

Affective Criticism, Oral Poetics, and Beowulf's Fight with the Dragon

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I

Affective criticism, as it has been practiced over the last few years, has come to focus upon the reader's (or audience's) subjective experience of a given literary work.¹ Rather than examining the text *qua* object, affective criticism (like all subjective criticism) has abandoned the objectivism and textual reification which lay at the heart of the New Critical enterprise, striving instead to lead "one away from the 'thing itself' in all its solidity to the inchoate impressions of a variable and various reader" (Fish 1980:42).² Shifting the critical focus away from the text to the reader has engendered

¹ Iser, one of the leading proponents of reader-based inquiry, offers the following succinct statement of the logic underlying his and related approaches: "[a]s a literary text can only produce a response when it is read, it is virtually impossible to describe this response without also analyzing the reading process" (1978:ix). Iser's emphasis on the reader's role and on the constitutive and enabling functions inherent in the act of reading are shared by many other modern theorists despite their radical differences in methodologies, aims, and conclusions. See especially Culler (1982:17-83), and the collections edited by Tompkins (1980) and Suleiman and Crosman (1980).

² The New Criticism has generally warned against inscribing an idiosyncratic, historically and culturally determined reader into a literary text because doing so would lead to subjectivism and ultimately to interpretative chaos. Subjective criticism—criticism which according to Wimsatt and Beardsley "begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism"—poses an especially large threat to the recovery of a text's meaning because "the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear" (1954:21). Further, assigning such importance to the reader's role seriously challenges the New Critical paradigm that established the author as determinant and his or her text as repository of a single, fixed, absolute, and absolutely recoverable meaning (available to those who can properly decode the text).

much controversy, in large part because the emphasis placed upon the reader as sole (or co-)creator of meaning has led to “the exclusion, and even to the avowed extinction, of authors and literary objects” (DeMaria 1978:463).

The debate over the role and function of the reader has been both heated and far-ranging, but for the present purposes it is most important to note that it has yet to be extended in any significant fashion to the vernacular literature produced in England before the Norman Conquest. Peter Travis attributes medievalists’ exclusion from poststructuralist discourse to their “apparent xenophobia” and somewhat archly observes that “[i]t is more than a slight understatement to assert that scholars of medieval English literature have not been centrally engaged in contemporary critical theoretical debate” (1987:201). But while his claim appears to have some substance,³ Travis paints only a partial picture. There is little doubt that a general resistance to what is commonly, if vaguely, referred to simply as “theory” exists among many medievalists,⁴ but their reluctance to enter into contemporary theoretical debates does not wholly explain matters. Despite the appearance of some recent articles and books which apply contemporary theory to Old English texts,⁵ the emphasis of poststructuralist theoretical

³ Green (1990), for example, makes no reference to any aspect of the contemporary debate over the role or function of the reader in his survey of orality and reading in medieval studies. The journal *Speculum* apparently stirred up a large segment of its readership by devoting an entire issue to the question of the so-called New Philology: in a subsequent issue of the *Medieval Academy Newsletter* (November 1990, no. 108), the journal’s editor, Luke Wenger, defended the special issue’s theoretical focus by asserting that “the practitioners of medieval studies cannot and should not stand aloof from the critical and theoretical and political debates that have a prominent place in contemporary academic discourse” (1, 3).

⁴ A case in point is the recent discussion of modern theory and its applicability to Old English literature that was carried on under the derisive heading “Derri-la-de-da” on ANSAX-L, an electronic network of Anglo-Saxonists, during the spring and early summer of 1991. This discussion is preserved in the ANSAX-L archives, ANSAXDAT. See Conner 1993 for more information on gaining access to this electronic discussion group. For a general consideration of contemporary theory’s applicability to medieval literatures, see Patterson 1990; Frantzen 1991a; and Finke and Shichtman 1987.

⁵ For recent books on Old English literature that have a strongly theoretical focus, see among others, Lerer 1991; Overing 1990; Gellrich 1985; and Hermann 1989. Recent articles in this vein include Irvine 1986; Parks 1991; and a number of the essays included in

discourse remains squarely on post-Conquest texts: indeed, those most actively engaged in contemporary theoretical debates rarely, if ever, extend their theories to English literature composed before the fifteenth century. As a way of illustrating this general pattern, Lee Patterson cites Stephen Greenblatt's admission that what he proposes to examine in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* "does not suddenly spring up from nowhere when 1499 becomes 1500" (cited in Patterson 1990:99). For Patterson, Greenblatt's acknowledgment is disturbing because it constitutes "less a recognition of historicity than its suppression, a gesture toward a terra incognita whose experience is acknowledged but whose terrain can be allowed to remain unexplored" (*idem*).

Medieval literature, Patterson suggests, does not figure prominently in contemporary critical debate because "[m]ost literary scholars and critics consider medieval texts to be utterly extraneous to their own interests, as at best irrelevant, at worst inconsequential; and they perceive the field itself as a site of pedantry and antiquarianism, a place to escape from the demands of modern intellectual life" (87). Although evidence supporting this view can be easily adduced, I will offer only the following two examples: Wolfgang Iser, an important figure in the development of reader-based theory, dismisses much of the literature of the Middle Ages as "trivial" because it is "affirmative" (1978:77)⁶ and Jane P. Tompkins tellingly relegates the medieval period to a blank spot on her page as she passes silently from the classical era to the Renaissance while discussing the history of "what literary response was or could be" (1980:206).⁷

Such treatment (or more precisely non-treatment) may well reflect the more general marginalization of medieval studies within the larger discipline as a whole,⁸ but in many ways the neglect of early English literature by contemporary reader-oriented theorists and the resistance to theory in many quarters of medieval studies are difficult to explain both

Frantzen 1991a.

⁶ Mailloux (1982:44-47) discusses this aspect of Iser's theory more fully.

⁷ In discussing this essay in *On Deconstruction*, Culler similarly passes silently over the Middle Ages (1982:39). Suleiman (1980) does touch briefly on the medieval period in her discussion of Hans Robert Jauss's contributions to the field, but her comments are at best cursory. Frantzen has recently considered this question at considerable length (1990 and 1991b).

⁸ See Patterson 1990 for an important discussion of this issue.

because “affective criticism ... [is] explicitly inscribed in the strategies of various kinds of medieval literature” (Travis 1987:202) and because it has historically occupied an important position in medieval literary criticism.⁹ To cite just two well known examples, R.M. Lumiansky (1952) argues that the reactions of the “implied, fictional audience” (Lerer 1991:22) in *Beowulf* are central to the poem’s narrative design because they channel and direct the actual audience’s reception of it, and Arthur Brodeur’s more extended consideration of the poem’s affective dynamics (1959) reveals the active reader’s crucial role.

Although he never employs the term “affective” and although his criticism reinforces rather than challenges basic New Critical tenets, Brodeur’s sensitivity to the reader, if not his aim, is in many ways consonant with contemporary affective criticism. The distance between Brodeur’s approach and Fish’s investigation of the “precise mental operations involved in reading, including the formulation of complete thoughts, the performing (and regretting) of acts of judgment, [and] the following and making of logical sequences” (Fish 1980:43) appears very short indeed. The readily acknowledged subjectivism of the latter replaces the objectivism striven for by the former, but the heuristic impulse underlying these (seemingly) varied critical approaches remains remarkably similar.

