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## *The Episode of Finn in Beowulf. Discharging Hengest<sup>1</sup>*

L'articolo analizza il testo del brano tratto dal *Beowulf* comunemente noto come "L'episodio di Finn" e propone una interpretazione dei fatti narrati che si distacca da quelle generalmente adottate. Sulla base di studi linguistici circa la sintassi poetica anglosassone si analizzano alcuni punti cruciali della narrazione al fine di valutare sotto una nuova luce il comportamento di uno dei personaggi, Hengest. Più precisamente, si vuole dimostrare come la sua condotta non implichi la rottura del patto stabilito con Finn, ma che, al contrario, egli adotti una strategia più raffinata per ottenere lo stesso scopo però all'interno dei termini giuridici posti.

Germanic poetry shows some paradoxical situations in which characters are forced to behave in a way that goes against their expressed intentions. A paradoxical situation seems to me to be the one described in the so-called *Finn's Episode* that is contained within the long Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. More than a paradox, this passage is presented as the tragedy of one of its characters, the Dane Hengest, who is between the devil and the deep blue because of contrasting covenants: a pledge with the hosting Frisian people and the moral obligation of revenge against them. This is the same sort of awkward condition that can be found in other masterpieces of ancient Germanic poetry such as the *Hildebrandslied*, the *Nibelungenlied* or in the sagas of Old Norse literature, where someone is compelled to do something which he/she himself/herself wishes not to and feels obliged to do in the same time. The solutions of this kind of stall lead inevitably to dramatic consequences, carry on the story and surely give pleasure to the reader or listener by relaxing the level of tension and suspense thus produced.

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The *Finn's Episode* has been widely studied by Old English scholars on the one hand because it covers lines 1065-1159 of the epic poem *Beowulf*, whose importance in the Anglo-Saxon studies does not need further mention; on the other hand, it is connected to a fragmentary piece of poetry which has been given the title of *Fight at Finnsburg* or *The Finnsburg Fragment* too.

What we now have of a longer composition is the transcript made by George Hickes that appeared printed in his *Thesaurus*<sup>2</sup> of a manuscript leaf that the scholars attribute to Lambeth Palace MS 487 or possibly 489 and is now lost. Editors generally consider the work of Hickes to be careless and have thus carried many corrections to the readings of the transcription all with the purpose to wipe away the ambiguity of a still incomplete text.<sup>3</sup> Problems also arise for the metrical scansion since Hickes does not provide a text in the modern visual layout of alliterative poetry, namely two half-lines per verse. He writes the text in three columns basically formed by half-lines. From a stylistic point of view the fragment has also been paired to the genre of the *lay* together with the *Hildebrandslied* with which it would share some linguistic technicalities.<sup>4</sup>

But the real interest that these 48 lines have excited in the scholars is its connection with the story told in the *Finn's Episode*, and the task which has emerged since was to determine the chronological order of the events described in each text. The matter is Scandinavian because of the presence of Danes, and the setting is ancient Friesland, meaning that Old Norse literature has also come to help with the reconstruction of the events and the relations among the characters involved and referred to by name.<sup>5</sup> It

<sup>2</sup> *Linguarum Vett. Septentrionalium Thesaurus Grammatico-Criticus et Archaeologicus* (1703-5). The ASPR edited by Dobbie indicates the date of 1705, which is instead the date of publication of Wanley's *Librorum Vett. Septentrionalium, qui in Angliae Bibliothecis extant, nec non multorum Vett. Codd. Septentrionalium alibi extantium Catalogus Historico-Criticus* (1705) in which the fragment is mentioned too.

<sup>3</sup> I refer to the critical apparatus Dobbie (1942) for an exhaustive list of emendations.

<sup>4</sup> Klaus Von See (1967: 34-36) well summarises Kuhn's position for half-line typology, and the fact that in the *Fragment* and in *Hildebrandslied* there are finite verbs behaving anomalously, is a common trait putting the two compositions in a sort of shared original background where syntax was not as fixed as in later times. Both, moreover, show large sections of direct speech, typical of the genre (see *The Battle of Maldon*) but totally lacking in the *Episode*, which would not configure as a *lay*. See also Fry (1974: 25).

<sup>5</sup> For example the *Skjöldunga Saga* (chapter IV) helps in the reconstruction of the kinship among Hunlaf, Ordlaf and Guðlaf, sons of a Danish king named Leifus. See Pulsiano (1993: 597-598) for reference.

seems to be generally accepted that the *Fragment* reports facts which happened before those told in the *Episode*, would indeed start from the consequences of the battle described in the *Fragment*. It might be useful for later arguments to make a survey on the sometimes very different positions of the critics regarding the story of Finn, Hnæf and Hengest.

