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# SÆMEARH AND LIKE COMPOUNDS: A THEME IN OLD ENGLISH POETRY

Compounds involving the idea of a ship as a "sea-horse" are numerous in Old English poetry, although they are of relatively low frequency within the corpus: *brimhengest*, *fearophengest*, *lagumearh*, *merhengest*, *sæhengest*, *sæmearh*, *sundhengest*, *wæghengest*, *yðhengest*, *yðmearh*. Since their use appears to be restricted almost exclusively to poetry, they may be considered part of Old English "poetic diction." *Fearophengest*, *lagumearh*, *sæhengest*<sup>1</sup> and *yðhengest* are each recorded only once in Bosworth-Toller, and *sundhengest* appears only at the end of Cynewulf's *Ascension*; but the conventional character of these compounds—even if some are nonce words, which is unlikely—is indicated partly by their similarity to words for sea-horse in Old Icelandic poetry,<sup>2</sup> and partly by the fact that only *hengest* and *mearh* are used. Among the other words for "horse," *eh*, *eah*, *fola*, *steda*, *mere* "mare" and *wicg* are used in compounds rarely or never, and nearly all the numerous compounds with *hors* have meanings related specifically to the use or care of horses. Many Old English words for "sea," of course, lend themselves to compounding in certain semantic contexts, which explains the great variety of words available for "sea-horse."

What function does this class of words play in Old English poetry? We may profitably refer this problem to the technical concept "theme," defined by Donald K. Fry as "a recurring concatenation of details and ideas, not restricted to a specific event, verbatim repetition, or certain formulas, which forms an underlying struc-

<sup>1</sup> *Sæhengest* in a second recording glosses *ipotamus*.

<sup>2</sup> G. Vigfússon and F. York Powell, eds., *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (Oxford, 1883), II, 458.

ture for an action or description."<sup>3</sup> Themes are to be distinguished from type-scenes, both in form and function. A type-scene is "a recurring stereotyped presentation of conventional details used to describe a certain narrative event, requiring neither verbatim repetition nor a specific formula content."<sup>4</sup> Type-scenes, such as sea voyages, councils, the approach to battle or the arrival of a messenger, play a part in mnemonic technology and composition, as do formulas. Themes, in contrast, "contribute little to the basic compositional structure";<sup>5</sup> but they provide "a framework of imagery underlying the surface of narrative"<sup>6</sup> which enriches the poem by providing it with complex associations shared by the poet and his audience by virtue of their knowledge of poetic tradition. Our knowledge of type-scenes is beginning to become fairly extensive,<sup>7</sup> but so far only three themes have been isolated for study: exile,<sup>8</sup> "the hero on the beach/at the door,"<sup>9</sup> and "the traveler recognizes his goal."<sup>10</sup> Hopefully we can improve on our knowledge of themes through careful attention to detail in the poetry, and thereby recover some of the associations shared by an Anglo-Saxon poet and his audience.

<sup>3</sup> Donald K. Fry, "Old English Formulaic Themes and Type-Scenes," *Neophilologus*, LII (1968), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Fry, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Fry, "Themes and Type-Scenes in *Elene* 1-113," *Speculum*, XLIV (1969), 44.

<sup>6</sup> Fry, "Themes and Type-Scenes in *Elene*," p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> For recent discussion, see, for example, Lee C. Ramsey, "The Sea Voyages in *Beowulf*," *NM*, LXXII (1971), 51-9; Frederik J. Heineman, "*Judith* 236-291a: A Mock Heroic Approach-to-Battle Type Scene," *NM*, LXXI (1970), 83-96; Fry, "Type-Scene Composition in *Judith*," *Annuaire Medievale*, XII (1972), 100-19.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley B. Greenfield, "The Formulaic Expression of the Theme of 'Exile' in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," *Speculum*, XXX (1955), 200-6.

<sup>9</sup> David Crowne, "The Hero on the Beach: an Example of Composition by Theme in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," *NM*, LXI (1960), 362-72; Alain Renoir, "Oral-Formulaic Theme Survival: a Possible Instance in the 'Nibelungenlied'," *NM*, LXV (1964), 70-75; Fry, "The Hero on the Beach in *Finnsburh*," *NM*, LXVII (1966), 27-31; Fry, "The Heroine on the Beach in *Judith*," *NM*, LXVIII (1967), 168-84.

