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Acta Neophilologica 15/2, 213-223

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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THE FUNCTIONS OF DIGRESSIONS IN *BEOWULF*

Key words: Old English literature, *Beowulf*, digressions, Adrien Bonjour, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien

Introduction

Beowulf is a heroic narrative composed between the middle of the 7th and the end of the 10th century. The analysis of its numerous digressions began to arouse a great deal of interest thanks to Jakob Langebek in 1772. He was the first scholar who related the poem to the Danish history by identifying Scyld Scefing as the Skiold of Danish legend¹. It is worthy of remark that the approach towards the digressions of *Beowulf* has significantly changed in the course of history. In the beginning scholars, along with Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, used to consider most of them as separate stories of minor importance to the main plot. Despite being interesting for historical reasons, these so-called “tasteless intrusions” were claimed to prove either the author’s ineptitude or the poem’s multiple authorship². However, a completely different approach towards digressions was adopted by Ludvig Schrøder. He claimed that they were purposely created by the poet, and thus the relation between them and the poem had to be taken for granted in order to carry out a proper analysis³. Even though these two attitudes were entirely forgotten when the influential *Liedertheorie*⁴ [ballad theory] of Ernst Moritz

¹ R.E. Bjork, J.D. Niles, *A Beowulf Handbook*, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press 1997, p. 196.

² *Ibidem*, p. 193–197.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 198.

⁴ The *Liedertheorie* of composition, popular in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, saw the poem’s origin in short epic folk narratives composed orally immediately after the events had taken place, just as in the poem the *scop* intones a *spel garade* [873] comparing Beowulf, after he defeats Grendel [ll. 867–874], allusively to Sigemund and Fitela (cf. H.L.C. Tristram, *Medieval Insular Literature Between the Oral and the Written II: Continuity of Transmission*, Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag 1997, p. 66).

Ludwig Ettmüller and Karl Müllenhoff was introduced⁵, Adrien Bonjour and most scholars of today opt for Schröder's theory. This article also follows the pattern of treating the poem as a structural whole.

1. Functions of digressions

Bonjour, one of the most brilliant *Beowulf* scholars, devoted his research to the digressions included in the poem. In his thorough analysis he justified their presence by mentioning the existence of general reasons, notwithstanding the wide variety of ways how the digressions are related to the main story. He claimed that not only did these stylistic devices make the background of the poem alive and enrich the main theme, but also contained important pieces of information concerning the hero's life⁶. Moreover, serving as a foil to a given situation, contributing to the historical significance, providing symbolic value which influenced the understanding of the poem and heightening artistic effect were the most important functions of digressions according to Bonjour. This scholar's full-length study also included a detailed description of particular digressions. For the purposes of accuracy he divided them into four categories, namely the Scyld episode, digressions concerning Beowulf and the Geats, historical or legendary digressions and Biblical digressions⁷. A separate section of this article is devoted to each category.

1.1. The Scyld episode [ll. 4–52]⁸

The poem begins with a long digression about Danish kings, which seems to be in direct contradiction to the fact that *Beowulf* presents the history of a Geatish warrior. However, some similarities between Scyld Scefing and Beowulf can be noticed. First of all, both of them managed to liberate the Danes, regardless of their inglorious youth. Secondly, the death of both kings is mentioned and the descriptions of their funerals at the beginning and at the end of *Beowulf* form the narrative frame of the poem. As a matter of fact, the story of Scyld Scefing foreshadows both Beowulf's reign as a king and death. Moreover, the contrast between Scyld's and Beowulf's funeral is also of great significance. The beautiful

⁵ R.E. Bjork, J.D. Niles, op. cit., p. 199.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 199.

⁷ R. Huffman, *The Purpose of Digressions in Beowulf*, Ezine Articles 2009, available on-line: <<http://ezinearticles.com/?The-Purpose-of-Digressions-in-Beowulf&id=2909879>>, date of access: 6.12.2012. Huffman's article is based on Bonjour's analysis called *The Digressions in Beowulf*, Oxford, Blackwell 1950.

