

The Use of ‘Oft’ as Understatement in *The Phoenix* *

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The characteristics of Old English poetry are alliteration, variation, kenning, and formula.¹ Besides these four features, understatement is another significant characteristic.² Through the use of understatement, we can emphasize a given fact. For example, in modern English, we employ a weak expression such as ‘he is *a little* too fast’ to emphasize a speeding driver.

In Old English poetry, the understatement often co-occurs with negative phrases.³ Following is an example from *Beowulf* (hereafter referred to as *Beo*)⁴:

(1) *Beo*, 1575b-76a⁵

Næs seo ecg fracod

hilderince,

Although the example originally meant ‘the blade was not useless to the hero’⁶, this phrase analyses as ‘the edge was very useless to the warrior’, which emphasizes the usefulness of the edge by employing the negative phrase, ‘Næs’.⁷

While the understatement is compatible with negative phrases, the use of ‘oft’⁸ in *The Phoenix* is a kind of understatement. *OED* gives the meaning of oft (often) as ‘many times; at many times; on numerous occasions; frequently; for a significant amount or proportion of the time; Contrasted with *seldom*’.⁹ Furthermore, the word ‘oft’ co-occurred with both positive and negative meanings in *Beowulf*:

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¹ Sara M. Pons-Sanz, U., 2016. ‘Old English Style’ in Violeta Sotirova ed., *Bloomsbury Companion to Stylistics*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 569-82

² F. B. Gummere, 1925. *The Oldest English Epic*. New York: The Macmillan Company; Bracher Frederick, 1937. ‘Understatement in Old English Poetry’, *PMLA*, 52: 4, 915-934.

³ Bruce Mitchell, 1985. *Old English Syntax*, Vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, §§1142, 1146, 1632

⁴ The edition of *Beowulf* used for this study is R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, eds., 2008. *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 4th ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

⁵ Emphases on the quotations are author’s own.

⁶ The translation of *Beo* is adopted from John R. Clark Hall and Friedrich Klaeber, 1950. *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment: a Translation into Modern English Prose*. London: Allen & Unwin

⁷ Junpei Funai, 2012. ‘Koeishiniokeru Understatementno youhounituute’ (The Usage of Understatement in Old English Poetry) *Nagoyagakuin daigaku ronshu* 23:2, 43-50 (p. 43).

⁸ In the Old English period, the form of *often* never appeared. It was not until the fourteenth century that the form, *often*, appeared.

⁹ *OED* (s.v. often, 1.a.)

(2) *Beo*, 1886b-7

oþ þæt hine ylðo benam
 mægenes wynnum, se þe *oft* menagum scod.
 [until old age deprived him of the joys of power, —old age which has oftentimes
 caused harm to many.]

(3) *Beo*, 2018b-9

oft hio beahwriðan
 secge (sealde) ær hie to setle geong.
 [often gave a circlet to some guest, ere she went back to her seat.]

(2) includes the verb *scod*, which means ‘injure’, in contrast to which (3) contains the verb *secge* (*sealde*), which means ‘give’. The object of the verb is *beahwriðan*, showing the high value. These descriptions imply that the word ‘oft’ does not contain the negative meaning.

The use of ‘oft’ in *The Phoenix*, however, refers to ‘always’, more frequently than ‘often’, while the glossary of the edition of Blake mentions it as ‘often’.¹⁰ There are four instances in *The Phoenix*¹¹:

(4) *Phoenix*, 11-2

Ðær bið *oft* open, eadgum togeanes
 onhliden hleoþra wyn, heofonrices duru.
 [There heavenly door, blessed to melody joy, is open all the times.]¹²

(5) *Phoenix*, 108-10

sweglcondelle, ond symle swa *oft*
 of þam wilsuman wyllgespryngum
 brimcald beorgeð æt baða gehwylcum.
 [the heaven’s candle, and always as often from that delightful spring the cold
 water preserves him with every bath.]

(6) *Phoenix*, 259b-62a

No he foddor þigeð,
 mete on moldan nemne meledeawes
 dæl gebyrge, se dreoseð *oft*
 æt middre nighte;

¹⁰ Norman Blake, 1964. *The Phoenix*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 117; J. R. Clark-Hall, 1916. *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan.

¹¹ The edition of *The Phoenix* is Blake.

¹² The translation of *Phoenix* is mine.

[He eats no food at all, meat on this earth, except the bit of nectar he tastes, which always falls in mid-night.]

(7) *Phoenix*, 442

earme aglæcan oft gescodan
[wicked devils ofte harmed]

These four instances of ‘oft’ must be regarded as understatement. Quotation (4) describes the ‘æþelast londa’ [noble land] (l. 2b). The land is so delightful and drawn as the Utopia and it is natural to consider that the door to Heaven is *always* open. In the scene of (5), Phoenix is bathing ‘twelf’ [twelve] (l. 106b) times. The number is the books of the twelve ‘minor prophets’ in the Old Testament and is later used as the abstract number. The phrase ‘symle swa’, which functions as the emphatic adverb, co-occurs with ‘oft’. These suggest that the number and the adverb are emphatic. In (6), Phoenix does not eat ‘mete on moldan’ (l. 260a) and tastes ‘dæl’ (l. 261a). The use of ‘oft’ in this situation contrasts ‘mete’, which people and animals *always* eat, and ‘dæl’, which Phoenix *always* tastes. (7) first seems to be the original sense of ‘oft’. This scene, however, praises the ‘forengan’ [forefather] (l. 437b). ‘Oft’ here functions as the understatement so as to show the achievement and the hardship¹³.

In addition to ‘oft’, ‘always’ appears in *The Phoenix*. ‘always’ in this poetry means ‘ever, always’:

(8) *Phoenix*, 35b-6

ac þa beamas a
grene stondað, swa him God bibead.
[but the tree always stands green, as God commanded them.]

(9) *Phoenix*, 385b-6

ond siþþan a
wunian in worulde weorca to leane.
[and forever and ever, live in the world, as reward to his work.]

Since both ‘oft’ (often) and ‘ā’ (always) start with the vowel, the choice of these two words does not deal with the alliteration, although there are no examples in which ‘ā’ is used for alliteration in *The Phoenix*.¹⁴

¹³ The use of ‘oft’ to record the hardship of the ancestor is also observed in *Beo* (l. 4):

Oft Scyld Sceþing sceapena þreatum,
[often Scyld sceþing (took) enemy from many peoples.]

¹⁴ In *Beo* (l. 1478), ‘ā’ is used for alliteration:

aldre linnan, þæt ðu me a wære

The use of ‘oft’ as understatement depends on the context. To emphasize the high frequency and praise for the act, ‘oft’ often functions as understatement. This usage mainly appears in *The Phoenix*, while we can observe the same usage in *Beo*.¹⁵

Although understatement in Old English is usually closed to the negative words or phrases, ‘oft’ does not contain a negative meaning. This is a rare example of understatement. It is essential to collect other data and examine the differences between the genres and the style.

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¹⁵ *Beo*, 2029b-31

	Oft seldan hwærena
æfter leodhyrne	lytle hwile
bongar bugeð,	þeah seo bryd duge.
[a little while, after the downfall of prince, however the good the bride may be.]	

Fulk, Bjork, and Niles notes ‘often (always, as a rule, by litotes) the spear will rest idle only for a short time under such circumstances.’ (p. 230)