The critical literature provides a number of reconstructions for the facts reported in the two poetic sections —if I may call them as such, for now— two of which are summarised quite in detail in Chambers (1967) and are attributed respectively to Möller (1883: 94-95) and Bugge. The crucial difference between the two proposals is that the former places the night attack described in the *Fragment* as a part of the *Episode* while the latter considers the *Fragment* as the antecedent for the *Episode*. In addition, other details that make the latter solution a more plausible situation are investigated by Chambers. In this paper I will assume this very solution and namely the story that is clearly summarised by Olivieri (1934: lii-liii) and that is worth quoting here:

Hnæf, son of Hoc, is the prince of the Danish tribe of the Hocings, also named “Half-Danes”; he is the brother of Hildeburh, wife of Finn. He attacks Finn and is killed.<sup>6</sup> [...] Hengest, a Danish leader in chief of the survived Danes after the death of Hnæf, belongs to the Half-Danes: his tragic condition is well described by the poet, his inner struggle between the will of revenge and the oath with Finn. Hengest is the first of the thanes of Hnæf, and when this latter is killed he becomes the leader of the Danes. They are in an uneasy situation: in a foreign land, in the middle of the winter season, among foes. They had sworn solemnly to keep the peace. Still, they longed to revenge their leader’s death, Hnæf, in the country of the Frisians. In spring time, the son of Hunlaf gives a sword to Hengest as a cue to start the battle. Probably Hunlaf had died in the fight at the castle —the sword had been used with the Jutes— and his son asked for revenge. Hengest agrees to the invitation, breaches the deal and attacks with the Danes Finn killing all of the Frisians. Then, after revenge is fulfilled and Finn fallen on the ground together with the Frisians, Hengest and the Danes sail back to their homeland.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> To be complete, in the most generally accepted reconstruction the first assault is from the part of the Frisians in a treacherous onslaught which excites the Danish strenuous defence.

<sup>7</sup> “Hnæf, figlio di Hoc, è principe della tribù danese degli Hocinghi, detti anche ‘Healf-Dene’, e fratello di Hildeburh, moglie di Finn; egli assale Finn ed è ucciso. [...] Hengest, un capo danese che rimane al comando dei superstiti dopo la morte di Hnæf, appartiene agli Healf-Dene: la sua

In general, this is what all critics assume as the most acceptable reconstruction, and the one that is to be read in the vast majority of the translations of *Beowulf*. Personally I assume this interpretation as a starting point for my analysis, even if there is room for a revision of the collocation of the *Fragment*, in which there is no overt textual indication for it to be the antecedent of the *Episode*.<sup>8</sup> But let us take the above-mentioned hypothesis, even though I find myself unsatisfied with the “Wendung” of the story, namely that Hengest eventually does not keep his word and breaches the agreement he had made with Finn. It seems to me that this solution does not equal the complexity of the relations entailed both in the narrated story and in the larger story of *Beowulf* itself. That Hengest grabs a sword and in a “Thor-like manner” in the end smashes the hated Frisians sounds to be too simple. On the contrary, someone may say that this is simply what the text is telling, no more no less. Yet it is on the very textual level that it is possible —I think— to say that Hengest is no traitor at all and does not breach the deal he made in accordance with Finn in order to keep peace between Frisians and Danes after the death of the leader of the latter, Hnæf.

I would like to move and follow the relevant sections of the *Episode*<sup>9</sup> and analyse the text starting from the terms by which peace is declared between the two parties, Frisians and Danes:

þæt hie him oðer flet eal gerymdon  
healle ond heahsetl... (ll. 1086-1087a)

In these lines it is agreed that they (the Frisians in the interpretation

tragica posizione è ben descritta dal poeta, la sua intima lotta fra il desiderio di vendetta ed il giuramento prestato a Finn. Hengest era il primo fra i capitani di Hnæf, e, quando questi fu ucciso, a lui si devolve il comando dei Danesi. Essi erano in una difficile situazione: in una terra straniera, in mezzo inverno, fra nemici. Essi avevano prestato solenne giuramento di tener pace. Pur essendo nelle terre dei Frisí, essi bramavano di vendicare la morte del loro re, Hnæf. Alla primavera, il figlio di Hunlaf porge una spada a Hengest, come segno di battaglia. Probabilmente Hunlaf era caduto nella lotta nel castello – la spada era stata usata contro i Juti – ed il figlio voleva vendetta. Hengest cede al suggerimento, rompe il patto, e coi suoi Danesi assalta Finn e fa strage dei Frisí; quindi, fatta vendetta, essendo Finn caduto nella lotta e sconfitti i Frisí, Hengest e i Danesi fan vela alla loro contrada nativa.” The translation into English is mine.