⁸ S. Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, New York – London, W.W. Norton & Company Inc. 2000, p. 5. All of the quotations from *Beowulf* are excerpted from Heaney's Modern English translation.

description of Scyld's burial⁹ suggests the beginning of a glorious future, while Beowulf's gloomy funeral is a symbol of its end¹⁰:

They stretched their beloved lord [Scyld] in his boat,
laid out by the mast, amidships,
the great ring-giver. Far-fetched treasures
were piled upon him, and precious gear.
I never heard before of a ship so well furbished
[ll. 34–38]

Then his [Beowulf's] warriors laid him in the middle of it [a pyre],
mourning a lord far-famed and beloved.
On a height they kindled the hugest of all
funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke
billowed darkly up, the blaze roared
and drowned out their weeping, wind died down
and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,
burning it to the core. They were disconsolate
and wailed aloud for their lord's decease.
[ll. 3141–3149]

These two extracts show the general law governing the presented world. The times of prosperity are followed by the times of misery¹¹, which may be considered as a vicious circle. The beginning of the poem already contains its end because the opening lines “cast a shadow of doom and inevitability over all the subsequent action”¹².

The Scyld episode fulfills other important functions. First of all, this prologue establishes the glory of the Danish dynasty. Secondly, along with the following description of Heorot Hall [ll. 67–85], it highlights the strength of Grendel, the monster who managed to terrorise the whole kingdom. Thirdly, it emphasises Beowulf's might as the hero eventually killed the powerful beast and became the saviour of Heorot Hall.

1.2. Digressions concerning Beowulf and the Geats

A considerable number of digressions is devoted to Beowulf and the Geats. Most of them emphasise Beowulf's greatness and might. A good example is Beowulf's boasting about his fight against giants [ll. 419–424], which justifies his

⁹ Scyld's ship burial has intrigued scholars because it does not have an analogue in the Germanic tradition. The relevant analogues include cremation of the dead, but the account of Scyld's funeral does not. An interesting theory was proposed by Jean Haudry, who claimed that the first part of the poem is dominated by water crossings, symbolic of winter and the danger inherent in it. Fire would be out of place in this part of the poem (cf. R.E. Bjork, J.D. Niles, op. cit., p. 203).

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 203–204.

¹¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, London, British Academy 1936, p. 9.

¹² R.E. Bjork, J.D. Niles, op. cit., p. 204.

arrival at Hrothgar's court, shows his uncommon strength and glorifies his name¹³. However, these are not all purposes of this digression. Whenever the noble Beowulf fought against evil and stood up for those who suffered, he unconsciously allied himself with the Christian God¹⁴. The function of this digression is to present Beowulf as the champion of the oppressed.

When it comes to the digression concerning Ecgtheow [ll. 459–472], its function is to create another bond between Beowulf and the Danes. Beowulf's father began a feud with the powerful Wulfing tribe in the past. He was the one who killed Heatholaf, one of its members. The Geats could not help Ecgtheow and that is why he fled to the court of Hrothgar. The Danish king managed to end the conflict by paying wergild to the Wulfings. This digression is important as it also counterbalances the fact that the Danes accepted help from Beowulf, who promised to kill Grendel¹⁵.

As far as the Unferth episode¹⁶ and the swimming duel with Breca are concerned [ll. 499–606], they emphasise Beowulf's greatness:

Unferth, a son of Ecglaƿ's, spoke [...]
 "Are you the Beowulf who took on Breca
 in a swimming match on the open sea,
 risking the water just to prove that you could win?
 [...] [Breca] came ashore the stronger contender. [...]"
 Beowulf, Ecgtheow's son, replied:
 "Well, friend Unferth, you have had your say
 about Breca and me. But it was mostly beer
 that was doing the talking. The truth is this: [...]
 Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on
 for five nights, until the long flow
 and pitch of the waves [...]
 drove us apart. [...]
 However it occurred, my sword had killed
 nine sea-monsters".

[ll. 500–575]

First of all, Beowulf turned out to be superior in his speech to another great warrior – the envious Unferth. Secondly, Beowulf boasted about his earlier achievements, namely defeating nine sea-monsters.

¹³ R. Hufmann, op. cit.

¹⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁵ R. Hufmann, op. cit.

¹⁶ Unferth has concerned critics since Grundtvig, who eventually saw him as fulfilling a dramatic purpose. Most studies were focused on the role he plays in the poem. In the *Scylding* part of *Beowulf* Unferth is the investigator of evil and Beowulf's antagonist, while in "the Beowulf episodes" his villainy is unnecessary, and he graciously lends Hrunting to a superior warrior. There are mixed opinions about this character: some scholars consider him as a true villain, others condemn him to a much lesser extent and claim that his behavior provides Beowulf with the opportunity to show off his achievements (cf. R.E. Bjork, J.D. Niles, op. cit., p. 205).