As Patterson suggests, the reasons medieval literature has been largely overlooked in contemporary critical discourse are complex, but were contemporary affective critics to glance back towards the Middle Ages, they would discover in the “textuality” of oral and oral-derived¹⁰ poetry the very fluidity and instability that they posit (with much continuing controversy) for contemporary written texts. Throughout much of the medieval period, the concept of a fixed, inviolable “text” is simply not applicable; literature, whether produced orally or in writing, was experienced for the most part aurally.¹¹ Furthermore, an orally composed and transmitted text is especially resistant to reification: “exist[ing] only as a synecdoche of the song” (Foley 1987:197), it does not claim authority in the way that written texts are often believed to. Because the poet is not marked by absence (as is

⁹ See further Renoir 1988:7-47.

¹⁰ For a recent and important discussion of this term, see Foley 1991:1-16.

¹¹ Cf. Crosby 1936, 1938.

true for the literate poet) but by his or her immediate physical presence, the poem can have no independent existence—indeed, without the poet there is no poem. The “object” that he or she produces enjoys only the most ephemeral and temporally circumscribed existence because it is, as Chaucer’s eagle comments, “In his substaunce ...but air”¹²—residing only within the collective memory of those present while it was performed, it leaves behind no trace once the final reverberations of the poet’s voice die out. And finally, because it is always necessarily composed under the exigencies of public performance, the oral text is truly dynamic and highly protean.¹³

By their very natures, oral and oral-derived poetry appear to be particularly well suited to contemporary affective criticism: in the most absolute sense, oral literature is *in* both the hearer and author, and because oral texts have virtually no existence independent of their reception, their audiences truly serve as dynamic co-creators of the texts. In their reception of the text, the audience “*perform[s]* the text, translating from metonym to Gestalt, ... [and] re-mak[es] the work of art” (Foley 1987:196). The processes involved in thus actively (co-)creating the text appear remarkably similar whether it is reconstructed from a static, fixed source (a printed text) or (re-)performed from a fluid, protean one (an oral text).

Yet despite this fundamental similarity, contemporary reader-based theory has yet to embrace medieval literature. To some extent, the marginalization of medieval studies may account for this phenomenon, but another important reason may be that the phrase “affective criticism” is seen to denote two widely divergent critical endeavors rather than marking two distinct points along the same critical continuum. Accordingly, medievalists such as Lumiansky and Brodeur, who consider the “tears, prickles or other physiological symptoms” (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954:34) that an Old English poem may elicit, are seen to affiliate themselves with “the ancient rhetorical tradition” that viewed “literature ... as existing primarily in order to produce results and not as an end in itself” (Tompkins 1980:204), while contemporary critics, in contrast, are seen to focus on “the meaning of the text” and not on “the behavior of the

¹² *House of Fame*, line 768; cited from Benson 1987:357.

¹³ As the late Albert B. Lord demonstrated, performances of the same poem by the same oral poet on successive occasions are marked by lexical and narrative variation; see further Lord 1960 and Foley 1990.

audience” (*ibid.*:205). Further, contemporary affective critics treat “the reader’s encounter with literature as an experience of interpretation” (Culler 1982:40), ignoring the effects that literature may have on its audience.

The distinction that Tompkins draws is valid—as Jonathan Culler observes, describing a poem’s impact upon its audience “is not ... to give what we would today regard as an interpretation” (1982:39)—but it is not absolute. The affective criticism applied to medieval literature need not be solely descriptive; a glance at the work of Alain Renoir or John Miles Foley reveals that the hermeneutics that informs their scholarship encompasses both the affective, subjective responses (the tears, prickles, etc.) that the New Critics warned against as well as such “cognitive” responses as “having one’s expectations proved false, struggling with an irresolvable ambiguity, or questioning the assumptions on which one had relied” (Culler 1982:39), experiences that are the primary focus of poststructuralist affective inquiry. As we will see in the second part of this essay, the oral poetics that structures Beowulf’s fight with the dragon and that elicits such strong affective responses (in Culler’s sense of the term) leads directly to the types of cognitive responses Culler isolates. In other words, the traditional structure of the dragon fight provides both the “foundation on which the aesthetic experience takes shape and the perceptual grid through which it is transmitted” (Foley 1991a:51). Rather than asserting with Tompkins that “[d]espite initial appearances, the ‘affective’ criticism practiced by critics in the second half of the twentieth century owes nothing to the ancient rhetorical tradition” (1980:202), we should note that their chief difference appears to be methodological: the branch of affective criticism informed by oral poetics proceeds from a recoverable structuralist foundation while the one that dominates contemporary reader-based theory removes itself from any structuralist ties.

The linguistic and cultural alterity of Old English literature further contributes to its exclusion from contemporary affective criticism. Chaucer’s poetry has been the focus of some important recent theoretical studies in large part because its essential modernity makes it an apt locus for such investigations,¹⁴ a point Travis neatly (if perhaps unintentionally) articulates (1987:205): “[o]ne reason Chaucer’s poetry is so patently open to reader-response criticism is that it is highly conscious of itself as linguistic artifice and of its readers’ role as coconspirator in the art of

¹⁴ See, for example, Patterson 1991; Dinshaw 1989; Travis 1987; and Lerer 1993.

making fiction.” Chaucer’s poetry, in other words, is for its era unusually self-reflexive.” But in pointing to these “unusual”—one is tempted to read “modern”—characteristics of Chaucer’s work, Travis does not raise the crucial question of whether or not contemporary affective criticism can speak in any meaningful fashion to that medieval literature which does not evidence modern characteristics. The ineluctably traditional nature of Old English poetry and the central role that tradition plays in shaping its reception contribute significantly to this problem,¹⁵ as does the fact that the medieval recipient of literature differs sharply from the Renaissance reader that affective stylistics initially constructed, as well as from the contemporary readers we cannot help but be.¹⁶

As the work of oral theorists has revealed,¹⁷ Old English oral-derived poetic texts have a resonant traditional dimension: the oral poetics that underlies this poetry functions through lexical, thematic, and narrative encodings that shape the text and perhaps even enable the audience’s response.¹⁸ In providing poets with ready access to compositional devices as small as a single word or as large as a narrative pattern that metonymically summon “conventional connotations to conventional structures” (Foley 1991a:8) and “*pars pro toto*” the entire tradition upon which the poetry is predicated to an immediate narrative moment,

¹⁵ For a medievalist such as D.W. Robertson, the need to preserve the cultural wholeness (and hence alterity) of the Middle Ages from what he apparently sees as “the historical imperialism of modern readers,” to borrow Dinshaw’s trenchant phrase (1989:32), is paramount. Robertson succinctly makes the case for his view when he argues that “if we are to compose valid criticism of works produced in earlier stylistic periods, we must do so in terms of conventions established at a time contemporary with the works themselves. If we fail to do so, we shall miss the integrity of the works we study, not to mention their significance, frequently profound, for their original audience” (1980:82).

¹⁶ Such differences can also be found within the medieval period itself. As Lerer has recently argued, fifteenth-century “scribal manipulations” of Chaucer’s texts are important indicators of the different “critical presuppositions and literary tastes” (1988:311) Chaucer’s fifteenth-century readers brought to bear on his poetry. See further Lerer 1990 and espec. 1993.

¹⁷ See Olsen 1986 and 1988 for an excellent survey of the many significant contributions made by oral-formulaicists.

