OE *Ealuscerwen/Meoduscerwen* and the Concept of 'Paying for Mead'

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The purpose of this article is not to review the extensive range of semantic and philological studies of the poetic compounds *ealuscerwen* and *meoduscerwen*, but rather to approach the problem of the meaning, origin and appropriateness of these words from a comparative standpoint. It was sparked off by a brief comment in T. A. Shippey's excellent study of Old English poetry on the use of *meoduscerwen* in *Andreas*: '. . . it is . . . odd to compare anything "bitter" to mead, a sweet drink. The metaphor is muddled, and may have been borrowed.'[1] To any student of early Welsh verse the concept of 'bitter mead' is not odd, but very familiar. Since it is best expressed in *The Gododdin* where it is closely linked to the idea of the retainer paying for his lord's mead in battle, an idea which I knew is also found in Old English poetry, it appeared to be worthwhile to examine whether *meoduscerwen* belonged to a similar complex of ideas. If it is accepted that it does, at least on this account the *Andreas* poet can be absolved of having clumsily imitated the compound *ealuscerwen* in *Beowulf* by thoughtlessly substituted sweet mead for ale in the context of 'bitter drinking'. While the problem of the original sense of the compounds cannot be completely ignored, further attention to a complex of ideas in Old English about the dispensing of drink may explain their evolved sense of 'terror, distress', especially in the light of early Welsh heroic poetry. This evidence suggests that *meodu-* in the *Andreas* compound may be neither substitution for *ealu-* nor unsuitable.

The meaning of *ealuscerwen* and *meoduscerwen* from their contexts is one of the few points of agreement of scholars, although occasionally other suggestions have been made, most dependent on the premise that the *Andreas* poet was completely ignorant of the sense of the compound he imitated.[2] Since context is similar in both instances the safest and most usual assumption is that the *Andreas* poet's substitution of *meodu-* is inept, but not senseless. The second element of the

two compounds is attested in *bescerwan* 'to deprive'. Depending on whether the prefix is neutral or privative **scerwen* can be interpreted as 'deprivation' or 'dispensing'. Only the latter, however, makes sense in *Andreas* where the poet plays on the glut of drink given to the drowning Myrmidons. 'Ale-/mead-dispensing' or '-granting', therefore, is usually taken as the basic sense of the compound.

Naturally enough, commentators concentrate on how the sense 'distress, terror' developed. Among these studies are several which make relevant points about the figurative connotations of the dispensing of drink. Carleton Brown, '*Poculum Mortis* in Old English', calls attention to the concept of the '(bitter) drink of death' in Christian Latin literature and in Old English.[3] Although providing a useful survey of examples, Brown dwells on only one aspect of figurative ideas concerned with the sharing of drink and, contrary to his analysis, the priority of heroic imagery (with perhaps some stimulus from the exegetical tradition) seems likely. G. V. Smithers notes this and other figurative uses of serving out drink in Old English and cites examples not only from Christian texts but also Germanic secular literature. He concentrates, however, on the ironic use of serving drink to the enemy, i.e. give battle or deal blows.[4] The *Andreas* passage contains this ironic usage, but it is basically distinct from the figurative usages of serving out drink among friends and retainers also present in the relevant passage. E. B. Irving's arguments that *ealuscerwen* means 'the noise of a wild celebration' are forced, but his comparison of the drunkenness of the doomed Myrmidons in *Andreas* with the drunken feast of Holfernes's warriors in *Judith* makes important points about the bonds formed in the lord's feast which will make warriors fight to the death.[5] Finally, P. L. Henry cites some of the Welsh parallels for figurative usage of the taking of mead, particularly the heroic paradox of 'bitter mead', in two notes.[6] His derivation of **scerwen* from Old Irish *seirbe* 'bitter', however, is extremely unlikely and obscures the valuable parallel he draws.[7]

The symbolic use of drink in relation to the bond between lord and retainer in early Welsh poetry is many-faceted. The taking of drink initially indicates the warrior's acceptance of the lord's service, and then, since this often led to death in battle, it is closely linked with death, bitterness, and sorrow. Mead is by far the most common drink used in this context,[8] perhaps because it gives a poetic contrast between the sweetness of the mead at the feast and the bitterness of its after-effect. The acceptance of mead and other drinks at the feast and its ramifications is a major motif in *The Gododdin*. This poem, attributed to the poet Aneirin, consists of a series of heroic elegies celebrating three hundred warriors killed in a battle at

Catraeth. It is generally believed to have a nucleus going back to the sixth century, although there have undoubtedly been many changes and additions made during centuries of oral and written transmission.[9] The willingness of the men to attack is in several places described as the direct result of the contract tacitly made by accepting their lord's drink:

> Disgynsit en trum yg kesseuin
> gwerth med yg kynted a gwirawt win.
> (*CA*, lines 423-24)
> [He attacked in battle in the front rank in return for mead in the hall and wine.]

