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**The Monsters of *Beowulf*: Heroic and Christian Values**

Monstra v díle *Beowulf*: Světské a Křesťanské Hodnoty

**Bakalářská práce**

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## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

Beowulf, Old English poetry, heroic poetry, conversion, heroic values, monsters

## **KEY WORDS**

Beowulf, Old English poetry, heroic poetry, conversion, heroic values, monsters

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## Abstract:

This thesis deals with the Old English poem *Beowulf*, exploring the dichotomy between the Christian poet and the pre-Christian material he tackles. *Beowulf* was written at least a few hundred years after Christianity was already established in England, yet still had to reckon with the remnants of a culture that had radically different values. The attitude Christianity had to these was ambivalent, at times choosing to conform and integrate some aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture, and at others taking a confrontational approach and condemning them. This is reflected in *Beowulf*, which has both praise and censure for the society it depicts. The poem's overarching theme is community<sup>1</sup>, and the fight against forces that would threaten to destroy it. These forces are personified by monsters, who are literal as well as metaphorical threats to social order. I argue that in *Beowulf*, by putting secular material in a Christian framework, the poet is able to explore which values are the most conducive to the fight against these threats.

The monsters of *Beowulf* have long been recognized as “crucial to the very structure of the poem”<sup>2</sup>. They are the point where the secular and the Christian world meet, as they are both material creatures and evil spirits. The Grendel-kin and the dragon are material monsters, analogous to creatures commonly found in mythologies and folktales all around the world, and therefore they still carry the meaning associated with them. The Christian poet also gives them a scriptural pedigree, making them enemies of God. This puts the pagan characters, albeit unbeknownst to them, on God's side in the Great Feud against the forces of evil. Even though, from a Christian perspective, these people are tragically ignorant of the true faith, they still have virtues that even a Christian can appreciate. However, the kind of social order they have set up is faulty, as the poet makes clear by showcasing the constant feuding and warring that plagues their society. The three monsters of *Beowulf* represent troublemaking, vengeance, and war<sup>3</sup> - threats that come both from without and within, and threats that the Germanic order struggled to mollify, on the contrary, that the heroic values even encouraged. The Christian poet commends the pagan hero's valour in overcoming physical threats, clearly appreciating some aspects of the heroic code, while at the same time making clear even those praiseworthy values *Beowulf*'s society espouses alone cannot grant eternal victory.

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<sup>1</sup> John Niles. *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition* (Harvard University Press, 1983) 226.

<sup>2</sup> Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript*, p.28

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Hume, “The Theme and Structure of ‘Beowulf.’” *Studies in Philology* 72.1 (1975): 5. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173860>. Accessed 15 Jun. 2022.

## Abstrakt:

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá staroanglickou básní *Beowulf*. Práce zkoumá dichotomii mezi křesťanským básníkem a před-křesťanským materiálem, který zpracovává. *Beowulf* byl napsán přinejmenším několik staletí poté, co v Anglii bylo etablováno křesťanství, jež se ale stále muselo potýkat s pozůstatky kultury, která měla radikálně odlišné hodnoty. Postoj křesťanství k těmto hodnotám byl ambivalentní, některé aspekty anglosaské kultury se rozhodlo přijmout a integrovat, k jiným se postavilo konfrontačně a zavrhl je. Tato dichotomie je reflektována v *Beowulfovi*, jenž ke společnosti, kterou popisuje, oplývá jak chválou, tak kritikou. Všeobjímajícím tématem této básně je komunita, společnost a síly, které ji fatálně ohrožují. Tyto síly jsou zosobněny monstry, která jsou jak doslovnými, tak metaforickými hrozbami pro společenský řád. Tvrdím, že díky zasazení světské látky do křesťanského kontextu se básníkovi podařilo prozkoumat to, které hodnoty jsou nejúčinnější pro boj s těmito hrozbami.

Téma monster je již dlouho považováno za "krucióální pro samotnou strukturu básně". Jsou bodem, kde se setkává světský a křesťanský svět, díky své přináležitosti jak k materiálním bytostem, tak ke zlým duchům. Postavy Grendlů a draka jsou monstra z masa a kostí, podobné bytostem typickým pro mýty a pohádky z celého světa, což jim propůjčuje význam vyplývající z těchto asociací. Křesťanský básník k nim přidává biblický rodokmen a pasuje je tak na nepřátele Boha. Aniž by si toho byly vědomy, jsou postavy pohanských Dánů v konečné bitvě proti silám zla tímto postaveny na stranu Boha. Ačkoliv z křesťanské perspektivy tito lidé tragicky setrvávají v nevědomosti o pravé víře, vykazují se ctnostmi, které ocení dokonce i křesťan. Avšak jejich společenský systém je závadný, na což básník upozorňuje tím, že zobrazuje neustálé sváry z krevní msty a války, kterými je jejich společnost sužována. Tři monstra reprezentují sváry, mstu a válku - hrozby, které vycházejí jak z vně, tak z nitra této společnosti, a hrozby, které se řád germánské společnosti snaží zmírňovat, a které světské hodnoty ještě povzbuzovaly. Křesťanský básník chválí statečnost, se kterou pohanský hrdina překonává fyzické hrozby, a dává přitom jasně najevo, že oceňuje některé aspekty světské etiky, zároveň však upozorňuje, že ani ty chvályhodné hodnoty, které jsou základem *Beowulfovy* společnosti, nemohou samy o sobě zaručit vítězství na věčnost.



## 1. Introduction:

The Old English poem *Beowulf*, most likely composed somewhere from the 7th to the 10th century<sup>4</sup>, recounts events which take place in sixth century Scandinavia and follows the life of a pagan hero on his monster-slaying exploits, interspersed with “a number of apparently historical elements used to embellish and enhance the main action.”<sup>5</sup> The poem has Christian narrator, who provides ample commentary on the heroic value-oriented society’s vices and virtues. For some time, there persisted a view that *Beowulf* was originally a “pagan” poem written by a “folk” poet, which was tampered with and reworked by a Christian scribe.<sup>6</sup> That view has long been disproven as the Christian elements of the poem have been found to be integral. The work has gone from being considered a pagan text with a Christian colouring to a Christian text with pagan colouring, since the poet has clearly borrowed from different folklore and mythological elements, especially when constructing the monsters that the protagonist faces.

The question of why the Christian poet would choose to set his story in a pagan time and depict non-Christian characters as noble and heroic has been raised many times and the answers may vary. Nevertheless, most critics would agree that it was part of some kind of reconciliation of the Anglo-Saxon Christians with their pagan ancestry. Damned or not, the pagans exhibit good qualities that the poem celebrates - bravery, generosity, a strong sense of kinship and community. John Niles believes that “the poem's controlling theme is community: its nature, its occasional breakdown, and the qualities that are necessary to maintain it.”<sup>7</sup> And

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<sup>4</sup> A chronological summary of opinions on the composition of *Beowulf*: Robert E. Bjork and Anita Obermeier, “Date, Provenance, Author, Audiences,” in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 13–34.

<sup>5</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2008) 36 of Introduction.

<sup>6</sup> Edward B Irving Jr., “Christian and Pagan Elements.” *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. John Niles and Robert Bjork (University of Nebraska Press, 1998) 181.

<sup>7</sup> John Niles. *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition* (Harvard University Press, 1983) 226.

according to Kathryn Hume, the monsters of *Beowulf* represent forces that would destroy a community, or “threats to social order.”<sup>8</sup> I argue that in *Beowulf*, heroic material is put in a Christian framework in order to find common ground between the two worlds, but also to highlight which old values must be rejected. The struggle of a community to maintain social order against disruptive forces is a theme that lends itself to the exploration of what kind of values are the most conducive to this fight.

In the first part of the thesis, I will look at the Christianisation of England, what did or did not make Anglo-Saxon society receptive to Christianity and how it in certain aspects adapted to fit the local culture. The theme of community would have been particularly pertinent to the Anglo-Saxons, as prior to conversion, they practised a Germanic world-accepting folk-religion to which the community was paramount. This mentality stood in opposition to Christianity’s world-rejecting emphasis on individual salvation. These contrasting world-views were primarily the result of disparate social environments. The Early Mediaeval Germanic people lived in tribal rural homogeneous societies, whereas Christianity “tends to flourish in heterogeneous societies in which there exist high levels of anomie, or social destabilisation.”<sup>9</sup> James C. Russell argues that early missionaries, despite outwardly condemning pagan beliefs and practices, deliberately inculturated Christianity with Germanic religiocultural attitudes<sup>10</sup> which resulted in a Germanization of Christianity. Anglo-Saxon society was also undergoing momentous changes in social and political structure at the time of conversion, and moving towards a more ‘political’, less ‘tribal’ organisation.”<sup>11</sup> John Blair argues that the new English kings would find institutional Christianity handy, as there arose a need for a religion that would serve as a unifying force. I conclude that the attitudes of Christians towards Anglo-Saxon

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<sup>8</sup> Kathryn Hume, “The Theme and Structure of ‘Beowulf.’” *Studies in Philology* 72.1 (1975): 5. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173860>. Accessed 15 Jun. 2022.

<sup>9</sup> James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 20.

<sup>10</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 39.

<sup>11</sup> John Blair. *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 50.

society were ambivalent, condemning certain aspects but willing to integrate others, as is reflected in *Beowulf*.

In the second part I examine monsters from a psychological and mythological perspective and demonstrate why they are universal and can be found in most world religions and societies, as they symbolise forces that threaten social order, whether those be internal or external. I look at the relationship of monsters and monster-slayers in mythology and see how it is pertinent to *Beowulf*. Then I examine how Christianity grappled with these monsters, as Mediaeval Christian thinkers, who considered monsters as real, came to one of two possible conclusions: either monsters were a part of God's creation and had a purpose in His plan, or they were just evil demons to be destroyed. The latter view was particularly present in northwestern Europe, where they were associated with heathenism. The material monsters of Germanic Folklore underwent a transformation into evil spirits of Christianity, a process that can be observed in *Beowulf*.

In the last part I look at the actual monsters of *Beowulf*, who are both physical as well as metaphorical threats, representing chaotic and destructive forces of nature and simultaneously exemplifying social phenomena that must be rejected - Grendel's troublemaking and disregard for social institutions, Grendel's mother's vengeance, which culminate in the war the dragon brings.<sup>12</sup> They are portents in that their actions mirror and foreshadow those of the humans, pointing to the dark side of the heroic code. Given the Christian context however, they are also presented by the poet as evil spirits, demons, descendants of Cain, personifications of sin and evil. All this is lost on the characters to whom "the monsters have meaning only in terms of the pagan's dark mythology of evil."<sup>13</sup> By giving the monster's a scriptural pedigree, the poet is able to show that the characters' struggles are

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<sup>12</sup> Kathryn Hume, "The Theme and Structure of 'Beowulf.'" *Studies in Philology* 72.1 (1975): 5. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173860>. Accessed 15 Jun. 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Rafael J. Pascual, "Material Monsters and Semantic Shifts." *The Dating of Beowulf a Reassessment*, ed. Leonard Neidorf (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014) 209.

also part of the Great Feud, and that without even knowing it, they are fighting on the side of God. However due to their limited perspective, the heroes are not able to overcome the spiritual danger they represent.

