THE PASSING OF THINGS:
LOSS, REMEMBRANCE, AND COMMUNITY
IN ANGLO-SAXON AND OLD NORSE LITERATURE

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

By

Daniel D. Atherton, B.A.

Washington, D.C.
April 19th, 2017
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Thesis Advisor: Kelley M. Wickham-Crowley, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The desire to return to the past and to re-experience events as they happened is a powerful creative force. Reinterpreting aspects of Beowulf’s narrative through the allegorical framework of towers and ruins, with towers representing achievements and ruins serving as the permanent reminder of those achievements, this master’s thesis explores the malleability of this creative process to summon and reshape the past in Anglo-Saxon literature. By extending the allegory of ruins to characters, material objects and their verbal descriptions, and imagined spaces that exist only within cultural recollections, one can more readily see the currents and forces by which narratives have the power to shape realities—and how there are absences that hint at possible realities left unexpressed. Beowulf is imbued with history because its settings revivify places that are dead and destroyed. Much of what happens in Beowulf occurs inside what to the Beowulf poet and his contemporary audience would have been a culturally remembered ruin, if not a physically known one. It is this act of creating enlivened settings in which characters play out the cycles of life and death within the space of resurrected ruins that imbues a text with a sense of history.

Later, the thesis focuses on the Franks Casket depiction of Weland’s betrayal of Beadohilde by handing her the cup of drugged beer as described in the Old Norse tale Völundarkviða. Examining the specific inclusion of the cup and its centrality, I raise questions about the key role cup symbolism plays in the complex constellation of interactions that mark the
distribution of power, the formation of identity, and the role of communal memory. If cups can serve as symbols of communal binding, the specific inclusion on the Franks Casket panel of a poisoned cup from a story whose narrative power draws on deception, rape, vengeance, and the ultimate usurpation of an entire dynasty is a small but powerful reminder of the tenuous relationship between destruction and creation. It is also a reminder that affirms the persistence and perpetuation of an ecology of memories through which communities continue to create and coalesce around culturally shared moments and the interpretive possibilities available to them. Connected to the discussion in the preceding chapter, I explore the power of narratives and their relationship to ruins—whether they are actual ruins, physical objects, thought-objects, individuals, or cultural concepts.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe so much to Professor Kelley Wickham-Crowley and her unfailing encouragement, her constant kindness and immense good cheer, and the gentle and wise mentorship that she has always shown me. It was through her that I came to know the joy that animates our study of the still-vibrant worlds within Anglo-Saxon literature. A substantive portion of this master’s thesis took shape in her Worlds of Beowulf seminar, which—despite having concluded in December of 2015—I have not quite left and, I suspect, never shall. Professor Sarah McNamer has also been a great pillar of strength through her own mentorship, through the faith and support she has always so graciously extended to me, and for the confidence she gave me in pursuing the interpretive possibilities inherent in later medieval literature. I am grateful for having had the privilege of learning from these two most wonderful of teachers, both as their student and as their teaching assistant, and to have been able to share this time with them. Many thanks, as well, to Professor Lori Merish, who provided insightful advice on my early work. I cannot be remiss in acknowledging my dear friends and colleagues of the Georgetown English M.A. program, whose unparalleled good humor, commiserative capacity, companionship, and just plain goodness have made my time at Georgetown one of the happiest chapters of my life. I would also like to express my gratitude to A.K., without whose staunch friendship, perception, and willingness to push me to confront what I wanted to make of this project provided me with the knowledge, inspiration, and excitement to pursue the course I ultimately took. Thank you to my family, Sumontha and David, Monique and William, for your constant love, support, and encouragement. I would not be the person I am today without you all. And finally, I owe everything to Shanoaha for having seen me through my worst, for having always advised me with patience and kindness, and for having been the most joyful companion one could ask for in this life. I dedicate this work to you.
INTRODUCTION

One of the most poignant characteristics of many Anglo-Saxon works of literature is a pervasive and deep sense of loss. Even when the texts are not specifically describing the passing of things, one may still feel this pain because the narratives seem leavened less by overt displays of machismo than by a kind of quiet melancholy. Never again being able to experience what was once so powerfully felt and known at a particular, significant moment in time serves simultaneously as a cause for lamentation and as an overwhelming motivation for remembrance and the exercise of creative urges. The feeling travels beyond what we might today characterize as nostalgia or just a wistful sentiment or the casual longing for days gone by. There is a keen awareness of the ephemeral quality of the glories gained in battle, of the treasures heaped up in one’s hall, and the time enjoyed in the company of others; an awareness that not only is life short but even shorter are the moments we have for making any meaning out of what may bless or befall us.

Within that sense of fatalism, though, exists a vitality and an ever-present desire to shape the circumstances of one’s own life and one’s community to conform to the wishes of an individual’s own perception, ambition, and agency. Extending and sculpting the limits of what is known, clashing with competing narratives of the same events, and retaining memories of bygone people and their deeds and words are all part of the process of grieving for that which we can no longer return to. Yet despite this, there is a creative force that prolongs the life of communities and cultures. Not only does creation happen when one insists on a narrative of how one thing happened over some other thing (for better or for ill), or when we use words and concepts and images to convey memories of forever-inaccessible moments and truths, but one comes to understand that in creating we can learn to forget. One regrets the inability to summon
once again that for which one longs, but in time the memory of the moment fades with the individual who passes. The moment becomes but an echo in the impenetrable marshes of deep time. We mourn for and meditate upon those fragments of times we can no longer know or feel or experience as they happened. And in that there is both a space for sorrow and the chance for creation.

In this master’s thesis, I write in such a way that at times incorporates elements of the personal with the academic, adopting at turns narrative choices that attempt to reflect the fragmented yet interconnected nature of memory and our own relationship to it with the passing of time. Similar to the way in which Jeffrey Jerome Cohen characterizes his tracing of the occurrence and inclusion of stone in literature in his book *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, my work is also “something of a thought experiment, attempting to discern in the most mundane of substances a liveliness” (Cohen 6). While memory is more than a mundane substance, I take it and the way it is prominently—yet on some level still subtly—woven through Old English literature as that element through which I see a liveliness that must be expressed. In exploring these narratives, I will occasionally offer forth a working-through of ideas that seeks to bridge the moments unique to my own individual experiences with those of the characters and communities within the texts at hand. In the introduction to his book, Cohen narrates an aspect of his childhood in which he describes a boulder, a “glacial erratic, swept southward and stranded by ancient ice” (17), sitting atop a mound in his neighborhood, which he and the other children called the Big Rock. The Big Rock became a creative force through which he and his friends and siblings “wove an elaborate mythology” (17). “The worlds this rock opened,” Cohen writes, “were the dreams of a child who lived in a place too small” (18). In approaching literature and discussing it, our own interior worlds and the relationship we have to the texts we read are
themselves shaped by those individual experiences unique to our own aggregate moments, shifting in meaning and sentiment, altering and adjusting according to the new narratives we ourselves construct over the years of those moments that fade farther and farther from our present realities. “Even if born of a general principle of matter,” Cohen explains, “geophilia’s mobility and clasp possess their own rocky effects, in the quadruple sense ‘effects’ carries of aftermath, agency, production, and belongings. These effects are palpable even in my prose, an aggregate matter that moves by slide and shift” (Cohen 19). In reflecting on the elements of interest that make up the subject of this work, my prose also takes on a quality that reflects the nature of the research at hand, being willing at times to contemplate the border between the unquantifiable experience of being a fallible human and the desire to seek objectivity.

The first chapter of this master’s thesis, “Beowulf and Conceptual Ruins: Loss and Creation,” is largely built upon the foundation established specifically (although not exclusively) by J. R. R. Tolkien in his “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics.” Additionally, I have chosen Michael D. C. Drout’s engagement with Tolkien in “The tower and the ruin: the past in J.R.R. Tolkien’s works,” a chapter from Tolkien: The forest and the city, as a useful and productive starting point for my own explorations because he works through ideas (albeit in the context of Tolkien’s works) that are similar to mine. In many respects, my chapter is meant to be in some small measure an addition to the discussion that Drout begins in his response to Tolkien’s groundbreaking essay in Beowulf studies. But I also, as mentioned above, return to the spirit of Tolkien’s argument by extending and at times testing his allegorical and interpretive framework to play a role in shaping my own narrative and argumentative choices. Most prominent of Tolkien’s framings is his allegory of the text of Beowulf being a tower built to look out upon the

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1 I have kept the particular stylistic choices of the editors of the book by not capitalizing the expected words in the titles and chapters of the compilation.
sea, but whose stones—having belonged to an older hall—were of chief interest to historians and various other scholars who sought to break apart the tower (that is, *Beowulf* itself) to more closely examine the interesting carvings on the stones. (One could say that these scholars missed the forest for the trees, but I am concerned that the mixing of these figurative expressions will cause something more than just an allegorical tower to topple.) Tolkien’s critique of the scholarly tendencies of his era and those decades preceding him are at times difficult for me to accept—not necessarily because of any vehement disagreement with him, but rather because I am aware that I too am at times guilty of indulging in my zeal to focus on the stones as I turn them over for clues to a past whose reality eludes us, forgetting to stop and think and enjoy the view of the sea.

Tolkien, in his spirited defense of the poetry of *Beowulf*, employs what may ostensibly be considered a New Critical approach of appreciating the text for itself and arguing for the merits it has in presenting itself as it is—as a monumental, complex, and moving poem for which historical context is not required to fully understand and appreciate its beauty and its humanity (Lees 130). This is not to say that he disregards the fine qualities of history and its related fields (for which he provides another allegory that I also reference in the first chapter). Rather, it has been in the quest for determining historical truth—to somehow resurrect the “lostness” of a reality that once was that is intimated throughout the text—that scholars all too readily dismissed the poem for its literary merits, seeking to determine an objective truth behind and among the historical references with which the text is laden. In perhaps conceiving of the theoretical possibility of ascertaining an objective truth, they lost sight of the creative forces at work within the lives of the characters inhabiting the text itself and of the sustained act of imaginary power.
that the *Beowulf* poet carried out in building and shaping the world that they, in Tolkien’s framing, sought to dismantle.

The tension in my approach is that—even though there is an acknowledgment and embracing of the qualities for which Tolkien advocates—we should not lose sight of the fact that these very works of scholarly inquiry are in and of themselves creative acts. Although it is useful for Tolkien’s purposes to characterize the attitude with which certain scholars approached the text as a kind of destructive act, we need not be bound to such a sentiment when we regard such scholarly inquiry as derived from the same creative, imaginative curiosity that even the characters within *Beowulf* practice when they contemplate their relationship to the past. And furthermore, when the *Beowulf* poet himself set about creating his work, his work draws much of its power from the act of conjuring the images of the past, attempting to draw forth an inaccessible world into his own present time. The text invites the audience to imagine creation at many levels.

Drout, in his analysis of ruins and towers in Tolkien’s works, provides a fruitful framework with which to reinterpret aspects of *Beowulf*’s narrative, and even by extension other works in the Old English literary corpus. Towers are achievements that exist within a fixed, temporal point, and they are bound to fall. It is through the ruins that we have a permanent reminder of that achievement that is no longer accessible—the lostness of which I made mention. “Lostness” seems to imply within itself something more than mere loss—if loss is ever mere—a sense of frustration amid the sorrow that we are still aware and reminded of something that once was and that we are still trying to bring back, but which we know we never can. By extending the allegory of ruins to characters, material objects and their verbal descriptions, imagined spaces that exist only within cultural recollections, and funerary practices, one can more readily see the
currents and forces by which things such as narrative have the power to shape realities—and how within those narratives, there are absences that hint at possibilities that never were.

The second chapter, “The Cup in Anglo-Saxon Imagery: Vessels of Memory and Meaning,” focuses on the Northumbrian Franks Casket depiction of Weland’s betrayal of Beadohilde by handing her the cup of drugged beer as described in the Old Norse tale Völundarkviða. Examining the specific inclusion of the cup and its centrality, I raise questions about the inclusion of cups in Anglo-Saxon (and by relation Old Norse) imagery, both in terms of material culture and in literature. Cups and other drinking vessels play a key role in the complex constellation of interactions that mark the distribution of power, the formation of identity, and the role of communal memory. The inclusion of scenes such as the Weland-Beadohilde interaction in an object as ornate and culturally complex as the Franks Casket also has an intriguing purpose: If cups can serve as symbols of communal binding, the specific inclusion of a poisoned cup from a story whose narrative power draws on deception, rape, vengeance, and the ultimate usurpation of an entire dynasty is a small but powerful reminder of the tenuous relationship between destruction and creation. It is also a reminder that affirms the persistence and perpetuation of an ecology of memories through which communities continue to create and coalesce around culturally shared moments and the interpretive possibilities available to them. Focusing on specific scenes in Beowulf with this context in mind also allows for interpretations of the dynamics between Hrothgar, Wealhtheow, and Beowulf, such as the clash of cultural memories that informs Wealhtheow’s caution and Hrothgar’s hasty elevation of Beowulf above his own nephew and sons.