<sup>10</sup> George Clark, "The Traveler Recognizes his Goal: A Theme in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," *JEGP*, LXIV (1965), 645-59.

The isolated use of *sæmearh* or like compounds, of course, can hardly be said to constitute a "theme" in the sense outlined above. Accordingly we may dismiss from our consideration those compounds for which no attempt is made to develop the metaphor implicit in "sea-horse," e.g. *sæhengest* and *brimhengest* in *Andreas* 488 and 513,<sup>11</sup> and *merehengest* in Exeter Riddle 14 (line 6) and, in *Meters of Boethius* 26 (line 25). In several instances, however, *sæmearh*-compounds are used, in conjunction with supporting details and ideas, to introduce and develop a submerged metaphor in which sea travel is likened to the travel of a horse over land. The *sæmearh* "theme" is quite flexible — supporting details vary from one passage to the next; but in each case the metaphor is used to develop one or another of two separate ideas: the dangers of sea travel in a ship out of control (as in a storm) and the necessity of mooring or anchoring a ship, analogous to restraining a horse; and the speed of a sea voyage, analogous to the travel of a swift horse over land.

*The Rune Poem* clearly illustrates the possibilities available to a poet who wishes to emphasize through metaphor the dangers of sea travel and the necessity for controlling a ship:

L (lagu) byþ leodum langsum geþuht,  
 gif hi sculun neþan on nacan tealtum,  
 and hi sæyþa swyþe bregap,  
 and se brimhengest bridles ne gymeð.

(*Rune Poem* 63-6: L (the ocean) seems interminable to men, if they venture on the rolling bark and the waves of the sea terrify them and the courser of the deep heed not its bridle).<sup>12</sup> The same idea appears at the end of Cynewulf's *Ascension*, where the spiritual condition of man is compared with the predicament of sailors in a *sundhengest* caught in a storm (*Christ II*, 850-56a). In contrast to the peril in a ship/horse out of control on the sea of "þas wacan woruld," Cynewulf develops an image to emphasize the safety that comes through God's grace:

<sup>11</sup> George P. Krapp and Elliott v. K. Dobbie, eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (New York, 1931-53), used for all references to poetic texts.

<sup>12</sup> Translation from Bruce Dickins, ed., *Runic and Heroic Poems of the Old Teutonic Peoples* (Cambridge, 1915), p. 19.

Ða us help bicwom,  
 þæt us to hælo hyþe gelædde,  
 godes gæstsunu, ond us giefe sealde  
 þæt we oncnawan magun ofer ceoles bord  
 hwær we sælan sceolon sunðhengestas,  
 ealde yðmearas, ancrum fæste.

(*Christ II*, 858b-863: Then help came to us, God's spiritual Son, who led us to a haven of safety, and gave us grace, so that we may know where we must moor the sea-steeds, old wave-horses, firmly with anchors over the side of the ship.) *Ancor* is specifically appropriate only to the maritime imagery (just as in the *Rune Poem* *bridel* is specifically appropriate only to the equestrian imagery), but *sælan* 'to fasten with a cord; restrain' is general enough to suggest restraints on a horse as well as on a ship. The chiasmic arrangement *sælan* — *sunðhengestas/yðmearas* — *ancrum* contributes to the association of these ideas.

Danger and ship-mooring are brought together with unusual irony in *Physiologus*, where the whale is said to look deceptively like an island,

swa þæt wenap wæglibende  
 þæt hy on ealond sum eagam wliton,  
 ond þonne gehydað heahstefn scipu  
 to þam unlonde oncyrrapum,  
 setlap sæmearas sundes æt ende,  
 ond þonne in þæt eglond up gewitað  
 collenferþe; ceolas stondað  
 bi staþe fæste, streame biwunden.

