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*Leeds Studies in English*  
School of English  
University of Leeds  
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## ***Beowulf*: Six Notes, Mostly Syntactical**

Bruce Mitchell

It is a pleasure for an Australian exile in England to salute an English exile in Australia and to wish him well in his retirement, wherever he may choose to enjoy it. *Wæs þu, Leslie, hal!*

### **I**

þanon up hraðe  
Wedera leode on wang stigon,  
sæwudu sældon (syrca hrysedon,  
guðgewædo), gode þancedon  
þæs þe him yplade eaðe wurdon. (*Beowulf*, ll. 224–28)<sup>1</sup>

The verb *hrysedon*, line 226, is the 3rd pers. pret. pl. of *hryssan*, which is glossed by Wrenn-Bolton as 'rattle; shake' and by Klaeber as 'shake, rattle (intr.) . . . (Elsewhere trans.)'. Klaeber glosses *syrca* as 'n.p.', and the punctuation of both editions indicates that *syrca* is to be taken as the subject of *hrysedon*. This gives the conventional translation 'their coats of mail, their armour, rang' and is supported by Dobbie's punctuation above and by his note on the passage (*ASPR*, 4):

226 *hrysedon*] Taken by most edd. as intransitive, 'their shirts of mail rattled'. Trautmann, however, would construe it transitively, with *Wedera leode* the subject of this verb as well as of *sældon* and *þancedon*. So also Andrew, p. 48. This interpretation gives a much smoother reading but is probably wrong; the intransitive function of *hryssan* here is supported by Andreas 127, *garas hrysedon* (parallel to *guðsearo gullon*). The

punctuation in the text, with ll. 226b–227a in parentheses, follows Socin and Holder (2nd ed.); cf. the similar punctuation of *Andreas* 127 in this edition (Records II, 6).

Andrew's comment (*Postscript*, pp. 48–49) puts the alternative thus:

'hrysedon' is usually taken as intransitive, 'their sarks rattled'; then 'syrcañ' must be taken, absurdly, as the subject of 'pancedon' also. If, however, we give 'hrysedon' its usual transitive sense, we have three co-ordinate clauses with the same subject and good sense 'they made fast the sea-wood, shook their sarks, and thanked God'.

I do not agree with Andrew that, if *hrysedon* is taken as intransitive, *syrcañ* must be the subject of *pancedon*; this is to misunderstand the nature and function of parentheses in OE poetry and is no argument for *hrysedon* transitive. There is no doubt that the parenthesis is perfectly acceptable here. However, I do agree with Dobbie when he says that Trautmann's interpretation 'gives a much smoother reading'. But I would urge that he may be wrong when he says that it 'is probably wrong'. My reasons are twofold.

First, the passage from *Andreas* is a two-edged sword. The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, 2, takes *hrysedon* as intransitive, printing:

Duguð samnade,  
hæðne hildfrecañ, heapum þrungeñ,  
(guðsearo gullon, garas hrysedon),  
bolgeñmode, under bordhreoðan. (*Andreas*, ll. 125–28)

On the evidence of the *Microfiche Concordance*, the prevailing use of *hryssañ* is the transitive one seen in *Ps(A)* 21. 6(8) and *Ps(A)* 108. 25 *viderunt me et mouerunt capita sua*, 'gesegeñ me 7 hrysedon heafud heara'. The only two possible intransitive examples are the two from the poetry — *Beowulf*, line 226 (not recorded in the *Microfiche Concordance*, s.v. *hrysedon*), and *Andreas*, line 127. It can reasonably be argued that the intransitive use is a characteristic of the poetry, with both examples by coincidence occurring in parentheses. But it can equally well be argued that there was no intransitive use, for we can just as easily read

Beowulf: *Six Notes*

*Andreas*, line 127 (*guðsearo gullon*), *garas hrysedon* or (as I would prefer it) — *guðsearo gullon* — *garas hrysedon*.

Second, there is no doubt that spears can be shaken. But it may be asked whether an Anglo-Saxon warrior would have been likely to shake a coat of mail. A passage from *Exodus* supports the answer 'Yes':

Him þær segncyning wið þone segn foran,  
manna þengel, mearcþreate rad;  
guðweard gumena grimhelm gespeon,  
cycling cinberge, (cumbol lixton),  
wiges on wenum, wæhlencan sceoc,  
het his hereciste healdan georne  
fæst fyrdgetrum. (Exodus, ll. 172–78)

II

Reced hlynsode.

