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THE COLLECTIVE SENSE OF CONCRETE SINGULAR NOUNS IN *BEOWULF*:

*Emendations of Sense*¹

SUMMARY. — The collective sense of the singular of concrete nouns has long been an accepted part of Old English syntax. But the form appears to be little more than a convenience to the modern reader, editor and translator. Of ten commonly accepted examples of this collective sense to the singular of concrete nouns in *Beowulf*, there is not one in which a singular reading is not equally as possible as the collective reading. In many passages, there are distinct thematic, semantic or syntactic reasons for preferring the singular reading.

Par genestost brægd

795 eorl Beowulfes calde lafe,
wode freadrithnes feorh calgjan,
maeres peodnes, þar hie meahtron swa.²

In attempting to explain the changes in number in ll. 794b–797, Frederick Klaeber translates *brægd/eorl Beowulfes* in the above passage as “virtually, ‘many a man brandished his sword’,” adding that “the sing. of concrete nouns is often used in a collective sense ... in connection with *manig, ofi, genestost, yþgerene*, 794 ff., 1065, 1110 ff., 1243 ff., 1288 ff., 2018 l.; [and] also without any such auxiliary word suggesting the collective function, 296 ff., 492ff., 1067, 1284 ff.”³ In his note, Klaeber was repeating a point he made many years earlier in an article in *Modern Philology*:⁴ and with the exception of the brief flurry of articles between Kock and Sievers’ responsible for this earlier note, most editors, translators and commentators in this century have quietly followed Klaeber’s explanation of both the passage and the form, occasionally challenging the collective reading of one or another of his examples, but without questioning the form as a whole.⁵

But this collective sense of the singular of concrete nouns deserves a more careful consideration. Of the ten examples of the form cited by Klaeber in his note to ll. 794b–797, there is not one in which the supposedly collective noun cannot also be read in a singular sense.⁶ In many cases there are compelling syntactic or thematic reasons for preferring the singular. While attributing a collective sense to the singular of concrete nouns makes for an easier Modern English translation, such smoothing out of the abrupt changes in number of the original text tends to change the sense and obscure the meaning of the original poetry, often ignoring the subtle effects achieved by these same transitions.

In the case of a few of Klaeber’s examples, a singular reading is made possible simply by finding an appropriate singular antecedent or consequent for the singular concrete noun. Thus, in ll. 1063 ff., a singular reading for *gid ofi wrecen* (l. 1065b) is possible if one views the passage as a specific description of the entertainment offered to Beowulf and his men rather than a more general description of the types of entertainment available at Heorot⁷:

- Peat was sang ond sweg samod atgædere
 fore Healfdene hildewisan,
 1065 gomenwudu greted, *gild of wrecen*,⁹
 Bonne healgemen Hroþgaras scop
 æfter meodbece manan scode

There was song and noise together before Healfdene's battle-leader — the touched mirth-wood, the often recited tale — when Hroðgar's scop should sing joy in the hall at the mead-bench!¹⁰ ...

Similarly, in the passage describing the arrival of Grendel's mother at Heorot (ll. 1282b ff.), it is possible to maintain the singular sense of *wifes* (l. 1284a) by taking the phrase *wiggyre wifes* as being appositive to the singular *se gyrye* (l. 1282b) rather than to *mægþa cræft* (l. 1283b):¹¹

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| | Wæs se gyrye læssa |
| | eþne swa micle, swa bið mægþa cræft, |
| | wiggyre wifes be wæpnedmen, |
| 1285 þonne heoru bunden, hamere gefruen, | |
| se word swate fah swin ofer helme | |
| ecgum dyhtig andweard screð. | |

The terror [i.e., engendered by Grendel's mother], the war-terror of a woman, was less even by as much as is the might of maidens against men and their weapons, when the bound blade — the blood-stained sword — forged by hammers, enduring in edge, shears the opposing boat-image above the helmet.

