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The Meaning of the Name 'Hygd': Onomastic Contrast in *Beowulf*

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Although it has been nearly fifteen years since Fred Robinson claimed that there was "a growing awareness" among scholars "of a pervasive onomastic strain in much Anglo-Saxon writing,"[1] little has been accomplished since in the establishing of the relationship of onomastics to Old English poetics. A major poetic device in *Beowulf* and other Old English poems, contrast has been long recognized by scholars,[2] and contrast between characters in *Beowulf* has also been widely noted.[3] Few, however, have recognized that names illustrate some of the same characteristics as the poetic devices the *Beowulf* poet used or that onomastic contrasts can move the lingual content from

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[1] Fred Robinson, "Anglo-Saxon Onomastics in the Old English *Andreas*," *Names*, 21 (1973), 133.

[2] Klaeber pointed out that the poet likes to "contrast situations and events," citing nine examples in his edition, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1950), lxii. The contrast of the hero in his youth to the hero in his old age was shown by J.R.R. Tolkien in "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," *PBA*, 22 (1936), 245-295. Robert E. Kaske noted thematic contrast in "*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*," *SP*, LV (1958), 423-456. See also Jerome Mandell, "Contrast in Old English Poetry," *ChauR* 6 (1971), 1-13, and Bernard F. Huppé, *The Web of Words* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1970), especially pp. 64-114 on "The Dream of the Rood." A recent study by Huppé, *The Hero in the Earthly City: A Study and Translation of Beowulf* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1984), stresses the poet's reliance on polarities.

mere device to structural and semantic content, giving direction to interpretation. An example of a name which directs interpretation by contrast is that of *Hygd* for Hygelāc's wife; the name given to this queen demonstrates the poet's fondness for contrast to develop character and story as well as his familiarity with Old Germanic principles of naming, and well-known practices of Old English poetry. The *Beowulf* poet could have inherited the figurative use of names from three traditions: the well-established pagan Germanic, the exegetical, and "the celebrated commentaries on classical poetry, such as those of Servius and Donatus," whose works have been noted by Ogilvy as having been known in England between 597 and 1066.[4]

Except for the eight or nine names of definite English origin, most of the personal names in *Beowulf* are Scandinavian. Prior to the Conquest in England, the elements of personal names are nouns and adjectives referring to natural phenomena, fierce animals, desirable personal traits, and familiar weapons. These names are usually compounds of two semantic units, either of which can be combined with another, although many elements tend to be found more frequently in one of the two positions.[5] For example, *Ecg-*, 'sword,' the first element in the name of Beowulf's father, is almost always found as the first element in a compounded name, while *-þeow,* 'servant,' is usually found in the final position. Compounding of nouns in a similar manner is a favorite poetic device of the Old English poet. Furthermore, Woolf has shown in *The Old Germanic Principles of Name-Giving* that Germanic naming-customs exhibit well-established principles, namely those of alliteration, variation, and repetition,[6] devices also frequently used by the Old English poet. Unlike the Old English poetic device of amplification by apposition, also known as variation, variation in Germanic names is the practice of forming one name so that it differs from another through the change of a single element, for example, AElf*red* and

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[3]W.J. Sedgefield, *Beowulf,* 3rd ed. (Manchester, 1935), 130; and Adrien Bonjour, *The Digressions in Beowulf* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 55.

[4]Clarence Steinberg, "For a Servian Reading of *Beowulf*: Further Studies in Old English Onomastics," *NM*, 79 (1978), 321-329.

[5]Several exceptions to this rule, however, occur in *Beowulf*: Beo*wulf*, *Wulf*gar and *Gar*mund; AEsc*here* and *Here*mod; Hrodulf and *Wulf*gar.

[6]Henry B. Woolf, *The Old Germanic Principles of Name-Giving* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1938), 1-3.

Æþel*red*, or *Ead*gar and *Ead*mund. Variation also occurs through an addition of a new element to an uncompounded name, as in *Gode* and *God*gifu, and transposition of both name elements as in Beorht*wulf* and *Wulf*beorht. These principles of name-giving were, to be sure, developed by an oral society as mnemonic devices, but they persisted in the English chronicles long after written histories insured the accuracy of records. The three dynasties in *Beowulf* clearly show these practices. The genealogies of the Danes, Geats, and Swedes also exhibit alliteration, and the names in the Danish royal house show variation.