The Anglo-Saxon heroic values were fit for a tribal society and the world-accepting religion. The Early Mediaeval Germanic people saw destructive elements endangering their community coming primarily from external sources, from the chaos raging outside the safety of their halls. Christianity, on the other hand, as a world-rejecting religion, sees these destructive forces coming from the inside, from one's failure to recognize one's own weakness and sin. I aim to demonstrate that the threats represented by the monsters remained the same when seen through the Christian lens but were portrayed as more internalised to show that they can lurk inside one's soul.

## **2. Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England**

The dating of *Beowulf* is widely debated – suggestions span across the latter half of the first millennium; a consensus has never been reached and it is unlikely that it ever will. “Whatever the poem's date, everyone will agree that there is a chasm of time - two or four centuries - separating the poet from the dramatic action of his poem, and during that time there was a transforming migration, both geographical and theological.”<sup>14</sup> By the time *Beowulf* was composed, Christianity was firmly established in Anglo-Saxon England. Paganism was something that was officially widely condemned throughout this time period, even though to what extent the Anglo-Saxons had been converted is questionable, as many pagan beliefs and practices still persisted. As late as the end of the ninth century, the Pope wrote to the English Bishop that “the abominable rites of the pagans have sprouted again in your parts.”<sup>15</sup> In order

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<sup>14</sup> Fred C. Robinson, “Appositive Style and the Theme of *Beowulf*.” *Beowulf A Prose Translation* (Norton Critical Editions), ed. Nicholas Howe, 2nd ed. (NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998) 77.

<sup>15</sup> William A. Chaney, “Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England.” *The Harvard Theological Review* 53.3 (1960) 199. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1508400>. Accessed 10 Jun. 2022.

to contend with these pagan beliefs, Christianity could not only condemn, but also had to adapt in order to better appeal to Anglo-Saxons, a warrior society driven by heroic values, which were often at odds with Christian ones.

Fred C. Robinson writes that “English kings ... had to acknowledge upon becoming Christians that their ancestors were consigned to eternal damnation.”<sup>16</sup> This is demonstrated by the famous, though likely historically inaccurate, story of the attempted conversion of the pagan Frisian king Radbod<sup>17</sup> who is said to have changed his mind at the last minute upon learning from bishop Wulfram that all his pagan ancestors would not also be saved. To Radbod, the prospect of burning in hell with his ancestors seemed a more preferable option than to “dwell in the kingdom of heaven with a small number of poor [wretches].”<sup>18</sup> The popularity of this story suggests that the idea of Wulfram’s unyielding approach, “the notion of an absolute dichotomy between “paganism” and Christianity”<sup>19</sup>, was appealing, despite the fact that in reality, such an approach would not have yielded many results (as the story demonstrates). Alcuin, also unyielding, saw no reason to associate oneself with non-Christian traditions, and in his letter reprimanded monks for their interest in the legendary hero Ingeld, famously writing: “For what has Ingeld to do with Christ? Narrow is the house, it cannot hold both.”<sup>20</sup> This statement may seem ironic in light of Pope Gregory’s letter to the first bishop of London, Mellitus, included in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. In this letter, he urges him to do the exact opposite, in fact “to make use of formerly pagan building sites and ... recycle as it were pagan festivals by renaming them as festivals in honour of Christian martyrs, but allowing the lay folk to enjoy their traditional feasts and celebrations.”<sup>21</sup> Gregory advises

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<sup>16</sup> Robinson, “Appositive Style and the Theme of Beowulf.” 78.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas D. Hill, “Beowulf and Conversion History.” *The Dating of Beowulf a Reassessment*, ed. Leonard Neidorf (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014) 191.

<sup>18</sup> Hill, “Beowulf and Conversion History.” 192.

<sup>19</sup> Hill, “Beowulf and Conversion History.” 197.

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, “Appositive Style and the Theme of Beowulf.” 78.

<sup>21</sup> Hill, “Beowulf and Conversion History.” 198.

that those temples “be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God.”<sup>22</sup> However in a different letter, he urges king Aethelbert to “suppress the worship of idols, and destroy their shrines”<sup>23</sup> These letters demonstrate the tension between an accommodating approach on the one hand and a condemning one on the other. To the Church authorities, any heathen beliefs remained reprehensible throughout the period - “Wulfstan, writing in Old English at the beginning of the eleventh century, has as much to say in condemnation of heathen customs and practices, as Aldhelm, writing in Latin at the end of the seventh.”<sup>24</sup> In reality, concessions had to be made in order for Christianity to spread as far and wide as it did and the approach of the missionaries must have been at least somewhat tolerant, even if only begrudgingly.

James C. Russell claims that early missionaries were implicitly misinterpreting Christian doctrine in order to appeal to the native Germanic population, with the expectation that further post-baptismal religious instruction would gradually lead to an acceptance of a Christian world-view. Such instruction, however, was never fully realised "and thus, simultaneous with an attempted Christianization of the Germanic peoples, there occurred a substantial Germanization of Christianity and Christian religious culture.”<sup>25</sup> According to Russell, the reason Early Mediaeval Germanic people were not particularly receptive to the teachings of Christianity was the disparity of world-views between Indo-European folk-religion and Christianity. He characterises Christianity as a universal world-rejecting religion that has a negative view on man and society, and the primary sacral locus of which is “the salvation of the individual by access to an existence which transcends that normally associated with a biological view of human life.”<sup>26</sup> Christianity originated and initially spread in the

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<sup>22</sup> Bede, et al. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People; The Greater Chronicle; Bede's Letter to Egbert* (Oxford World's Classics) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 57.

<sup>23</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 185.

<sup>24</sup> Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (NY: D.S. Brewer, 2003) 100.

<sup>25</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 131.

<sup>26</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 48-49.

declining Roman Empire, thriving particularly in an anomic urban environment, where people were predisposed to such a message.<sup>27</sup> It would have particularly appealed to those on the fringes of society, to whom it provided an alternative community, as it “offered the alienated individual, without regard to sex, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, membership in a caring community, together with the hope of bodily resurrection.”<sup>28</sup> Christianity also substituted familial bonds and the Church served as an artificial kin group.<sup>29</sup> As such it was good at promoting social cohesion in heterogeneous societies. This was unnecessary in early mediaeval Germanic societies as they were homogeneous, lived in a rural environment, and had strong social cohesion, Russell argues. Theirs was a world-accepting folk-religion, the primary sacral locus of which “is the folk community itself. The sacrality of the community is expressed in ritual ceremonies that celebrate its relationship with its own exclusive gods and that “promote a strong sense of in-group identification and loyalty.”<sup>30</sup> Since the Germanic people did not have the protection of a strong central authority, they had to rely on “the bonds of familial and communal solidarity.”<sup>31</sup> Russell writes that “ethical misconduct ... consisted primarily in violating the code of honour of one's kindred or one's comitatus”<sup>32</sup> (a band of warriors led by a chief/king that provided protection in war and prestige in peace). The Germanic notion of honour, or *êre*, was “focused upon the external approval which one usually merited by courageous acts performed on behalf of one's kin or one's lord,”<sup>33</sup> such as displays of heroism, loyalty till death, revenge for those killed, etc. Not adhering to this code of honour meant shaming yourself and your kin, for which you could be executed or banished, however performing exemplary heroic deeds would bring you material rewards, power and glory, which

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<sup>27</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 86.

<sup>28</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 91-92.

<sup>29</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 91.

<sup>30</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 48-49.

<sup>31</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 120.

<sup>32</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 204.

<sup>33</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 120.

could immortalise you in legend,<sup>34</sup> especially if such deeds ensured the ongoing life of your tribe. Thus, the Christian focus on individual salvation stood in opposition to the Germanic focus on community survival, and honour gained through external approval. The Christian notion of honour, on the other hand, was more internally focused and stemmed “from a desire to avoid the feelings of guilt and the fear of punishment associated with sinfulness.”<sup>35</sup> The Christian moral ideal of altruism, expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, did not agree with the heroic ethic either, though it is questionable to what degree institutional Christianity ever adhered to it.

Russell claims that for this reason, “the Germanic peoples did not have immediate social or spiritual needs which Christianity might fulfill”<sup>36</sup> and in order for it to be accepted, missionaries had to accommodate Germanic concerns, the result of which was the “the emergence of a worldly, heroic, magicoreligious, folk-centered Christianity.”<sup>37</sup> This accommodating approach can be seen in Pope Gregory’s letter to Mellitus, and his advice to repurpose pagan temples, rename pagan festivals, and let people keep sacrificing beasts, no longer to the devil but to “give thanks to the Giver of all things for His bountiful provision.”<sup>38</sup> “The general missionary policy of Gregory, and later Boniface, may be summarized as “that which cannot be supplanted by preaching or coercion, may be accommodated.””<sup>39</sup> Gregory indicates that these accommodations are meant to be only temporary, expecting that the converts would “put away one part of the sacrifice and retain the other.”<sup>40</sup> The result, however, was that many people simply switched from worshipping pagan gods, “and the shrines and amulets dedicated to them, to Christus Victor, his loyal saints, and their shrines and relics”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 204.

<sup>35</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 120-121.

<sup>36</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 20.

<sup>37</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 189.

<sup>38</sup> Bede, et al. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People...* 57.

<sup>39</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 187.

<sup>40</sup> Bede, et al. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People...* 57.

<sup>41</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 188.



without then thoroughly accepting Christian doctrine and ethics. Aside from this inculturated form of Christianity, what may have swayed potential converts were also the “extrareligious aspects of a missionary’s culture.”<sup>42</sup> John Blair writes that Christian European culture would have been appealing to seventh century Anglo-Saxon rulers, as it had a capacity to equip them “with new ideals of royal power expressed in new kinds of places.”<sup>43</sup>

John Blair writes that “some radical changes occurred in social hierarchies, and in means of controlling resources, at the end of the sixth century”<sup>44</sup> and it was during the seventh century, when English kingdoms were established, that these new kings started looking “overseas for their political and cultural inspiration.”<sup>45</sup> It was during this time that “Christianity made its fastest progress.”<sup>46</sup> Blair writes that “it was only as [the English] moved towards a more ‘political’, less ‘tribal’ organisation that they reorientated themselves towards the Christian world.”<sup>47</sup> These new dynasties sought to legitimise themselves through establishing continuity with their pagan past but also by aligning themselves with the Christian world since “Christianity, as an exclusive and hierarchical religion offering normative regulation and written record, had particular attractions for emergent rulers deploying wider and more systematic power.”<sup>48</sup> As Italian and Frankish ecclesiastics first targeted the early seventh century English rulers, “organized Christianization proceeded from the top downwards, via courts to wider kindreds and dependants.”<sup>49</sup>

Written records show England was full of kings at this time, it was not just a heptarchy of seven kingdoms.<sup>50</sup> The list of ‘rulers of Britain’ from the fifth to the seventh centuries that

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<sup>42</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 24.

<sup>43</sup> Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*. 50.

<sup>44</sup> Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*. 49.

<sup>45</sup> Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*. 22.

<sup>46</sup> Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*. 50.

<sup>47</sup> Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*. 50.

<sup>48</sup> Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*. 50.

<sup>49</sup> Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*. 49-50.

<sup>50</sup> James Campbell, et al. *The Anglo-Saxons*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982) 53.