<sup>8</sup> As Prof. Marina Buzzoni personally communicated, but also the theme of an interesting article by Östman / Wårvik (1994) investigating the pragmatic aspects of the fragment.

<sup>9</sup> I will refer to the edition of Dobbie (1953).

by Klaeber (1950: 172), but not in the one by Fry (1974: 39)) would make ready for the Danes (*him*) another (*oðer*, where Fry reads “one of two” referring to the couple of terms in the next line) “floor” (*flet*), namely a place to dwell but with the specification of its quality (*healle ond heah-setl*, see the relevant footnote in Fry (1974: 39-40)), that is not a simple building but a place that should represent also social prestige and noble rank.

The Frisians offer to come to terms with the Danes because they need to resolve the situation in a bloodless way, given that they cannot afford a military victory. This interpretation seems to be better than the one given by Fry who reads it the other way round: the Danes offering terms to the Frisians. The former interpretation is in line with the course of the narrated events and enhances the weight of concealed meanings which are only revealed in a tragic epilogue.

... þæt hie healfre gewealde  
wið eotena bearn agan moston (ll. 1087b-1088)

The Danes, thanks to the social position acquired by means of the statement made by Finn in the previous lines, are granted privileges together with (*healfre*) the sons of the Jutes (*eotena bearn*), namely the Frisians.<sup>10</sup> Both groups are then endowed with privileges due to the recognition of a noble rank.

ond æt feohgyftum Folcwaldan sunu  
dógra gehwylce Dene weorþode  
Hengestes heap hringum wenede  
efne swa swiðe sincgestreonum  
fættan goldes swa he Fresena cyn  
on béorsele byldan wolde (ll. 1089-1094)

Finn (*Folcwealda sunu*) swears to show honour to Hengest’s party with the giving of precious things (*hringum*, *fættan goldes*, *sincgestreonum*), as much as he would have given each day at the time of the treasure-giving (*feohgyftum*) to his own party, namely the Frisian (*Fresena cyn*).

<sup>10</sup> In case where we want to follow Chambers (1967) and consider Frisians and Jutes as different people, the latter a tribe subjected to the former, the thesis put forward in this paper would not be spoiled.

After having offered his terms of peace, Finn asks some conditions which must be observed for the acceptance of the truce. These are traceable from line 1095 to line 1106.

... Fin Hengeste  
elne unflitme ađum benemde (ll. 1096b-1097)

Finn defines to Hengest the conditions implied by the covenant between Frisians and Danes alongside the way of conduct that the Frisians commit themselves to. The interesting point of discussion is provided by the meaning of the word in line 1097, *unflitme*, “strongly and indisputably”.<sup>11</sup> In line 1129 another one very similar shows up, *unhlitme*, but with a different meaning that is related to *hlytm*, “casting of lots”, which would give “without casting of lots” by way of the negative prefix and the adverbial function of the suffix morphology. Fry (1974: 22) says that “*unhlitme*, a puzzling *hapax*, is generally taken as ‘unhappily’ or ‘involuntarily [...] But ‘without casting of lots’ should produce just the opposite of ‘having no choice’. Casting lots throws the result up to chance, and so *un-hlitme* should logically mean ‘not by chance’, that is voluntarily”. This reinterpretation is relevant for the reading of the following lines:

...Hengest đa gyt  
wælfagne winter wunode mit Finne  
eal unhlitme. Eard gemunde,  
þeah þe he ne meahte on mere drifan  
hringedstefnan; (ll. 1127b-1131a)

According to Fry, who also provides textual data attesting to the possibility of winter sailing by the Vikings, if the meaning of *unhlitme* is “voluntarily”, then “the manuscript reading *he [þeah þe he meahte on mere drifan]* of 1130a is restored” (Fry 1974: 22). Hengest would turn to be a “hero remaining with Finn not because of the weather, but by his own choice, by his own design.” (Fry 1974: 22). Now, the strong will to set the things down from both sides, and the stress given by the poet on the behaviour of Hengest is part of an irony made greater if compared with the final event.

<sup>11</sup> See Dobbie (1953: 177).

