

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*, Continued

To the Editor:

I enjoyed John D. Niles's article "Ring Composition and the Structure of *Beowulf*" (*PMLA*, 94 [1979], 924–35), not least because I have found passages in Old Icelandic sagas that might be added to his list of examples.

I do not, however, immediately understand the objections to the numerological analyses done by Hart and others that Niles sets forth in his third note. According to Niles, "the line numeration of *Beowulf* is a modern invention" (p. 933). Does Niles mean that because the *Beowulf* poet had no lineated copy of the text before him, he had no idea how many lines of poetry he had composed? If this is what Niles means, I find his position an unreasonable one and an insufficient reason for rejecting Hart's work. What was to prevent the poet from keeping track of the number of lines—by means of chalk and slate, for example—if he had a reason to do so? The wish properly to complete the parts of a numerological pattern (whose proportions and factors had perhaps symbolic meaning) would be such a reason.

In *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* we have an account of an oral poet's completing a prescribed pattern in the composition of *Höfuðlausn*: the prescription is for a *drápa tvítug*, a twenty-stanza poem of praise with an *upphaf* (introduction), *stef* (middle section with refrains), and *slæmr* (conclusion). The *upphaf* is two and a half stanzas long (twenty lines); the *slæmr* is of equal length: if Egil had not kept count of the number of lines and stanzas he had composed, how could he have known when to start the *slæmr* and how long to make it so that it would be symmetrical with the *upphaf*? Granted, a *drápa tvítug*'s pattern is much less complicated than the one Hart proposes for *Beowulf*, but the principle—the filling in of a prescribed pattern that obliges the poet to keep track of how many lines he has composed at any given time—is the same.

The presence of lacunae does pose a problem to numerological analysis. A further problem, at least for me, is that analysts sometimes fail to draw any connection between the patterns they find and the

meanings of the poems in which they find them. I would like to see the preplanned pattern working right along with a poem's diction and subject matter in the service of the poem's theme; otherwise, I find it unlikely that a poet would go to the trouble of making a numerological pattern at all. In "Schematic Form and Its Symbolism in *The Phoenix*" (*Viator*, 11 [1980], 95–121), Robert D. Stevick successfully applies numerological analysis to a poem that has no lacunae, and he goes on to link the symbolic meaning of the factors in the pattern with the meaning of the poem. Furthermore, he uses the numerological pattern to account for the awkwardness in lines 380–86 of *The Phoenix*, a passage long considered by literary critics to be the unhappy result of the poet's inability to bridge the gap between the fable of the first part of the poem and the exegesis of the last part.

A few years ago, one might have attributed the turning up of a complex numerological pattern in an Old English poem to the working of the laws of coincidence. But as more works are found to contain such patterns, it seems to me that the role of coincidence must be viewed as inconsiderable. The patterns are there, and we must deal with them; the argument that a given poet had no way of knowing how many lines of poetry he had composed at a given time during the process of composition is not a sufficient reason for us to dismiss from consideration the work of Hart, Stevick, and others. The four-beat alliterative line is not, after all, a typographical convention: it is a group of words with four stresses, alliteration, a *höfuðstaf*, and two *stuðlar*, a pattern recognized by the ear.

T. C. S. LANGEN
Seattle, Washington

To the Editor:

The confident claim of John D. Niles that *Beowulf* "as a whole has the solidity and grace of a well-planned piece of architecture" (p. 931) is a telling index of how far *Beowulf* scholarship has now come from the once canonical view that the poem is structurally deficient, even clumsy. Like many of the recent precursors he cites, Niles finds