Connected to the discussion in the preceding chapter, the power of narratives and their relationship to ruins—whether they be actual ruins, objects, individuals, or cultural concepts—is
a continued concern. Whatever mysterious process may be behind what may be called “imbuing” something with history, which Drout touches on in his essay on ruins and towers, the seeming power that material objects wield when they are imbued with culturally remembered narratives is a power unto itself, as well as a lesser seen act of creation beyond the physical and material crafting of the object itself. The continued reproduction of cultural memories and therefore the perpetuation of culture itself is an act that weaves itself in the powerful, symbolic rituals that bind individuals to one another. As the acts recede farther into time, their places take up a position as ruins within the collective memories of communities, to mold and to shape into narratives that either serve the purposes of reifying a present ideology or for the quieter purposes of introspective contemplation. Through the generative capabilities inherent in these ruins, new towers may rise.

Bede’s image of the sparrow flying through the hall is an often-cited image from his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People.* It is vivid, poignant, and demonstrative of much of

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2 “Cuius suasioni uerbisque prudentibus alius optimatum regis tribuenus assensum continuo subdidit: ‘Talis’ inquiens ‘mihi uidetur, rex, uita hominum praesens in terris, ad comparationem eius, quod nobis incertum est temporis, quale cum te residente ad caenam cum ducibus ac ministris tuis tempore brumali, accenso quidem foco in medio et calido efffcto cenanulo, furentibus autem foris per omnia turbinibus hiemaliu pluiiarum uel niuim, adueniens unus passerum domum citissime peruolauerit; qui cum per unum ostium ingrediens mox per aliud exierit, ipso quidem tempore quo intus est hiemis tempestate non tangitur, sed tamen paruissimo spatii serenitatis ad momentum excurso, mox de hieme in hiemem regrediens tuis oculis elabitur. Ita haec uita hominum ad modicum apparat; quid autem sequatur, quidue praecesserit, prorsus ignoramus. Vnde, si haec noua doctrina certius aliiquid attulit, merito esse sequenda uidetur.’ His similia et ceteri maiores natu ac regis consiliarii diuinitii admoniti prosequebantur.” “Another of the king’s chief men agreed with this advice and with these wise words and then added, ‘This is how the present life of man on earth, King, appears to me in comparison with that time which is unknown to us. You are sitting feasting with your ealdormen and thegns in winter time; the fire is burning on the hearth in the middle of the hall and all inside is warm, while outside the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging; and a sparrow flies swiftly through the hall. It enters in at one door and quickly flies out through the other. For the few moments it is inside, the storm and wintry tempest cannot touch it, but after the briefest moment of calm, it flits from your sight, out of the wintry storm and into it again. So this life of man appears but for a moment; what follows or indeed what went before, we know not at all. If this new doctrine brings us more certain information, it seems right that we should accept it.’ Other elders and counselors of the king continued in the same manner, being divinely prompted to do so.” This edition and
the sentiment with which I grapple. It encapsulates the passing of things without dwelling on superficial nostalgia; it very specifically suggests the vast impenetrability that surrounds much of human life. But for the span of whatever duration we have flitting from one end of the great hall to the next, emerging from out of that darkness, into the warm light, and once more out again, we inhabit a space and time that is as fleeting as the flapping of wings. If there is a divine scribe who toils cataloging every thought and action and utterance that takes place over the course of one’s life, chronicling the objective moments as they happened from a perspective that cannot be challenged, it also suggests an end to the creative striving by which we ourselves toil to determine what happened, what things meant, and what words will shape the towers and ruins that stand as tokens of our brief presence.

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CHAPTER I

BEOWULF AND CONCEPTUAL RUINS: LOSS AND CREATION

Writing in her 1982 essay “The Beowulf Poet’s Sense of History,” Roberta Frank states that “the [Beowulf] poet avoids obvious anachronisms and presents such an internally consistent picture of Scandinavian society around A.D. 500 that his illusion of historical truth has been taken for the reality” by scholars such as Kemp Malone, who writes of the poem’s “high standard of historical accuracy” (Frank 99). In citing Walter Goffart’s “Hetware and Hugas: Datable Anachronisms in Beowulf;” though, Frank points out that moments appear that betray the process of reconstruction on the part of the poet. Yet in crafting this illusion of a historical past, the poet is himself participating in a process of reconstructing memory and interpreting its meaning, an act that is itself at the heart of much of Beowulf and our own experience as readers today. While what one may consider “historical accuracy” in the modern sense seems to have been a concern on the part of the Beowulf poet in that he took care to not erase the pre-Christian elements while writing as a Christian, more is certainly at stake than the mere reporting of past events or the desire to produce evocative imagery of old things and depictions of ancient rituals, illuminating though they may be.

Amid the preserved glimpses of a past that even to the poet was ancient and to us is all the more so, we should not think that the text is somehow inert, bereft of a still-powerful vitality. One sees the act of creation taking place even within settings that are ostensibly ruined and gone, of narratives that suggest fixed concepts of what is and what is not, which are then changed by the characters within the text—both in what they say or do not say, in the actions they take or do not take, and in the intimations of a kind of deep time that is aware not only of the past but of the future outside the bounds of what any of the characters could know. Beowulf is, in many respects,
about what is readable and unreadable, knowledge that others have and knowledge of which many remain ignorant, and how that knowledge, whether correctly or incorrectly interpreted or recalled, shapes the understanding of our present realities. The anxieties of the poet’s present and our own present circumstances may filter how events depicted as the distant past in Beowulf are perceived, but we should not regard the inescapability of our own mooring in the present to prevent us from imagining the complex creative and contemplative possibilities that texts such as Beowulf contain either overtly or through (intentional or unintentional) omission. The text simultaneously invites and bars its audience from being able to truly experience its own internal present—what to both the poet and to us is depicted as the past. But the inability to once more experience what happened as it happened does not negate the inherent power of creation that thrives in both this state of loss itself and in the act of thinking about that loss—what happens when we even begin to attempt the process of reifying an imagined past.

In discussing the relationship between towers and ruins in J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings, Michael D. C. Drout characterizes the tower as “the achievement” while the ruin is “the permanent memory, or at least a trigger for memory,” as long as there are people living to experience the memory associated with the ruin (“The tower and the ruin” 177). Drout builds much of his discussion on Tolkien’s often-cited allegory of the tower whose stones were quarried from some ruins belonging to an old hall, as discussed in “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics”:

A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without
troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man’s distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: ‘This tower is most interesting.’ But they also said (after pushing it over): ‘What a muddle it is in!’ And even the man’s own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: ‘He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he store the old house? He had no sense of proportion.’ But from the top of that tower that man had been able to look out upon the sea.

(Tolkien 7-8)

Drout then explores what he contends is the “dominant emotion in all of Tolkien’s works.” Ruins are, in Drout’s words, “token[s] that while it can call to mind previous joy or accomplishment, at the same time it makes concrete the inescapable fact that what is lost cannot be recovered” (177). The permanence of that loss leads to a melancholy feeling that is at the heart of Tolkien’s writing and, I believe, in Beowulf as well. That melancholy is more than what can be captured by the contemporary sense of the word “nostalgia,” the origin of which Drout traces to 1770 as a coining, rather than an original Latin word, of the German heimweh, or homesickness (literally “home woe” or “home pain”). The more wistful connotations of “nostalgia” today derive from a shift in meaning that began to take root in the 1920s, and it is this particular connotative sense of the word that has taken on its “bad reputation” that “can certainly degenerate into sentimentality and from there into cliché and tedium. But that is not the sort of nostalgia we find in Tolkien’s
work” (178), and, I would like to extend, that is not found as well in Anglo-Saxon literature. Drout connects *heimweh* with *langoth*, a word describing an emotion that T. A. Shippey “identifies [as] one of the most important emotions in Tolkien’s work,” being “a longing for the straight road to Valinor coupled with a recognition that such a road is no longer accessible. With that recognition . . . comes a kind of pain” (Shippey, as quoted in “The tower and the ruin” 178).

We can enter into and imagine three parallel experiences. One is that of the world of the text itself removed from the *Beowulf* poet, one in which we walk around the rooms of the tower, ascending and descending the stairs at our leisure, enjoying our time inside its walls or emerging at the top to survey the sea; the second is that of the *Beowulf* poet himself crafting the narrative inhabiting his present—taking those old stones, so to speak, and building the tower which he invites us to visit; and the third is that of the modern reader who inhabits his or her own respective present, choosing either (as mentioned in the first experience) to look out upon the sea or choosing to, as Tolkien characterizes it, push over the stones to examine them for clues to an ancient and buried past. In the first parallel experience, the text is a universe unto itself. Issues of chronology and our conception, and indeed the poet’s own conception, of historical fact are not necessary insofar as readers outside of that universe are concerned. In acknowledging this, we can more readily examine narrative moments for their own particular qualities for shaping what is happening within that particular cosmological framework (that is, how the reality of the textual universe is being built—how what people say or do challenges or fixes what is known. *Beowulf*, and other similar Anglo-Saxon texts, are ruins of a sort on their own, but the textual worlds are similar to Tolkien’s own constructs. There are both towers that mark achievement inhabiting the text’s own sense of its present time just as there are ruins that signify permanent loss.
The *Beowulf* poet may also have enhanced the sense of the age of the story by deliberately drawing on words and phrasings that even to him would have been archaic, which Tolkien similarly does in the “Lay of the Children of Húrin” to achieve an effect that draws the reader into a more ancient mood and mode (Hall 1-2). While a minor example, the alteration of language to approximate a feeling of archaism is an element of this same process. One takes a kind of imagined ruin and constructs a tower out of it; or, perhaps more aptly, the language serves as the mortar of the structure. The deliberate use of the old language serves as a means of signifying “oldness” on the part of the contemporary person and his or her audience, while more than likely not being the perfect reality of the era it is attempting to evoke.

The *ubi sunt* motif and this desire to perform the act of remembrance is a palpable anxiety that persists over the course of *Beowulf*, as is also the case in many other texts recording tales of pre-Christian North Sea cultures of the early medieval era. That anxiety is the desire to retain and contextualize lore, to recall the memorialized store of knowledge and events in such a way that places members of the present in a continuum, thereby reinforcing one’s place in a communal narrative and therefore a community. Despite this high-minded characterization, that does not mean that audiences from the time of its composition down to the present time are not allowed to enjoy the poetry for its own sake and even to feel genuine excitement during moments of narrative action or tension, such as the repetition of the heavy-sounding, suspense-filled “come” in describing Grendel’s journey to Heorot: “*Cōm on wanre niht / scrīðan sceadu-genge*” (“Now in the night / the dark walker came”) (702-703), shortly followed thereafter by “*Đā cōm of mōre under mist-hleoþum / Grendel gongan*” (“Then up from the marsh, under misty cliffs, / Grendel came walking”) (710-711). Nor are we barred from pausing to admire the beauty of the most basic of word-images, such as “*Đā wæs winter scacen, / fæger foldan bearm*” (“Winter was

3 My thanks to Kelley Wickham-Crowley for this idea. (The italics are my emphasis.)
gone, / the lush fields fair”) (1136-1137). It calls to mind for me the end of the months-long, gray winters of my early years in rural eastern Washington state, which would every spring be marked by the melting snows giving way first to the dreary revealing of long, yellow stalks of grass from the slush and mud and then to the gradual and verdant emergence of grasses, oats, and alfalfa in the fields around my home. There is nothing sophisticated about acknowledging the feeling that accompanies the end of winter and the coming of spring, yet there is a potency to the poetry as it occurs in the moment—like walking along a gravel road and noticing amid the dull gray stones a particularly fetching feldspar.