þæt he þa wealafe weotena dome  
arum heolde... (ll. 1098-1099a)

Here the condition is defined that Finn, together with the counsel of his wise-men (*weotena dome*), would retain the survivors of the battle (*wealafe*).

ne þurh inwitsearo aefre gemænden  
ðeah hie hira beaggyfan banan folgedon  
ðeodenlease, þa him swa geþearfod wæs (ll. 1101-1103)

It is imposed on the Danish part that they should never moan by means of deceitful devices (*inwit* means also “fraud, beguile, evilness”; *searu* means “device, design, contrivance”, in a positive sense too) about the fact that they (*hie*), the Danes deprived of their chief (*ðeodenlease*), namely Hnæf, had followed the slayer of their leader, namely Finn, because (or “when”, depending on the interpretation of *þa* in line 1103) they were compelled to do so. This implies that if the Danes make a deal with the Frisians they will lose their right to call vengeance for the death of Hnæf alleged to the Frisians (in the battle of the *Fragment*, under the hypothesis here assumed). They would thus not have any motivation for a future attack against the Frisians supported by the right of feud.

In this interpretation revenge is not supposed to be a valid reason for the subsequent actions of Hengest. On the contrary, he has the necessity to find a different motivation, which should be consistent with a regular institutional conduct, but one that would lead to the same effects of an act of *retaliation*.

gyf þonne Frysna hwylc frecnan spræce  
ðæs morþorhetes myndgiend wære  
þonne hit sweordes ecg seðan scolde (ll. 1104-1106)

In these lines it is said that in case one of the Frisians would call back with hostile speech memory of the hatred caused by that slaughter (*morþorhetes*), he will be put to death (*þonne hit sweordes ecg seðan scolde*<sup>12</sup>). Therefore, death penalty is for any of the Frisians that would

<sup>12</sup> Klaeber (1950: 173) e Fry (1974: 41, footnote) find both difficult the interpretation of the line because of an apparent absence of the verb, unless we interpret the manuscript reading *syððan* as a weak verb related to the strong verb *seoðan*.

dare to stir up the Danes with the memory of the past hostility (indeed creating a kind of taboo). It is to be underlined that the same restriction is not imposed to the Danes. More precisely, they are not allowed to express their feeling of discomfort for the situation they must cope with, nonetheless no punishment is overtly mentioned for the infringement of such a command. This will turn to be a pivotal fact in the development of the events to the benefit of Hengest.

Now, we can sum up some points in order to define the situation thus created up to line 1106. The Danes and the Frisians share an equal social position, or same or different dwelling place, depending on the interpretation of the phrase in ll. 1086-1087 (see Fry, but also Klaber (1950:173), on the other hand, says that “whether another hall was meant or not, it is shared by the two parties”). Finn is obliged to show equal generosity toward both his men and the Danes, increasing the wealth of the latter too. The deal cannot be loosened neither by means of a verbal agreement nor an action (see line 1100, *wordum ne worcum wære ne bræce*), as if Finn wanted to raise it above his will and that of the Danes on a higher institutional level. The unconditional acceptance of the agreement would cancel (or at least hinder) the right of vengeance of the Danes. This implies a consequent political stability and does not seem to be damaged by the punishment for breaching it since it is referred only to the individual who is guilty of the infraction —it is therefore not only chance that it is Finn himself who has to die in order to get a disestablishment of the political situation.

In such a frame we should ask ourselves how Hengest is able to turn the power of Finn upside down without breaching the deal. The analysis of the section that goes from line 1138 to line 1153 will provide a possible answer to the question. We should recall once again that the situation to which Hengest is bound does not allow him any possible armed action against the Frisians and blocks the effect of revenge actually negating the right of feud, which is a fundamental principle in ancient Germanic society. The vast majority of the critics takes this cultural factor as the chief justification for Hengest’s most inner thoughts and consequent actions. More precisely, the strong will of revenge would be the actual reason for him to accept the proposal of a deal and to then spend a whole winter among the Frisians. It seems to



me desirable to keep the analysis of the facts as tight to the text as is possible so as to avoid speculating on unexpressed motivations —that is, those absent from the text— leading Hengest to stay with the Frisians. I will therefore not connect the desire and the need of revenge *a priori* to all the possible events, in fact I will simply collect the information recoverable from the reading of the passage, that is, Hengest agrees with the proposal of a deal advanced by Finn —which is nonetheless an appealing proposal on a mere material ground— for some personal reason. What is of greater interest is the observation of the textual cues that are present, in order to understand the actions performed in the passage and that lead Hengest to the subversion of the situation and to the final victory of the Danes.