Bede provides shows gaps and overlaps, indicating “the instability of hegemony. First one kingdom has it, then another.”<sup>51</sup> Many of these kings had wide power but never for long. James Campbell writes that the constant feuding and warring meant kings were often killed on the battlefield, or sent into exile, and were obliged to keep giving treasure in order to sustain their power. Treasure “rewards service, creates the expectation of loyalty and is the outward sign of honour,”<sup>52</sup> but in order to keep giving, the king “has to keep taking, and so adds feud to feud.”<sup>53</sup> However danger did not only come from the outside; another factor that added to instability was that none of the kingdoms had a “settled system of succession. ... This meant that a king’s most dangerous enemies could be his own relations, especially if he sought to determine his own successor. Such circumstances were among those which generated feud; and feud made exile common.”<sup>54</sup> Campbell writes that “the circumstances of their conversion often derived from the nature of such lives.”<sup>55</sup>

In order to accommodate the Anglo-Saxons’ belligerent mindset, early missionaries “seeking to appeal to the Germanic regard for power ... tended to emphasise the omnipotence of the Christian God and the temporal rewards he would bestow.”<sup>56</sup> This strategy can be seen in Bede’s account of the conversion of king Edwin, who is promised great victories in battle as a reward for converting to Christianity. However, Bede also emphasises that what finally swayed Edwin was a divine apparition, and describes the new converts happily destroying their former temples and idols.<sup>57</sup> As a result of catering to the warrior mentality, e.g. portraying Christ as a victorious Germanic warlord, “the Germanic perception of Christianity as primarily a magico-religious cult of a powerful deity endured at least through the eighth century.”<sup>58</sup> Many

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<sup>51</sup> Campbell, et al. *The Anglo-Saxons*. 54.

<sup>52</sup> Campbell, et al. *The Anglo-Saxons*. 54.

<sup>53</sup> Campbell, et al. *The Anglo-Saxons*. 55.

<sup>54</sup> Campbell, et al. *The Anglo-Saxons*. 56.

<sup>55</sup> Campbell, et al. *The Anglo-Saxons*. 56.

<sup>56</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 23-24.

<sup>57</sup> Bede, et al. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People...* 94-96.

<sup>58</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 198.

people converted simply by adding the Christian God to their already existing pantheon. A popular example of this attitude is “King Raedwald of East Anglia, who to Bede’s disgust ‘had in the same temple both an altar for the Christian sacrifice and a little altar for [offering sacrificial] victims to demons’.”<sup>59</sup> However, problems could arise when worshipping the strongest god granted no material rewards, in which case the king could revert back to his old ways. Embracing Christianity too much and forsaking the heroic ethos on the other hand was also problematic. “Bede says that Sigbert of Essex was murdered (between 650 and 664) because he would forgive his enemies.”<sup>60</sup> Some kings also found so much spiritual fulfilment in Christianity that they decided to retreat from the world to monasteries, which posed its own problems.<sup>61</sup> One truly had to walk a fine line there.

The conversion of the king was particularly important, as the “ruler was the leader of the tribal cult”<sup>62</sup> and his fate was related to the fate of his people. Once the ruler converted to the more powerful deity, it was easy for his subjects to follow, as he was seen to be “tied into temporal and cosmic history by divine descent, he represented and indeed was the “luck” of his people.”<sup>63</sup> Many Anglo-Saxon royal houses traced their lineage to Woden<sup>64</sup> and the divine origins of these royal houses were incorporated into biblical history. This can be seen in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* sub anno 855, where Woden is made a descendant of the legendary “Sceaf, who is the son of Noah and was born in Noah's Ark,”<sup>65</sup> and is able to be incorporated as a great hero of the past. However if a king apostatised, he would be deleted from this lineage and promised some kind of calamity as punishment. The kings therefore retained a somewhat divine status, also because nearly all who died a violent death were made saints. Chaney writes

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<sup>59</sup> Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*. 52.

<sup>60</sup> Campbell, et al. *The Anglo-Saxons*. 56.

<sup>61</sup> Campbell, et al. *The Anglo-Saxons*. 56.

<sup>62</sup> Chaney, “Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England.” 209.

<sup>63</sup> Chaney, “Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England.” 209.

<sup>64</sup> Chaney, “Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England.” 200.

<sup>65</sup> Chaney, “Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England.” 203-204.

that this “may well be regarded as a Christian substitute for the ritual king-slaying of paganism.”<sup>66</sup> Woden is also in some instances associated with Christ, as in the “Nine Herbs Charm”, where parallels are drawn between the two, emphasising their self-sacrifices as they hung on the World-tree and Cross.<sup>67</sup> The integration of pagan gods into Christianity was however not always so smooth, as “missionaries in early mediaeval Europe often denigrated the indigenous gods, myths, and cultic practices of the Germanic peoples, sometimes characterising them as satanic.”<sup>68</sup> Even Woden was at times equated with the devil. The pagan gods were often seen as false idols, meant to sway people away from the true faith. However, according to Russell, the prohibition of heathenism only resulted in people adhering to their pagan practices in secret, which in the long run only contributed to the syncretism of Christian and non-Christian beliefs.<sup>69</sup> Christianity “had been successfully assimilated by a warrior nobility, which had no intention of abandoning its culture, or seriously changing its way of life, but which was willing to throw its traditions, customs, tastes and loyalties into the articulation of the new faith.”<sup>70</sup>

Thus, we can see that despite officially rejecting pagan beliefs and practices, Christianity had to seek common ground with the Anglo-Saxons in order to convert them. However, there were always incongruities that at times bubbled up to the surface between the Christian and secular worlds, as the disparity of their world-views was too great to be completely smoothed over by an accommodating approach. I conclude that the relationship between Christianity and Anglo-Saxon society was ambivalent as it included on the one hand attempts at integration and on the other hand confrontational stances. Given this historical

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<sup>66</sup> Chaney, “Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England.” 212-213.

<sup>67</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 24.

<sup>68</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 17.

<sup>69</sup> Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. 17.

<sup>70</sup> Irving Jr., “Christian and Pagan Elements.” 186-187.

context, a poem such as *Beowulf* would appeal to a population that had on the surface converted to Christianity but would neither forsake their native culture nor their ancestors.

### 3. Monsters in context

#### 3.1. Monsters – Psychology

There have been monsters in every civilization, they have been abundant in legends, fairy tales and mythology ever since the dawn of man. Joseph Campbell writes that the monster's "characteristics are everywhere essentially the same. He is the hoarder of the general benefit. He is the monster avid for the greedy rights of "my and mine.""<sup>71</sup> Their ubiquitous presence is connected to people's fear of as well as fascination with them. As life on earth is very precarious, and the struggle for survival can be very cruel, naturally many sources of fear arise. "Fear of the unknown is one of the most innate and primaeval of all human instincts,"<sup>72</sup> and it stems both from the unpredictable forces of nature man is at the mercy of, as well as from man's own dark tendencies. Psychologists building on Freud generally characterise them as "merely our own impulses and anxieties projected and objectified and personalised into creatures of the external world."<sup>73</sup> The monster fight is, in a Jungian sense, part of the ego's integration of the shadow, repressed parts of the self that are hidden in the subconscious: "the shadow cast by the conscious mind of the individual contains the hidden, repressed, and unfavourable (or nefarious) aspects of the personality."<sup>74</sup> David D. Gilmore writes that the monster "embodies the existential threat to social life, the chaos, atavism, and negativism that symbolise destructiveness and all other obstacles to order and progress."<sup>75</sup> The monster must be cleared

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<sup>71</sup> Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Commemorative Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 14.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Lapidge, "Beowulf and the Psychology of Terror." *Beowulf A Prose Translation* (Norton Critical Editions), ed. Nicholas Howe (NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998) 146.

<sup>73</sup> Lapidge, "Beowulf and the Psychology of Terror." 149.

<sup>74</sup> C.G. Jung, et al. *Man and his Symbols* (New York: Anchor Press, 1964) 118-120.

<sup>75</sup> David Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) 12.

away in order for a healthy individual to develop, but also a healthy society. What this system symbolises is by far not only victory over chaos, but also prosperity and a chance for rebirth. “Only birth can conquer death—the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be—if we are to experience long survival—a continuous “recurrence of birth” (palingenesia) to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death.”<sup>76</sup>

### 3.2. Monsters – Mythology

Monsters are unsurprisingly a staple in mythologies all around the world. Since they represent the shadow – nefarious aspects of the personality – they are often sent by gods as punishment for some transgression, typically disobedience or excessive pride. An example of this is the Minotaur of Crete, who is begot as a result of the king’s hubris – keeping a bull he was supposed to sacrifice. Joseph Campbell writes that “the retaining of the bull represented an impulse to egocentric self-aggrandisement”<sup>77</sup> for which the king is then punished. However, monsters typically also “have a critical and fundamental role to play in the rise of civilization itself, not only in Europe and the Middle East, but everywhere.”<sup>78</sup>

Practically every religion is founded on an allegorical origin myth of a warrior-god defeating a chaos-monster. The monster’s defeat is connected with establishing order out of chaos, or defeating the old order and establishing a new one. An important variation of the monster fight is the dragon slaying myth. Examples include the Babylonian myth of Marduk, god of storms, defeating Tiamat, “the spirit of chaos in the primeval ocean,”<sup>79</sup> the Egyptian god Ra defeating Apep, the serpent embodying chaos, or the Hindu myth of the god Indra defeating

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<sup>76</sup> Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 15.

<sup>77</sup> Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 14.

<sup>78</sup> Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*. 26.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Blust. “The Origin of Dragons.” *Anthropos*, 95.2 (2000) 521. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40465957>. Accessed 1 Jan. 2023.

Vritra, “a limbless cloud serpent ... holding the waters of heaven in its belly”<sup>80</sup>, by launching a thunderbolt at him so that the waters can flow and bring new life to the land. The dragon is also often depicted as “the underworld serpent whose head supports the earth and who represents the life-pro genitive, demiurgic powers of the abyss.”<sup>81</sup> Whether it be a personal shortcoming, social transgression, a personification of chaos or just an allegory for the weather, the monster is always a force that threatens social order which must be defeated for humanity to thrive.

In order for monsters to be vanquished, an equally powerful hero is needed. Gilmore points out that monsters and heroes are indivisible, as the existence of the monster brings forth necessary heroic action. He writes that “monsters and heroes arise simultaneously in virtually all the ancient cosmologies as paired twins, indeed as inseparable polarities of a unified system of values and ideas underlying order itself.”<sup>82</sup> Campbell describes the quest of the archetypal hero who has to descend into the underworld, the symbolic unconscious, to fight the battle of good and evil.<sup>83</sup> The purpose of and also the reward for suppressing the dark forces is gaining a higher level of consciousness that the hero can then share with his people. The hero “and/or the world in which he finds himself suffers from a symbolical deficiency,”<sup>84</sup> the world is dying in some sense, which forces him to leave and seek some sort of revitalising power elsewhere. Campbell writes that “the effect of the successful adventure of the hero is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world.”<sup>85</sup> Joyce Tally Lionarons likewise writes that in these types of myths, “the destruction of the dragon and the creation of cosmic order comprise a single narrative act: order in the myth is established only through an act of

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<sup>80</sup> Blust. “The Origin of Dragons.” 530.

<sup>81</sup> Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 47.

<sup>82</sup> Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*. 27.

<sup>83</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 33.

<sup>84</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 35.

