinforce the explicit meaning of the poem—would have been considerable. Through these mechanisms, *Beowulf* assumes its sad, nostalgic mood even for listeners unfamiliar with Old English. Furthermore, the neuropsychological linkage between sound units and memories explains the metonymic referentiality that Foley proposes and this paper investigates. Earlier, I drew a comparison between oral-formulaic theory and the stringing of beads, itself an action devoid of skill. Any artisan, however, will attest that she or he crafts no object mindlessly. The artisan places those beads upon the string using colors and combinations that create a particular aesthetic effect. Likewise, a skilled poet can maximize the emotional impact of his or her composition by stringing together sound units that create an emotional effect seemingly greater than expected given the poem’s explicit meaning. The next chapter will consider how, through his use of the formulas documented above, the *Beowulf*-poet might have done just that.
CHAPTER IX
Pride and Peril:
Noun-Epithet Formulas as Critiques of Heroic Institutions

J. R. R. Tolkien’s 1936 lecture "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," widely heralded for moving Beowulf criticism beyond mining the poem for historical incidentals, is often treated as the first work of modern Beowulf criticism. Tolkien covers broad ground in his lecture-turned-essay, but about halfway through, he discusses the theme of the poem:

In the struggle with Grendel one can as a reader dismiss the certainty of literary experience that the hero will not in fact perish, and allow oneself to share the hopes and fears of the Geats upon the shore. In the second part the author has no desire whatever that the issue should remain open, even according to literary convention. There is no need to hasten like the messenger, who rode to bear the lamentable news to the waiting people (2892 ff). They may have hoped, but we are not supposed to. By now we are supposed to have grasped the plan. Disaster is foreboded. Defeat is the theme. Triumph over the foes of man’s precarious fortress is over, and we approach slowly and reluctantly the inevitable victory of death. (33)

Since Tolkien’s introduction of the poem to literary criticism, critics have overwhelmingly recognized these themes of ephemerality, decline, and inevitable loss in the poem. Shortly before the passage cited above, Tolkien observes, "Beowulf is indeed the most successful Old English poem because in it the elements, language, metre, theme, structure, are all most nearly in harmony" (33). Yet, ironically, Tolkien’s induction of Beowulf as a literary text prefaced an era in which his observation would go unheeded in the scholarship. At the time of his lecture, Parry’s research on formulaic Homeric poetry was ripening into oral-formulaic theory, and
Beowulf studies were about to undergo a schism between those who read it as they’d read Wordsworth or Keats and those who became technicians of its language: the meter, the philology, the formulas. As Foley observed, rarely were the twain permitted to meet, and accepting Beowulf as oral usually proscribed viewing it as a work of literary art.

Foley’s theory promised to bridge the gap and restore the ability to read an oral poem as a work of art without resorting to treating it identically to those texts solidly in the canon of written literature. My investigation above into the noun-epithet formulas of Beowulf shows that Foley’s hypothesis about formulas summoning a broader, traditional context for its audience is as correct as we can determine without time-warping back to the halls of Alfred. It also lends support to Tolkien’s advocacy for a multidisciplinary understanding of Beowulf because the contexts revealed by that investigation reinforce the themes of ephemerality, decline, and loss.

Throughout the poem, the poet seems to be cleverly plying his audience: using formulas and sound patterns that subtly reinforce the more overt, mournful message of his poem.

The Sound of the Poem

Before we decode the semantics of the words that make up Beowulf, before we infer the constellation of associations summoned via metonymy, and well before we discern the mood, the theme, and the deeper meanings of the poem that arise from the synergy of these myriad factors, we hear the sound of its words. This forms the foundation for the audience’s emotional response to the poem. As discussed in the previous chapter, the sound of the poem bypasses the conscious parsing of the words and ideas that make up the poem and accesses a pathway to the emotional centers of the brain that is nearly reflexive and that emerged deep in the past of human evolution.
Sound patterns often trigger emotions. The metanalysis by Gabrielsson and Lindström discussed above showed that tempo exerted the greatest influence over the perception of emotion in music. Obviously, it is impossible to know the tempo at which *Beowulf* was recited (if it was recited at all). However, the number of unstressed syllables permitted by Old English meter suggests a relatively low "event density" compared to, for instance, a modern iambic meter, where stresses fall in rapid succession and contribute a bouncing, energetic meter to a poem. In contrast, the relatively sluggish alliterative meter of Old English may contribute to the lugubrious mood of much of its poetry.

Rhythm has a less robust effect in psychological studies of music and emotion, but we know much more about the rhythm of *Beowulf* than we do the performance factors such as tempo and intensity. As noted above, a metanalysis by Juslin and Laukka found that rhythm that was slightly irregular and rubato—containing arbitrarily shorter or longer notes—suggested sadness, as did falling intonation (221).

Old English meter differs from metrical forms more familiar to Modern English speakers because it is based on stress and not syllable count. Each half-line must contain two stressed syllables—although *Beowulf* has a handful of hypermetrical lines that contain more—with any number of unstressed syllables sprinkled among them. How a poet performing a poem like *Beowulf* would have handled this inconsistency is purely speculative, but it seems reasonable to assume that it would have created *some* degree of irregularity similar to the rhythmic irregularities utilized by composers and musicians trying to evoke a sense of sadness. Certainly, the structure of Old English poetry inclines itself toward the rhythmic qualities of sad music more so than happy music, which Juslin and Laukka, in their metanalysis, characterized as containing little variability and a high degree of regularity (221).
Because it depends far less on performance factors to which we no longer have access, the matter of falling intonation is a bit clearer in the meter of *Beowulf*. Metrists have dedicated decades of research to the challenges of Old English meter, but the five metrical types described by Eduard Sievers are one of the more widely accepted systems for classifying Old English meter. Each type describes the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables within the half-line to create the sense of rising (unstressed to stressed) or falling (stressed to unstressed) and combinations thereof.

Sievers’ A and C types of meter are of particular interest here. Sievers type A is double falling (stressed-unstressed-stressed-unstressed), and Sievers type C in rising-falling (unstressed-stressed-stressed-unstressed). In *Traditional Oral Epic*, Foley conducted a computer analysis of the whole-line structure of *Beowulf*. A preponderance of lines rely on falling intonation. What he terms Paradigm 1 accounts for 54.7% of the whole lines in the poem. Paradigm 1 always begins with the double falling A-type in the first half-line and ends with either a double-rising B- or single-falling C-type. Paradigm 2 (24.7% of the poem) includes a D- or E-type in the first half-line and an A-, B-, or C-type in the second half-line and so is not of particular interest here because it does not specify falling intonation in either half-line. The third paradigm mandates at least one falling half-line: either two A-types (double falling) or a combination of a B- and a C-type; 14.9% of the lines of *Beowulf* fit this paradigm (116-119). Foley’s results show that well over half of the lines of *Beowulf* require at least one falling half-line with strong preference given for the double-falling type-A meter. At no point is the double-rising B-type required by the meter of the poem.

Thomas Cable’s study of the meter of *Beowulf* returns similar results. Unlike Foley, Cable looked at half-lines of the poem and obtained the following results (78):
Type A: 45.1%
Type B: 16.6%
Type C: 17.7%
Type D: 13.5%
Type E: 7.1%

Again, the double-falling type-A meter dominates and, with the exception of the anomalous D- and E-types, the double-rising type-B meter occurs least often. Putting together the studies of Foley and Cable, we see that not only does the poem contain a preponderance of falling metrical lines—almost two-thirds of the poem is either type A or type C—but constructing whole-lines from these half-lines almost always requires a falling metrical type at some point in the line.

This preference for falling intonation partly explains why Beowulf sounds somber and sorrowful, even to listeners who don’t understand Old English. At the most basic level of sound, the construction of Beowulf communicates sadness to listeners. Some of this—the low event density, the rhythmic irregularity—is characteristic of Old English meter and not unique to Beowulf. However, even within the inherently doleful sound of Old English poetry, the Beowulf-poet demonstrably preferred metrical constructions that further reinforced the sense of sadness in the poem.

