



THE ART OF
BEOWULF

by

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of Hrothgar as a kind of reaction to this act of grace, a recognition, vouchsafed even to a pagan, that only the One God could have sent him such a champion to save him from unendurable affliction. Beowulf, in his expressions of gratitude to God and acknowledgment of God's mercy, speaks as the human agent of God for noble ends. His soul is saved in virtue of those finer qualities in which, as in his strength, he exceeds other men: courage, loyalty, and love, and willing self-sacrifice.

The Christianity of the poem, then, is much more than "coloring." It manifests itself in the constant affirmation and illustration of a principle which underlies all the dealings of God with men. The primary sin of man against God is pride: through pride Heremod is brought low; through pride (*for wlenco*) Hygelac suffers death in Frisia; Hrothgar, in his monologue, attributes the persecutions of Grendel to Hrothgar's own pride, and he warns Beowulf against this sin. This sin motivates the envy of Unferth, and the usurpation and murder of kin of Hrothulf. From it Beowulf is free, and Beowulf is saved. God's will rules all creation; God's foreknowledge determines Beowulf's victories, failures, and death. Well is it with him who after death—like Beowulf—is permitted to seek peace in the embraces of the Father.

In this, as in his management of the details of his hero's life and as in his use of the complicated materials of the subplot, the poet controls the threads of his design admirably, and weaves them into a magnificent whole. As Walter Morris Hart has said, in the conclusion to *Ballad and Epic, Beowulf* "must be regarded as the work of a poet of remarkable taste and technical skill, who flung aside, far more boldly than the poet of the *Roland*, the binding conventions of popular art, and succeeded in impressing far more deeply his own powerful personality upon his work."

APPENDIX A

The Varieties of Poetic Appellation

Old English poetic appellations fall, in general, into the same categories as those of Old Norse poetry. In practice, however, we observe two major differences: (1) the Old English poetic periphrases are much less esoteric and far-fetched than the Norse; and (2) whereas, in Icelandic poetry, the periphrasis, or the traditional poetic simplex, for a given concept, functions most frequently as substitution for the direct, literal term, in Old English substitution is somewhat less common than the use of the poetic appellation as a variation of an *expressed* literal term, or as a variation of a transparent equivalent for the literal word.

I have discussed elsewhere—"The Meaning of Snorri's Categories," *University of California Publications in Modern Philology*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1952), pp. 129-148—the categories of skaldic appellation listed and illustrated by Snorri Sturluson in his treatise *Skáldskaparmál*. Since all these categories are represented in Old English poetry, it seems logical to use the Icelandic terms—indeed, we have no others—to label each of them, as we have already adopted the term *kenning*.

Snorri called the simplices *ókennd heiti*, which may be translated 'unqualified' or 'uncharacterized terms'; they are uncompounded nouns the

reference of which is not limited in area of application or in scope, nor characterized by a modifying genitive. The *ókent heiti* is simply an unqualified simplex denoting a person or thing. Thus, in Old English, a ship may be called by the literal term *scip*, or *bat*; or by the more figurative *flota*, or *ceol*.

Compounds, too, may be literal or figurative: a ship may be called *wegflota* or *sæbat*. Similarly a sword may be called, quite literally, *guðsweord*; or—in a striking metaphor—*hildeleoma*.

The Icelandic rhetoricians who described the language of skaldic poetry made no distinction between the poetic compounds and the combinations of basic noun with limiting genitive. The two types are indeed logically equivalent: *yðgewinn* and *yða gewinn* mean precisely the same thing. The first element of a compound limits or characterizes the meaning of the second, or basic, element; just as the genitive in a combinatory appellation limits or characterizes the meaning of the basic noun combined with it. The limiting word most frequently expresses the area, the medium, or the object of the action or function denoted by the base-word. In *hildeleoma*, the sword is conceived as a flame which flashes in battle; in *beaga brytta*, a prince is thought of as one who breaks—i.e., who dispenses—rings.

It would be difficult to determine whether poets felt *beaga brytta* as a more elevated term than *beahgifa*, which expresses the same concept without metonymy. In all probability the choice between two such terms for the same referent, the one a compound and the other a basic noun plus genitive, was determined largely by metrical considerations. The compounds are, on the whole, more numerous; but the proportion of one type to the other varies with the concept to be expressed: *Beowulf* contains but two compounds for 'sea' with *yð-* as first element, as against four combinations with the genitive *yða*.

