
Ring Composition and the Structure of Beowulf

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Ring Composition and the Structure of *Beowulf*

IN ORGANIZING the narrative of *Beowulf*, the poet relied heavily on *ring composition*, a chiasmic design in which the last element in a series in some way echoes the first, the next to the last the second, and so on. Often the series centers on a single kernel, which may serve as the key element, so that the design as a whole may be thought of as an *ABC . . . X . . . CBA* pattern capable of indefinite expansion. Ring composition has been shown to be a basic structuring device in early Greek literature, the Old Testament Jacob cycle, Old French epic poetry, and traditional British balladry.¹ For a small-scale example we can turn to the *Iliad*. While the Homeric simile is regularly framed by the two connectives *ὡς . . . ὡς*, the following simile achieves a more complex symmetry:

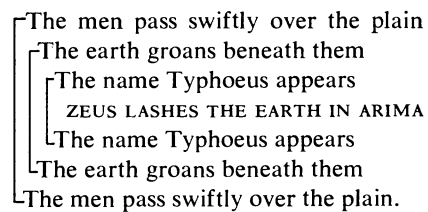
οἱ δ' ἄρ' ἴσαν ὡς εἴ τε πυρὶ χθὼν πᾶσα νέμοιτο·
 γαῖα δ' ὑπεστενάχιζε Διὶ ὡς τερπικεραύνῳ
 χροομένῳ, ὅτε τ' ἀμφὶ Τυφωεῖ γαίαν ἰμάσση
 εἰν Ἀρίμοις, ὅθι φασὶ Τυφωέος ἔμμεναι εἰνᾶς·
 ὡς ἄρα τῶν ὑπὸ ποσσὶ μέγα στεναχίζετο γαῖα
 ἐρχομένων· μάλα δ' ὄκα διέπρησσαν πεδίοιο.

So the men went, as if the whole earth were being consumed by fire; and the earth groaned beneath them, as when Zeus the Thunderer lashes the earth about Typhoeus in anger, in Arima, where Typhoeus is said to lie—so greatly did the earth groan beneath the feet of the men as they walked, and swiftly they passed over the plain. (*Iliad* II.780–85)²

In these lines, which describe the advance of the Greek host toward Troy, the poet proceeds from the immediate narrative event (the passing of the soldiers over the plain) to a legend that is said to correspond to it (the legend of Zeus's punishment of the monster Typhoeus), then back again to the event in progress. The kernel of the passage is the lashing of the earth by Zeus in Arima. The next element outward is the proper name Typhoeus, which occurs in a differ-

ent inflection but in an identical metrical position in lines 782 (“Τυφωεῖ”) and 783 (“Τυφωέος”). Then we find the phrase “the earth groaned beneath [them],” which occurs both at the beginning of line 781 (“γαῖα δ' ὑπεστενάχιζε”) and, in a mirror image, at the end of line 784 (“ὑπὸ . . . στεναχίζετο γαῖα”). The passage begins and ends with a description of the men's physical progress over the plain. A diagram will make these relationships more clear.

Diagram 1



The simile thus is built up into an *ABCDCBA* structure. It is adorned by the two verbal “rhymes” “Τυφωεῖ . . . Τυφωέος” and “γαῖα δ' ὑπεστενάχιζε . . . ὑπὸ . . . στεναχίζετο γαῖα,” in addition to the “rhyme” “ὡς . . . ὡς” with which it begins and ends.

A chiasmic technique akin to ring composition of this sort has also been observed in Old English poetry, although under a different name. In her illuminating study of the rhetorical patterns used by Old English poets in extended verse paragraphs, Adeline Courtney Bartlett cites a number of passages that are organized according to what she calls an “envelope” pattern, a pattern in which the same word, phrase, or idea both begins and ends the passage.³ A good example of ring composition based on a verbal “envelope” (although not an example cited by Bartlett) occurs early in *Beowulf*, in the lines that tell of the coming of Scyld's son, Beowulf (or *Beow*, as he is called in the genealogies):

Ðæm eafera wæs æfter cenned
 geong in geardum þone God sende
 folce to frofre; fyrenðearfe ongeat
 þe hie ær drugon aldrlease
 lange hwile; him þæs Liffrea,
 wuldres Wealdend woroldare forgeaf,
 Beowulf wæs breme —blæd wide sprang—
 Scyldes eafera Scedelandum in.

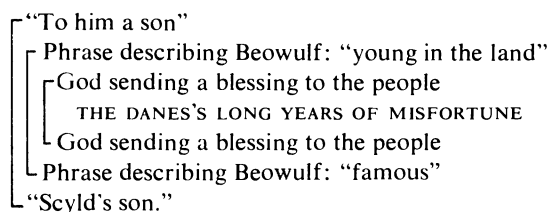
To him in time a son was born,
 young in the land, whom God sent
 as a comfort to the people; He understood the
 dire need

they had suffered earlier, lacking a king
 for a long time. Therefore the Lord of life,
 Ruler of glory, granted them worldly grace.
 Beowulf was famous, his name rang widely,
 Scyld's son, in the lands of the North.

(ll. 12–19)⁴

This self-contained verse paragraph clearly is framed by the word “son” ‘eafera.’ Less obviously it is built up not only as an envelope but as a ring. The second element in the ring is a phrase descriptive of Scyld’s son, Beowulf: first he is said to be “young in the land” ‘geong in geardum’ (l. 13a), then he is described as “famous” ‘brema’ (l. 18a). Third is the equivalent of the phrase “God sent him as a blessing to the people” ‘þone God sende . . .’ (ll. 13b–14a) and ‘him þæs Liffrea . . .’ (ll. 16b–17). The kernel of the passage is the reference to the Danes’s long years of misery before the coming of Scyld (ll. 14b–16a). The structure is shown in Diagram 2.

Diagram 2



As in the example from the *Iliad*, the poet uses ring composition as a means of traveling from the immediate reality (the Danes under Scyld’s son, Beowulf) to an “other,” legendary reality, which is used as a point of comparison (the Danes in their previous years of misery), then back again to the present. Ring composition enables the poet to ease into and out of a picture

of past terrors. Just as the monster Typhoeus is “chained” between balanced links of transitional verse, the Danes’s previous sufferings are enclosed safely within the envelope of God’s mercy.