This sound is the foundation of the poem. Even before a listener begins to decode what the words mean either denotatively or connotatively, he or she is confronted with a composition designed to unconsciously evoke feelings of sadness. The sound of the poem essentially primes the listener or reader to interpret the words, formulas, and poem as a whole in a dismal light. Much as the soundtrack to a film cues readers about how they should interpret emotionally neutral imagery, the sound of Beowulf provides a dark backdrop upon which even the triumphs
of the characters in the poem—Beowulf’s defeat of first Grendel and then Grendel’s mother, his triumphant return to Geatland, Wiglaf’s heroic intercession in the dragon fight—seem but swiftly dwindling sparks of brilliance upon a history toppling toward annihilation and obsolescence. It is upon this foundation that the poet places the formulas that will build his poem—formulas that reinforce the desolate mood of the poem and begin to hint at the poem’s theme.

Episodic Concentration of Noun-Epithet Formulas

In Chapter VI, I looked at the fitts where the Beowulf-poet most often used noun-epithet formulas. As stated in that chapter, there are clearly some sections of the poem where the use of noun-epithet formulas is concentrated and other areas of the poem where it is nearly or wholly absent. I proposed the poet’s use of noun-epithet formulas corresponded with episodes in the poem that depicted traditional heroic behavior. Appendix A contains a brief summary of each fitt and the number of and specific noun-epithet formulas it contains.

As the glory of Beowulf’s achievements grows, the poet becomes freer with his use of noun-epithet phrases. What is happening is bidirectional: Attaching these phrases to episodes of heroic achievement is the same process that colored these phrases with metonymic significance and resonance for the poem’s original audience. At the same time, the poet communicates to the audience that Beowulf—a character described as unpromising, as "þæt he sleac wære, / æðeling unfrom" ("he that was slothful, the feeble prince")—is earning the right to have his name uttered in the company of the names of heroes (2187a-2188b). The poet’s growing reliance on noun-epithet phrases as Beowulf’s deeds progress signals the audience that he belongs among those traditional heroes evoked through such phraseology.
Along similar lines, the two fitts that I have summarized in Appendix A as "counsel with Hygelac" contain four and five noun-epithet phrases apiece, respectively. This scene is interesting because, in it, Beowulf recounts his own deeds—his triumphs against both Grendels—to his uncle. This is a chance to see both fights again, and the poet—speaking with the voice of Beowulf—now takes the opportunity to use noun-epithet phrases heavily for both instances of heroic action. Beowulf’s recourse to a heavier-than-usual reliance on noun-epithet phrases suggests that he wants his uncle to see his triumphs in heroic terms. They stand in stark contrast to his characterization, in the next fitt, as sleac and unfrom. Versed in the heroic tradition, Hygelac would have experienced the referentiality evoked by his nephew’s use of terms reserved for heroes acting in a protective role, and Beowulf might have used these phrases to generate this very reaction: to associate his deeds with the deep and significant acts of his and Hygelac’s shared ancestry.

Several other scenes involve the deliberate invocation and celebration of heroic attributes. Wulfgar’s exhortation to Hrothgar to welcome Beowulf and his men necessarily requires Wulfgar to emphasize the heroic potential of the unexpected guest. After Beowulf’s death, his people eulogize his vigilance and generosity. Again, it seems possible that the use of noun-epithet phrases in these instances might have subtly reinforced Beowulf’s worth as a hero in his own right and metonymically conjured in the minds of the poem’s traditional audience a crowd of heroes among which the poet was making the case for Beowulf to be a part.

One scene is particularly interesting—the "twelve years of Grendel, grief of Hrothgar"—so named because this scene seems to defy the context of protectiveness evoked by the noun-epithet phrases. This fitt centers on Hrothgar’s failure to protect his people and the twelve years of Grendel’s devastation that result. Given the purpose of the noun-epithet phrases proposed by
Foley and corroborated by my results here, this seems an unusual scene in which to signal heroic values.

One could also interpret this fitt, however, as an example of formulaic referentiality functioning to summon information that is not readily apparent from the text, reminding listeners or readers of Hrothgar’s membership within the heroic contingent despite his failure in this particular poem. In the scenes discussed above, Beowulf is clearly behaving heroically. Situating that within the heroic context summoned by the noun-epithet phrases sprinkled throughout those scenes adds little to those scenes aside from reminding listeners or readers of the broader heroic context—that a multitude of others before Beowulf have faced similar challenges to protect their people and behave open-handedly towards those most loyal to them—and adding Beowulf to that multitude. In the scene with Hrothgar, however, the summoning of that heroic context could be read as an attempt by the poet to identify Hrothgar with those heroes of the tradition, despite his unheroic plight and inability to offer the most basic of protections to his people. In fact, the poet takes pains to negate any personal responsibility on Hrothgar’s part for the Grendel disaster, noting that among Hrothgar’s warriors, "Ne hie huru winedrihten with ne logon, / glædne Hroðgar, ac þæt wæs god cyning" ("However, they did not blame their friendly lord, / gracious Hrothgar, but that was a good king"; 863a-864b). Foley notes that this association of Hrothgar with the þæt wæs god cyning ("that was a good king") formula sounds almost defensive (Immanent Art 212-213).

At this point, Foley’s theory of referentiality might have operated upon a traditional audience by summoning a context that reminds listeners and readers that, despite a character’s actions in a particular instance, his character is more complicated than the limited view we are given of him. We can see how a formula that, to literate readers, seems colorless and even
redundant, would have possessed layers of meaning for a traditional audience not immediately
apprehensible to a reader unversed in the tradition. Hrothgar, the poet seems eager to assert,
belongs among the great heroes. That he was so beset by Grendel reminds us of the frailty of
even the greatest of heroes.

Overall, the poet’s concentrated use of noun-epithet formulas serves several functions. It
identifies the characters of the poem with the expectations of heroic culture. Beowulf, we are led
to see, does not fall in the dragon fight because he lacks courage or because his miserliness or
cruelty toward his people caused them to desert him. Instead, we see that Beowulf does all that is
expected of him by heroic culture. His associations with numerous noun-epithet formulas and the
\textit{þæt wæs god cyning} formula present Hrothgar similarly. Their failures, we are led to believe, is
not because of their flaws. There is something deeper at work here: a tumbling of a culture from
glory to obscurity. As analysis of the scenes that lack noun-epithet formulas will show, this
failure comes from within the culture itself, leaving even the greatest of kings—a Beowulf, a
Hrothgar—powerless to countermand it.

\textbf{Episodic Absence of Noun-Epithet Formulas}

Usually, those fitts without noun-epithet phrases are also devoid of the heroic values that
are metonymically summoned by these formulas. The first half of the flyting with Unferth is the
first instance of this. Half of the fitt concerns Unferth’s accusations about Beowulf’s loss to
Breca in the swimming contest; in the second half of the fitt, Beowulf depicts the contest as a
prideful and perilous competition between two boys. The poet applies no noun-epithets in this
fitt. It is not until fitt VIII and the second half of Beowulf’s anecdote that he begins to frame the
swimming contest and the ensuing destruction of the monsters that assail him as protective of his people:

… þæt syðþan na
ymb brontne ford    brimliðende
lade ne letton. (567b-569a)

And ever since
around the steep seaway     the seafarers’

passage goes unhindered.

This half of the fitt contains two noun-epithet phrases. At this point, Beowulf assumes the role of protector and, therefore, hero. With the preceding fitt, it serves as a microcosmic representation of Beowulf’s character development across all of the poem: an inauspicious beginning followed by a rise to fame through committing impressive deeds largely in pursuit of self-centered renown that evolves, ultimately, into the role of protector as a defining character trait.

Fitt XXXII contains no noun-epithet phrases, and the fitt concerns itself with the calamitous theft of the cup from the dragon’s barrow. Like the first half of the flying, it is decidedly unheroic in tone. Readers receive little background on the thief whose petty theft sets off a domino fall of events that culminate with Beowulf’s death (and the predicted demise of his people), but the poet does reveal that he is "þeow nathwylces" ("someone’s servant") who "hæleða bearna heteswengeas fleah" ("fled the harsh blow of his master’s son"; 2223-2224). The thief lacks the lineage to be heroic, but his fatal gold-lust situates him precisely opposite the generosity that would be expected of him if he were. Furthermore, the abuse from his lord that motivates his absconding and ultimate theft does not conform to the heroic ideal of openhandedness. The fitt then proceeds to tell of the history of the barrow and how an abundance
of golden treasure was abandoned in the earth by a lord forsaken, all of his men having perished in battle. This lord mourns the loss of his comitatus and regards the gold as his sole remaining connection to those glorious years. The story of the gold speaks of a society in decline, of men who have faltered and fallen in battle and of a lord so overwhelmed with grief that, even if some of his people remained, he’d be useless to them as a protector. Not surprisingly, none of the figures in this fitt—the abusive master, the thieving servant, or the despondent lord—earn the approbation of a heroic noun-epithet.

