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A Commentary on *Beowulf* Lines 499-518

Line 499 In this line, a new character is introduced to the poem, one of Hrothgar's retainers named Unferth. As is indicated in a gloss, Unferth's name can mean either "un-peace" or "un-reason" (76). Considering that Unferth is about to draw Beowulf's reputation into question, this name seems very appropriate. As is typical for characters in *Beowulf* when they are introduced, it is noted that Unferth is "son of Ecglaf" (499). This recollection of each character's ancestry is not at all uncommon throughout the poem. Later within the same section, Beowulf is referred to as "son of Ecgtheow" (529) even though he is not being introduced for the first time. This fixation upon ancestors is clear from the poem's outset as the prologue consists of an elaborate account of "the glory in bygone days/ of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes" (2-3). Unferth's epithet is logical in this context given the theme in the poem of recalling ties to a nobler past.

Line 500 This line presents Unferth's location in Heorot: "at the feet of the Scylding lord" (500). As the gloss reveals, this is likely an honorable position. By being allowed to remain so close to Hrothgar, it reveals that he is viewed favorably by his lord, and the proximity between the two of them also would be a visual clue to others in the hall that Unferth is in good standing. This is interesting given the information that Beowulf shortly reveals by accusing Unferth of fratricide by calling him his "brothers' killer" (587). This is a grave accusation, so it is noteworthy that Unferth occupies an honorable position in spite of his apparent transgression. Additionally, Unferth's prominent seat likely means that he commands attention in the hall, and his upcoming speech is likely to draw an audience.

Line 501 Unferth's negative intentions toward Beowulf are revealed as he "unbound his battle-runes" (501). It is clear here that Unferth has a combative attitude, a sense that is heightened by the gloss which translates the phrase as "unleashed his hostile secret thoughts" (76). Also noted is the fact that in Old English, "run" often carries the meaning of "secret" (76). Rune also has an interesting definition in the Oxford English Dictionary. Though there are many definitions and connotations for this word, it can mean for the tongue to "move rapidly," and implies "indiscreet speech." The kenning "battle-runes" strengthens this implication, as the "indiscreet speech" from "runes" is combined with "battle," emphasizing the anger and combativeness that Unferth feels. As Unferth is about to challenge the honor of a man who has come to Heorot with the intention to defeat the murderous Grendel, it seems appropriate to find the words that he will soon speak to Beowulf to be "indiscreet."

Line 502 The theme of Unferth's aggravation with Beowulf is carried over into this line. He is "sorely vexed" (502) by Beowulf's presence in his Heorot. Beowulf is metonymically referred to as "that brave seafarer" (502), a description that appears to offer praise to Beowulf. However, the narrators sentiments do not align with those of Unferth in this instance as he is about to call into question one of the deeds that contributed to Beowulf's bravery. In one definition of "vex," it specifically means "to trouble... by encroachment." Clearly, Unferth feels that Beowulf is infringing upon his territory, and questioning his own prowess. As a warrior who actually lives in Heorot, Unferth should be the one to defend it from the monstrous Grendel. Instead, a stranger has to come to do it for him, an action likely interpreted by Unferth as a slight to his own character. Indeed, Unferth probably also feels that his favored status is at risk as a result of this bold interloper.

Line 503-5 This sentiment is confirmed in the next lines. Here it is verified that Unferth is unhappy with Beowulf's presence in the hall as he did not want anyone else to "care for glory/ under the heavens, more than he himself" (504-5). This makes it clear that he does in fact resent Beowulf for coming to Heorot in an attempt to seize the glory that Unferth feels should rightfully belong to him. The Kenning "middle-earth" (504), the definition of which refers to the earth as being the "middle region between heaven and hell," indicates that Unferth's anger may not be specific to Beowulf, but rather would have been directed at any man who dared to step into what Unferth perceives as his rightful place.

Line 506-7 At this point Unferth actually addresses Beowulf for the first time. His language seems brash and challenging as he asks "Are you the Beowulf who strove with Breca" (506). By being the one to address Beowulf first rather than the other way around, Unferth attempts to control the situation. He is effectively asserting his presence in the mead hall before he attempts to embarrass Beowulf. Owing to Unferth's prominent location, it is likely that many of the other people in the hall are listening to his conversation with Beowulf, and Unferth is probably playing to this notion as he tries to call Beowulf into question as a warrior. However, the simple fact that Unferth knows specific details regarding Beowulf's competition with Breca puts him at somewhat of a disadvantage. Unferth not only knows that Beowulf was in a "swimming contest on the open sea" (507), he even knows the identity of his competitor. This indicates that Beowulf is a well-known individual, and seems to give credence to the fact that he claims to be a worthy opponent for Grendel. However, Beowulf later reveals that he knows of Unferth as well when he accuses him of fratricide, so it is possible that the rivalry Unferth feels with Beowulf may be reciprocal.

