A Narrative Technique in *Beowulf* and Homeric Epic

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Over the last forty-seven years commentators have explicated much of the structure of *Beowulf* by investigating what is known of the techniques of oral poetry.[1] Consequently a rough consensus has been reached that the poem is "oral-derived."[2] While the study of oral techniques has firmly established the formula, theme and/or type-scene, and narrative pattern as among the tools available to the oral composer, less attention has been given to another technique of the orally composing poet: specific functions of syntax capable of delivering typical or generic effects.[3] In this essay I demonstrate the presence in *Beowulf* of a narrative technique that involves the manipulation of a specific form of syntax, a technique common in Homeric epic and which has recently received close study. I proceed to note that though both epic traditions, Homeric and Old English, apply the technique in a number of parallel contexts and type-scenes, the syntactic pattern is particularly used in one crucial context, the hero's encounter with a deadly opponent and life-threatening circumstances.

The locution under examination is an expression taking the general form of "and now *x* would have happened, had not *y* intervened," a past contrary-to-fact condition with a negated apodosis preceding the protasis. There are three such passages in *Beowulf*, 1054-58, 1550-54, and 1655-58, discussed below, all figuring in narratives describing Beowulf's encounters

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[1] For a history of the entire discipline of research on oral literature, see Foley 1988. For summaries of the work relevant to Old English, see Olsen 1986 and 1988, as well as Foley 1990:331-33, 1991:190-242, among others. The forty-seven years are from Lord's 1949 dissertation, precursor to *The Singer of Tales* (Lord 1960).

[2] On this issue, see Foley 1990:5-8 and 1991: *passim.*

[3] While there have been a few studies of syntax in *Beowulf* from an oral perspective, most have been concerned with relatively small units, smaller than that focused on in this article. See, e.g., Cassidy 1965 and Green 1971, as well as two earlier unpublished dissertations, O'Neil 1960 and Gattiker 1962 (which I have not consulted).

with Grendel or his mother. By virtue of their contextual deployment in the poem, they may be regarded as a key component in the narrative logic of those encounters. Let us first establish a context for analyzing the structure by noting its use in another oral epic tradition, Homeric epic.

In the fifth book of the *Odyssey*, as Odysseus makes his way by raft from Ogygia to Skheria, Poseidon wrecks his vessel with a violent storm, forcing Odysseus to swim the rest of the way. As the hero makes for shore, however, Skheria's rocky coast offers no easy access.   His dilemma compounded, Odysseus is now struck by a great wave resurging from Poseidon's storm (5.436-37):

> ἔνθα κε δὴ δύστηνος ὑπὲρ μόρον ὤλετ' Ὀδυσσεύς,
> εἰ μὴ ἐπιφροσύνην δῶκε γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη.

> There Odysseus would have perished, wretched, beyond fate,
> had not gray-eyed Athene given him forethought.[4]

In its syntax the passage is a past contrary-to-fact condition, with the more logical order of clauses reversed, that is, "if Athene had not given him forethought, Odysseus would have perished." In its rhetorical thrust and narrative function, however, the passage warrants further examination. Odysseus, the titular hero of the epic, can hardly be allowed to die here at this stage of the poem. Nonetheless, the narrator thrusts the possibility before the audience, if only momentarily, that Odysseus's luck may have finally run out.   Such a death would be rather ironic were Odysseus, consistently depicted by Homeric epic as a survivor, having survived ten years of mortal combat at Troy, encounters with such deadly opponents as Polyphemos, the Laistrygones, and Skylla and Kharybdis, to die a nameless death, drowned at sea. Such a death would also bring the *Odyssey* to an abrupt end, with the audience cheated of the opportunity to hear about Odysseus' most famous exploits, and with the poem's own opening claim that he would return (1.16-18) violated. However, the poet, having directed the narrative to such a forbidden juncture, neatly changes its direction through a technique occurring regularly in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.[5]

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[4] All Homeric translations are my own. All quotations from Homer are taken from the Oxford standard edition of D. B. Monro and T. W. Allen.

[5] There are 60 such passages. For a complete list, as well as reference to earlier literature on the subject, see Louden 1993:n. 5. See also Nesselrath 1992 for a synoptic view of the device in Homer and later literature through the Renaissance (though he does not consider *Beowulf*), de Jong 1987:68-81, Lang 1989, Morrison 1992a and 1992b.