The Christian tradition of onomastics originates in the Old Testament etymologies; from these sprang a vigorous tradition of name etymologizing in learned exegetical works, sermons, saints' lives, and folk etymologies, which, although not as popular as in Old Irish and Old Norse, have been shown by the work of Fred C. Robinson and others to be an integral part of OE poetry.[7] Multiple etymologies of one name, frequently used by the Christian fathers who believed that a name revealed the essence of the person named, offend modern philologists, who seek name origins with so-called scientific methods. To the uninitiated modern reader, the results of medieval onomastic practices can be baffling, if not outrageous. But such multiple etymologies were held in high regard in the Middle Ages for it was believed that divine providence ordered even the naming of individuals. A standard reference work in the Middle Ages drawing together all human knowledge, a truly encyclopedic compendium of classical learning, is Isidore of Seville's seventh century *Etymologies* which derives its name from its compiler's practice of "explaining" the origins of words and names he discusses. The following example, a copious explanation of origins and meanings of the name *Cecilia* which Chaucer used in the "Second Nun's Tale," comes from Isidore through a thirteenth century collection of saints' lives, *The Golden Legend*, produced by a Genoese Dominican, Jacobus de Voragine:

> Cecilia comes from *coeli lilia*, lily of Heaven, or from *caecis via*, a way unto the blind, or from *coelum*, Heaven, and *lya*, one who works. Or again, it is the same as *caecitate carens*, free from blindness, or comes

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[7] See Fred Robinson, "The Significance of Names in Old English Literature," *Anglia*, 86 (1968), 14-58 and "Some Uses of Name-Meanings in Old English Poetry," *NM*, 69 (1968), 161-71. Also Mark Allen "Name-Play and Structure in the Old English *Exodus*," *Literary Onomastic Studies*, X (1983), 301-313. A general survey of literary onomastics is Elizabeth M. Rajec, *The Study of Names in Literature: A Bibliography* (New York: K.G. Saur Pub. Inc., 1978).

> from *coelum* and *leos,* people. For Cecilia was a heavenly lily by her virginity; or she is called a lily because of the whiteness of her purity, the freshness of her conscience, and the sweet odour of her good renown. She was a way unto the blind by her example, a heaven by her unwearying contemplation, a worker by her diligent labour. Or she is called a heaven because, as Isidore says, the philosophers asserted that the heavens are revolving, round and burning. Thus Cecilia was revolving in that she went around in her good works; she was round in perseverance, and burning with charity.[8]

Chaucer's Second Nun had the good sense to stop right here in her Prologue, although the original in the *Golden Legend* elaborates for six more lines. The tradition of multiple etymologizing continues, as this example shows, practically unchanged at least from the seventh to the fourteenth centuries.

The commentaries on classical poetry which could have influenced the *Beowulf* poet provide examples of onomastic exposition which result in a figurative interpolation for parts of a work, but the figures do not add up to a single-overriding allegorical statement, such as that given by Fulgentius of Vergil's *Aeneid*. Fulgentius's etymologies, moreover, are far more extravagant than anything attempted in *Beowulf.* If the poet was heir to any one of these traditions, he was certainly conditioned to be conscious of the names he uses, especially those which he changes or invents for thematic purposes, as has been recently argued by Constance Hieatt about the name Modþryðo.[9] The availability of the hoard of Germanic name elements, most of which had symbolic or folkloric value, provided him with an immense potential for name choice. Given such potential, he shows considerable restraint. In fact, he never names Beowulf's mother, certainly a lady whose position merits a name rich in significance. Nor does he choose a name for Hildeburh's son, whose body she consigns to the funeral pyre of his uncle and mortal enemy, Hnæf.

On the other hand, the *Beowulf* poet thrusts into important roles people whose names are elsewhere completely unknown. The prime example of this is, of course, the hero, Beowulf, whose name is never connected with the Danes or even the Geats in any other source, although it repeats the name of Beowulf the Scylding, listed in the poem as the son of the equally fictitious Scyld. Just as Beowulf the Geat is violent-

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[8] *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), 689.