¹⁸ See Foley 1990 for the most detailed discussion to date of the mechanics of the oral tradition and Foley (espec. 1991a) for an illuminating and provocative discussion of the aesthetics of oral and oral-derived poetry.

traditional oral poetics differs most sharply from the literate poetics posited by contemporary affective criticism. That a text may contain some sort of controlling structure that must first be uncovered before proceeding with the business of interpretation simply does not accord with the highly subjective endeavor that is contemporary affective criticism: indeed, the extraordinary variety of responses post-medieval texts engender has been taken as proof positive that they contain no “formal encoding” for “executing interpretive strategies” (Fish 1980:173). Accordingly, the affective dynamics of such texts depends solely upon the idiosyncrasies of those who in reading them, write them. Foley, in distinguishing between the “conferred” meaning of a literate text and the “inherent” meaning of a traditional text, offers a subtle but important corrective to this view. In literary texts, he explains, “the author (not a tradition) *confers* meaning on his or her creation ... and is responsible not only for what the text encodes, but also how the encoding takes place” (1991a:8). Acknowledging that authors encode their works does not threaten the privileged position of the reader; readers will still (necessarily) rewrite the texts that “their interpretive strategies demand and call into being” (Fish 1980:171), but texts created outside a strong, controlling tradition will contain highly idiosyncratic codes and will, not surprisingly, give rise to highly idiosyncratic responses.¹⁹ The “inherent” meaning of an oral traditional text depends, in contrast, “primarily on elements and strategies that were in place long before the execution of the present version or text, long before the present nominal author learned the inherited craft” (Foley 1991a:8). The reception of a text composed within a literate poetics mirrors the text’s production in that both are private and highly idiosyncratic acts. The reception of an oral traditional text—and here it matters little whether we are considering its intended audience’s aural reception or the ocular reception of contemporary readers who have attempted to steep themselves in the tradition—is far different because “the present performance text is always half-immersed in and enriched by a world of resonance that is generally outside the experience of readers who are not acculturated to that tradition” (Parks 1994:157). The traditional narrative structures so important to the composition of oral traditional texts may serve to guide

¹⁹ See further Fish’s comments on the nature and function of what he labels “interpretive communities” (1980:171-73) and Stock’s notion of “textual communities” (1983:88-240).

(or, more extremely, determine) response, but they in no way shackle us to a certain interpretation or point to some sort of objective, monolithic, and ultimately recoverable meaning: examining a text's oral poetics will reveal *how* that text means without in any way delimiting *what* it means.

In what follows, I will attempt to illuminate the position sketched above by arguing that the dragon episode in *Beowulf* possesses a significant, resonant, and largely overlooked oral traditional dimension that can only be recovered by reading the narrative from the inside out;²⁰ given the highly metonymic nature of oral and oral-derived poetry, considering the microstructure of the situation-specific narrative (the *pars* in Foley's terms) will enable us to glimpse the macrostructure of the tradition (the *toto*) that underlies and (in)forms the episode as a whole. The narrative structures that form the core of the following discussion and the narrative techniques upon which they depend can be appreciated by ear or eye—otherwise at this great remove from the English oral tradition modern scholars would never be able to uncover them—but we need to keep in mind that when “we ‘read’ or interpret any traditional performance or text with attention to the metonymic meaning it necessarily summons, we are, in effect, recontextualizing that work, bridging Iserian ‘gaps of indeterminacy’ . . . , reaffirming contiguity with other performances or texts, or, better, with the ever-immanent tradition itself” (Foley 1991b:43). By coupling affective criticism's focus upon the active recipient's response with oral theory's attention to the tradition that (in)forms medieval English oral and oral-derived poetry, I hope to recontextualize *Beowulf*'s fight with the dragon within its “ever-immanent tradition” and thus enable us to hear once again its traditional resonance. My internally focused discussion of *Beowulf* will be supplemented and necessarily balanced by an external comparison with the late twelfth-century *Brut* that seems to confirm the dragon episode's oral traditional foundation and in so doing also sheds important light on the continued influence of oral poetics in post-Conquest England.

²⁰ Without entering into the controversy that still attends the matter of *Beowulf*'s genesis, I should note that I consider the poem to be oral-derived. A detailed discussion of oral and literate poetics in post-Conquest England, the main points of which apply equally well to Anglo-Saxon England, can be found in Amodio 1994.

II

The dragon episode in *Beowulf* occupies fully the final third of the poem and has been described as the “loftiest and most magnificent [section] of the poem” (Niles 1979:927). While serving as the locus for a great many critical studies,²¹ its traditional dimension (its “traditional referentiality” in Foley’s terms) has remained almost entirely unnoticed.²² Its diction and lexicon place this episode squarely within the tradition of Old English oral-derived poetry,²³ but its narrative singularity has effectively obscured the equally traditional nature of its story-pattern.²⁴

Foley has recently opened a window onto this problem by uncovering some important structural similarities among the poem’s three monster fights that have led him to posit that all three fights conform to a story-pattern that he labels “the Battle with the Monster.” The chief constituent motifs of this pattern are “Arming, a *Beot* (or verbal contract), the monster’s Approach, the Death of a Substitute, and the Engagement itself” (1991a:233). While the three monstrous encounters that constitute *Beowulf*’s narrative spine undoubtedly follow the pattern Foley outlines, the dragon fight’s affective dynamics and narrative resonance distance it from the fights against Grendel and Grendel’s mother and suggest that it results from a discrete narrative pattern. The first evidence of the dragon fight’s distinct story-pattern emerges from a consideration of the large narrative contexts within which each of the fights occurs.

Beowulf’s fights with Grendel and Grendel’s mother are firmly grounded within the carefully circumscribed feud ethos so central to the

²¹ The literature devoted to the dragon fight either directly or indirectly is far too voluminous to list. Of particular note are Tolkien 1936; Gang 1952; Bonjour 1953; Rogers 1955; DuBois 1957; Sisam 1958; Chadwick 1959; Leyerle 1965; Scheps 1974-75; Niles 1979; Brown 1980; and Tripp 1983.

²² While complementing Foley’s work on the dragon fight, the present study argues that it possesses a greater structural integrity and traditional weight than he assigns it.

²³ See Foley 1991a:234-35.

²⁴ Chambers long ago remarked that “of all the innumerable dragon-stories extant, there is probably not one which we can declare to be really identical with that of *Beowulf*” (1959:97).

poem and perhaps to early Germanic life.²⁵ From the outset, Grendel's actions against the Danes are viewed as violations of the Christian and social ethos with which the poem's audience were familiar. His monstrous ancestry, his unexplained hatred of the joyful human sounds emanating from the hall, and his refusal to settle blood feuds in the socially prescribed manner by paying *wergild* all fix Grendel as an outcast from the society of God and man from the moment we first see him. As a descendant of Cain, he is by birth opposed to the Christian God who orders the Anglo-Saxon world and as a monster he is by definition exiled from and opposed to the world of *humanitas*.²⁶

The feud ethos also serves to contextualize the actions of Grendel's mother: her seizing of only one man coupled with what may be her conscious and symbolic placing of his head on the "enge anpaðas" ['narrow passes'] (1410a) leading to her mere strongly indicate that she attacks Heorot to avenge her son's death, a point the poet makes explicit.²⁷ Through her actions she shifts the terms of the feud and further aligns them with human actions: what had before been broadly construed as a feud between humans and non-humans suddenly takes on a wholly human character in her desire to gain vengeance and restitution for the life of her (monstrous) son: she "wolde hyre mæg wrecan / gē feor hafað fæhðe gestæled" ['would avenge her kinsman and has carried far the feud'] (1339b-40). Her attack seems more akin to a duty-bound and socially circumscribed attempt to redress the injury done her son than an instinctual and uncontrolled outburst. For both of Beowulf's fights in Denmark, the threats posed to Danish society and the course of the hero's response are mapped out and reaffirmed through contextual signals: the terms of the feuds are clear and familiar.

