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T Old English (OE) dual pronouns *git*[1] and *wit* (and their declined forms) are scattered throughout the OE textual corpus, appearing often in both poetic and non-poetic works, some examples of which are *Christ and Satan*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *Guthlac*, *Wulf and Eadwacer,* etc. (Seppänen 8–9). The use of

the dual[2] in place of the typical plural pronoun is often recognized by scholars as a way of adding nuance (Hall 140)—these words are used in many texts to signify closeness between two otherwise disconnected people or beings, or their relatedness in an activity. There is a most notable example of dual-pronoun significance in *Genesis B*, where the various forms of the dual appear more than forty times, with far-reaching effects on our understanding of the text. Applying similar import to dual pronouns in other OE texts is debated (Seppänen 9); however, ignoring the precise meanings of these words is to "overlook an aspect of the poet's art, for [the meanings serve] ... to define character and action in the narrative" (Hall 139). Furthermore, although Seppänen debates the significance of these pronouns he does establish their deliberate, purposed use and untainted transmission in the copying of manuscripts (15–18). Their appearance in the narrative of *Beowulf* is of particular interest because of *where* they appear—in the

literarily rich, and relationally tense, scenes of Unferth and Beowulf's flyting, Wealhtheow's defense of her sons' inheritance, and Beowulf's pre-battle speeches.

In the oral culture of *Beowulf*, where unlocking the "word-hoard" was as significant as a king dispensing treasure, every aspect of a speech is key to its meaning and intended effect (Magennis 73–74). This is of heightened importance in a flyting; as Carol J. Clover points out, the "flyting is … itself the oral equivalent of war" (133). Despite the potential significance of dual usage, in the various scholarly renderings of *Beowulf* these words are often translated simply into an unmodified modern English second-person plural form (Table 1), without comment. Therefore, various indirect associations between characters (for example, Unferth and Hrothgar) are lost—so what the poet is saying is altered. In fact, most of the dual pronouns in *Beowulf* are stylistic elements deeply embedded in the themes and storyline of the epic. As such, they are meaningful

in many ways (detailed below) and this should be expressed in translation.

Lines	OE	Translations			
		Liuzza	*Heaney*	*Hall*	*Raffel*
508	git	you	you	you, ye	*both of you*
510	inc	*you two*	*the pair of you*	you	you
512	git	you	you	you	you
535	wit	*we two*	we	—	—
537	wit	we	we	we	we
539	wit	we	each of us	we	each of us
540	wit	we	—	we	—
544	wit	*we two*	we	*we two*	—
545	unc	us	us	us	us

Table 1. Selection of prominent scholars' typical translation of the dual

The OE dual pronoun is declined as shown in Table 2. Six of the seven forms are found in *Beowulf* (all but the second-person dative), with twenty-four total appearances. The second-person accusative and genitive each occur once, while all other forms occur at least thrice. Since alliteration, the "matching initial sounds of stressed syllables" (McGillivary 92), was central to OE poetry, with words carefully chosen to fit the meter, Figure 1 offers a convenient categorization of

the ways in which *Beowulf's* dual pronouns alliterate.[3] The following categories are used: 1) non-alliterative 2), non-essential alliterative, and 3) essential alliterative, whereby "essential" indicates that the dual pronoun is involved in an alliterative pattern that a plural pronoun replacement breaks, while "non-essential" means that the plural pronoun replacement maintains alliteration. The OE words *wit* and *uncran* are the only dual forms involved in alliteration, *wit* twice, and *uncran* once; every other use of the dual is non-alliterative. In both cases of *wit*, the use of the dual is non-essential, as the first-person

	First Person	Second Person
Nominative	wit	git
Accusative	unc	inc
Genitive	uncer, uncran	incer
Dative	unc	inc

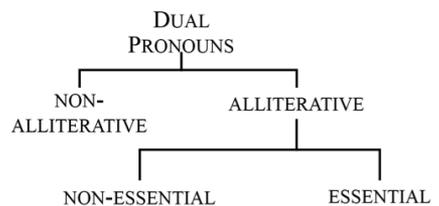**Table 2.** Declension of OE dual pronouns