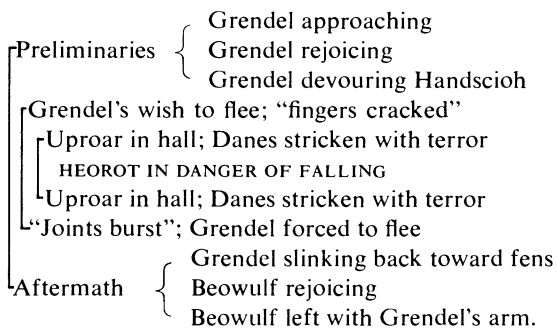
Ring composition in archaic and oral narrative poetry is by no means confined to the short verse paragraph. It may be used as a way of organizing long passages as well, even entire poems. In *Beowulf* it is a technique of major importance from beginning to end. The poet, in fact, relied so greatly on this sort of patterning that for him balance and symmetry of thought must have been almost second nature. Of course, certain instances of ring composition in the poem might be dismissed as obvious and practically inevitable. The two sea voyages, for example (ll. 205–28, 1880b–924), show symmetrical structure of a sort that could scarcely have been avoided: (A) *journey down to shore*, (B) *embarcation*, (C) *voyage across high seas*, (B) *disembarcation*, (A) *journey up from shore*.⁵ Other instances of fairly simple ring composition are identified by Bartlett and by Constance Heatt in their discussions of “double-envelope” and “triple-envelope” patterning in *Beowulf*.⁶ I should like to call attention to certain additional ways in which the *Beowulf* poet built up his narrative by means of chiasmic patterning of a kind that is neither obvious nor inevitable. The parts of the poem that I single out for attention are the episodes that tell of the midnight struggle between Beowulf and Grendel (ll. 702b–836), the subsequent feud between Beowulf and Grendel’s dam (ll. 1251–802a), and the battle many years later between Beowulf and the fire-drake (ll. 2200–3136). A close study of these episodes shows that the *Beowulf* poet used ring composition not only as a minor rhetorical device or an occasional linking tool but as a means of giving form to the most important events of his story.⁷

I. The Fight with Grendel

All the preliminary action of the poem (ll. 1–702a) leads up to a single event: the hero’s hand-to-hand struggle against the manlike monster Grendel. Before the fight begins, Grendel stands for a moment at the door of Heorot and

laughs to see his sleeping prey (“then his heart laughed” ‘þa his mod ahlog’ [l. 730b]). When the fight is over, it is Beowulf who stands at the doors exulting (“he rejoiced in the night’s work” ‘nihtweorce gefeh’ [l. 827b]). The act that initiates the fight—Grendel’s devouring of the young warrior Handscoih, even to his feet and hands (ll. 739–45a)—is balanced later by Beowulf’s similar act of brute physical assimilation in wrenching Grendel’s arm from his body. When the monster first grapples with Beowulf, the poet notes the deadly effect of Beowulf’s grip on Grendel’s hand (“his fingers cracked” ‘fingras burston’ [l. 760b]) and indicates that the ogre “wished to flee” ‘wolde . . . fleon’ (l. 755b). Toward the end of the fight the poet reverts to a similar bone-crushing image (“his joints burst” ‘burston banlocan’ [l. 818a]) and indicates that Grendel “had to flee” ‘scolde . . . fleon’ (ll. 819b–20a). At the climax the poet twice calls attention to the uproar in the hall and to the fear that grips the listening Danes (ll. 767–70, 782b–88a). All the details of the fight radiate about a single kernel, the moment of extreme violence when Heorot itself seems about to fall (ll. 771–82a).

Diagram 3



Formless as the episode might seem at first, thanks in part to a repetitive, stop-and-go narrative movement, which has been described rather generously as “lack of steady advance” (Klaeber, p. lvii), the narrative coheres. Important events align themselves into contrastive pairs that center about the moment of awesome fury when the mead-hall begins to splinter around the two antagonists, whose struggle is still unresolved.

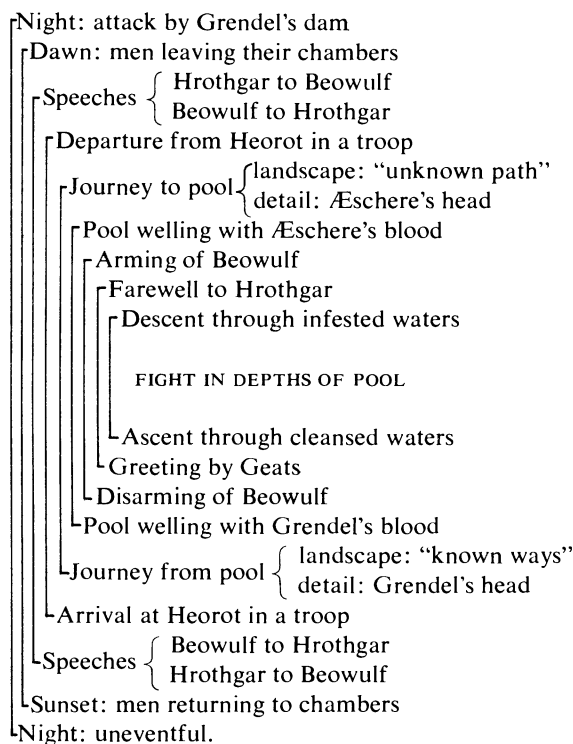
II. The Fight with Grendel’s Dam

Longer and more complex than the preceding passage is the account of the events that occur from sunset of the second day until sunset of the third day of the hero’s stay in Denmark. The episode centers on the critical fight between Beowulf and Grendel’s dam on the floor of the mysterious pool that serves as home for the monsters.