Þa wæs wundor micel þæt se winsele  
wiðhæfde heapodeorum, þæt he on hrusan ne feol,  
fæger foldbold; ac he þæs fæste wæs  
innan ond utan irenbendum  
searþoncum besmipod. Þær fram sylle abeag  
medubenc monig, mine gefræge,  
golde geregnad, þær þa graman wunnon.  
Þæs ne wendon ær witan Scyldinga  
þæt hit a mid gemete manna ænig,  
betlic ond banfag, tobrecan meahte,  
listum tolucan, nympe liges fæpm  
swulge on swapule. (Beowulf, ll. 770–82)

What is the grammatical referent of the neuter *hit* in line 779? The Wrenn-Bolton note reads: 'Here *hit* is used loosely in a general way for the hall, although in strict grammar the pron. should be *f.*, as *heall* is *f.* or *m.*, as *sele*, cf. 771.' If we are to import *heall* *f.*, we might just as well say that *hit* agrees with *ærn* *n.*, which — like *heall* — does not appear in the passage under discussion, or argue that it agrees

with *reced* m. or n. in line 770; see *OES*, §46, where Robinson's note on *pone*, line 70, is discussed and accepted. But such comments will not do. The grammatical sequence *se winsele* (l. 771), . . . *he* (l. 772), . . . *he* (l. 773), demands *hine*, and *hit* is quite clearly an aberrant anticipation of the situation in Modern English; see *OES*, §§69–71.

### III

#### Welhwylc gecwæð

þæt he fram Sigemundes secgan hyrde  
ellendædum, uncupes fela,  
Wælsinges gewin, wide siðas,  
para þe gumena bearn gearwe ne wiston,  
fæhðe ond fyrena, buton Fitela mid hine,  
þonne he swulces hwæt secgan wolde,  
eam his nefan, swa hie a wæron  
æt niða gehwam nydgesteallan;  
hæfdon ealfela eotena cynnes  
sweordum gesæged. (Beowulf, ll. 874–84)

Here both Klaeber and Dobbie emend MS *Sigemunde* to *Sigemundes* — Klaeber silently, Dobbie with the observation that 'the emendation is slight, particularly in view of the following *s*-, and gives a more probable reading'. The Wrenn-Bolton note reads: 'In 875–76, *ellen-dædum* is in apposition to the dat. *Sigemunde*, and there is no need to emend to gen. *Sigemundes*, as Klaeber and some others have done.' I have already commented on this point in *OES*, §1175, but take this opportunity of arguing the case for the emendation more fully.

The 'native informant' within me tells me that the manuscript reading produces strained syntax; as I have already pointed out in *OES*, §§1173–74, repetition of a preposition is not required when the parallel elements have the same referent but is necessary when they do not. The latter is the situation here, and one would therefore expect *\*fram Sigemunde . . . / fram ellendædum*.

The first scribe does not omit gen. sg. -s. There is one such possible error by the second scribe in line 2958, but see VI, below. However, Dobbie's suggestion of haplography in *Sigemunde secgan*, like that in line 987, *egl unheoru* (IV, below), is attractive.

## Beowulf: Six Notes

The problem with the emendation is the separation of the dependent genitive *Sigemundes* from *ellendædum*, the word on which it depends. Such separation can, however, be paralleled from *Beowulf*, e.g. lines 1180–1, *Ic minne can | glædne Hroþulf* and, I would argue, decisively lines 450–1, *no ðu ymb mines ne þearft | lices feorme leng sorgian*, where the preposition *ymb* governs *feorme* in the next line, just as *fram* governs *ellendædum* in the emended version of line 874, printed at the beginning of this note — which I accept.

### IV

Da wæs swigra secg, sunu Eclafes,  
on gylpspræce guðgeweorca,  
siþðan æþelingas eorles cræfte  
ofer heanne hrof hand sceawedon,  
feondes fingras. Foran æghwylc wæs,  
stiðra nægla gehwylc, style gelicost,  
hæpenes handsporu hilderinces,  
egl, unheoru. *Æghwylc gecwæð . . . (Beowulf, ll. 980–87)*

Two distinguished scholars, both known to Leslie Rogers, combine through me to write this note, for I begin by merely reporting comments from lectures I attended in my early years in Oxford. J. R. R. Tolkien explained the troublesome *æghwylc* in line 984 as a scribal error for *æghwær*, 'everywhere', caused by the presence of line 984, *gehwylc . . . line 987, æghwylc*. Alistair Campbell cited the word *stedewang*, which he translated as 'a plain, open space, firm ground', in support of his reading *stedenægla* for MS *steda nægla*. A combination of these two proposals gives the translation 'At the tip each of the firm nails was everywhere most like steel.'