> Eveis y win a med e mordei
> can yveis disgynneis rann fin. fawt ut.
> (*CA*, lines 221-22)
> [I drank his wine and mead in the court. Because I drank I attacked on the border region – a lamentable fate.]

> yr med a chwryf
> yd aethan twryf dros eu h[am]ffin
> (*CA*, lines 1306-07)
> [For mead and beer the host went across their ?border]

In another early poem (ninth or tenth-century) warriors are exhorted to keep their contract expressed in symbolic terms by their acceptance of mead:

> a teulu na fouch
> gwydi met meuil na vynuch.[10]
> [O warband, do not flee. After mead do not seek disgrace.]

It is impossible not to connect this exhortation with similar ones in *Beowulf*[11] and *The Battle of Maldon*[12] in which warriors are reminded of their duty to the one who gave them mead:

> Ic ðæt mæl geman, þær we medu þegun,

þonne we geheton ussum hlaforde
in biorsele, ðe us ðas beagas geaf,
þæt we him ða guðgetawa gyldan woldon,
gif him þyslicu þearf gelumpe . . . .
(*Beo*, lines 2633-37)
[I remember the time when we promised our lord in the beerhall where we partook of mead, he who gave us these treasures, that we would repay him for the armour, if ever such trouble befell him . . .]

Gemun[aþ] þa mæla þe we oft æt meodo spræcon,
þonne we on bence beot ahofon,
hæleð on healle, ymbe heard gewinn:
nu mæg cunnian hwa cene sy . . . .
(*Maldon*, lines 212-15)
[Remember the times that we frequently spoke while drinking mead, when we, warriors in the hall, loudly boasted concerning bitter battle: now one may find out who is bold . . .]

Mead is only one of the gifts the lord provides for his retainers – on the whole more stress is laid on tangible rewards in Old English verse – but the similar symbolic usage is clear. Both passages, too, make it clear that the drinking was an occasion for boasting and making heroic vows.[13] The feast not only provides a contrast, but also should inspire promises of even more heroic service in warfare. This is also the case in *The Gododdin*; cf. *CA*, line 364, 'blwydyn od uch med mawr eu haruaeth' [for a year over mead their stated intentions were great]. The feast, despite its pleasurable aspects, added increased risks in the coming fight because of the element of boasting.

In symbolic terms the fulfilling of the contract made at the feast repays the lord for his mead. This is an idea found in both Welsh and Old English poetry. *The Gododdin* speaks of various warriors who paid for their mead or were worthy of it:[14]

med a dalhei
(*CA*, line 22)
[He paid for (his) mead]

dyrllŷdei vedgyrn eillt mynydawc
(*CA*, line 397)
[The retainer of Mynyddawg deserved mead-horns.]

a chin i olo atan titguet daiar
dirlishei etar iued iuet.
(*CA*, lines 1235-36)
[And before he was buried under sod and earth Edar deserved to drink his mead.]

The idea of paying for or being worthy of mead is implicit in the passages cited above from *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, but clearly expressed in the *Finnsburg Fragment*:[15]

Ne gefrægn ic næfre wurþlicor æt wera hilde
sixtig sigebeorna sel gebæran
ne nefre swanas hwitne medo sel forgyldan
ðonne Hnæfe guldan his hægstealdas.
(lines 37-40)
[I never heard of warriors more worthy in battle, of sixty glorious heroes behaving better, nor ever of retainers better repaying for shining mead than Hnæf's young warriors repaid him.]

It seems here that Old English and Welsh poetry share a common symbolic use of the acceptance of drink by retainers from their lord, although it is seen more fully in Welsh. This may be the result of direct borrowing, but there are many similarities between the two heroic societies and their outward symbols which may have given independent genesis to the usage.[16]

The final important symbolism of acceptance of mead is not, however, attested in Old English unless it lies behind the semantic development of *ealu-/meoduscerwen* as suggested above. The contract expressed by taking mead to fight for one's lord and the boast made over mead to exceed minimal expectations of heroism can lead to death, and so the taking of the drink itself is often symbolic of death, destruction and fate, as in these lines from *The Gododdin*:

Gwyr a gryssyassant buant gytneit.

hoedyl vyrryon medwon uch med hidleit.
gosgord vynydawc enwawc en reit.
gwerth eu gwled o ved vu eu heneit.
(*CA*, lines 353-56)
[The men who attacked leapt together, short-lived ones drunk over clarified mead. The retinue of Mynyddog, famous in battle – the payment for their feast of mead was their lives.]

med evynt melyn melys maglawr.
(*CA*, line 92]
[They drank yellow, sweet, ensnaring mead.]

gloew dull e am drull yt gy[t]uaethant.
o ancwyn mynydauc handit tristlavn vy mryt
rwy ⟨e⟩ry golleis y om gwir garant
(*CA*, lines 704-06)
[A bright host around the wine vessel feasted together. Because of the feast of Mynyddog my mind is sorrowful: I have lost too many of my true friends.]