To begin the day Hrothgar, Beowulf, and their companions emerge from their bedchambers and learn of the attack made by Grendel’s dam during the night. In a long speech that is admired as one of the beauties of the poem (ll. 1321–82), Hrothgar recounts the death of his chief thane, Æschere, and describes the monsters’ pool. In a short reply Beowulf expresses his determination to avenge Æschere’s death (ll. 1383–96). Toward the end of the day these two speeches are answered by another pair, a brief address in which Beowulf reports on his success (ll. 1651–76) and Hrothgar’s famous homiletic speech on the subject of pride (ll. 1700–84). In like manner, the journey of Hrothgar, Beowulf, and their men to the pool (ll. 1399–421) is later balanced by the briefly described triumphant return of Beowulf and his men to Heorot (ll. 1632–50). On the journey out, the narrow trail taken by the men is described as an “unknown path” ‘uncuð gelad’ (l. 1410b); on the return trip, the same route has become “known ways” ‘cuþe stræte’ (l. 1634a). Each journey culminates in the image of a severed head—first Æschere’s (ll. 1417b–21), then Grendel’s (ll. 1647–50).⁸ When the Danes and Geats first come to the banks of the pool, they gaze with horror on the blood welling there, the blood of Æschere (ll. 1422–23a). After Beowulf has emerged from the mere, the poet again calls attention to the blood staining the water, now the blood of the monsters (ll. 1630b–31). Other details echo back and forth in similar fashion: the ceremonious arming of Beowulf in his helm and byrnie (ll. 1441b–54) and the swift removal of his helm and byrnie after his return (ll. 1629–30a); the hero’s solemn farewell before the fight and his comrades’ joyous greeting afterward; his descent through serpent-infested waters and his later ascent

through the same waters, now miraculously “all cleansed” ‘eal gefælsod’ (l. 1620b). From first to last, events on the third day in Denmark succeed one another, not haphazardly, but in the order imposed by a sustained narrative intelligence.

Diagram 4



Certain correspondences noted in the preceding diagram are admittedly of little consequence. If, for example, the hero survives his descent through the waters of the pool, he may be expected to swim back up; if he journeys overland from Heorot to the pool, he may be expected to return. All the same, the consistency *and the detail* with which events after the fight resonate with earlier events appear to be special characteristics of the *Beowulf* poet's style. Little patterning of this sort is to be observed, for instance, in the corresponding episode of *Grettir's Saga* (Chs. lxx–lxxvi), in which the story is nearly linear in its development. In *Beowulf*, few narrative events stand alone; most seem linked to other events in a complex network of interrelationships. Equally characteristic of the poet's

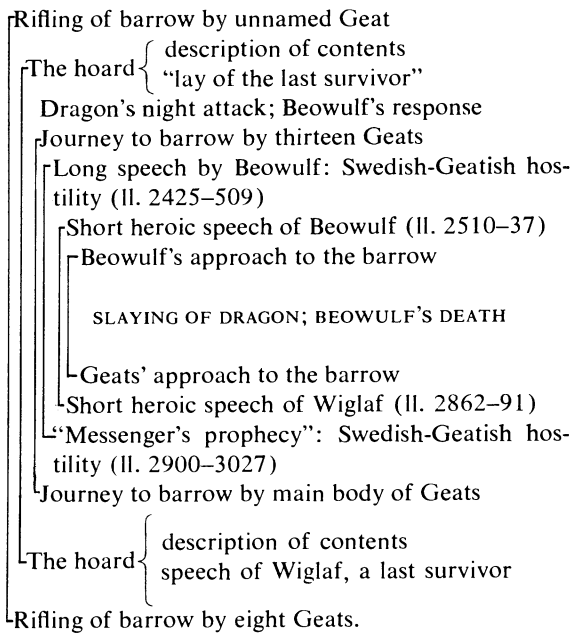
style is the way in which thesis is answered by antithesis. The horror of the second night in Heorot is answered by the calm of the third; solemn farewells are answered by joyful greetings; the once infested waters become miraculously cleansed. Rarely in *Beowulf* is an event repeated in the same terms and with the same emotional coloring. More often, one event is balanced by another that resembles it in certain respects but differs in others. Between the midnight attack of Grendel's dam and Beowulf's triumphant return from the pool, events seem clouded. Fear of the unknown hangs over all, making even familiar paths look weird and unknown. After the fight, events seem to take place in the clear light of the sun.

III. The Fight with the Dragon

Less elegant in its patterning, though in some ways still more interesting, is the third great episode, the story of the aged Beowulf's fight against the fire-drake. Apart from certain transitional lines that summarize some of the chief events of the preceding years (ll. 2200–10a, 2354b–96), this story occupies the whole of Part II of the poem up to the final fit (ll. 2200–3182). Although any structural scheme that claims to account neatly for all the events in this part of the poem would be an oversimplification, the episode does not lack form. In this section—the loftiest and most magnificent of the poem—speeches, journeys, allusions to Swedish-Geatish hostilities, and references to the splendor of the dragon's hoard are ranged in complementary pairs about the scene of the hero's final combat and death (see Diagram 5 on p. 928).

Although the fight itself and its immediate aftermath (ll. 2550–845a) are recounted in linear fashion, this kernel episode too reveals the *Beowulf* poet's tendency toward stylization and patterning. Three times the dragon attacks before Beowulf and his young kinsman Wiglaf cut him down (see ll. 2569, 2669–70, 2688); three times the wounded king speaks before he dies (ll. 2724–51, 2792b–808, 2813–16). Framing this central episode like a pair of trumpet calls are two speeches that express in brief the code of conduct on which both Beowulf and

Diagram 5



Wiglaf have based their actions. In the first of these, Beowulf addresses his comrades and kinsmen for the last time and affirms in emphatic words his intention to live and die by the heroic ideal:

Ic mid elne sceall
gold gegangan, oððe guð nimeð,
feorhbealu frecne frean eowerne!

With my daring I shall
win the gold, or cruel and deadly
battle will take your lord! (ll. 2535b-37)

The second speech is Wiglaf's. In equally emphatic words, it concludes with a reproach to the same comrades and kinsmen, men who in the meantime have been found conspicuously lacking in the stuff of heroism:

Deað bið sella
eorla gehwylcum þonne edwitlif!