<sup>85</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 37.

violence.”<sup>86</sup> According to her, the hero and monster are doubles, as they represent the beneficent and maleficent aspects of this mythic violence.<sup>87</sup> The hero’s adventure varies little across different cultures, the structure always being separation—initiation—return, “which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.”<sup>88</sup> One variation that Campbell notes is that “popular tales represent the heroic action as physical; the higher religions show the deed to be moral.”<sup>89</sup> This is reflected by a “broader cultural process whereby the material monsters of the pagan era became the purely spiritual devils of orthodox Christianity.”<sup>90</sup>

### 3.3. Monsters – Christianity

For mediaeval Christians, who still believed that monsters were real physical beings, it was difficult to reconcile their existence with the idea of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and most importantly benevolent God. Mediaeval theologians devised various theories as to why God would let these creatures walk the earth. One of the most significant theologians of the middle ages was Saint Augustine (354-430), who approached the problem of monsters in his book *De Civitate Dei*. In the chapter ‘Whether certain monstrous races of men derived from the stock of Adam or Noah’s sons?’, he claimed “they must be part of God’s plan and great design, for God is omniscient.”<sup>91</sup> He says they are the “descendants of the disobedient offspring of the Biblical Noah” ... whom God suffers to exist for the edification of men.”<sup>92</sup> Their purpose is therefore to remind humanity of their sins, while being part of early Christianity’s vision of the Great Feud, the battle between good and evil. Another Christian thinker, Isidore of Seville, thinks along similar lines as Augustine, providing in his *Etymologies* (622-33) a taxonomy of

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<sup>86</sup> Joyce Tally Lionarons, “Beowulf: Myth and Monsters.” *English Studies*, 77.1 (1996): 3. Crossref, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00138389608599003>. Accessed 15 Jun. 2022.

<sup>87</sup> Lionarons, “Beowulf: Myth and Monsters.” 4.

<sup>88</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 28.

<sup>89</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 35-36.

<sup>90</sup> Pascual, “Material Monsters and Semantic Shifts.” 203.

<sup>91</sup> Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*. 52.

<sup>92</sup> Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*. 52.



monsters who are also part of God's plan and part of nature and as such are "a contradiction not of nature but of human epistemological categories."<sup>93</sup> He shows that they have a purpose even if it is not known to humans. By doing so "he acknowledges their significance in the system of creation and their belonging to the natural order established by God."<sup>94</sup> Isidore's view is not at odds with the Greco-Romans, as he "understands monsters as signs and portents, grouping them under the heading *portenda*."<sup>95</sup> In *Etymologies*, he writes that "Portents are also called signs, omens, and prodigies, because they are seen to portend and display, indicate and predict future events."<sup>96</sup>

David Gilmore writes that in the "period of the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries"<sup>97</sup>, the conception of monsters diverged between the Nordic and Latin traditions. The Latin tradition, which originated with Augustine and culminated in Isidore, "continues-at least in the sense of ascribing an allegorical or metaphorical role to monsters."<sup>98</sup> The view in northwestern Europe differs, possibly due to the Germanic peoples' later conversion. Monsters became associated with heathenism, which was still present. "The morally ambiguous beings of Germanic folklore became identified with the purely evil spirits of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England."<sup>99</sup> Here, the monsters "have no meaning in God's plan other than as mortal enemies to be destroyed."<sup>100</sup>

In his essay 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', J.R.R. Tolkien writes that (in *Beowulf*) a continuation can be seen between the Nordic mythology and Christianity. Old Norse mythology had an end – Ragnarok – a battle between the gods and monsters which the gods

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<sup>93</sup> Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*. 52.

<sup>94</sup> Jacek Olesiejko, "The Grendelkin and the Politics of Succession at Heorot: The Significance of Monsters in Beowulf." *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 53.1 (2018): 47. <https://doi.org/10.2478/stap-2018-0003>. Accessed 15 Jun. 2022

<sup>95</sup> Olesiejko, "The Grendelkin and the Politics of Succession at Heorot: The Significance of Monsters in Beowulf." 46.

<sup>96</sup> Olesiejko, "The Grendelkin and the Politics of Succession at Heorot: The Significance of Monsters in Beowulf." 46. (*Etymologies*, 243)

<sup>97</sup> Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*. 56.

<sup>98</sup> Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*. 54.

<sup>99</sup> Pascual, "Material Monsters and Semantic Shifts." 208-209.

<sup>100</sup> Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*. 56.

lost. Thus “the monsters remained the enemies of mankind, the infantry of the old war, and became inevitably the enemies of the one God.”<sup>101</sup> Because, as was discussed earlier, Christianity positioned itself as the cult of the strongest god, it promised eternal victory in the form of salvation. Tolkien writes: “Beyond there appears a possibility of eternal victory (or eternal defeat), and the real battle is between the soul and its adversaries. So the old monsters became images of the evil spirit or spirits, or rather the evil spirits entered into the monsters and took visible shape in the hideous bodies of the *pyrsas* and *sigel-hearwan* of heathen imagination.”<sup>102</sup>

#### **4. The Monsters of Beowulf**

##### **4.1. Grendel-kin**

###### **4.1.1. Folktale Inspiration**

The poet has clearly borrowed from various folkloric and mythological elements in order to construct the monsters of *Beowulf*. “Beowulf’s encounters with Grendel and his mother have called to mind both whole folktale plots and independent folkloric motifs recorded in various languages, particularly in Celtic- and Germanic-speaking areas.”<sup>103</sup> This motif which shares many similarities with *Beowulf* is called ‘The Hand and the Child’, featuring “narratives in which the motif of a giant’s arm, torn off in the course of a nocturnal struggle in a haunted house, is conjoined with an ensuing pursuit to a remote and forbidding place.”<sup>104</sup> There are also parallels from Germanic-speaking areas. Panzer (1910) “recognized in the Beowulf story a version (raised to a heroic level) of a widespread folktale type he called the ‘Bear’s Son Tale’.”<sup>105</sup> Most of these are Scandinavian. Their structure mirrors that of Beowulf as the hero

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<sup>101</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. (London: HarperCollins, 2006) 22.

<sup>102</sup> Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. 22.

<sup>103</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 36 of Introduction.

<sup>104</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 37 of Introduction.

<sup>105</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 37 of Introduction.

in them engages in two monster fights, the first of which often ends with the creature managing to run away, “leaving a bloody trail to be followed”<sup>106</sup> and in the second, the hero must follow the creature into its lair where he typically slays it. The final part of these tales also includes the hero being abandoned.<sup>107</sup> It is likely that Beowulf’s battles against the Grendel-kin “could have had their genesis in folktales of this type.”<sup>108</sup>

There are also similarities with Norse and Icelandic sagas, though these date from several centuries later, so they could not have been an inspiration for the *Beowulf* poet. There is a possibility, however, that they might have a common origin. “The Beowulf-poet must in the first instance have conceived Grendel in terms of an Old Norse *draugr*, an “undead man” or “ghost” or “zombi,” a dead man who had not been properly buried and therefore became an animated corpse able to haunt the living by walking about, usually at night and in the mist.”<sup>109</sup> The *draugar* most similar to Grendel are “Ögmundr in Örvar-Odds Saga, who is invulnerable to iron weapons and who lives beneath a waterfall with his mother, a troll-woman or *gygr*”<sup>110</sup> and Glámr in Grettis Saga, who is also slain by the story’s hero, Grettir, while battling in a hall at night. A terrifying light is emitted from both Grendel and Glámr’s eyes.<sup>111</sup>

#### 4.1.2. The Grendel-kin as Hostile Nature

The first part of the poem is set in Denmark, where the hero Beowulf voyages in order to battle the monster, Grendel, who terrorises the locals, and unbeknownst to Beowulf also his mother, who comes to avenge her son after he is killed. These two monsters are known as the Grendel-kin, and not much is known about them by the characters except for the fact that they appear to have the shape of humans, albeit of abnormally large size and supernatural strength. Besides

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<sup>106</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 38 of Introduction.

<sup>107</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 38 of Introduction.

<sup>108</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 38 of Introduction.

<sup>109</sup> Lapidge, “Beowulf and the Psychology of Terror.” 136.

<sup>110</sup> Lapidge, “Beowulf and the Psychology of Terror.” 136.

<sup>111</sup> Lapidge, “Beowulf and the Psychology of Terror.” 137.

that, the Danes only know they dwell together in a mere located in the dark misty moors. For twelve years, Grendel has been coming to Heorot at night, ruling over the hall in terror, slaughtering whoever gets in his way, eating his victims and drinking their blood. Beowulf watches as Grendel savagely slaughters one of his men:

“...starting his work, he suddenly seized a sleeping man, tore at him ravenously, bit into his bone-locks, drank the blood from his veins, swallowed huge morsels; quickly he had eaten all of the lifeless one, feet and hands.”<sup>112</sup>

This act of cannibalism strikes terror in the characters’ hearts particularly because of its animalistic savagery. “Fear of the dead and the fear of being eaten, both primitive anxieties, are embodied ... in Grendel and his mother; they find nearly universal expression in folk mythology. Such fears arise from the condition of the real world.”<sup>113</sup> Since Heorot represents the heart of their society, a central space, “a place of communal joy, of light, warmth, song, and companionship,”<sup>114</sup> Grendel symbolises the threatening forces that would disturb the social order. “The hostility of the natural world and its inherently anti-social aspects are embodied in Grendel. He is above all a creature of the night, a walker of the darkness (“*sceadugenga*” line 703), he who dwells in darkness (5) ... ; he is the greatest of the night's evils (“*nihtbealwa mæst*” line 193).”<sup>115</sup> His association with darkness is contrasted with the light of Heorot and as he “inhabits the hall, he negates Heorot 's function as the locus of civilized life.”<sup>116</sup>

Grendel’s mother, just as her son, is a creature of the night, and her appearance is left largely to our imagination, though she is supposed to be just as monstrous as Grendel, if slightly

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<sup>112</sup> Nicholas Howe, and Talbot Donaldson. *Beowulf: A Prose Translation (Norton Critical Editions)* (New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 1998) 14. All subsequent quotations from this edition will be indicated in the text by parentheses. Quotations of Beowulf in Old English will be referenced by line numbers.

<sup>113</sup> John Halverson, “The World of Beowulf.” *ELH* 36.4 (1969) 600. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2872097>. Accessed 10 Jun. 2022.

<sup>114</sup> Halverson, “The World of Beowulf.” 593.

<sup>115</sup> Halverson, “The World of Beowulf.” 599.

<sup>116</sup> Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe. “Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 23.4 (1981) 491. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40754660>. Accessed 20 Jun. 2022.

less strong. She “is never described in a straightforward fashion ... She remains in the realm of the shadowy and the half-known, and her role is that of avenger.”<sup>117</sup> She rules the underwater hall of the mere, so she may also be associated with the cruel forces of nature. Hrothgar says of the Grendel-kin’s dwelling:

“They hold to the secret land, the wolf-slopes, the windy headlands, the dangerous fen-paths where the mountain stream goes down under the darkness of the hills, the flood under the earth. It is not far from here, measured in miles, that the mere stands; over it hang frost-covered woods, trees fast of root close over the water. There each night may be seen fire on the flood, a fearful wonder.” (24)

We are told that a hart would rather be killed by hounds than to enter the mere, making it seem like she’s some ultimate predator. This has symbolic meaning since ‘Heorot’ also means hart in Old English. The people of Heorot feel as hopeless prey against Grendel’s attacks, they too would rather cower away than to approach the threat looming in the mere head on.

## 4.2. Grendel

### 4.2.1. From Dark Spirit to Human Troublemaker

Grendel, despite being doubtlessly inspired by the inhuman cannibalistic monsters of folk tales, also has many humanlike qualities. The Danes that have spotted him describe him (and his mother) as “huge walkers” (24) “in the form of a man, except that he was bigger than any other man” (24). That his nature is not completely clear to them can be seen when Hrothgar describes him to Beowulf, and “does so by mingling three categories of epithets: Grendel and his mother are "*mearcstapan*" [line 1348] (walkers of the borders, a general term); "*ellorgaestas*" [line 1349] (alien spirits); and humanlike ("*idese onlicnes*,"[likeness of a woman] "*on weres*

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<sup>117</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 106 of Introduction.