...gymwræce<sup>13</sup>... (l. 1138b)

This is not a simple revenge, *wræc* —a later form of *wracu*—, such as it would be one right and fully acceptable in the Germanic “Weltanschauung”. The compound is built on a neuter noun, *gym*, “grief, affliction, trouble, evil”, which carries its negative connotation onto the word it modifies. Such a revenge would be in contrast with an oath already given, the deal between Hengest and Finn, so that it cannot be performed because lacking legitimacy of status. The fact that Hengest had thought more of this action than of his homecoming, as the narrating voice of the poet of *Beowulf* well emphasizes, would demonstrate how a wrong conduct towards Finn has always found a mental barrier for its performance, and that consequently within the mind of Hengest the need was born to get the desired effect, Finn’s defeat, without breaching the pact.

gif he torn gemot þurhteon mihte  
 þæt he eotena bearn inne gemunde (ll. 1140-1141)

In this couple of lines we read the issue at stake as it has formed in the mind of Hengest, who is in the difficult position of one who is bound to the word given. I would stress the fact that he is bound to the

<sup>13</sup> Bosworth/Toller (1898) reports for *gym* “grief, affliction, trouble, evil, calamity, injury”. For *gymwracu*, the same gives “vengeance for trouble” or “for injury”.

“word” but not to the person of Finn, who does not become the “dryhten” of Hengest; this relationship does not imply absolute loyalty. Hengest is bound only with the formal expression verbalised in the covenant between the two leaders, and only the infraction of the terms then imposed in a formal way will bear consequences which are furthermore verbally formalised.

As a consequence, Hengest is in need of finding a way to overcome the restrictions of not being allowed to claim a “natural” right, as revenge is, of not being allowed to breach the deal through words or actions and finally not being allowed to lament his condition; besides, he is there in the court of Finn, sharing rooms with Frisians in their home, however other Danes have left the place, as line 1125, the first of the 17th fit, describes (*gewiton him tha wigend wica neosian*). Such a contrast between the figure of Hengest and those who left seems to allude to the fact that those who did not stay and share the commitment with Hengest were somehow excluded from the deal and free of any restriction for their conduct. The oath has scope on those present in the place where it was taken so much as it must be overcome in the place where it bears institutional value, namely at Finn’s court. This seems to be indicated by the meaning of the adverb *inne*, which carries as epistemic reference the space delimited by domestic walls and as a figurative one, the inner side of a person (see Bosworth-Toller). The figurative meaning does not seem to be traceable within the problem analysed here, unless we force an interpretation of the possible reaction of the Jutes-Frisians, but one that we still cannot interpret. What Hengest is compelled to bring to the memory (*gemunde*) of the “sons of the Jutes”,<sup>14</sup> must be done also inside the physical institutional limits of applicability of the conditional terms; besides, what he must accomplish (*þurhteon*, see modern German *durchziehen*) in the form of a provocation, is a meeting which must turn to be hostile (*torngemot*). With these elements provided by the text, we should wonder what the plan that Hengest conceives is in order to free himself from any dishonourable conduct.

swa he ne forwyrnde woroldrædenne (l. 1142)

<sup>14</sup> See Chambers (1967: 261) for the interpretation of the word *eotena*.

This sentence introduces a narrative sequence that needs a specialised analysis in order to recover the story and the plot due to the typical allusive information provided in Germanic poetry, its peculiar stylistic feature. Specifically, the line describes how Hengest does not forget the worldly law (*woroldrædanne*, the second term of the compound is a feminine genitive of a word nominative that the Bosworth-Toller translates as “condition, stipulation”, see also Klaeber (1950: 176), while the compound is translated as “rule/way of the world”), and if we interpret it as referring to the revenge then it is not problematic in a traditional reconstruction of the story. It is possible, however, to wonder when and why Hengest does not forget, or in other words, remember which law. We should ask ourselves which was the moment and the motivations for Hengest to remember that there was a legally codified conduct that had to be taken, if revenge is the “way of the world” alluded to by the term *woroldrædanne*. We might think that the word could be referring also to the very deal between the two leaders, which could be support for the reanalysis of the story by casting some light on the plot.

þonne him Hunlafing, hildeleoman  
billa selest on bearm dyde (ll. 1143-1144)

These two lines immediately follow those in which the “wordly law” is mentioned, and describe the giving of a sword as the symbol and charge of executing the imperative entailed by the previous line. The critics take this action as the cause for the reaction of Hengest who would come to fight because of the moral duty towards the Danes who had been deprived of their leader, Hnæf. I do not believe, however, that we need to base the analysis on this motivation and consider it the turning point in the narration, because it would besides imply the infraction of an oath. The change is generated by a much more subtle reason than a simple armed engagement, in fact it implies the use of words.

