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[Invitational Lecture]

Questioning the Validity of Some Notes by Prominent Old English Scholars*

Sung-Il Lee (Yonsei University)

The interpretative observations made by the scholars of fame are often taken to be absolutely true—so much so that most students will consider it an act of heinous treason or sacrilege even to question their truthfulness. To respect the foregoing scholars' achievements is one thing; to question the truthfulness of what they have said another. When misinterpretation of a certain passage or phrase occurs in an influential book, such as *A Guide to Old English* or *Beowulf: An Edition*, both edited by Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, the students will not notice it, nay, not even question whether what the editors say

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is correct or not, because for them these books are like the Holy Bible, the authority of which is not to be challenged.

The two books mentioned above continue to be the standard textbooks for 'Introduction to Old English' and '*Beowulf*,' the two introductory courses in Anglo-Saxon studies in many graduate programs. For this very reason, we must not remain blind to the blunders the renowned scholars have made in them: the misinterpretations suggested by them can persist for a long time, thus influencing the students' approach to the works involved.

In this paper, I wish to call the reader's attention to three instances of misinterpretation of words or phrases that appear in the notes on *Beowulf*, and one on *The Wife's Lament*, all by prominent scholars of Old English poetry.

I

After Beowulf defeats Grendel, the Danes celebrate his victory over the monster. While the jubilee goes on, a thane endowed with eloquence and resourceful with abundance of old tales recounts the stories of Sigemund and of Heremod (ll. 874b-915). The life-story of Sigemund and that of Heremod, as narrated at this point, are quite contrasting: Sigemund was a triumphant winner of his goal, and Heremod was one whose career turned out disastrous, quite disillusioning for those who had harbored much hope for him. Why did the *Beowulf*-poet feel the urge to insert this digression? Surely, there must have been some motive lying behind this insertion of a digression in the course of telling Beowulf's triumphant achievement as an epic hero.

But to turn to the point at issue—how my reading of the passage on Sigemund's success as a heroic warrior mandates slight departure from

Mitchell's and Robinson's—please allow me to read the relevant lines in my translation:

He did not miss anything
In telling what he had heard say of Sigemund's
Deeds of valor, many an unknown tale,
The strife of the son of Wæls, his journeys afar,
The feuds and the evil deeds, of which the offspring of men
Had no knowledge of—except Fitela with him,
To whom he would not mind revealing such matters,
As uncle to his nephew: they were always so close
Companions in every battle they fought together.
They had together defeated many a clan of giants
With their swords. For Sigemund sprang up
Not a little glory after the day of his death,
When, hardy as he was in battle, he killed a serpent
That watched over treasure. Under a gray stone, he,
Son of a prince, ventured all alone upon
The daring deed, nor was Fitela with him.
However, it befell him that the sword pierced
The wondrous worm that it staid stuck on the wall,
The splendid sword did; the dragon died of the deadly stroke.
The fierce fighter, with his valor, had incurred
That he could rejoice at claiming the ring-hoard,
Upon his own will. He loaded his sea-boat,
Bore into the ship's bosom the dazzling adornments,
Son of Wæls did. The dragon had melted away hot.
(ll. 874b-897; my translation)

As retold by the *Beowulf*-poet, Sigemund, son of Wæls, a hero in the Northern saga, attained the height of his martial glory by slaying a dragon that had been the warden of a treasure-hoard. His loyal companion throughout his

martial adventures had been Fitela, his nephew (or son, since the latter was given birth by Sigemund's twin-sister, who had coaxed him to sleep with her); but in achieving the zenith of his martial feat, the slaying of the dragon, Sigemund was not aided by his young kin.

