Volume 3: 2010-2011 ISSN: 2041-6776

INNERVATE
Leading Undergraduate Work in English Studies

The University of Nottingham
School of English Studies

'Inevitability is a more powerful instrument of the narrator's art than novelty or last-minute surprise, and the gratification of knowledgable expectancy is as much a challenge to the teller as it is a pleasure to the audience.' To what extent is such a view relevant to your understanding of *Beowulf* and/or any other Old English texts that you have read?

Jennifer Hien

Inevitability in Old English literature derives from the concept of 'wyrd', a prevalent feature of Anglo-Saxon culture. Wyrd is perhaps best explained through '[t]he idea of fate and the unalterable course of events in life'' and it is a prominent feature in many Old English texts, as B. J. Timmer observes: '[t]here can hardly be any doubt that the outlook on life of the Germanic peoples was fatalistic'. Having such a large stake in the lives of the Anglo-Saxons, inevitability can thus be utilised as a powerful instrument in literature.

The problem with inevitability is how the poet is to maintain suspense and engagement when the audience already know the outcome of the poem. The poet must rely on, and work from, the 'gratification of knowledgable expectancy'. The sense of doom and of events being preordained captivates the audience, and they may relish the feeling of knowing the fate of the poem's characters, whilst the hero must journey onwards and discover this for themselves. Concurrently, although the audience know the outcome, we still want the details that allow us to experience discovery, gore and emotion. Indeed, even with inevitability, one can still be shocked. The audience thus take pleasure in living vicariously through the characters - it is here that inevitability becomes a 'challenge to the teller' and the poet must employ various techniques to sustain the audience's interest. In analysing the different ways which this occurs in Old English poetry, my focus will be on *Beowulf*, with reference to *Judith* and *Genesis B.*

Each poem initially employs framing devices with which the poet can set up inevitability. For *Beowulf*, the poet casts Beowulf against two important periods in the history of the Scyldings, beginning first with a history of the tribe's legendary progenitor, Scyld Scefing. The opening passage establishes an exemplary model through Scyld Scefing and this becomes a source for parallelism between Beowulf and the warrior king:

> Oft Scyld Scefing scealbena breatum,
> feasceaft funden; he bees frOfre gebad: weox under wolcnum, weora-myndum bah
>
> There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,
> A foundling to start with he would flourish later on
> as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.

Indeed, the audience is to find Beowulf echoing the successful prowess of the warrior king as the poem develops, and it will be easy for the audience to draw comparisons between both men. As such, it is perhaps no coincidence that the sentiment of proving his worth' is also applied to Beowulf later in the poem:

> ... Hean woes la nge,
> swa hyne Geata beam god ne ne tealdon, me hyne on medo-bence micles wyrone
> Edwenden cwom
> ti r-eadigum menn ¯Lorna gehwylces.
>
> ... He had been poorly regarded for a long time, was taken by the Geats for less than he was worth but presently every affront to his deserving was reversed.
> (II. 2183b-9)

and having defeated both Grendel and Grendel's mother, he too has experienced a glorious reversal in fortune.

Having opened the poem with the accomplishments of Scyld's youth, the poet soon turns the audience to his death and it is from here that the sense of fated doom in Beowulf is catalysed. In an emotive account of Scyld's funeral, the poem evokes a tragic tone from 'hinting at a future disaster in contrast to present glory and magnificence' – and it is this that will cast a lingering shadow across the entirety of the poem. From here, inevitability is made a more powerful instrument for the audience as the destiny of Scyld Scefing's funeral ship is uncertain: 'Men ne cunnon secgan to se8e, sele-reedencle, heeled under heofenum, hwa hleeste onfeng.' ('No man can tell, / no wise man in hall or weathered veteran / knows for certain who salvaged that load', II. 50b-2). As the poem continues to subtly remind the audience of the parallels between Beowulf and Scyld, this is a scene that will 'retain a haunting presence in the mind', infiltrating the audience's engagement so effectively because of its perpetuation of inevitability.