In sharp contrast to the two monster fights that precede it, the dragon fight, because it lacks the Christian and social dimensions that help to

²⁵ Cf. Byock 1982 and, more recently, Miller 1983a, 1983b, and 1989. See also Kahrl 1972 on the feud in *Beowulf*.

²⁶ See Irving 1989:100-101. On the theme of exile, see Greenfield 1955. The Grendel episode, because it fits the narrative pattern of the frequently occurring and well documented theme of the hero-on-the-beach, is further grounded for the audience. For more on this theme, see especially Crowne 1960; Fry 1966 and 1967; and Renoir 1964.

²⁷ I cite Klaeber's (1950) edition of *Beowulf* throughout. Translations from *Beowulf* are mine, unless otherwise noted.

situate the fights in Denmark, thrusts us onto decidedly difficult ground. That some sort of feud is at its heart is clear, as are the roles and affiliations of the participants in it; but this feud, because it is predicated upon a theft, orients the audience neither sharply nor unproblematically. That someone enters the dragon's barrow and removes a cup is beyond dispute, but the significance of this theft remains clouded and the text offers little clarification of the thief's shadowy nature or motivation: as Theodore M. Andersson remarks, "[t]here is not enough evidence in the *Beowulf* text to reveal the details of the thief's prehistory or his status" (1984:496). The poor state of folio 179r contributes mightily to the problem of the so-called thief's status because all that can be read of the word variously emended to *þegn*, *þeow*, or, as Andersson suggests, *þeof* is its initial *þ*. But even if this philological crux were to be indisputably settled, the larger issue of securely contextualizing this act of thievery would remain.

In his study, Andersson turns with duly noted caution to Old Norse analogues as a means of explicating the theft in *Beowulf*, in large part because theft plays a surprisingly small role in the extant Old English poetry.²⁸ Bessinger and Smith 1978 lists only six occurrences of *þeof*²⁹ and these occur in five poems.³⁰ Further, none of these provide any significant parallels to *Beowulf*. Although the small size of the poetic corpus and our inability to know what has been irrecoverably lost will inevitably undermine any sort of statistical argument, the relative infrequency and demonstrable narrative marginality of thefts in Old English poetry suggest that unlike the attacks of Grendel and his mother, both of which occur within readily apprehensible frameworks, the dragon fight is from its outset not securely contextualized for the audience. When Grendel and then his mother attack Heorot, the context for their actions is known and familiar: it provides a framework for the whole host of expectations activated by their actions. Because the significance of the theft, the precise status of the one

²⁸ Interestingly, Andersson notes that Old Norse poetry similarly contains few instances of theft and comments that "[t]he *Poetic Edda* provides only two occurrences of *þjófr*" (1984:496).

²⁹ This count does not include Andersson's proposed emendation, as the Krapp-Dobbie edition, the basis for the concordance, reads *þ(eow)* at 2223b.

³⁰ The poems in which *þeof* occurs are: *Christ* (twice), *Riddle 47*, *Riddle 73*, *Maxims II*, and *Beowulf* (once each).

who takes the cup, the nature of the theft,³¹ and even “the route taken by the cup” (Andersson 1984:494) remain notoriously opaque, the dragon episode decenters the audience by evoking an unusual, perhaps non-traditional, context for receiving it.³²

Although the dragon fight’s context fails to provide a clear traditional background against which to read the ensuing narrative, the episode’s oral poetics provides clear signals, or codes (to echo Fish’s terminology), that shape the narrative and direct the audience’s response to it. The dragon’s deliberately vague description, Beowulf’s decision to fight the monster alone, and his sword Naegling’s failure constitute the story-pattern’s most salient elements. The affective signals informing all three of these constituents are highly traditional, and have all been encountered earlier in the text, but only in the dragon fight do they cohere into a tightly knit and powerful whole.

The brief and cryptic description of the dragon—the poet tells us only that it is “grimly terrible in its variegated colors” (*grimlic gry[refah]*, 3041a) and spews flames (2312b)—recalls the earlier description (or to be more precise, non-description) of Grendel. The poet calls the dragon alternately “se gæst,” which here means ‘the enemy,’ ‘the demon,’³³ a term common in the corpus of extant Old English poetry and one applied to human and inhuman foes as well, or “se wyrm,” ‘the serpent,’ another frequently used term. The principle underlying the description of both Grendel and the dragon is the same: because the poet provides little concrete detail, the audience must actively participate in the narrative process (filling in what in Iserian terms would be a significant gap of indeterminacy) by fleshing out the creatures in idiosyncratic and terrifying detail. But the similarity ends here. Grendel undergoes a steady process of familiarization

³¹ On this point see Anderson, who argues that “the intruder was blameless in regard to the manner in which he acquired the dragon’s cup” (1977:153) and Andersson, who suggests that “the removal of a single item does not contravene the laws of treasure trove” (1984:494).

³² Foley sees the dragon episode as forming part of the Battle with Monsters theme, and he would hence, I suspect, argue for a broader contextual basis for the dragon episode than I allow here.

³³ In considering this term, we should note the notorious difficulty of distinguishing *gæst* ‘enemy, demon’ from *giest* ‘guest’ and the possible irony that attends the confusion of these terms. I am indebted to John D. Niles for this insight.

as the narrative progresses; we learn his habits (and thus how to avoid death at his hands), his limitations (he seizes only thirty men at a time), and his unvarying destination and time of arrival (Heorot, on a nightly basis). Further, he lives within some sort of recognizable (if monstrous) society with his mother, who herself lives in a fire-lit hall that contains war gear (*searo*) that may well serve a decorative function. The familiarization of Grendel culminates in the public display of his body parts in Heorot. His mutilated arm is carefully scrutinized and then hung up as the central ornament in the hall, and later his severed head is ceremoniously presented to Hrothgar by Beowulf. These ritual displays of the monster's dismembered body reduce what was once an unknowable, undefinable terror to a trophy, a harmless curiosity that may elicit wonder and awe but that has been stripped of its power to terrify.³⁴

The dragon, in contrast, remains unknown and unknowable even in death. The Geats are, as Niles observes (1983:24), able to take its measure once it lies dead on the headlands near its barrow, but they make no attempt to assert their community's collective power over the monstrous other by gathering to wonder at it; rather they quickly and unceremoniously dump its carcass into the sea. The failure to reduce the dragon to a trophy may ultimately stem from the truly unfathomable nature of the monster: the dragon remains, even in death, so far outside the realm of human comprehension that the Geats cannot even attempt to bring it within their society.

Just as the dragon episode's context fails to supply an adequate basis for our reception of it, the dragon, through its unfathomable nature and actions, continually decenters the audience. In contrast to Grendel's sharply focused attacks, the dragon attacks widely and indiscriminately: "Ðā se gæst ongan glēdum spīwan, / beorht hofu bænan; byrnelēoma stōd / eldum on andan" (2312-14a) ['then the enemy began to spew flames, to burn bright dwellings; the flame rose up, terrible to men']. That its awful and immeasurable anger is not directed at any specific person or object but is to a large degree random adds greatly to the almost overwhelming air of indeterminacy that attends the dragon. Beowulf's hall is burnt, not because it has a special significance for the attacker, as Heorot does for Grendel, but

³⁴ We are not told what becomes of Grendel's head, but the speculation that it, too, was mounted on Heorot's wall as a trophy may not be entirely unfounded.

simply because it happens to be in the dragon's path.³⁵ The dragon's power cannot easily be measured by human standards and its aim is truly chilling in its scope: it does not just seek control of one hall during the night, but in the countryside surrounding its barrow it "nō ðær āht cwices / ... lāfan wolde" (2314b-15b) ['would not leave anything alive there']. Whereas Grendel mutely and perversely plays at being a *healðegn* (142a) 'hall-retainer' and hence invokes an inverted, disturbing but recognizable and ultimately rectifiable paradigm of human power, the dragon remains "implacably dedicated to the obliteration of all history" (Irving 1989:100-01), of all that is human.