If Homer does not intend to let the outcome occur, then why does he steer the story toward such a possibility in the first place?[6] For various dramatic and rhetorical effects, Homeric epic threatens a dire event, such as the premature death of a character. In each instance the poet contravenes the threatened disaster by having another character, most often a divinity,[7] intervene and change the direction of the narrative. The poet thereby affords himself a number of means of emphasis, heightening the narrative in various ways. First, such near-disasters and their resolution form seemingly natural climaxes, allowing the narrator to confer an added dramatic emphasis upon events. The reversed sequence of clauses, serving to underscore the likelihood of the looming disaster ("and Odysseus would have perished . . ."), contributes greatly to the drama the construction so naturally confers. Second, the construction is an emphatic method for changing the direction of the plot, forming a pivot. Third, it often conveys an editorial comment, positive or negative, on a particular character.

We can observe all of these effects in the Odyssean passage that began our discussion. The audience knows that, traditionally, Odysseus cannot and will not die here, though the narrative threatens. But, caught up in the onrushing events, our emotions are nonetheless engaged and we experience a brief, suspenseful climax. Affective criticism might suggest that the technique is a way of increasing an audience's fear, and thereby its engagement with the narrative.[8]

The trajectory of the plot pivots here, the passage serving to mark the juncture between different sections of the narrative. The preceding unit (5.269-434) delineates Odysseus' dangerous approach to Skheria, capped by Poseidon's tempest aimed directly at Odysseus. The subsequent section (5.438ff.), however, depicts safety for the hero and a secure approach to the river mouth, found immediately after the passage. The passage under discussion highlights, therefore, the emphatic change in fortune.

The sequence also constitutes an implicit positive editorial comment on Odysseus. In the midst of such trials he performs heroic feats of swimming and endurance, the passage illuminating qualities unique to Odysseus—that he is much-enduring, the man of many ways, and so on.

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[6] Though committed to the oral theory for the genesis of Homeric epic, I tend to think that one individual gave the plots of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* their final form. For recent argument to this effect, see Janko 1982.

[7] Deities intervene in 34 out of the 60 Homeric instances. For a complete list, see Louden 1993:n. 8.

[8] On affective criticism and *Beowulf*, see Amodio 1994.

Athena's intervention in no way reduces his stature, since he still must perform the labor required to extricate himself from this predicament.

In a recent study I adopted *pivotal contrafactual*[9] as a shorthand term for this technique, the potential of which post-Homeric classical epic, especially Greek, continues to exploit.[10] The *Aeneid*, by contrast, contains only four such passages.[11] Hence my claim that the device is especially Homeric, whether in the Homeric corpus itself or in closely derivative subsequent Greek epic. "Pivotal" refers to the structural function such passages serve in forming a pivot or hinge within contrary actions of an episode or between two episodes, while "contrafactual" refers to their syntactic shape or force. As the following analysis will argue, this is an apt name for the same structure in *Beowulf*.

Beowulf contains three passages that closely conform to Homeric pivotal contrafactuals. It is worth noting that all three passages describe the encounters between the hero and either Grendel or his mother, arguably among the poem's most memorable sequences. Let us consider them in their order of occurrence, beginning with the description of Hrothgar's reception of Beowulf after he has slain Grendel in the raid on Heorot. Though Hrothgar especially makes recompense for Handscoh, slain by Grendel, the narrator ominously stresses that more warriors would have perished, if not for Beowulf's bravery,[12]

> þone ðe Grendel ær
> mane acwealde,—   swa he hyra ma wolde,
> nefne him witig God   wyrd forstode

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[9] Louden 1993.

[10] E.g., Hesiod, *Theogony* 836; Apollonius, *Argonautica* 1.492, 1.863, 1.1298, 2.285, 2.864, 2.985, 3.74, 3.584, 4.20, 4.338, 4.639, 4.903, 4.1305, 4.1651; Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica* 1.215, 1.447, 1.689, 2.507, 3.26, 3.366, (3.571) 3.752, 4.329, 4.563, 6.570, 6.644, 7.28, 7.626, 8.152, 8.237, 8.427, 9.255, 9.403, 10.104, 11.255, 11.457, 12.93, 12.395, 14.419, 14.580.

[11] 5.232ff., 6.358ff., 10.324ff., 11.912ff. Considering that in Homer it is not unusual to encounter four pivotal contrafactuals in one book (e.g., *Iliad* 5.22, 311, 388, 679; 17.70, 319, 530, 613)—the total number found in the *Aeneid*—we appreciate how comparatively scarce are the Vergilian occurrences. Furthermore, none of the Vergilian passages are particularly crucial or pivotal in the *Aeneid*'s plot, unlike many of the Homeric instances.