Death is better
for any man than a life of shame!
(ll. 2890b-91)

Framing these two speeches, in turn, are two longer ones alluding to long-standing Swedish-

Geatish hostility, which threatens to erupt again into war. The first of these Beowulf addresses to the Geats (ll. 2425-509); the second, the "messenger's prophecy," is spoken by an unnamed Geat who is given the gloomy task of bearing the news of the fight to his countrymen (ll. 2900-3027). The dangers of war, which had seemed hypothetical, now are both real and immediate, and the messenger depicts them with grim precision:

Forðon sceall gar wasan
monig morgenceald mundum bewunden,
hæfen on handa, nalles hearpan sweg
wigend weccan, ac se wonna hrefn
fus ofer fægum fela reordian,
earne secgan, hu him æt æte speow,
þenden he wið wulf wæl reafode.

Therefore many a cold morning
the spear shall be hefted up
high in the hand. No sound of the harp
will wake the warriors, but the dark raven
will cry out eagerly over doomed men,
will call to the eagle how he fared at the feast
when he and the wolf rifled the slain.
(ll. 3021b-27)

As in the account of the second great fight, pairs of journeys frame the period of combat, but here the movement is all toward the scene of carnage and none of it away. First Beowulf sets out for the dragon's barrow with twelve chosen Geats (ll. 2401-13a); later he leaves his companions and approaches the barrow alone (ll. 2538-41). After the fight, first a small band of Geats draws near the spot where Wiglaf is trying vainly to revive Beowulf with water (ll. 2845b-52a); later the main body of Geats approaches to gaze on the dead dragon and the dead king (ll. 3030b-46).

In the episode of the dragon fight, as in other parts of the poem, ends and beginnings are intertwined. The initial account of the dragon's hoard (ll. 2231b-70a) finds a counterpart in the later description that introduces the theme of a charm or curse laid on the treasure (ll. 3047-57). In each passage the poet dwells with evident delight on the splendor of the hoard: the rings and cups plated with gold, the swords, the helms, the byrnies. After the later description, the rifling of

the barrow's treasures by eight chosen Geats (ll. 3120–36) answers to the event that set this episode in motion, the rifling of the barrow by an unknown fugitive. Even the “lay of the last survivor” (ll. 2247–66), the celebrated digression in which the last survivor of an ancient tribe is depicted in the act of bequeathing his tribe's treasures to the earth, has an analogue, Wiglaf's solemn address to his fellow Geats as they stand over their dead king (ll. 2864–91). This is the last speech in the poem, and it is heavy with the melancholy tone that has been sounded throughout this episode. Its speaker has more than a little in common with the speaker of the earlier “lay.”⁹ Wiglaf, too, is a last survivor, as Beowulf makes clear in his final speech: “You are the last of our tribe, the Wægmundings” ‘þu eart endelaf usses cynnes, / Wægmundinga’ (ll. 2813–14a). He too has lived to see the death of his former lord. He stands gazing on the same treasure that the last survivor had held so lovingly, and he buries it “as useless to men as it had been before” (l. 3168). The last survivor witnessed the breakup of a kingdom. Wiglaf fears the same fate for the Geats. Between the speech of the last survivor and Wiglaf's concluding speech, between the first rifling of the treasure and the last, there is little advance in tone. The same sense of impending doom hangs over all, and in the scene of Beowulf's death this doom becomes reality.

In the main, we may conclude, *Beowulf* consists of three major episodes of different length and complexity, each one of which shows ring patterning. The question remains, How are these three episodes articulated into a single coherent story of epic length?

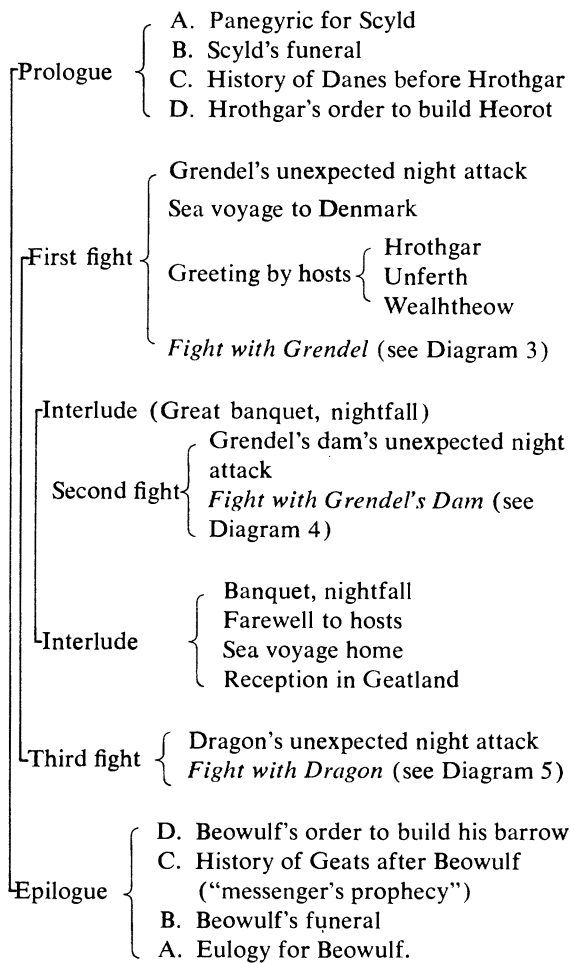
If the reader does not become lost in the many byways of the narrative, its large-scale symmetry of design will be evident: (A) *introduction*, (B) *fight with Grendel*, (C) *celebrations*, (D) *fight with Grendel's dam*, (C) *celebrations*, (B) *fight with dragon*, (A) *close*. The three great fights that constitute the main body of the poem are separated by two substantial interludes in which the hero's triumphs are celebrated with gifts, feasting, and songs and speeches alluding to legendary heroes: Sigemund and Fitela, Finn and Hengest, Heremod, Ingeld, Offa (ll. 837–1250, 1651–2176). Surrounding

the whole—enveloping it in the wraps of eternity, as it were—are passages of opening and closing that look deep into the past, in the story of Scyld, and far into the future, in the dark forebodings of the “messenger's prophecy” and in the building of a barrow for the dead king, to stand ever after as a reminder to his people (l. 2804). In the grand design as well as in its parts, events answer to one another. The poem ends where it begins, with a eulogy for a dead king. And before and after these eulogies? Stories of the kings' funerals. In a way too consistent to be the result of chance, events in the poem's gradual unfolding find a reply in events from the poem's gradual close. While these events are like one another in some ways, they are antithetical in others. Scyld is an ideal king, for example, but preeminently a king of war and conquest. Beowulf, an equally ideal king, is renowned for his keeping of the peace: of all worldly kings he is “mildest of men” ‘manna mildust’ and “most gracious to his people” ‘leodum liðost’ (ll. 3181–82). The fight with Grendel is the young Beowulf's first great test, a test that he meets with extraordinary courage and strength. The moment the hero puts his hands on Grendel, the joyful outcome of the fight is no longer in doubt. The fight with the dragon is the aged Beowulf's last test, one that he meets with almost superhuman fortitude. In this fight, the narrator's frequent and all too clear asides (ll. 2341b–44, 2419b–24, 2511a, 2589–91a, and 2725b–28) impress on the audience the dark end that is drawing near.