[9] Constance B. Hieatt, "Modþryðo and Heremod; Intertwined Threads in the *Bēowulf* Poet's Web of Words," *JEGP*, 83 (1984), 173-182.

ly inserted into a story whose outlines are known throughout England and Scandinavia, so also are all the members of his family except Hygelāc, his uncle, whose death is the only firmly documented historical event of the poem. The genealogical tables show that all members of the Geatish royal house have names beginning with "h", as do the names of all the offspring of Healfdene except that of Freawarv, his granddaughter. Beowulf's name does not alliterate with that of his father, nor with the names of the members of his mother's family in the Geatish royal house. As far as his name is concerned, Beowulf seems an intruder in both houses. Since all the names in his father's family are probably poetic inventions, the *Beowulf* poet has taken special care to make his hero the exception to the principles of Old Germanic naming customs which are elsewhere in the poem followed with great consistency. Through the careful choice of the hero's name, the poet makes Beowulf extraordinary.

The names of the women in *Beowulf* present special problems for a number of reasons. Even though in Kent, Mercia, and Northumberland, the historical accounts Henry Woolf has presented show that daughters' names alliterate with those of their fathers with greater uniformity than those of the sons, conclusions about Germanic father-daughter naming traditions based on the evidence in *Beowulf* might be unsound because of the low percentage of women's names in the poem.[10] For instance, of the twelve Danes by birth in the genealogy of the Danish royal family, only two daughters are noted and one, the younger sister of Hroðgar, is left unnamed. Moreoever, the one named daughter in this genealogy, Freawaru, has a name which does not vary, repeat or alliterate with the name of either of her parents, an exception to the Germanic principles of alliteration, variation, and repetition. In the Swedish royal family as presented in *Beowulf*, not one woman, named or unnamed, appears. Of the seven members of the Geatish royal family, the two left unnamed are women, one of which is the daughter of Hygelāc who marries Eofor. The other is Beowulf's mother, the sister of Hygelāc.

The two remaining named women related to the royal houses of the Danes and Geats appear because they have married kings: Wealhþeow, the wife of the Danish king Hroðgar; and Hygd, the wife of the Geatish king Hygelāc. Both are striking and powerful queens with peculiar names, but Hygd's is of special interest.

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[10]Henry B. Woolf, "The Naming of Women in Old English Times," *MP*, 36 (1938), 116-117.

Hygd, the wife of Beowulf's maternal uncle, King Hygelāc, is not a genuinely historical individual; that is, although Hygelāc certainly had a wife, no allusions to her survive in any source other than *Beowulf.* The name *Hygd* may have some remote parallels in Old West Norse and Old Danish, but Björkman thinks that it is probably a fanciful name because it is completely unknown outside the Old English epic.[11] Kemp Malone established the derivation of the name from Old English *gehydg,* "thought," "mind,"[12] earlier suggested by Klaeber.[13] This name exhibits two of the three principles of name-giving in the Germanic tradition, alliteration and variation. The initial "h" of Hygd alliterates with the initial sound of the name of her father, Hæreð, and with that of her genuinely historical husband, Hygelāc, the Geatish king whose disastrous raid in Frisia is recorded by Gregory of Tours in his history of the Franks. Alliterating names, of course, were usually given to offspring, not spouses, or even future spouses. Yet, as I will later explain, the alliteration of the name *Hygd* with the name of her husband produces singularly effective results.

The second kind of variation the name *Hygd* displays, again with Hygelāc, is that of addition—or in this case, subtraction—of one of the usual two name elements found in the Germanic tradition. Normally, variation by addition is formed by the attaching of a second element, either initially or finally, to that of a relative who has a one-element name. For example, Wulf's son is named Wulfgar, 'wolf + spear,' or the son of Sige, 'victory,' is Beorhtsige, 'bright + victory.' In the case of Hygd, however, the operation is reversed; her name may have been developed by the poet by subtracting an element, the final and, as I will show, damning element, *-lāc*, from the name of her husband, the rash Hygelāc.

Moreover, the name *Hygd* deserves further scrutiny because it is an uncompounded name and it has an abstract meaning; both characteristics are relatively rare in *Beowulf*, the latter extremely so. Of the other four names usually taken to be abstract, *Froda, Halga, Freawaru,* and *(H)unferð,* the meanings of the last two are notoriously difficult to establish but this is not the place to review the arguments about these names which can hardly be settled by the limited considerations of this paper. In any case, Axel Olrik points out that heroic names of

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[11] Erik Björkman, "Studien über die Eigennamen im *Beowulf*," *Stud. zur engl. Phil.* LVIII (1920), 76.

[12] Kemp Malone, "Hygd," *MLN*, 56 (1941), 356-358.