What I have presented here is an example of a reader-response interpretation of the line, which on some level clashes with the New Critical approach of imagining the text as a universe unto itself (in other words, my memories of the fields of Eastern Washington are irrelevant). But what can we do with this similar kind of response that I, someone outside the bounds of the universe of the text, may suddenly imagine and to which I may have an emotional response? It is important to reiterate the role of the scop within the narrative: The Beowulf poet has included the scop and the audience within the hall; the scop’s recitation of the long-ago events of Finnsburg is being processed by the audience much in the way that I am processing the image, except for those imagined members of the audience inhabiting the text they are conjuring images that—though they may be similar to my own—are forming within the context of a culture that is still acutely feeling the simultaneous connection and loss to the recollected events. In other words, they themselves are having a kind of reader-response interpretation to the scop’s verse, which creates a multiplicity of interpretive truths that exist for a brief moment and which are held inside the minds of the listeners. It is through the transmission of one word-image that new images become produced, and which in their own transmission perpetuates a blended textual culture
whose internal consistency and integrity become shaped by outside interpretations. The internal narrative images of the mind’s eye of individual members of a communal audience can have the power of altering the fabric of an internal universe of the text, and in that there is the eventuality of forgetting and creating.

Indeed, it is through small moments such as these that the practice of passing on communal knowledge could more readily be exercised. The image of winter’s passing occurs during the Finnsburg episode, which is a kind of meta-ruin that the Beowulf poet includes in which a scop relates the tale within the text to a presumably already-familiar audience. It is a meta-ruin in the sense that the poet invites us to participate in an act of imagining-through-imaginary characters of an incident that is all but forgotten to us, but which to the imagined characters are all real. For the imagined audience—perhaps within the text itself and those who inhabited the poet’s own present—recalling the events of Finnsburg would presumably have been familiar, the cultural markers being evident in such a way that the mere mentioning of the word-images (e.g., the laying of the sword in the lap, line 1143) and the dropped names of individuals (e.g., Guthlaf and Oslaf, line 1148) would have probably held a deep resonance connecting to a constellation of ideas that to us is not just largely unknown but also forever inaccessible. It requires extraordinary acts of imagination to even begin to attempt to access those lost memories in a way that approaches—to reuse an earlier phrasing—the way the recorded events occurred as they happened. But whether or not that should even be considered the purpose of such stories is important to consider. At the simplest, though, amid the feeling of grief, exile, and destruction, something as simple as fields sprouting again after the snowmelt affords us a glimpse of life, a kind of creative generativity in perpetuity. On some level, because our knowledge of the presented historical cultures of these texts is mediated through the work of
later hands—the inheritor of the ancient stones, so to speak—any endeavor to reconstruct the memories and stories of long-ago tribal communities and ways of remembering comes to us through a glass darkly, with only archaeological discoveries of material culture serving to either confirm or complicate our best imaginative conjurations. But that inaccessibility, while it may inspire heimweh or langoth, still offers the potential for renewal.

Some of these explorations lead to what Tolkien describes in another allegorical formulation. The fairy godmother’s entourage of “excellent ladies” was invited to look over Beowulf. Historia was put in charge, and “she brought with her Philologia, Mythologia, Archaeologia, and Laographia.” Poesis, though, was usually forgotten, being only “occasionally admitted by a side-door; sometimes dismissed upon the door-step. “‘The Beowulf,’ they said, ‘is hardly an affair of yours, and not in any case a protégé that you could be proud of. It is an historical document. Only as such does it interest the superior culture of today’” (Tolkien 6).

What Tolkien means to say by this is that scholars for too long placed a great emphasis upon attempting to interpret the building blocks of Beowulf through the lenses of history, philology, mythology, archaeology, and folklore—all of which are fine endeavors—but for too long neglected to appreciate the creative vitality of the poetry itself, the actual culmination of all those composite parts. Beowulf, seemingly historically accurate though it may be, and with its verse lines being “more like masonry than music” (Tolkien 30), is a tower that is built upon the foundation of ruins remembered and reimagined; it also, I contend, participates in the process of forming both towers and ruins within its own self. Within these reimagined facsimiles of the past, we are ourselves invited to participate in the very acts of recollection and interpretation that the characters in the stories practice, while also confronting the frustration that occurs when we no longer have the means of truly grasping that actual past with any certainty. In embracing and
welcoming Poesis, to extend Tolkien’s allegory, and if we view the text as being both a ruin and a tower simultaneously, aspects of the text pertaining to its flow of time and what could be termed the boundaries of knowledge—as well as its absence—can be viewed through a lens of creation and destruction, remembrance and loss.

*Beowulf* has the peculiar quality in its narrative structure of resembling the experience of recalling one’s own memories. The mind still imagines time progressing linearly and constructs its recollections accordingly, but so too does it jump to other moments in time once a point in the narrative has stopped needing to be in focus. And so too is there an element of the cyclical, as if what we experience at the beginning with the summary of Scyld Seafing and his life is in fact not meant to be in the past but rather a present summation of what the *scop* and perhaps even the community knows about the full story presented in *Beowulf*. Understanding events in a linear fashion does not need to preclude the ability to simultaneously regard these events as part of a cyclical continuum or of seeing them as parallel and simultaneous, challenging concepts of temporal location. Any potential modern inclination toward organizing time in terms of linear progression chafes against this tendency of abruptly folding space-time in order to visit the future or the distant past and to return to a semblance of the narrative present as if no time has passed at all. In our own personal memories, though, we still exhibit the practice of perceiving events linearly while also frequently traveling between temporally disparate points. Societies whose conceptual framework for the self in relation to the world centered more on immediate kinship and geographical ties rather than the positioning of the self within a narrative of global historical and humanist progress—as we have a tendency of doing nowadays—conceivably would have more readily allowed these structures to shape their narrative aesthetics. And when one’s communal stories feature the same cycles of birth, life, and death and everything that occurs in
between, the acknowledgment of the power of cycles seems more evident than an assumption of progressive accretions toward a vague sense of perfection.

Even though we have a sense of what is supposed to be the primary temporal context of the story of *Beowulf*, if we actually view the story as a whole, its fixity starts to feel unmoored. Despite this, though, in *Beowulf* there is “a method and structure that within the limits of the verse-kind approaches rather to sculpture or painting. It is a composition not a tune” (Tolkien 30). A written text is static and complete in its materiality, rather than an oral performance that may shift over the generations based on the interpretive emphases of the *scop* performing the tale, and therefore demands a different set of assumptions of the modern reader who interacts with it versus the listener who relies on the *scop*’s performance to summon forth the moments. But even if *Beowulf* was not originally performed as an oral poem—if it was actually only ever in manuscript form—the relationship that we as modern readers have to the text is fundamentally different.

John Leyerle, who characterizes *Beowulf* as “a poem of rapid shifts in subject and time” (Leyerle 1), expresses the observation that “the details are rich, but the pattern does not represent a linear structure, a lack discussed with distaste by many” (1). When we today progress from the first page to the final page of a text such as *Beowulf*, we are automatically imposing our own set of assumptions on how such a poem should begin to be comprehended. We expect, for example, pagination and line numbers that attempt to sequester and contain the communicated word-images. Already when we begin a poem such as *Beowulf* we are, through the necessity of modern literary conventions, positioned on a specific trajectory of filtration. We are, in other words, implicitly invited to approach *Beowulf* as a linear narrative progression whose time markers observe the same rules as our own contemporary conceptual constructions of time. Leyerle posits
the intriguing relationship between interlace design and its profusion through England around the
time of Beowulf’s composition. “Interlace designs,” he writes, “go back to prehistoric
Mesopotamia; in one form or another they are characteristic of the art of all races” (2). In
interlace design, “the bands may be plaited together to form a braid or rope pattern, a design that
appears, for example, on borders of the Franks Casket” (2). The design is “made when the bands
are turned back on themselves to form knots or breaks that interrupt, so to speak, the linear flow
of the bands” (2). In imagining narrative patterns that reflect interlace designs, the frequent
memorialized events of the past that interrupt the main narrative threads of the story suggest an
intimate intertwining of multiple realities that are both real and felt. Just as specific memories
may emerge, summoned by some trigger or series of events in our present realities, the existence
of what is recalled in the mind’s eye is itself a parallel reality that becomes an indelible presence.
In giving voice to the memory, narrating its recalled sequence of events and bringing it forth in
one’s lived, present reality, braiding cultural memory and the concerns of the present in such a
way that rises and disappears to create patterns and bonding.

We have a couple of different images with which to conceptualize Beowulf’s narrative
structure: Tolkien’s comparison of the text to that of a sculpture or a painting (Tolkien 30) and
Leyerle’s conception of the text as reflective of interlace design. If one were to take Tolkien’s
comparison of the text as a sculpture or a painting, narrative sequences filtered through
chronological order do not necessarily disappear, but there is a sense that all happens at once—
that it is indeed a tower at the same time that it is also a ruin.

Under what constraints did the scop present the same word-images to his audiences? He
must have needed to craft self-contained moments that would concurrently tell the familiar tale
while weaving moments significant to the culture’s past with the concerns of the present,
practicing the art of memory and interpretation along the way in such a manner that would have perpetuated the community’s sense of its selfhood and its position in the world, or of the contours of their world itself. He would have drawn on some of the same cultural markers that are vaguely defined when examined closely yet recognized as signifying something culturally known. Drout, in a different work, describes this using the concept of memes, “the simplest unit of cultural replication, analogous to the biological gene; it is whatever is transmitted when one person imitates, consciously or unconsciously, another” (*How Tradition Works* 4). Memories and associative ideas inhabit, and make up, an ecology of memes that reproduce one another. Owing to limitations in how many of these memes can be retained at any given time, they must compete with one another. Certain memes are forgotten while others are remembered. This is, in other words, what makes a culture (*How Tradition Works* 7).

It seems as well that, even if *Beowulf* were always in written form, its aesthetic aim in large part reconstructs the narrative practices of the *scop*, so that it would not be unreasonable to imagine that we can still view those previously described methods of linear-cyclical narrative aesthetics at play. We need not cover too extensively the well-trod ground of the differences between orality and literacy when others have already done so.4 I do think, though, that texts such as *Beowulf*—along with modern practices of editing and publishing—both capture and obscure processes at work in the original minds who told the tales and the many iterations the tales must have taken, and it is my own hope to attempt to reconstruct and express what some of these moments could reveal about the role of memory, meaning, and identity. Drout explains that “the power of the ruin, the physical object, is a key to understanding this aesthetic and emotional accomplishment. A ruin, despite its permanence in the landscape—no, because of its permanence

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in the landscape—is a tangible marker, an absolute insistence on the pastness of the past, the permanence of the separation from the present experience of the person who views it” (185-186).\(^5\) The aesthetic and emotional accomplishment that Drout describes is “blessed sadness” (185), a term meant to describe sadness without bitterness. Tolkien, Drout explains, captures this feeling of blessed sadness in manner that, in his estimation, is unparalleled in the literary output of the twentieth-century; only James Joyce approaches it in “The Dead,” and even then it is not as clearly felt and beheld as it is in Tolkien’s writings.

