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Admissions Committee

Medieval Studies Writing Sample

January 15, 2026

Creation to Lamentation: Explorations of Song in *Beowulf*

Song in *Beowulf* is not merely ornamental. Song is how characters prepare for obstacles and interpret experiences. Comprehending its import in the poem demands serious reflection upon a holistic picture of chant in the narrative. By "song," I mean broadly musical speech, including the chanting of Old English verse. This paper argues that *Beowulf* organizes song into a progressive taxonomy – moving from creation to corporate lament – which draws the listener into an experience of irreversible loss. Song does not merely accompany heroic action; it functions as a hermeneutical engine for characters and audience. The progressive taxonomy – protopoiesis, antegūð, postgūða, and sorhleoð – teaches the hearer to see heroic action as part of a broader fatalistic vision. This paper traces that progression by examining the songs of Hrothgar's *scop*, the sorrow songs of other lay singers, and the anomalous "songs" of the mere.

1. Songs of the Minstrel

A survey of terms relevant to "song" (*sang*, *galan*, *byman*, etc.) reveals three choral parties: the minstrel of Heorot, the five grievers, and two inanimate objects at the mere. Hrothgar's minstrel sings four times, always in Heorot. Grouping these instances by context yields three events: once before the coming of Grendel (Beowulf 86–98), once after the coming of Beowulf (491–498), and twice following the death of Grendel (867–915, 1063–1166). These song events will be referred to respectively as the protopoiesis ("first poem"), antegūð ("pre-battle"), and postgūða

("post-battle," *A* and *B*). Together, these three events sketch the function of Hrothgar's minstrel at Heorot. He is the sole human vocalist in the *Beowulf* narrative until the protagonist's funeral.[1] Other song events play off of his paradigmatic singing, such as the hoard-keeper lamenting the absence of song when his people are dead (*Beowulf* 2262–2263) compared to the Geats' descent from song into the "haunt" of Grendel at night (Heaney 167). He is also the only vocalist that sings more than once or whose song is recorded verbatim. For these reasons, his singing warrants investigation at the outset of any survey of song.

The protopoiesis precludes the antagonist. This "first poem" concerns the *frumsceaft fira*, the "primal creation of men" (91). The first song recalls the first history. This creation/origin theme is strengthened by the context, following an association between Hrothgar's creative speech and the Creator's. In *Genesis A* and *B*, God names day and night (*Genesis A* 128, 140) and Satan (*Genesis B* 343). Similarly, Hrothgar's hall-naming of Heorot (*Beowulf* 78-79) is framed as an act of creation. Heaney and Tolkien both prefer the language of law [e.g. "he whose word far and wide was law" (Tolkien 64)], but the allusion to effectual verbiage is lost in such renderings. The power (*geweald*) of Hrothgar's word is at issue.[2]

As an opening origin song, the first poem contextualizes those that follow, rehearsing the creative order in Heorot. Before any monster steps foot into the hall, the listener glimpses the normative life, so that later he understands what Grendel has taken from the Danes.

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[1] Grendel's song is that of a monster. Hildeburh sings within a lay the minstrel recites. Hrethel sings only in analogy. The mere-singing is done by inanimate objects. Not until Beowulf's burning and burial do we have human singers in the world of the lay, aside from Hrothgar's *scop*. Put another way: there are two singing human parties in the narrative; they are Hrothgar's *scop* and Beowulf's mourners.

[2] See also Bjork 998.

However, the first poem does more than pass on information about the past. It provokes conflict that drives the entire narrative, such that, without the first poem, Grendel might not have attacked at all, or at least not in the way presented. As Battles and Wright explain, "It is the *swutol sang scopes* ['the clear song of the scop,' (Bwf 90a)] that first draws the monster Grendel's attention to Heorot and sets in motion the major events of the first part of the poem" (3).

ða se ellengæst earfoðlice
þrage geþolode, se þe in þystrum bad,
þæt he dogora gehwam dream gehyrde
hludne in healle; þær wæs hearpan sweg,
swutol sang scopes. Sægde se þe cuþe
frumsceaft fira feorran reccan
(*Beowulf* 86-91)

Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him
to hear the din of the loud banquet
every day in the hall, the harp being struck
and the clear song of a skilled poet
telling with mastery of man's beginnings
(Heaney 86–91)

Song draws the antagonist and provokes conflict. Song will also present itself amidst and after engagements, provoking and interpreting the conflict. Thus, the first poem leads both the audience and the narrative into an experience of strife.