Figure 1. Categories of OE dual pronouns

plural *we* could have been used and the (consonant) alliteration left unchanged: "**wi**t þæt ge**cwæ**don

cniht**we**sende" (535: we two had bargained, being boys)

versus "**we** þæt gec**wæ**don cniht**we**sende", and "**hwæt**

wit tō **w**illan ond tō **w**orðmyndum" (1186: what we two

purposed for his honor) versus "**hw**æt **w**e tō **w**illan ond

tō worðmyndum." In the line containing *uncran*, the

vowels alliterate according to OE usage: "**u**ncran **ea**feran

gif hē þæt **ea**l gemon" (1185: the children of the two of

us, if he remembers all that), and substitution of *ure* or

user for *uncran* does not produce any change: "**u**ncran

eaferan" versus "**u**re **ea**rferan" or "**u**ser **ea**rferan." [4]

In short, the dual pronouns are far more important

thematically in relation to the politics and character

development of the epic than they are metrically.

The dual is used in three ways: 1) to condemn an

individual, 2) to praise an individual, or 3) to equate two

individuals. The use of the dual pronoun is pertinent

to understanding three types of situations, all involving

interpersonal tension: 1) confrontation between

Beowulf and Unferth, 2) confrontation between two

close individuals, and 3) confrontation between Beowulf and a monster. Lines 508–16, where Unferth (a notable thegn of Hrothgar) is speaking contemptuously of Beowulf's adventure with Breca (Liuzza 85fn3), contain the first type of dual usage. Fourteen (over half) of the dual-pronoun occurrences in *Beowulf* appear in the flyting between Unferth and Beowulf, and Unferth's eight-line portion contains six. The quarrel begins when Unferth unleashes "his battle-runes", the text of which is transcribed by Zuptia as

> eart þu se beo-wulf se þe wið Brecan
> wunne on|sídne sǽ ymb sund flite
> ðaer git for wlence wada cunnedon
> ond for dol-gilpe on deop wæter aldrum
> neþdon (506–10) [5]
> Art thou the Beowulf who
> struggled with Breca
> On the open ocean with
> swimming-strife?

> There you two with pride
>
> waded, explored,
>
> And in deep water with
>
> vain-glory risked life!

Line 508 contains the first occurrence of the dual (*git*) in *Beowulf*; the non-dual *ge* could have been used, but was not, and again, this indicates non-metrical/-alliterative intention. Unferth continues using the dual in his description of the sea-adventure, applying it to Beowulf and Breca. His main goal seems to be a test of Beowulf's mettle (Clover 460–61), and there are multiple ways that he could accomplish this with the dual. First, he could be insinuating that Beowulf is a follower and/or a pushover, dependent on his companion—that once the two are separated, Breca accomplishes a great deed, while Beowulf falters in the ocean despite his bravado in taking on the risk. If this is so, it would follow that Beowulf's challenge to fight the monster alone should be scorned. Second, Unferth

could be tempting Beowulf to deny his friendship with Breca by exaggerating their companionship. If Beowulf fell for the trap, his men could have lost faith in him as their captain, proving his ineptness as a leader and making him into a warrior unsuited for the quest he proposes. Finally, one of the hallmarks of a flyting is the reference to disgraces committed by the person under attack. Clover gives a list of categories into which insults regarding these disgraces fall (134), and notes that in the Beowuf/Unferth episode the "only conspicuous irregularity is the absence of a sexual element" (146), since accusations of perversity are nearly universal in the flytings. The duals may hold the answer to this: these pronouns are very often used for the husband-wife relationship, and Unferth may be hinting at an inappropriate intimacy between Beowulf and Breca.