[12] Lines 1054b-58. Quotations from *Beowulf* are taken from Klaeber 1950, with diacritics deleted. Translations are quoted from Raffel 1963.

ond ðæs mannes mod.   Metod eallum weold
gumena cynnes,   swa he nu git deð.

Raffel's translation accurately reflects the pivot in the sequence (1963:56):

> . . . and for the one
> Murdered by Grendel gold was carefully
> Paid. The monster would have murdered again
> And again had not God, and the hero's courage,
> Turned fate aside.

As in Homer, the passage is a past contrary-to-fact condition, with the most typical order of clauses reversed.[13] As in Homer, a conjunction, *nefne* (or its allomorphs, *nymðe* and *nemne*),[14] introduces the second clause containing the intervention and reversing the dire circumstances.

We can also observe a similar rhetorical strategy at work. Handscoh was slain by Grendel, but the sequence continues by suggesting Grendel would accomplish *further* depradations, emphasizing, as in Homeric practice, the dire event that would have transpired. As in the *Odyssey*, however, the sequence concludes with the dire circumstances averted, with Beowulf triumphing and containing the threat. Both passsages offer similar accounts of divine intervention, "nefne him witig God" as compared with "had not the gray-eyed goddess, Athena." In *Beowulf*, divine intervention is not the concrete and visual fact that it is in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Nonetheless, the intervention is clearly given credit for reversing the dire circumstances. And, as in Homer, the passage offers a climax and a pivot in the plot.

As to the specific provocation necessitating intervention, the threat of *repeated* destruction, Homeric epic offers some equivalent contexts. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* several times employ pivotal contrafactuals to break up various iterative actions. The following passage from the *Iliad* serves to illustrate the tendency (5.679-82):[15]

καί νύ κ' ἔτι πλέονας Λυκίων κτάνε δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς,
εἰ μὴ ἄρ' ὀξὺ νόησε μέγας κορυθαίολος Ἕκτωρ·

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[13] For fuller description of the syntax, and some parallel passages, see Mitchell 1985:835-38.

[14] Equivalent to Homeric εἰ μή "unless, if not, had not" or adversative ἀλλά "but," either of which may introduce the contravening action or clause.

[15] For a list of additional such passages see Louden 1993:n. 22.

βῆ δὲ διὰ προμάχων κεκορυθμένος αἴθοπι χαλκῷ,
δεῖμα φέρων Δαναοῖσι·

And now shining Odysseus would have killed yet more of the Lykians,
had not shiny-helmed Hektor sharply perceived,
and gone through the front ranks armed in bright bronze,
bringing terror to the Danaans.

In this instance a man, not a monster, threatens the continual carnage. Nonetheless, the general shape of the threat and its resolution are roughly parallel with *Beowulf* 1054b-58. Further violent acts would have occurred unless a heroic opponent intervened to contain the threat. We might compare a further instance from the *Iliad* (21.211-12):

καί νύ κ' ἔτι πλέονας κτάνε Παίονας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς,
εἰ μὴ χωσάμενος προσέφη ποταμὸς βαθυδίνης.

And now swift Achilleus would have killed yet more Paionians
had not the deep-eddying river addressed him in anger.

In these passages, as in *Beowulf* 1054b-58, deaths have already occurred, but intervention through a pivotal contrafactual prevents further fatalities. Both poetic traditions thus employ pivotal contrafactuals in similar contexts. We might further observe that the *Iliad* 21.211-12 passage occurs in a river, while most of Beowulf's exploits, particularly the victory over Grendel's mother, are similarly set in various bodies of water.[16]

The second such sequence in *Beowulf* figures prominently in the hero's fight against Grendel's mother. As many have noted, this encounter is in many respects an inversion of Beowulf's earlier encounter with Grendel in that Beowulf stalks the monster to her lair, as opposed to encountering her son in the hall.[17] Though he takes the initiative, nonetheless, in the early stages of the actual encounter Beowulf is clearly at a disadvantage. Like Beowulf himself, Grendel's mother is a powerful swimmer and has a forceful grip. Worse, because the sword given by Unferth cannot inflict any harm upon her, Beowulf's chances for victory or even survival appear slim as his opponent draws a knife on him (1550-54a):

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[16] A further Iliadic pivotal contrafactual, 21.176-79, is set on the river bank as something of a prelude to the passage discussed above (21.211-12). Both passages are elements in Achilleus' ongoing fight with the river. Recall also that the *Odyssey* passage with which we began our discussion featured that hero swimming in the sea.