The second song event of Hrothgar's minstrel, the antegūð, follows Beowulf's arrival. This pre-battle song stands in the tension of monster and savior. Grendel has not been

confronted, but one to confront him has arrived. For the Danes, the tension is between their lost world and their hope in its recovery. The content of the song is unspecified, but the effect is explicit: “And the minstrel sang, / filling Heorot with his head-clearing voice, / gladdening that great rally of Geats and Danes” (Heaney 496–498).

In contrast to the first poem, this text gives us no information about what the minstrel sings. Instead, the poem focuses on the song’s effect upon its hearers. The minstrel brings joy (*dream*; Tolkien chooses “mirth”) to the hall (Tolkien 403). The gathered folk feast on account of Beowulf’s arrival and agreement to fight Grendel, yet their gladness is not what it could be until the *scop* sings. He serves an irreplaceable function in the festivities. The listener also may recognize the polarizing nature of his work. He infuriates enemies (*Beowulf* 86–90) and invigorates friends (496–498). Song has ensured there will be conflict by driving antagonist and protagonist together.

If the first poem establishes the place of song in the life of the hall, then the pre-battle song clarifies the role of the *scop* in sustaining that life-critical song. Objectively, nothing about the Danish plight has changed; Grendel waits to spill more blood. The novelty explored by the pre-battle song is hope, not salvation. It pulls the characters and the reader into this hope. However, it is a hollow hope, for, as the next song event will clarify, even *Beowulf’s* most joyful moments are overshadowed by dread.

Lastly, the minstrel sings the postgūða. The narrative has moved beyond hope to substance: Grendel is dead. Both songs [postgūð A (867–915) and postgūð B (1063–1166)] do more than praise and rehearse the hoped-for victory; they interpret it. That interpretation spans past, present, and future – where historical consciousness, contemporary insight, and prophetic accuracy weave a powerful exegetical tapestry. In the post-battle songs, the listener anticipates

what the world should be after victory, but he discovers the inverse to be its true destiny. The hoped-for victory of the pre-battle song did not bring the hoped-for result of the post-battle song.

In the first post-battle song, Hrothgar's minstrel recites the tale of Sigemund (867–915). He, being one "schooled in the lore of the past," begins a "new theme" (Heaney 869). His recitation is first framed as a rehearsal of Beowulf's triumph. However, to accomplish this, he chooses the well-worn tale of Sigemund. The *scop* does not merely make new verse but rehearses a known story in a new context, where new meaning can emerge. The minstrel connects the fame of Sigemund and Beowulf, but the link goes beyond a simple comparison of how famous either could be. The *scop* pairs Sigemund and Beowulf typologically: "What Beowulf did here today – this is what Sigemund did long ago," *vice versa*. He is not merely interested in Sigemund's *gesprong* ("glory," 884) but specific details regarding his exploits. Beowulf slaying Grendel reminded the *scop* of Sigemund slaying giants.

As the lay explains, Heremod was a notable king, but Sigemund outshone his glory. We know less about the former than the latter, according to the minstrel, because the latter was greater. They stand in the same historical avenue. When Sigemund came into view, he eclipsed Heremod. The minstrel presents Beowulf as a third figure stepping into that same avenue. As Sigemund once eclipsed Heremod, Beowulf now eclipses Sigemund. In this way, when the *scop* sings, his choice of historical content is significant. Song is itself an interpretive event.[3]

[3] Battles and Wright argue it is possible to carefully infer something about the Beowulf-poet from the poem itself (7). They acknowledge an interweaving of historical sources – Sigemund, Heremod, Beowulf, etc. – that proves impossible to untangle but leave the conclusion at its non-accidental nature, refraining from stating a purpose beyond bearing tradition and creating new poetry (ibid., 7-8). Tolkien seems to go further, noting the Beowulf-poet is ultimately to be credited with the typological connections made by the Heorot-poet in the narrative (p.286).