In each of these cases (or any combination of them) Unferth's obvious hostility is intensified through the dual pronoun; more importantly, the political

barriers to Beowulf's mission are much more apparent, which highlights the hero's diplomatic abilities. Clover suggests that the flyting was, in the Anglo-Saxon era, an integral part of how Germanic courts received outsiders. In this case, Unferth may not be *hostile*, but he is still a threat to the continuation of Beowulf's mission. The tension of the confrontation is heightened (rather than being raw accusation, the dialogue contains traps), and the reader is given a glimpse of what may have been a typical political procedure of the Anglo-Saxon "court." Beowulf responds to Unferth in kind (lines 535–84), using the dual, playing along with what Unferth has been saying, all in the style of a flyting. Beowulf then uses the dual himself to accuse two warriors—Unferth and another, discussed below—of cowardice:

> no ic whit fra*m*
>> Þe swylcra searo-niða secgan hyrde
>> billa brogan breca næfre git æt heaðo-
>> lace. ne|ge-hwæþer incer *swa deorlice

> dæd gefremede fagum sweordum (581–85)
>
> > Not a whit of you
> >
> > in such a skill-contest have I heard,
> >
> > of blade terror, or yet ever of Brecaat
> >
> > battle-play. Nor has either of you two
> >
> > so boldly performed a deed with bright
> >
> > swords[.]

For a guest in the court, this is a surprisingly bold declaration, especially as, up to that point, Beowulf has been conceding to Unferth, supplying only minor corrections to the Dane's account of the contest (Clover 462). As mentioned above, it also raises the question of who is meant by "you two"—is Beowulf speaking of Unferth and Breca, or of Unferth and Hrothgar?

This question is left unaddressed by the current English scholarship, but the dual pronoun *incer* makes it significant because there is ambiguity regarding who is being addressed, allowing for more than one understanding of the passage. A plural pronoun

would have made the statement speak to all Danes, and a singular pronoun would have made it a direct accusation of Unferth; the dual is the only pronoun that has the capacity to introduce such nuance. If the comment is directed to Unferth and Breca, then Beowulf is swapping roles with Unferth, becoming the attacker. He first demonstrates his superiority to Breca, then joins his current antagonist to his boyhood opponent, stands in the place of the Danish king's advisor, and judges the man before him—with his pronouncement over Unferth (and by extension, conceivably the rest of the Danes) being quite caustic. If the dual pronoun refers to Unferth and Hrothgar (this is intimately connected with the oral tradition: imagine a *scop* gesturing toward an imaginary king), then Beowulf could be employing highly diplomatic tactics to calm his challenger. Unferth used the dual to cast a negative pall on Beowulf, but it is possible that Beowulf has the *opposite* intent; in declaring his own superiority, he elevates Unferth by linking him to

Hrothgar, a great warrior, and appeases his opponent's pride. After all, if Beowulf is analogous to a force of nature (Tripp 157), then his superiority is nothing that Unferth need be ashamed about. Hrothgar, however, is a complex character— he is both an "aged and ineffectual king" (Liuzza 43) and one who Beowulf knows is already established as a hero. A "figure like the biblical patriarchs" (Johnston 122), the old monarch has a reputation set in stone. Therefore, while Beowulf's comments *could* be a compliment to Unferth in the way that they compare him to the "ideal" Dane, they could also be an observation of the Danes' general impotence.

In a general way, though, the effect of the dual pronoun here is the same for any of the interpretations, which it must be said are not mutually exclusive. The use of *incer* lends depth and texture to Beowulf's speech, and gives his retort a complexity that may be the reason for his victory in the flyting. The Dane and the Geat also appear to be reconciled: Unferth later lends Beowulf his

own sword Hrunting, forgetting "what he said before / drunk with wine" (1466–67) and allowing Beowulf to prove himself the better warrior (1468–72). In short, using the dual pronoun allows both the linking of Breca and Unferth, and of Unferth and Hrothgar, with positive and negative associations in both cases—the end result being that Beowulf, through his word-hoard, is able to avoid physical conflict with the Danes and instead bring them aid.