The poet had wide latitude for substitution in these compounds and combinations: he could substitute for either member an exact or approximate synonym. Thus the concept 'sword' may be expressed by the compounds *guðbill*, *guðsweord*, *wigbill*, *hildebill*, *hildemece*; or the poet might use any of the simplices for 'sword': *bill*, *sweord*, *mece*, *heoru*. Words sufficiently archaic to have lost something of their original sense, or to have acquired wider connotations, might be used rather loosely as the first or limiting element in compounds. *Heoru* originally meant 'sword'; but *heorowearh* means 'savage outcast'; *heorodreor*, literally 'sword-gore,' means no more than blood shed from mortal wounds; yet, when the poet says that Hygelac died of 'sword-drinks' (*heorodryncum swealt*), the first element of the compound is literal, and the metaphor—almost a personification—resides in the basic noun.

Among the compound or combinatory appellations which may substitute

for the literal word for a concept or accompany it in variation, the kenning is the most strained, the farthest from the natural and obvious image. As Heusler observed, Meissner's definition of the kenning as a substitution of two or more members for the literal substantive of prose ignores the distinction between two different types of substantive appellation: that which calls the referent something that it is, and that which calls it something which it actually is not. Under Meissner's definition the appellations 'helm-bearer' for 'warrior,' 'wave-traverser' for 'ship,' 'slayer of Fafnir' for Sigurðr are kennings; so also are 'oak of the enforced ransom of the otter' for 'woman,' and 'snow of the crucible' for 'silver.' But we must observe a fundamental distinction here: a warrior actually *is* a helm-bearer; a ship *is* a wave-traverser; whereas a woman is *not* an oak of any kind; nor is silver snow. We are dealing here with two quite distinct rhetorical devices, structurally analogous but in quality utterly distinct. Periphrastic substitutions of the nature of 'helm-bearer,' 'wave-traverser,' 'slayer of Fafnir' can be found on almost any page of Milton; but nothing comparable with 'oak of the enforced ransom of the otter' exists outside of Old Norse poetry. The one is a simple, immediately intelligible allusion; the other is an elaborate, far-fetched conceit, intelligible only to a special audience. The one is not intended to puzzle the hearer even for a moment, but rather to please him by recalling a familiar story or situation or a useful or pleasant quality of the referent, and to permit him to share in the poetic experience. The other pleases only as a riddle pleases; it also contains an allusion or a comparison, but requires the listener to ferret out its secret through the exercise of his own ingenuity.

The skaldic periphrasis for 'woman' just cited is a complex puzzle, involving allusion, substitution, and a grammatical trick. The limiting element is not a single word, but is itself a substituting periphrasis: 'enforced ransom of the otter' stands for the concept 'gold,' in allusion to the ransom which three of the Æsir were compelled to pay Hreiðmarr for the killing of his son Ottarr, the gold of the ransom having itself been taken by force from Andvari. Woman is conceived as the giver of gold, *selja gulls*. Having periphrased the concept 'gold' (*gull*) by *ótr's nauðgjöld*, the skald then substituted for the word *selja*, 'giver'—which also means 'willow'—the word *eik*, which, like *selja*, is a feminine tree-name. But there is a difference between the character of the puzzle involved in periphrasing 'gold' as 'enforced ransom of the otter' and that presented by 'oak' for 'giver': the first is a mythological allusion, and in the myth gold *was* a ransom demanded and paid under duress—gold is characterized as something which, in a given context, it actually *was*. But a giver is *not* an oak: woman, as giver, is called something which woman is *not*. And here, in the identification of a person or thing with something which it is *not*, except in a very

special and artificial sense, lies the nature of the true kenning; a kenning is not merely a metaphor; it is, in Heusler's words, *metapher mit ablenkung*. The base-word identifies the referent with something which it is not, except in a specially conceived relation which the poet imagines between it and the sense of the limiting element. An example which is clearer because it involves no play on words is the skaldic *hliðar þang*, 'tang of the hillside,' for grass or brush, which is not tang, but is called tang because it grows on the hillside as tang grows in the sea. Similarly 'sea of beasts' is a kenning for 'earth': earth is the abiding-place of beasts, as the sea is of fish.

I have used skaldic examples to illustrate the kenning because the extremes to which they carry the principle underlying the figure emphasize the difference between the kenning and other images of similar structure. The Old English kennings are much simpler and more transparent. *Hildenædre*, 'battle-adder,' is a kenning for 'arrow' or 'javelin' (*Elene, Judith*); *garbeam*, 'spear-tree,' is a kenning for 'warrior' (*Exodus*). In these, as in the skaldic kennings, the base-word identifies the referent with something which it is not, except in relation to the concept expressed in the limiting word: an arrow is thought of as stinging those wounded by it in battle, as an adder stings in the field; a warrior stands firm in strife, as a tree stands in the forest; the limiting noun 'spear' substitutes for a noun denoting 'battle,' the sphere in which the warrior functions. In all kennings there is a tension between the concept and the base-word; the limiting word partially resolves the unreality of that relation.