[17] See, among others, Rosier 1963 and Desmond 1992:274-75.

> Hæfde ða forsiðod   sunu Ecgþeowes
> under gynne grund,   Geata cempa,
> nemne him heaðobyrne   helpe gefremede,
> herenet hearde,—   ond halig God
> geweold wigsigor.

> He'd have traveled to the bottom of the earth,
> Edgetho's son, and died there, if that shining
> woven metal had not helped—and Holy
> God, who sent him victory, gave judgment.

The essential dynamic is the same as in the earlier passage. Destruction is threatened, and would occur if not (*nemne*) for intervention linked to God. The passage is climactic and literally pivotal, for immediately afterward (1557ff.) Beowulf sees the giants' sword (that he now notices it is a consequence of the divine intervention, as 1661-64, Beowulf's own later narration of the same event, makes clear) with which he will be able to defeat Grendel's mother. The outcome is roughly similar to that of Odysseus, in the earlier discussed passage (*Odyssey* 5.436ff.), discovering safety in the river mouth immediately after Athena's intervention in the same construction. We should observe that in this instance one of the climaxes of the poem, and of Beowulf's heroic career, is signalled or prepared for by the pivotal contrafactual. Beowulf's triumph over Grendel's mother in effect ends the action of the first half of the poem, as well as lays the most immediate foundation for the subsequent events in Beowulf's life.

The sequence begins, however, by calling all of this into question in a way that is again quite parallel with our first passage from the *Odyssey* (5.436-37). The pivotal contrafactual initially threatens Beowulf's imminent death: "He'd have traveled to the bottom of the earth, / Edgetho's son, and died there" (1550-51). To threaten the protagonist's death at this juncture is to threaten the continuation of the narrative itself. Beowulf will die, to be sure, but only after having reigned as king for fifty years, and only after helping to slay the dragon that will slay him. His death against Grendel's mother, then, would be an event outside of or contrary to the tradition from which the poem itself derives. It is from such a perspective that the crucial nature of the plot pivot contained in 1550-54a might be appreciated.[18] We earlier observed, in respect to *Odyssey* 5.436-37, that Homeric epic displays a parallel tendency to have pivotal contrafactuals

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[18] The earlier sequence arguably carries a kernel of this same force in "swa he hyra ma wolde" (1055b), which implicitly suggests harm to Beowulf as well.

threaten dire events that cannot occur because they would violate the tradition.[19] Both traditions then can employ contrafactuals to step outside, if only briefly, their implied or expected boundaries—a passing metanarrative moment.

The final pivotal contrafactual in the poem is one that Beowulf himself narrates.[20] Returning to Hrothgar after his victory over Grendel's mother, he renders his own retrospective account of that exploit. As he offers Grendel's head to the king, Beowulf begins his narrative by noting that at one point he appeared to be doomed to defeat (1655-58):

> Ic þæt unsofte   ealdre gedigde,
> wigge under wætere,   weorc geneþde
> earfoðlice;   ætrihte wæs
> guð getwæfed,   nymðe mec God scylde.

> My life was almost lost, fighting for it,
> Struggling under water: I'd have been dead at once,
> and the fight finished, the she-devil victorious,
> If our Father in Heaven had not helped me.

While it is hardly surprising that Beowulf closes in on the climax of the exploit so quickly, it is somewhat surprising that he, just like the principal narrator, depicts the event using the same narrative technique. His subsequent remarks (1659-76) again underscore how crucial the moment is: only the divine intervention, highlighted both times in the pivotal contrafactuals, makes possible his victory.

The hero is threatened with death, a death that could not occur because it lies outside the traditional outline of his career. Beowulf not only survives his encounter with Grendel's mother; this triumph establishes his fame through a subsequent long life. As in Homeric epic, this particular intervention reflects positively on Beowulf, and elsewhere his success is also linked to divine aid.[21] God intervenes, implicitly, because the hero,

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[19] For discussion of this well-defined tendency, a list of relevant passages, and mention of earlier literature, see Louden 1993:25-26.