The uses of the dual following Beowulf's defense are similar in their pacifying nature, and are found in the following passages: 1185–6, Wealhtheow about Wealhtheow and Hrothgar; 1476, Beowulf about Beowulf and Hrothgar, and 1707–83, Hrothgar about Beowulf and Hrothgar. These usages share the characteristic that they all link two people who, in an ideal situation, would be on friendly terms. All the characters involved are major players in the epic—Wealhtheow stands out as a woman who plays

the gracious hostess, and also as an active political figure; far from being a "cardboard queen," she is a moving force with "political possibilities … [in] her situation and her speech," her own loyalties and influences (Johnston 118). The use of the dual here seems to be similar to the way Beowulf employed it in the flyting—to emphasize an attempt at some type of reconciliation. The difference here is that the first type of use is in response to an attack, while this usage is more proactive, attempting to re-build the connection between two individuals. Wealhtheow's speech begins by showing the distance between herself and the king: "I have been told that you would take this warrior for your son" (Liuzza 1175). The clause "I have been told" indicates that Hrothgar is deciding on an heir without consulting his queen, resulting in relational distance between the husband and wife. In explaining that another possible heir (or regent) has been receiving kindnesses, Wealhtheow, who is advocating her nephew

as a temporary stand-in for her sons (1169–91), includes Hrothgar as a giver of kindness by using the dual *wit* (us two) to describe who has been kind.

This is praise, intimacy, and honor rolled into one word—Wealhtheow is verbally joining herself to her husband, as Eve does in *Genesis B* (Hall 143). By not using the plural pronoun *we* she unambiguously excludes the rest of the royal household from the heir-choosing (a nuance lost in Liuzza's simple rendition "the pleasures and honors that we have shown him" [1186]). Similarly, in line 1476 Beowulf has indirectly caused the death of a soldier, Æscere, beloved by Hrothgar, which understandably estranges the two, while in lines 1707–83 Beowulf has just done what Hrothgar could not do (eliminate the Grendels), placing a barrier of accomplishment between them—at this point in the tale Beowulf will also soon *physically* leave the Danish court.[6] These instances, all causing separation between the hero and Hrothgar, are in the same way resolved by

reconciliatory usage of the dual as it is employed by the estranged party.

In lines 683 (Beowulf on Beowulf and Grendel), 2002–137 (Beowulf on Beowulf and the Grendels), and 2525–32 (Beowulf on Beowulf and the dragon), we find instances of the last type of usage—the equalization of two characters (Beowulf and a foe). The wording of these passages—"we two will forego our swords … let the wise Lord … grant the judgment" (683–86), "what a struggle … Grendel and I had" (2000–02), and "for us it shall be … as *wyrd* decrees" (2525–26), etc.—all indicate the equality of the combatants in their strength and/or likelihood of dying in the combat.[7] Why does Beowulf speak this way? Calling attention to a more powerful or a weaker foe is understandable, as therein lies great difficulty and danger (and thus the potential of greater honor) in the former case, or the certainty of victory in the latter, but one-on-one combat with an equal is just that—there is nothing significant about the fight itself,

and nothing to gain or lose, except life. The dual, in expressing the equality of the contenders, places them in the background, and the *reasons* for the fight in the foreground. Rather than condemn one individual or laud another, as in the other passages, this usage instead removes both individuals from the scene: each has his own reason to fight, to live, to have the other dead, and those reasons are what makes the fights necessary, not the status of the opponents.

While dual-pronoun usage in Beowulf is found in the three scenario-types given above, and used in three ways, there is another aspect of its use: the usage frequency has a subtle crescendo effect, following an initial "explosion" (Figure 2). In a poem characterized by "taut, tightly interlaced structure" (Hudson 149), it is reasonable that every aspect of language, including repetition, would be employed to enhance the story. By bombarding the reader with the dual at the beginning of the poem during a flyting, the poet may cause the

audience to associate a conflict or pre-conflict situation
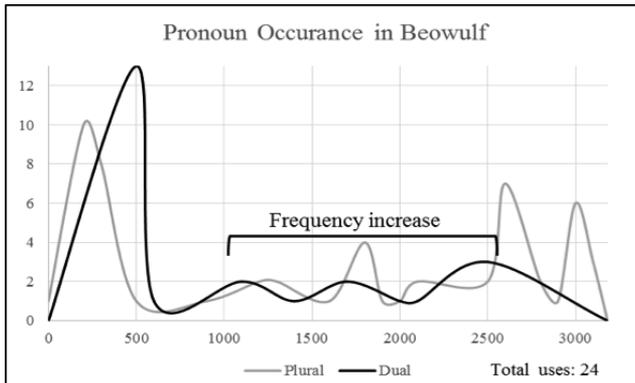with the use of "you two," "us two," etc. This connotation