Fitt XXXVIII exemplifies a similar lack of heroic values, as Wiglaf berates his companions for their fatal desertion of their lord. This fitt presents a society whose core values have failed, with disastrous results: Betraying their obligation to their lord, Beowulf’s retainers certify the inevitability of his death. With his death, Beowulf can no longer fulfill his role as protector of his people. At his funeral, a Geatish woman laments

þæt hio hyre (here)g(eon)gas hearde ond(r)ede,

wælfylla wo(r)n, (w)erudes egesan,

hynðo ond hæftnyd. (3153a-3155a)

that she on her day of mourning sorely dreaded,

the great slaughter of the terrified company,

of humiliation and bondage.

Beowulf’s demise puts the Geats in a susceptible position, open to attack from the neighboring Swedes, with whom Hygelac feuded before his death and Beowulf’s ascension to his throne. Beowulf’s failure against the dragon is larger than the loss of a single battle or even the loss of his life: It is the failure to fulfill his obligation to protect his people. The Swedes—held at bay by Beowulf’s presence on the throne—are a more dangerous, if less spectacular, foe than the dragon.
The golden treasure of the dragon’s barrow—which could be used to fulfill Beowulf’s obligation to reward those who deserve it—instead goes unspent into the darkness of his tomb. The lack of noun-epithet formulas here holds this scene apart from the heroic tradition in which, to this point, the poet has placed Beowulf. As in the recounting of the history of the dragon barrow in fitt XXXII, none in this scene have behaved heroically: not Beowulf’s retainers, not Wiglaf—who by necessity is left to rebuke rather than reward those who would form his comitatus—and not even Beowulf, whose death has left the Geats undefended.

Finally, there is a pair of scenes that primarily concern the institution of the blood feud and that conspicuously lack noun-epithet phrases. The so-called Finn episode (fitt XVI into fitt XVII) is the only section of the poem that is unequivocally attested in another source: the fragmentary *Fight at Finnsburgh*, preserved now only as a transcript, the original manuscript fragment having been lost. There are many interpretations of the relationship between *Beowulf* and *The Fight at Finnsburgh*, but the possibility that this scene alone of the entirety of *Beowulf* exists elsewhere opens the possibility that the Finn episode is a traditional poem. (Furthering this idea, the Finn episode is presented in *Beowulf* as a song performed in Heorot by a gleoman or singer.) One might, therefore, expect the Finn episode to contain much traditional material, yet it includes not a single noun-epithet phrase. Fitt XVI is devoid of noun-epithet phrases, and the three phases found in fitt XVII all occur only after the gleoman has concluded his song.

In fitts XL and XLI, Wiglaf’s herald tells of the feud between the Geats and the Swedes, provoked by Hygelac, and foretells that once the Swedes hear of Beowulf’s death, they will come to claim their revenge. As with the Finn episode, this scene—despite being full of battle action and highborn characters—is surprisingly devoid of noun-epithet formulas. In fitt XLI, the poet begins using noun-epithet phrases again but only once he has told the tale of the fight with
the Swedes. Here again, the poet deploys these formulas in contexts where he shows the subject in the role of protector and benefactor of his people. Line 2977b is perhaps the only exception to this, and the context still allows the possibility for seeing the subject in a protective role. Here, the noun-epithet formula *Higelaces þegn* ("Hygelac’s thain") refers to Eofer at a moment in the battle where, in defense of his gravely wounded brother, he strikes down their opponent Ongentheow. The next noun-epithet formula, *folces hyrde* ("protector of the people") refers at line 2981a to Ongentheow, directly invoking his protective role and implying a defenselessness of the Swedes now left without a king, much as the Geats are left defenseless following Beowulf’s demise. Finally, *Geata dryhten* ("lord of the Geats") refers at line 2991b to Hygelac in the context of richly rewarding the brothers Wulf and Eofer for their aid in defeating Ongentheow. Again, the emphasis is placed on the traditional heroic attributes of protector and benefactor, not on Hygelac’s role in fighting the feud.

A prevalent critical view proposes that *Beowulf* serves as negative commentary on the institution of the blood feud (Carsley 31). These two episodes would lend support to the hypothesis that the poem presents a critical stance on this quintessential Germanic institution. As shown above, scenes that focus on heroic action via the monster fights employ heavy usage of noun-epithet formulas. The Finn episode and the feud between the Geats and Swedes would likewise present ample opportunities for celebrating the characters’ prowess on the field of battle. It is notable that they do not. These episodes are conspicuously devoid of reference to noun-epithets that would suggest the characters’ participation in blood feuds as heroic. Instead, the lack of metonymic reference to heroic custom isolates these actions outside the comfortable compass of tradition. The poet seems to want to leave no confusion in the minds of the audience of his poem: Participation in the blood feud is *not* heroic. It is ruinous.
The section above shows that the poet regards Beowulf as deserving member of a company of heroes. As with Hrothgar, his inclusion in this company averts placing blame upon him personally for his failings. The criticism, instead, lies with the heroic cultural institutions themselves: institutions that the poem positions as being prone to failure because of the weakness of less-heroic humans (the betrayal of Beowulf by his retainers) or the tendency of its customs to escape control even of heroes with the strength to slay monsters (the blood feud).

This is a society doomed to fall. When Beowulf leans, dying, upon the *enta geweorc* ("earthworks of giants"), the ephemerality of even the powerful and strong is reinforced. The society of the giants has ended, and we observe the society of the Geats likely not long to follow. And it is a society that has devoured itself from within: Institutions such as the blood feud have evolved beyond providing balance and safety. Having spun out of control, they threaten the very society out of which they sprang as, presumably, protective institutions.

**The Metonymy of Specific Formulas**

Chapter VII examined five specific noun-epithet formulas and the contexts in which they were used. In these uses, we can see how formulas as sound units begin to amass numerous associative meanings that, when activated in the minds of listeners or readers, would have added layers of meaning that continue to reinforce the themes of ephemerality and loss that characterize the poem.

The *sinces/beaga brytta* formula is used to signify the power differential that exists between a lord and a supplicant. It subtly reinforces the social order and serves as a reminder to would-be lords and kings that they are responsible for the well-being of their people and, if they would see that social order maintained, should behave with generosity towards those who depend
on them. Its use by Wealtheow out of the context of the sea voyage shows how the poet can ply this particular formula to evoke the context of the need for generosity toward the helpless.

As I observed in Chapter VII, \textit{sinces/beaga brytta} is applied to three characters—Scyld, Hrothgar, and Hygelac—but notably is \textit{not} applied to Beowulf. These four characters occupy two different lineages. Hrothgar is a descendant of Scyld, and the poet depicts both in the poem with the \textit{sinces/beaga brytta} epithet, a formula that would have summoned to its audience the idea of a leader functioning in a protective role. Even after enduring twelve years of the ravages of Grendel, Hrothgar still warrants this epithet because he still retains power enough to influence the fates of those who depend on him. We see evidence of this in Wealtheow’s appeal on behalf of their children and Hrothgar’s largesse toward Beowulf, a reward ample enough to bolster his reputation among his people. Even in the Grendel episode—which suggests Hrothgar as inadequate in the role of protector—the monsters are eventually defeated, and the outsider who defeated them came to Hrothgar’s shores to offer repayment for Hrothgar’s previous generosity toward his father. In short, Hrothgar’s earlier altruism ensures he receives needed assistance when Grendel attacks, and through this, he has in fact fulfilled his duty as protector of his people. Hygelac, likewise, earns the epithet: He leads his people into a dangerous blood feud, but he also provides them with a worthy successor in the person of Beowulf, who withholds the furor of the Swedes while he lives.

Beowulf, though, is never identified with either of these noun-epithet formulas, and it is worth considering why. The \textit{sinces/beaga brytta} formula is used in situations where a power differential exists between lord and supplicant and where the lord’s altruism permits the supplicant’s comfort or even survival. The poet presents Beowulf’s role as a ring-giver, however, in the context of a society where that heroic compact has been broken. With their desertion of
their lord, Beowulf’s retainers have broken a thread in the delicately woven social fabric. Soon, the rest will unravel as well. Beowulf cannot serve as a beaga brytta in the fullest sense of the formula because the failure of heroic institutions has effectually prevented him from assuming the necessary role as protector. To identify him with such an epithet would place him in the company of venerable characters who do fulfill their obligations, even if indirectly, as with Hrothgar. As the social fabric unravels, Beowulf dies, and his death creates a lacuna not easily filled that leaves his people unprotected. As the Geatish woman laments, the Geats fear attack from the Swedes and the "slavery and shame" that such an attack would bring.