In alluding to both longstanding glory and death, the poet immediately intimates the course of Beowulf's life and the audience is drawn in by the knowledge that sets his fate in motion. This framework is reinforced by the second history that the audience learns of: the victories of Scyld Scging's descendant, Hrothgar. As with Scyld, Hrothgar is shown to be a great warrior and king whose rule culminates in the building of Heorot Hall: 'medo-Fern mice) /13onne yldo beam fre gefranon' Ca great mead-hall / meant to be a wonder of the world forever', II. 69-70). However, the poet allows none to escape from the cruel and crushing grip of inevitability and so, Heorot must also meet a dreadful obstacle as the glorious reign of Hrothgar, worthy of the great tradition, emphasizes by contrast the sorrowful plight in which he and his people find themselves in consequence of Grendel's attacks'· Having grounded the poem in a history of glory, twice crushed before we even meet Beowulf, the poet has constructed a fateful pattern that will incite the audience's anticipation. Through such inevitability, the events in the lives of Scyld Scefing and Hrothgar will play on our minds throughout the entirety of *Beowulf* as we wait for history to repeat itself yet again.

In *Genesis B* the framing device works differently to that of *Beowulf.* The poet firmly roots the audience in the notion of loyalty and obligation: 'They were precious to God whilst they were willing to keep his holy commandments', supporting this by listing all that God has given to his angels, and Satan particularly. In his incredibly descriptive account, the poet utilises the literary technique of repetition to stress again and again the way in which Satan *should* behave and act in light of God's gifts to him:

> ... he ought to have done homage to the

> Lord, he ought to have prized his pleasure in the heavens and
> he ought to have thanked his Lord for the bounty he had
> allotted him in that existence ...
> (l.246)

Such repetition could potentially become monotonous for the audience, but the poet's emphasis effectively sets up a 'causal framework [for] ... the temptation and subsequent fall' of first Satan, and later Adam and Eve. Indeed, as Marsden notes, the story of the fall of the angels as a result of the subversive pride of Lucifer ... is not told in the Bible, and as such, the audience's interest is ignited by the suspense of the defiance that they know is to come.

The poet of *Judith* frames the poem with an allusion to God and demonstrates the heroine's 'firm faith in the Almighty' who should 'protect her against this supreme danger'. Immediately the audience is alerted to God's hand in the events to come, and gain a sense that whoever attempts to harm Judith will most likely meet their end. Indeed, this is soon confirmed when the poet points to the inevitability of such a fateful outcome, describing the Assyrians as 'doomed men' (I. 15). As with *Genesis B, Judith* is based on the biblical Book of Judith and the audience may already know the story. Thus the challenge for the poet is to ensure that the audience remain captivated by the events in the poem, and he does so by 'very freely adapting, contracting, and adding'. The poet paints a strong image of the Assyrians as a vulgar, deplorable people. The audience meet them in a state of drunken and debauched revelry, and they are described as: 'insolent and 'confederates in evil'. Their leader, Holofernes, is furthermore 'the awesome lord over evils', the villain' and 'wickedly promiscuous' (II. 15-46). Indeed, Holofernes, his people and his position – 'abhorrent to the Saviour' (I. 32) - are meticulously constructed so that the evil, heathen figure can be fiercely juxtaposed with the pure and devout Judith. By presenting the audience with a powerful 'polarisation of good and evil', the poet effectively incites the moral need for good to prevail over evil, and the audience awaits this outcome.

Having drawn the audience's attention to inevitability and provoking our anticipation, the poets then proceed to taunt the audience by utilising delaying tactics. We see this in *Beowulf,* luring Beowulfs battle with Grendel's mother. Having already baited the audience when Unferth presents Beowulf with Hrunting, a sword that is described as: 'nEtfre hit Ee t hilde ne swat manna ongum, Para 13e hit mid mundum bewand' ('It had never failed *I* the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle', II. 1460b-1), the audience may then become frustrated when Beowulf strikes Grendel's mother with Hrunting - and the sword fails to bite. We know that the sword has failed the prince in need' (I. 1525), but the poet continues to describe it in the heroic vein:

> aolode aEr fela
> hond-gemota, helm aft gesc,r,
> fages fyrd-hrEegl; Oa wEes forma sia
> deorum madme, laaet his dOrn
>
> ... It had gone through many
> hand-to-hand fights, had hewed the armour
> and the helmets of the doomed, but here at last
> the fabulous powers of that heirloom failed.
> (II. 1525b-8)

prolonging the suspenseful nature of the event. The audience must then continue to anticipate the death-wielding blow as Beowulf decides to throw away the sword and engage in hand to

hand combat with Grendel's mother instead. In what seems to be a reversal of fortune, Grendel's mother manages to overthrow the strongest of warriors' (I. 1543). However, in actuality, this appears to be a rhetorical device with which the poet can remind the audience of fate and the overarching inevitability that penetrates Beowulf:

> Haefde as forsiii5od sunu Ecgbeowes
> under gynne grund, Geata cem pa,
> nem ne him hea8o-byrne helpe gefremede,
> here-net hearde, and halig God
> gelAreold wig-sigor
>
> The son of Ecgtheow would have surely perished
> and the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth
> had the strong links and locks of his war-gear
> not helped to save him: holy God
> decided the victory
>
> (II. 1550-5a)

Indeed, in a passage where the sense of inevitability is not so obvious, Beowulf's survival being preordained is implied through the involvement of God, and is particularly stressed in the poet's use of 'nemne' ('unless' or if ... not') which is in accordance with both 'gefremede' - pertaining to his battle-corselet - and 'geweold' which pertains to God.

Finally, the audience is rewarded for their patience when Beowulf discovers a 'sige-aadig bir ('victory-blessed sword', I. 1558b). Throughout the passage the poet has repeatedly referred to discovery: 'onfunde' (I. 1497), 'ongeat' (II. 1512 and 1518), 'onfand' (I. 1522), using this to build up tension to prevent the audience from resting too comfortably on their knowledgable expectancy. But of course, the outcome of the battle is inevitable and the audience can take pleasure - at long last - in the death of Grendel's mother as Beowulf cuts through the 'fRgne flasc-homan' ['doomed house of her flesh', I. 1568).

The poet of *Judith* alludes to the death of Holofornes three times: They drank it down as doomed men ... though the great man, the awesome lord over evils, did not foresee it (I.15), 'where he was to lose his life, swiftly, within the one night' (I. 61), and 'wine-glutted men who had put the perjurer, the odious persecutor, to bed for the last time (I. 67). Yet the poet then chooses to put off the inevitable. At the crucial point when Holofernes is rendered inept in his drunken state and Judith has taken hold of a sword, Judith instead pauses to make an invocation to God - an event that does not occur in the biblical version. Judith then proceeds to list a great number of epithets about God, delaying furthermore the fateful event before she finally strikes Holofernes with the sword:

> ... frymda God and freifre gEbst /
> bearn alwaldan ... I orynesse orym ... /
>
> swegles ealdor ... I PearlmOd Peoden gumena ... /
> mihtig Dryhten, /
> torhtmOd tires brytta
>
> 'God of beginnings, Spirit of comfort, Son of the universal Rule
> ... majesty of the Trinity
> ... Lord of heaven
> ... stern-minded Prince over men
> ... mighty Lord, illustrious Dispenser of glory'

(I. 83)

delaying furthermore the fateful event before she finally strikes Holofernes with the sword. Frustratingly so, the blade does not completely cut through Holofernes's neck: 'He was not then yet dead, not quite lifeless' (I. 107), and as in *Beowulf*, the audience must wait through Judith's second attempt at his life. The tension is finally released as the sword succeeds on the second strike and the audience is met with the humorous image of Holofernes's head rolling forth on the floor.

For *Genesis B*, inevitability is invigorated by the hugely dramatic style of the poem - a subtle and psychological narrative that invests in fleshing out its characters. The poet constructs the identity of its characters through speech, and Satan in particular is given long vaunting and vengeful speeches. Much of Satan's speech is self-justifying, capitalising on heroic tradition to warrant his rebellion and vengeance:

> Peah we hine for laam awaldan agan ne moston
> rtmigan tires rIces. Nicr3 he yeah riht gedon
> j)Eet he us hmfo befEelled fyre to botme
> helle j)Etre h5tan, heofonrice benumen'
>
> ... though we were not allowed by the Ruler of all to keep it
> and to extend our realm. Yet he has not done right in having
> toppled us into the depth of the fire, into this scorching hell,
> robbed of our heavenly realm
>
> (I. 356)

