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Abstract

In this essay, I close read chosen lines in the Anglo Saxon poem *Beowulf* to demonstrate how Old English formulaic expression and hyperbole are used to delineate territory between the hero *Beowulf* and the King *Hrothgar*. I argue that hyperbole grants all known territory to *Beowulf*, and as a result this weakens the Old English formulaic expression typically used to assert power. However, I conclude by arguing how this possession of territory changes after *Beowulf* himself becomes king.

Beowulf Fitt XIII, Lines 856b-863:

	“Ðær wæs Beowulfes
mærðo mæned;	monig oft gecwæð
þætte suð ne norð	be sæm tweonum
ofer eormengrund	oþer nænig
under swegles begong	selra nære
rondhæbbendra,	rices wyrðra
-ne hie huru winedrihten	wiht ne logon,
glædne Hroðgar,	ac þæt wæs god cyning.”

Fitt XXXVII, Lines 2729-2737

“Nu ic suna minum	syllan wolde
guðgewædu,	þær me gifeðe swa
ænig yrfeward	after wurde
lice gelenge.	Ic ðas leode heold
fiftig wintra;	naes se folccyning,
ymbesittendra	aenig ðara,
þe mec guðwinum	gretan dorste
egesam ðeon.	Ic on earde bad
mælgescæfta,	heold min tela,”

The *God King* and the *Selra Hero*: Distribution of Territory and its Significance for Kingship in *Beowulf*

The epic hero *Beowulf* is a figure of overstatement. He is a mighty warrior whose strength and glory are recounted by everyone, to the point where his competence and

abilities are so highly elevated that we begin to consider his character in relation to that of the beloved king, Hroðgar. As the audience begins to ponder this question, the narrator makes a point to remind us, however, that Hroðgar is still the mighty one, and even Klaeber instructs us to take note of “the delicacy of feeling and the author’s unshakable respect for kingship” (Klaeber 158). While both the narrator and Klaeber may be trying to ensure Hroðgar’s supremacy, the different rhetorical devices used to describe both Beowulf and Hroðgar in these lines do not accomplish this goal. The hyperbolic language used to describe Beowulf grants him supremacy over all heaven and earth, while the understatement and formulaic expression used for Hroðgar leave the king empty-handed. While Klaeber might anxiously believe these lines function adequately in this passage, when we read Hroðgar’s pithy obsequience against the all-encompassing terms used to describe Beowulf, the attempt to engender greater respect for Hroðgar fails. Through use of hyperbole, the narrator cedes all geographic and cosmic territory to Beowulf and leaves Hroðgar with nothing to claim except for empty formulaic expression, demonstrating the ironic shift of power between king and hero.

By closely examining the language the narrator uses to explain how Beowulf’s fame has spread among the Danes, we can see what exaggerated heights his glory has reached. The narrator starts by describing Beowulf’s power in relation to the known, physical world. His statements begin specifically within the parameters of recognized geographic boundaries, saying that there is none better “suð ne norð be sǣm tveonom” (line 858). Beowulf’s prowess over the land and seas have been mapped and traveled, and moreover, Klaeber notes that the phrase “be tveonom” need not refer to only two things, “and so the expression may rather denote the seas located on the edge of the known

world” (Klaeber 165). In the following line Beowulf’s fame increases, and the narrator now grants Beowulf strength over the unknown depths and foundations of the Earth – the “eormengrund” (859). Bosworth-Toller define “eormen” as “universal, immense, or whole” (Bosworth, “Eormen”) and define “grund” as not only ground, but also as “bottom, foundation, the lowest part of anything, lowest part reached by root” (Bosworth, “Grund”). According to the narrator, Beowulf’s glory traverses the foundations of the earth and reaches its absolute deepest, unknown depths. Furthermore, this creative, polysyllabic compound takes up almost the entire line, similar to the way Beowulf is taking over and claiming all known and unknown territory. Not only is Beowulf’s power the greatest “ofer” the spacious depths of Earth but also immediately becomes the best “under the swegles begong” (line 860). Bosworth-Toller translates this phrase as “under heaven’s course,” (Bosworth, “Be-Gong”) with the word course (translated from the word “gong”) meaning a way or passage of space, as well as passage of time (Bosworth, “Gang”). With this definition, we can see that the narrator is describing Beowulf’s immense power as the best under all of heaven, covering a distance in terms of both space and time. The narrator has made a point to declare Beowulf’s strength in a way that leaves absolutely nothing within King Hroðgar’s domain. Beowulf’s power is better than any other from the north to the south, between the seas, above the deepest foundations of earth, and under all the heavens, in both spatial distance and temporal distance. The narrator has not left a single possible location unaccounted for, and this demonstrates how Beowulf’s glory is higher than any other, including that of King Hroðgar.