[13] Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1950), 438. Klaeber also speculated that the names of Hygd and Unferð were perhaps coined by the poet. See p. cxviii.

abstract meaning are never found in Scandinavian sources, although they are quite familiar in Anglo-Saxon lays, suggesting an Anglo-Saxon origin for the name *Hygd.*[14] Many of the single element names which appear in *Beowulf* are those of natural events, virtues, animals, and weapons familiar to and characteristic of the culture the poem presents. For instance, the Danish warrior and hunter society, the poet tells us, has men named Scyld, "shield," and Wulf, "wolf." Another single element name in the poem which may have a meaning nearly as abstract as that of *Hygd* is *Ðryð,* the wife of King Offa. Although it is uncertain whether this is a single or double element name—i.e., Ðryð or Modþryð—the final element is, according to Björkman, parallel to the Old English noun, þryð, 'might, power, force, strength, majesty, multitude, troops.'[15] From parallels with well-documented semantic developments of Old English nouns, however, it is safe to conclude that the noun *þryð* originally meant the most tangible of the glosses Björkman cites, that is, 'troops, men of arms, warriors,' and only by later extension the abstractions, 'might, power, force and majesty.' Moreoever, the name of the queen of the English Offa is recorded in the *Life of Offa II* as "Drida," which, although Chambers claims it is "just another way of spelling Ðryð,"[16] in fact exhibits consonant change. In light of Kiernan's recent work on the date of *Beowulf,*[17] we can no longer reject the historicity of this lady as the queen of the Mercian king, nor can we give the *Beowulf* poet credit for the name *Ðryð,* however appropriate or inappropriate it may have been. Therefore, *Hygd* is apparently the only single element name with an abstract meaning which the poet himself creates.

In yet a different way the poet frustrates analysis of the name *Hygd* because he describes another queen whose name he also invented as even more thoughtful and mindful than Hygd herself. This lady is Hroðgar's queen, Wealhþeow; she seems more suitable for the name *Hygd* because she exhibits the traits associated with "thought," "mind" even more than Hygelāc's queen. Granted, the poet tells us that Hygd is prudent and kind to her people, and offers the throne to Beowulf after Hygelāc's death, but the poet hardly dwells on her as he does on the Danish queen. He gives long speeches to Wealhþeow which dramat-

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[14] Axel Olrik, *The Heroic Legends of Denmark*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (London: London University Press, 1919), 64.

[15] Björkman, 102.

[16] R.W. Chambers, *Beowulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 37.

[17] Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981).

ically reveal her character; Hygd never directly says a word. At the feast in Heorot, Wealhþeow carefully prepares for her speeches to Hroðgar, Beowulf, and Hroþulf, her nephew. She begs her husband not to forget their sons despite his "adoption" of Beowulf (*Beowulf*, 1062-1073).[18] She asks Hroþulf and Beowulf to protect her sons in the event of Hroðgar's death, reminding the one of past favors, 1074-1080, and promising the other even more gifts, 1111-1125. She is truly thoughtful and mindful of the position of her sons, thoroughly conscious of what the future might hold for them. Her complete appreciation of the situation makes her more deserving of the name *Hygd* than Hygelāc's queen.

Why, then, did the *Beowulf* poet give the name *Hygd* to Hygelāc's wife and not to Hroðgar's? It would alliterate just as well. We must remember that to the poet, Hygelāc was an immutable historical name, one which in the Continental sources seems always to suggest a man despised for his rash and fatal raids in Frisia. The elements of his name suggest a frivolity or thoughtlessness which caused the disastrous Frisian expedition. *Hyge-*, the first element, is associated with the mind just as Hygd's name is. Professor Kaske has argued that the final element, *-lāc*, is an otherwise unattested Old English word, **-laec*, with a meaning similar to modern English "lack" or "a lack of."[19] According to the *OED*, modern English "lack" derives from Middle Dutch *lac*, corresponding to Middle Low German *lak*, and does not appear till the early Middle English period. Fred Robinson has noted that whereas **-laec* occurs nowhere else in Old English, *-lac*, "play," is very common as a second element of compound names.[20] He cites Cuthlāc, Ealāc, Guthlāc, Hathulāc, and Oslāc as examples in Old English, and Frankish, Scandinavian and other sources which "leave no doubt that the second element of the original name was Germanic **-laikaz*, Old English *-lāc*."

In eliciting significance from a name received from history, the *Beowulf* poet could have been following the well-established medieval tradition of deducing from a single name multiple meanings suggested by a word play latent in the final element, for he might have seen the

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[18] Klaeber's edition is used throughout.