[20] Homeric epic several times features the hero using pivotal contrafactuals in his own narrations. Odysseus does so at 7.278 (discussed below), 9.79, 11.565, 630. Menelaus, in his own very Odyssean narratives, does so as well at 4.363, 441, and 502.

[21] E.g., "þurh Drihtnes miht" (940a). A propos of this I suggest that the concept of *over-determination*, the effects of which are frequently seen in Greek mythology, applies well to *Beowulf*. Events in Greek mythology are frequently determined twice, once on the human plane and once on the divine plane. For instance, Hektor slays Patroklos in Book

whether Greek or Germanic, has earned such attention and favor. Concluding his brief narrative, he proceeds to turn over the remnant hilt to Hrothgar.

Again, Homeric epic offers relevant parallels in this particular deployment of the pivotal contrafactual. The importance of *Odyssey* 5.436-37 (with which we began our investigation of pivotal contrafactuals) in that poem's overall structure is underscored by the fact that Odysseus himself, in his initial account to the Phaiakians, offers a second description of the same event, earlier related by the principal narrator. When asked by Arete, the Phaiakian queen, to account for his arrival on the island, Odysseus narrates his arrival made hazardous by the storm, the wreck of his raft, and the necessity for prodigious swimming (7.275-80):

> τὴν μὲν ἔπειτα θύελλα διεσκέδασ᾽· αὐτὰρ ἐγώ γε
> νηχόμενος τόδε λαῖτμα διέτμαγον, ὄφρα με γαίη
> ὑμετέρῃ ἐπέλασσε φέρων ἄνεμός τε καὶ ὕδωρ.
> ἔνθα κέ μ᾽ ἐκβαίνοντα βιήσατο κῦμ᾽ ἐπὶ χέρσου,
> πέτρης πρὸς μεγάλῃσι βαλὸν καὶ ἀτερπέϊ χώρῳ·
> ἀλλ᾽ ἀναχασσάμενος νῆχον πάλιν.

> The stormwind utterly scattered it [the raft], but I
> cut across the great gulf by swimming until
> the wind and the water carrying me drove me to your shore;
> and there, had I emerged onto land, the rough wave
> would have dashed me against the great rocks in a gruesome place
> had I not backed away and swam again.

The circumstances are identical to those earlier described in 5.436-37,[22] except that Odysseus in his narration is unaware of the divine intervention described by the principal narrator. In *Beowulf* the principal narrator uses a pivotal contrafactual to describe Beowulf's encounter with Grendel's mother (1550-54a) and, shortly thereafter, the hero himself employs the same narrative technique as he recounts the same exploit to Hrothgar (1655-58). In the *Odyssey* the principal narrator first highlights Odysseus's difficult approach to Skheria in a pivotal contrafactual and then shortly

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16 of the *Iliad*, but Apollo slays him as well, or simultaneously. Apollo's action does not detract from Hektor's; both are responsible for the slaying. In *Beowulf*, the hero always performs the act, but God is always given credit as well. On over-determination see Dodds 1951:7, 16, 30ff., 51. For a brief comparison of the functions of deities in *Beowulf* and Homeric epic, see Parks 1990:37-38.

[22] "and now the great wave covered him . . . and Odysseus would have perished had not . . . ."

afterward the hero follows suit, again employing a pivotal contrafactual in his own partial narration of his exploits.

In 1963 Robert P. Creed identified a theme common to *Beowulf* and Homeric epic, "the singer looks at his sources," in which, for both Odysseus and Beowulf, a court singer sings a song about the hero's deeds in the presence of the hero himself.[23] Following Creed's example we might thus suggest the existence of an additional common theme or technique: "the hero emphasizes (with a pivotal contrafactual) his own exploits and proximity to death, earlier so emphasized by the principal narrator."

Having observed the three instances of the structure in *Beowulf*, we might now briefly consider it from some other perspectives. I have called the pivotal contrafactual a *narrative technique*, a classification that emphasizes its role in shaping and structuring the narrative. The device exists at the level of the sentence, as does the simile, for instance. Pivotal contrafactuals are, however, far more integral to the course of the narrative than the simile.[24]