In regard to this episode Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson make the following observation:

> A major discrepancy between *Beowulf* and other tellings of the story is that Sigemund seems to slay the dragon in *Beowulf*, whereas in all other versions his son Siegfried is the dragon-slayer. But if we take *wīges heard* (l. 886) and *æþelinges bearn* (l. 888) as referring to Sigemund's (unnamed) son, then there is no discrepancy. (Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf* 77n)

In the above note, Mitchell and Robinson say, "Sigemund seems to slay the dragon in *Beowulf*," and, "if we take *wīges heard* (l. 886) and *æþelinges bearn* (l. 888) as referring to Sigemund's (unnamed) son, then there is no discrepancy ['between *Beowulf* and other tellings of the story']". I totally disagree with Mitchell and Robinson. They overlook what is clearly stated in ll. 884b-889:

> Sigemunde gesprong
> æfter dēaðdæge dōm unlytel,
> syðþan wīges heard wyrm ācwealde,
> hordes hyrde hē under hārne stān,
> æþelinges bearn ān ġenēðde
> frēcne dæde, nē wæs him Fitela mid; (ll. 884b-889)[1)]

> [For Sigemund sprang up
> Not a little glory after the day of his death,

1) All quotations from *Beowulf* are from Klaeber.

When, hardy as he was in battle, he killed a serpent
That watched over treasure. Under a gray stone, he,
Son of a prince, ventured all alone upon
The daring deed, nor was Fitela with him.] (ll. 884b-889; my translation)

The emphasis here is that not even Fitela, who had been Sigemund's lifelong companion in all battles, was nearby, when the latter was slaying the dragon. Moreover, contextually speaking, there is no point in emphasizing that, not Sigemund, but his son (or nephew) did the dragon slaying, in a passage glorifying the martial feat of the former. The phrases, *wīges heard* (l. 886) and *æþelinges bearn* (l. 888), both allude to Sigemund—not Fitela, as Mitchell and Robinson think.

Sigemund's slaying the dragon guarding a treasure-hoard, I wish to emphasize here, does foreshadow Beowulf's slaying the fire-spewing dragon toward the end of the epic. Both Sigemund and Beowulf fight a treasure-guarding dragon, and when we reach the point of listening to the lines depicting the poignant loneliness that Beowulf must face in his confrontation with the Dragon, we are bound to recall the glory that Sigemund attained by slaying a treasure-hoard warden alone, in retrospection. A point to note to reassure ourselves that no digression is haphazard—that any apparently impromptu 'digression' is mandated by artistic craftsmanship that a creative artist must exert, either consciously or unwittingly.

II

Beowulf's victory over Grendel invites the marauding of a monster more formidable than Grendel himself—his mother, who wishes to revenge her brat's

death. One of the victims of her vengeful attack on Heorot is Æschere, one of Hrothgar's dearest thanes. While addressing Beowulf to request him to perform an act of retribution for Æschere's death, Hrothgar utters the following lines:

> ond nū ōþer cwōm
> mihtig mānscaða, wolde hyre mæg wrecan,
> gē feor hafað fæhðe gestæled,
> þæs þe þincean mæg þegne monegum,
> sē þe æfter sincgyfan on sefan grēoteð,—
> hreþerbealo hearde; nū sēo hand ligeð,
> sē þe ēow wēlhwylcra wilna dohte. (ll. 1338b-1344)

> [And now another
> Powerful evil-doer came, would avenge her son,
> And has so far made vengeance for the fight—
> As it may appear to many a thane,
> Who weeps in his heart for his treasure-giver,
> A hard heart-bale; now the hand lies low,
> That treated you well with all the good things.]
>
> (ll. 1338b-1344; my translation)

My attention is given to how scholars read ll. 1343b-1344: 'nū sēo hand ligeð, / sē þe ēow wēlhwylcra wilna dohte' ('now the hand lies [low] / that treated you well with all the good things'). Scholars have taken 'the hand' ('sēo hand') as that of Æschere—under the supposition that Hrothgar laments that, now that Æschere is dead, the latter can no longer provide the help he used to while alive. Thus E. Talbot Donaldson's prose translation reads:

> Now the hand lies lifeless that was strong in support of all your desires. (Donaldson 24)

A number of other translators, including Seamus Heaney and R. M. Liuzza, whose translations of *Beowulf* are most widely read these days, take 'sēo hand' ('the hand') as referring to Æschere's. Thus,

