What's the point?: Comparing the 'Finn story' in *Beowulf* and *The Fight at Finnsburh*

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Beowulf has long been acknowledged as a story full of stories. One of the most famous occurs in the first third of the poem: at the celebration of Beowulf's victory over Grendel, a professional poet or *scop* relates the story of how Finn's son and Hnæf Scylding *in Freswæle feallen*, 'fell in Frisian slaughter'. This so-called 'Finn Episode' in *Beowulf* is rarely studied without mentioning *The Fight at Finnsburh*, a fragmentary poem that seems to relate the same story in a different manuscript, now lost. But what does the Finn Fragment actually tell us about the story of the *Freswæle*? Does it do anything at all to help us interpret the Episode?

In this paper originally delivered at the 28th SELIM conference, I will draw on socio-narratological analysis techniques to argue that the Finn Fragment sheds very little light on the detail of the Episode and does not help us understand the story itself. However, it reveals that the *Beowulf* poet has manipulated a story known to exist in the contemporary narrative habitus to make his own point. It also demonstrates the flexibility of narrative since the two versions are dramatically different: where the Fragment celebrates heroic warrior culture, the Episode dwells on the tragedy that results from 'glorious' battles. As this episode participates in the reflective nexus of stories told within *Beowulf*, it also poses modern readers an interesting question: which other embedded narratives has the poet changed in order to manipulate the point of each story and of *Beowulf* as a whole?

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paper I will draw on socio-narratological analysis to argue that the Finn Fragment sheds very little light on the detail of the Episode and does not help understand the story itself. However, it reveals that the *Beowulf* poet has manipulated a story known to exist in the contemporary narrative habitus to make his own point.

The type of analysis that will underpin this discussion relies on an examination of which elements in each story receive the most evaluation, whether from the narrator or from characters. Following Chambers (1984: 3–10) and Labov (1997: 404–406), I take the most evaluated elements of the narrative as an indication of what the story is really about, its point. The cumulative effect of the evaluations is related to the significance of the story and indicate what the storyteller is trying to say to the audience.

Evaluation in this sense can take a few forms. It includes explicit value judgements as well as implicit ones, and they can be delivered either through a character or through the narrator. Direct evaluation is relatively easy to recognise. Indirect evaluation is more subtle and subjective —it could include omission of detail, the tone used by a character or the narrator, what actions a character takes in reaction to something, and so on.

Point of view is bound up in determining who is evaluating what within a text; who expresses a value judgement is as important as the value judgement itself. Therefore I have also focussed my analysis on whose points of view are represented in each narrative and taking that into account when looking at the layers of evaluation in the texts.

As with all methods of literary analysis, this approach must be used with caution. Cultural context and the nuanced connotations of the words and phrases in the text also impact evaluation; in the case of a foreign (or dead) language like Old English, it is possible that a word or phrase a modern audience might interpret as being neutral actually carried some kind of value judgement to the poet and his original audience. However, it is still possible to use this evaluation-focussed approach as an additional tool to attempt understanding what these Englishmen were trying to say 1000 years ago.

As mentioned above, this paper focuses on the story of the battles at Finnsburh between the characters Finn and Hengest. The text survives in two Old English sources: in the so-called 'Finn Episode' in *Beowulf* and in *The*

Fight at Finnsburh or 'Finn Fragment'.[1] The manuscript for the Finn Fragment no longer exists, but the published version of an 18th-century transcription survives (Fulk, Bjork & Niles 2008: 279). The Episode is located in lines 1062–1163a of *Beowulf*, which survives in MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv. The story about the fight at Finnsburh is the only embedded narrative in *Beowulf* that survives independently in a roughly contemporary source in the same language; it is therefore not surprising that the Episode and Fragment are usually studied together.