When the narrator begins to describe Beowulf’s glory using comparative adjectives, a direct comparison to Hroðgar is established, and this causes a tension

between the two men's achievements that will last throughout the passage. In the previous lines, the narrator describes the vast breadth of Beowulf's glory; however, with the use of comparative adjectives, the narrator now explains how Beowulf's glory surpasses that of every other hero and warrior. The first comparative adjective is "selra" in order to say that there was none better of shield-bearers than Beowulf (line 860). In these lines, the narrator declares Beowulf's superiority over all those who bear shields, literally over all other warriors. However, with the use of the second comparative adjective "wyrðra," The narrator removes Beowulf from the realm of warriors and inserts him into the realm of kings. In the verse "rices wyrðra," the narrator states that Beowulf is "more worthy" or "better worthy" of a "kingdom" (line 861). Quickly from one line to the next, Beowulf is compared to both all other warriors and all other kings, and he is considered the "wyrðra" – the more worthy. Of course, when this statement is made using this particular comparative adjective, the first king that comes to mind is Hroðgar, the beloved king of the Danes who employs young Beowulf to fight Grendel. Furthermore, if we look at the word "rondhæbbendra," we see once more the use of a polysyllabic compound, which in this case takes up the entire first verse of the line, embodying the idea that Beowulf's supremacy over all geographies and cosmos leaves no room for anyone else, even a king. The narrator has been carried away by his own rhetoric and has ranked Beowulf as the greatest over both warriors and kings, leaving Hroðgar in the shadow of the young Geatish warrior. We as the audience realize that the narrator has made a statement declaring Beowulf's supremacy over Hroðgar, and at this point Beowulf's hyperbolic praise comes to a crashing halt. The narrator realizes the assertion he has made, and he uses the remaining two lines to rectify his transgression.

In order to mediate this tension between king and hero, the narrator heaps praise on Hroðgar to remind the audience what a good ruler he is, rather than continue to praise Beowulf and establish his dominion. The narrator awkwardly cuts off mid-sentence (after “rices wyrðra”) and suddenly changes the passage’s subject to Hroðgar. He begins by saying “ne hie huru windrihten,” naming Hroðgar as their friend and lord (line 862). As stated before, Klaeber refers to this line and instructs us to take note of “the delicacy of feeling and the author’s unshakable respect for kingship” (158). However, this unshakable respect is limited when we further examine the language that the narrator is using in these two lines. Unlike the hyperbole used to describe Beowulf’s achievements and grant him claim over all territory, the narrator instead uses an example of understatement to illustrate respect for Hroðgar. The first expression he uses is “wiht ne logon,” which can translate to “did not find fault with at all” or literally “did not find fault with a *wiht*,” with the word “wiht” meaning a small weight or amount (line 862). Rather than giving Hroðgar positive, exaggerated praise similar to that lavished on Beowulf, the narrator decides instead to utilize the conventions of litotes in order to show his reverence. We see this used a second time with the formula “ac þæt wæs god cyning” (line 863). The narrator asserts that Hroðgar is indeed a good king, in response to the earlier statement of Beowulf being the most worthy of a kingdom; and he draws a parallel between the adjective “god” with its comparative form “selra” used to describe Beowulf earlier in the passage. While the narrator is using formula as an attempt to highlight Hroðgar’s glory as king, the extreme use of hyperbole used to describe Beowulf strips these two lines of their ability to function as understated praise. In comparison Hroðgar seems inferior, for how can we acknowledge the “god cyning” Hroðgar when he is placed