Diagram 6 summarizes the chief correspondences that knit the poem together. Most of them are obvious. Others, less obvious, appear with equal force when we reflect on them. Hrothgar's command to build Heorot, for example (ll. 67b–76a), has a parallel in Beowulf's request to have his barrow built (ll. 2802–08). Each edifice, adorned with gold in magnificent quantities, is to “stand high” ‘hlifade’ (l. 81b) ‘hlifian’ (l. 2805a) over the surrounding countryside, a monument to future generations of the glory of the past. Each is given a special name: “Heorot,” “Biowulfes beorh,” and each has its own special light: Heorot “shone” ‘lixte’ (l. 311a), and the barrow will be “bright” ‘beorhtne’ (l. 2803a). In fire the hall is to meet its end (ll. 82b–83a); in fire the dead

king is layed in the barrow (ll. 3137–55). Heort echoes with the song of creation (ll. 90b–98), and over the barrow is heard the lamentation of the Geats (ll. 3148b–55a).

Diagram 6



To a remarkable extent, the structure of *Beowulf* may be described in terms of a series of major and minor pairs. The two great parts of the poem, the parts that together make up Tolkien's "balance" and "opposition of ends and beginnings,"¹⁰ are the largest pair. Another contrasting pair consists of the Grendel fight and the dragon fight. Somewhat smaller in magnitude are the sea voyages to and from Denmark. Smallest of all are minute echoes of diction, such as "known ways" 'cupe strate' (l. 1634a) and "unknown path" 'uncuð gelad' (l. 1410b), echoes that ring too clear to be fortuitous. Many of

these correspondences, both great and small, converge on a single narrative event of great intensity: the hero's struggle against Grendel's dam in the depths of the monsters' pool. The choice of this event as the structural center of the epic is not casual. It is at this point in the narrative that the young hero Beowulf has his closest brush with death; he is in fact given up for dead by the Danes, who think that the blood welling to the surface of the pool is his. Insofar as Beowulf is marked out as "a mythical figure of death and resurrection," as Albert B. Lord has maintained,¹¹ it is here that he can be said to suffer symbolic death. Thereafter the hero returns to his native land to take his rightful place in society as a mature and respected adult. Readers of the *Odyssey* will note a curious and appropriate parallel between the ring structures of these two poems. As both Germain and Whitman have observed,¹² the adventure that forms the kernel of the story of Odysseus' wanderings (Bks. IX–XII) is the Nekyia, the tale of the hero's journey to the land of the dead. The corresponding event of the *Aeneid* will leap to mind at once: Book VI, Aeneas' descent to the underworld to consult the shades of the dead. Like Homer and Vergil, the *Beowulf* poet had the narrative genius to develop his story around its point of greatest mystery. In doing so, he called to mind the greatest story of Christendom as well. By repeatedly associating Grendel and his dam with the creatures of hell,¹³ he presents Beowulf's descent in terms that call to mind Christ's legendary harrowing of hell, as recounted in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus.¹⁴ Such echoes may have been unintentional, of course. There is no way of knowing if the narrator was consciously alluding to Christ's descent into hell, although he evidently drew on traditional Christian conceptions of hell, such as those underlying the description in the seventeenth Blickling homily.¹⁵ Vergilian influence in the poem is problematical,¹⁶ and direct Homeric influence can be ruled out. In developing a narrative that has points in common with certain critical parts of the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and the Christ story, the author may have been unconsciously drawing on the same age-old folk traditions (or the same psychic depths) that inspired Homer, Vergil, and the early disseminators of the Christ myth. All that

we can say with confidence is that to an audience familiar with these mythically cognate materials, such associations between *Beowulf* and other legendary heroes are an appropriate means of enriching the poem. Thanks largely to the way in which it centers on a complex of events that resonate deeply with famous stories of the past, *Beowulf* is transformed from what it might have been—a fairly straightforward tale of the deeds of a good man—into a work of superb psychological and mythic suggestiveness.

Far from having been an unskilled compiler of separate tales, the *Beowulf* poet appears to have been endowed with a keen (although always flexible) sense of narrative form. His epic develops in a leisurely manner, as events in the poem's gradual beginning eventually find their equivalents in the poem's gradual close, so that the work as a whole has the solidity and grace of a well-planned piece of architecture. *Beowulf* is no mere collection of "fabulous exploits redolent of folk-tale fancy" (Klaeber, p. xii). It is no sightless narration, nor is it a clumsy joining of two tales.¹⁷ It is a finely wrought epic poem. Its chief *materials* may be highly disparate, but in his ordering of these materials the poet shows his mastery of the art of relating a long, cohesive verse narrative.

Several important questions remain.¹⁸ What aesthetic effect would the patterning in the structure of *Beowulf* have had on an audience of Anglo-Saxons listening to the poem? And what is the aesthetic effect of such patterning on a person reading the poem today?