The poet’s withholding the sinces/beaga brytta formula from Beowulf would have, in the minds of the audience, failed to summon fully the characteristics of a worthy king in heroic society. Yet Beowulf does everything right and appears the model leader. However, the dissolution of heroic society embodied by Beowulf’s failure to achieve status as a beaga brytta comes not from an attack from the outside but from within. Ostensibly, it is the dragon that kills Beowulf, but a constellation of failures of heroic society surround the dragon’s rise to power and exert disproportionate influence over the fates of the Geatish people. The thief, abused by his lord and driven to burglary, incites the dragon. Beowulf’s retainers, inadequately motivated by the rewards of heroic society to face likely immolation, fail to uphold their part of the bargain. The blood feud between the Geats and the Swedes, kept by Beowulf’s kingship at a harmless simmer, threatens the Geats not with mere hardship after the death of their king but ethnic annihilation. The forces of chaos, corruption, and wyrd prove larger and more powerful than even the most superhuman of heroes and of heroic society. Even as the audience looks back, perhaps with longing, to a king such as Beowulf—a seeming paragon of heroic culture—the poem subtly reinforces that such a king is ultimately an ideal, a fantasy. The tribalism
exemplified in the poem and from which institutions like the blood feud arise is inherently unstable. A strong centralized leadership is needed: one that provides a single identity under which tribal differences no longer matter. The use of the *sinces/beaga brytta* formula in *Beowulf* reinforces this idea.

The *hilderinces* and *leofes mannes* formulas function similarly. *Hilderinces* occurs in the context of trophies and spoils of battle, and *leofes mannes* most often refers to characters who have died or are imperiled. As I observed in Chapter VII’s investigation of the *hilderinces* formula, it is used in both positive and negative contexts, signifying the precariousness of those exploits intended to fill the royal coffers so kings could offer the remuneration that their followers expected. Again, this suggests a weakness in heroic society itself, where the expected pursuit of treasure and glory comes at the risk of a king’s life and an ensuing threat to his people.

Both of these epithets function ironically. Denotatively, they refer to a character’s bravery in battle and affectionate regard by his people. Because both often (for *hilderinces*) or typically (for *leofes mannes*) refer eulogistically to a character who has died or is believed unlikely to survive, their use in a scene essentially hints the hero has lost the battle, often before he has even begun to fight. Rather than focusing on his achievements, the contexts of these formulas pull the audience’s thoughts out of the fight and toward the hero’s eventual demise. This is hardly a laudable depiction of heroic action. The *lofgeor* a hero desires and the safe, stable life his exploits supposedly produce for his people become transient states, subject to the vagaries of battle. Even the bravest and most beloved hero will die someday, these epithets say, and when he does, all of his bravery and benevolence will mean little for the fate of his people.

As with *sinces/beaga brytta*, these formulas are critical of heroic institutions and their ability to provide for a king’s subjects. Recall that previous critics have found and my study
confirmed that a king’s ability to protect and provide for his people are the key criteria for his effectiveness as a ruler, and noun-epithet formulas in general correspond with the king’s exercise of this role. The poet’s use of the hilderinces and leofes mannes formulas in such perilous contexts is far from a strong endorsement of the stability afforded by these "beloved battle-men" whose adventuring leaves their subjects a few heartbeats from annihilation. Activating these associations in the minds of the audience would have perhaps evoked nostalgia for a time (probably largely imaginative) when such bravery was commonplace, and pride in one’s people was intimately tied with such exploits as recounted in the tradition. But again, for the person who does not, with each reign, want to fear the fate voiced by the Geatish woman at Beowulf’s death, such a look at the precariousness of traditional institutions suggests a need for more stability and centrality to weather events like the death of a beloved leader.

The mære þeoden formula, as discussed above, occurs in two contexts: in scenes showing death or peril and in scenes depicting heroic traditions. As with the hilderinces and leofes mannes formulas, its use in so many scenes depicting heroic failure serves as a statement by the poet of the durability of heroic values or, perhaps, the folly of pursuing fame as a virtue. Fame guarantees nothing. It does not require capability in battle or guarantee victory. It does not protect against failure. It does not allow a king to fulfill his primary role of protecting his people. It does not even ensure that the king adheres to heroic values at all, as shown by the examples of Heremod and Onela, to whom this particular epithet is applied. For all the famous deeds of their leaders, the people of Hrothgar and Beowulf were defenseless once the right enemy struck.

Again, the use of this formula in this particular context seems intended to glorify the poem’s heroes while criticizing its institutions—in this case, the pursuit of fame required by heroic culture.
Conclusion

Taken as a whole, these noun-epithet formulas show heroic culture to be a thing of surprising frailty. Rather than summoning associations of big, glittering victories, of gold and glory, the poet almost unequivocally attaches these noun-epithet formulas to scenes of peril, death, and loss. Even a hero who can slay monsters after a day-long dive to the bottom of a lake remains mortal and will eventually die. The use of noun-epithet formulas carrying so much traditional meaning gives the audience permission to admire characters like Hrothgar and Beowulf and even regret the demise of the ideals they represent. But it is the institutions that have engendered their failure, and the Beowulf-poet’s use of traditional noun-epithet formulas creates a sense of sadness of the loss of its heroes while critically examining the heroic culture it blames for their deaths and the precarious positions in which they leave their subjects. Without stable institutions to constantly renew the protections the hero offers, heroic culture will create at best a tenuous society. For all its bluster and boasting, such a society will eventually fail because it cannot support—and in fact often acts to derail—the leader’s basic protective function. The poem offers caution against the close-knit tribal society we see in Beowulf, implicitly arguing for something more stable and more centralized. Given the time period in which I believe the poem was written—the late ninth-century reign of King Alfred—it would have availed itself of the political and social climate and advocated for the Alfredian agenda.
CHAPTER X

Conclusion:

A Germanic Hero in King Alfred’s Court

The date of *Beowulf* is one of the many contentious (and probably irresolvable) issues surrounding the poem. Only a brief discussion of the major issues is possible here. Besides the dozens of papers on the topic, the subject is politically fraught, and much of the evidence for one date or another seems cherrypicked to support a conclusion rather than allowing for a conclusion based on broad consideration of the evidence (Murray 101; Drout 157-158). There is compelling evidence for both an early date for *Beowulf* and a later date. R. D. Fulk makes the strongest argument for an early date with his consideration of multiple philological and metrical criteria, presented in his book *A History of Old English Meter* (348-350). Historically and culturally, however, I believe that the poem fits best later in the Anglo-Saxon period; John D. Niles summarizes some of the more compelling evidence for this conclusion ("Locating *Beowulf*" 96-101). My selection of Alfred’s reign as the probable date of composition for the poem can be summed up by this convergence of historical and literary evidence toward a late ninth-century date. I am convinced it is easier to fathom that a skilled poet could manipulate the language of an earlier era for artistic effect—Pope makes such a claim for the archaisms in the tenth-century *Battle of Maldon*—than it is to imagine allotting resources to record a poem that celebrated a feared and detested people (194). The reign of Alfred provides a point upon the Anglo-Saxon timeline where multiple historical and literary factors converge to make possible a poem like *Beowulf*, namely its expansion of vernacular literacy and its political unification of the English people and Danish settlers for the first time in their history.
Alfred is renowned in part for his elevation of vernacular English during a time when scholarship and religion (which were more often than not entangled) were largely conducted in Latin. Alfred insisted that all nobleman learn to read English and promoted translating major Latin texts into English, making major intellectual works accessible to a wider audience (Booth 41; Niles, "Locating Beowulf" 90). Some scholars have proposed the nostalgic tone of Beowulf expresses anxiety over the shift to a literate society and the concomitant loss of oral-traditional culture, associating literary culture with alienation and silence (Liuzza, "Beowulf" 106-107; Near 324). This grants literacy substantial power—essentially proposing the written word can and will annihilate oral traditions—and ignores the evidence that orality and literacy comfortably coexist in most circumstances. Rather, Alfred’s emphasis on vernacular literacy and his valuation of vernacular texts creates the climate where a text like Beowulf would have been valued enough to justify putting it to parchment. The use of oral formulas—particularly because of what my investigation here has shown of their function for the poem’s audience—in a written poem instead communicates in the traditional idiom a message relevant to Alfred’s kingship.