alongside the “selra” hero Beowulf? In fact, if we look at the words within this example of understatement, “ac þæt wæs god cyning,” we notice that almost each word in the verse is monosyllabic. When we compare these words to the polysyllabic compounds used in the previous lines, we realize that even the individual words chosen to honor Hroðgar are minimized and understated. These examples of litotes do nothing to outline Hroðgar’s territory because these lines have nothing left to give him. Furthermore, we must also read “ac þæt wæs god cyning” as an example of Old English formula; however, the narrator makes a slight alteration to the traditional formula. While “þæt wæs god cyning” should have the ability to stand alone and function as a strong declaration of Hroðgar’s complete authority, the narrator’s qualification “ac” limits the formula’s strength, and instead minimizes Hroðgar’s glory. In contrast to Beowulf’s rich, excessive language that claims all territory, the only territory left for Hroðgar is an empty piece of rhetoric used in praise of kingship. The narrator has ceded all heaven and earth to Beowulf through use of hyperbole, and he use of litotes and formula fails because there is literally nothing else left for the old king.

The relationship between hero and king is delicate, with the young hero living in his glory days and the established king living in memory of previous victories. It can be expected that an old king would exist within subtle and modest expressions of power. This may be what Klaeber is arguing, that these moments of understatement are simply humble, yet earnest assertions of dear respect. However, when these two lines are placed adjacent to the larger than life review of Beowulf and then connected with the key comparative phrase “wyrðra rices,” these lines lose their power as understated reverence, and they instead transform into moments of irony. This sense of irony occurs when we as

readers realize the narrator's inability to glorify the king, and we acknowledge the shifted power dynamic. We acknowledge that these lines do not function according to their intent, and the balance has moved out of favor with the old king, with the young hero reigning supreme.

As years quickly pass after Grendel's defeat, we see through a history of battles and tragedies that Beowulf eventually ascends the throne and rules over the Geatish nation. We as an audience now have the privilege to witness the all-mighty, epic Beowulf reign as king. As a hero, Beowulf was a larger than life warrior who managed to outshine even the beloved Danish king, Hroðgar. He was a hero most worthy of a kingdom, to whom the narrator ceded all the heavens and the earth. However, we see that while Beowulf as a hero possessed infinite geographic and cosmic territory and left Hroðgar empty-handed, as a king Beowulf's territory is completely fixed and stationary. By examining kingship through its relationship with territory, we can see Beowulf's reign is unsuccessful due to his lack of movement, expansion, and productivity.

After his fatal encounter with the dragon, Beowulf gives his final words to Wiglaf, which focus on his time as king. He tells Wiglaf, "Nu ic suna minum syllan wolde/guðgewædu þær me gifeðe swa/ænic yrfeward" (lines 2729-31). From the very beginning of Beowulf's speech, we are confronted with the fact that Beowulf has not been a productive king. Beowulf fails to produce an heir who would allow him to expand his kingdom and continue his line. Focusing on the term "yrfeward" used in line 2741, we see that Bosworth-Toller defines this word as "guardian of an inheritance, an heir, possessor of a property" ("Irfeward"). In this instance, Beowulf chooses not to use "sunu" or "bearn" as before, which would both simply refer to a child he has failed to

produce. Instead, Beowulf uses a word that highlights property, and this reinforces the loss of territory that results in not having an heir to help expand and grow his kingdom. Furthermore, if we look at the word “gifeðe,” we see that Bosworth-Toller defines this as “what is granted by fate, lot, fortune” (“Gifeðe”). Rather than seeing Beowulf the king as an active subject, we see Beowulf depicted as an object that waits for fortune to act upon him. These first lines demonstrate how the hero Beowulf, who we saw in earlier lines as active and productive, with infinite expanses of territory at his grasp, has become a king that is unproductive and has failed to produce a son and claim territory as a good king should.