The story itself can be described as follows; the chief source for this outline is the Episode in *Beowulf*: a group of Danes, led by Hnæf Scylding, is visiting Finn's hall in Friesland. Finn's wife, Hildeburh, is Hnæf's sister. For an undisclosed reason, there is a battle. There are heavy losses on both sides, including Hnæf and his nephew, Hildeburh's son. The battle reaches a stalemate, at which point peace terms are offered. Finn and Hengest, who now represents the Danes, swear to uphold a peace treaty. There is a joint funeral where Hildeburh makes a point of burning her son alongside her brother. Many or all of the Frisians return to their homes for the winter; the Danes remain at the hall with Finn. Hengest broods on revenge over the winter; come spring, the Danes voice their complaints against Finn until Hengest leads them against Finn and his remaining troops. Finn and his men are slaughtered, the hall is plundered, and the Danes go back to Denmark with Finn's household treasures and Hildeburh.

The Fragment reads like an action film. Even though it does not encompass the entire narrative —indeed, it only covers part of the beginning of the story— it is clear that the narrative is very detailed, focusing less on the characters' emotional responses and more on their participation in the battle. The language glories in the quality of the warriors, their splendid gear, and their ability to pay their lord back for all the gold and mead he had provided for them in the past. There are no allusions or complex figurative language, but rather direct descriptions of the action punctuated by evaluative statements indicating how glorious the whole business must be.

It is impossible to say what the main point of the Fragment is because it is fragmentary. However, all but one of the evaluative statements in the Fragment praise the worth of the warriors, their gear, and their actions. The

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[1] The edition used for both texts can be found in R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork & John D. Niles, eds., *Klaeber's Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). All translations are my own.

strong implication is that, whatever the point is, it includes a positive view of the secular heroic code and glory earned in battle.

In contrast, the Episode in *Beowulf* is told in an extremely allusive fashion, skipping over details and focusing more on characters' reaction to things than on describing the action of the narrative. The overall tone is very negative, communicating intense frustration over being unable to act and an intense grief that removes all glory from battle. The story ends in victory for the Danes, but it rings hollow because of how much was lost; instead of praising the brave deeds of the warriors, the poet broods over them.

Three elements in the Episode receive evaluation: the first battle and its effects, the peace treaty, and the second battle. The analysis can be summarised as follows; the Episode is 99.5 lines long, so line count can also be interpreted as a percentage of the overall story.

- The first battle takes up 31.5 lines woven through the whole episode. 16.5 are references to or descriptions of the battle and its impact; 15 lines evaluate the battle through the narrator, Hildeburh, and the Danes.
- The peace treaty occupies the next largest amount of text with 21 lines, most of which appears in one central section; only 1.5 lines of this form an evaluation.
- Finally, the second battle occupies 12 lines, only two of which evaluate the event.

The item that receives the most reference and the most evaluation is the first battle and resulting pain and loss. The lines and half-lines of reference are woven through most of the story and are entirely negative. The audience is never allowed to forget the event and its consequences. The battle is evaluated both through characters and through comments by the narrator. Each opinion represented points to the same thing: human conflicts are complex, difficult to end in a satisfactory way, and result in tragedy even in victory. Living warriors are praised, but in death, *wæs hira blæd scacen* 'their glory was all departed' (line 1124b).

The Episode appears in *Beowulf* at a celebratory feast; given that its point is so pessimistic, it seems strange that the poet would include it at this point in the story. Beowulf has killed Grendel, and the Danes have not yet been attacked by Grendel's mother. Why, then, would a professional storyteller or *scop* at the feast relate such a depressing tale? This choice seems all the

stranger since we have physical evidence that a more appropriate version of the fight story existed in Anglo-Saxon England.

However, it does not appear in the poem as direct speech, but rather as indirect speech. It is the external narrator paraphrasing the performance of Hroðgar's *scop*. Although some editions and scholars mark the tale as direct speech, some arguing that it *must* be direct speech (e.g. Williams 1924: 14–18), I agree with more recent scholarship that this is not the case (e.g. Marsden 2004: 273). The main evidence is the way direct speech is consistently marked throughout *Beowulf*. Of the forty-six instances of direct speech in the poem, all but six are marked with obvious speech verbs such as *maþelian* or *sprecan*, leaving no question of who is speaking or where the speech begins.

The six instances without an obvious speech verb are introduced through some other construction indicating that a quotation is about to appear. In these cases, verbs relating to speech such as *fricgan* 'to question', in combination with personal pronouns in the speech itself, make it clear that direct speech is present. These introductions to direct speech are not present in the Finn Episode; instead, the poet uses *mænan scolde* 'he was to speak [of]', indicating that what follows is what the scop *talked about*, not what he *said*. This phrase is an indicator of indirect speech.