Before Alfred’s reign, the English kingdom had endured varying degrees of fragmentation. In the sixth century, the portion of Britain held by the Anglo-Saxons was broken into as many as twelve different kingdoms at certain points (Blair 26). Pressures from Celtic and Pictish tribes to the north and west sometimes subsumed entire swaths of Anglo-Saxon territory. The Anglo-Saxons later reclaimed this land when the balance of power shifted to favor them. While the number of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms dwindled as smaller kingdoms were absorbed by their more powerful neighbors, before the start of the Viking invasions in the eighth century, two or three kingdoms dominated at any given time. Supremacy, however, did not survive the death of the king who achieved it (Blair 46-51).
This volatile political history forms the backdrop of Alfred’s successful unification of the English people and Danish settlers into a single nation during the late ninth century. The parallels between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms before Alfred and the world depicted in *Beowulf* are clear: fragmented, often tribal, dominated by a handful of larger-than-life hero-kings whose influence sputters out quickly after that king’s death. Alfred offered unification and of a diverse group of people: not just the myriad Anglo-Saxon kingdoms but of the Danish settlers descended of the one-time Viking invaders.

Alfred was no stranger to using the vernacular literacy he fostered in his kingdom to achieve his political goals. John D. Niles calls Alfred’s *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* "the first piece of political propaganda written in English" for its depiction of the king in a heroic light ("Locating *Beowulf*" 90). Several scholars have argued that the ninth-century genealogies—which often share remarkable concordances with characters *Beowulf*—show that *Beowulf* was not only intended for a mixed English-Danish audience but aimed to build cohesion between the two peoples and establish West Saxon suzerainty over the Danish kings of northern England (Davis 113; Murray 105; Frank 129). *Beowulf*’s tendency to show traditional heroic institutions—those that would have sustained the smaller Anglo-Saxon and Danish kingdoms that Alfred united—as well-intentioned but unstable and dangerous also promotes the unity he sought to achieve.

*Beowulf* employs traditional oral techniques to express the nostalgia and uncertainty that many people felt at such a crucial moment in Anglo-Saxon history. My investigation into how the sounds of the poem create an emotional response in listeners shows that *Beowulf* sounds unrelentingly sad. The foundation of the poem primes its audience to regard its hero and his triumphs—narrative elements may have strong emotional associations for them already—with sadness. As discussed in Chapter VIII, the neurobiological pathways that allow the brain to
interpret such aural information occurs below the conscious level, perhaps causing the audience to feel sadness toward Beowulf and his exploits without knowing why.

The traditional language employed by the poem functions similarly, although with more nuance. I looked at noun-epithet formulas, which Foley hypothesized summoned the king’s roles as protector and provider to his people. My investigation of the distribution of the noun-epithet formulas within the poem confirmed Foley’s theory: They occurred far more often in scenes showing traditional heroic values and were almost always absent from scenes showing unheroic behavior. This suggests that, broadly, noun-epithet formulas would evoke associations with heroic culture in the audience.

Looking at several of the more common noun-epithet formulas showed the poet used them to create a much more complicated picture than the mere celebration of heroic achievement presented upon a somber aural backdrop. While some of these formulas were used exactly as I would have expected—in association with heroic achievements and institutions—usually they were used in negative contexts associated with death, loss, and peril. The poet seems to be delicately plying traditional language to express a complex idea. Through it, he grants leave to the audience to admire and mourn for the heroes. He unerringly depicts these characters as doing their best by their people, even in overwhelming circumstances. The heroic culture in which they operate, however, is rotten beyond salvation, and herein the poet’s criticism lies. Heroic institutions—not the flaws of the heroes themselves—account for their failure.

This, of course, aligns nicely with Alfred’s agenda. Keep your heroes, it seems to say, and your admiration of them. But leave them firmly in the past. Relish the stories of their achievements but don’t forget that those achievements were just as likely to end in failure, and heroic failure carried calamitous consequences for the people dependent upon the hero’s success.
A stable, central government offers the protection those heroes cannot, and a king like Alfred—himself enamored of heroic poetry—whom the genealogies conveniently show was related to all the major groups over whom he ruled, will enable both the stability and the pride in their past that his people craved.

Anglo-Saxon Britain contains few figures illuminated well enough to gain a sense of who they were and the lives they led. The few definitive dates, places, events, and people of which we know tend to obscure the human element that underlies the patchwork history constructed after centuries of scholarship. We see, for example, the unification of England under Alfred as part of a historical trajectory that largely confirms the world as we see it today. It is hard to remember that an event so large in history was a human concern to many people: a source of anxiety, a source of hope.

That human element is one of the great losses to oral poetry composed as the Parry-Lord hypothesis assumes. A relatively unchanging stock of formulas cobbled together in the most convenient manner under the duress of live performance cannot express the subtle and complex emotions a gifted poet might be expected to convey when speaking to an audience skeptical of their place in a rapidly changing era of history. I believe that Beowulf shows precisely the opposite. It undoubtedly uses oral techniques, but it employs them with an exquisite sensitivity that creates a multilayered work of art that speaks to the traditional, the political, and most importantly of all, the human.
Works Consulted

Amodio, Mark C. "Affective Criticism, Oral Poetics, and Beowulf's Fight with the Dragon."


## APPENDIX A:

Occurrence of Noun-Epithet Formulas by Fitt

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<td>1-52</td>
<td></td>
<td>35a: <em>since(s)/beaga bryttan</em>/brytnade*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I</td>
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<tr>
<td>II</td>
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<td>115-188</td>
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<td>130a: <em>æþeling ærgod</em></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>148a: <em>wine(um) Scyldinga</em></td>
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<td>201a: <em>mære(es,um,ne) þeoden(nes,ne)/þeoden(nas) mærne(e)</em></td>
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<td>249a: <em>secg(as) on searwum</em></td>
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<td>258-319</td>
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<td>297b: <em>leofes(na,re) mann(a,an,a)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Arrival at Heorot, Wulfgar convinces Hrothgar to admit</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>320-370</td>
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<td>345a: <em>mære(es,um,ne) þeoden(nes,ne)/þeoden(nas) mærne(e)</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>352a: <em>since(s)/beaga bryttan</em>/brytnade*</td>
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<td>Volume</td>
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<td>Description</td>
<td>Lines</td>
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<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>371-455</td>
<td>Beowulf comes before Hrothgar and pledges to fight Grendel</td>
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<td>VII</td>
<td>456-498</td>
<td>Hrothgar’s history with Ecgtheow</td>
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<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>499-558</td>
<td>Flying between Beowulf and Unferth</td>
<td></td>
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<td>VIII</td>
<td>559-661</td>
<td>Flying between Beowulf and Unferth, Wealtheow greets Beowulf</td>
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<td>XI</td>
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<td>Celebration of Beowulf’s victory, songs of Sigemund</td>
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<td>XV</td>
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| XVIII  | 1192-1250  | Wealtheow bestows the neck-ring of Hama, pleas with Beowulf | | | 0 |
| XVIII  | 1251-1320  | Grendel’s mother arrives, death of Æschere | | | 0 |
| XX     | 1321-1383  | Hrothgar’s despair, pleas with Beowulf | 1321b: *helm Scyldinga*  
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| XXI    | 1383-1472  | Beowulf rides to Grendel’s mere, gift of Hrunting | 1408b: *æþlinges (a) bearn*  
|         |            |       | 1418a: *wine(um) Scyldinga* | | 2 |
| XXII   |            | Fight with Grendel’s | 1487a: *since(s)/beagā brytta(n)/brytnade* | | 5 |
| XXIII  | 1473-1556 | mother | 1476a: *goldwine gumena*  
1484b: *Geata dryhten(ne)*  
1492b: *Wedergeata leod*  
1495a: *hilderinces(e,a)* |
|--------|-----------|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1557-1650 | Death of Grendel’s mother, Beowulf’s return | 1574b: *Higelaces þegn*  
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1598a: *mære(es,um,ne) þeoden(nes,ne)/þeoden(nas) mærne(e)*  
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| XXIII  | 1651-1749 | Gift of Grendel’s head and sword hilt, Hrothgar’s "sermon" | 1680a: *Deniga frean*  
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<td>2127a: <em>lofes(na,re) mannes(an,a)</em></td>
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<td>2337b: <em>wigendra hleo</em></td>
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<td>Tale of Hrethel, Beowulf goes forth and begins to fight the dragon, Beowulf is deserted by his men</td>
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<td>XXXVIII</td>
<td>Wiglaf takes Beowulf to the treasure,</td>
<td>2752-2820</td>
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2383b: *since(s)/beaga brytta(n)/brytnade*