> now that the hand
> that bestowed so richly has been stilled in death. (Heaney 36)

And,

> now that hand lies dead
> which was wont to give you all good things. (Liuzza 94)

And George Jack, in his note, remarks:

> Although the antecedent of *sē þe* 'which' is the feminine noun *hand* (1343), the reference is to Æschere; this is probably why the masculine pronoun *sē* has been used. (108n)

I strongly object to the above readings, especially that by George Jack. In his prose translation, Donaldson at least does not pointedly make the reader think that 'the hand' alludes to Æschere's: depending on how we read his version, we can surmise that 'the hand' refers to Hrothgar's. But George Jack's clear-cut statement leaves no room for another possibility. The preceding lines read: 'þæs þe þincean mæg þegne monegum, / sē þe æfter sincgyfan on sefan grēoteþ,— / hreþerbealo hearde;' ('As it may appear to many a thane, / who weeps in his heart for his treasure-giver, / a hard heart-bale' (ll. 1341-43a). The point is that Hrothgar's thanes feel sore at heart for their ring-giver Hrothgar, hitherto a strong bulwark for them, who now has to remain helpless in the

presence of another marauder—as he was before, when Grendel assaulted Heorot. And Hrothgar is well aware of the despondency his thanes feel. In this context, 'the hand [lying] low,' which used to treat the thanes well, does not refer to Æschere's, but Hrothgar's own: Hrothgar is lamenting his being helpless in spite of the butchery perpetrated on his beloved thane Æschere.

III

Toward the end of *Beowulf*, there is a long digression (ll. 2910b-3007a) apparently interpolated later by the *Beowulf*-poet. The runaways return only after the fight between Beowulf and the dragon is over; and they see Wiglaf tending on Beowulf dying. Wiglaf reproves the runaways for their cowardice; and then follows the herald's report to the Geats on Beowulf's demise and the dragon's death, which also contains a long digression recounting the feuds and the political entanglement that the Geats have had with their neighboring nations. The herald concludes his long speech (ll. 2900-3027) with a pessimistic forecast of the grim fate in store for the Geats.

I don't want to read the whole passage, but I do wish to read some lines that are relevant to my present topic:

"Now the people
May look forward to a time of war, for the fall
Of our king will be widely known to the Franks
And to the Frisians. A fierce feud was fostered
Against the Hugas when Hygelac went, faring
With his ship-borne force, to the land of the Frisians;
There the Hetware made an assault on him in battle,

Swiftly brought it about with a stronger force
That the warrior in battle-gear had to bow down,
And fell in the foot-band; the prince could not bestow 2920
Treasure on his retainers. Since that time on to us
Good will of the Merovingian has been denied."
(ll. 2911b-22; my translation)

While working on the Explanatory Notes on *Beowulf* in my Modern English verse translation—which, alas, has yet to find a publisher—I happened to encounter a note on ll. 2919b-20a, by Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson. The off-verse of l. 2919 and the on-verse of l. 2920 read: 'nalles frætwe geaf / ealdor dugoðe' ('the prince could not bestow treasure on his retainers') [literally, 'the prince gave no treasure to (his) retainers']. Mitchell and Robinson think that the word 'frætwe' (l. 2919) specifically alludes to "the golden torque which Wealhtheow gave to Beowulf... and which the poet says Hygelac lost to the Franks on this expedition..." (Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf* 150n). Why this specifically defining the word 'frætwe'? To me, the clause—'nalles frætwe geaf / ealdor dugoðe' ('the prince gave no treasure to his retainers')—simply means that Hygelac, on account of his untimely death, did not even have a chance to reward his retainers in a ring-giving ceremony—which could have occurred, had he survived and won the battle.