In the second song after Grendel's death, the *scop* tells the saga of Finn (1063-1166). Unlike the first post-battle song, the singing of the minstrel is not solitary: "They sang then and played to please the hero, / words and music for their warrior prince, / harp tunes and tales of adventure" (Heaney 1062–1064). His singing is unaccompanied, but it is explicitly in the context of many other singers. Song has become, not simply a communal event, but a communal effort. The work of the *scop* is not categorically distinct from other singing that could take place in the hall. Consider Beowulf's later account of song in Heorot:

> There was singing and excitement: *an old reciter*,
> a carrier of stories, recalled the early days.
> At times *some hero* made the timbered harp
> tremble with sweetness, or related true
> and tragic happenings; at times *the king*
> gave the proper turn to some fantastic tale,
> or *a battle-scarred veteran*, bowed with age,
> would begin to remember the martial deeds
> of his youth and prime and be overcome
> as the past welled up in his wintry heart.
> (Heaney 2105–2114, emphasis mine)

The poet again chooses an historical legend to associate with the present moment in the narrative. A typological connection may be seen between Hildeburh and Wealhtheow, though the connection is only implied and incomplete until *Beowulf* progresses further. The choice of Finn's saga, whatever else might be said, moves the listener decidedly into grief – an unexpected turn amidst festivity. Where we might expect a resounding tale of glory and victory, we find a funeral and lament. In this way, song moves the audience where the narrative has yet to turn.

The minstrel's four songs color the observant reader's conception of the surrounding narrative. They also pull the audience into emotional and teleological avenues yet to be explored by the narrative. Finally, because all three song events (protopoiesis, antegūð, postgūða) are presented so uniquely and progressively in relation to the narrative, other singers in the poem may be read in relation to the minstrel's pattern. The interpretive authority of the minstrel leads to an interpretive plurality and ultimately interpretive collapse (sorhleoð).

Others find a more pronounced distinction between the two parts of *Beowulf*. Irving argues for "history made (part 1)" and "history studied (part 2)" (201; see also Georgianna 829-850). Irving is after a boarder psychological point related to Beowulf's autobiography, but the oversimplification of the poem's structure remains unhelpful. The entire poem features novel achievements and interpretations. Such an outline removes the deep typological work of Hrothgar's minstrel. Beowulf's historical reflections are a narrative compounding result of historical studies he witnessed among the Danes. It also makes little sense of the historical scope of the second act, which reaches far beyond, temporally and geographically, the Danish narrative of the first act.

2. The Choral Sorhleoð

These three song events, while foundational, represent only one piece of the vocal tapestry. To grasp the grand arc of chant in *Beowulf*, we must widen the scope of observation.[4] Other singers in the poem include Grendel (*Beowulf* 787), Hildeburh (1118), the figurative Hrethel (2460), a

[4] Battles and Wright may prefer less emphasis on the philological: "It is nevertheless clear that Old English themes contained far less verbatim or near-verbatim repetition than Homeric or South Slavic poetry" (5). However, this paper assumes the relevance of terms regardless of their relation to recitation practices.

Geat woman (3152), and twelve warriors (3171). In contrast to the formal, established work of Hrothgar's *scop*, these songs bring novel performers and contexts. Most notably, each song is a lament; these are the sorhleoð. The text anticipates this sonic expansion with the second post-battle song, which could be classified as the minstrel's own sorrow-song, when his singing gives way to a chorus of other singers in the story. Song in *Beowulf* is the province of all life, not merely the hall-minstrel. This shift is not incidental. It signals that song is no longer the work of a single interpretive authority, and the work of song the poem describes is lament.

Grendel, overwhelmed by Beowulf's strength, sings *sige-leasne sang* (787, "the song of defeat"). His crying out is called a "song" because encroaching loss, not immediate pain, is the catalyst for his grief. Dismayed by Beowulf's strength, he sings defeat.

In the saga of Finn, Hildeburh *geomrode* ("lamented") the death of her son and his uncle by way of a *gidd* (1118, "lay/chant"). If the dative plural *giddum* is taken with locative connotations, we might say Hildeburh laments to the lay. Her anguish is too great for words, and so she calls upon a poem to mediate her heartbreak. She grieves to the lay, and the lay grieves for her. The immediate parallel is Wealhtheow. When the tale of Finn is complete, the queen welcomes a new time of peace, for Grendel is dead (1169-1187). She relishes the sight of her boys (1188-1191). The "pleasant murmur" in the hall (Heaney 1159) and the queen's quaint optimism forbode further conflict; the grief of Hildeburh hangs in the air. Grendel, we soon find out, is only one among many monsters, and Wealhtheow's, one among many funerals.