*waestmum*" [form of a man] [lines 1351-52]).<sup>118</sup> The first word the poet uses to describe Grendel is *'ellengǣst'* (line 86), a compound comprised of *ellen*, which means strength or power, and the ambivalent *gǣst*, which can be either a spirit, demon, or a visitor.<sup>119</sup> Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe writes that the closer he comes to the humans, he becomes less of a spirit and more of a physical being. "We might perceive a being who exists in two different modes, who appears as spirit and mist in the fens, but who is manifestly corporeal in his contact with men."<sup>120</sup>

When Grendel reaches Heorot, it becomes clearer that apart from being somewhat human-shaped, he is also a sentient being. He is "described as a 'man', albeit one 'deprived of joys' (*rinc... dreamum bedaeled*, lines 720-1)"<sup>121</sup> and an 'unfortunate man' (*wonsæli wer*, line 105). The Danes find his actions perplexing as he's breaking all the rules they have for establishing social order.

"He wanted no peace with any of the men of the Danish host, would not withdraw his deadly rancor, or pay compensation: no counselor there had any reason to expect splendid repayment at the hands of the slayer." (6)

The Danes understand "Grendel's strife with Hrothgar in terms of Germanic feud"<sup>122</sup> and "according to old Germanic law, a slayer could achieve peace with his victim's kinsmen only by paying them *wergild*, i.e. compensation for the life of the slain man."<sup>123</sup> But Grendel will not follow the rules their society has set up, either because he is too primitive to understand them, or more likely, simply because he does not want to. The Danes know not what to make of him. The name Grendel is something that "land-dwellers in the old days named him...",

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<sup>118</sup> O'Brien O'Keefe. "Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human." 486

<sup>119</sup> Lapidge, "Beowulf and the Psychology of Terror." 138.

<sup>120</sup> O'Brien O'Keefe. "Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human." 486-487.

<sup>121</sup> Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript* (Heritage). (NY: D.S. Brewer, 1995) 36.

<sup>122</sup> Osborn, "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in Beowulf." 976.

<sup>123</sup> Talbot Donaldson. *Beowulf: A Prose Translation* (Norton Critical Editions) ed. Nicholas Howe, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998) 6.

“They know of no father, whether in earlier times any was begotten for them among the dark spirits.”(24) The lack of paternal ancestry is an important part of what separates Grendel from the characters in the poem, something that is emphasised when at the beginning, we are told of the long line of Danish kings who ruled before Hrothgar. Grendel has no such lineage to speak of, at least not one that is known to the characters. To the characters, Grendel may demonstrate the fate of an outcast and the terror that results from individuals who do not follow any code of conduct. His antics are a threat to their society both literally and figuratively. Kathryn Hume sees all three monsters of the poem as representing “threats to social order”, which she considers the controlling theme of the poem.<sup>124</sup> The poet gives the audience insight into Grendel’s inner state and motivations. Hume writes that he “is driven by two intertwined motives”<sup>125</sup>, one being envy (which gives him the desire to destroy all that he cannot have and cannot be a part of) and the other being a kind of “killer mentality which characterizes most of the deliberate troublemakers in heroic narrative.”<sup>126</sup> Grendel takes pride in the violent acts he commits and feels no remorse. “Not only does he kill freely, he even enjoys the act: his eyes light up (lines 726-7), *his mōd āhlōg* [his heart laughs] (line 730), *hē lust wigeð* [he lustily murders] (line 599).”<sup>127</sup>

“The creature of evil, grim and fierce, was quickly ready, savage and cruel, and seized from their rest thirty thanes. From there he turned to go back to his home, proud of his plunder, ...” (5)

Grendel’s reign of terror over Heorot also prevents Hrothgar from being able to be a good king and give out gifts to his people. He seems to present the dark side of power, only dealing out death and no treasure. Indeed, the same verb “*dælan*“ is used for both Hrothgar’s gift-giving

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<sup>124</sup> Hume, “The Theme and Structure of ‘Beowulf.’” 5.

<sup>125</sup> Hume, “The Theme and Structure of ‘Beowulf.’” 6.

<sup>126</sup> Hume, “The Theme and Structure of ‘Beowulf.’” 6.

<sup>127</sup> Hume, “The Theme and Structure of ‘Beowulf.’” 6.

and Grendel's death-dealing.<sup>128</sup> "Though he dwells by night in Heorot, [he] cannot approach the *gífstol*, the center of giving and fellowship in that hall."<sup>129</sup> It is significant that Grendel cannot approach this seat, for it suggests that he is not a true thane. As a result he cannot participate in a productive, civilised community.

This kind of behaviour can threaten a society from the outside but also from within, as envy and violence are intrinsic in human nature. "Though he must, by virtue of his monstrous nature, operate from outside, his symbolic equivalence to a force normally found within society is underlined by his human shape and by the author's ironic treatment of him as a *healðegn* [hall-thane]."<sup>130</sup> By representing the threat of troublemaking, Grendel serves as a portent, foreshadowing future events, as characters are later seen committing acts that mirror his own, and that will eventually bring about the end of their society. "The defragmentation of the human world, resulting from war and feud, is a threat that comes from monsters and humans in the poem. Similarly, Grendel's violence is juxtaposed and compared to cultural practices that organise and regulate the homosocial bonds between warriors."<sup>131</sup> We are told Heorot will burn down as a result of a future feud between son-in-law and father-in-law. It is hinted that Beowulf's father was a troublemaker who started a feud that Hrothgar then had to settle. One of Hrothgar's men, Unferth, has (according to Beowulf) killed his own brother. Beowulf tells him that Grendel would have never been so successful in his raids against Heorot "if your spirit, your heart, were so fierce in fight as you claim" (12), so he has at least an inkling that Grendel's actions are a result of some internal weakness in the Danes' court. When the scop recounts the tales of Sigemund and Heremod (17), it is to stress the importance of good leadership and the disaster that comes when a king succumbs to selfishness and greed. "Heremod is the ruler out

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<sup>128</sup> Olesiejko, "The Grendelkin and the Politics of Succession at Heorot: The Significance of Monsters in Beowulf." 50.

<sup>129</sup> Osborn, "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in Beowulf." 976.

<sup>130</sup> Hume, "The Theme and Structure of 'Beowulf.'" 7.

<sup>131</sup> Olesiejko, "The Grendelkin and the Politics of Succession at Heorot: The Significance of Monsters in Beowulf." 49.



of control. His refusal to act within the definition of a king costs him exile from the society of men. Heremod slew his companions, withheld treasure from his retainers, lived without joy.”<sup>132</sup>

It is during the digressions, such as Heremod’s tale, that the poet looks at the world of the poem more critically, revealing its more sinister aspects. Heremod and Grendel are depicted as very similar, highlighting that monstrous behaviour is not reserved only for monsters. On the other hand, there is also some sympathy evoked for Grendel’s plight, as he is described as a joyless and unfortunate man in exile, who cannot partake in “the hall-joys of men.” (38)

#### 4.2.2. Two Levels of Knowledge

The audience is privy to knowledge that the characters do not possess, and the additional information serves to endow the secular conflict with a spiritual dimension. In this way, Grendel’s troublemaking and outcast status is given additional resonance by being linked with Cain, who is condemned by God, and therefore in exile. This biblical ancestry also links him with the taboo of disregarding kinship ties, as Cain killed his own brother, and according to the heroic code, such violence can never be settled.

“...after Cain became sword-slayer of his only brother, his own father's son. Then Cain went as an outlaw to flee the cheerful life of men, marked for his murder, held to the wasteland. From him sprang many a devil sent by fate. Grendel was one of them, ...”  
(23)

As Marijane Osborn has pointed out in her essay ‘The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*’, the poet is working with two levels of knowledge. She writes that the poet “establishes two complementary frames of reference, one heroic and one cosmic. The former aligns us, the audience, with the native Germanic world of the poem, while the latter aligns us with the Christian world of the poet.”<sup>133</sup> Since these two frames of reference are consistently

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<sup>132</sup> O’Brien O’Keefe, “Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human.” 491.

<sup>133</sup> Osborn, “The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*.” 973.

juxtaposed, it may even seem that the information we are given is at times contradictory. During Scyld's funeral, the all-knowing narrator tells us that he went "away into the protection of the Lord" (3), but when presenting us with the characters' point of view, we're told: "Men cannot truthfully say who received that cargo, neither counselors in the hall nor warriors under the skies" (4). The characters clearly have some sense of an afterlife, but no knowledge of Christian heaven.<sup>134</sup> Establishing these two levels of knowledge is also helped by the appositive language the poet uses (at times purposefully ambiguous) which can "supply various kinds of information if we reflect on the implications of the parallel structures."<sup>135</sup> An example of this is the clausal apposition: "by that he overcame the foe, subdued the hell-spirit" (23). The first part "describes the victory from the hero's point of view, while the restatement... emphasises the Christian narrator's ampler perspective on the vanquished monster."<sup>136</sup> The pagan Danes of the sixth century have no knowledge of Christianity, even if the poet at times has them speak in "pseudo-Christian language."<sup>137</sup> The characters do not realise the cosmic dimension of the trouble they are facing, they do not see their fight against Grendel as part of "the great feud" between good and evil, God and the devil. But they nonetheless "have what may be described as a sense of myth and the idea of reversal: within the world of Heorot light challenges darkness, and it is felt that the bright hall of friendship and harp song calls up the envious *grimma gest* from his misery."<sup>138</sup>

By putting this typical folktale monster in the context of scriptural history, the poet also makes him into an evil hell-spirit, aligned with the devil. This is part of a "process of transfer whereby the morally ambiguous beings of Germanic folklore became identified with the purely evil spirits of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England."<sup>139</sup> *Beowulf* presents a mid-point in this

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<sup>134</sup> Osborn, "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in Beowulf." 973-974.

<sup>135</sup> Robinson, "Appositive Style and the Theme of Beowulf." 90.

<sup>136</sup> Robinson, "Appositive Style and the Theme of Beowulf." 90.

<sup>137</sup> Robinson, "Appositive Style and the Theme of Beowulf." 81.

<sup>138</sup> Osborn, "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in Beowulf." 976.

<sup>139</sup> Pascual, "Material Monsters and Semantic Shifts." 208.

process, where the monsters are “scripturized” and begin to “symbolise” (and ultimately to become identified with) the powers of evil, even while they remain...mortal denizens of the material world.”<sup>140</sup> There is again a contrast between the way the poet refers to Grendel (and his mother), always emphasising their devilish nature, and the way the characters perceive them. To them, they are simply regular monsters of Germanic folklore, of the type that can be found in folk tales. “The pagan characters consistently refer to monsters in spiritually neutral terms, such as *eoten* [giant, monster], *fēond* [enemy], or *sceaþa* [enemy, ravager], while the narrator uses spiritually charged terms such as *dēofol* [devil], *hellegāst* [hell-spirit], or *helrūne*.”<sup>141</sup> In his essay ‘Material Monsters and Semantic Shifts’, Rafael J. Pascual argues “that two words – *scucca* and *þyrs* – possess only their pre-conversion meanings in Beowulf, for if they had acquired a Christian meaning by the time of composition, the poet would have violated his own design.”<sup>142</sup> Pascual shows that these two words, each only used once and by the characters, have often been wrongly translated to mean “demon” or “devil”, instead of referring to a material monster. Since the characters have no way of knowing the spiritual nature of the monsters that plague them, this would suggest inconsistency on the part of the poet, which is unlikely.

