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The *unfægne eorl* in *Beowulf* (572b-573)

After recounting his successful exploits at sea and his slaying of nine sea monsters, Beowulf remarks, *Wyrð oft nereð/ unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen deah* “Fate often spares/ an doomed man when his courage avails” (572b-573). Both Klaeber (2008: 153) and Tolkien (1936: 290, 291) liken this Old English (OE) proverb to the proverb “Fortune favors the brave.” Drawing the same parallel, Deskis (1996: 73), however, suggests that “[t]he *Beowulfian* version is somewhat complicated by the added condition that the *eorl* be *unfæge*.” Indeed, the interpretation of this proverb hinges on understanding the complex relationship between *wyrð*, personal agency, and the state of being (*un*)*fæge*. Given the wealth of scholarship on the concept of *wyrð* (e.g., Phillpotts 1928, Timmer 1941, Kasik 1979, Weil 1989, Pollack 2006) and on OE maxims (e.g., Williams 1914; Cavill 1993, 1999; Deskis 1996, 2005, 2013; Shippey 1977, 1978; Thayer 2003; Kramer 2010; O’Camb 2013), this proverb has enjoyed considerable scholarly attention. The significance of the word *unfæge* in this proverb, however, has received relatively less treatment.

For more than a century, readers have contrasted this proverb with the earlier assertion that *Gæð a wyrð swa hio scel* “Goes always fate as it must” (455b), e.g., “Household Words” (1858), Williams 1914, Weil 1989, emphasizing the idea that a man may change his fate through brave acts. This essay seeks to complicate this interpretation by addressing the significance of the word *unfæge*, as related to but distinct from the meanings associated with the word *wyrð* and the phrase *þonne his ellen deah* in this proverb.

This paper argues that linguistic analysis of the noun phrase *unfægne eorl* and further attention to Germanic cognates of (*un*)*fæge*, such as Old Norse (ON) *úfeigr*, reveal a proverb that harmonizes with 455b. (*Un*)*fæge* and its cognates have meanings related to being brave or cowardly, blessed or accursed, and doomed or undoomed. A related ON proverb also speaks to the significance of the status of *unfæge* men. Futher, Haumann (2010) suggests that in OE, as in many languages, pronominal adjectives, e.g., *unfægne eorl*, indicate a quality that is characteristic of the noun modified, and this contrasts with the temporary or incidental nature of qualities depicted by postnominal adjectives. In other words, the position of the adjective *unfæge* also suggests a more inherent quality, such as being fated to live a long life. This contrasts with the frequent interpretation of this adjective as depicting a temporary quality, such as the mere absence of being doomed at a particular moment in time, in which case a person’s actions may alone determine his fate. This interpretive point is significant in that it provides more information about the portrayal of *wyrð* in *Beowulf* by clarifying a well-known proverb in the text; it also has implications for future translations of these verses.

Considering patterns of word order variation and their hypothesized significance in OE, this paper aims to illustrate how insight from linguistic theory can supplement traditional philological insight in the analysis of a well-known OE proverb.