Figure 2. Dual pronoun frequency through Beowulf, compared

is subsequently employed to enrich the narrative with
suspense and expectation. When the audience hears the
dual, they should expect a climactic scene to follow. The
relationship of this to how an oral delivery of the poem
was/is received, versus a textual delivery, would be
interesting to investigate.[8] Notably, the plural pronouns
do not exhibit such a patterned distribution (Figure
2), although this is simply a visual observation, and no
statistical analysis has yet been executed on the data.

In conclusion, the use of dual pronouns in *Beowulf* is an integral, non-mechanical, and artistic facet of the epic: the duals are used to contrast and compare characters, or subtly comment on situations, rather than simply serve as metrical elements. In this way, they speak to the themes and story of *Beowulf* with regard to specific political and personal relationships involving the epic's main characters (Beowulf, the Grendels, Hrothgar, Unferth, Wealhtheow, et al.). Therefore, they have the potential to significantly affect our understanding of both Germanic and Anglo-Saxon politics, familial relations, etc., and our perception of their treatment in the epic. This aspect of *Beowulf* does not seem to have been addressed by the current English-language scholarship, with the exception of a few comments on the unusual pairing of opposites (e.g. Beowulf and Grendel) that these words imply.

R. P. Tripp acknowledges that "these usages [of the dual] carry the same profound implications as do

instances of the dual pronoun for souls and bodies in the doomsday poetry" (157, fn21), but he says nothing about what these implications are. Seppänen observes that "when we find exactly the same variation [between dual and plural] in other OE texts … we cannot justifiably claim that the variation is unnatural and therefore due to the corruption of the text by copyists" (18). As Brodeur states, "the poet of *Beowulf*…was by no means independent of formula, but was its master … nowhere else in Old English do we find such splendor of language … *Beowulf* is the work … of a great literary artist" (87). The poet's use of dual and plural pronouns is one aspect of this mastery. Nevertheless, in "hoping to rescue the poem from the obscurity of the past, [the translator] risks plunging it into the obscurity of his own present" (Liuzza 41), and the duals seem to have suffered this fate. Future editions of current translations as well as entirely new translations of *Beowulf* should therefore note the existence of the duals through

commentary, and attempt a literal translation when possible.

[1]Note that git is also a word meaning "yet" or "still", as in "wǣron bēgen ðā gīt on geogoðfēore" (Liuzza 536–7: we were both still in our youth).

[2]In modern English, there are singular pronouns (I, it) that stand for one object, and plural pronouns (we, they) that stand for two or more objects. An OE dual pronoun stands for precisely two objects; in modern English, there is still a word that retains the concept of duality, the word "both."

[3]This system could theoretically be applied to any alliterative text.

[4]For an excellent explanation of alliteration and how alliterative lines are analyzed, described and classified, see Ruth A. Johnston, *A Companion to Beowulf*, 144–45, and Murray McGillivary, *A Gentle Introduction to Old English*, Chapter 12.

[5]Zuptia's transcription of the OE manuscript is more accurate than those that Liuzza and Heaney provide in their bilingual editions. Unless otherwise indicated, OE translations are my own.

[6]"nú ic eom síðes fús gold- / wine gumena hwæt wit geo spræcon" (1476: now am I ready to go, man's gold-friend, / to what we two spoke of before) and "ic þé sceal míne gelaéstan / swa wit furðum spræcon" (1707: I will give [you] my protection / as we two were speaking of).

[7]That is, apart from supernatural intervention. It could be argued, at least for 683–86, that Beowulf is counting on divine favor in some form (Liuzza 95 fn1).

[8]Are the duals more noticeable/effective when they are *heard* as opposed to when they are *read*?

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