Line 508-510 Unferth continues to prove that he has a deep knowledge of Beowulf's exploits as he begins to describe the swimming competition in detail. He immediately accuses Beowulf of having "pride" (508), though he does not intend for this to be taken as a compliment. One definition of pride specifically equates it with "arrogance," and it seems that this is the meaning that Unferth wishes to convey to both Beowulf and anyone else in the hall who is listening. Moreover, Unferth declares that Beowulf did all of this "for a foolish boast" (509). Here, "boast" refers to "an expression of ostentation," meaning that Beowulf must have challenged Breca, or vice versa, to this swimming contest simply to see who was stronger. However, Unferth frowns upon this boast, calling it "foolish," which bears the definition of "wanting in sense or judgement." Thus, Unferth is accusing Beowulf of engaging in reckless behavior for no real purpose other than to stroke his ego.

511-12 If Unferth's disapproval of the swimming contest was not already abundantly apparent, these lines make it quite clear. Rather than considering the competition to be a worthwhile endeavor, he calls it a "sad venture" (512). "Venture" can be defined as "the chance or risk of incurring harm or loss," but as Unferth judges it to be "sad" he clearly does not find it to be worthwhile at all. "Sad" also serves to minimize the feat of the swimming contest. It suggests that this was not some grand moment worthy of praise, but rather that it was simply an ill-conceived stunt intended to determine who possessed more strength.

513 Here, Unferth launches into a description of the contest itself. He uses a kenning in order to invoke the ocean. He describes "ocean-streams" (513) in reference to either the water or the waves through which Beowulf and Breca swam. In addition to the kenning, this line is also noteworthy for the interesting manner in which Unferth describes this contest. Unlike his previous claims that this contest was rather pathetic, his descriptions make it sound exciting

through use of words such as “seized” (513). This word invokes a connotation of strength and power, which is reinforced by several of its definitions which indicate that it is a legal term. As a legal term, this use also implies that Beowulf is somehow exercising ownership over the ocean itself. This does not seem to align with Unferth’s attitude unless the words were spoken with a level of sarcasm, which given Unferth’s “indiscreet speech” does not seem so unlikely.

514 Furthermore, the next line contains another kenning in which Unferth describes Beowulf and Breca’s route across the ocean as “sea-ways” (514). The word “flailed” (514) is particularly interesting. To a modern reader, flailed likely has a connotation of weak or ineffectual flapping. This would seem to be an instance of Unferth openly criticizing Beowulf. However, the oldest definitions for “flail” in the Oxford English Dictionary relate to striking something with a whip, or making a similar motion. This suggests powerful swimming. Therefore, once again, Unferth seems to be praising Beowulf even as he is confronting him and attempting to embarrass him in front of everybody in the hall. As such, this line as well could possibly be intended to have a sarcastic undertone.

515-16 The following lines keep with this theme of a seemingly heroic description of Beowulf and Breca’s contest. Without context for Unferth’s frustration with Beowulf’s arrival in Heorot, these lines would appear to celebrate the swimming contest. However, it is without doubt that Unferth scorns the competition, so his word choice here is interesting and once again suggests that he may be employing verbal irony. In particular, the phrase “the water roiled,/ wintry surges” (515-16) employs impressive sounding language, emphasizing the challenge of the contest between Beowulf and Breca. As is the case in previous sections, it is very unlikely that Unferth is actually giving Beowulf any praise at all. Unferth is possibly being sarcastic, but

it is also possible that he is emphasizing how difficult the contest was in order draw attention to the fact that Beowulf went to such trouble for something Unferth finds pointless.

Line 517-518 After his dramatic lead up describing the contest between Beowulf and Breca, Unferth delivers the insult to which he has been building since the beginning of the section.

Unferth declares to Beowulf that “he outswam you,/ and had more strength” (517-518). Rather than stop at the declaration that Breca won, Unferth adds that he “had more strength.” Without the second half of this claim, it would be possible to assume that perhaps Beowulf lost by some fluke, but it is Unferth’s claim that Breca was stronger that is designed to call Beowulf’s reputation into question. He wishes to instill doubt in Hrothgar’s people. If Beowulf lacks the strength to defeat another human, what would he do against a monster such as Grendel? Indeed, when Beowulf later rebukes Unferth’s statement, he does not deny that Breca defeated him in the race. In fact, early in his retort, Beowulf borrows from Unferth’s diction to claim he “had greater strength on the sea” (533). It is the question of strength that bothers Beowulf rather than his defeat by Breca, thus it is only logical that Unferth would make this claim in his boast against Beowulf.

Works Cited

- Liuzza, R. M., trans. "Beowulf." *The Medieval Period*. Third ed. Ontario: Broadview, 2015. 65-111. Print. The Broadview Anthology of British Literature.