þæs wæron mid eotenum ecge cuðe (l. 1145)

The common interpretation of this line refers to the sword shown up in the two previous lines, thus revealing that it was known also to the

Jutes (*eotenum*), probably because it had been used in the first battle, causing the death to many of the Jutes-Frisians. Consider, however, *þæs*, which is a masculine or neuter singular genitive carrying the function of *pro-form* of the previous neuter *bil*. We might also think it referring to the feminine genitive in line 1142, *woroldrædenne*, not because of morphological agreement, in fact *via* symbolic link by means of the evoked sword. The whole meaning, thus, would be that Hengest does not restrain himself from a law (*swa he ne forwyrnde woroldrædenne*), which was known by the Jutes also as a norm that implied the use of the sword, viz. death, as it had been stipulated by the terms of the oath in line 1106. That is, the Jutes and everyone else knew that if the law had been breached, it would cause the raising of swords against the one who would commit the crime.

The reanalysis of the lines 1142-1145 reinterprets lines 1142 and 1145 as linked and containing an insertion (lines 1143 and 1144) describing something which is probably to be imagined as coming later in the sequence of the events. More clearly, the scene where Hunlafing places the sword in the bosom of Hengest is to be considered as a “flash-forward”, alluding to actions to be placed in the future, and as the direct motive for the reminding Hengest of his duty. This is an interpretation of a text that splits the chronological scansion and inserts in a very peculiar way images referring to the story in a non-linear narration, giving us a complex plot. At this point of the narration we need to rewind the tape and walk the steps leading to the actions already anticipated.

Swylce ferhðfrecan Fin eft begeat  
sweordbealo sliðen æt his selfes ham (ll. 1146-1147)

In these lines we are told how Finn with a bold spirit, or better, bold in spirit (*ferhðfrecan*) is struck by a disgrace and by the evil caused by the sword (*sweordbealo*) in his very house, meaning that he is killed. Now the attribute used to describe the Frisian leader might be crucial for the interpretation and not a mere connotative element (without attempting a full psychological characterization of the figure of Finn, he shows himself as confident and courageous and willing to take risks in the deal with the Dane and the promise of recompensation). The

description of his mood could be read as a narrative element in the plot of the poet; the mental state described by the compound adjective could be referring to a reaction caused by a provocation and then not only carrying a mere poetical function, for example, being required by the alliteration with *Fin*, thus being a relevant element in the story. Again, we must note that the narration is still moving in the opposite direction than the real chronological scansion because first we are told that Finn is somehow disturbed in his mind, but not about the cause.

sifþðan grimne gripe Guðlaf ond Oslaf  
æfter sæsiðe sorge mændon  
ætwtiton weana dæl... (ll. 1148-1150a)

A first question should come out in our minds after these two lines. Why is it that only after the coming of Guðlaf and Oslaf that Finn is killed (*sifþðan*)? We are told that the two Danes arrive after a sea journey (*after sæsiðe*), therefore we must imply that they were not present during the time Hengest spent at the court of the Frisians. Only after their appearance there is a turning point in the situation. Just after their arrival, the two bring up to the memory the bad luck the Danes had with the death of Hnæf in the first battle which ended up in the deal among the survivors. This is likely to have happened in a public situation, in the above-mentioned *feohgiftum* which takes place in the *beorsele*, and very likely in the presence of Finn himself. We have to think at this situation as one that Hengest wanted and created on purpose —remember lines 1140-1141 — because he has already foreseen the consequences.

... ne meahte wæfre mod  
forhabban in hreþre... (ll. 1150b-1151a)

Eventually we are told of the consequences of the behaviour of Guðlaf and Oslaf. It is not Hengest that can no longer stand his feeling but Finn, instead, who can not help giving vent to his feeling of wrath and irritation well described by the adjective *wæfre*, “flickering, wavering, quivering”, caused by the laments and the mournful remembrance of the two newcomers. The textual interpretation I put forward here has not merely surfaced from the necessity to demonstrate the thesis that Hengest is not guilty of treason, but it has come to my

mind after the reading of an article by Mary Blockley (1990),<sup>15</sup> a researcher who devoted much of her work to analysing poetic Old English syntax. In her study of uncontracted negations she claims —and I think with due reason— that the use of such forms as *ne wæs* or *næs*, for example, is constrained by syntactical motivations, in other terms they are not in free alternation. Quoting her words might be useful for understanding the issue,

[...]uncontracted forms may result from the speaker's anticipation of a formally independent clause that is elliptically coordinated with or subordinated to the clause with the uncontracted forms [...]. Even when a considerable number of words creates a distance that obscures the effect of one clause upon its successor to our eyes, Anglo-Saxon ears seem to have been capable not only of taking contraction as the sign of an incomplete predication, but of sustaining the expectation of a conclusion to a long, subtly suspended series of clauses.