The feasting often has a sad outcome; the long-lasting result of drinking sweet mead is paradoxical bitterness as in the early proverb: 'wech me[d] weru pandalawr'[17] [Mead is sweet – (but) bitter when it is paid for]. The heroic paradox of bitter mead is not expressed quite so concisely in *The Gododdin*, but the drinks are often closely linked with their bitter result, cf.:

glasved eu hancwyn a gwenwyn vu
(*CA*, line 69)
[Pale mead was their feast and it was poison.][18]

ket yvem ved gloyw wrth leu babir
ket vei da e vlas y gas bu hir.
(*CA*, lines 138-39)
[Although we drank bright mead by the light of rushes – although its taste was good its bitterness was long-lasting.]

bu atveillyawc eu gwirodeu
(*CA*, line 1315)
[Their drinks were bitter.]

The drinking of mead in the lord's hall symbolizes a whole area of the warrior's code and life: loyalty in battle, aspiration for greater heroism and the ultimate repayment of death. 'Bitter mead' therefore has a more complex significance and resonance than the bitter drink of death of Christian tradition.[19]

In the light of the Old English usage of paying for mead it seems likely that the idea of mead-drinking in an heroic context also developed further symbolic overtones of death, bitterness and sorrow which may explain the semantic development of *ealu-/meoduscerwen*. The context of *ealuscerwen* in *Beowulf* is not very revealing, unlike the usage in *Andreas* which is part of a suggestive complex of ideas. In line 769 *ealuscerwen* refers to the reaction of the Danes upon hearing Beowulf's fight with Grendel in Heorot. They themselves are in no immediate danger, but the situation must be reminiscent of the times when one of their own paid for his drink by remaining to fight Heorot's enemy:

Ful oft gebeotedon beore druncne
ofer ealowæge oretmecgas
þæt hie in beorsele bidan woldon
Grendles guþe . . .
(*Beowulf*, lines 480-82)
[Often warriors boasted, drunk on beer, over the ale cups, that they would await Grendel's warfare in the beer-hall . . .]

Beowulf has been feasted in the hall and has made his vow, now, as far as the Danes know, he is repaying his host with his life. The 'fear, distress' or perhaps 'sorrow' of the Danes can be explained as a developed sense from the common bitter outcome of the contract implicit in the dispensing of drink in the hall.

The passage in *Andreas*,[20] although tiresomely prolonged and obvious, strongly suggests the poet was drawing upon a full range of symbolic connotations about drinking similar to the Welsh evidence. The passage on the destruction of the Myrmidons deserves quoting at length:

Næs þa wordlatu wihte þon mare,

þæt se stan togan. Stream ut aweoll,
fleow ofer foldan; famige walcan
mid ærdæge eorðan þehton,
myclade mereflod. Meoduscerwen wearð
æfter symbeldæge; slæpe tobrugdon
searuhæb⟨b⟩ende. Sund grunde onfeng,
deope gedrefed; duguð wearð afyrhted
þurh þæs flodes fær. Fæge swulton,
geonge on geofone guðræs fornam
þurh sealtes swe⟨l⟩g; þæt wæs sorgbyrþen,
biter beorþegu. Byrlas ne gældon,
ombehtþegnas; þær wæs ælcum genog
fram dæges orde drync sona gearu.
(lines 1522-35)

[There was no delay in obeying the command in any way, until the stone split. The sea was stirred out, flowed over earth; foamy rollers engulfed the earth with the dawn, the flood of water grew greater. There was *meoduscerwen* after the day of feasting; armed men started from sleep. The flood attacked the earth, stirred up from the deep; the host was terrified by the onrush of the sea. Doomed to die they perished, on the sea the battle rush carried off young men through the salt abyss; that was a sorrowful drink, a bitter beer-drinking. Cupbearers, serving men, did not delay; from daybreak there was enough drink for everyone immediately ready.]