When describing the sorrow of Hrethel at losing his son, Beowulf speaks figuratively of a generic man. This figurative Hrethel laments his son's death with *sarigne sang* (*Beowulf* 2447), a *sorh-leoð* (2460, "sorrow-song").

When Beowulf's body is burned, a Geat woman sings a *giomor-gyd* (3150, "mournful lay"). Where the listener might expect a song of mourning for Beowulf, we find lament for everyone but the protagonist. "Her nation invaded, / enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles, / slavery and abasement" (Heaney 3153-3155). She grieves, not for the warrior, but for the world lost in his loss.

The woman is followed nearly a fortnight later by the *word-gyd* of the twelve warriors (*Beowulf* 3172). Given the Old English tradition of chanting lays and the author's verbiage in previous scenes of lamentation, Heaney's translation is understandable: "chanting in dirges."[5] These warriors form a twelve-part choir to sing the final song. Unlike the Geat woman, they do grieve explicitly for Beowulf. Her national, corporate lamentation is reflected, not in the content of this final chant, but in the chanters themselves. They are twelve "chieftain's sons" (Heaney 3170), no minstrels or bards.

From the first poem to the sorrow songs, the reader has traveled from joy to grief, from a lively hall full of song to a burial mound within which all is quiet. The poem began with a vocational, solitary poet but concludes with a band of lay poets. As Beowulf descended into the mere, so has the listener descended into grief – from the creation of the world into its destruction. By its usage of song, *Beowulf* paints a picture of corporate lamentation into which it drives the narrative and pulls the hearer. We become invested in the world and life of the protagonist,

[5] The semantic range for terms such as *sang* and *gyd* can include instances typically not recognized as "singing" to the modern ear. If the reader of *Beowulf* considers only the sense and narrative of the poem, then these observations are suspect. However, if one reads *Beowulf* with the assumption that the poet chose his verbiage and labored over the images, implications, and terminology of the text, then broadening the scope of what we consider "song," at the very least in a poetic sense, is reasonable, even if experimental.

Beowulf. We come to adore the glory of Heorot and the sacrifices of courage. The progression is so effective that, when its doom is pronounced, we are moved.

A song of sorrow without the first poem lacks an understanding of what has been lost; it retains an illusion that the world is as it should be. A song of sorrow without the pre-battle song lacks the memory of hope in the tension of life and death; it retains faith in victory. A song of sorrow without the post-battle songs lacks the failed experiment of redemption; it retains an expectation that what was, could be again. When preceded by all three types of song events, sorhleoð becomes a powerful tool for creating utter grief. It establishes unfalsifiable dread and compels its characters and hearers to grieve over lost life, false hope, and unattainable redemption.

3. Test Case: The Mere-Songs

Song in *Beowulf* takes an unusual turn at the mere. This vignette features two non-animate singers: a horn and a sword. The horn by the mere sang a *fyrd-leoð* (*Beowulf* 1424, “host-song”) to the reptiles. Beowulf’s blade sang a *guð-leoð* (1522, “war-song”) when it descended upon Grendel’s mother. The horn and the sword sing at the mere, their enchantment adding to the aura of the mere-world where the range of *cyn* expands (cf. 97). Their song also infuriates the monsters just as the minstrel’s song did; they do not sing as neutral parties. Most importantly, the songs of the horn and sword test whether the poem’s logic of song holds outside the human community. The answer is negative; it only holds through enchantment and paradox. This sharpens the poem’s fatalism upon the human experience rather than weakening the coherence of its song-structure.