She writes these words following an example taken from the *Seafarer*:

...þæt se mon **ne wat**  
þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð  
**hu** ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ  
winter wunade wræccan lastum (ll. 12b-15)

I have marked in bold the elements which are the focus of the reasoning of Blockley, that is, the clause in line 12 introduced by the word *þæt* is the main clause in the syntactical sequence and refers to the dependent clause introduced by the *hu*. It is broken by the relative clause introduced by *þe*, but continuity of reference is signalled by the uncontracted negation *ne wat*. Such a restriction in the use of contraction is to be found also in *Beowulf*<sup>16</sup> —and Old English poetry in general— as a productive feature of poetical syntax. The independent

<sup>15</sup> The article is published also as a chapter in a subsequent monography by the same author, *Aspects of Old English Poetic Syntax. Where clauses begin*, Urbana, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Immediately after the example quoted, Blockley presents two contrasting examples from *Beowulf*, with uncontracted (ll. 714-719) and contracted (ll. 1460-1468b) negation.

clause to which line 1150b in *Finn's Episode* is to be traced back is in lines 1146-1147, where Finn is explicitly mentioned; to this former clause the latter would be asyndetically coordinated, thus creating the meaning "Finn was disgraced inside his home because he could not refrain himself from anger." However, the pattern shown by Blockely in her work seems to have a fixed direction in the syntactical distribution of the clausal elements: the uncontracted negation should precede its modifying clause, and the link is somehow "vertical" from up to down. This may raise some doubts to the interpretation of the passage put forward here, because I claim, in fact, the opposite pattern, namely that a following uncontracted negation links vertically to an "upper" preceding clause. That is not entirely true if we look closer, because the pattern as developed in the analysis of Blockley is indeed present and starts at line 1142, *Swa he ne forwyrnde woroldrædenne*, that asyndetically coordinates line 1145, *þæs wæron mid eotenum ecge cuðe*, in an "up to down" reference. Afterwards, the poet inserts a variation of the syntactical pattern introducing a "down to up" reference, in order to create a sort of *chiastic* larger section that contains the entire meaning: "(1) A law *was not* forgotten (2) because it was known. (3) Someone died (4) because he *could not* help breaking that law "which, in its unfolded logical sequence, would turn to "(2) There was a law (4) that someone broke (3) and he therefore died (1) because someone else remembered the penalty".

Here is a possible reconstruction of the events: the two new guests behave openly against the stipulations of the deal that imposed to avoid mourning for the lost of their leader and their condition, but for which conduct no sanction was defined, since in line 1104 *gyf þonne Frysna hwylc* only is clearly said. Finn would have listened first bearing patience until they directly accuse him of the killing (*æt witon weana dæl* in line 1149a). At this point he would lose his control and remember inside his court those actions that the deal had peacefully set, but using hostile and offensive words (*frencan spræce*) because of his wrath. At this very moment he breaches the terms that he himself posed as penalty for the infraction and puts himself to death. Now we have to reintroduce in the story the events described in lines 1143-1144, and imagine, just after the utterance of Finn, the giving of the sword to Hengest for him to execute the conditions of the deal and then kill that

Frisian who remembered with hostile words those interactions between Frisians and Danes, namely Finn himself. Moreover, as it has been said above, this “law” was already known to the Jutes-Frisians.

It is this last occasion that leads to the final battle when the Danes will grab all the treasures belonging to the Frisians and take home Hildeburh, Finn’s widow, sister of Hnæf, because after the killing of Finn, not by revenge but only for the keeping of a formal bound, the Frisians are without a leader and cannot gather around a representative chief any longer (in the same way the Danes have been, but no deal is offered to the Frisians now). As a first conclusion one may say that Hengest is no traitor at all, does keep the word given, and asserts the right imposed by Finn in the terms of the deal. He makes use only of the logic created by the words that mould the experienced reality. In case we want to see whether some of the Danes breach the deal, there is always Guðlaf and Oslaf, two true, pragmatic Vikings.