2384a: *mær(es,um,ne) þeoden(nes,ne)/þeoden(nas) mærne(e)*

2429a: *freo(a)wine folca*

2483a: *Geata dryhten(ne)*

2530a: *secg(as) on searwum*

2551a: *Wedergeata leod*

2560b: *Geata dryhten(ne)*

2572a: *mær(es,um,ne) þeoden(nes,ne)/þeoden(nas) mærne(e)*

2576a: *Geata dryhten(ne)*

2597a: *æplinges (a) bearn*

2626a: *goegum(an) cempan*

2644b: *folces hyrde*

2656a: *Wedra þeoden(nes)*

2700a: *secg(as) on searwum*

2721a: *mær(es,um,ne) þeoden(nes,ne)/þeoden(nas) mærne(e)*

2786b: *Wedra þeoden(nes)*
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<thead>
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<th>Beowulf bestows treasure on him, Beowulf dies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Wiglaf rebukes the deserters</td>
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<td>2897a: <em>leofes(na,re) mannes(an,a)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>More on feuds, viewing of Beowulf and the dragon by the warriors</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>2981a: <em>folces hyrde</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2991b: <em>Geata dryhten(ne)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3037a: <em>Wedra þeoden(nes)</em></td>
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<td>3070b: <em>Æþlinges (a) bearn</em></td>
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<td>3108a: <em>leofes(na,re) mannes(an,a)</em></td>
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<td>3111a: <em>hæle hildedeor</em></td>
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<td>3124a: <em>hilderinces(e,a)</em></td>
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<td>Beowulf’s funeral</td>
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<td>3137-3182</td>
<td>3141b: <em>mære(es,um,ne) þeoden(nes,ne)/ þeoden(nas) mærne(e)</em></td>
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<td>3170a: <em>æþlinges (a) bearn</em></td>
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</table>
APPENDIX B:

Occurrences of the Formulas in Context

**Sinces/beaga Brytta(n)**

| Scyld (30b-36a): Scyld’s body is sent to sea by way of a funeral ship. |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| **Wine Scyldinga,** | **Friend of the Scyldings,** |
| leof landfruma lange ahte— | beloved ruler and long-lived— |
| þær æt hyðe stod, hringedstefna | there at the landing-place stood ring-prowed, |
| isig and utfus— aþelinges fær; | resplendent and eager to set out upon the |
| aledon þa leofne þeoden, | prince’s journey; |
| **beaga bryttan** on bearm scipes, | they laid out the beloved lord, |
| mærne be mæste. | the giver of rings on the ship’s bosom, |
| | the glorious near the mast. |

| Hrothgar (348a-355b): Wulfgar addresses Hrothgar and asks him to give hearing to the newly arrived Beowulf. |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Wulfgar mapelode; þæt wæs Wendla leod;** | **Wulfgar spoke that was the Wendle’s chieftain;** |
| wæs his modsefa manegum gecyðed, | his heart was thought by many |
| wig ond wisdom: ‘Ic þæs wine Deniga, | courageous and wise: ‘I to the friend of the |
| frean Scyldinga frinan wille, | Danes, |
| **beaga bryttan,** swa þu bena eart, | lord of the Scyldings will ask |
| þeoden mærne ymb þinne syð, | the giver of rings, you the petitioner, |
| | famous lord, about your fate, |
Beowulf speaks to Hrothgar about his intentions to rid Heorot of Grendel.

Hrothgar (607a-610b):

Beowulf speaks to Hrothgar about his intentions to rid Heorot of Grendel.

Hrothgar (1169a-1172b): Wealtheow presents a cup to her husband and prepares to speak on behalf of their sons.

Wealtheow speaking:

‘Onfoh þissum fulle, freodrihten min, sinces brytta. Þu on sælum wes, goldwine gumena, ond to Geatum spræc mildum wordrum, swa sceal man don.

Hrothgar (1484a-1487b): Before riding out to Grendel’s mere, Beowulf asks Hrothgar to send his treasure to Hygelac should he die.

Beowulf speaking, before going into the lair:

Mæg þonne on þæm golde ongitan Geata dryhten,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old English</th>
<th>Scandinavian</th>
<th>English</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>geseon sunu Hrædles, þonne he on þæt sinc starað, þæt ic guncystum godne funde <strong>beaga bryttan</strong>, breac þonne moste.</td>
<td>Hrethel’s son, as he stares at the treasure, that I found good generosity from the giver of rings most enjoyed.</td>
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</table>

**Hygelac (1920a-1924b):** Newly returned home, Beowulf orders his men to carry the treasure to Hygelac.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old English</th>
<th>Scandinavian</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Het þa up beran æþelinga gestreon, frætwe on fætgold; næs him ðeor þanon to gesecanne <strong>sinces bryttan</strong>, Higelac Hreþling, þær æt him wunað selfa mid gesiðum sæwealle neah.</td>
<td>He ordered them to bear up the prince’s treasure ornaments and gold jewelry; it was by no means far to him from there, to seek the giver of treasure, Hygelac son of Hrethel, who dwelled at home, among his companions near the sea-wall.</td>
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</table>

**Hygelac (2069b-2072a):** Beowulf prepares to tell Hygelac the tale of his exploits in Denmark.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old English</th>
<th>Scandinavian</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ic sceal forð sprecan gen ymbe Grendel, þæt ðu geare cunne, <strong>sinces brytta</strong>, to hwan syððan wearð hondæs hæleða.</td>
<td>I shall speak forth about Grendel, as well you know, giver of treasure, as to what happened at the hand-fray of heroes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Hilderinces(e,a)**
Grendel (980a-987a): Beowulf does not need to boast as Hrothgar’s men regard Grendel’s hand hung high over Heorot.

| Da wæs swigra secg, | Silent was the man, | gylpsprææce guðgeweorca, | in boastful speech of war-work, |
| on gylpsprææce guðgeweorca, | the son of Ecgtheow, | sīþðan æþelingas eorles cræfte | since the princes of the earl’s skill |
| sīþðan æþelingas eorles cræfte | over the high roof, | ofer heanne hrof hand sceawedon, | they beheld the hand, |
| ofer heanne hrof hand sceawedon, | the fiend’s fingers; | feondes fingras; foran æghwylc wæs, | each was above |
| feondes fingras; foran æghwylc wæs, | each of steel, | stead næglæ gehwylc style gelicost, | the tip of each finger |
| stead næglæ gehwylc style gelicost, | the heathen’s claw, | hæþenes handsporu, **hilderinces**, | the battle-man’s |
| hæþenes handsporu, **hilderinces**, | perilous talon. | egl unheoru. | |

Beowulf (1492a-1495a): After asking Hrothgar to give his spoils to Hygelac in the event of his death, Beowulf plunges into Grendel’s mere.

| Æfter þæm wordum | After those words | Weder-Geata leod | the lord of the Weather-Geats |
| efste mid elne, | courageously hastened, | nalas andsware | for no answer |
| bidan wolde; | would he await; | brimwylm onfeng | the sea-surge accepted |
| **hilderince**. | the battle-man. | | |

Beowulf (1575b-1584a): After killing Grendel’s mother, Beowulf spies Grendel’s corpse and decides to take his head as trophy.

| Næs seo ecg fracod | That edge was not useless |
| **hilderince**, ac he hræpe wolde | to the battle-man, but he would swiftly |
Grendle forgylđan  guđræsa fela  
ðara þe he geworhte  to West-Denum  
oftor micle  ðonne on ænne sið,  
þonne he Hroðgares heorðgeneatas  
sloh on sweofote,  slæpende fræt  
folces Denigea  fyftyne men  
ond oðer swylc  ut offered,  
laðlicu lac.  

repay Grendel’s  many battle-storms  
that he there performed  against the West Danes  
more often  than a single time,  
when he Hrothgar’s companions,  
sleep-struck,  he devoured slumbering  
of the Danish people  fifty men  
and others such  carried off  
as wretched offering.

