

## Forum

Members of the Association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the Editor, and the authors of the articles discussed will be invited to reply.

### Patterning in *Beowulf*

To the Editor:

Readers of the important note 3 to John D. Niles's "Ring Composition and the Structure of *Beowulf*" (*PMLA*, 94 [1979], 924–35) may derive a rather strange impression of my "Envelope Patterns and the Structure of *Beowulf*." Far from "disregarding Bartlett's warning" that "mere repetition" is not enough to establish an envelope pattern, I found her definition too lenient in admitting the repetition of "ideas" without verbal confirmation. My working definition was "patterns repeating both words and ideas"; I repeatedly sounded a cautionary note that minimal patterns involving "isolated words" may be of dubious significance. I would have considered just such a minimal pattern the "eafera" envelope of ll. 12–19, within which Niles sees a "ring"—although there are no other verbal parallels.

Further, Niles obscures terms when he calls the envelope pattern "a chiasmic technique akin to ring composition" (p. 924). As Bartlett and I pointed out, envelope patterns are not necessarily chiasmic—certainly not in their verbal elements, which are the only elements beyond disagreement. For example, *The Dream of the Rood* (ll. 35–43) contains a notable envelope of which the principal elements are "bugan" (*A*), "bifian" (*B*), "eorðan sceatas" (*C*, or *CD*), repeated in the order *BAC*, not *CBA*.

I have considerable sympathy for Niles's adverse views on numerical analysis, but for slightly different reasons. Many such analyses start with assumptions that certain events or "ideas" are important and proceed to find echoing or answering events, themes, and so on, at satisfactory distances. I expressed the same doubts about ring structure, which also seems to depend on a somewhat arbitrary choice of episodes to arrange into a ring. I am, therefore, as exasperated as Niles will be to have to tell him that a numerically inclined student of mine, a few years back, produced a well-argued paper starting with the premise that the numerical center point of *Beowulf* is the axis around which the poem revolves. That numerical center point agrees perfectly with what appears at the center of Niles's overall ring,

Diagram 6, since it comes just at the end of the fight with Grendel's dam.

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*Mr. Niles replies:*

My apologies to Constance Hieatt if I have left *PMLA* readers with a mistaken impression of her article. She may be assured that any offense was unintentional, and I hope that her letter spurs readers to give her article more attention than I was able to do in a few lines of a footnote.

The fact remains that there are differences between her approach and mine, and it is as well to have them aired. I see two main questions: (1) Is there such a thing as thematic patterning as well as verbal patterning in literature? (2) At what point does verbal repetition become verbal patterning?

In response to the first question, I am on the side of Bartlett against Hieatt in holding that thematic patterning can and often does exist in a poem, whether or not the patterning is accompanied by verbal repetition. Certainly the repetition of ideas can be traced in a variety of ways in *Beowulf*, as generations of readers have discovered. Hieatt is quite right to point out the dangers of subjectivity that enter the picture as soon as a critic tries to judge which themes echo with others. We have all seen examples of overkill on the part of critics hunting for thematic parallels, and my own article is probably as bad as others in this regard. Still, the exercise of critical judgment need not be abandoned.

On the second question, I am ready to shake hands with Hieatt and part if she agrees that minimal patterns involving isolated words may be of dubious significance. In a work as long as *Beowulf*, verbal repetitions are bound to occur. What one wants to know is whether these repetitions have thematic or structural significance. Subjective judgment enters through the back door even after Hieatt has locked the front. In practice Bartlett's criteria for judgment strike me as both clear and defensible, Hieatt's less clear and less defensible, though far-