Drout cites Renée Trilling’s summary of what is regarded as the “mainstream and consensus view of nostalgia in contemporary literary-theoretical analysis” (“The tower and the ruin” 186), which is that “nostalgia, which paradoxically affirms the past (and very often a fictional past at that) by reconstituting the story of its passing, is primarily concerned with the present” (Trilling 4). Drout explains that Trilling is “synthesizing arguments by, among others, Slavoj Žižek and J. M. Fritzman, that a nostalgic view of the past is really about the political circumstances of the present. The emotion of nostalgia, in this view, is generated by the reification of ideology” (“The tower and the ruin” 186). Drout disagrees with this view of nostalgia because it is “too convenient for the critic and the theorist. If we believe nostalgia really is primarily about present politics rather than the inescapable human loss of the past, then study of the past is automatically politically relevant and therefore important. How helpful for the theorists, who can then thus justify their consumption of social resources and positions of political power” (186). He does acknowledge that the past is always perceived and conceived of in the present, and that “[i]deological interpretation does illuminate those features of nostalgia that are about the present” (186), but it is different from the inherent “lost-ness, the permanent separation from all that has come before. The past may be active in our minds, but we do not

\(^5\) The italics are his.
reach it directly, only through memory, and that inaccessibility, that exile, is a cause of *heimweh*, the longing or *langoth* that is so important in Tolkien’s work” (186). I think that Drout’s critique of the current consensus on nostalgia in literary-theoretical analysis is a fair identification of a potential conflict of interest, but it does not negate the validity or generative capacity for arguments rooted in such a view. He is perhaps more on the nose, though, when he states, “For me and, I am pretty certain, for Tolkien, *heimweh* is not cured by ideology. It is not a pain assuaged by reification (as wonderful as that possibility must sound to some),” after which he then refers the reader to a footnote that glibly says, “On phenomenological grounds ideological reification seems one of the lesser pleasures” (187). A more pressing concern is at stake, though: How does one truly imbue something with history? (This is similar to the question of how one invents a tradition, Drout notes.) He does not provide an answer beyond identifying the question’s answer as being very useful for literary studies. Tolkien touches on something close to what I will suggest in a moment when he says that *Beowulf* “used knowledge of these things for its own purpose—to give that sense of perspective, of antiquity with a greater and yet darker antiquity behind. These things are mainly on the outer edges or in the background because they belong there, if they are to function in this way” (127). What is in the center of the story is “an heroic figure of enlarged proportions” (127). I would like to make a modest suggestion that a way to imbue something with history is not to merely mention the correct number of seemingly accurate-sounding descriptions of cultural heirlooms, nor to purposefully pepper archaic turns of phrase throughout the text in an attempt to perform the act of speech-spackling the allegorical tower’s stones. *Beowulf* is imbued with history not because the *Beowulf* poet’s re-creation of historically accurate descriptions is expertly done, but rather because he consciously establishes

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6 “For *Beowulf* was not designed to tell the tale of Hygelac’s fall, or for that matter to give the whole biography of Beowulf, still less to write the history of the Geatish kingdom and its downfall” (Tolkien 31).
settings that revivify places that are dead and destroyed. In other words, much of what happens in *Beowulf* occurs inside what to the Beowulf poet and his contemporary audience would have been a culturally remembered ruin, if not a physically known one. It is this act of creating enlivened settings in which characters play out the cycles of life and death within the space of resurrected ruins that imbues a text with a sense of history. It is in this act of attempting to reimagine, to re-experience something lost, that *Beowulf* becomes imbued with history, and which is why it, like Tolkien’s works, is also imbued with *heimweh* and *langoth*, for none of us may ever wend our way back to those times.

Tolkien, in attempting to determine a proper literary genre label to affix to *Beowulf*, writes that “*Beowulf* is not an ‘epic,’ not even a magnified ‘lay.’ No terms borrowed from Greek or other literatures exactly fit: there is no reason why they should. Though if we must have a term, we should choose rather ‘elegy.’ It is an heroic-elegiac poem; and in a sense all its first 3,136 lines are the prelude to a dirge” (Tolkien 31). In Tolkien’s estimation, the most moving lines are “him þa gegiredan Gēata leode / ād on eorðan unwāclīcē”7 (“The Geatish people then built a pyre / on that high ground, no mean thing”) (3137-3138). The funereal quality of *Beowulf* is emphasized through the three overt funeral scenes—Scyld’s at the beginning, the Finnsburg cremation scene, and Beowulf’s at the end—plus the fourth, more subtle funeral identified by Gale Owen-Crocker and often referred to as the Lay of the Last Survivor. *Beowulf* begins in *geardagum*, in the days of yore, with an account of the genealogy of King Hrothgar of the Danes. As mentioned, the opening of the poem concerns the life of Scyld Scefing, whose tale is encapsulated in the first fifty-two lines. The recounting in broad strokes of the life of Scyld seems on the surface just a means of establishing the good stock from which Hrothgar comes. Hrothgar, as one of the heirs in the line of Scyld, has a lot to live up to. But I think that in reading

these first fifty-two lines instead as the narrative present rather than just the distant past, we are being initiated into an unfolding of what will be an elaboration of the key moments in Beowulf’s youth and the key moment at the end of his life. (After all, although Scyld’s burial at the beginning seems overt to us because of the popular image of ship burials after the Sutton Hoo finds in 1939, Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, his editor, and six out of seven of his reviewers in the early nineteenth century did not recognize Scyld’s funeral at the beginning, and neither did Thorkelin even know that Scyld was indeed supposed to be dead [Shippey 135-136].) This is not meant to be put forward as a profound shift in thinking, as thinking of Scyld’s accomplishments in the context of Hrothgar certainly does not negate one from beginning to think of Beowulf’s actions over the course of the poem either. However, if we divide the section into component parts, we can draw some general parallels to the presentation of Beowulf’s life: 1) lines 1 through 11 are analogous to Beowulf’s actions in coming to assist Hrothgar in ridding him of the menace of Grendel and his mother; 2) lines 12 through 25 align with the events toward the end of the poem when Wiglaf is made Beowulf’s heir (with the references to “treasur[ing] up the future” (21) being an important connection); and 3) the lengthy description of Scyld’s death and funeral from lines 26 through 52 are pegged temporally to Beowulf’s own death and funeral. This structure serves two basic purposes. The first is that this mirroring through association is a means of not only contextualizing the historical position of both Hrothgar and Beowulf but also, second, orienting the listener to conceive of this ritualized performance of a bygone person’s life as a means of reading the present, as cyclical. In other words, the second purpose is—despite what I would imagine Drout’s protestations to be—an invitation to (at the simplest) contemplate present anxieties or (at the most political) reify a potential ideology. However, there is a third purpose that I would like to put forward: Scyld’s life and by extension the depiction of his own funeral,
with its description of material goods and even the physical space that the imagined ship inhabits, is a way of conjuring a ruin out of a tower. What I mean by this is that, on a figurative level, the perceived sense of accomplishment that Scyld’s life represented (or represents) serves as a thought-ruin that outlines the contours of a world in which new, communally significant spaces may be constructed in which memes can thrive. Scyld’s life as a thought-ruin is also a cyclical reminder of the ruins that Hrothgar’s own kingdom will eventually become, but that in the meantime we can use the past ruins—Scyld’s life—and the idea of future ruins—Hrothgar’s—to enliven spaces that are—were—to the contemporary audience reminders of an inaccessible past.

A particular challenge in emphasizing too much of the life of the individual in this performance, though, is the risk of suggesting that the purpose was to even focus on the person’s life in the first place. I do not mean to suggest the person’s actual life or the construction of that person’s role in the narrative is meaningless, and neither am I asserting that those who heard these tales were immune from regarding the heroes’ lives in hagiographic terms or even as a kind of guide for emulation or warning. Rather, the individuals’ lives became contemplative objects through which the present actions of communities could establish a sense of selfhood and relation to one another as well as those outside of their kin or tribal framework. The stories and individuals who were memorialized in pre-Christian poems such as Beowulf are a kind of artifact in and of themselves. What could be imagined as the ready reception and interpretation within the communities that shared tales of these lives was a means of establishing the context in which meaning could be made.

A similar clue about the temporal location in Beowulf comes not too long after we first hear the name of the great hall Heorot.

Sele hlífade,
hēah ond horn-gēap, heāðo-wylma bād,
laðan līges; ne wæs hit lenge þā gēn
þæt se [e]cg-hete āþum-swerian
æfter wælnīðe wæcnan scolde.⁸ (81-85)

The mentioning of the destruction of Heorot and the subsequent reference to the depredations of Ingeld suggest that Ingeld is the one who will burn down Heorot. This is an interpretation that makes sense given the proximity of the lines, but it is also possible to read “ne wæs hit lenge þā gēn” (“it was still not the time”) as suggesting that it would still be some while after the burning of the great hall that Ingeld would declare war against his father-in-law. Regardless, the passage suggests at least a couple of interesting aspects of communal memory at play. It should first be stated that this sudden jump into the future seems to suggest two jumps in what appears to be one jump: the first is the destruction of Heorot and the second is the foreknowledge of Ingeld’s war that was to come after. What comes as the far future in this poem is by necessity then the past for the contemporary audience of the poem, so they are able to use these moments in their collective memory, as summoned forth by the scop, to serve as an interpretive framework for whatever their current preoccupations may have been—again, this makes the assumption that reifying an ideology is the primary goal, above other motivations, of hearing the story—what one may consider the simple desire to be entertained. But perhaps more importantly, what the insertion of these memories into the narrative does is create the context by which moments shaped by the scop may be interpreted. An unusual thing happens, though: We do not return to the topic of Ingeld until much later in the poem.

⁸ “The hall towered high, cliff-like, horn-gabled, awaited the war-flames, malicious burning; it was still not the time for the sharp-edged hate of his sworn son-in-law to rise against Hrothgar in murderous rage.” (The translation is by Chickering.)
Mention of Ingeld occurs again when Beowulf recounts to Hygelac and his court his recollection of having seen Freawaru, the daughter of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow. He begins by stating what may be taken as a basic political observation, reporting back to his king on some information that would be important to know of the changing political landscape and offering his analysis of the situation:

Śī gehāten [wās],
geong, gold-hroden, gladum suna Frōdan;
[h]afað þæs geworden wine Scyldinga,
rīces hyrde, ond þæt ræd talað,
þæt hē mid ðŷ wīfe wæl-fēhða dēl,
sæcca gesette. Oft seldon hwār
æfter lēod-hryre lŷtle hwīle
bon-gār būgeð, þēah sēo brŷd duge!9 (2024-2031)

This all seems reasonable so far. Beowulf is demonstrating his shrewd understanding of politics in this scene and doing nothing that seems outside of the ordinary. It seems that on the surface Beowulf is merely exercising his observational and reasoning skills in determining what he knows about the political situation of the Danes and Heathobards—that there is some hope that Hrothgar can gain peace and end a feud by marrying off his daughter Freawaru to Ingeld. Beowulf is also subtly demonstrating the acumen that he would presumably rely upon when he becomes a king in both attaining the knowledge of this union. He is not only good at feats of strength and martial prowess but he is also skilled at quiet observation, political calculation,

9 “She has been promised, young, gold-laden, to the gracious Ingeld, son of King Froda. The Scylding king has brought this about, the guard of his kingdom, accepts the opinion that with the young woman he’ll settle his share of the killings and feud. But seldom anywhere, after a slaying, will the death-spear rest, even for a while, though the bride be good.” (The translation is by Chickering.)
and—at the risk of using a seemingly anachronistic term—providing intelligence. In other words, his trip to Heorot was not merely to gain glory and to win the goodwill of Hrothgar, but it was also gather information. Beowulf knows when to employ great public bluster and when to fight—both of which, owing to their overt qualities, are the most prominently displayed characteristics in the text—but he also knows when to be gracious and well-mannered as the occasion calls for it, as well as when to be still and to listen. All of these traits and what Beowulf learns and accomplishes through them are within the realm of the internal, textual possibility of its own present sense of chronology.

We do not learn of Freawaru at all until this scene, and I think there is some significance to that fact. By this point in the narrative—if all we consider is the chronological, sequential progression of one scene after the next—Beowulf has completed his commitments to Hrothgar and the men of Heorot. He has said his goodbyes and he has had his emotional farewell with Hrothgar. The recollection of Freawaru in this instance is doing (at least) two things. The first is that her memory is serving in and of itself as a kind of minor ruin—she is both a trigger for a memory (in Drout’s terminology) that is left unexpressed and a token of what will now, within the bounds of the text, be an inaccessible part of Beowulf’s own past (that is, Hrothgar and his hall and the specific events Beowulf accomplished that would forever guarantee his fame). Freawaru is also being recalled as a focal point of Heorot that both expands the knowledge of Hygelac’s own court and what the court knows of Hrothgar’s eventual fate. This is the area in which Beowulf seems to speak of events that should not be within his ken. One almost wonders if Beowulf’s farsightedness is a creative way by which he may hint at paths not taken or even seen by Hrothgar. Would, for example, the promise of Freawaru instead to Beowulf have proven more fortuitous for the fortunes of Heorot? Hrothgar could not see what Beowulf could see,
namely that Freawaru’s marriage to Ingeld would not be enough to stave off ruin. Solidifying Beowulf’s ties to the kin group not through adoption but rather through marriage, especially after he had proven himself so able, could have been a safer route. There would still have been inevitable war against Ingeld, but if Beowulf could handle Grendel and Grendel’s mother, then surely some pesky Heathobards would prove no trouble. It seems as well that, within the universe of the text and ignoring authorial intention, Beowulf’s desire to discuss Freawaru should be more than to deliver a bland intelligence report or political analysis (to topple my own tower for a moment); it seems reasonable that his thoughts turned to her for the simple reason that he, at the very least, was intrigued by her, and at the most, in love with her. His own love for Hrothgar and Hrothgar’s love for him could have conceivably made the desire to stay at Heorot plausible for Beowulf. Marrying Freawaru could have made that even more possible.