Beowulf (3120a-3125b): Wiglaf and Beowulf’s men enter the dragon barrow to view the gold.

| Huru se snotra  sunu Wihstanes       | Indeed the wise man  son of Weohstan       |
| acigde of corøre  cyninges þegnas    | summoned forth a troop  of the king’s thanes |
| syfône (t)sonne,  þa selestan,         | seven together,  the best,                  |
| eode eahta sum  under inwithrof       | one of eight  under a hostile roof          |
| hilderinc[a];  sum on handa bær     | of battle-men;  some bear in hand           |
| æledleoman,  se ðe on orde geong.      | a torch,  going forth at the front.         |

Leofes(ne,ra) Mannes(an,a)

Beowulf (293a-300b): The Danish coast-guard offers to guide Beowulf and his men to Hrothgar and see that their ship is protected.

<p>| Swylce ic maguþegnas  mine hate    | My young retainers  I will call           |
| wið feonda gehwone  flotan eowerne, | against the enemy’s theft  of your ship,   |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>niwtwyndne  nacan on sande</th>
<th>the new-tarred  ship on sand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>arum healdan,  òf ðæt ðeft byreð</td>
<td>to guard with honor, until it carries again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ofer lagustreamas  <strong>leofne mannan</strong></td>
<td>over the water the beloved man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wudu wundenhals  to Wedermearce,</td>
<td>twist-prowed wood to Wederland,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>godfremmendra  swylcum gifeðe bið</td>
<td>properly to such fate is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ðæt ðone hilderæs  hal gedigeð.</td>
<td>the battle-storm to pass through safely.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Beowulf (1914a-1919b):** Hygelac’s coastguard eagerly welcomes Beowulf home.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hreþe wæs æt holme  hyðweard geara,</th>
<th>Quickly by the sea the harbor-warden stood ready,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>se þe ær lange tid  <strong>leofra manna</strong></td>
<td>he was long awaiting the beloved man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fús æt faroðe  feor wlateðe;</td>
<td>eagerly toward the sea gazing far out;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sælde to sande  sidfæþme scip</td>
<td>the messenger secured the broad-beamed ship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oncerbendum fæst, ðy læs hym yða ðrym</td>
<td>with firm bonds lest the majestic waves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wudu wynsuman  forwrecan meahte.</td>
<td>the delightful wood might drive forth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Indefinite (1940b-1943b):** Comparing Hygelac’s wife Hygd to the queen Thyth, the poet laments Thryth’s practice of killing warriors who looked upon her in daylight.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw</th>
<th>It was not a queenly custom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>idese to efnanne,  þeah ðe hio ænlicu sy,</td>
<td>of woman to perform, though she was singular,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ðætte freoðuwebbe  feores onsæce</td>
<td>that a peace-weaver to deprive the life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
æfter ligetorne leofne mannan. after lies of a beloved man.


Ic ðæs modceare sorhwylmum seað, sìe ne truwode leofes mannes; ic ðe lange bæd ðæt ðu þone wælgæst wihte ne grette, lete Suð-Dene sylfe geweorðan guðe wið Grendel. I grieved of heart afflicted by sorrow, I mistrusted this journey of this beloved man; I long asked that you the murderous spirit you not approach,
let the South-Danes themselves decide to war with Grendel.

Hondsco (2076a-2080b): Beowulf recounts to Hygelac Hondsco’s devouring by Grendel.

Þær wæs Hondscio hild onsæge, feorhbealu fægum; he firmest læg, gyrded cempa; him Grendel wearð, mærum maguþegne to muðbonan, leofes mannes lice all forswealg. There was to Hondsco a fatal battle, deadly attack to his life; he first lay dead, a girded warrior; Grendel turned on him, glorious young thane to the devourer, body of the beloved man all consumed.

Æschere (2124a-2128a): Beowulf recounts to Hygelac Æschere’s capture by Grendel’s mother.

Noðer hy hine ne moston, syððan mergen cwom, deaðwerigne Denia leode Nor were they permitted, at daybreak, the death-wearied Danish people
bronde forbærnan, ne on bel hladan
leofne mannan; hio þæt lic ætbær
feondes fæð(mum un)der firgenstream.

a brand to burn, or a pyre to build
for the beloved man; she that carried off
in fiend’s embrace under the mountain stream.

Beowulf (2892a-2897a): Beowulf’s men await in dread news of the outcome of the dragon fight.

Heht ða þæt heaðoweorc to hagan biodan
up ofer egcclif, þær þæt eorlweorod
morgenlongne dæg modgiomor sæt,
bordhæbbende, bega on wenum,
endedogores ond eftcymes
lofes monnes.

The battle-work then required that he announce to the town
atop the sea-cliff, there the warrior-band
all morning long sat in sorrow,
shield-bearing, expecting either
the death or the imminent arrival
of their beloved man.

Beowulf (3105b-3109a): Wiglaf recounts his doubts about Beowulf fighting the dragon and Beowulf’s disregard; he orders the funeral pyre to be prepared.

Sie sio bær gearo,
ædre geæfned, þonne we ut cymen,
ond þonne geferian frean userne,
leofne mannan þær he longe sceal
on ðæs waldendes waren gepolian.

Ready the bier,
promptly carry out, the outward bring,
and carry our lord,
beloved man, there he must long
with the Lord remain.

Helm Scyldinga
Hrothgar (317a-322b): Hrothgar recalls to Wulfgar his knowledge of Beowulf.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hroðgar maþelode, helm Scyldinga:</th>
<th>Hrothgar spoke, helm of the Scyldings:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Ic hine cuðe cnihtwesende;</td>
<td>‘I knew him as a young boy;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>væs his ealdfæder Ecgþeo haten,</td>
<td>his late father was called Ecgtheow,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>δæm to ham forgeaf Hreþel Geata</td>
<td>to him gave Hrethel of the Geats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>angan dohtor; is his eafora nu</td>
<td>his only daughter; their child now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heard her cumen, sohte holdne wine.’</td>
<td>comes here, seeking a trusty friend.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hrothgar (456a-458b): Hrothgar greets Beowulf and reminds him of Hrothgar’s aid to his father Ecgtheow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hroðgar maþelode, helm Scyldinga:</th>
<th>Hrothgar spoke, helm of the Scyldings:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Fore fyhtum þu, wine min Beowulf,</td>
<td>‘For the fight, my friend Beowulf,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ond for arstafum usic söhest.’</td>
<td>and for favor thou sought us.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hrothgar (1321a-1328a): Hrothgar laments the loss of Æschere.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hroðgar maþelode, helm Scyldinga:</th>
<th>Hrothgar spoke, helm of the Scyldings:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Ne frin þu æfter sælum! Sohr is geniwwod</td>
<td>Do not ask after happiness! The pain is renewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigea leodum: dead is Æschere,</td>
<td>of the Danish people: Æschere is dead,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yrmenlafoes yldræ broþor,</td>
<td>of the Danes a late brother,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>min run wita ond min rædbora,</td>
<td>my trusted advisor my councilor,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eaxlgestealla ðonne we on orlege</td>
<td>shoulder-companion when we in battle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hafelan weredon, þonne hniton feþan,</td>
<td>guarded our heads, when we clashed with</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
eoferas cnysedan.  
the troop,  
the boar-helms clashed.’

### Mære(es,um,ne) þeoden(nes,ne)

Hrothgar (129b-134a): Hrothgar mourns after the attack of Grendel on Heorot.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mære þeoden,</th>
<th>The famed lord,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>æþeling ærgod, unbliðe sæt,</td>
<td>prince renowned, cheerlessly sat,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>þolode ðryðswyð, þegnsorge dreah,</td>
<td>suffered strong, his thanes’ loss,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syðþan hie þæs laðan last sceawedon,</td>
<td>since the hated track he searched,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wergan gastes; wæs ðæt gewin to strang,</td>
<td>for the accursed spirit; that sorrow was too strong,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lað ond longsum.</td>
<td>hateful and long-enduring.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hrothgar (198b-201b): Beowulf prepares to sail to Hrothgar’s aid.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Het him yðlidan godne gegyrwan; cwæð, he guðcyning ofer swanræð secean wolde,</th>
<th>He commanded a good ship made ready; he said, the war-lord over the sea he desired to seek,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mærne þeoden, þa him wæs manna þearf.</td>
<td>the famed lord who needed men.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hrothgar (342b-347b): Beowulf introduces himself to Hrothgar’s coast-guard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘We synt Higelaces beodgeneatas; Beowulf is min nama. Wille ic asecgan sunu Healfdenes,</th>
<th>‘We are Hygelac’s table companions; Beowulf is my name. I wish to tell the son of Healfdane,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

mærum þeodne  min ærende,  the famed lord,  my message,  
alder þinum,  gif he us geunnan wile  I wish to tell your prince,  if he will hear us,  
þæt we hine swa godne  gretan moton.’  if we may be allowed  to give good  
greetings.’