As a final example of this type, there is the passage in which Hroðgar's coast-guard offers to post a guard around Beowulf's ship:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| ... | ic mægþegnas | mine hate |
| | wið feonda gehwone | Doan eowerne, |
| 295 niwyrwydne | nacan on sande | |
| arum healdan, | oþ ðæt eft byred | |
| ofer lagustramas | leofofe mannan | |
| wudu wundenhals | to Wederneare, | |
| godfremmenðra | swycum gifþe hab, | |
| 300 þæt þone hilderas | hal gedigeð. | |

In this passage, *leofofe mannan* (l. 297b) and the singular adjective *hal* (l. 300b), rather than as collectives referring to "the whole band,"¹² are more properly seen as referring to Beowulf, continuing the fascination of the coast-guard with Beowulf's martial and noble appearance expressed throughout his speeches in this section (for example, in ll. 247b–251):¹³

... I shall order my retainers to guard your boat — the newly-tarred ship on the sand — with their spears against every enemy until it, wooden, with a curved-grow, shall bear back [that] beloved man [i.e., Beowulf] to the coast of the Weather-Geats — it is given in the case of such a one of helpful men that he [Beowulf] shall safely survive the rush of battle.

In the majority of the examples from Klaeber's note, the abrupt shifts in number which led to his collective reading are better seen as further examples of the *Beowulf* poet's well-known use of rapid transitions for rhetorical effect. In each of these passages, a general pattern of contrasting plural and singular examples is used for emphasis, to heighten pathos or excitement, or merely illustrate coincidental action.

Of this pattern, perhaps the simplest example is that in which Beowulf, reporting to Hygelac on his visit to Heorot, gives the following testimonial to the generosity and diplomatic skills of Wealhþeow (ll. 2016b–2019):¹⁴

- | | |
|--|------------------------|
| | Hwatum maera cwen, |
| | frubusibb folca |
| | fræde byre geonge; |
| | seoce (sealde), |
| | æt hie to setle geong. |

At times the great queen, a peace pledge of the people, strolled about the hall, encountered the young men; often she gave a twisted ring to a man before she went to [her] seat.

In this passage the singular concrete dative *seoce*, rather than being roughly appositive to the plural accusatives *byre geonge* as a collective reading would have it, serves as an additional, more specific example of Wealhþeow's generosity, emphasizing her skill in handling her husband's retainers: not only did she cheer the ranks of the young men (which was only to be expected), she also frequently gave a ring to an individual warrior (a great reward in a poem in which the fitness of a warrior to accept such gifts receives such great attention¹⁵).

An example similar to the above passage in its use of side-by-side singular and plural examples for the purposes of rhetorical emphasis is the description of the great funeral pyre in the Finnsburg episode of *Beowulf* (ll. 1110–1113a):

- | | | |
|------|------------------|----------------|
| 1110 | Æt þam ade was | eþgesyne |
| | swatfah syrece, | swyn ealgylden |
| | eofer irenheard, | æþþelg manig |
| | wundum awyrted; | |

A parallel to this passage, although with the plural/singular word-order reversed, is to be found in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ll. 17b–20a:

- | | |
|----|---------------------------------|
| | Peat læg secg manig |
| | garum ageted, |
| | ofer scild scoten, |
| 20 | wealg, wiges sæd. ¹⁶ |

In each of these passages, singular nouns and adjectives are used to enliven a more general collective example. In the passage from *Beowulf*, the juxtaposition of the aggregate number of slain with the detailed description of personal artifacts is used by the poet to emphasize and individualize the great cost of the battle. In this passage, the singular concrete noun-adjective pairs *swatfah syrece*, *swyn ealgylden* and *eofer irenheard* add a greater force to the true collective *æþþelg manig*:

On that pyre was easily seen: a blood-stained shirt of mail, a golden swine, an iron-hand boar, [and] many a prince, destroyed by [his] wounds.¹⁷

In the passage from *Brunanburh*, the singular nouns and adjectives *gama norþerna* and *scithre* are given as examples of the type of men left on the battlefield rather than as exact appositives to the true collective *secg menig*. In this example, the relative fullness of the description of the individual dead men — combined, of course, with the exultant understatement of the description of the Irish warrior as being *werg*, *wiges sæd* — adds a greater force to the collective *secg menig*, again emphasizing the number of slain:

There lay many a man killed by spears: a Northerner, shot over his shield, and an Irishman as well, tired, sated with war.¹⁸

In ll. 1288 ff. of *Beowulf*, contrasts between singular and plural nouns are used to give the impression of quick simultaneous action. Here, the breathlessly fast transitions from the singular to the plural reflect the speed and confusion of the raid of Grendel's mother on Heorot. Indeed, the entire passage gives the effect of a fragmentary eye-witness account: a sword is seen drawn, hands hold up shields, a warrior, having been seen by the enemy, is forced into battle without his helmet or armor¹⁹:

Da wæs on bealle heardseg togen
sword ofer seutum, sidrand manig,
1290 hafen handa frast; heln ne gemunde,
byrnan side, þa hlæw se boorga angeat.