Such speculation cannot be proved, though. Beowulf may indeed simply be doing the less exciting act of astutely reading how the situation will play out politically. But that is not the impression we are left with, especially when he envisions the speech of the old retainer who convinces Ingeld to put aside the cause of peace and seek vengeance against the Danes. Beowulf suddenly seems in the position of being both a prognosticator and the poet himself who knows of future events that the characters inhabiting the universe of the text cannot know about. It is one thing to hold a grim opinion of the success of attaining peace by marrying off a daughter to a rival power to balance the scales of having slain someone’s kin, but it is an altogether different power to see the specific events as they will happen—in other words, as they happen in the future. Beowulf seems capable of accessing a future that to others should be inaccessible in the same way that the past is, both to himself and ourselves. He is gifted with a vision of the future, yet this does not seem like a skill that Beowulf should possess; it is the purview of the scop. We
therefore return to the beginning of the poem, which foresees and mentions the vengeance that 
Ingeld will wreak, while Beowulf, in this role as a meta-
scop, creates another moment of forward 
time travel. He inhabits a kind of present time in the past telling of future events that, for the 
audience, have long ago already occurred.

There is also an important element of the role of material objects in serving as foci for 
these memories. It is not just that the objects remind individuals of old memories—although that 
too is significant—but that the characters are envisioned in Beowulf’s prophecy as having 
practiced the art of reading these objects through memory. Beowulf exercises a powerful act of 
the imagination in laying out the eventuality that Danes will be seen wearing “shining heirlooms” 
that “swing” from their belts (2036), and when the old fighter sees “that ring-hilt, remembers it 
all” (2042), equating the heirloom with a killing and by extension the object as representative of 
death and the ruination of life. He continues this when he admonishes Ingeld to “recognize the 
sword which your father bore in the final battle, under grim war-mask for the last time, that 
precious iron, when the Danes killed him” (2047-2050). These objects become much more than 
just the objects themselves; they come to stand in for entire nexuses of meaning around which 
the existential anxieties of the communities hearing the tale—as well as the depicted characters 
imagined and called forth to listeners’ minds in the stories—could process and act on and 
expurgate them. Beowulf seems capable of either seeing literally these events occurring or 
performing the imaginative act of conjuring such a performance for Hygelac. He becomes a scop 
who builds a scene set in the future that involves an old man looking upon objects-as-ruins that 
then sway the narrative reality of that (non)fictive future.

It is significant that the man who admonishes Ingeld happens to be an old fighter. He 
seems to be inhabiting a role similar to Hrothgar’s runwita and rædbora Æschere. Chickering
translates runwita as “chief adviser” and raedbora as “rune-counselor” (1325). One of the key ways in approaching our understanding of this comes through Æschere. He is Hrothgar’s most trusted advisor and companion. The two of them served in battle together, but he is tasked with a role in the community that is of exceptional importance. He not only is an advice-giver and a counselor but he is also gifted with the ability to penetrate complex and murky situations, bearing and dispensing the accumulated cultural knowledge of the community. His sagacity is needed for interpreting memories, events, and objects, as well as the memories and events that may be tethered to specific objects. It is of great importance that the scop tells us of the indiscriminate slaughter Grendel wreaks on Heorot, but the very particular slaughter of Æschere at the hands of Grendel’s mother. Both Grendel and Grendel’s mother are themselves something of an enigma, a rune or a secret themselves, being unreadable and outside of the community of the Danes. When Grendel’s mother kills Æschere, she is in effect denying the community access to their reader. James Paz, writing on the topic of Æschere, states,

> By killing and decapitating Hrothgar’s reader, Grendel’s mother highlights an anxiety within Beowulf about ‘things’ that defy human interpretation and convey monstrous, marginal, or unknowable messages instead. Although Beowulf acknowledges that a wide range of artifacts can be read, the text also reveals that certain enigmatic things exceed their role as readable objects. Liminal things like the giants’ sword carry alien stories and histories into the safety of the mead hall, disrupting a longstanding human reliance upon legibility and altering the way that literate communities interpret that which has come before them. (Paz 231)

It is a way of upending the security of the Danes in that they are now, on some level, adrift. When Beowulf returns from having killed Grendel’s mother with the sword he finds in her lair,
Hrothgar holds aloft the hilt (for the blade has melted away) and examines the runes on the hilt. It is the only specific example of reading in the sense that we think of it as literate modern readers that takes place in the poem, but Hrothgar does not actually read the runes, nor does he “read” the engraving of “the origin of past strife” (1689), but rather the verb is sceawian (1687), which Chickering translates as “examined” (although it can simply mean to look at, observe, or behold, according to Bosworth-Toller). When one can only vaguely determine how to interpret events—when one is cut off from the means of even conceiving of the means of accessing vaguely determined cultural knowledge and making sense of it—a kind of more visceral, violent assault takes place on the foundations of that culture. Hrothgar may be a ruler of a people, but without Æschere, the inaccessibility of the past is made all the more palpable.

Old English literature reveals an anxiety about the necessity of controlling memory, both individually and communally, which represents itself not only verbally but materially and spatially. One of the first and overt instances in which this feeling manifests itself is in the famous flyting scene between Unferth and Beowulf. Much is revealed in Unferth’s challenge to Beowulf. But I contend that before we can understand the significance of the flyting scene, we must return to the scene shortly before Unferth’s challenge, when Beowulf speaks with Hrothgar and boasts of his previous deeds. He refers not only to having “slain a tribe of giants” (“ȳðde eotena cyn”) (421), but also “on the waves at night / slew water-beasts” (“on ȳðum slog / niceras nihtes”) (421-422). This is the specific boast to which Unferth will take exception. Beowulf’s boasts in this context suggest these are tales that perhaps already precede him. He is, in effect, reciting his accomplishments for performative power rather than as a means of informing his host and his host’s men. In this performative act, though, Beowulf is not only presenting what could be characterized as the narrative boundaries of his memories of past deeds but actively
pushing them into Hrothgar’s community’s own particular interpretation of those memories. Through Beowulf’s specifically stated version of events, he is able to shape reality by extending the bounds of his particular narrative community, thereby in some measure increasing his power and influence. Presumably not only he but also his men believe in his telling of events, and what he does when he performs his version of the memories of his accomplishments in Heorot is not merely a means of reassuring Hrothgar and all of his assembled men that he can take care of Grendel. Rather, he is aggressively asserting that Hrothgar and his men accept a telling of events that may very well be at odds with what they have come to understand of what preceded Beowulf’s coming. His observation of protocol and respect merely allows this aggression to take place.

The significance of this scene can be further understood in the context of what comes before it. Wulfgar, who is “a prince of the Vendels” (“þæt wæs Wendla lēod”) (348) and whose friendship and subservience to Hrothgar is characterized as *wine-drihtne* (360), informs Hrothgar that Beowulf has come. Hrothgar then recalls having seen Beowulf as a young boy, the friendly dealings he shared with Beowulf’s father, Ecgtheow, and the knowledge of who Beowulf’s (unnamed) mother was, the only daughter of Hrethel of the Geats (372-375). What is interesting about this scene is that the conversation takes place specifically between Hrothgar and Wulfgar (who is a member of the group), but presumably others of Hrothgar’s court are privy to it as well. The performance of the knowledge of Beowulf’s past is not actually shared with Beowulf, so it serves not just as a means of informing the audience of the story but also as a means of rehearsing and reinforcing known communal memories within the group before the subject of those memories appears. The act, though it is presented in friendly terms, is a means of staking
out the current bounds of the community’s memory and knowledge with the full expectation that those boundaries are on the verge of shifting.

Of all his boasts, Unferth singles out the swimming one in particular as the target of his condemnation. Even though Unferth appears as something of a loathsome figure for whom we are to have low regard, he occupies an important position in the framework of Hrothgar’s court. The primary indication of Unferth’s place of honor is that he “sat at the feet of the lord of the Scyldings” (“æt fōtum sæt frēan Scyldinga”) (500). His proximity to Hrothgar suggests his trusted position in the political hierarchy. But what position could he hold? And, furthermore, does it not make greater sense that his entire urge to engage in flyting is merely the cause of envy? As to his position, Unferth is given a title, þyle, which Chickering translates as “spokesman at court” (1165). Before we learn of his envy, though, we first learn that “he unbound a battle-rune” (“onband beadu-rūne”) (501). While on the surface this action seems to suggest that Unferth was interacting with a physical object—for example, something such as a stone with a rune written on it—the idea is figurative. Its occurrence at the beginning of Unferth’s challenge of Beowulf is significant, though. It represents the ritual action of his opening-up—his unbinding (onband)—of his arts of interpreting those things which are hidden or concealed (rune), taking what in the case of Æschere would be provided as sage counsel and weaponizing it for battle (beadu). This is a verbal battle, but what is at stake is the narrative of the community.

Now the text does overtly present envy as Unferth’s motive in that Beowulf “caused him chagrin, / for he would not grant that any other man / under the heavens might ever care more / for famous deeds than he himself” (micel æfþunca / forþon þe hē ne ūþe þæt āenig ðōðer man / āefre mǣrōa þon mā middan-geardes / gehēdde under heofenum þonne hē sylfā” (502-505).
However, even if envy personally motivates a figure such as Unferth, that does not negate his inherent usefulness to the community, in that his role as the *þyle* makes him the keeper of history, of famous deeds, and of memory. Unferth protects these most important aspects of the stories that mark the culture’s store of narrative knowledge through envy. His envy swells only after he unbinds his battle-rune, further suggesting the ritual act involved. There is a kind of magical craft at play in this scene, one in which Unferth is the practitioner of an art that channels his inherent flaw into the jealous protection of the community’s narrative memory. It is his responsibility to ensure the cohesive integrity of Heorot’s memories. He does that by not just verbally sparring with Beowulf but also by seeking out what Beowulf himself may be concealing.

I see a relationship between the verbal sparring of Unferth and Beowulf’s flyting, the seeming visions of the future that Beowulf is privy to, and the funerary practices and barrow- or pyre-construction. Each of these strands all serve the purpose of either expanding, reinforcing, or subverting extant communal narratives. As explored in the flyting episode, underneath all the observance of etiquette in the face of dealing with political power, and even though physical violence may not be occurring, there is still a kind of creative aggression that is at play. In life there is an innate desire and perhaps even an obligation to assert one’s own perception of events over others—that somehow through this life-flyting one creates the means by which one will be remembered. But upon one’s death, one gives up the ability to exercise one’s own agency in shaping one’s legacy. It seems that there is a mechanism by which the memory of one’s life becomes a usable thought-object, a kind of ruin, by which others may expand the limits of knowledge and narration. Just as *Beowulf* begins with Scyld’s funeral, which then, almost as if it were a Big Bang moment, creates a universe in which Beowulf himself may attain glory and
build up his own legacy, the dirge (as Tolkien puts it) ends with his own death, the wishes he has for his own funeral, and the funeral itself. Shortly before his death, he speaks to Wiglaf, saying,

\[\ldots\text{ ne mæg ic her leng wesan.}\]

Hatað heaðomære hlæw gewyrcean
beorhtne æfter bæle æt brimes nosan;
se scel to gemyndum minum leodium
heah hlifian on Hronesnæsse,
þæt hit sæliðend syððan hatan
Biowulfes biorh, ða ðe brentingas ofer floda genipu feorran drifað.\textsuperscript{10}

The first thing that should be pointed out is Beowulf’s ability to direct the details of how his funeral should be carried out. Of the funerals in the poem, Beowulf’s is the only one in which we have a character exercising an expressed wish for how he should be remembered. It is not he himself that will serve as the generative engine by which his future people will remember him and create the memes that perpetuate their culture. Rather, he is directing what will essentially become a tower-ruin to mark the boundaries of his people. The ships will sail by and recognize that that is Beowulf’s Mound. There is more than just the marking of physical territory happening here, though; there is literally the marking of narrative boundaries, the space in which a culture can replicate those traditions and cultural reference points that will guarantee their future. “The grave,” writes Stephen Pollington, “need not be viewed as a static ‘container’ for the remains of the dead, but may instead be part of ongoing processes of ritual and social renewal”