The final three lines develop the ironic use of serving up drink which Smithers notes, but the rest of the passage offers many parallels with Welsh treatment of the theme. The flood is depicted as a rush of battle ('guðræs') which carries off the victims, described as warriors and retainers, after feasting. Irving's comparison to *Judith* is helpful here. Holofernes's warriors also pay for his feast with their lives. While the poet depicts this as divine judgement on their drunken orgy, it is as much loyalty to their lord which dooms them. Even the poet's disapproval cannot prevent the traditional heroic mode in which he describes their faithful battling in a hopeless situation. The poet of *Andreas*, too, deliberately echoes this heroic concept (although he also disapproves of his subjects) by presenting the destruction which befalls the Myrmidons after feasting as an attack. The contrast 'Meoduscerwen

wearð/æfter symbeldæge' resembles several made in *The Gododdin*, although the usage in the latter is not exultant, but poignant:

> gwede meddawt
> a med yuet.
> ny bu waret
> an gorwylam
> (*CA*, lines 1021-24)
> [After drunkenness and mead drinking there was no deliverance from our fate.]
>
> a gwedy elwch tawelwch vu
> (*CA*, line 71)
> [and after carousal there was the silence of death]

In *Andreas*, too, the carousal is depicted as leading to destruction, although the heroic rationale is in part missing. It is the taking of drink as well as the drink itself which is symbolic of death. (The latter image includes the literal water of the flood.) The use of 'meoduscerwen' with 'sorgbyrþen' and 'biter beorþegu' provides another close parallel with the Welsh material – indeed, if the analogues are correctly identified the *Andreas* poet can scarcely be faulted for linking sweet mead with bitter drinking as he so often is.[21] Christine E. Fell, moreover, has convincingly argued that the original use of *beor* was for a fortified sweet fruit wine, making 'biter beorþegu' closer to the Welsh 'bitter mead' and 'meoduscerwen'.[22] The use of 'meoduscerwen' is of course one of the central points in the debate as to whether the poet was directly indebted to *Beowulf*. It is clear, however, that 'meoduscerwen' at least is not an ill-adapted borrowing; the poet both understands this compound and uses it allusively within a wider frame of reference which suggests a broad acquaintance with heroic literature, some now lost. In fact, from the Welsh evidence *medu-* may have been the original or most common first element in the compound. The *Beowulf* 'ealuscerwen', if this analysis is correct, may be the usage which stretches the limits of the *-scerwen* compound, using a sour brewed drink instead of a sweet one which gives greater contrast. Fell also notes that *medu* is far more common than *ealu* in compounds of an emotive rather than a descriptive, factual nature and concludes: 'I suspect that the strongly emotive terminology of *medu* is very closely linked with the loyalties and patterns of the heroic code . . . '.[23]

Andreas is a religious epic and *Beowulf* is steeped in Christian concepts (although probably not so thoroughly as some critics have held). The prior symbolic use of taking drink for the contract between lord and man, and the figurative 'paying for mead' would indicate that the further connotation of the drink as 'death, bitterness, terror' is primarily heroic rather than Christian, although the Christian usages of the bitter drink of death may have reinforced the concept. *The Gododdin*, nominally a Christian poem, gives no religious colouring to the symbolic connotations of mead and taking drink, but two later religious poems refer to the old heroic concept of bitter mead, twisting it subtly for a religious message. One instructional poem warns:

> Ryhun a ryuetudaud a riwirawt o vet
> a ri etillter o gynaud
> Llyna chuec chuerv erbin braud.[24]
> [Too much sloth and too much drunkenness, too strong
> a drink of mead and too much luxury – behold sweet
> things bitter in the face of judgement.]

In another pilgrimage poem renouncing earthly joys the poet exclaims with conciseness made possible by the long secular tradition behind his imagery:

> chuerv vuelin met melis[25]
> [bitter is the horn of sweet mead.]

Here death comes as the wages of sin, not from the battle contract formed at the feast. This twist is not unlike that given to the concept in *Judith* and *Andreas* where moral censure also overlays and heroic concept and its traditional expression.

If the parallels drawn from Welsh literature help to clarify *ealu-/ meoduscerwen* it would only be in repayment of a debt. In light of its many references to drink and feasting early scholars of *The Gododdin* attributed the massacre of the army to the fact that the warriors went into battle still drunk. It was not until Bruce Dickins drew the attention of the first modern editor, Ifor Williams, to the *Finnsburg* reference to paying for mead that the allusions to mead and carousal in *The Gododdin* were fully understood.[26] While elucidation by comparative study of Old English and Welsh may not always be so clear and fruitful, it is nonetheless worth undertaking in order to build a picture of a culture and literature at best only meagrely attested.

NOTES

[1] T. A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London, 1972), p. 116.