Though a sentence-level device, they may be interpreted as very brief type-scenes, for in *Beowulf*, in particular, they always contain several repeated elements, including some verbal responsion and other specific correspondences. Each passage in *Beowulf* has these same smaller units: 1) a threatening action: *swa he hyra ma wolde* (1055b), *Hæfde ða forsiðod . . . under gynne grund* (1550a, 1551a), *Ic þæt unsofte ealdre gedigde . . . ætrihte wæs / guð getwæfed* (1655-58a); 2) a conjunction introducing the intervention: *nefne* (1056a), *nemne* (1552a), *nymðe* (1658b); 3) divine agency: *witig God* (1056a), *halig God* (1553b), *God* (1658b); 4) a personal pronoun referring to Beowulf: *ðæs mannes* (1057a), *him* (1552a), *mec* (1658b); 5) the threat averted: *him . . . wyrd forstode* (1056), *geweold wigsigor* (1554a), *scylde* (1658b). That "God" is the most stable element in the constructions emphasizes the importance of divine agency in the dynamics of the device.

Since one of the chief contextual demands for deployment of the pivotal contrafactuals appears to be Beowulf in combat against a monster, we should wonder, perhaps, why the poem does not employ such a sequence

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[23] The relevant passages are *Beowulf* 867ff., *Odyssey* 8.72ff., 499ff. See also Renoir 1988:100; and below for other citations on some elements common to *Beowulf* and Homeric epic.

[24] See Peabody 1975:220: "often a simile is only thematic gloss on a momentarily salient secondary element within a thematic development. A simile is seldom a significant feature of any major song pattern."

in the final combat, that with the dragon.[25] A brief consideration of why this does not occur may shed further light on the workings of this narrative technique. Partly building on some earlier work by Albert Lord, J. M. Foley has recently analyzed the three principal engagements, which he draws together under the rubric, "Battle with the Monster."[26] He persuasively argues for a five part *schema* underlying the three principal engagements, "Arming, a *Beot* (or verbal contract), the monster's Approach, the Death of a Substitute, and the Engagement itself" (233). The sequences with which we are concerned would thus be a smaller component within Foley's fifth element, the Engagement.

In making his case for how Beowulf's death against the dragon is an individual elaboration on the pattern established by the earlier engagements, Foley pays particular attention to his fourth element, "the Death of a Substitute." As in the first encounter Grendel slays Handscoh, and in the second his mother slays Aeschere, so the third battle also requires this preliminary to the actual engagement. There is something of a shift in the poem's modality, however, as the final sequence starts up, for, as Foley notes, the leisurely pace between the final Arming and *Beot* strikes a fatalistic tone.[27] When Beowulf's sword fails in the encounter, the narrative begins to signal that, to a degree, Beowulf himself will now fulfill the function of Death of a Substitute, while Wiglaf will fulfill the role Beowulf played in the first two encounters. That is to say, Wiglaf will not displace Beowulf as the hero, given the pomp and circumstance that commemorates Beowulf's death and draws out its significance to the end of the poem. Furthermore, Beowulf and Wiglaf kill the dragon together, and Wiglaf remains subsidiary in the battle's aftermath. Nonetheless, much of Foley's pattern holds.

The deployment of the pivotal contrafactuals in the first two multiforms of the Battle with the Monster, but absence of the narrative device in the final sequence, may offer a corollary to Foley's *schema*. Divine intervention is perhaps the most crucial element in the pivotal sequences. The course of the poem suggests a steadily upward evolution in

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[25] The other context in *Beowulf* most suitable for a pivotal contrafactual is Beowulf's account of his youthful victory over the sea-monster (549-72). Renoir (1988:129) notes the specific theme of a light flashing at the moment of victory (569-70, 1570), linking the defeat of the sea-monster with the victory over Grendel's mother.

[26] Foley 1991:231-42; Lord 1960:201-2. For another recent study of the first two Monster scenes, see Desmond 1992.

[27] Foley 1991:236.

the necessity for divine aid in the three Battle with the Monster multiforms. That is, Beowulf is increasingly more dependent on such aid with each subsequent engagement. In the encounter with Grendel divine aid is present, but the narrative does not suggest that Beowulf is in dire need of such aid. The aid itself is not made a central issue in the account. If anything the passage implies a joint responsibility, "nefne him witig God   wyrd forstode / ond ðæs mannes mod" (1056-57a).[28] Against Grendel's mother, however, divine aid is crucial, as highlighted in the two pivotal sequences (1550-54a, 1655-58).   Both accounts suggest that Beowulf could not survive the encounter without help from God.   Against the dragon such aid is not forthcoming, and Beowulf does not survive. In that final engagement there could be no divine intervention, and as a narrative consequence no pivotal contrafactual, unless on behalf of Wiglaf, who is hardly yet the proper recipient of such narrative focus. As Beowulf's role modulates from the successful hero to the doomed substitute, so the narrative motivation behind pivotal contafactuals, which in *Beowulf* are only used of successful encounters by Beowulf himself, vanishes.