\textsuperscript{10}“\ldots I can stay no longer. Order a bright mound made by the brave, after the pyre, at the sea’s edge; let it rise high on Whale’s Cliff, a memorial to my people, that ever after sailors will call it ‘Beowulf’s barrow’ when the steep ships drive out on the sea, on the darkness of waters, from lands far away” (Chickering).
Anglo-Saxon Burial Mounds 65). He continues, “Since barrows held a physical remainder of the dead, they were viewed as ‘altars to the ancestors’ and this is especially true of the barrows which held founder-burials: in such cases the spirit of the deceased went on to be a protective genius for the locality and those who honoured it” (65). Whether or not Beowulf was imagined to literally be walking around protecting his people in the future, his memory very much did as long as people were around to contemplate the ruins of his barrow and to recall those events of his life. The “protection” in this instance was the perpetuation of ties that bound one person to the next. In discussing mythic tales, “that is, tales expressing poetic truths about the nature and order of the world,” Pollington explains that they are “used in a secondary semiotic system to create and maintain social structure and orderliness; this is never more important than when the social structure is under attack, be it from within or without” (65). Beowulf’s narratives can stand in as a figurative placeholder that engages beyond the grave, through his people, in flytings protecting the bounds of the culture’s knowledge and the narratives it constructs out its own interpretations of events. And by creating salient episodes within the recollection of his own life narrative involving a flyting, even individuals such as Unferth can serve a purpose beyond the grave. He becomes the stand-in for any potential enemies of the future. These enemies could be individuals or rival groups who would seek to dismantle these conceptions of that inaccessible past. It is through the sharing of stories centering on this inaccessible past and the asserted narrative bounds they engender that cultures coalesce. As time passes, the memories fade and those connections that define the conceptual bounds of shared communal identifiers inevitably disintegrate. The fragments of their once enlivened existence become ruins. The people of the culture pass away and what is left are those remnants, waiting for someone to stop and ask questions of their people. Those objects retain memories but remain forever silent.
CHAPTER II

THE CUP IN ANGLO-SAXON IMAGERY: VESSELS OF MEMORY AND MEANING

Weland’s acts of revenge against King Niðhad and his family for having been enslaved and crippled appear in a depiction on the front panel of the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon Franks Casket, where to the contemporary viewer the details seem a swirl of meaning obscured by the distance of over a millennium. At Weland’s feet is the corpse of one of the princes he slew. In one of his hands, he carries the prince’s head with a pair of tongs. He holds the head in an almost surreptitious manner; its obvious presence goes seemingly unnoticed by the prince’s sister as it hovers in the grip of the tongs just under the draping folds of her robes. The smith is surrounded
by the implements of his craft: hammers, a saw, an anvil. Even though the princess’s and her handmaiden’s eyes are wide open, they do not see what Weland is working. Amid the remnants of Weland’s violence, the object to which the viewer’s attention is attuned is the cup: Weland extends it to Beadohilde, and she takes it. In this one compact scene, the artisan who carved the depiction has included symbolic and emotional tension that would have resonated more acutely for an Anglo-Saxon than for a modern-day viewer: the hidden presence of one’s slain kin and the macabre hint that the cup has been crafted from the skull of the second brother who is not depicted; the presumed foreknowledge of what will happen to Beadohilde once she drinks Weland’s beer; and, most powerfully, the perceptibly toying quality with which Weland offers the cup and Beadohilde reaches for it. Note that the cup is not quite centered, that Weland holds back ever so slightly (his leg is bowed—a careful point of detail that reminds the audience of his having been hamstrung—and he holds his arm back as if luring her closer), while Beadohilde’s hand that takes the proffered cup is exaggerated in its length (a feature also present in the Ruthwell Cross panel featuring Mary Magdalene drying Christ’s feet with her hair). The depicted postures suggest the smith’s confidence in ensnaring the princess while also communicating the princess’s own fateful participation in accepting the cup, unwittingly entering into a union that will doom her parents’ dynasty. While the Franks Casket is Northumbrian in its provenance, the tale it depicts is recorded in the Old Norse Völundarkviða, in which Weland is named Völundr and Beadohilde is Böðvildr (although spellings vary):

24 Snejð af höfuð / húna þeira / ok und fen fjöturs / fætr of lagði; / en þær skálar, / er und skörum váru, / sveip hann útan silfr, / seldi Níðaði.

The passage does not go into detail in describing the interactions between Weland and Beadohilde when he “overcame her with beer” and raped her (“Bar hann hana bjóri, / því at hann betr kunni / svá at hon í sessi / of sofnaði”) (28), resulting in her pregnancy (revealed later in stanza 36), nor does it describe a cup, per se. The princes’ skulls are “chased outside with silver” (“en þær skálar, / er und skörum váru, / sveip hann útan silfri”) (24) suggesting they have been made into skull cups, but they too are not directly tied to the act of drinking beer. The Franks Casket depiction naturally implies the presence of the cup for the beer and includes it in the scene. Beyond the literal necessity of requiring a vessel for drinking, the inclusion of the cup in the central position it occupies would have symbolically communicated to the Anglo-Saxon audience the ritualistic bond created between Weland and Beadohilde. What cultural relationship to the image of the cup could the artisan have been calling to mind for his audience? I argue that the Franks Casket artisan may have placed Weland’s cup in its position of prominence to draw

11 “He cut off the heads of those young cubs, and under the mud of the smithy he laid their limbs; and their skulls which were under the hair, he chased outside with silver, gave to Nidud. And from their eyes he shaped exotic stones, he sent them to the cunning queen of Nidud; and from the teeth of the two he struck brooches; sent them to Bodvild. Then Bodvild began to praise the ring, which she had broken. “I would not dare tell anyone except you alone.” Volund said: “I will so repair the break in the gold, that your father will think it fairer, and your mother much better, and you yourself the same as before.” He overcame her with beer, because he was more experienced, so that on the couch she fell asleep.” (The translation is Larrington’s. See p. 106 [The Lay of Volund in The Poetic Edda]. The Old Norse is from Heimskringla.no, edited by Guðni Jónsson.)
the Anglo-Saxon mind toward a contemplation of the binding power of cups, as described and
intimated in Old English and Old Norse literature. It was by the power of the cup that
communities coalesced and in which individuals could form an identity—a sense of belonging—
exercising the agency by which one may derive one’s purpose for existence. As a narrative
mechanism, the image of the cup was a powerful symbol through which communal memory
transferred, serving over the course of many generations as a way to recall knowledge of past
friendships, promises, and grievances.

Throughout the corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature, many words for specific types of
drinking vessels appear, serving at times as crucial and overt symbols of ritual (such as in
Beowulf) or as background items—whose inclusion still signifies symbolic statements of the
characters to whom, and the settings to which, they are connected. Stephen Pollington in The
Mead-Hall provides a concise catalogue of vocabulary for words associated with drinking
vessels and containers of liquids:

Old English has a good range of words for “drinking vessel”: bune, cuppe,
drencfæt, ful, scenc, wæge, wearr. Specific types of vessel included calic (chalice),
drenchorn (drinking horn), glæsfæt (glass vessel), ease (beaker), seleful (hall-cup).
Pitchers and jugs had a variety of names: canne, ceac, crog, stane, waterbuc—
the latter for holding water. Flasks and flagons were variously ampelle, buc, bytt,
cyll, flasce, steap. Barrels and tuns were called byden, bytt, cyf, trog, tunne while
a tub was a tyncen. A bucket or pail was æscen, embren or stoppa. (143)

The importance of drinking vessels transcends the mere utility of such objects in their daily use.
Indeed, the archaeological record reflects their centrality in Anglo-Saxon cultural thought as both
symbols of status and the means through which individuals could perform and display communal
belonging. Some of the archaeological finds include “a set of eight wooden cups . . . from the Sutton Hoo ship burial, Mound 1” (Pollington 143), a silver cup that had been “patched or repaired in antiquity [that] was among the items found inside the Sutton Hoo fluted bowl” (144), and “the 7th century bed-burial at Swallowcliffe Down, Wiltshire, [which] contained many high-status finds, including two small glass palm-cups by the lady’s right forearm” (146). Pollington asserts that in royal burials “drinking horns symbolise the dead person’s role as host and provider of strong drink. The use of such horns at the symbol [feast] for the purpose of swearing oaths is also relevant here—the horns symbolised the oaths of loyalty and mutual support between the leader and his men” (149-150). Pollington, in his later article “The Mead-Hall Community,” cites MS Cotton Tiberius C. VI, f. 10v (mid-eleventh century), which suggests the role of cups in signifying worldly status in the Anglo-Saxon world connection cups had to worldly status in the Anglo-Saxon world (29). The illustration in the manuscript depicts the temptation of Christ in an Anglo-Saxon context: not only are overt items of power and wealth such as a sword and pieces of jewelry shown to be chief among the temptations of this world but so too are a drinking horn and a cup (29-30). One may certainly argue that oferdrenan (“over-drinking”) is part of the admonition in the depiction, but the salient suggestion is the relationship that the cup shares with ritualistically bonding one to another—the lord, the warband—tethering one to this life. When Wiglaf admonishes his companions for having abandoned Beowulf to fight the dragon alone, he begins his speech by recalling the oaths they swore over drinks.

Ic ðæt mǣl geman þær wē medu þēgum
þonne wē gehēton ūsum hlāforde
in bīor-sele, ðe ūs ðās bēagas geaf,
þæt wē him ðā gūð-getāwa gyldan woldon,
gif him þyslicu þearf gelumpe,

helmas ondheard sweord.¹² (2633-2638)

The rites of oath-swearing that the men of a warband would participate in through the use of cups and horns filled with libation established the social structures through which their actions held significance—through which power could be exercised and gained. Sharing drinks was a means of crafting a particular memory that would serve as a binding moment—a kind of nodal contract for preliterate society. By participating in a cup-sharing or even horn-sharing moment, the men were ritualistically bonding in a way that went beyond the merely perfunctory. They were engaging in an act of intimacy that implied the potential for betrayal.

The shapes of the objects may have also lent cups and horns to other more ritualistically poignant or symbolically powerful moments depending on which occasion called for either respective type of object to be used. For example, a full drinking horn cannot be as readily set down as a cup is, so this could have easily involved more convivial acts of ritual bonding through pairs or groups of men sharing one horn until they emptied it together. While not specifically Anglo-Saxon, such an example does exist from the ancient Kul-Oba archaeological site in Crimea of a “[g]old relief appliqué showing two Scythians drinking from one drinking-horn” that “[Mikhail Ivanovich] Rostovtzeff identified . . . with the Scythian sacred oath described in Herodotus 4.70” (Meyer 246). In Beowulf, however, one of the clearest examples of the ritualized function of the cup in the display of worldly power and the performance of social cohesion appears during Wealhtheow’s ritual.