Then in the hall a hard-edged sword was drawn from over the bench, many a broad shield [was] held fast in hands; this one did not think of a helmet, of the broad mail-shirt, when the horror perceived him.

In the final two of Klaeber's examples — the preparations of the warriors for bed on the night of the attack of Grendel's mother (ll. 1237 ff.) and the attempts of Beowulf's men to help him in his fight with Grendel (ll. 794b ff.) — similarly abrupt transitions are used both for rhetorical effects similar to those described above, and to maintain a distinction between the individual warrior and the war-band often found in the poem (for example, throughout the coast-guard's speech mentioned above or in the distinction made between Wiglaf and Beowulf's unfaithful retainers in fits 35 and 36).

Ræced weardode
urrim eorla, swa hie of ær dydon,
Bencpelu beredan; hit geondraded weard
1240 beddum ond bolstrum. Beorsealca sum
fas ond ferge flettraste gebæag,
Setton him to healdon hildrandas,
bordwudu beorhtan; þær on bence wæs
ofer æþelinge yfgesene

1245 heapsteapa helm, bringed byrme,
preowudu þrymlic, Wæs þeaw byra,
þær hie of wæron, an wig gearwe,
ge æt ham ge on herge, ...

In ll. 1237b ff., rapid changes in number are used to emphasize the surface similarity and deeper difference between the man *fas ond ferge* and his luckier comrades. In this passage, the narrator compares the preparations for night of the troop and those of the doomed warrior Æschere by means of a set on highly repetitive examples in which both the troop and the as-yet-unnamed individual warrior are seen in similar situations and performing similar tasks. Thus, the retainers are seen to clear the bench-plank (l. 1239a), while Æschere, *beorsealca sum* (l. 124b), bows to his half-rest; the troop set their shields at their heads (ll. 1242–1243b), and a helmet, mail-corslet and battle-stave are said to be easily seen above a specific prince²⁰ (the supposedly collective dative singular *æþelinge*, l. 1244b)²¹:

A countless number of warriors guarded the hall, just as they often did before. They barred the bench-plank; it became over-spread with beds and pillows. One of the beer-drinkers, eager and fated to die, bowed to [his] half-rest. They [i.e., the entire troop] had set themselves [their] battle-rounds — bright shield-wood, — at their heads; there, easily seen on the bench over a prince was a war-lowering helmet, a ringed mail-coat, a mighty stave. It was their [the entire troop's] custom that they were usually ready in war both at home and on expedition ...

This emphasis on the difference between Æschere and the other members of his troop maintains a similar emphasis found throughout the account of the approach and attack of Grendel's mother on Heorot, as seen, for example, in the account of the individual warrior who forgets his helmet and armor during her attack (ll. 1288–91 above), or in the intensity of Hroðgar's grief when he discovers that it is Æschere, his dearest retainer, who has been killed (ll. 1306–1309).

Finally, in ll. 794b–797, the mid-sentence change in number is used by the poet to create a distinction between an individual warrior and the rest of the war-band. In this passage, the correlative pair *þær ... þær ...* and the change from the singular to the plural over the two clauses of the sentence distinguish syntactically between the actions of the unnamed *eorl* of Beowulf and the rest of his retainers in anticipation and variation of the actual distinction to be made between Wiglaf and the unfaithful retainers in fits 35 and 36. Here, as in the Wiglaf episode, a faithful retainer (the *eorl Beowulfes*) remains to protect the life of his lord where he believes his troop may be of service (*ðær hie meahon swa*, l. 797b).²² In contrast to the Wiglaf episode, however, in ll. 794b–805a the general body of Beowulf's retainers also remain, albeit unnecessarily, to defend their lord²³.