Assuming that the poem was composed for oral presentation,¹⁹ one might think that an audience of Anglo-Saxon monks or thanes could hardly have been cognizant of the poem's close-knit design. If the poem was recited during a single evening, how could listeners have held the Scyld episode in mind until the poet reached *Beowulf's* funeral? How or why would they be thinking of Grendel at the time of the dragon's attack? If the performance was drawn out over several sittings, the audience's perception of patterning would be yet more faint. All the same, one suspects that the patterned structure of *Beowulf* would not have been wholly without aesthetic effect. No concern is purely structural; one cannot conceive of structural phenomena in literature that are devoid of aesthetic implica-

tions. To the question of whether or not Homer's audience could possibly have caught the signs of such "fearful symmetry" in the *Iliad*, Cedric Whitman replies as follows:

The human mind is a strange organ, and one which perceives many things without conscious or articulate knowledge of them, and responds to them with emotions necessarily and appropriately vague. An audience hence might feel more symmetry than it could possibly analyze or describe. (p. 256)

An audience of Anglo-Saxons listening to a recital of *Beowulf* might well have had certain definite, though unarticulated, expectations about the proper way of conducting such an epic song. Among these may have been the expectation that in a well-wrought tale no one narrative event would stand alone; no event would be thought of as random or isolated, without antecedents or consequences. The story of the coming of Scyld, for example, might have set up certain expectations that would not have been satisfied until the singer came to tell of the passing away of *Beowulf*. The story of the young hero's rout of Grendel, a monstrous creature whose eyes blaze like fire, who has been ravaging a king's hall in midnight attacks, and who reminds one of the walking dead, might likewise have set up expectations that would not have been satisfied until the poet sang of the hero's last fight against the dragon, a more terrible creature still, whose mouth breathes fire, who has razed a royal hall in a midnight attack, and who comes with the inexorability of death itself. The probability that such expectations would have been unconscious makes them no less real.²⁰

To the modern reader—able as he is to review the text in detail, comparing event with event, speech with speech, and word with word—the poem has a readily apparent symmetry of design that exerts a clear aesthetic effect. In *Beowulf*, it would appear, human success and human failure are conceived of as an inseparable pair. As in other poems of the Anglo-Saxon corpus,²¹ joy does not occur apart from sorrow, creation apart from dissolution, human success apart from human failure. The founding of the Scylding dynasty is answered in time by the tribal dissolution facing the Geats. *Æschere's* head demands Grendel's. Heorot gives way to flames, and in its

place stands a barrow. In *Beowulf*, as Joan Blomfield has pointed out so ably, there is no simplistic development of either character or plot. In a tale such as this "the concluding affairs must be implicit in the beginning," as one is made to see "the ever-present identity of seed in fruit and fruit in seed."²² John Leyerle has put the matter more pessimistically:

The sudden reversals inherent in the structure . . . give to the whole poem a sense of transience about the world and all that is in it. . . . With each reversal the elegiac texture is tightened, reminding one of impermanence and change, extending even to the greatest of heroes, Beowulf. . . . A bright and golden age of a magnanimous man vanishes, even as it seems hardly to have begun. (pp. 14–15)

The dominant mood created by this recurrent play of joy against sorrow, creation against dis-

solution, may strike some readers as fatalistic, and it may well be; but if so, the poem's fatalism stems from a realistic understanding of the limits that bound earthly success. The *Beowulf* poet seems to have lived enough of life to appreciate the awful ease with which time and an indifferent fate blot out even 'the most glorious of human achievements. Possibly the realistic fatalism of *Beowulf* may be the melancholy of a poet who was looking back on a former heroic age whose virtues he admired intensely. Possibly—more plausibly, it seems to me—such fatalism is an innate part of the heroic view of life. Whatever the explanation, the poem has power to move, and that is its reason for being.²³

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Notes

¹ See W. A. A. van Otterlo, *Untersuchungen über Begriff, Anwendung und Entstehung der griechischen Ringkomposition*, Mededelingen der Nederlandsche Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afdeling Letterkunde, NS 7, No. 3 (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1944); "Eine merkwürdige Kompositionsform der älteren griechischen Literatur," *Mnemosyne*, 3rd ser., 12 (1944), 192–207; and *De Ringcompositie als Opbouwprincipe in de epische Gedichten van Homerus*, Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandsche Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afdeling Letterkunde, NS 51, No. 1 (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1948). Cedric Whitman develops and refines Otterlo's methods of structural analysis in his book *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 87–101, 249–84, 287–90, and the chart at the end of the book, as does Julie Haig Gaisser in "A Structural Analysis of the Digressions in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 73 (1969), 1–44. See also my note "On the Design of the Hymn to Delian Apollo," forthcoming in *Classical Journal*, 75 (1979–80). For examples of the extension of similar methods of analysis to literatures other than early Greek, see Michael Fishbane, "Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen. 25:19–35:22)," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 36 (1975), 19–32; John D. Niles, "Ring-Composition in *La Chanson de Roland* and *La Chanson de Willame*," *Olifant*, 1 (Dec. 1973), 4–12; and David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London: Routledge, 1972), pp. 87–144, 230.

² D. B. Monro, ed., *The Iliad*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963). The translation is my own.

³ Bartlett, *The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature, No. 122 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1935), pp. 9–29. Bartlett cites the following lines from *Beowulf* as exhibiting envelope patterning of a simple or complex sort: ll. 115–25, 129–93, 237–57, 491a–646a, 767–70, 837–924, 1063–162a, 1323b–29, 1384b–89, 1425–41a, 1441b–72, 1591–622, 2247–66, and (depending on the emendation "næfne" for "næs he" in l. 3074b) 3051–75. On envelope patterning, see also Constance B. Heatt, "Envelope Patterns and the Structure of *Beowulf*," *English Studies in Canada*, 1 (1975), 249–65. In developing Bartlett's mode of analysis, Heatt pays close attention to the echoing of isolated words. She thus disregards Bartlett's warning that "the mere repetition of a phrase or phrases within the space of ten or twenty or a hundred lines does not suffice to establish the presence of what is here called the Envelope pattern. The group of verses must be a real group to the mind of the reader as well as to his ear and eye" (Bartlett, p. 9). And again: "It must not be forgotten that perfect verbal agreement without content unity does not constitute an Envelope pattern. Repetition alone is, as group pattern, almost meaningless" (Bartlett, p. 24). On mere verbal echo in *Beowulf*, see J. O. Beaty, "The Echo-Word in *Beowulf* with a Note on the *Finnsburg Fragment*," *PMLA*, 49 (1934), 365–73. Another recent study of structural patterning in *Beowulf* is David R. Howlett, "Form and Genre in *Beowulf*," *Studia Neophilologica*, 46 (1974), 309–25 (esp. pp. 318–25). Howlett attempts to identify a number of examples of thematic envelopment in *Beowulf*. In his close attention to the line numeration of the text