Wealhtheow’s ritual is described thus:

615 ond ðā frēolic wīf ful gesealde

¹² “‘I recall the time, when taking the mead in the great hall, we promised our chief who gave us these rings, these very armlets, that we would repay him for these war-helmets, tempered edges, if he ever needed us’” (2633-2638).
The scene is significant for its detailed description of an ancient ritual of lordship in which a cup is the central object through which societal power is made manifest. All the assembled men of the hall bear public witness to the ritual. Their willingness to participate in the hierarchical distribution of mead through the cup is equivalent to both their acceptance of their position in

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13 “The noble lady gave the first cup, filled to the brim, to the king of the Danes, bade him rejoice in this mead-serving, beloved by his people; he took it happily, victory-famed king, the hall-cup and feast. The lady of the Helmings walked through the hall, offered the jeweled cup to veterans and youths, until the time came that the courteous queen, splendid in rings, excellent in virtues, came to Beowulf, brought him the mead. She greeted him well, gave thanks to God, wise in her words, that her wish came to pass, that she might expect help against crimes from any man. He accepted the cup, battle-fierce warrior, from Wealhtheow’s hand, then made a speech, eager for combat—”
society in relation to others and their acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the power structure they inhabit. The queen initiates the ritual by being the first to offer the cup—an act that is not only symbolically powerful but also powerful in actual effect, showing the particular importance of her role in creating what could be described as an environmental transition of the power dynamics marking the scene. She changes the dynamics of the moment and uses it as a means of moving all the members of the community to perform their obeisance and their relational position—ostensibly, their position below Hrothgar and herself. At the end of the scene, Beowulf then makes his boast, an act that, in combination with the drink, forms a contract. The scene is stark in its depiction of orderliness as a chief characteristic of a good *hlaford*, or lord, and his *hlæfdige*, or lady. In this ritual, the lady performs the role of provider. To those Anglo-Saxons who would have been an audience to the *Beowulf* tale, Wealhtheow’s methodical performance of the cup-sharing ritual would have struck them as an ideal execution of the time-honored ceremony. Describing the lordship ritual that takes place in *Maxims I*, Michael J. Enright says, “at mead drinking she [the nobleman’s wife] must at all times and places approach the protector of princes first, in front of the companions, quickly pass the first cup to her lord’s hand, and know what advice to give him as joint master and mistress of the house together” (7). While this power seems implicit in the role, the fact that she must adhere to prescribed rules for the ritual also tempers one’s ability to read what the potential for female agency may have been for Wealhtheow and other women in Anglo-Saxon society. Where *Maxims I* merely describes the existence and necessity of the ritual, the *Beowulf* poet composed an ideal scene of Anglo-Saxon aristocratic kingship that demonstrates a model of stability amid the chaos of the world. Wealhtheow begins the ritual by proffering the cup first to Hrothgar, and from him moves to the “veterans and the youths” (“duguþe ond geogoþe”) (621). The final person to receive the cup is
the honored but still unproven guest, Beowulf. She reinforces status by creating an atmosphere in which all members of the *comitatus* perform their particular standing in the community, enforced by her role as the cup-bearer and consented to by those participating in the ritual. While each individual who shares of the cup presumably receives approximately the same portion of drink, the hierarchical distribution of the mead cup from the king to the proven and then to the unproven was a public means of establishing one’s power and rank within the *comitatus*, or warband (in relation to the *hlaford*), while also communicating that each participant was accepted as worthy of belonging to the group. While the symbolism of this ritual is important, Wealhtheow’s role as the joint mistress is also key. She is not only the master of ceremonies, so to speak, but she must also guide the lord with advice. Her sagacity and her ability to navigate the public performance of rituals, such as the cup-sharing, are the means by which she ensures that communal bonds are maintained and preserved.

Etymologically, the words “lord” and “lady” are symbolically linked to the concept of bread. In Old English, *hlaford* means “bread-guardian” and *hlæfdige* means “bread-kneader.” The underlying principle of this concept is basic, namely that the man who provides well for his warband in terms of the more overt symbols of wealth via treasure and gold is the provider of their sustenance, their daily bread. While “bread-kneader” for *hlæfdige* sounds on the surface lesser in status than “bread-guardian” (Lee 146) (the latter provides and protects while the former distributes), much power is still implied in this relationship—and, indeed, *Maxims I* does describe the nature of the relationship as being that of a “joint master and mistress,” although one could argue that may have been an ideal not often practiced. The key, though, is that the lady, as the most privileged (and equal) counselor to the lord, must know what advice to give; Wealhtheow’s speeches seem demonstrative of this skill—and how influential the *hlæfdige* can
be. On a literal level, one cannot have bread if one has not first kneaded the dough, but the
discussion of this constellation of cups, drinks, and food is not just concerned with the literal
realities of the objects themselves. If the hlaford is the guardian of the bread, and if the hlæfdige
is the kneader of the bread, one may draw the connection that the lord’s power is tenuous without
his lady. Through the lens of fertility, dough doubles and, by rising, implies pregnancy\textsuperscript{14} and the
continuance of the lord’s lineage. Enright argues that Wealhtheow is shown to be helpless in
terms of her ability to sway Hrothgar’s passionate sentiments toward the victorious Beowulf
when he raises him up to be seated among their own sons (23), but one need not assume that this
means the position within the Anglo-Saxon power structure that the hlæfdige inhabits is
necessarily lesser in power. Hrothgar is on the surface shown to be a good king. He maintains the
loyalty of his men. But he is and has been for a long time ineffectual against the threat that
Grendel has posed to his mead-hall. One may argue that Wealhtheow has kneaded, so to speak,
the relationships of Hrothgar’s men so adroitly for so long that she is the one who has managed
to keep Hrothgar in power for as long as he has maintained it. The subtle alarm that Wealhtheow
displays when Hrothgar elevates Beowulf to a position equal with that of their own sons (and
perhaps even greater, at least in sentiment, than that of Hrothgar’s own nephew, Hrothulf) is
indicative of a situation in which the bread-kneader has exercised her powers beyond the limits
of her position. She has massaged the relations between the men and their lord, maintaining the
dough-bond (if one will allow such a construct), but he himself has not been an effective bread-
guardian. There is as well in this treatment a kind of negative framing at play in this concept of
community—even if we take as necessary the communal desire for belonging and the
perpetuation of the cycles of life and reproduction, Hrothgar seems desirous to reproduce without
Wealhtheow, or more specifically in his case to create an heir that removes the necessity of the
\textsuperscript{14} My thanks to Kelley Wickham-Crowley for this idea.
woman. Wealhtheow, while even having a fair measure of power within the bounds of the communal rules and roles at play, is still bound by certain cultural strictures, within which she must remain vigilant against attempts to undermine her own power—as well as from the behavior of Hrothgar.

We can look at this more closely in exploring the relationship weddings and adoptions. Similar to the relationship between power and bread is the relationship between the concept of the people group and drink. Enright provides a fascinating philological exploration of the word dryht:

The first extant example of druht appears in Lex Salica around 500 where, however, and this is most remarkable, it does not mean warband at all but “marriage procession” and appears in a chapter which describes the various forms of the kidnapping of women: “If anyone follows a betrothed girl in a wedding procession [dructe ducente] who is on her way to be married and assaults her on the road and rapes her . . . let him be held liable for 8000 denarii, which makes 200 solidi.” (Enright 71)

Citing Hans Kuhn, Enright explains that Kuhn “argues that one of the very old meanings of druht must be ‘festive procession,’ or ‘wedding procession,’ and that at an early stage it must also have meant ‘festive gathering,’ ‘festival,’ ‘festival meal’” (Enright 71-72). One notes immediately how very closely this cluster of ideas—marriage, procession, drink, festival meal—accords with the discussion above of the wife who gives drink to her husband and proclaims his leadership of the warband. If this etymological tracing is accurate, it is similar to the symbolic connections that hlaford and hlæfdige share with power via bread. They belong to the same family of concepts: power, identity, memory, belonging, and the means through which these
created and perpetuated. The cup is the natural symbol through which all these concepts can be communicated: the literal drink that pours from the vessel and is distributed proportionally but hierarchically throughout the *comitatus* represents the power that flows from the *hlaford*, as meted out by the *hlæfdige*, and as given meaning by the communal participation of all who belong to the kin structure and those who seek initiation into it. What is a marriage ceremony but a public declaration of the joining of families? Ceremonies such as the one Wealhtheow performs in *Beowulf* are not much different, or are at least evocative of that ritual. Any regular occurrence of these ceremonies would have served as reminders of those bonds of kinship, as well as opportunities to invite additional members into the kin group. Marriage and—by extension within this scheme—adoption were therefore potentially troubling and serious matters (Enright 75-76). Hrothgar’s eager willingness to bring Beowulf into the kin group as not just the last member to receive the cup from Wealhtheow but also now in a position equal to his and Wealhtheow’s own sons (*Beowulf* 1168-1232) can again be viewed as a politically and emotionally fraught statement of Hrothgar’s own weakness in contrast to Wealhtheow’s steadfastness. To some degree, Hrothgar’s acceptance of the lack of readiness of his own blood kin is as well a statement against himself: He has acknowledged, through Wealhtheow, in a public ceremony that a recently met stranger (impressive though he is) is as worthy of being the bread-guardian than the sons who share his own blood. Wealhtheow’s own power is made all the more apparent because of this, in that she still has faith in her kin whereas her *hlaford* has lost his. One may also say that he has placed more trust in male social kinship versus female blood kinship, which even suggests malleability on Hrothgar’s part in attempting to construct a family without the necessity of a woman.
Anglo-Saxon literature derives much of its dramatic and emotional power from the simultaneous treatment of oppositional contrasts. Hrothgar’s hall, Heorot, is an exemplum of order and harmony, while the fatalistic dread Hrothgar and his followers hold in expectation of Grendel’s nocturnal raids permeates the mood of the narration. The positioning of Wealhtheow’s ritual in a relatively early part of the narrative, one could imagine, helped the Anglo-Saxon audience accept the reality that Hrothgar’s kingdom—vexed by persistent assaults and riven internally by the seeming inefficacy of Hrothgar to counter them—could still be accepted as a comitatus striving for peace, security, and the harmonious distribution of treasure to warriors loyal to their lord. Men still want to belong to the kin group, even though an outsider is required to restore the equilibrium that would theoretically allow the kingdom to regain its confidence. But within this concept of the kin group—those men who would share from the cup and drink from the vessel of the lord’s power—lies its own oppositional contrast of equal, if not greater, emotional power: simply not belonging to it—or, more pointedly, not being allowed to belong to the group. An analysis of the hapax legomenon ealuscerwen, “ale-share” (sometimes “mead-share”) that appears in Beowulf (“Dryht-sele dynede; Denum eallum wearð, / ceaster-buendum, cenra gehwylcum, / eorlum ealu-scerwen”) (767-769) is a useful example. Ealuscerwen has prompted much debate among scholars about its precise meaning (Glosecki 1). A similar hapax legomenon, meoduscerwen (specifically “mead-share” but probably synonymous with ealuscerwen), appears in the poem Andreas in line 1526 (Brown 394). The two compound words share the same verb -scerwen, but its meaning is not entirely clear. Stephen O. Glosecki puts forth the amusing interpretation that it was ironically idiomatic, similar to “I’m going to fix your wagon,” which implies, of course, that no literal wagon-fixing will occur and someone is about to receive his or her comeuppance for some offense (Glosecki 9). The passage from Beowulf,
however, is illuminating because of its use of irony regarding drinking. The Danes have all had their share of drink and are contentedly asleep after their feasting, despite knowing to expect the coming of Grendel. Grendel is a baleful figure who represents everything Heorot’s members fear becoming: exiled, disconnected, and miserable, dwelling not in a mead-hall but a drinkless hell. Heorot’s orderly context in which Hrothgar’s power is exercised is exemplified by Wealhtheow’s methodical ceremony. Each time the cup-sharing ritual takes place, that sense of order is actively reinforced in the minds of those who comprise the comitatus. Grendel, though, lives in a world without that ordered context and is, one may argue, desirous of belonging to it, of sharing in the cup. It is therefore no surprise that one of the first things he did in his frenzied assault on Heorot was tear apart the first man he saw and “swilled blood from his veins” (“blōd ēdrum dranc”) (742). In lieu of being able to share the communal cup, to receive his ealuscerwen, the man whom Grendel slaughters and consumes becomes the drinking vessel in Grendel’s desperate bid to appropriate for himself the beer that binds one to the comitatus. After Beowulf defeats Grendel, the poet sardonically uses the self-same hallmarks of the symbel that Grendel simultaneously hates but desires to join: “The king’s hall thundered: to all the Danes, / the city’s inhabitants, to every brave listener / it was a wild mead-sharing” (“Dryht-sele dynede; Denum eallum wearð, / ceaster-bûendum, cēnra gehwylcum, / eorlum earlu-scerwen”) (767-769).