The qualitative difference between these kennings and such compounds and combinations as 'helm-bearer,' 'wave-traverser,' 'heath-stepper,' 'breaker of rings' is obvious. These last, unlike kennings, express the concepts for which they stand through an identification of the referent with something which it actually *is*. In the four metaphorical instances cited by Klaeber, however, we have genuine kennings: 'candle of the sky,' 'gem of heaven' are terms for 'sun' in which the base-word calls the referent something which it is not, except in an imagined relation to the sky or the heavens. The sun is neither a candle nor a gem; but it illumines the sky as a candle illumines a room, and it adorns the heavens with its gleam as a gem adorns and shines upon a garment. The body is not a house; but it may be called *banhus* because it contains the bones as a house contains its occupants. A sword is not a flame; but in the kenning *beadoleoma* it is imagined as giving forth light in battle as a torch or brand gives light in darkness.

The kenning is indeed a metaphor; but it is not a direct or a just metaphor. It depends for its effect not upon the listener's recognition that a given thing is so like that with which it is identified that the identification has immediate poetic truth; it depends upon the hearer's ability and will-

ingness to see likeness within unlikeness, and the unlikeness must seem to be dissipated through the limiting word, which expresses an area, or a condition, within which likeness may be imagined. There are metaphors which are not kennings: for example, *forstes bend* for the ice which 'binds' the water in winter; *wintergewæde* (*Phoenix*) for the snow which covers the earth. A metaphor is a kenning only if it contains an incongruity between the referent and the meaning of the base-word; in the kenning the limiting word is essential to the figure because without it the incongruity would make any identification impossible.

Those periphrases which are not kennings, but which possess the same structure as the kenning, and which identify the referent as something which it *is*, may best be called by the Old Icelandic term *ķend heiti*. A *ķeiti*, in its more precise sense, is a substantive simplex; such a *ķeiti* becomes *ķent*, that is, 'characterized,' in terms of some actual quality or relationship, when it is combined with some limiting word. *ķend heiti* emphasize "a certain quality of a person or thing," as Klaeber says, or one of its aspects or functions. A great many *ķend heiti* denoting persons have as base-word a noun of agency: a king is 'breaker of rings'; a warrior is a 'helm-bearer.' Even *ķend heiti* denoting some animals or objects may have nouns of agency as base-words: a dragon is an 'air-flyer,' a ship is a 'wave-traverser.'

One special variety of *ķent heiti*, very common in both Icelandic and Old English poetry, is called by the Icelanders *viðķenning*. This is one of two varieties of appellation which Snorri groups together as *fornöfn*—that is, as substitutions not for concepts, but for the *names* of persons. The *viðķenning* has the structure base-noun combined with limiting genitive; but its base-word is always a term of ownership or of personal relationship (e.g., 'owner,' 'father,' 'brother,' 'son,' 'friend,' 'enemy,' 'slayer,' etc.); and its limiting word is the *name* of the person or the owned object with whom, or with which, the specified relationship exists, or a recognizable substitute therefor. In skaldic poetry Thor is called 'Lord of Bilskirnir'; Njörðr is 'father of Freyr'; Freyr is 'foe' or 'slayer of Beli'; King Olaf I of Norway is 'son of Tryggvi.' In Old English poetry Beowulf is *sunu Ecgðeowes*, *bearn Ecgðeowes*, etc.; Hrothgar is *Healfdenes hildewisa*; Hygelac is *bona Ongenþeoes*.

The *viðķenning* is NOT a variety of kenning, nor does its name imply that it partakes of the nature of the kenning. The word means, simply and literally, 'a characterization in terms of' a specific person or named thing; it is derived from the verb *ķenna*, which in rhetoric meant 'to make a characterizing periphrasis.' Snorri, in his initial classification of the skaldic poetic appellations, carefully excluded the *fornöfn* from the category of the kenning. The word *fornöfn* is regularly used in the Icelandic grammatical treatises to translate *prænomen*; and indeed the *viðķenning* is pronominal

in function: it stands for a *name*. Other types of *kennd heiti*, and all kennings, stand not for names, but for concepts. As *fornafn*, a *viðkenning* always stands for the name of one specific individual, and distinguishes him from all others; whereas other kinds of *kennd heiti*, and kennings, describe the referent typically. Thus *eodor Scyldinga*, 'protector of the Shieldings,' is a *kent heiti* applied to Hrothgar, but it could be applied with equal propriety to any Danish king; but the *viðkenning sunu Healfdenes*, used of Hrothgar after the death of his brothers, could mean no one but Hrothgar. The *viðkenning* identifies a specific individual, and stands for him alone. It stands lower than any other type of appellation in its poetic quality, which resides entirely in its allusiveness; in its direct and unmistakable identification it is poles apart from the kenning.