795	eort Beowulfes	Præ genehost bregad
	wolde freatdrifnes	ealde lafe,
	maeres beodnes,	feorh ealgarian,
	He þæt ne wiston,	ðær hie meathon swa.
	heardþigende	pa hie gewin dragon,
	ond on heafas gehwone	hildeneagas,
	sawle secan:	hearwan pohton,
	zenig ofer eorþan	þone synscaðan
	gubbiola nan	irena cyst,
	ac he sigewæpnum	gretan nolde;
805	ecga gehwylcere.	forsworen hæfde,

Then an earl of Beowulf most quickly swung an ancient heirloom; he wished to protect the life of [his] troop-leader, of that great prince, when they [i.e., the troop] could do so. They had no idea, those intent warriors, when engaged in the fight and [when] they thought to seek [Grendel's] soul from every side [that] no battle sword, the choicest of blades, none over the earth, wished to attack that murderous outlaw; but he [Beowulf]² had forsworn every blade, [all] victory-weapons.

Although in attempting to unravel some of the *Beowulf* poet's more difficult passages, editors, translators and commentators have found it useful to read a collective sense into the poet's singular concrete nouns, this form is more a convenience to the modern reader than a part of the poet's style. By altering the abrupt and hard-to-translate changes in subject and number to suit modern tastes, the collective reading also changes the original poem, frequently destroying the effects achieved by the *Beowulf* poet's careful use of these transitions.

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NOTES

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² *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Fr. Klaeber, 3rd edition with two supplements (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1950) ll. 794b–797. Quotations from the text of the poem are from this edition.

³ Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, note to ll. 794b–795, p. 157.

⁴ Fr. Klaeber, "Textual Interpretations of 'Beowulf'." *MP* 3(1905)235–265. Klaeber changed his mind about a number of examples of the form between this article and the later note in his edition of *Beowulf*.

⁵ See E. A. Kock, "Interpretations and Emendations of Early English Texts, III," *Anglia* 27(1904)218–37 and "Zu Anglia XXVII, 219 f., Beitr. Z. Gesch. D. D. Spr. U. Lit. XXIX, 560 ff., *Anglia* 28(1905)140–42; See also, E. Sievers, "Zum Beowulf," *Beitr* 29(1904)560–76.

⁶ See, for example, Bruce Mitchell's recent *Old English Syntax* (2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 1:§79, p. 41) in which he deals with the form by referring the reader to Klaeber's gloss on ll. 794b–795. Translators and editors in particular have relied heavily on this form, translating the concrete singular nouns of the text as collective or plural whenever an alternative reading has failed to present itself (particularly in ll. 1243 ff. and 794 ff.). Thus, C.L. Wrenn (ed., *Beowulf with the Finnsburg Fragment*, revised by W. F. Bolton, third edition (London: Harrap, 1973)), who otherwise allows Klaeber's examples of the supposed collective sense to pass without comment, translates the *eort* *Beowulfes* of 795a as "Beowulf's warriors", and adds that "eort is a kind of collective sing., perhaps" (p. 127). Over the course of this article I will refer to the following translations: Michael Swanton, *Beowulf* (Manchester UP, New York: Barnes, 1978); E. Talbot Donaldson, *Beowulf: The Donaldson Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, ed. J.F. Tuso (New York: Norton, 1975); G.N. Garmonsway and Jacques-Léon Simpson, *Beowulf and its Analogues* (London: Dent, New York: Dutton, 1968); R.K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1982).

⁷ *Medeocene* in l. 1067, and *þene* l. 492b are included by Klaeber in his note as examples of the collective form. These examples are not dealt with at length in this paper as it seems to me a moot point whether Beowulf's men would need one or more than one bench cleared for them when they arrived at Heorot (ll. 491–492), or whether it is possible that Hroldgar's *scop* could be said to sing to only a single bench instead of the whole hall (ll. 1063–1067).

⁸ Most translators translate *gid ofr wrecen* in the singular. Thus Donaldson "the tale oft told" (p. 19), Gordon, "a measure often recited" (p. 23) and Swanton, "a story often rehearsed" (p. 85). Garmonsway and Simpson are an exception, translating the phrase as a collective: "many a lay [was] recited" (p. 29).