The image of a “wild mead-sharing” is worth consideration for its relation to the idea of control and the loss of it—to the maintenance of narrative and communal memory, and therefore cultural cohesion—and how drunkenness is suggestive of the loss of that cohesion. Judith contains a scene that, while not described specifically as “a wild mead-sharing” (“eorlum earlu-scerwen”) (769), is of particular interest for its depiction of a chaotic feast that stands in contrast to the deliberate solemnity of Beowulf’s cup-sharing and drinking scenes:
“So they went and settled down to the feasting, insolent men to the wine-drinking, all those brash armoured warriors, his confederates in evil. Deep bowls were borne continually along the benches there and brimming goblets and pitchers as well to the hall-guests. They drank it down as doomed men, those celebrated shield-wielders—though the great man, the awesome lord over evils, did not foresee it. Then Holofernes, the bountiful lord of his men, grew merry with tippling. He laughed and bawled and roared and made a racket so that the children of men could hear from far away how the stern-minded man bellowed and yelled, insolent and flown with mead, and frequently exhorted the guests on the benches to enjoy themselves well. So the whole day long the villain, the stern-minded dispenser of treasure, plied his retainers with wine until they lay unconscious, the whole of his retinue drunk as though they had been struck dead, drained of every faculty.” (The translation is S. A. J. Bradley’s. See pp. 496-497 [Judith in...
Holofernes, although human, is monstrous in his behavior and appetites. His depiction is not dissimilar from Grendel’s: wild, frenzied, and driven by seemingly uncontrollable passions. But what is peculiar about Holofernes is that he theoretically inhabits the same position Hrothgar does, although the spatial environments are different (tents rather than halls). Holofernes has his own comitatus. His position is almost as if Grendel had become the master of Heorot but neglected to attend to his duties in a manner befitting a king. Holofernes inhabits his position within the previously discussed power structure but does not fulfill the expected responsibilities that result in social harmony: he is a hlaford without his hlæfdige. His power does not flow in such a way that encourages the proper reciprocity that Hrothgar and Wealhtheow’s rule does; his lack of a hlæfdige precludes him from properly distributing his power through the means that established legitimacy by communal consent. Where their adherence to the proper dispensation of drink to the warband would have provided the community a safe power context in which men may have risen (and fallen) in the hierarchy, displaying their emotions and exercising their passions among kin, Holofernes’s offerdrencan is characterized as drinking without any socially structured utility. The bowls, goblets, and pitchers (bollan, bunan, and orcas, respectively) that occupy the scene are myriad and presented as chaotically delivered to the guests, lacking in any of the etiquette and solemnity that marks Wealhtheow’s ritual. The drinking consequently registers as base and degrading for those who participate in it. The result is that his men are portrayed as feckless, as living in dread of their liege, and as incapable of averting their ultimate annihilation by Judith and her host.

Anglo-Saxon Poetry]. The Old English is from The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records: Beowulf and Judith, vol. 4, 1953, pp. 99-100.)
The dangers of unrestrained passion in the mead-hall appear briefly in Juliana, as well, when the demon who attempts to deceive Juliana says,

\[
\text{Sume ic larum geteah,}
\]
\[
to geflite fremede, \quad \text{þæt hy færinga}
\]
\[
ealde æfponcan \quad \text{edniwedan,}
\]
\[
beore druncne. \quad \text{Ic him byrlade}
\]
\[
wroht of wege, \quad \text{þæt hi in winsele}
\]
\[
þærh sweordgripe \quad \text{sawle forletan}
\]
\[
of flæschoman \quad \text{fæge scyndan,}
\]
\[
sarum gesoht. \quad \text{Sume, þa ic funde}
\]
\[
butan godes tacne, \quad \text{gymelease,}
\]
\[
ungebletsade, \quad \text{þa ic bealdlice}
\]
\[
þærh mislic cwealm \quad \text{minum hondum}
\]
\[
searöponcum slog.\textsuperscript{16}
\]

The suggestion in this passage is that violence in the mead-hall could have been considered a temporary loss, or even a violation, of the lord’s power. An outburst of violence, while more than likely a common occurrence despite the ideal scheme described above, could still potentially have been regarded as a breach of decorum and a rupturing of the carefully constructed familial bonds put on display by any drinking rituals. At the very least, violence in the mead-hall would have been regarded as a loss of face for the proper lord and lady who care about keeping social discord at a minimum. The ability to be overcome by drink could have signaled to others an

\textsuperscript{16} “... some I have led on by my counsels and brought them into discord, so that suddenly, drunk with beer, they renewed old grievances; I have served them strife from out of the goblet, so that by resorting to swords within the wine hall, being stricken with wounds, they released their souls to flit doomed away from their body.” (The translation is S. A. J. Bradley’s. See pp. 483-494 [Juliana in Anglo-Saxon Poetry]. The Old English is from The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records: The Exeter Book, vol. 3, 1936, pp. 126-127.)
inability to control oneself in general—an indication of being weak-willed and controlled by
drink rather than able to use drink as a means, within the context of oath-swearing, of controlling
one’s memories and the narratives by which one would come to be remembered, of abdicating to
carelessness what should be crafted by one’s agency. On some level, the dignified and ordered
distribution and sharing of drink in an oath-swearing ceremony signaled that very desire to
control memory, of performing an action in which everyone is in synchronous understanding of a
shared narrative moment. The loss of control of drink was an invitation to chaos, to the blurring
of narrative memory and the undermining of cultural memory and cohesion.

We have seen Beowulf’s oath-swearing during Wealhtheow’s ritual, but one other such
eexample of public vow-making through the use of a cup comes from Old Norse literature,
_Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks_, or the _Saga of Hervor and King Heidrek the Wise_. It hews closer in
sentiment to the Franks Casket depiction of Weland and Beadohilde. At the beginning of the
third chapter, a scene depicting the time of Yule Eve takes place.

Þat var tíðenda eitthvert sinn jólaaptan, at menn skyldu heit strengja at bragarfulli,
sem siðr er til. Þá strengdu heit Arngríms synir. Hjörvarðr strengdi þess heit, at
hann skyldi eiga dóttur Ingjalds Svíakonungs, þá mey, er fræg var um öll lönd at
fegrð ok atgervi, eða enga konu ella.17

Hjorvard’s vow does not necessarily imply he will do what Weland does to Beadohilde, but one
can imagine that not much difference would separate the two in practice. The chief difference,

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17 “It was Yule Eve, the time for men to make solemn vows at the ceremony of the _bragarfull_, or chief’s
cup, as is the custom. Then Arngrim’s sons made vows. Hjorvard took this oath, that he would have the
daughter of Ingjal king of the Swedes, the girl who was famed through all lands for beauty and skill, or
else he would have no other woman.” (The Old Norse is cited from _Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks_, edited by
Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson via the Perseus Digital Library; Peter Tunstall provides the
English translation in _The Saga of Hervor & King Heidrek the Wise_ via _The Complete Fornaldarsögur
Norðurlanda: Legendary Sagas of the Northland in English Translation_ on the _Germanic Mythology_
website.)
however, is that this particular oath-swearing is similar to the modern-day equivalent of the marriage proposal, except instead of proposing directly to the woman, Hjorvard makes his vow to his *comitatus*. Weland’s raping of Beadohilde is a calculated act of vengeance that, with *Judith* and *Juliana* now discussed, calls to mind *Atlakviða*, the *Lay of Atli*. In particular, when Guðrún exacts revenge on her husband Atli, she kills their own two sons and then covertly feeds their flesh to Atli and all his men, who lose themselves in raucous drinking while unknowingly feasting on the dead princes. After she reveals her acts of vengeance, all the men are horrified and she then slays Atli and burns down their hall (214-216).

What both *Völundarkviða* and *Atlakviða* demonstrate are negative inversions of everything the drink-sharing rituals do to contribute to the harmony of the *comitatus*. They serve as cautionary tales for kings and queens who seek, through their positions within their own power structures, to exploit their power for greed. Leif Einarson succinctly writes that “in any other context, mead-cups made by the legendary smith Völundr would be a great compliment, a gift of unparalleled value and social significance. Níðuðr, however, has not commissioned Völundr’s services in an appropriately reciprocal manner. Völundr was enslaved and robbed by Níðuðr because of the king’s lust for wealth, prosperity, and power” (25). Einarson also notes that it is the queen who advises that Weland be hamstrung in order to prevent him from fleeing (27), suggesting the negative inversion of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow’s relationship that Niðhad and his queen share. Niðhad’s queen, like Wealhtheow, commands much power even though it is not always overtly displayed. For both their greed and in seeking revenge against the queen for having him crippled, Weland beheads their two sons and impregnates their daughter—the Franks Casket carries with it, through the cup symbolism, a strong suggestion that they are now wedded
to one another, that Beadohilde is herself a vessel—which is a devastating price to pay for what Niðhad and his queen extracted from Weland as their captive.

If the hasty elevation of Beowulf as the proven stranger within Hrothgar’s comitatus was enough to cause Wealhtheow existential unease about the position of her sons, then by extension the sudden elevation of Weland the slave and captive smith to the position of father of the unborn heir to Niðhad’s kingdom would have meant that all semblance of whatever current political order, as well as the channels through which power flows, have all suddenly been destroyed. If a lord (and his lady) begin to act like Grendel—if they invite Grendel to the symbel, to put it another way—then they hasten and welcome the demise of their temporary stay against the chaos of the outside world. Wealhtheow, as the one who controls and therefore shapes the situation that will serve as the communal narrative moment, wields great power. What we see in Beowulf is the active crafting of the societal framework under which individuals in the present must act and that individuals in the future will recall as guidance for how to act. To an Anglo-Saxon audience familiar with the tale of Weland and Beadohilde, gazing upon that one image of the cup on the Franks Casket was an invitation to imagine annihilation and to contemplate the everyday ephemera in one’s life that establish, at least for the moment, where one belongs.
CONCLUSION

As we pulled into the driveway, up loomed the old, decrepit, and once-beautiful home my father, brother, and I had to clear out and clean. The expansive yard was a sea of tall, yellow grasses punctuated by an archipelago of decaying lumber, hulking metal containers, and rusting machinery. The former occupants had left behind a great many things and a house filled with filth; the haste with which they left the premises was emphasized by the yard’s profusion of strewn remnants. The job—the first of many more to come over the course of my early years—was simple: Fill up the pickup with as much trash, junk, and abandoned furniture as possible, help haul it all to the dump, and if there was time, wipe the place down to once more prepare it to go back on the market. I was still in elementary school, it was the weekend, and I was an extra pair of hands. It was hard, honest labor, and like most of the strange work I had recently started doing, I hated it. Inside, a gloomy pall hung over every room, the air stale with the seeped-in stink of innumerable cigarettes savored and spent. Climbing the stairs to the second floor, greeting my entrance was a nightmare of discarded and empty, sticky alcohol containers all cast upon the floor. Each can would soon become acquainted with my fifth-grader fingers as I’d grasp and transfer them into a black garbage bag, ready to be received by the patient pickup. Who lived here? I wondered. My mind was troubled by new discoveries as I came to know every corner of that forlorn home, whose yellowed walls and filmy sills and knocked-over knick-knacks made me feel a mixture of emotions I could not at the time separate and sort: disgust, frustration, perplexity, fear, and an indelible sadness. Although I did not think of it in this way then, walking within the halls of the silent structure that bore witness to the memories of an inaccessible and lost past, I was the person who would become one of the first interpreters of the ruined fragments of someone’s life. And it was my task to help erase that reality to make way for a new future.
Perhaps this example is not quite as evocative of the grandeur of Tolkien’s or Drout’s towers marking a great achievement, but they share elements in common: The home was old and beautiful, and more than likely had housed at least a few generations of happy memories—but it was hard to see amid the more overt ruination of the recent inhabitants. “There are tumbled roofs,” *The Ruin* reads in reference to the remnants of an ancient city, “towers in ruins, high towers rime-frosted, rime on the limy mortar, storm-shielding tiling scarred, scored and collapsed, undermined by age” (“Hrofas sind gehrorene, hreorge torras, / hrungeat berofen, hrim on lime, / scearde scurbeorge scorene, gedrorene, / ældo undereotone”) (3-7).18 In discussing the theme of mutability and whether or not one should focus on the material or the human aspects of temporariness in *The Ruin*, Lawrence Beaston asserts, “The poem’s central truth, then, concerns not the mutability of the world but the fleeting nature of human life” (Beaston 482). When all the people who once enlivened the spaces of halls that are now empty and who created memories and meaning in those spaces all pass away, no one remains who holds memories of what to us are silent ruins, forever keeping their secrets. Although, as Beaston demonstrates, the speaker in *The Ruin* observes the broken state of the city’s ruins, “these structures have endured” (482); the emphasis is on “the transience of the people who built and inhabited the world of the ruined city” (482). When the people who make up the culture that remembers the events of the past as they happened—or who at least pass on narrations of the memories of events as they happened—leave this world, all that remains behind are the long-enduring structures that reveal only that such people existed—but little else. When we look upon these structures we cannot help but allow our minds to weave those imagined worlds that were, to give voice to the creative urge that these broken places inspire.

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