Within the dynamics of the dragon episode, Beowulf's *beot* serves to orient the audience by counterbalancing the indeterminacy that marks the scene's beginning.³⁶ In telling his retainers (2532b-35a)

Nis þæt ēower sīð,
nē gemet mannes, nefn(e) mīn ānes,
þæt hē wið āglācean eofodō dāle,
eorlscype efne....

[‘This is not your adventure, nor is it the measure of any man, except mine alone, that he should fight against the awesome one, perform a heroic deed...’],

Beowulf offers a powerful articulation of the poem's familiar heroic ethos.

³⁵ In the course of arguing for the hall's centrality in the poem's metaphors, Irving suggests that Beowulf's hall was, in fact, the target of the dragon's maliciousness: "[h]aving been first deeply penetrated by the human invader, the death-world of the dragon now bulges out in its turn to invade and coil menacingly around the living world outside and to seek to destroy its heart, the most important symbol of social life, the king's hall" (1989:102). Despite this argument's obvious appeal, a random, widely destructive power is more characteristic of what Irving elsewhere in the same study labels the "world of *draconitas*" (101). The opacity of a dragon's thinking and the indeterminacy of its attacks would seem to add greatly to its terrible aspect from the human perspective.

³⁶ The Geatish history that occupies such a large percentage of the poem's final section serves a similar function. In reporting the Swedish-Geatish feuds, the poet attempts—but fails—to make the dragon fight comprehensible to the audience by placing it against the backdrop of human feuds. For a contrasting view, cf. Kahrl (1972), who argues for the structural and thematic equivalence of Beowulf's feud with the dragon and the Swedish-Geatish feuds.

He prefaces the fight with Grendel with a similar remark (242b-26a) and although he does not explicitly make a comparable announcement before fighting Grendel's mother, saying only "ic mē mid Hruntinge / dōm gewyrce" (1490b-91a) ['I will perform glory with Hrunting'], his syntax, in doubly stressing his role through the successive positioning of the first person pronoun and the reflexive (perhaps pleonastic) dative pronoun, subtly and forcefully establishes that he, alone, will venture into the mere.³⁷ The similarities here among these three moments result in part from a shared and very broad affective base: the hero, by setting out on his task alone, magnifies the danger of his undertaking and increases the terror and admiration which the episode elicits in the audience.

But unlike his earlier boasts,³⁸ Beowulf's *beot* in the dragon episode does not align itself neatly along the poem's narrative axis. Indeed, in its immediate narrative context, the announcement that he will fight the dragon alone is most disturbing. His approach to the battle indicates that he clearly perceives the dragon to be a foe unlike any he has ever faced; he carefully arms himself and carries a specially made iron shield instead of the more usual wooden one (2337-41a):

Heht him þā gewyrcean wīgendra hlēo
 eallīrenne, eorla dryhten,
 wīgbord wrætlic; wisse hē gearwe
 þæt him holtwudu he(lpan) ne meahte,
 lind wið līge.

['The protector of warriors, the lord of earls, commanded that a wondrous shield all of iron be made; he knew well that forest-wood would not help him, lindenwood against flame.']

Yet immediately following this display of prudence, he paradoxically refuses to allow his men to assist him in what he senses will be his most difficult battle. Were we to view this moment strictly from the microstructural perspective of the poem's narrative, we might be tempted to

³⁷ See further Mitchell 1985:§271-74 on the distinction between "necessary" and "pleonastic" datives. The unrecoverable paralinguistic features of stress and vocalization play important roles in the oral poetics of this scene.

³⁸ On the nature of the *beot* in the second monster fight, see Foley 1991a:234.

cite it as an example of Beowulf's *ignorantia*,³⁹ especially in light of his subsequent fantastic statement that he wishes he could fight the dragon bare-handed as he did Grendel (2518b-21):

Nolde ic sweord beran,
wāpen tō wyrme, gif ic wiste hū
wið ðām āglācan elles meahte
gylpe wiðgrīpan, swa ic giō wið Grendle dyde....

[‘I would not bear a sword, a weapon against the serpent, if I knew how else I might wrestle against the awesome one to my honor, as I formerly did against Grendel...’]

He immediately offers a reassuringly accurate assessment of the situation—“ic ðær heaðufýres hātes wēne, / [o]reðes ond attres; forðon ic mē on hafu / bord on byrnan” (2522a-24a) [‘there I expect hot battle-fire, breath and poison; therefore I have on me shield and mail-shirt’]—but the inappropriateness of his former statement lingers. At the end of his long and storied life, Beowulf seems to grasp only imperfectly what may well be one of the basic lessons of martial life, namely that “[h]eroic existence is a series of *increasingly difficult* skirmishes in the one long battle” (Irving 1968:217; emphasis mine). Commissioning the metal shield is Beowulf’s sole concession to the dragon’s enormous power and his own advanced age and necessarily diminished physical capacity; in all other regards he behaves as if he were going to face Grendel, Grendel’s mother, or some other foe whose power he is more likely to match.

In identifying the role Beowulf’s *beot* plays within the “Battle with the Monster” story-pattern, Foley touches on an important aspect of the scene’s oral poetics.⁴⁰ But if we are to align fully the episode’s narrative and traditional axes, we need to recognize that the *beot* comprises, along with the failure of Naegling, the very heart of the episode’s affective

³⁹ Kaske (1968) offers a far different reading of this decision. To him, the dragon fight “is a brilliant device for presenting in a single action not only Beowulf’s final display of his kingly *fortitudo*, but also his development and his ultimate preservation of personal and kingly *sapientia*” (24). See also Kaske 1958:297.

⁴⁰ However, Foley does not attempt to account for the dragon episode’s full traditional resonance; his main concern is with demonstrating the traditional structure of the story-pattern he sees underlying it (1991a:232 and note 89).

dynamics. When the greatest hero alive, despite his advanced age and diminished physical capacities, resolves to face alone another severe, monstrous threat to a kingdom, as he had successfully done in his youth, the audience, privileged in their knowledge of the dragon's power and intentions and acutely aware of Beowulf's age and position within the kingdom, find themselves exquisitely suspended between powerful and conflicting emotions. Beowulf's decision increases the audience's fear and admiration exponentially as their desire to have the dragon's threat eradicated clashes with their attachment to and perhaps even identification with Beowulf, especially since the hero's death in the approaching battle has been forecast from the scene's outset.⁴¹

In contrast, the boasts that Beowulf makes in Denmark must be read in light of his youth and relative inexperience, and are, accordingly, far less resonant than his final one. He is a warrior in whom, early on at least, *fortitudo* far outweighs *sapientia*.⁴² He arrives at the Danish court eager to make a name for himself and valiantly (if perhaps foolishly) vows to engage singlehandedly and unarmed the monster that has been ravaging Heorot for the last twelve years.⁴³ Within the context of the first half of the poem, Beowulf's decision to fight Grendel derives unproblematically from the poem's traditional heroic ethos; ridding Denmark of Grendel would certainly enhance the reputation of the fledgling monster-fighter, and destroying the awful "shadow-goer" (*sceadugenga*) unarmed and unassisted would bring him even greater glory. He responds swiftly—almost as a matter of reflex—to the challenge Hrothgar lays at his feet following the

⁴¹ Such forecasts of Beowulf's death do not affect the episode's tension because, as Brodeur argues (1959:89), "[s]uspense can be maintained without withholding all knowledge of an action's outcome until the final moment; it resides in the degree and quality of emotional tension imposed upon the listener in the effective prolongation of the conflict between fear and hope."