The tale of Sigemund [ll. 874b–896] is a reference to both Beowulf's past and future. Not only does it exalt Beowulf's most recent victory over Grendel, but also it foreshadows his fight with the dragon. This digression and the following Heremod episode [ll. 897–915], which contrasts an evil king with the kind-hearted Beowulf, emphasise the hero's greatness.

The story of Eormenric and Hama [ll. 1197–1201] accentuates the splendour of the gifts given to Beowulf after defeating Grendel. What is more, the described torque seems to be an interesting symbol. This necklace was worn by Hygelac on the day of his death [ll. 1202–1214]. Therefore, there is a contrast between Beowulf being awarded with the precious torque and the later fall of a king. This description may suggest Beowulf's fate as he eventually died after defeating the dragon. This is also a reference to the dragon's treasure, which despite being amazing was also cursed.

The striking contrast between the noble Beowulf and the evil and bloodthirsty king Heremod [ll. 1709–1722] is another digression that emphasises Beowulf's greatness.

Heremod was different,
the way he behaved to Ecgwala's sons. [...] [He] killed his own comrades, a pariah king
who cut himself off from his own kind,
even though Almighty God had made him
eminent and powerful and marked him from the start
for a happy life. But a change happened,
he grew bloodthirsty, gave no more rings
to honour the Danes.

[ll. 1709–1720]

Not only are the ways of these two warriors contrasted, but also Beowulf's inglorious youth clashes with Heremod's "being marked from the start for a happy life". What is more, the digression concerning Beowulf's inglorious youth [ll. 2183b–2189] heightens the effect of his later remarkable deeds by means of contrast.

The digression about the Geatish history, namely Hygelac's death, Beowulf's swimming match, Heardred and the second Swedish wars [ll. 2354–2396] fulfills several functions. The description of Beowulf's escape from Friesland by swimming with thirty trophy battle-dresses glorifies his superhuman abilities. The fact that Beowulf rejected Queen Hygd's offer of the throne and decided to become a counsellor to Heardred (Hygelac's heir) illustrates the hero's sheer loyalty and moral sense. Moreover, there is a significant contrast between the Geats and the Danes. First of all, Queen Hygd asked Beowulf to become the king in favour of her son for the greater good of the Geats, while Queen Wealthew tried to use all of her powers to secure the succession of her sons to the Danish throne [ll. 1174–1186]. This contrast is made even more striking when Hrothulf's

treacherous usurpation¹⁷ comes into account¹⁸. As a matter of fact, the function of these contrasts is to draw the reader's attention to Beowulf's loyalty¹⁹. Moreover, this digression presents the harsh reality of hostilities and how Beowulf became the king after Heardred's death. Its purpose is also to highlight Beowulf's diplomatic skills that helped him befriend the Eadgils and kill Onela. This in turn contributes to creating Beowulf's image as a good king.

The stories of Hrethel and Herebeald, the earlier Swedish wars and Dæghrefn [ll. 2428–2508] constitute Beowulf's long speech which was uttered while he was looking for the Dragon's den. The primary purpose of this digression is to provide the hero with the opportunity to gather strength before the upcoming battle by looking back at his valiant past. Nevertheless, this is only one of the functions. The accidental death of Herebeald introduces the notion of "wyrd" [fate], which establishes the inevitable and predetermined state of affairs in the presented world. Beowulf also had to accept his own fate and Hrethel's lament over the dead son is a reference to the main character's grim future. Beowulf finished his speech by telling a story about killing with bare hands the mighty warrior Dæghrefn. The obvious purpose of this boast is glorifying the hero's name²⁰.

The Lay of the Last Survivor [ll. 2247–2266], which may be associated with the Old English poem *The Wanderer*, is another digression that refers to the notion of "wyrd":

Now, earth, hold what earls once held
and heroes can no more; it was mined from you first
by honourable men. My own people
have been ruined in war; one by one
they went down to death, looked their last
on sweet life in the hall. I am left with nobody
to bear a sword or burnish plated goblets,
put a sheen on the cup. The companies have departed.
The hard helmet, hasped with gold,
will be stripped of its hoops; and the helmet-shiner
who should polish the metal of the war-mask sleeps;
the coat of mail that came through all fights,
through shield-collapse and cut of sword,
decays with the warrior.