\* \* \*

Every story has a moral, or in other words, it carries a function. The story of the dilemma that forced Hengest to find an escape hatch from a problematic position might be seen as self-contained and autonomous. If that is true, then the only interesting element is the way in which Hengest frees the Danes from a commitment, by any interpretation one may give. But the one given here might reveal the very function of the story of Finn in the particular narrative situation in which it is sung by the court poet, the *scop* —and I will use this term from now on to distinguish it from the poet of *Beowulf*. We might get an insight into the mind of the composer of the epic and see why he decided that this episode is relevant in the design of the whole story. It is possible to come to the assertion that this section is not purely ornamental or a legacy of an ancient bulk of *lays*, or better said, *not only* ornamental but *also* functional to the creation of meaning. I will try to put forward that the poet is actually hinting at the listener (us) that the *scop* is giving a warning to Hroðgar that he should pay attention to the words he would say because they might lead to dangerous situations in the future. I will briefly summarise the situation that we face just before and after the singing of the Finn’s lay and draw the attention to the use of a word that



recurs before and after, which creates the frame in which the *scop* is made to sing. Beowulf has just fought with the monster Grendel and put him to flight —he tore off one of his arms— so that the court of Hroðgar is freed from that threat —at least, until the mother of Grendel comes to seek revenge. The king of the Danes orders a magnificent party in honour of his hero in which he gives rich presents to Beowulf (lines 1020-1042), and fitt XV comes to an end. The following fitt starts with some more presents given to the warriors of the company of Beowulf and to their leader too. But the poet also inserts some lines that sounds like gnomic verses (lines 1057a-1062) in which he reminds us that the supreme power is of the Lord alone, besides, the one who lives a long life has inevitably both a lot to suffer and to enjoy. Consequently, the best thing for men is *ferhþes foreþanc*, “forethought of mind” (l. 1060). Is the poet hinting to a religious consciousness of the eternal life? That may be, but not necessarily. After the singing of the *scop* we are presented scenes from the party in which the queen Wealhþeow comes close to Beowulf, Hroðgar and his *þyle*, his official spokesman, named Unferþ, the one who had a verbal dispute with Beowulf at the time of his coming, and the one who is also said to have killed his brothers in the past. Unferþ, however, is also said to be trusted by the two sitting with him because of his great mind: it is explicitly said that they trust Unferþ’s *ferhþe*, his “mind” (l. 1166). The fitt ends with the speech of Wealhþeow in which hopes of peace and loyalty are expressed even though they are understood to be illusions resulting in the opposite effect. The two occurrences of the word *ferhþe* contain the whole story of Hengest and Finn and each is used in a very different context. The first is the assertive conclusion of a gnomic section which opens a fitt that is to be seen as gnomic on the overall. The poet is creating an expectation of the listener in the sense that the question put in the back of his mind would be “what do you mean with ‘forethought of mind’?”. The issue is explained by means of an example taken from a shared cultural background, a Germanic lay. The second occurrence is an authorial understatement, by means of which the poet is telling us that those two people, Beowulf and Hroðgar, have not in fact got the message that the *scop* has just tried to communicate. Again Hroðgar will be said to trust also Hroðulf, his nephew, so much as to commend his two sons, should he die too early. Everyone acquainted with Nordic

legendary matter would have soon called back to mind the treachery of Hroðulf. The point is, therefore, a parallel between the use of the “mind” in the story of Finn and that in *Beowulf* by Hroðgar —I would rather spare the hero, now—, who credits both Unferþ and Hroðulf. Finn, in the former, did not make good use of his mind giving the possibility to Hengest not only to free himself but also to attack anew his old enemy. Hengest, instead —given the Latin saying “omen nomen”— actually created what in the computer world is called a “Trojan horse”, an attack on the system using the resources of the system itself. The story is nothing new and might be dated back to Homer, who tells of a skilful man who will be condemned to the torments of Hell many century later by Dante.<sup>17</sup> In *Beowulf*, Finn’s part is played by the king of the Danes who is not able to foresee things that involve himself directly, thus giving an image of a “short-sighted” man. The use of the mind in a proper way will belong later to Beowulf, when he will tell the story of Ingeld with the same function of warning to the still short-sighted Hroðgar.

But a more striking parallel may be seen if we realize that the *scop* is a creation of the poet of *Beowulf* functional to Hroðgar, who creates the message that the poet consequently hands down to the listener of *Beowulf*, and also to us. If the listener gets the message then he has made a good use of his/her mind. On the other hand, if someone does not make good use of his/her mind the initial situation will have a perpetual effect on the real world, and the poet will have sung in vain.

<sup>17</sup> Evil counsellors are put in The Eighth Bolgia of Hell (*Inferno*, Canto 26) and Ulysses is among them.

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