As we have noted several parallels between the deployment of pivotal contrafactuals in *Beowulf* and Homeric epic, some further comment on that relationship is in order.   Lord and others have noted several specific narrative techniques common to both traditions, from motif to type-scene to story-pattern.[29]   Some have argued for parallels between *Beowulf* and Indo-European   or   other   ancient   poetic   traditions.[30]   Without testimony

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[28] ("Had not God, and the hero's courage, / Turned fate aside"). Cf. again Dodds' formulation of "over-determination" (note 21 above).

[29] On common themes, see Creed 1963 on "the singer looks at his sources;" Lord 1965 for comparison of Odysseus' meeting with Nausikaa, preliminary to meeting the Phaiakians, and Beowulf's meeting with the coast guard; Renoir 1988 and 1990 for analysis of the "hero on the beach;" Renoir 1988:100, 111, and Parks 1990:72-77 on similarities between Unferth's taunting of Beowulf and Euryalos' rude remarks to Odysseus, as well as the subsequent reconciliations between these sets of characters; Nagler 1980 on similarities between Odysseus' combat with Polyphemos and that of Beowulf with Grendel's mother; Parks 1988 and 1990 on some narrative techniques common to both traditions. Lord 1965 and Renoir 1988 have compared various story-patterns and themes in the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf*; cf. Renoir 1990:*passim*.

[30] On Indo-European (IE) influence in Homeric epic, see Schmitt 1967 and Durante 1976.   Posited IE phrases surviving in Homer include ἱερὸν μένος, κλέος ἄφθιτον, κλέα ἀνδρῶν, δῶτορ ἐάων, Διὸς θυγάτηρ, and so on. Suggested influence of *Gilgamesh* is seen in Homeric divine councils, Aphrodite's relationship with Zeus in the *Iliad*, and the like; on this and IE influence, see West 1988. Klaeber notes an

from a third ancient Indo-European tradition, however, it would be reckless to assume Indo-European provenience for the technique.[31] It would be equally reckless, and unsupportable, to argue for direct influence of Homeric epic on the Old English poetic tradition.[32] Nonetheless, since deployment of the structure agrees in so many particulars in the two traditions, we cannot rule out indirect influence of Homeric epic patterns on *Beowulf*, or of an earlier tradition on both the Greek and Old English traditions, as a qualified and tentative conclusion.

Of those tools assumed to be at the disposal of the traditional oral poet, we have observed the properties of one type of narrative technique that has largely escaped notice, manipulation of a specific form of syntax. This particular device, the pivotal contrafactual, employed by both Old English and Homeric epic, is particularly used in one crucial context, the hero's encounter with a deadly opponent and life-threatening circumstances. So deployed, the syntactic pattern is capable of great force and can articulate issues reaching to the core of heroic poetry itself. As the hero can be effectively threatened by this device, so can the existence of the narrative itself be momentarily threatened. As we have noted, the *Beowulf* poet, at some moments of particular narrative tension, underscores the singular drama of key encounters through this ancient device. This narrative technique is, then, one more piece of evidence of the level of sophistication operative in the literature of oral cultures.[33]

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apparent IE narrative technique present in *Beowulf* 61: "Heorogar ond Hroðgar ond Halga til." The same pattern is also present at 2434; see also West 1988:155-56. On the general likelihood of IE themes surviving in *Beowulf*, see Renoir 1988:86ff.; cf. Lord 1980 and Nagler 1980. See Fontenrose 1959:524ff. for suggested parallels between Grendel's mother and Tiamat, the chaos demoness of Mesopotamian creation myths.

[31] Though Vergil employs the structure occasionally in the *Aeneid*, he clearly imitates Homeric practice in so doing, and his usage thus cannot be taken as a Latin reflex of an inherited IE phenomenon.

[32] Cf. Lord's similarly cautious conclusion (1965:139): "The *Odyssey* had no direct influence on *Beowulf* . . . . But they both belonged . . . to the same oral epic narrative tradition. The story patterns in such a tradition are very old, amazingly stable, surprisingly alive." On knowledge of Greek in Anglo-Saxon times, see Lapidge 1988 and Berschin 1988.

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