Continuing with his speech, Beowulf describes his fifty-year reign by telling Wiglaf, “Ic on earde bad maelgesceafta” (2736b-2737a). By examining the nouns “earde” and “maelgesceafta” in this line, we can further demonstrate Beowulf’s unproductive and static era. Bosworth-Toller defines the word “eard” as “native soil, dwelling, or home.” However, it can also mean more specifically “land in contrast to water” or “as a firm place on Earth” (“Eard”). In contrast to the hero Beowulf’s ownership of territory “suð ne norð/be sǣm tweonum,” King Beowulf’s territory is limited to his native soil. We do not see Beowulf claim all known and unknown territory but rather a finite area that actually refuses to expand and move toward the seas. We also read in Beowulf’s speech the word “maelgesceafta” which means “that which happens at an appointed time in accordance with decrees of fate” (Bosworth, “Mǣl-Gesceaft”). However, if we break this compound into its separate words, we can see that “mǣl” refers more specifically to “a measure, fixed, suitable” (Bosworth, “Mǣl”) and “gesceaft” is translated to “that which is created or decreed by fate or destiny” (Bosworth, “Ge-Sceaft”). Therefore, these two words

demonstrate the way in which Beowulf's territory is no longer all encompassing or infinite. Instead, we see that his boundaries are fixed, measurable, and stationary. In fact, Beowulf is not in motion at all. Instead, he remains on land, fixed in an object position satisfied with whatever "suitable" amount of territory fate gave him.

Now that we have established that King Beowulf's territory has shifted from an infinite expanse to a fixed location, we can look at the verbs "bidan" and "healdan" used in these lines to further emphasize his new static condition. Bosworth-Toller gives the definition of "bidan" as "to wait, endure, continue, remain" (Bosworth, "Bidan"). Whereas the hero Beowulf traveled by land and crossed seas in order to fight water monsters and defend Heorot, King Beowulf stands still and waits. He remains on his native soil and he endures for fifty winters without any sign of expansion or productivity. The second verb "healdan," is defined as "to protect, guard, rule" or "to hold, keep, grasp, retain, restrain, confine, contain" (Bosworth, "Healdan"). In governing or "holding" his people and territory, Beowulf is literally restraining his territory and preventing movement and growth. Whereas the narrator ceded all known and unknown geographic and cosmic land boundaries to the hero Beowulf and left nothing for Hroðgar, King Beowulf does nothing to claim what the narrator granted him earlier in the poem. Furthermore, if we look at the last word in these lines, "tela," we find that Bosworth-Toller defines this adjective as "well, rightly, correctly" (Bosworth, "Tela"). We see in this last word that Beowulf as a king has lost all the hyperbolic and superlative language used earlier to describe his hero identity. Beowulf is no longer larger than life, the most powerful and most worthy of warriors and kings. While everything seems "right" and "well" during his fifty-year reign, Beowulf does not take advantage of the infinite

expanses allotted to him earlier in the poem in order to grow his kingdom and benefit his people.

If we examine kingship through its relation with territory, we discover that a king's value and utility is based on territorial growth and expansion. Growth in territory fosters community ties. With territorial expansion, halls such as Heorot can be built, which strengthen the bonds of community, even if that unity comes with the exclusion of *mearcstapas* and border dwellers that live outside its geographic boundaries. Territorial growth also produces increase in wealth and material goods, allowing kings to bestow rings and cups that ignite these community bonds and tie individuals closer together. Therefore, good kings do not stand still on land and remain on their native soil, but instead they seek to expand territory and produce heirs in order to benefit their people. This is what allowed the hero Beowulf to be "rices wyrðra," due to his ability to possess all earthly and cosmic territory, which left king Hroðgar empty handed and therefore useless. However, we see that King Beowulf's inability to produce neither heir nor territorial expansion prevents him from being the hyperbolic and glorified king we expect him to be. Rather than functioning in the realm of kings and bringing forth heirs and territorial growth, we see Beowulf revert back into the realm of heroes, choosing to fight the dragon in order to finally produce a wealth for his people.

Word Count: 2823

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