⁴² For a fuller discussion of these terms and an important consideration of their role in *Beowulf*, see Kaske 1958.

⁴³ Within the poem, only Unferth voices any concern over Beowulf's past behavior and his announced plan of attack against Grendel. Long a disputed character, Unferth has recently come under reconsideration by Irving (1989:36-47), who persuasively argues against the various received opinions of Hrothgar's *pyle* and suggests that in accusing Beowulf of coming to their aid "for foolish pride" (*for dolgilpe*) and "for arrogance" (*for wlenco*), Unferth simply voices the unarticulated but real doubts of the collected Danes and thus serves as a sort of "Everydane."

attack of Grendel's mother for very similar reasons.⁴⁴ Although it plays a far less significant role in the oral poetics of the story pattern, the desire for fame figures in his final *beot* and supplies an important traditional link with the other boasts.

The failure of his sword Naegling, in contrast, does not appear to fit into any sort of traditional pattern, but rather appears to be the culmination of Beowulf's highly idiosyncratic inability to wield weapons successfully. In a comment meant perhaps to illuminate this striking aspect of Beowulf's character, the *Beowulf*-poet explains that the hero was simply too powerful for man-made weapons (2684b-87):⁴⁵

wæs sīo hond tō strong,
 sē ðe mēca gehwane, mīne gefrāge,
 swenge ofersōhte, þonne hē tō sæcce bær
 wāpen wund[r]um heard; næs him wihte ðē sēl.

[‘the hand was too strong, as I have heard, which with its stroke severely tested every blade, when he bore to battle the weapon hardened by wounds; he was none the better for it.’]

There is no doubt that Beowulf possesses tremendous power. In the course of the narrative we witness him performing several deeds requiring almost superhuman physical ability, performances supplemented by both his own and other reports of his prowess, and he is, by all accounts, a remarkable physical specimen: the Danish coastguard most tellingly remarks to the newly arrived troop of Geats that he “Nǣfre...māran geseah / eorla ofer eorþan ðonne is ēower sum” (247b-48) [‘I never saw a bigger warrior on earth than is a certain one of you’]. But Beowulf's power does not account

⁴⁴ We should perhaps note, however, that his decision to fight Grendel's mother occurs within a somewhat more complex narrative context. In “adopt[ing] or coopt[ing] Beowulf into the new pseudo-Danish role of son and hall-guardian” (Irving 1989:44), Hrothgar situates the Geat within two of Germanic society's most important positions. In Beowulf's careful arming and acceptance of a famous, battle-tested sword we may see a tacit acknowledgment of his new position within and obligation to Danish society. But cf. Leyerle (1965:92), who argues that Beowulf's unreflective answer is “the kind of *beot* warned against in *The Wanderer* (65-72).”

⁴⁵ However, Garbáty sees the hero's strength as underlying several other notable sword failures, and he argues (1962:59) that “[t]he *Beowulf*, then, gives us the earliest stated cause for the broken or fallible sword motif.”

for the troubles he has with weapons and we should, accordingly, not allow it to form the background for Naegling's failure. Against Grendel's mother, her tough hide causes Hrunting, Beowulf's man-made weapon, to fail.⁴⁶ And against the dragon his strength plays, at best, an ancillary role in Naegling's destruction; Beowulf offers a tremendous and dramatic stroke, but the blade fails because he attacks what may well be the dragon's most heavily armored spot, its head. Wiglaf has much more success because he is positioned where he can avoid the creature's head and strike at a more vulnerable (and sword-saving) spot.

In the matter of Naegling's failure, the *Beowulf*-poet's comment that to Beowulf "þæt gifeðe ne wæs / þæt him irenna ecge mihton / helpan æt hilde; wæs sīo hond tō strong" (2682b-84) ['it was not fated that iron edges might help him in battle; (his) hand was too strong'] has been allotted a disproportionate weight. We do see two swords fail in Beowulf's hands, but in each case the extraordinary use to which the man-made weapons were put causes their failure. We can perhaps best gain perspective on Beowulf's strength by recalling that he may be related to Indo-European grip heroes, such as Heracles, who rely chiefly on their own might and not weapons when fighting.⁴⁷ There is nothing in their characters inherently inimical to the successful employment of weapons; the heroes choose to fight unarmed and they will occasionally employ swords.⁴⁸ What is often overlooked in discussions of Beowulf's strength is that it plays a crucial role in all his battles with men and monsters. For example, during his fight with Grendel's mother, Beowulf's strength, far from hindering him in any way, enables him to employ the "old giant sword" (*ealdsweord eotenisc*) he discovers in her dwelling (1559b-61):

þæt [wæs] wāpna cyst,—
 būton hit wæs mære ðonne ænig mon oðer
 to beadulace ætberan meahte....

⁴⁶ Although the text is silent on this point, a spell similar to that cast over Grendel (cf. 801b-5a) may help protect her as well; cf. Chance 1986:103. Rogers (1984) argues against the existence of the spell.

⁴⁷ Irving (1989:92-4) emphasizes the narrative importance of Beowulf's hand-grip. See Chambers 1959:62-68 and 365-81 and, more recently, Glosecki 1989:197-210 and Stitt 1992 for discussions of *Beowulf*'s connection to the "Bear's Son" folktale.

⁴⁸ Beowulf himself reports on his past success with his sword at lines 555b-57a.

[‘that was the best of weapons, except that it was bigger than any other man could bear to battle....’]

Similarly, rather than seeing his crushing of Daeghrefn as another example of his inability to use weapons, we should align our reading of this event with Beowulf’s. His dispatching of the Frankish warrior appears to be the second and final time over the course of his long martial career that he is a *handbona*, taking this unique compound, as Beowulf clearly does, in its most literal sense as “slayer with the hand.” In explicitly linking the fights with Grendel and Daeghrefn in this manner, he demonstrates his conviction that they increased his reputation in precisely the same way.

That he singles out his slaying of both Grendel and Daeghrefn as examples of his status as a *handbona* and offers no further examples or any statement that would indicate he habitually destroyed foes in such a manner strongly suggests these were isolated incidents. Indeed, Beowulf, in his assertion that his sword has served him well for many years (2499b-2502), and the poet, in labeling Naegling “iron good from old times” (*īren ārgōd*, 2586a), allude to the sword’s tried and successful past; from both these comments we can infer that Naegling is not, like the sword Chaucer’s Reeve carries, rusty from disuse. Beowulf does state that he wishes he could fight the dragon unarmed (2518 ff. cited above), but we should see this desire as being linked to the exceptional honors that such battles bestowed on him in the past instead of casting it as a (rather oblique) comment on his ability to employ weapons. Reading his remark as even a veiled admission of ineptitude creates at least one enormous problem: given the special status of swords in the poem’s heroic society, an inability to wield weapons would, by definition, exclude the greatest hero of his day from participating in an essential aspect of his heroic society.

We can, I believe, best understand the failure of Naegling by reading it in its affective context and by recognizing that it forms the emotional, if not narrative, climax of both the dragon episode and of the entire poem. As with Beowulf’s decision to fight alone, recognizing the central role that the failure of Naegling plays in the episode’s affective dynamics will permit us to disentangle it from other related moments and to perceive more clearly its traditional structure.