Through such speech, Marsden observes that the poet 'has turned Lucifer's story into a human drama driven by psychological realism'' and indeed, through also designating long speeches to Adam and Eve, the poem becomes more appealing to the audience in its 'vivid presentation of the personalities of [these three characterW^{g}. Furthermore, the poet plays with rhetoric as the style of speech employed by Satan is typically spoken by those the audience ought to respond to favourably. This can prove problematic for the understanding of the modern reader, especially given that God himself does not speak at all in the poem. However, it is here that the contemporary audience is empowered by their knowledge – they would have known that Satan is the 'father of lies' and as such would not have believed such speeches. In this way, the manipulation and subversion of the heroic mode is used to highlight that even with such compelling arguments, the omnipotence of God overcomes Satan. Once again, inevitability impels the poet to look for interesting narrative techniques in order to maintain the engagement of the audience.

Perhaps then, one of the most interesting ways in which the *Beowulf* poet confronts the challenge of the audience's knowledgable expectancy is through his use of digressions. Many of these digressions hint at where the story is to take us, often reminding the audience of that dreaded sense of inevitability in foreshadowing the events of Beowulf's life. This can be seen in the stories of Sigemund and Heremod (II. 871-915). Of course, Sigemund's victory in slaying a dragon is a clear sign of foreboding as Beowulf himself is to contend with a dragon in his later life. The reference to Heremod at first provides a foil to Sigemund's glorious exploits, demonstrating a cautionary example of 'the dangers of arrogance and greed in a king' – however, it also serves to complicate the audience's attitude towards Beowulf in his very act of slaying the dragon.

As with Scyld Scefing, the audience is invited to draw comparisons between the three men and there is 'at the same time a parallelism and a contrast ... not devoid of a slight

dramatic irony. In regard to Sigemund, the parallel is obviously in fighting the dragon - but whilst Sigemund survives, Beowulf does not. The difficulty here stems from the reason as to why Beowulf, no longer a young warrior but king of the Geats, chooses to contend with the dragon 'knowing that it must end with his own death', and ultimately leaving his people without a leader. Heremod's example thus confronts the audience with the implication that, although his act saved his people from the dragon, Beowulf did not heed the warning of the dangers of greatness if it is not 'accompanied by magnanimity and modesty. Indeed, this is further reinforced by the poem's last words, describing Beowulf as : 'Iof-geornost' ('keenest to win fame', I. 3182). Here lies one of the greatest powers of the poem, as even though it is so substantially laced with the sense of inevitability, the poet still confounds the audience by refusing us true closure. Even in our expectance of history repeating itself - catalysed at the very beginning in the poem's allusion to Scyld Soefing - the ambiguity in what we are to make of Beowulf's last act, and in the destiny of the Geats, proves the most compelling consequence of inevitability.

In utilising inevitability and capitalising on the Anglo-Saxon belief in wyrd, poets have a powerful instrument in that the sense of doom is an unwavering feature throughout the entirety of the narrative. As such, poets must find various techniques with which to keep the audience engaged and it is here that we find characters situated within histories, heroes often challenged more than once, and the manipulation and subversion of literary traditions and established narratives. Thus, the complexities in narrative and literary tradition that may confound the modern reader's understanding of Old English texts can be eased through a comprehension of the consequences of employing inevitability, even revealing to the modern reader, where the power of the poem lies.

Bibliography

Primary
Beowulf: A New Verse Translation, ed. and trans. Seamus Heaney (London: Faber and Faber, 2007)

'Genesis B' in *Literature of the Anglo-Saxons course handbook* (Nottingham: School of English Studies, 2010-11) from *Anglo-Saxon Poetry,* 2nd ed., ed. S. A. J. Bradley (London: Everyman, 1995)

'Judith' in *Literature of the Anglo-Saxons course handbook* (Nottingham : School of English Studies, 2010-11) from *Anglo-Saxon Poetry,* 2nd ed., ed. S. A. J. Bradley (London: Everyman, 1995)

Secondary
Bonjour, A. *The Digressions in 'Beowulf'* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950)

Marsden, R. *The Cambridge Old English Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Timmer, B. J. 'Wyrd in Anglo-Saxon Prose and. Poetry', *Neophilologus,* 26 (1941), 1 Wrenn, C. L. *A Study of Old English Literature* (London: Harrap Ltd, 1983)