Therefore, the *Beowulf* poet does not present the external audience with the exact story that the character-bound audience 'hears', but rather he presents us with a *description* of the story: we are not meant to think that we experience the same version of the story that the characters experience. We are free to imagine that the characters 'hear' a different, probably longer and more complete, version of the story within the world of the poem. The existence of the Fragment supports this idea because it proves that real Anglo-Saxons knew a suitably heroic version of the Finn story: there is no need to hypothesise that such a version existed.

When it is understood that the Episode is indirect speech and not *exactly* the words the banqueters are meant to hear, we can see what the poet is doing: he has selected a story appropriate for the celebration, but he has manipulated this paraphrase in order to say something different to the external audience.

One important thing this achieves is that it opens the external audience to the possibility of interpreting stories that typically glorify warrior culture from a different perspective. This is the first criticism of secular-heroic culture that appears in *Beowulf*, and it invites the external audience to question whether

Beowulf gained any glory through killing Grendel. Additionally, before Beowulf's arrival in Denmark, many Danes had died in the attempt to defeat Grendel; were their deaths pointless —is their glory all departed? This critique also provides an alternate lens through which the audience can view and judge battles that happen later in the poem.

The voices represented in the Finn Episode come together to criticise the warrior culture glorified in the Finn Fragment while still being a part of it. The story does not simply present a balanced view of the cycle of violence, where glory is juxtaposed with loss and lamentation; instead, it pronounces judgment, stating that the kind of loss resulting from battles deprives people of glory, and the end result is simply more violence and loss. But despite criticising the cycle of violence, the poet does not offer an alternative way of life. Indeed, the idea of attempting peace without bloodshed is all but dismissed. The peace treaty itself is only described once as an important element —but not the heart— of the story, with very little direct evaluation. The implicit evaluation in the form of the treaty's failure is overshadowed by references to the first battle; the characters bear the battle in mind for the rest of the episode, but the peace treaty is totally forgotten.

This critique of secular-heroic culture does not come from an external, 'monkish' voice, but from voices anchored in the culture of the heterocosm: Hildeburh, Hengest, and the narrative voice relating the poem as a whole. This is only the first of several instances where the poet uses his characters and narrator to evaluate warrior society from within. The embedded narratives form a pattern of celebrating characters, such as Beowulf and Hroðgar, while judging the human conflicts in which they participate as ultimately futile and impossible to resolve. The poet —and also the character Beowulf— seems to prefer monster fights: these are straightforward good-vs-evil scenarios that are easily resolved through annihilation of the enemy.

Human fights, on the other hand, have a tendency to flare up even after periods of peace. Indeed, the poem ends with Beowulf's people on the brink of war; his death marks the end of a 50-year peace with the Swedes just as spring marked the end of a winter-long peace between Finn and Hengest. It is worth noting that human conflicts were never far away in the poet's world, either; his refusal to propose an alternative system can be seen as evidence that he is cynical about his own people's ability to refrain from killing each other. Even Christianity's message of peace did not stop the cycle of violence in medieval (or indeed, modern) England. His interest in monster fights acknowledges that humans have violent tendencies, and perhaps the poem is, at least in part,

an imaginative longing for monsters in the real world to provide an outlet for people's aggression.

This critique from within is emphasised by the jarring contrast between the Fragment and the Episode. We cannot know for certain whether the Fragment is the typical representation of the Finnsburh story, but it does provide a point of comparison anchored in a similar geographic and temporal location. The story of Finnsburh was known outside *Beowulf* as a glorious account of a battle, dwelling at least in part on the glorification of individual heroes as well as groups of warriors, and not as a tragic account attesting the human loss resulting from such a battle. By relating the story through indirect speech, the poet is able to maintain verisimilitude in his heterocosm while simultaneously taking the opportunity to present a quite harsh evaluation of the culture it represents. This raises some tantalising questions: which other embedded narratives has he changed so dramatically, which ones has he left in a more familiar form, and how do his modifications (or lack thereof) impact how we understand *Beowulf* as a whole?

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