Why Mitchell and Robinson had to associate the word 'frætwe' with "the golden torque which Wealhtheow gave to Beowulf," is beyond my comprehension. To guess why they did so, however, it may help to turn to the passage they might have had in mind. Earlier in the poem, as the feast celebrating Beowulf's victory over Grendel goes on in Heorot, Wealhtheow bestows sumptuous gifts on Beowulf, requesting him to become a guardian for her two sons. There appears a short digression on the transmission of the

neck-ring she gives to Beowulf:

To him a cup was borne, and friendship
Offered in words, and twisted gold bestowed
With good wishes, along with two arm-ornaments,
Corselet and rings, the greatest of neck-rings
That I have ever heard about on earth.
I have not heard of any better jewel of men
Under the sky, since Hama carried
To the bright burg a necklace of the Brosings,
A broach and a cup－fled the treacherous enmity
Of Eormenric, and chose an eternal benefit.
This ring Hygelac of the Geats, nephew to Swerting,
Had－he had it till most recently－
When under a banner he defended the treasure,
And protected the battle-spoil. Fate took him away,
When he, out of pride, sought for trouble:
Feud with the Frisians. He carried the treasure,
The mighty prince did carry the precious stones
Over the sea brimful of waves; he fell under a shield.
Then the king's body passed into the Franks' possession,
And his breast-guard and the ring, along with it;
The lowly warmongers plundered those slain,
When carnage was over; the people of the Geats
Kept the place filled with bodies. (ll. 1192-1214; my translation)

Yes, the torque Wealhtheow gave to Beowulf somehow became the property of Hygelac; and the treasure was certainly taken away from Hygelac's body, when he was slain in battle, and became the property of the Franks. But to say flatly that the word 'frætwe' specifically alludes to that particular ring, as Mitchell and Robinson do, is an instance of 'over-reading.' Even if Hygelac had

won the battle in his expedition, he certainly would not have given away what his nephew Beowulf had given him to any of his thanes at a festive ring-giving ceremony. As a matter of fact, Beowulf retrieves the torque from the Franks after killing Dæghrefn, a Frankish warrior (cf. ll. 2501-5), as he tells his thanes in his recollection of his past martial feats before declaring his resolution to confront the dragon all by himself.

IV

The scholarly notes I have examined above do not affect our overall reception of the poem *Beowulf* as a whole, although they may mislead us in reading the lines where the words or phrases commented on in those notes appear. A note that appears in *A Guide to Old English*, edited by Mitchell and Robinson, however, is a case of scholarly judgment that can shift the reader's reception of a poem to something far removed from what the poet might have intended in composing it.

The Old English elegy commonly referred to as "The Wife's Lament" has these opening lines:

> I sing this song about myself in deep sorrow
> By telling what I have undergone. I truthfully can say
> What misery I have gone through since I grew up—
> Whether lately or in the days long gone, never more than now.
> Ever have I suffered the torment of living in exile. (ll. 1-5; my translation)

From reading the opening lines of the poem in translation one cannot tell who the first-person narrator is. But the first sentence of the poem in its original text

contains words with feminine endings— 'ḡeomorre' (l. 1) and 'mīnre sylfre' (l. 2)—which imply that the first-person narrator is a woman:

> Ic þis giedd wrece bi mē ful ḡeomorre,
> mīnre sylfre sīð. (ll. 1-2a; Hulbert 172)

For this very reason, scholars have generally agreed that the poem is a complaint or lament of a woman alienated from her husband and ostracized by his kinsmen. (Hence the title of the poem, "The Wife's Lament" or "The Maiden's Complaint," depending on how one conceives of the relationship between the two.)

But I wonder if we are doing justice to this poem by adhering to the notion that the poet made it clear that the speaker in the poem is a woman by using the feminine endings for those three words. The title of the poem—"The Wife's Lament," as arbitrarily assigned by scholars—also has affected the general readers' reception of the poem by forcing them to read it only as the utterance of a woman. Elsewhere I have argued that the poem should be read as a metaphorical transfiguration of the grief of a man alienated from his lord by the conspiracy of those who are jealous of the close tie between the two. (Lee)

I do not wish to repeat the argument I have already made in a foregoing essay, but I do wish, in support of my present thesis, to emphasize that the first-person pronoun 'ic' does not appear from line 42 onward in the poem. The major bulk of the poem—up to line 41—is undoubtedly the complaint or lament of the first-person narrator, a fictional character set up by the poet. For that reason, the auditors of the poem are bound to share the sadness that the speaker wants to impart on the listeners—a process of the auditors' partaking of the pain that the fictional narrator wishes to express in his/her complaint. But from line

42 till the poem ends, we don't hear the first-person pronoun 'ic': instead, only the third-person references appear in this part that concludes the poem. What does this mean?