During the course of the dragon fight, Naegling fails not once, but twice. Its initial failure occurs in the first of Beowulf’s three encounters

with the dragon and parallels, narratively and affectively, the failure of Hrunting. Under the mere and against the dragon, the failure of a man-made weapon forces him to confront the boundaries of society's power. Beowulf compensates for society's inability to help him by first stepping momentarily outside of the realm of *humanitas* and then redefining it.⁴⁹ When Hrunting proves ineffectual against Grendel's mother, Beowulf utilizes his extraordinary power and employs the *ealdsweord eotenisc* he discovers hanging on the wall, thereby transcending the human world and entering, however briefly, the mythological world of the giants. Although he tosses the manmade blade away during the battle, when he later returns it to Unferth Beowulf appears to understand that the blade was overtaxed; he does not mention its failure but works to recuperate and reestablish its status by praising it as a *lēoflīc īren* ['precious sword'].

In the first encounter with the dragon, a manmade sword once again proves ineffective when turned against a non-human foe. However, when Naegling initially fails, no external alternative presents itself: Beowulf cannot, as he had earlier done, reach into another world for the assistance that his own society cannot provide. He seems to have arrived at the nadir of his existence; his *comitatus* has deserted him, his shield cannot long withstand the dragon's fierce onslaught, and his sword has proved useless. Once Naegling fails to penetrate the dragon's hide, Beowulf is truly stripped of all but the most elemental resource: his courage. Rather than crossing the border into another, non-human realm, he turns deep inside himself and pushes human courageousness to new heights when he reengages the dragon with a weapon that has just proved useless.

During the second of his three engagements with the dragon, Beowulf advances and strikes at its head with Naegling: "mægenstrengo slōh / hildebille, þæt hyt on heafolan stōd / nīþe genyded" (2678b-80a) ['with mighty force he struck with his battle-blade, so that, driven in a

⁴⁹ It can be argued that this pattern begins with his spurning of society in the fight with Grendel. He first strips himself of society's trappings and then seemingly becomes of a piece with the brutal, bestial, and inarticulate world Grendel occupies. The Beowulf who stands (perhaps naked) covered in blood and gore, mutely clutching the arm and shoulder he has just wrenched off his foe, certainly seems other than human. The difference between his behavior in the Grendel fight and in the other monstrous encounters is that he voluntarily and consciously rejects society from the start of the Grendel episode, whereas in the later fights he initially seeks to exploit the apparent technological advantages that society provides, only to have them fail him.

hostile manner, it stood in (the dragon's) head']. We may well question his tactics here; after all, his sword has just proved inadequate against the dragon's hide, dragons are renowned for possessing tough, bony heads, and the head of this particular poisonous, fire-breathing dragon is trebly fraught with danger.

The audience's emotional investment is at its greatest in the moments preceding Beowulf's second stroke. Having witnessed Naegling's failure and the dragon's power, they are buoyed by the hero's remarkable courage and his implicit resolution to overcome the inhuman threat facing him (and by extension them). But as the blade splinters and the hero's fortunes suddenly and irrevocably change for the worse, the audience's expectations are powerfully undercut. To emphasize the importance of the sword's failure, the poet explicitly states first that "Nægling forbærst" (2680b) ['Naegling burst'] and then immediately that "geswāc æt sæcce sweord Bīowulfes" (2681) ['Beowulf's sword failed in battle'], thus freezing the moment and prolonging its agony. At the very instant the sword fails, the tension and fear central to the episode reach their peak; all the references to Beowulf's doom that have punctuated the scene suddenly acquire an awful and inescapable reality.⁵⁰ In attacking the dragon head on with a useless sword and then finally facing the monster armed only with Naegling's shattered hilt and a "dagger" (*wall-seax*), Beowulf redefines human courage. The model for heroic behavior he offers is not suitable for everyone—Wiglaf, we must recall, chooses to strike the dragon's more vulnerable underbelly—but this in no way diminishes the gloriousness of Beowulf's gesture.⁵¹

III

To support the contention that Beowulf's fight with the dragon relies upon oral poetics, I offer as a comparand a scene from *Lazamon's Brut* that

⁵⁰ See for example the comments at lines 2510-11a and 2423b-24; see further Brodeur 1959:88-106.

⁵¹ Earl, in arguing (1991:85) that "in the last part of the poem, [*Beowulf's*] audience would probably have shifted their identification to Wiglaf, who comes to occupy the position of the faithful retainer," offers a contrasting reading of the dragon fight's affective dynamics.

bears a powerful resemblance to Beowulf's final battle. The outline of the scene is as follows: Morpidus, a hero of truly remarkable strength, goes off by himself to fight an extraordinary monster that has been harrying his country; the hero seeks out the monster and they engage in a protracted battle; during the fight, the hero pierces the monster's head with his sword; the sword breaks off at the hilt and the monster snares the hero in its jaws; at the scene's conclusion, both lie dead. Even from this sketchy outline, the striking narrative similarities of the two episodes emerge clearly. Although the library at Worcester (to which Laȝamon may have had access) appears to have contained a sizable collection of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we must be careful in positing a direct written influence on the *Brut* because, as Daniel Donoghue cautions, "[d]emonstrating that a large body of Old English alliterative verse and prose was available is not proof that Laȝamon read any part of it or used it in shaping his verse" (1990:541-42). The precise axes of this episode's transmission to Laȝamon will never be known, but because the *Brut* is generally agreed to be constructed upon two well known sources, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut*, we do have the relatively rare opportunity of observing how a medieval poet handles his sources.⁵²

With his characteristic narrative economy, Geoffrey of Monmouth tells us that

Inter hæc & alia seucie suæ gesta contigit ei infortunium quoddam quod nequitiam suam deleuit. Aduenerat namque ex partibus hibernici maris inaudite feritatis belua. quæ incolas iuxta maritima sine intermissione deuorabat. Cumque fama aures eius attigisset accessit ipse ad illam & solus cum ea congressus est. At cum omnia tela sua in illa in uanum consumpsisset. accelerauit monstrum illud & apertis faucibus ipsum uelut pisciculum deuorauit.

[‘there chanced to come a cruelty to destroy his wickedness and his iniquity; for there came out of the sea of *Iwerddon* a monster whose cruelty could never be satisfied; for wherever he went without rest he devoured man and beast. And when Morydd [Morpidus] heard this, he went out himself to fight it, but it did not prosper him, for when he had used up all his weapons,

⁵² For a more detailed discussion of the *Brut*'s oral poetics, see Amodio 1987:96-263 and 1994:13-21. Le Saux 1989 offers a thorough treatment of the *Brut*'s relationship to its sources.

the monster came upon him and swallowed him alive as a big fish gulps down a little one.’]⁵³

We can see the kernel of *Lazamon’s* account here, especially in the hero’s singlehanded engagement and the failure of his weapons, but neither of these receive significant stress in Geoffrey’s narrative. Wace, whose most immediate source was Geoffrey, offers a similarly compressed treatment of this scene. In his *Roman de Brut*, itself a primary source for the English poem, we discover that a “marine belue” (‘sea beast’)

Par les viles, lez les rivages,
Feseit granz duels e granz damages,
Homes e femes devurout,
E les bestes es champs mangout.⁵⁴

[‘Throughout the towns, along the shores,
It caused great suffering and great harm—
It devoured men and women
And ate the animals in the fields.’]