#### 4.2.3. The Issue of Paganism – Monsters and Heroes

If we view the conflict of the Danes with the Grendel-kin in terms of the Great Feud, then the Danes are on the side of God. What first prompts Grendel to attack Heorot is the singing of the creation song. Grendel being enraged by the creation song sung at Heorot makes sense, since as an enemy of God, he would be hateful of all of mankind, and especially enraged by a celebration of life and man’s achievement. The song makes a connection between the story of

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<sup>140</sup> Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. 20.

<sup>141</sup> Pascual, “Material Monsters and Semantic Shifts.” 206.

<sup>142</sup> Pascual, “Material Monsters and Semantic Shifts.” 202-203.

God's creation of earth and Hrothgar's building of Heorot, leading into both Cain and Grendel's rebellion against the established order. "Typically, the Beowulf-poet is able to encompass here in just a few lines both the spawning of the kin of Cain (*ealle onwocon*, line 111b) and their destruction by God (*he him ðæs lean forgeald*, line 114b)."<sup>143</sup>

Grendel is also twice called a "heathen" by the poet ("his heathen soul" (16) and "heathen warrior" (18)), "whose proper domain, in Christian eyes, is hell."<sup>144</sup> This association of paganism with the devil is in line with the mediaeval Christian thought that the pagan gods were false idols, created by the devil to sway people away from the true faith. This aspect appears in the much debated single explicit reference to heathenism on the characters' part, when they pray to their pagan gods for help against Grendel:

"At times they vowed sacrifices at heathen temples, with their words prayed that the soul-slayer would give help for the distress of the people. Such was their custom, the hope of heathens; in their spirits they thought of Hell, they knew not the Ruler, the Judge of Deeds, they recognized not the Lord God, nor indeed did they know how to praise the Protector of Heaven, the glorious King." (6)

"When the Danes, not knowing how to worship the Lord, seek help from the "slayer of souls", they are unwittingly aligning themselves with those adversaries of God enumerated at the end of the first fit."<sup>145</sup> Aside from the explicit reference, the mediaeval Christian audience would surely be tipped off by other, more inconspicuous seeming references to the characters' paganism, such as the cremations, "references to burying treasure or other grave goods with the dead", "reading omens of various kinds", "the allusion to totemic animals (boar, hart, and "snake swords")"<sup>146</sup>, etc. In this framework, a song which links God's creation of earth and

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<sup>143</sup> Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* 138.

<sup>144</sup> Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript* 39.

<sup>145</sup> Osborn, "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in Beowulf." 976-977.

<sup>146</sup> Robinson, "Appositive Style and the Theme of Beowulf." 80.

Hrothgar's creation of Heorot might be seen as heretical. In addition to being led astray and worshipping false gods, their building of Heorot, the "largest of hall-dwellings" (4), could be seen as an act of hubris. The pagan Danes have risen too high to the sun and God might think they need to be brought down a peg. This interpretation is also possible thanks to the ambiguous (appositive) language the poet uses: "an appositive style ... more suggestive than assertive, more oblique than direct."<sup>147</sup> Grendel is described as a "*manscaða*", which can mean 'wicked destroyer' as well as 'destroyer of wickedness'. Additionally, "the phrase 'he bore God's anger' (*godes yrre bæc* [line 711]) is ambiguous: Grendel is potentially both the recipient and the agent of God's wrath."<sup>148</sup> In these instances, the language lets the audience infer what kind of meaning the poet had in mind.

If Grendel could be 'the destroyer of wickedness', could our heroes be wicked? Have the Danes in their ignorance somehow angered God? It seems we are being invited to at least entertain the notion. I have already discussed the fact that the atrocities Grendel (and the other monsters) commits are a dark reflection of what goes on in the human world. Beowulf's similarity to Grendel goes beyond that – there are undoubtedly many parallels being drawn between the two. Both are extraordinarily strong, and both seem to be pretty good at killing. The poet uses the "word *āglægca*, translated in this case 'awesome assailant', which in various forms applies not only to Grendel, but to his mother, the dragon, and the water creatures that inhabit Grendel's mere."<sup>149</sup> This word is also used for Beowulf as well as the legendary hero Sigemund. Beowulf and Grendel's similarities are highlighted primarily during their confrontation. As Grendel "comes closer to Beowulf, the language, syntax, and management

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<sup>147</sup> Robinson, "Appositive Style and the Theme of Beowulf." 83.

<sup>148</sup> Andy Orchard, "Is Violence What Old English Literature Is about? Beowulf and Other Battlers: An Introduction to Beowulf." *Beowulf and Other Stories: A New Introduction to Old English, Old Icelandic and Anglo-Norman Literatures*, ed. Richard North and Joe Allard, 2nd ed., (Routledge, 2014) 68.

<sup>149</sup> Andy Orchard, "Is Violence What Old English Literature Is about? Beowulf and Other Battlers: An Introduction to Beowulf." 68.

of perspective in the scene blur the distinction between the two adversaries.”<sup>150</sup> During the fight, “as Beowulf responds to Grendel's grasp, *"he onfeng hraþe"* [line 748]; his action is described in a half line almost identical to the one which describes Grendel's snatching at the doomed warrior (*"ac he gefeng hraðe"* [line 740]).”<sup>151</sup> We see the fight in the hall through the Danes' eyes as well, and to them, the “hero and hostile one, prey and predator, have become indistinguishable. They are fierce hall-guardians (*"reþe renweardas"* [line 770]), battle-brave (*"heapodeorum"* [line 772]), and finally, hostile ones (*"graman"* [line 777]).”<sup>152</sup> In order to defeat Grendel, Beowulf must channel his own inner monstrosity. “Beowulf succeeds in his combat by rejecting human armor and weapons and adopting his enemy's primitive mode of fighting.”<sup>153</sup>

Some see the similarity Beowulf bears to Grendel as reflecting negatively on him, but in all mythological monster fights, “the monster/victim is frequently represented as the twin or double of the monster-killing hero, for the two signify, respectively, the maleficent and beneficent aspects of the same mythic violence.”<sup>154</sup> Beowulf has qualities that, if perverted, could result in the destruction of his community, as seen with Heremod. It is necessary for the hero to come to terms with his own “destructive powers if he is to become sufficiently terrible to overcome”<sup>155</sup> the monster. Beowulf could give in to greed, pride and power, but chooses not to, which is what makes him virtuous in both a heroic and Christian sense.

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<sup>150</sup> O'Brien O'Keefe. “Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human.” 488.

<sup>151</sup> O'Brien O'Keefe. “Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human.” 489.

<sup>152</sup> O'Brien O'Keefe. “Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human.” 490.

<sup>153</sup> O'Brien O'Keefe. “Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human.” 487.

<sup>154</sup> Joyce Tally Lionarons, “Beowulf: Myth and Monsters.” *English Studies*, 77.1 (1996): 4. Crossref, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00138389608599003>. Accessed 15 Jun. 2022.

<sup>155</sup> Jung, et al. *Man and his Symbols*, 120-121.

### 4.3. Grendel's mother

#### 4.3.1. A Vengeful Mother

The second monster that Beowulf battles is Grendel's mother. During her introduction, we are once again reminded of her origin story, that she and her son are the progeny of Cain and of their unpleasant dwelling in exile.

“Grendel's mother, woman, monster-wife, was mindful of her misery, she who had to dwell in the terrible water, the cold currents, after Cain became sword-slayer of his only brother, his own father's son.” (23)

Much like her son, she comes to Heorot at night, once everybody is asleep after celebrating Beowulf's first victory. Her actions, however, are described with more sympathy, emphasising the pain and grief she feels at her only son's loss: “...his mother, still greedy and gallows-grim, would go on a sorrowful venture, avenge her son's death” (23). She kills just one man, Aeschere, Hrothgar's beloved retainer, takes his body along with her son's arm, which was hung on the wall of Heorot as a trophy, and then retreats back to her home in the moors. The Danes later find Aeschere's head on a rock by the mere, a gesture that is similar to their own display of Grendel's arm. This response to her son's murder seems quite measured, and her actions are more understandable to the Danes, as she is only avenging her son, something that is a common practice in their society. “In its deadly necessity vengeance is more comprehensible and more predictable than fate, for it is the expected and praiseworthy duty for both kin and thegn.”<sup>156</sup> This institution of resolving conflict, either by paying wergild or taking vengeance, is respected by the mother but not by Grendel. Olesiejko writes that “the Grendelkin stands for two contradictory courses of action, the utmost disregard for kinship ties and the

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<sup>156</sup> O'Brien O'Keefe, “Heroic Values and Christian Ethics.” 112.

ardent honouring of kinship obligations.”<sup>157</sup> Hrothgar, when recounting what had happened to Beowulf, clearly understands Grendel’s mother’s motives:

“She has avenged the feud - that last night you killed Grendel with hard hand-grips, savagely, because too long he had diminished and destroyed my people. He fell in the fight, his life forfeited, and now the other has come, a mighty worker of wrong, would avenge her kinsman, and has carried far her revenge...” (24)

Beowulf approves of the ethos of vengeance. When consoling Hrothgar after Aeschere’s death, he tells him that “avenging one’s companion is the best form of consolation.”<sup>158</sup> “Sorrow not, wise warrior. It is better for a man to avenge his friend than much mourn.” (25)

Vengeance is a major theme of the Finn episode, which serves to foreshadow Grendel’s mother’s retributive attack. During this digression, the tale of the feud between the Danes and the Jutes (Frisians) is told by the scop at Heorot the night after Grendel is defeated. This tale centres on Hildeburh, who is the sister of the Danish king, and is married to the king of the Jutes. When a quarrel breaks out between the Danes and Jutes, both her brother and son are killed. Eventually, the Danes feel the need to avenge their king, and so Hildeburh’s husband is killed also. During this digression, Hildeburh’s sorrow and loss is what is highlighted. Grendel’s mother’s “active engagement in the feud contrasts sharply with the passive impotence of other (human) mothers in the poem, notably with Wealhtheow and Hildeburh.”<sup>159</sup> Wealhtheow, Hrothgar’s wife, is the ceremonial cup-bearer in her husband’s hall and gives speeches in which she alludes “to her sons’ succession and her appeals to Beowulf to support them,”<sup>160</sup> as they are young and not the most obvious choice to succeed their father, whose nephew is also a contender for the throne. She is clearly aware of the threat her nephew poses,

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<sup>157</sup> Olesiejko, "The Grendelkin and the Politics of Succession at Heorot: The Significance of Monsters in Beowulf." 48.

<sup>158</sup> Olesiejko, "The Grendelkin and the Politics of Succession at Heorot: The Significance of Monsters in Beowulf." 48.

<sup>159</sup> Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript* 30.