I believe that the first-person narrator's voice ends with line 41; the rest of the poem (ll. 42-53) is not in the voice of the one who laments his/her unbearable pain of being rejected by his/her lord, but in the voice of the poet (or the minstrel) himself, who has so far assumed the role of the fictional speaker, the first-person narrator up to the end of line 41, in order to convey the lament. To make my point clear, I will read the lines that function as a postscript, so to speak, or the poet's own moralization on the predicament of the first-person narrator, whose complaint he has vivified in the foregoing lines:

> The young man must ever be in grief,
> His thought drenched in sorrow, while he must keep
> A cheerful bearing, despite his breast's pain
> And sorrow thronging endlessly. All his worldly joy
> Will depend on him, though he may be banished far
> To live in exile in a distant land; my friend sits
> Under a rocky slope, frost-bit in storm,
> My weary-hearted friend, drenched with rain,
> In his dreary dwelling place. My friend endures
> Great pain and grief; he often recalls
> A dwelling more replenished with joy. Woe be with him
> Who must be waiting in longing for his beloved. (ll. 42-53; my translation)

The sudden disappearance of the first-person pronoun 'ic'—that has so far maintained the keynote of a lament uttered by a grief-stricken outcast—should alert a sensitive reader, for it may imply that the voice has shifted from that of the first-person narrator to that of the poet or the minstrel, who now

addresses the auditor in his own voice.

Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson make the following observation in their notes on ll. 42-53 that I have just read in my translation:

> Here the speaker seems to speculate over what might be the present state of her estranged spouse and to assure herself that whatever his circumstances he will certainly be sharing her sorrow over their separation. (Mitchell and Robinson, *Guide* 266n)

'*Solamen miseris socios habuisse doloris*' ('Misery loves company') is what Mitchell and Robinson are implying by making this observation. To think that a woman who has so far spoken of the grief of estrangement from her lord may find consolation in the belief that her lord will also feel the pain of separation from her, however, is not compatible with the ethos of the foregoing lament: the speaker reveals an unswerving devotion and longing for the lord, no matter what unbearable pain the lord may have inflicted on the speaker.

In these twelve lines that conclude the poem the poet makes it clear that the speaker of the foregoing lament is a young man. The shift of voice from that of the grief-stricken speaker of the lament (ll. 1-41) to that of the poet or minstrel, who moralizes on the virtue of stoic endurance, has not been noticed by Mitchell and Robinson, who think that the last dozen lines are continuation of the foregoing lament.

The question remains: Why did the poet choose those three words with feminine endings, 'ḡeomorre' (l. 1) and 'mīnre sylfre' (l. 2), thereby leading the readers to think that the speaker of the lament is a woman? As I have argued elsewhere (Lee), adoption of the supposedly female voice is mandated by the poet's need: he wanted to project the grief of a young retainer alienated from

his lord in the transfiguration of a woman suffering from marital breakup. Anglo-Saxon audience of poetry recitation must have been much more sophisticated than we are now. Nowadays we read poems mainly by looking on the printed pages; but, in an age when poetry reading (or recitation) was more of a public entertainment involving much theatricality, shifting the voice in the recitation of a poem could have been quite an ordinary matter, and could have been a good stimulant of poetic imagination, on the parts of both the minstrel and the auditors.

So far, I have tried to prove that not all that the authorities in Old English literature have said can be true. My attempt, however, is not to disprove what the prominent scholars have done, but to refresh our resolution to remain alert to a few cases of misreading or misinterpretation commonly accepted, simply because they happen to be observations made by prominent scholars.

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