and to the division of the text into numbered fits, he appears to be influenced by the numerological analyses of Thomas E. Hart, "Ellen: Some Tectonic Relationships in *Beowulf* and Their Formal Resemblance to Anglo-Saxon Art," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 6 (1970), 263–90, and "Tectonic Design, Formulaic Craft, and Literary Execution: The Episodes of Finn and Ingeld in *Beowulf*," *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik*, 2 (1972), 1–61. Space does not permit a review of the dangers attendant on the numerological analyses of medieval texts, but it should be borne in mind that, unlike the fit divisions, the line numeration of *Beowulf* is a modern invention. In the manuscript, as in all Old English poetic manuscripts, the lines are written not separately but continuously, like prose. In view of the lacunae in the text, furthermore, the modern lineation of the poem seems rather problematical. A more recent and more successful attempt to find structural symmetry in an Old English poem is Earl Anderson, "Cynewulf's *Elene*: Manuscript Divisions and Structural Symmetry," *Modern Philology*, 72 (1974), 111–22. One further article on this subject appeared after the present paper was completed, and I can do little more than call attention to it here: H. Ward Tonsfeldt, "Ring Structure in *Beowulf*," *Neophilologus*, 61 (1977), 443–52. Although his methods of analysis are similar to my own and to those of Hieatt and Howlett, Tonsfeldt does not cite either of their studies or my "Ring Structure in *Beowulf* and in Oral Poetry," the chapter of my doctoral dissertation on which this article is based (see "Aspects of the Oral Art of *Beowulf*: A Comparative Investigation," Diss. Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1972, Ch. v, pp. 154–90). After analyzing the ring structure of ll. 129b–49a, 237–70, 1017–168, 1885b–924, 2355–72, and 2426–512a, Tonsfeldt concludes that "the poet does not use ring structure consistently enough or determinately enough to justify any very extensive claims" (p. 452).

⁴ All references to the text of *Beowulf* are to Frederick Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed., with 1st and 2nd supps. (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1950). Diacritical marks are omitted, and all translations are my own.

⁵ For a discussion of the symmetry of the two sea voyages see my "Aspects of the Oral Art of *Beowulf*," pp. 59–60 and 167–70; Lee Carter Ramsey, "The Sea-Voyages in *Beowulf*," *Neophilologische Mitteilungen*, 72 (1971), 51–59; and Tonsfeldt, p. 445.

⁶ Bartlett, pp. 19–22; Hieatt, pp. 250–51, 254–56, 258–59, and the diagram on p. 260; and Howlett, diagram on p. 324.

⁷ It may be useful to relate my concerns in this essay to those of John Nist, "The Structure of *Beowulf*," *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters*, 43 (1958), 307–14; Thomas E. Carrigan, "Structure and Thematic Development in *Beowulf*," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 66 (1967), Sec. C, pp. 1–51; and John Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 37 (1967), 1–17. All three authors find evidence of detailed structural parallelism and balance in the poem.

Nist shows how certain themes (such as "Grendel motifs" or "details of Beowulf's life") recur in a complex and apparently meaningful sequence, which he calls "spiral" design. Carrigan analyzes the poem into a discrete number of fit groupings and shows how they balance one another thematically. In addition, he shows that one such grouping (covering the events of the dragon fight) has a similar balanced structure on a smaller scale. Leyerle points out how certain individual themes (e.g., the Frisian raid, monsters, or women as the bond of kinship) interweave with one another in a manner that he finds analogous to the interlace design characteristic of much Anglo-Saxon art. Of the three studies Leyerle's seems to me the most rewarding, and yet both his and Nist's methods of analysis are open to the objection that the recurrence of certain themes in *Beowulf* is in itself of little significance. In such a long and complex work, some themes are bound to recur. What one wants to know is, Is there a meaningful pattern to this recurrence? Leyerle would say yes, but he does not identify this pattern except in general terms. My essay might be regarded as an attempt to supplement Leyerle's case for the interlaced structure of *Beowulf* by reference to the specific structure of the hero's three great fights. From this point of view, ring composition (like parallel composition) might be looked on as one special type of interlace design.

⁸ On the interplay between Æschere's head and Grendel's, see Hieatt, p. 257, writing in response to Stanley B. Greenfield, *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* (London: Routledge, 1972), pp. 58–59.

⁹ See, in addition, Christopher Knipp, "Beowulf 2210b–2323: Repetition in the Description of the Dragon's Hoard," *Neophilologische Mitteilungen*, 73 (1972), 783, and Carrigan, p. 44. In Fig. 2 of a plate appended to the end of his essay, Carrigan diagrams his conception of the design of the dragon fight (ll. 2221–3182), with particular reference to speeches before and after the fight, to the roles of Wiglaf and of the last survivor, and to allusions to Beowulf's peaceful reign; see also Carrigan, pp. 30–49. On how the "lay of the last survivor" helps to prepare the way for the dominant mood of the end of the poem, see also Adrien Bonjour, *The Digressions in Beowulf*, Medium Ævum Monographs, No. 5 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1950), pp. 68–69.

¹⁰ J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 22 (1936), 245–95; rpt. in *The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Donald K. Fry (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 34–35.

¹¹ Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), p. 201.

¹² Gabriel Germain, *Genèse de l'Odyssée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), p. 333; Whitman, p. 288.

¹³ Grendel, for example, is introduced as a "fiend in hell" 'feond on helle' (l. 101b) and is elsewhere called by names that seem modeled on Latin terms denoting the Christian devil—"helle hæfta" (*captivus inferni*), "ealdgewinna" (*hostis antiquus*), and "feond mancynnes"

(*hostis humani generis*). During his struggle with Beowulf, Grendel wishes to flee "to seek out the throng of devils" *'secan deofla gedreag'* (l. 756a), as if his pool were to be identified with the Christian underworld. For a further discussion of the poet's association of Grendel with the Archfiend, see Marijane Osborn, "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*," *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 975–77.