<sup>160</sup> Robinson, "Appositive Style and the Theme of Beowulf." 75.



but unable to take any direct action to prevent the looming conflict, as Hrothgar nor Beowulf answer her. Her daughter Freawaru's betrothal to an enemy clan (the Heatho-Bards) is an attempt to mend a past feud which fails anyway, as Hrothgar's new son-in-law is the one who ends up burning Heorot to the ground. "Below the surface of the main plot, the Danish court is crumbling, unaware of imminent disaster."<sup>161</sup> Grendel's mother is therefore the portent of never-ending feud resulting from vengeance that plagues the characters' society. Since heroic values dictate that one must always avenge a kinsman, revenge becomes a cycle that is not easy to break. Vengeance is "directed by the same laudable forces which help create and ensure social order in a violent world -- the desire to conserve and protect kin or allies."<sup>162</sup> The Finn and Heathobard digressions frame the mother's attack, highlighting that the heroic code can also encourage monstrous behaviour. Grendel's mother therefore "represents the violence Anglo-Saxon kingship was most at pains to control, and which Anglo-Saxon law struggled for centuries to limit, modify, and eliminate."<sup>163</sup>

The blood feud was a social institution that formed the backbone of the established order of tribal society. Vengeance was functional when it came to protecting the small unit – the clan, kin – but led to fragmentation of society at large. Since, as Blair writes, Anglo-Saxon society was moving towards a less 'tribal' and more 'political' organisation<sup>164</sup>, the blood feud would not have been a conducive way of keeping order anymore. Christianity would therefore have aided in this transition, as it offered rulers ways to get more power as well as the taboos on murder. Olesiejko sees in the poem a warning about establishing connections with those outside your kin, as those are the ones that tend to lead to disaster, such as Hildeburh's marriage

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<sup>161</sup> James W. Earl, "Transformation of Chaos: Immanence and Transcendence in Beowulf and Other Old English Poetry." *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 10.3 (1987) 182. Crossref, <https://doi.org/10.3138/uram.10.3.164>. Accessed 10 Jun. 2022.

<sup>162</sup> Hume, "The Theme and Structure of 'Beowulf.'" 7.

<sup>163</sup> Earl, "Transformation of Chaos: Immanence and Transcendence in Beowulf and Other Old English Poetry." 182.

<sup>164</sup> Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*. 50.

to Finn or Freawaru's marriage to Ingeld. He writes: "In the poem's many allusions to feuds ... reverberates distrust in the exogamic sworn obligations, established at the expense of kinship ties."<sup>165</sup> However, it seems more likely that the poem is pointing out that the mechanisms the Danes have for dealing with outside groups are faulty.

#### 4.3.2. Association with devil, paganism

Just as Grendel, his mother is also associated with Christian evil. She too is of course a descendant of Cain, and therefore carries the same legacy of fratricide, which makes her an exile and enemy of God. The poet describes her as a heathen too, an association that is confirmed by the look of the dwelling. "The description of Grendel's mere, combining as it does a number of the natural elements (fire, blood, water-surges, stones, and trees) which apparently lent themselves to animistic practice."<sup>166</sup> When Hrothgar and his men are scoping out the mere, they see the boiling and bloody water, snakes and sea-serpents, as well as sea-monsters on the slopes of the shore. To the Danes, the Grendel-kin's habitation looks like a wasteland, however once Beowulf enters the mere, he discovers their dwelling looks like any other hall in Denmark. Their "underwater dwelling is described in human, almost homely terms, as a 'roofed hall' (*hrofsele*, line 1515), albeit a hateful dwelling (*niðsele*, line 1513), and as a 'hall' (*reced*, line 1572) whose walls, like those of Heorot itself, were bedecked with weapons."<sup>167</sup> The similarity in their dwellings further highlights the connection between the world of the humans and that of the monsters. The Grendel-kin are not so different from the Danes once you look under the surface. "When Beowulf enters Grendel's mere, he is received by Grendel's mother as *selegyst* [hall-guest] (line 1545)"<sup>168</sup> and the roles of guest and intruder

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<sup>165</sup> Olesiejko, "The Grendelkin and the Politics of Succession at Heorot: The Significance of Monsters in Beowulf." 47-48.

<sup>166</sup> Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript*. 44.

<sup>167</sup> Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript*, 30.

<sup>168</sup> Olesiejko, "The Grendelkin and the Politics of Succession at Heorot: The Significance of Monsters in Beowulf." 62.

are reversed. “Beowulf’s attack on Grendel’s mother in her abode is narrated as the inverse of Grendel’s attack on Heorot”<sup>169</sup>, which further emphasises Beowulf’s similarity to Grendel. During this fight, curiously, Beowulf comes more prepared, wearing armour and wielding Unferth’s sword. To his fight with Grendel, Beowulf does not bring any weapons in order to make the fight fair. When Grendel enters the hall, Beowulf manages to catch the monster by surprise and quite easily beats him in hand to hand combat. Now it is Beowulf who becomes the invader/guest in the monster hall, and he has the added disadvantage of being expected. The fight with the mother is more difficult, despite the fact we are told she is not as strong as her son. Hume proposes that that is because the threat to social order she represents - vengeance - is greater than Grendel’s troublemaking, since it is a threat coming from the inside, a threat that exists within their order. Naturally it would be harder for Beowulf to overcome.<sup>170</sup> Beowulf fails when he tries to kill the mother with the sword he borrowed from Unferth. This is perhaps meaningful, as Unferth is also associated with fratricide, so his sword could be tainted with this sin and therefore not work against her. He throws the sword away and grabs her by the hair, but she overwhelms him and ends up sitting on him.

“Then he saw among the armor a victory-blessed blade, an old sword made by the giants, strong of its edges, glory of warriors: it was the best of weapons, except that it was larger than any other man might bear to war-sport, good and adorned, the work of giants.” (27)

This special weapon is what helps Beowulf slay the mother. He then uses it to decapitate Grendel’s corpse, whose blood melts the blade away, leaving only the golden hilt, which is inscribed with ancient runes. Beowulf then takes the hilt back to Heorot, where Hrothgar examines it. The two levels of knowledge are present here, as it is not clear how much of the

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<sup>169</sup> Marilynn Desmond, “Beowulf : The Monsters and the Tradition”, *Oral Tradition*, 7/2 (1992): 274. [https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/7ii/5\\_desmond.pdf](https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/7ii/5_desmond.pdf) Accessed 7 Aug. 2022.

<sup>170</sup> Hume, “The Theme and Structure of ‘Beowulf.’” 14.

inscription is comprehensible to the Danes. The narrator, however, fills the audience in, as he “knows what is inscribed on the hilt of the giant-wrought sword ... but he does not report what exactly is spelt out there. Still he knows ... more about the sword-hilt than does Hrōðgār, who gazes upon it without, evidently, any clear knowledge of its ancient origins.”<sup>171</sup> Hrothgar’s speech is interrupted by the narrator’s recounting of the sword hilt’s backstory:

“Hrothgar spoke -- he looked on the hilt, the old heirloom, on which was written the origin of ancient strife, when the flood, rushing water, slew the race of giants -- they suffered terribly: that was a people alien to the Everlasting Lord. The Ruler made them a last payment through water's welling. On the sword-guard of bright gold there was also rightly marked through rune-staves, set down and told, for whom that sword, best of irons, had first been made, its hilt twisted and ornamented with snakes.” (29)

To Beowulf, the sword may appear ancient, but neither he nor Hrothgar have any way of knowing this backstory. The poet “gives a scriptural context for the wisdom that Hrothgar subsequently reveals about the recurrent feud with mankind's enemy within the human breast.”<sup>172</sup> Hrothgar’s speech that follows praises Beowulf, but once again reminds us of Heremod, who was just as exceptional, but went down the wrong path. The example of Heremod is invoked both here, after Beowulf’s victory over Grendel’s mother, as well as after his victory over Grendel. “Heremod's fate, to turn away in lonely exile from the joys of men, recalls that of Grendel himself, the more so since his exile takes place among giants, as Heremod, just like Grendel, passes [on feonda gewæld] 'into the power of enemies' (lines 808 and 903).”<sup>173</sup>

“So was not Heremod to the sons of Ecgwela, the Honor-Scyldings. He grew great not for their joy, but for their slaughter, for the destruction of Danish people. With swollen

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<sup>171</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 99 of Introduction.

<sup>172</sup> Osborn, “The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in Beowulf.” 978.

<sup>173</sup> Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript*, 48.

heart he killed his table-companions, shoulder-comrades, until he turned away from the joys of men, alone, notorious king, although mighty God had raised him in power, in the joys of strength, had set him up over all men. Yet in his breast his heart's thought grew blood-thirsty: no rings did he give to the Danes for glory. He lived joyless to suffer the pain of that strife, the long-lasting harm of the people. Teach yourself to him, be mindful of munificence. Old of winters, I tell this tale for you." (30)

Hrothgar's speech may be seen as a Christian homily/ sermon, though a secular interpretation is also possible.<sup>174</sup> To the characters, Hrothgar is simply stressing the importance of adhering to certain aspects of the heroic code - such as ring-giving, generosity, importance of kinship ties... Bravery and heroism is all well and good but the ability to perform those is mainly reserved for the young. In order to rule well and for a long time, one also needs other qualities.

"Keep yourself against that wickedness, beloved Beowulf, best of men, and choose better—eternal gains. Have no care for pride, great warrior. Now for a time there is glory in your might: yet soon it shall be that sickness or sword will diminish your strength, or fire's fangs, or flood's surge, or sword's swing, or spear's flight, or appalling age; brightness of eyes will fail and grow dark; then it shall be that death will overcome you, warrior." (30)

However, as with the creation song, this speech also has additional resonance for the audience. "It is the accompanying scriptural allusions that lend Hrothgar's discourse a special meaning for us, different from the meaning it has for those listening in Heorot, who have not "been given spiritual understanding."<sup>175</sup> Hrothgar's cautioning against pride also reads as in line with Christian values, as pride is a sin. Even though Beowulf is so exceptional, and his heroic deeds so great, his desire for glory will not grant him eternal life. "Beowulf's definitive heroic

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<sup>174</sup> Osborn, "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in Beowulf." 978.

<sup>175</sup> Osborn, "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in Beowulf." 978.

declaration before the second fight “Each of us must await his end of the world’s life. Let him who may get glory before death” (25) is explicitly countered by Hrothgar after the event.”<sup>176</sup> Beowulf’s power could easily degenerate and make him a tyrant like Heremod, thus aligning him with the devil in the Great Feud against God. By engaging in vengeance, he continues the cycle of violence that will result in his community’s destruction. Though what drives vengeance is the desire to protect one’s community, it only ever brings about further death and chaos, as is illustrated by the Finn and Heathobard digressions. Grendel's mother was trapped in this same cycle, and her fate could easily befall anyone who decided to engage in this ‘praiseworthy’ act.

#### 4.4. The dragon

##### 4.4.1. Mythological Dragons

Tales involving dragons and dragon slayers are common in mythology and folklore all over the world. Analogues to the story of *Beowulf* “to which attention has most often been drawn are Scandinavian, but some classical and, especially, hagiographical parallels are worthy of study as well.”<sup>177</sup> There is a similarity between Beowulf’s fight with the dragon and that of Thor and the world serpent, Miðgarðsormr. “Panzer (1910: 294–313) examined thirty-eight narratives of the so-called Þórr type, most of which are localized in Germany, a few in Denmark.”<sup>178</sup> It is quite probable that the poet took inspiration from a narrative of this kind since many of the features of the stories are the same. There are special similarities to the dragons killed by Frotho and Sigurd, the latter even being mentioned in the poem itself.

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<sup>176</sup> Judith Garde, “CHRISTIAN AND FOLKLODIC TRADITION IN ‘BEOWULF’: DEATH AND THE DRAGON EPISODE.” *Literature and Theology*, 11.4 (1997) 328. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23925523>. Accessed 7 Aug. 2022.

<sup>177</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 45 of Introduction.

<sup>178</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 45 of Introduction.