Morpidus learns of the beast’s ravagings and journeys to meet it alone (3436) with the same outcome as in the *Brut*: “Mort fu li reis” (3451) [‘the king was dead’] and “la beste si tost morut” (3461) [‘the beast had died quickly’].

By way of contrast, in the *Brut*, Morpidus’ engagement with the monster is much more fully developed:⁵⁵ in addition to the narrative details outlined above, we learn that Morpidus is “monnene strengest / of maine and of þeauwe; of alle þissere þeode” (3170-71) [‘the strongest of men of might and of thews of all this people’], that he had an unpromising birth, that he has killed seven hundred men in one battle, and that he periodically falls

⁵³ Both the Latin text of Geoffrey’s *Historia* and its English translation are from Griscom’s edition (1929:295).

⁵⁴ I cite the *Roman de Brut* from Arnold’s edition (1938:ll. 3425-28). I am indebted to Christine Reno for her help with translating Wace.

⁵⁵ Ringbom (1968:105) notes that the section in the English poem that contains the Morpidus episode shows an 84.6% increase in the number of lines over Wace’s treatment of the same material.

victim to a murderous rage (3174-77).⁵⁶ The beast is described only elliptically as “a deor swiðe sellich” (3209) [‘a very marvelous beast’], leaving us to infer its size by its killing power (3212). These and other obvious points of contact between *Beowulf* and the *Brut* point to this episode’s deep and rich oral traditional structure, the core of which emerges most clearly when we examine the affective dynamics of Morpidus’ decision to fight the monster alone and his weapons’ subsequent failure against the beast.

Just as Beowulf excuses his *comitatus* from the dragon fight, so too Morpidus commands “al his hird-folc; faren to are burȝe. / and hæhte heom þer abiden” (3222-23) [‘all his people to go to a town and to wait there’]. Despite the important distinctions between ordering a trained group of select warriors to remove themselves from an imminent battle and telling one’s subjects to protect themselves by remaining at a safe distance, the affective principle underlying both these actions remains the same: the hero substantially increases the risk at hand by undertaking the fight alone. After counseling his people to keep themselves safely removed, Morpidus, we are told “ane . . . gon riden” (3223) [‘alone . . . he began to ride’]. A similar stress on the hero’s isolation is also found on several occasions in *Beowulf*, most notably when the Geat announces to his *comitatus* (2532-34) that

Nis þæt ēower sīð,
nē gemet mannes, nefn(e) mīn ānes,
þæt hē wið āglācean eofodo dāle....

[‘This is not your adventure, nor is it the measure of any man, except mine alone, that he should fight against the awesome one...’].

moments before calling the dragon forth from its cave. When we fit the phrase “and ane he gon riden” into its larger narrative context by recalling that Morpidus is a king, that he is the strongest of men alive, and that he faces a powerful, monstrous, indeterminate foe, the full metonymic force and traditional referentiality of *ane* come into play.

The failure of Morpidus’ weapons sheds perhaps the most light on the oral poetics that informs the episode. In preparing to fight the beast, Morpidus assembles a rather impressive array of weapons (3225-27):

⁵⁶ I cite the *Brut* from Brook and Leslie’s edition (1963-78) throughout. Translations from the *Brut* are mine unless otherwise noted.

. . . a kene sweord; and enne koker fulne flan.
 enne boʒe swiðe strong; and a spere swiðe long.
 æt his sadele an æx; and æt þe oðer hælue an hond-sæx.

[a sharp sword and a quiver full of arrows, a very strong bow and a very long spear; at his saddle an ax and on the other side a dagger.]

Of these, the *æx* and the *hond-sæx*, despite recalling Beowulf's *wæll-seax*, play no part in the narrative; the bow, spear, and sword, however, are all employed during the fight and, most significantly, they all are destroyed. The spear splinters when it strikes the beast's tough hide, and in a moment sharply reminiscent of *Beowulf*, Morpιδus' sword shatters against the beast's skull (3241-43):

And þe king droh his sweord; þe him wes itase.
 and þet deor he smat a-nan; uppe þat hæued-bæn.
 þat þet sweord in deæf; and þe hilt on his hand bræc.

[And the king drew his sword when he was ready and struck that beast at once upon the head-bone so that the sword sunk in and the hilt broke in his hand.]

Just as in Beowulf's fight with the dragon, the affective stylistics of this episode depend heavily upon the dramatic destruction of the hero's weapons and each failure carries with it a deep metonymic resonance.⁵⁷

Of the three failures, that of his bow is most striking because it is not logically grounded; the spear and sword break when he employs them, but we learn simply and rather inexplicably that "Þa his flæn weoren iscoten; þa iwærd his boʒe to-broken" (3234). Donald G. Bzdyl, in his recent prose translation of the poem, renders this as "When the arrows were shot, the bow was broken" (1989:86) and thus captures only very loosely the sense of *iward* and *tobroken*. Frederic Madden's more literal translation preserves much more faithfully, if far less elegantly, both the sense of ME *wurþen* (<OE *weorþan*), "to become, to happen" and the intensive force of the

⁵⁷ A narrative imperative also informs these failures: the destruction of the spear and bow, weapons that are used from afar, forces the hero into close quarters with the beast.

verbal prefix *to-*:⁵⁸ “When his arrows were shot, then became his bow broken in pieces” (1847:I, 276). The impersonal force of *wurþen* is particularly important here because the poet ascribes no agency to Morpidus for this action.⁵⁹ He does not break his bow out of anger or frustration when the arrows do not have their desired effect; the bow simply and spontaneously shatters.

Viewed from the perspective of a literate poetics, this moment bespeaks a serious artistic and narrative breakdown since bows do not tend to self-destruct. But in its very defiance of narrative logic, the bow’s shattering emphatically demonstrates the power of the oral poetics working in this scene. Even though Laʒamon’s handling of the destruction of the hero’s weapon is in this instance illogical and inelegant, his spartan treatment allows us to see all the more clearly the affective dynamics that underlies the entire episode. Put simply, to achieve the affective level it does, this episode depends upon the failure of the hero’s weapon(s). Recalling the importance of such a failure to the episode’s oral poetics clarifies the function of this seemingly odd narrative moment: just as Naegling’s initial failure in the dragon episode prefigures its ultimate destruction (and the hero’s death), the destruction of Morpidus’ bow heightens the episode’s tension and joins with the other failures to betoken the hero’s imminent death. Although it lacks the emotional intensity and narrative resonance that Beowulf’s fight with the dragon possesses, Morpidus’ final battle is clearly constructed along similar lines.

IV

The approach sketched in the preceding pages derives from two seemingly contradictory critical practices. On the one hand, it depends upon the affective, largely subjective hermeneutics—central to much contemporary literary theory—that emphasizes the powerful role idiosyncratic readers play in forming literature. On the other hand, it relies heavily upon a structural, oral poetics that, because it contains inherent and consistent codes, would seem to inhibit the range and type of admissible

⁵⁸ On ME *wurþen* (<OE *weorþan*), see Mustanoja 1960:615-16 and Mitchell 1985:I, 267-68. On the intensive force of the verbal prefix *to-*, see Brinton 1988:206-7.

⁵⁹ See further Mitchell 1985:I, 435-36.

responses. But the paradox is more perceived than real: uncovering the role oral poetics plays in shaping the text reveals *how* the text means while leaving the interestingly vexed question of *what* it means completely and necessarily open. We can, and will, continue to dispute just what *Beowulf*, or any other text, means, but in acknowledging the oral traditional underpinnings of medieval oral-derived poetry we can begin to see more clearly both how the texts work and how those who receive them figure as their (co-)creators.⁶⁰

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