(*Whale*, 11-18: so that seafarers believe that they gaze with their eyes on some island, and then fasten the high-prowed ships to the false land with anchor-ropes, secure the sea-horses at the shore of the sea, and then, bold-spirited, go up into that island; the ships stand fast by the shore, surrounded by water.) "Gehydað scipu oncyrrapum" is appropriate only to a maritime environment, but *setlan*, in the verse "setlap sæmearas," is general enough to suggest restraints on a horse as well as on a ship. The false security of the "island" is revealed when the whale suddenly dives to the bottom of the sea. Such are the wiles of the devil, who like the whale "bisenceð sælipende/eorlas ond yðmearas" (*Whale*, 48-9a). In contrast to the true haven of God's grace in Cynewulf's

*Ascension*, the whale represents the false haven of this world. The similarity in imagery can be explained by reference to a poetic tradition available to both poets; hence the cross-reference augments our understanding of both poems.

Indeed the *Whale* poet, in developing his irony, goes far beyond the manipulation of a single theme. The ideas associated with *sæmearh* play only a small part in a complex network of words and formulas used ironically within the framework of a conventional type-scene. *Eagum wlitán*, for example, is a formula<sup>13</sup> which places special emphasis, through the amplifying addition of *leagum*, on the act of looking; yet what the sailors see is a *hiw* (*Whale* 8a), a feigned appearance: in one of its meanings, *hiw* has a pejorative sense; compare *hiwian* 'feign, pretend' and *hiwung* 'hypocrisy'. The sequence *ealond / unlonde* 'false land' / *eglonde* (*Whale*, 12a, 14a and 16a) further underscores the idea of an illusion. Once the sailors have anchored the ship and kindled a fire on this "island," "hæleþ beoþ on wynnum, / reonigmode, ræste geliste" (*Whale* 22a-3: the men are joyful, weary, longing for rest). The collocation of *ræst* and *reonigmod* occurs elsewhere in the context of resting after sea travel,<sup>14</sup> but in this case the wished for *rest* ironically anticipates the *deaðsele* (*Whale*, 30a) to which the sailors go, "scipu mid scealcum" (31a): the potential irony is implicit in the use of *restan* as a euphemism for death, and in the compound *wælstrest*. *Scipu mid scealcum* 'ships with their crewmen' is alliterated with subtle irony, for these crewmen have been separated from their ship through the treachery of the whale. For his narrative framework the poet draws on details familiar in "sea-voyage" type-scenes, analysed by Ramsey as including a command to travel, a statement of purpose, the approach to the ship, the loading of war gear, the voyage, sighting of land and landing, mooring the ship, and departure from the shore.<sup>15</sup> The first part of this type-scene is irrelevant to the poet's purpose, but in *The Whale* we observe the sighting of land while at sea (8-12), the mooring of the ship (13-15), and departure from the shore (16-18). These

<sup>13</sup> BT, s.v. *wlitán*, lists six examples.

<sup>14</sup> *Andreas* 592; cf. *Guthlac* 1095-6.

<sup>15</sup> Ramsey, pp. 55-6.

are details ordinarily associated with a safe voyage, but the *Whale* poet imposes on them an irony which exposes the dangers of trusting in the false security of this world.

*Sæmearh* and like compounds are not always used to emphasize the dangers of sea travel. Sometimes they suggest the speed of the journey, as in *Andreas* 264-9, where the ship piloted by God, here disguised as a Mermedonian sailor, is called a "snellic sæmearh *sunde bewunden*" (267: swift sea-horse encompassed by water).<sup>16</sup> The idea of speed, already apparent in *snellic*, is further emphasized by the intensifier *for-* used to describe the movement of the ship "swa us wind fordraf" (269b). Again in *Guthlac B*, the metaphor is used to describe the flight of the servant when, after Guthlac's death, the island trembles with heavenly music:

Ða afyrhted weard  
 ar, elnes biloren,      gewat þa ofestlice  
 beorn unhyðig,      þæt he bat gestag,  
 wæghengest wræc;      wæterþisa for,  
 snel under sorgum.      Swegl hate scan,  
 blac ofer bursalo.      Brimwudu scynde,  
 leoht, lade fus.      Lagumearg snyrede,  
 gehlæsted to hyðe,      þæt se hærnflota  
 æfter sundplegan      sondlond gespearn,  
 grond wið greote.