In the use of the *viðkenning* for the name of any person, there is no intent to mystify, to compel the listener to supply the answer to an unasked question. The scop's audience was thoroughly familiar with royal genealogy and with heroic legend, and recognized instantly the person referred to. The *viðkenning* at once lost its character as a rhetorical device when it was used with, instead of as a substitution for, the name of the referent. *Mago Healfdenes, sunu Frodan*, used instead of the name, had the same poetic quality that attaches to any simple literary allusion; but this was instantly lost when the *viðkenning* stood in close juxtaposition to the name. Thus, in the well-known formula *Beowulf mapelode, bearn Ecgðeowes*, the combination *bearn Ecgðeowes* is not a *viðkenning*, but a mere patronymic.

And therein lies a most important distinction between the *viðkenning* on the one hand and other varieties of *kennd heiti* and the kenning on the other: whereas the *viðkenning* loses all poetic quality, and its very existence as an allusion, in combination with the name of the referent, other kinds of *kennd heiti*, and kennings, are used freely in Old English poetry either as substitutions for, or side by side with, the literal word for the referent, without losing, in either case, any of their poetic effect. Too much emphasis has been placed upon substitution as an essential character of the kenning: it is most commonly a substitution in Old Norse, but not in Old English. Most frequently, in Old English poetry, we find kennings and *kennd heiti* used as variations of the direct and literal word for the referent, or as variations of one another. Old English poets did not share the fondness of the skalds for mystification; and they carried variation to lengths undreamed of by Norse poets. In *Elene* 117-120 we find the kenning *hildenædran* used as a variation for the specific term for the referent, *flana scuras, garas*; and in *Judith* 221-222:

leton forð fleogan flana scuras,
hildenædran of hornbogán.

In *Beowulf* 1965b-66a the kenning *woruldandel* is explained in the next line by the variation *sigel*, an *ókent heiti* (i.e., a poetic simplex) for the referent, the sun. Indeed, it is one of the characteristic traits of Old English poetic style that kenning and *heiti* are most often used in variations: the variation, rather than kenning or *heiti*, is, for the poet, the prime consideration; the poetic simplex or periphrasis is the material out of which the variation is made.

The essence of the kenning is the incongruity between its referent and that which it is called in the base-word, and an artificial resolution of the incongruity through the choice of limiting word. When a ship is called 'wain of the roller,' it is conceived as moving forward on the rollers which permit it to be thrust down to the water as a wain moves forward on its wheels. The identification is unreal; the very resolution is imperfect, since a wain moves forward not on rollers, but on wheels. Creation and apprehension of such a strained metaphor require an act of intellectual exercise not unlike that required by a riddle. The *kent heiti*, possessing the same structure as the kenning, embodies not a strained image, not an identification of the referent with something which it is not, but a just metaphor or metonymy; it involves no incongruity, and may be apprehended at once. Its base-word may be a noun denoting the material of which the referent is made, or one of its parts, or one of its functions or qualities; the limiting word expresses the medium or area in which the function is performed, or the object upon which it is performed, or some characterizing attribute (as in *fetelhilt, wundenstefna*) or some quality which gives the thing its value (*mægenwudu, ellenweorc*).

In the formation of kennings and *kennd heiti* substitution plays a most important part. Once a poetic appellation has been formed and has become an accepted part of the language of poetry, new compounds and combinations may be formed to express the same concept, by the substitution for either one, or for both, of its parts of an exact or approximate synonym. This is, indeed, the primary manner in which the poetic vocabulary was expanded. A spear may be called *mægenwudu*; for the first element its approximate synonym *prec-* may be substituted. Since *hild* and *beado* are synonyms, a sword may be called either *hildeleoma* or *beadoleoma*. A warrior may be called *guðwiga, guðfreca, guðbeorn*; or *hilderinc, hildemecg, hildfreca*. This is a procedure less artificial than it may appear: it is almost inevitable that the poetic vocabulary should develop largely in this manner in a compounding language.