[ll. 2247–2260]

The degeneration of "earthly glory", which is clearly presented in *The Wanderer*, appears also in The Lay of the Last Survivor. According to Bonjour, the

¹⁷ In the poem there are references to Hrothulf's treacherous seizing the throne after killing the young king Hrethric [ll. 1016–1018; ll. 1163–1164]. Note that this subplot is briefly and rather unclearly mentioned in the poem. However, it is expanded in *The Saga of Beowulf* by R. Scot Johns (cf. R. Scot Johns, *The Saga of Beowulf*, Boise, Fantasy Castle Books 2012, p. 300–317).

¹⁸ A.G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf*, California, University of California Press 1959, p. 153.

¹⁹ R. Huffman, op. cit.

²⁰ Ibidem.

lyric reflects the dominant grieving mood at the end of the poem and the destruction of the Last Survivor's people foreshadows the destruction of the Geats²¹.

The digression about Weohstan (Wiglaf's father) and his slaying of Eanmund in the second Swedish wars [ll. 2611–2625a] presents the history of Wiglaf's sword. The function of this digression is to create a relation between Wiglaf and Beowulf in terms of being an incredible warrior. These two characters are of the same kind, hence both of them took part in the fight against the dragon. What is more, Wiglaf's loyalty to king Beowulf and Beowulf's loyalty to king Hygelac are also similar²².

According to Bonjour, the digression concerning Hygelac's fall and the battle at Ravenswood in the earlier Swedish war [ll. 2910b–2998] fulfills the function of revealing the sad future of the Geatish nation. The Franks and the Geats were hostile towards each other since Hygelac's raid. To make matters worse, an old feud between the Swedes and the Geats was likely to rekindle. In the poem the end of the times of prosperity, which is marked by Beowulf's funeral [ll. 3137–3182], was foreshadowed in Wiglaf's messenger's speech²³.

1.3. Historical and legendary digressions

Bonjour distinguished historical and legendary digressions as a separate category in his research. The fate of Heorot [ll. 82b–85] is a good example of the poet's tendency to make positive and negative elements overlap in descriptions. After creating an image of a prosperous hall, he inserted a sad conclusion:

And soon it stood there,
finished and ready, in full view,
the hall of halls. Heorot was the name
he [Hrothgar] had settled on it, whose utterance was law.
Nor did he renege, but doled out rings
and torques at the table. The hall towered,
its gables wide and high and awaiting
a barbarous burning.

[ll. 76–83]

The so-called "barbarous burning" is an allusion to the feud between Ingeld and Hrothgar. Bonjour claims that such contrasts are supposed to give an impression of melancholy which adds even more sadness to the poem's general reception²⁴.

At this point it is reasonable to come back to the digressions about Sigemund [ll. 874b–896] and Heremod [ll. 897–915]. After Beowulf's victorious fight against

²¹ R.E. Bjork, J.D. Niles, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

²² R. Huffman, *op. cit.*

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

Grendel, the hero was compared to these two characters in a scop's lay. Sigemund was known for slaying monsters and taking part in dangerous adventures. He was the greatest warrior since the unfortunate Heremod. As it was mentioned earlier, the function of these digressions is to praise Beowulf for his good deeds²⁵.

The next digression begins after Beowulf's return to the land of the Geats. It presents a significant contrast between the descriptions of the evil queen Modthryth and the good queen Hygd. Nevertheless, heightening the virtues of queen Hygd by means of contrast is only one of the functions of this digression. The fact that Modthryth changed herself for the better after marrying Offa, who was a brave and just king, is of great importance. This is a reference to Beowulf's past and future – the early period of queen Modthryth being evil can be associated with Beowulf's inglorious youth, while the story of Offa foreshadows the reign of the noble king Beowulf. What is more, there is a parallelism between queen Modthryth and king Heremod as both of them became victims of abuse of power²⁶.

The Fight at Finnsburg [ll. 1069–1159a] and the story of Freawaru and Ingeld [ll. 2032–2066] share the function of presenting tribal enmity as a powerful factor that dissolved truces and agreements. An outbreak of war was usually a matter of time. The Finn episode is an account of a feud between the Danes and the Frisians. In order to end the conflict, a Danish princess called Hildeburh was married to king Finn of the Frisians. However, peace was maintained temporarily and the purpose of this digression is to show how unstable the truce was²⁷. In the digression about Freawaru and Ingeld [ll. 2032–2066], Beowulf foresaw the fact that the proposed marriage would have similar effects in terms of martial alliance. This digression has also another function because it shows Beowulf as a great analyst, a warrior cut out for being a ruler.