Hrothgar (348a-355b): Wulfgar addressed Hrothgar and asks him to give hearing to the newly arrived Beowulf.

Wulfgar maþelode;  þæt wæs Wendla leod;  Wulfgar spoke  that was the Wendle’s  
wæs his modsefa  manegum gecyðed,  chieftain;  
wig ond wisdom:  ‘Ic þæs wine Deniga,  his heart was thought by many  
wig ond wisdom:    ‘I to the friend of the  
frean Scyldinga  frinan wille,  Danes,  
beaga bryttan,  swa þu bena eart,  lord of the Scyldings  will ask  
þeoden mærne  ymb þinne syð,  famous lord,  about your fate,  
don þe þa andsware  ædre gecyðan  and he who an answer speedily announced  
dðe me se goda  agifan þendeð.’  that good things he intends to bestow.’

Beowulf (794b-797b): Beowulf’s men brandish weapons against Grendel.

þær genehost brægd  There frequently brandished  
eorl Beowulfes  ealde lafe,  the earls of Beowulf  the old inheritance,  
wolde freadrihtnes  feorh ealgian,  would the lord’s life defend,  
mæres þeodnes,  ðær hie meahton swa.  the famed lord,  if they could.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hrothgar (1046a-1049b): Hrothgar gives gifts to Beowulf for slaying Grendel.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Swa manlice**,  
**hordweard hæleþa, mære þeoden**  
**heāoporēzas geald**  
**mearum ond madmum, swa hy næfre man**  
**lyhød,**  
**se þe secgan wile soð æfter rihte.**  

**Thus nobly**  
**the famed lord,**  
**the king**  
**for the battle-storm paid**  
**with horses and treasure,**  
**thus never could a**  
**man find fault,**  
**he who will speak**  
**truth according to justice.** |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hrothgar (1594b-1599a): Hrothgar and his men begin to fear that Beowulf has perished in the fight against Grendel’s mother; Beowulf’s men keep the faith.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Blondenfeaxe,**  
**gomele ymb godne ongeador spræcon**  
**þæt hig þæs æpelinges eft ne wendon,**  
**þæt he sigehreðig secean come**  
**mære þeoden;**  
**þæt hine seo brimwylf abroten hæfäde.**  

**Pale-haired,**  
**those good and old**  
**together spoke**  
**that he this prince**  
**they did not expect again,**  
**that the glory of victory**  
**would not come**  
**to the famed lord;**  
**to many it seemed**  
**that she the crafty water-wolf possessed him.** |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heremod (1709b-1715b): Hrothgar warns Beowulf against violence and greed, using the example of Heremod.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Ne wearð Heremod swa**  
**eaforum Ecgwelan, Ar-Scyldingum;**  
**ne geweox he him to willan ac to vælfealle**  

**Was not Heremod thus**  
**to the sons of Ecgwela, Honor-Scyldings;**  
**he did not give them grace**  
**but destruction** |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Old English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>and death of the Danish people;</td>
<td>ond to deācwalum Deniga leodum;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enraged he destroyed table-companions,</td>
<td>breat bolgenmod beodgeneatas,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shoulder-companions, until he alone remained,</td>
<td>eaxlgesteallan, ɒp þæt he ana hwearf,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>famed lord apart from the joy of men.</td>
<td>mære þeoden mondreamum from.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hrothgar (1990b-1997a): Hygelac speaks of his doubts about Beowulf’s venture to Denmark.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Old English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ac ðu Hroðgare widcuðne wean wihte gebettest,                               | Ac ðu Hroðgare
wicuðne wean wihte gebettest,                                               |
| But Hrothgar thou in his widely known misfortune could you aid in any way  | But Hrothgar thou
in his widely known misfortune could you aid in any way                   |
| that famed lord? I grieved of heart afflicted by sorrow, I mistrusted this journey of this beloved man; I long asked that you the murderous spirit you not approach, let the South-Danes themselves decide to war with Grendel. |
| mærum ðeodne? Íc ðæs modceare sorhwylmum seað, siðe ne truwode leofes mannæs; Íc ðe lange bæd þæt ðu þone wælgæst wihte ne grette, lete Suð-Dene sylfe geowordan guðe wið Grendel. | mærum ðeodne? Íc ðæs modceare sorhwylmum seað, siðe ne truwode leofes mannæs; Íc ðe lange bæd þæt ðu þone wælgæst wihte ne grette, lete Suð-Dene sylfe geowordan guðe wið Grendel. |

Onela (2379b-2384a): Eofer and Wulf seek Hygelac’s protection from Ongentheow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Old English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Him the exiles sought over the sea, the sons of Ohtere; who rebelled against the helm of the Scyflings,</td>
<td>Hyne wræcmæcgas ofer sæ sohtan, suna Ohteres; hæfdon hy forhealden helm Scyflinga,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

135
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>þone selestan sæcyninga</th>
<th>who was best of the sea-kings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>þara ðe in Swiorice sinc brytnade,</td>
<td>who in Sweden gave out rings,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>mærne þeoden.</strong></td>
<td>famed lord.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Beowulf (2570b-2575a): In the dragon fight, the odds are against Beowulf’s victory.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scyld wel gebearg</th>
<th>The shield well protected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>life ond lice læssan hwile</td>
<td>the life and body a shorter while</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>mærum þeodne</strong> þonne his myne sohte,</td>
<td>of the famed lord than he desired,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ðær he þy fyreste forman dogore</td>
<td>he the space of time the first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wealdan moste swa him wyrd ne gescraf</td>
<td>he possessed, but fate did not grant him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hreð æt hilde.</td>
<td>victory in battle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Beowulf (2720a-2723b): After the dragon fight, Wiglaf aids a dying Beowulf.**

| Hyne þa mid handa heorodreorigne, | Here must the hand battle-blooded, |
| **þeoden mærne,** þegn ungemete till, | the famed lord, the exceedingly good thane |
| winedryten his wætere gelafede | his lord-friend wash with water |
| hilde sædne ond his helm onspeon. | the battle-wearied and his helm unfasten. |

**Beowulf (3066a-3073b): After Beowulf’s death, the dragon-gold is described as cursed by those who buried it.**

<p>| Swa wæs Biowulfe, þa he biorges weard sohte, searoniðas —seolfa ne cuðe | So was Beowulf, and the barrow-warden he sought, cunning hatred —not knowing |
| þurh hwæt his worulde gedal weorðan | by what means his separation from the world |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old English</th>
<th>Modern English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sceolde—</td>
<td>must come—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swa hit òð domes dæg</td>
<td>thus until doomsday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dope benemdon</td>
<td>buried deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>þæt se secg wære</td>
<td>of the famed lord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>synnum scildig</td>
<td>those that there did,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>þær ðæt þær dydon,</td>
<td>that the man would be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>þæt se secg wære</td>
<td>guilty of crimes,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>synnum scildig</td>
<td>here restrained,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>þær ðæt þær dydon,</td>
<td>hell-bound fast,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>þæt se secg wære</td>
<td>sin punished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>synnum scildig</td>
<td>of he that plundered the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hergum geheaðerod,</td>
<td>ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hellbendum fæst,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wommum gewitnad,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>se ðone wong strude.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Beowulf (3137a-3142b): The Geats prepare Beowulf’s funeral pyre.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old English</th>
<th>Modern English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Him ða gegiredan</td>
<td>For him, they made ready</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geata leode</td>
<td>the Geatish people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ad on earðan</td>
<td>the earthen pyre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unwaclincne,</td>
<td>splendid,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helm[um] behongen,</td>
<td>hung his round helm,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hildebordum,</td>
<td>his shield,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beorhtum byrnum,</td>
<td>his bright mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swa he bena wæs;</td>
<td>as he had asked;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alegdon ða tomiddes</td>
<td>amidst these they lay down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mærne þeoden</td>
<td>the famed lord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hæleð hiofende,</td>
<td>the hero lamenting,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hlaford leofne.</td>
<td>their beloved lord.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>