These singers are unexpected, out of place, and inappropriate, unless the context is considered. The mere itself is an unnatural place. Where we might expect ice, the water burns (1366, *fyr on flode*). The Beowulf-poet calls this a *niðwundor* (1365, "dire wonder" – a *hapax legomenon*). *Wundor* would typically denote something awesome and likely divine – revelation (*Wanderer* 36-37), miracles (*Andreas* 911-12), or creation (*Genesis A* 103-104). This rule of thumb holds in *Beowulf*, though simple, generic wonder is also appropriate (see *Beowulf* 771, 840, 920, 995, 1440, 1681, 1724, 1747, 3037). The mere, on the other hand, introduces a unique window of *wundor*. *Niðwundor* identifies unnatural space. This monstrous abode is not merely unholy; it is perverse. It is grotesque. Here, water burns and *wundorlic* dragons abide. That the *wundor* is in some way geographically tied to the mere is supported by the songs of horn and sword. The magical sword dissolves in battle. Beowulf only brings back the hilt, a relic of the blade, and never again in the poem do horns and swords sing.

The chanting of the horn angers the beasts, just as the first poem angered Grendel. The horn-song provokes conflict, ensuring that blood will be spilled. The chanting of the sword ends in defeat, finding the monster's helm impossible to penetrate. Thus, the horn and the sword provoke a conflict they are powerless to manage. They direct the narrative and the listener into an experience of loss. They also illustrate the Danish plight, for the songs of the Danes, like the horn and the sword, conclude in loss. Conceiving the plight of the Danes as illustrated by objects at the mere is consistent with Beowulf's praise of Hrunting. Hrunting's victory, though somehow parallel to the mystical mere-sword (both behead monsters, and the time between Grendel's death and beheading explains Hrunting's survival; see Eliason, 277-281), should be judged harshly by its failing Beowulf in the heat of engagement.

The mere is a vignette of the larger struggle of *Beowulf*, and the songs of the mere form analogies of the inevitable defeat our protagonist and his people will face in the end. Interestingly, John D. Niles' chiasm of the poem places this scene in the center (Niles 924-935). If correct, this further contributes to the notion that the twisted mere creates an enchanted scene central to the import of the poem. If, as has been argued here, lamentation through song for ultimate defeat is fundamental to the Beowulf-poet's motivations, then this idea is served well by the above interpretation of the mere-songs. It also informs us of how humankind might work against this fatalistic end. In brief: within the poem's imagination, it cannot. Our songs are helpless before the might of those who disrupt the created order. Divine intervention may bring relief, but human feats will prove fruitless. Thus, the center of the poem is an illustration of utter lament, of the fatalistic grief song is progressing towards.

4. Conclusion: Songs of Lamentation

Niles, enfleshing the ring composition of *Beowulf*, located the three fights in chiastic centers of the lay. The story moves along by way of these engagements, where death deals broadly and ultimately. The battle vignettes offer occasion for historical grief and experience for novel lament. The listener experiences the song of Hrothgar's minstrel in relation to these gory battles. The first poem is framed by Grendel's lurking. The pre-battle song by definition anticipates the coming battle. The post-battle song praise Beowulf's deeds through tragic recollections and the foreboding shadow of more grief to come. The five singers of sorrow songs clearly fit the mold of lamentation for battle-loss. The enchanted horn and sword at the mere likewise sing in battle, which Beowulf explicitly identifies as an act of vengeance for grief (*Beowulf* 1383ff).

In *Beowulf*, song drives towards lament. It provokes conflict through direct confrontation and false hope, and then it frames the result in fatalistic loss. The reader journeys from a new, festive world in the first poem to a doomed, mourning world in the final sorrow song. Even in times of rejoicing, song pulls the audience down into the valley of bereavement and loss. The minstrel chooses the sorrowful saga of Finn as a fitting piece for a triumphant hall. In *Beowulf*, lamenters span categories of class, gender, location, and age. They are bound together in the act of grieving but also in the breadth of what is grieved. The lay begins with lament over a singular, legendary figure, and ends with lament over an entire people. The Geat woman wails before Beowulf's pyre, not merely for him, but for her whole way of life. Tolkien interprets this to feature multiple Geat women, forming an adjacent host to the following twelve warriors (Tolkien 2640-2644). Georgianna observes this lament for a way of life in the figurative Hrethel, who, in mourning for his son, laments a joyless hall (Georgianna 839). The objects of grief in *Beowulf* are not solitary. By the end of the poem, they comprise an entire world, and the loss of that world takes centerstage – alongside a growing choir of lamentation.

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