[2] E. V. K. Dobbie in his edition of *Beowulf and Judith*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, 4 (New York, 1953) calls the definition 'the one certain thing about it' (p. 154). The discussion on pp. 154-55 gives a useful summary of the various philological and contextual arguments, and most of the articles cited below give some attention to previous studies.

[3] Carleton Brown, '*Poculum Mortis* in Old English', *Speculum*, 15 (1940), pp. 385-95; cf. also A. S. Cook, 'Bitter Beerdrinking', *Modern Language Notes*, 40 (1925), 285-88.

[4] G. V. Smithers, 'Five Notes on Old English Texts', *English and Germanic Studies*, 4 (1951-52), 67-75. This usage incidently also occurs in early Welsh poetry; I hope to deal with it in the future.

[5] E. B. Irving, '*Ealuscerwen*: Wild Party at Heorot', *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 2 (1966), 161-68.

[6] P. L. Henry, '*Beowulf* Cruces', *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung*, 77 (1961), 150-59; also *The Early English and Celtic Lyric* (London, 1966), p. 266.

[7] Especially since the usage of 'bitter mead' in a heroic context is not apparently attested in Old Irish poetry. His point is further confused by citing the different symbolic use of the mead or ale of sovereignty which represents the bond of the ruler with his land.

[8] Wine is also common since as an imported delicacy it was appropriate for a lord's feast. In *The Gododdin* brewed drinks are only rarely mentioned; four instances. This contrasts with some fifty references to mead and mead-drinking and twenty-five to wine.

[9] The sole manuscript is thirteenth-century, but part is written in Old Welsh orthography. The poem is edited by Ifor Williams, *Canu Aneirin* (Caerdydd, 1938); all references are to this edition (*CA*). It is translated by Kenneth Jackson, *The Gododdin* (Edinburgh, 1969), and A. O. H. Jarman, *Aneirin: Y Gododdin* (Llandysul, 1988). The introductions to all these works summarize the historical background and the arguments for and against authenticity. See also the discussions by David Greene, 'Linguistic Considerations in the Dating of Early Welsh Verse', *Studia Celtica*, 6 (1971), 1-11; the reply to Greene by Kenneth Jackson, 'Some Questions in Dispute about Early Welsh Literature and Language', *Studia Celtica*, 8/9 (1973-74), 1-17; and T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Authenticity of the *Gododdin*: An Historian's View', in *Astudiaethau ar yr Hengerdd*, edited by Rachel Bromwich and R. Brinley Jones (Caerdydd, 1978), 44-71. The figurative uses of mead, however, are pervasive and can with some certainty be taken as part of the original core.

[10] *Canu Llywarch Hen*, edited by Ifor Williams (Caerdydd, 1953), p. 29.

[11] *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, edited by Fr. Klaeber, third edition (Boston, 1950).

[12] *The Battle of Maldon*, edited by D. G. Scragg (Manchester, 1981).

[13] For examples of boasting at drink see Stefán Einarsson, 'Old English *Beot* and Old Icelandic

Heitstrenging', *PMLA*, 49 (1934), 475-93.

[14] *Talu* in early Welsh can mean both 'pay for' and 'be worth', Ifor Williams, *CA*, p. 70.

[15] Edited by Klaeber on pp. 245-47 of his edition of *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. There are metrical and other difficulties with the emended line 39 as presented above. Some editors suggest reading *swetne* for *hwitne*.

[16] Jackson, *Gododdin*, p. 37.

[17] In the Black Book of Chirk (thirteenth century), edited by Ifor Williams, 'Hen Ddiarhebion', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 3 (1926-27), 23. The emendation is based on the version of the proverb in the Red Book of Hergest, col. 966.

[18] *Gwenwyn* has several figurative senses and might also be translated as 'bitterness'.

[19] The bitterness is also in part the reaction of the mourners – cf. *CA*, line 698, a variant of *CA*, line 705, quoted above: 'o ancwyn vynydawc andwyf atueillyawc' [because of the feast of Mynyddog I am bitter/sorrowful], and *CA*, lines 363-71, translated by Jackson, p. 130.

[20] *Andreas and The Fates of the Apostles*, edited by Kenneth R. Brooks (Oxford, 1961).

[21] See for instance, Brooks, p. 114; Shippey, p. 116.

[22] Christine E. Fell, 'Old English *Beor*', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s., 8 (1975), pp. 76-95.

[23] Fell, pp. 77-80.

[24] *The Black Book of Carmarthen*, 84.13-15, diplomatic edition by J. Gwenogvryn Evans (Pwllheli, 1907).

[25] *Black Book of Carmarthen*, 83.9-10.

[26] *CA*, p. xlix.