(*Guthlac*, 1326b-35a: Then the servant became frightened, bereft of courage; the unhappy man went hastily, so that he boarded a boat, drove the sea-horse; the water-rusher sailed, quick under the sorrowful man. The sun shone hot, bright over the houses. The ship hastened, nimble, swift in its course. The sea-horse, laden with its cargo, rushed to the haven, so that the ship, after its sea journey, spurned the sandy shore, ground against the sand.) In *Guthlac B*, as in *The Whale*, the "sea-voyage" type-scene provides the narrative framework. There is a command to travel,

<sup>16</sup> Krapp preserves the MS reading *snude*, which is possible; but see Claes Schaar, *Critical Studies in the Cynewulf Group* (Lund and Copenhagen, 1949), pp. 51-2, and Kenneth R. Brooks, ed., *Andreas and The Fates of the Apostles* (Oxford, 1961), p. 71, note to line 267. Note that in *Whale* 18 the *sæmearh* is said to be "streame biwunden." Perhaps the Vercelli scribe was led to write "snude bewunden" (encompassed by speed?) in response to the idea of speed emphasized elsewhere in the passage.

given by Guthlac before his death (1293b-9), a statement of purpose (to bring news of the saint's death), the approach to the ship (1326b-8a), boarding and launching (1328b-9a), the voyage (1329b-30a), sighting of land (implied in 1331-2a), landing (1332b-3a), mooring (1333b-5a), and departure from the shore (1335b-45a). Speed, here motivated by the servant's fright, is implied in the quick succession of narrative details, and in the metaphor submerged in the compounds *wæghengest* and *lagumearh*, together with the supporting words *wræc*, *wæterþisa*, *snel*, *snyrede*.

Our final example is the celebrated sea voyage in Cynewulf's *Elene*, once thought to have been inspired by a passage in *Beowulf*,<sup>17</sup> but recently analyzed as a type-scene by Ramsey, who notes that "the description in *Elene* proceeds through a command (213-16), a statement of Elene's purpose (219-24), the approach to the ship (225-26), the loading-on of war gear (234-36), the voyage and landing (237-50), the mooring of the ship (250-52), and the departure from the shore (261-63)."<sup>18</sup> *Sæmearh* compounds are used first to describe the ships standing ready, moored in the harbor — *fearoðhengestas* (226b), *wæghengestas* (236b), *sælde sæmearas* (228a), recalling Cynewulf's collocation of *sælan* and *sundhengestas* at the end of *Ascension* (*Christ II*, 802), and also the collocation of *setlan* and *sæmearas* in *The Whale* (14). Speed is emphasized in the description of the voyage itself:

Dær meahthe gesion,      se ðone sið beheold,  
 brecan ofer bæðweg,      brimwudu snyrgan  
 under swellingum,      sæmearh plegean,  
 wadan wægflotan.

(*Elene*, 243-6a: There one who beheld the journey would be able to see, rushing over the bath-way, the ship hastening under sails [?], the sea-horse darting, the ship moving.) The "sea-horse" metaphor here is supported by verbs suggesting quick movement (*brecan*, *snyrgan*, *plegean*), and also by *weg* and *stræt* in the compounds *merestræte* and *bæðweg* (242a and 244a).

<sup>17</sup> G. Sarrazin, "Beowulf und Kynewulf," *Anglia*, IX (1886), 515-50; Schaar, pp. 235 ff.; John Gardner, "Cynewulf's *Elene*: Sources and Structure," *Neophilologist*, LIV (1970), 65 and 68-9.

<sup>18</sup> Ramsey, p. 56.



The association of horses with the sea is, of course, by no means peculiar to Germanic poetry. Poseidon, besides being the ruler of the sea, "gave the first horse to man, and he was honored as much for the one as for the other."<sup>19</sup> Examples from classical and neoclassical tradition are familiar and too numerous to mention, though Vergil's *Aeneid* and Racine's *Phèdre* immediately come to mind. May we imagine an Indo-European tradition which survives in both cultures? This possibility is weakened by the fact that there is no evidence for an IE word for 'sea.' Perhaps the coincident association of horses with the sea is merely fortuitous. In any case it seems clear that compounds like *sæmearh* had conventional associations in Old English poetry, and were commonly used to suggest either the danger of sea travel, or the speed of a voyage at sea.

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<sup>19</sup> Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (Boston, 1940), pp. 27-8.