[19] Robert E. Kaske, "'Hygelac' and 'Hygd'," *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. Stanley B. Greenfield, repr. with new "Author's Note" (New York, 1973), 200-206.

[20] Fred Robinson, "The Significance of Names in Old English Literature," *Anglia*, 86 (1968), 53.

possibility of both "mindlessness" as well as "frivolity" in the name *Hygelāc.* Considering this familiar medieval onomastic practice, the interpretations of Kaske and Robinson are not mutually exclusive.

One device the poet used to capitalize on the etymological possibilities of the received name, *Hygelāc*, was the development of the name of his wife which juxtaposes with his in *both* interpretations of the final element. The subtraction of the final *-lāc* from Hygelāc's name to develop the name of his wife effectively isolates that element for analysis, just what Professors Kaske and Robinson have done. Although contrast of characters through name oppositions is not regarded as a typical Germanic name-giving technique, Klaeber noted that "characterization by contrast is seen in *Beowulf* in the cases of Ðryð-Hygd and of Heremod-Beowulf."[21]

Through variation of and alliteration with an inalterable received name, *Hygelāc*, the *Beowulf* poet developed the probably Old English name *Hygd*, which, by juxtaposition, underscores the multiple etymologies possible in an historical name. In probing the possibly multiple and prophetic onomastic significances latent in a received name, the poet exploited familiar medieval Christian practices as well as traditional Germanic principles of naming.

Variation examples: from Henry B. Woolf, *The Old Germanic Principles of Name Giving* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins), 1938.

1. Variation through changing 1st element:
   Ælf/*rēd* and Æl/*rēd*

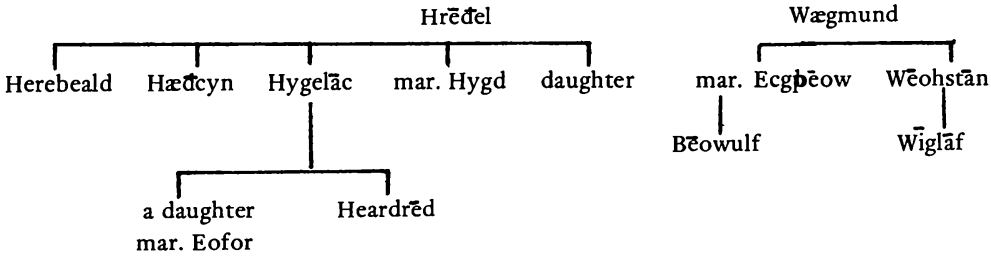
2. Variation through changing 2nd element:
   Ead/gār and *Ead*/mund

3. Variation through addition:
   *God*e and *God*/gifu;
   Wulf and *Wulf*/gār;
   Sige and Beorht/*sige*

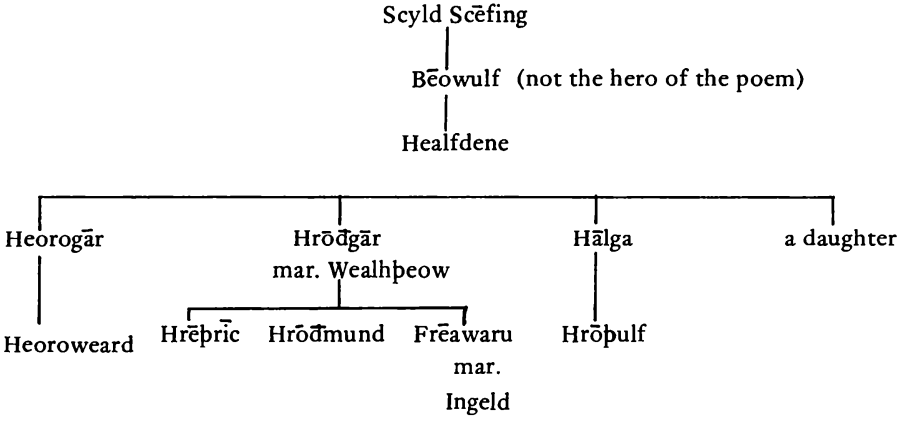
4. Variation through transposition:
   Beorht/*wulf* and *Wulf*/beorht

[21] Klaeber, lxii.

The Geat Royal Family*



The Danish Royal Family



*The genealogical tables are adapted from Klaeber's edition of *Beowulf*.

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