To this, I add a brief comment of my own on the Wrenn–Bolton note on line 985a, *egl unheoru*: 'The common emendation of *egl* to make it an adj. *eglu* is palaeographically plausible, but gives odd syntax and weak meaning.' The accusation that two adjectives in asyndetic parataxis in the same half-line give 'odd syntax' is odd when it comes from editors who print line 1641a, *frome, fyrd-hwate*, without complaint. The accusation that 'horrible, monstrous' is 'weak meaning' is weak when it comes from editors who apply a noun meaning 'a beard of barley, a splinter, a mote (Luke, 6. 41)' to Grendel's horrid talons.

V

Guðdeað fornam,  
feorhbealo frecne, fyra gehwylcne  
leoda minra, þara ðe þis lif ofgeaf,  
gesawon seledream. (Beowulf, ll. 2249–52)

Here Klaeber, Dobbie, and Wrenn–Bolton, all retain MS *gesawon*, thereby rejecting the various emendations noted by Klaeber, including Trautmann's *secga*. I believe that they are right in this. Dobbie observes that 'here it is noteworthy that the singular verb *ofgeaf* is parallel to the following plural *gesawon*'. It is true that OE idiom permits either a singular or a plural verb in adjective clauses which follow an unambiguously singular form of an indefinite + *þara þe*; see *OES*, §2349. There I was content to quote this example with the comment that in it 'we have a singular and then a plural'. I am now inclined to suggest replacing the comma after *ofgeaf* with a semi-colon or (perhaps better) a colon, translating (with Wrenn–Clark Hall) 'they saw (the last of) festive joy' or, as I prefer, 'they had seen the last of joy in the hall'; compare William Morris, as reported by Klaeber, 'The hall-joy had they seen'. The clause thus becomes a summarizing comment on what has gone before.

VI

Þa wæs æht boden  
Sweona leodum, segn Higelaces  
freoðowong þone forð ofereodon,  
syððan Hreðlingas to hagan þrunjon. (Beowulf, ll. 2957–60)

Here the emendation of MS *Higelace* to *Higelaces* is accepted by Klaeber, Dobbie, and Wrenn–Bolton. This is certainly preferable to retaining the manuscript reading, with the consequent difficulties which are well explained by Dobbie.

But the emendation involves taking *segn* as nominative plural neuter. The word is unambiguously masculine in *Beowulf*, lines 47–8, *Þa gyt hie him asetton segen ge[l]denne | heah ofer heafod*, where *heah* is uninflected in accordance with the idiom described in *OES*, §42. 8, 'and apparently neuter', according to Dobbie, in *Beowulf*, lines 2767–8, *Swylce he siomian geseah segn eallgylden | heah ofer*

### Beowulf: Six Notes

*horde*, where *heah* is, on the analogy of *heah* in the previous example, indecisive but where one could reasonably expect \**eallgyldenne* in the accusative and infinitive construction if *segn* had been thought of as masculine; compare *Beowulf*, line 47, above, and line 1021a, *segen gyldenne*, and see *OEG*, §643. 5. b. So Dobbie's 'apparently neuter' is perhaps overcautious. There is other evidence for *segn* masculine, including *Exodus*, line 172b, *pone segn*. But *Genesis A*, line 2372b, *þæt segn*, is sufficient for the word to be added to the list of nouns of fluctuating gender given in *OES*, §§62–65.



NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, *Beowulf* and other verse texts are cited from the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, abbreviated to *ASPR*.

*OEG* is A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959; reprinted, 1962, 1964, 1969, etc.).

*OES* is Bruce Mitchell, *Old English Syntax* (Oxford, 1985; reprinted, 1985, 1987).

*Microfiche Concordance* is *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English*, Publications of the Dictionary of Old English, 1, compiled by Antonette diPaolo Healey and Richard L. Venezky (Toronto, 1980; reprinted with revisions, 1985).

The names of the authors serve as cue-titles for the following works:

S. O. Andrew, *Postscript on 'Beowulf'* (Cambridge, 1948)

*Beowulf and Judith*, edited by Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, *ASPR*, 4 (New York, 1953, and London, 1954)

*Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, edited by Fr. Klaeber, third edition (Boston, 1936; reprinted, 1941, 1950, etc.)

*Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment*, edited by C. L. Wrenn, fully revised by W. F. Bolton (London, 1973)

John R. Clark Hall, *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment: A Translation into Modern English Prose*, new edition revised by C. L. Wrenn (London, 1950).