¹⁴ For a tenth-century Latin version, see H. C. Kim, ed., *The Gospel of Nicodemus: Gesta Salvatoris* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1973). There is also an Old English version dating from the tenth or eleventh century: *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, ed. S. J. Crawford (Edinburgh: Hutchen, 1927). The theme of the *descensus*, which was probably widely known in Anglo-Saxon England by the early eighth century, recurs frequently in Old English devotional literature, notably in the poem known as "The Descent into Hell," which is included on fols. 119b–21b of the *Exeter Book* (see George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1936], pp. lxi–lxiii, 219–23, 356–59). We need not conclude, however, that Grendel's mere is to be regarded as a symbolic representation of hell or that Beowulf's descent into the waters is to be read as a thinly veiled allusion to Christ's harrowing of hell and to the related liturgy of baptism, as is argued independently by Allen Cabaniss in "Beowulf and the Liturgy," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 54 (1955), 195–201, and by Maurice B. McNamee, S.J., in "Beowulf—An Allegory of Salvation?" *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 59 (1960), 190–207. Such parallels as exist between the two stories fall short of the sort of precision that one would expect if *Beowulf* were a conscious allegory.

¹⁵ See Klaeber, n. to l. 1357, for the relevant passage, which is based on a Latin *Visio Pauli*.

¹⁶ Scholars who have supposed Vergilian influence in *Beowulf* have tended to concentrate their attention on *Aeneid* vi.237–42 and *Beowulf*, ll. 1357b–76a (the description of Grendel's mere); again see Klaeber, n. to l. 1357. Alan Renoir compares the artistry of the two passages without making any commitment about whether or not the *Beowulf* poet knew Vergil ("The Terror of the Dark Waters: A Note on Virgilian and Beowulfian Techniques," in Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, Harvard English Studies, No. 5 [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974], pp. 147–60). For a review of earlier scholarship and a sensitive attempt to find new evidence for Vergilian influence, see Theodore M. Andersson, "The Virgilian Heritage in *Beowulf*," Ch. iv of his *Early Epic Scenery: Homer, Virgil, and the Medieval Legacy* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 145–59.

¹⁷ For a recent revival of the analytical heresy concerning the structure of *Beowulf*, see Francis P. Magoun, Jr., "Beowulf A: A Folk-Variant," *Arv*, 14 (1958), 95–101, and "Beowulf B: A Folk-Poem on Beowulf's Death," in *Early English and Norse Studies Presented to Hugh Smith in Honour of His Sixtieth*

Birthday, ed. A. Brown and P. Foote (London: Methuen, 1963), pp. 127–40. That the action of *Beowulf* is based on two kinds of tale (the "bear's son" type and the dragon-slayer type) is beyond dispute: see Gwyn Jones, *Kings, Beasts and Heroes* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 6–19. Few modern scholars follow Magoun, however, in seeing the extant text of *Beowulf* as the work of two or three authors.

¹⁸ Certain questions must remain beyond the scope of the present inquiry. The question of the relation of the extant text of *Beowulf* to oral tradition, for example, is too complex and problematical to be entered into here. Clearly, patterning of any sort would be mnemonically useful to an oral poet or to a performer of oral poems, just as it is useful to any stage performer (whether singer, storyteller, actor, musician, or nightclub entertainer) who does not rely on a fixed text as the basis for his performance. Ring composition could serve as one elementary type of mnemonic patterning: as Whitman observes, "the oral poet, having mentioned A, B, and C, picks them up later on in the order C, B, and A, since it is natural to reconstruct a train of thought backwards" (p. 98). Whitman's conclusion that the complex ring structure of the *Iliad* marks the poem as a work of oral literature, however, does not necessarily follow. Such an argument is based on a priori reasoning rather than on a careful examination of indubitably oral texts, for oral texts recorded in the field have not been shown to exhibit complex ring structures of the same kind. Perhaps these structures exist, but the necessary fieldwork and analysis have not been done. Of the works referred to in n. 1 of this paper, for example, none (not even Buchan's ballad texts) could be proved to be exact records of oral tradition unmediated by literary hands, although all appear to have a close relation to oral tradition. Until such fieldwork and analysis are done, the presence of various sorts of ring composition in *Beowulf* may plausibly be taken as evidence that, like the *Iliad* and the *Song of Roland*, the poem shows traits that would be useful to an oral poet or performer, but further conclusions seem premature. Moreover, even polished literary works (such as *Tom Jones* and *Paradise Lost*) may show complex ring patterning, as R. G. Peterson reminds us with appropriate bibliographical citations in his outstanding essay "Critical Calculations: Measure and Symmetry in Literature," *PMLA*, 91 (1976), 367–75. A person who wished to make a case for the specifically oral character of the ring patterning of *Beowulf* would have to distinguish between the sort of patterning in this poem and the sort in, for example, *Tom Jones*.

¹⁹ That the poem was intended to be performed aloud (as opposed to being created aloud) is beyond doubt. See Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1951), passim, and Kenneth Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 1, 8–10, et passim; and note further Ruth Crosby, "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages," *Speculum*, 11 (1936), 88–110.

²⁰ In fact one need not assume that such expectations

were unconscious, although I do not wish to press the point here. An audience that had heard the same story not once but often, with variations, might have become sufficiently discerning to appreciate subtle instances of thematic echo. The *Beowulf* poet, moreover, took pains to point out how the parts of his story interrelate, as in ll. 2349b–54a, an allusion to the Grendel fight, and in l. 2521b, a direct reminiscence of the Grendel fight at the moment before Beowulf sets out to challenge the dragon.

²¹ See Herbert G. Wright, "Good and Evil; Light and

Darkness; Joy and Sorrow in *Beowulf*," *Review of English Studies*, NS 8 (1957), 1–11, and Jerome Mandel, "Contrast in Old English Poetry," *Chaucer Review*, 6 (1971), 1–13.

²² Joan Blomfield, "The Style and Structure of *Beowulf*," *Review of English Studies*, 14 (1938), 397.

²³ I should like to thank John Leyerle, Dean of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Toronto, for having read this paper sympathetically and for having made a number of suggestions for its improvement.