The legend of the dragon's gold [ll. 2210b–2240] is a digression that acts as an introduction to the final combat between Beowulf and the dragon. What is more, it presents gold as the object of human desire. In fact, the raging dragon began to wreak havoc on the Geats because of a theft. Although Beowulf was anxious for the first time before his fight against the dragon, he was still determined to take his revenge on the monster, the latter being a typical feature of a mighty warrior.

1.4. Biblical digressions

The last group of digressions mentioned by Bonjour are Biblical digressions. There are some Christian elements, such as the Song of Creation, an allusion to the Giants' war against God and references to Cain, which are included in the poem and contribute to its artistry.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem.

The Song of Creation [ll. 90b–98] appears just before the introduction of Grendel. It refers to the Book of Genesis from the Old Testament:

[...] and the clear song of a skilled poet
telling with mastery of man's beginnings,
how the Almighty had made the earth
a gleaming plain girdled with waters;
in His splendour He set the sun and the moon
to be earth's lamplight, lanterns for men,
and filled the broad lap of the world
with branches and leaves; and quickened life
in every other thing that moved.

[ll. 90–98]

The description of the creation of the world is not only full of joy, but it is also contrasted with the grim and terrifying Grendel²⁸:

So times were pleasant for the people there
until finally one, a fiend out of hell,
began to work his evil in the world.
Grendel was the name of this grim demon
haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
in misery among the banished monsters,
Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed
and condemned as outcasts.

[ll. 99–107]

This extract refers also to the Biblical Cain, who killed his brother Abel and was made anathema by God. Grendel, because of representing evil in the poem, is claimed to be descended from the Biblical murderer. Moreover, this reference and later allusions to Cain [ll. 107b–114; ll. 1261b–1266a], as well as the digression concerning the Giants [ll. 1689b–1693] show how pagan and Christian elements overlap in the poem. Although old Germanic tribes considered monsters as evil spirits, the poet mentioned that these creatures are of Biblical origin. In fact, there is a unity between old traditions and The Holy Scripture²⁹.

The history of the destruction of the giants [ll. 1689b–1693] was said to be carved on the hilt of the sword which allowed Beowulf to slay Grendel's mother. This digression fulfills the function of glorifying Beowulf. As a matter of fact, he is almost raised to the rank of a Christian knight³⁰ because of using a sword with a Biblical motif engraved on it to fight against evil forces.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibidem.

Conclusion

In spite of being related to the main plot in various ways, the digressions of *Beowulf* must have been consciously incorporated into the poem because they share the function of presenting contrasts, parallelisms and forebodings. As it was mentioned earlier, digressions serve as a foil to a given situation, contribute to the historical significance, provide symbolic value and heighten artistic effect. Bonjour's research proves that every digression included in the poem has its purpose and, contrary to what sceptics say, is much more than just a "clumsy breach of decorum"³¹. It is a foregone conclusion that the main function of digressions is not to confuse the reader by making the poem more complicated, but to make the story a Geatish Prince called Beowulf easier to imagine and comprehend. Not only do they show the hero's background, but also describe certain values such as the Anglo-Saxon code of honour, and thus create the presented world of the poem. The use of digressions constitutes the artistic design of *Beowulf* and the most important function of these stylistic devices is to provide the reader with additional pieces of information, so that the poem as a whole can be understood up to a greater extent. As a direct consequence of that, the presence of digressions in *Beowulf* is justified and should not be questioned³².

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³¹ R.E. Bjork, J.D. Niles, op. cit., p. 193.

³² When it comes to the most common complaints about digressions, some scholars, such as B.J. Timmer, claim that glorifying both pagan and Christian elements seems out of place and, along with the so-called "tasteless intrusions", diminishes the value of the poem (cf. R. Huffman, op. cit.). However, these researchers are in minority.

Summary

The Functions of Digressions in *Beowulf*

The article aims at establishing the reasons why digressions constitute an integral part of *Beowulf*. It shows the wide variety of ways how these stylistic devices are related to the main plot of the poem and the latest approach towards the task of analysis. Moreover, the author rejects the misguided notion of digressions being nothing more than just “tasteless intrusions”. Even though the purpose of some digressions may not seem perfectly straightforward, all of them contribute to the artistry of the poem. Therefore, *Beowulf* has to be analysed in terms of a work of art and should not be regarded as valuable for merely historical significance.