⁹ Throughout this paper words read by Klaeber as being collective in sense will appear in bold face.

¹⁰ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ Gordon (p. 27), Swanton (p. 95), Donaldson (p. 23) and Garmonsway and Simpson (p. 35) all translate *wifes gýre* as appositive to *mægðra cregl*. Bradley translates *wifes gýre* as appositive to *se gýre* (p. 445).

¹² Klaeber, "Textual Interpretations of Beowulf," p. 250.

¹³ Swanton (p. 49) and Garmonsway and Simpson (p. 10) translate both words in the singular. Donaldson translates *leofne mannan* as the plural "beloved men", and *kað* as referring to the singular "one who behaves so bravely" (p. 6). Gordon reverses the order, translating *leofne mannan* as "the beloved man," and linking *kað* with "the brave ones" (p. 8).

¹⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly, most translators retain the singular reading of *sege* in this passage. See for example, Swanton, p. 131; Donaldson, p. 35; Garmonsway and Simpson, p. 34; Gordon, p. 41.

¹⁵ See, for example, Hroldgar's complaint that "*Ful of ic for lessan lean teohode, / hord weorþunge mahan rice*" (ll. 951 f.), the narrator's comment concerning Beowulf that "*no he þære / eohgyfe / for sefe[ot]e[al]dum scamgan doffe*" (ll. 1025b = 1026), and Wiglaf's scolding of Beowulf's unfaithful retainers (2631 ff.).

¹⁶ *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. A. Campbell (1938; Oxford: EETS, 1974), p. 93, ll. 17b–20a.

¹⁷ Cf. for example, E. Talbot Donaldson's translation of the same passage (p. 20), which dilutes the effect of the singular/plural contrast by translating the singular nouns in the plural:

At the fire it was easy to see many a blood-stained battle-shirt, boar-image all golden — iron-hard swine — many a noble destroyed by wounds...

Other translators, such as Gordon (p. 23), and Garmonsway and Simpson (p. 31), maintain the singular readings of the original.

¹⁸ Cf. Bradley's translation (pp. 516–517) which again dilutes the effect brought about by the rapid transition from the singular to plural:

There lay many a man picked off by spears, many a Norseman shot above his shield and Scotsman too, spent and sated with fighting.

¹⁹ Gordon (p. 27) maintains the contrasts between the singular and plural nouns in this passage. Other translators read one or both of the singular concrete nouns in question as collective in sense. Thus Garmonsway and Simpson translate *headecg togen/ sword ofer setlum* as "Many a hard-edged sword was seized from above the bench" (p. 35). With Donaldson (p. 23) and Swanton (p. 97) they also translate the subject of *gemunde* as "none" (Donaldson and Swanton) or "no man" (Garmonsway and Simpson).

²⁰ Presumably, but not necessarily, *Feschere*. As in the *Wealhbeow* episode above, the contrast of singular and plural/collective examples is being used for rhetorical emphasis in addition to any thematic purposes.

²¹ *Æbelinge* in this passage is consistently translated as a collective or plural. See Donaldson p. 22, Swanton, pp. 94–95, Garmonsway and Simpson, p. 34, and Bradley p. 444, all of whom translate the singular dative noun as "each prince/man." Also, Gordon, who translates the same word as a plural: "chieftains" (p. 26).

²² See particularly ll. 2631–2650, in which Wiglaf attempts to rouse the rest of his war-band to come to Beowulf's aid.

²³ With the exception of Bradley, whose singular translation of *þær genehost brægd/eorl Beowulfes* as "Repeatedly, one of Beowulf's earls would draw his ancient sword there" (p. 432) seems to make little sense in context, translators have universally rendered *eorl Beowulfes* as collective or plural. Thus Swanton translates "many a warrior of Beowulf's [sic]" (p. 73), Donaldson, "more than enough of Beowulf's earls" (p. 14), and Gordon, "this one and that of Beowulf's men" (p. 17).

²⁴ For this identification of the *he* in l. 804 see H.L. Rogers, "Beowulf, l. 804," *N&Q* 229(1984)289–292.