Dragons have often been depicted as large serpentine fire breathing creatures, more often than not greedily guarding a hoard of treasure in a barrow or cave. In Norse mythology, the Midgard Serpent (or Jörmungandr) is a sea-serpent that grew so large it encircled the entire world, therefore also being called the World Serpent. It is often depicted as an ouroboros: a dragon or serpent biting its own tail, representing the circle of life, continual death and rebirth. Jung writes that “the Uroboros is a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite, i.e. of the shadow. This 'feedback' process is at the same time a symbol of immortality since it is said of the Uroboros that he slays himself and brings himself to life, fertilizes himself and gives birth to himself.”<sup>179</sup> This is indicative of the Norse mythological world view, as it saw the world ending in Ragnarok, being reborn and then the cycle repeating itself for eternity. Unlike dragons in the hagiographical tradition, the Midgard Serpent “has no moral weight at all, since the Germanic apocalypse is not a judgement upon man but only an inevitability, and Thor's heroism is only his determination in the ultimately hopeless struggle against chaos.”<sup>180</sup>

#### **4.4.2. Portent of War**

The last monster fight takes place after a time jump of fifty years – the same amount of time Hrothgar and Grendel’s mother ruled, before a calamity befell them. An aged Beowulf is now king of the Geats, a position which he first refused, but inherited after both his uncle and cousin were killed in wars with the Swedes. We are told he has ruled well, been generous to his people, adhered to the heroic code, and did not start any feuds. His reign was peaceful until the dragon appeared.

The dragon of Beowulf guards a hoard of cursed treasure in a funeral barrow by the sea and only starts wreaking havoc on the Geats after a piece of it, a precious cup, has been stolen.

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<sup>179</sup> C. G. Jung, et al. *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Complete Digital Edition*. (Princeton University Press, 2014) Vol. 14 para. 513.

<sup>180</sup> Earl, “Transformation of Chaos: Immanence and Transcendence in Beowulf and Other Old English Poetry.” 183.

Before knowing the reason for the dragon's attacks, Beowulf wonders whether he himself is not to blame, whether he has not broken some ancient law, but his moment of contemplation does not last very long as he quickly learns of the theft. The poet shows the audience the thief's point of view and afterwards, "we are presented with events from the dragon's perspective."<sup>181</sup> We see him awaken, notice the thief's footprints, look furiously for the intruder and discover a single cup had been taken. Even though the dragon is the least humanoid of all the monsters in Beowulf, he is still described as a sentient creature and his motives are understandable in the context of Germanic feuds. The poet tells us that "the cause of strife was renewed" (39), the dragon "took joy in the thought of war, in the work of fighting" (39). Much like the Grendel-kin, he is a creature of the night, waiting for evening to come before he goes and exacts his vengeance.

"Then the evil spirit began to vomit flames, burn bright dwellings; blaze of fire rose, to the horror of men; there the deadly flying thing would leave nothing alive. The worm's warfare was wide-seen, his cruel malice, near and far-how the destroyer hated and hurt the people of the Geats. He winged back to the hoard, his hidden hall, before the time of day. He had circled the land-dwellers with flame, with fire and burning. He had trust in his barrow, in his war and his wall: his expectation deceived him." (39)

Like the Grendel-kin, the dragon is a destructive force coming from the outside, and attacking at night when people are the most vulnerable. All the monsters feel themselves to be aggrieved by human society, and the audience is the first to learn what their motives are even though in Grendel's case, the characters never learn what drove him to attack them. As Grendel attacks Heorot, so does the dragon attack Beowulf's hall: "Then the terror was made known to Beowulf ... that his own home, the best of buildings, had melted in the surging flames, the stone-seat of

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<sup>181</sup> Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript (Heritage)*. (NY: D.S. Brewer, 1995) 29.



the Geats” (39). The dragon’s lair is again described in terms of the human dwellings, just as Grendel’s underwater hall was. “Likewise the dragon inhabits an ‘earth-house’ (*eorðhus*, line 2232) also described in the same language of the hall (*eorðsele*, lines 2410 and 2515; *eorðreced*, line 2719); the same word *dryhtsele* (‘noble hall’), unattested outside Beowulf, applies equally to Heorot (lines 485 and 767) and the dragon’s lair (line 2320).”<sup>182</sup> Since Beowulf is king, his home is the symbolic heart of his people just as Heorot was to the Danes. Indeed, there are similarities to the fate of both the Danes and the Geats. A monster appears after a successful rule of fifty years, when the king is old and his power is waning. Both Beowulf and Hrothgar are aided by a younger warrior in defeating the monster and each of their halls end up burned to the ground. According to Hume, each of the monsters represents escalating threats to social order, “Grendel is the originator of feuds and his mother an unreasoning wrecker of vengeance, the dragon represents war.”<sup>183</sup> The threat the dragon represents is the greatest because it’s the culmination of the first two. She argues that “the dragon behaves like an invader, firing the countryside and burning buildings.”<sup>184</sup> Feuds resulting in wars (and those resulting in the wiping out of an entire people) are not uncommon in the world of the poem. The treasure that the dragon guards was buried there by a lone survivor of an extinct race. The legendary king Scyld, with whose funeral the poem opens, came to the Danes during times of strife and managed to restore peace. Beowulf correctly predicts more war for the Danes, and the dragon fight is surrounded by accounts of different wars and feuds in the area. “Beowulf speaks of his coming fight with the dragon as though it were no different from his past fights with the Swedes and Frisians.”<sup>185</sup> Beowulf travels to the dragon’s barrow with twelve of his

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<sup>182</sup> Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript*, 30.

<sup>183</sup> Hume, “The Theme and Structure of ‘Beowulf.’” 9.

<sup>184</sup> Hume, “The Theme and Structure of ‘Beowulf.’” 9.

<sup>185</sup> Arthur E. DuBois, “The Dragon in Beowulf.” *PMLA*, 72.5 (1957) 822. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/460364>. Accessed 7 Aug. 2022.

men, including the thief, but enters it alone, determined to kill it by himself. He knows his death is near:

“His mind was mournful, restless and ripe for death: very close was the fate which should come to the old man, seek his soul's hoard, divide life from his body; not for long then was the life of the noble one wound in his flesh.” (41)

He makes a long speech before he goes to fight the dragon, ruminating on his reign and all the strife that resulted with him inheriting his throne as well as the many wars he fought in his youth. His meditation shows that he is aware of the cyclical nature of violence in his society. But he is resigned to his fate and resolved to perform this last act of heroism: “Old guardian of the people, I shall still seek battle, perform a deed of fame...” (42). The appearance of the dragon portends the end of the Geats, as they are surrounded by too much irresolvable strife, and with Beowulf being an old man, no longer able to hold it together by his might and having no equally strong successor, the end is in sight. After Beowulf's death, Wiglaf becomes the last of his clan, and the treasure is once again buried.

“The mutual destruction of Beowulf and the dragon repeats a motif from Norse mythology. In the Ragnarok (a fate of gods), Thor and the serpent destroy each other and the cosmos is returned to chaos. The world is destroyed by fire and by water, the earth finally sinks into the sea,”<sup>186</sup> after which a process of rejuvenation begins, and the cycle can repeat itself again. From a secular heroic perspective, such an end is not necessarily negative. Beowulf has achieved lasting fame and glory for his brave deeds, and the doom foretold for his people is simply part of the natural course of the world, since death is necessary for rebirth.

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<sup>186</sup> Jeffrey Helterman. “Beowulf: The Archetype Enters History.” *ELH*, 35.1 (1968) 20. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2872333>. Accessed 7 Aug. 2022.

#### 4.4.3. Christian Evil

Unlike the Grendel-kin, the dragon is never overtly described in scriptural terms. However, “in hagiographical tradition the dragon was frequently identified with the devil, the chief scriptural basis of this association being the Book of Revelation.”<sup>187</sup> It is probable the audience would have been aware of this connotation, as dragons were often cast as adversaries of saints, and especially since Beowulf’s previous two adversaries were explicitly called enemies of God. Beowulf’s “fight against the dragon, too, ... is readily viewed in spiritual terms as a confirmation of the theme of the triumph of good over evil that is the substance of the earlier part of the poem.”<sup>188</sup> Tolkien is in agreement with this view; he writes that the conception of the dragon is “a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and of the indiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or bad (the evil aspect of all life).”<sup>189</sup> Rafael J. Pascual compares the dragon of *Beowulf* to dragons in Aldhelm’s *De Virginitate*, composed around 700. The dragons in *De Virginitate* differ from Aldhelm’s sources in other Anglo-Latin literature which suggests “that super-destructive dragons were a current motif in Old English verse tradition at the time Aldhelm was composing, and that both Aldhelm and the Beowulf poet modelled their dragons upon it.”<sup>190</sup> Aldhelm’s dragons are also quasi-allegorical, in that they are described as “serpent of gluttony” and of the “ferocious adder of pride”<sup>191</sup> and as such associated with evil. They also present a physical threat (“which prevents them from becoming completely allegorical”<sup>192</sup>). The same can be said of the dragon in Beowulf, and Pascual again uses this similarity to argue for the poem’s early composition.

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<sup>187</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 80 of Introduction.

<sup>188</sup> R. Fulk, et al. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 80 of Introduction.

<sup>189</sup> Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. 17.

<sup>190</sup> Pascual, “Material Monsters and Semantic Shifts.” 214.

<sup>191</sup> Pascual, “Material Monsters and Semantic Shifts.” 215.

<sup>192</sup> Pascual, “Material Monsters and Semantic Shifts.” 215.

“In the context of this allegory, it is often argued, Beowulf’s defeat is a moral judgement brought on by his own pride and avarice.”<sup>193</sup>

To the characters, the dragon is a physical threat, and may even be a portent of the war which is to come, but it is unlikely they associate any spiritual danger with it. Beowulf does have a moment of doubt when he hears of the dragon attacking his land, fearing that he went “against old law” (39), but that is quickly cleared up once he learns of the theft. His moment of spiritual questioning is left ambiguous as we never really learn what kind of “old law” the poet has in mind. But in a strictly Christian sense, by this lack of introspection, “Beowulf demonstrates that he has learned little of the true nature of evil. He does not even consider prayer, fasting, or penitence but resolves to meet the dragon in combat as soon as possible.”<sup>194</sup> He does not see the evil coming from within (his own sin), only from without. This might be an allusion to the warning Hrothgar had given him about pride and avarice. As Beowulf learns of the dragon’s attacks, he decides to fight him all by himself. The poet says that he: “scorned to seek the far-flyer with a troop, a large army” (40) to help him defeat the intruder. Many see this decision to seek personal glory instead of delegating this task, to put his life at risk, as irresponsible and needlessly endangering his entire people. When his men abandon him in his moment of need, we see more internal weakness that is perhaps symptomatic of a crumbling society. On the other hand, facing danger head on is what has always paid off for Beowulf, and it is arguably the best he can do given his limited knowledge. Bravery in the face of insurmountable odds is certainly presented as admirable. It is a heroic value that is endorsed by Christianity. The fact that Beowulf loses is a risk every hero must be willing to take, as “lasting glory is won only under conditions where one’s life is in doubt.”<sup>195</sup> Even Tolkien writes

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<sup>193</sup> Earl, “Transformation of Chaos: Immanence and Transcendence in Beowulf and Other Old English Poetry.” 183.

<sup>194</sup> William Reynolds, “HEROISM IN ‘BEOWULF’: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE.” *Christianity and Literature* 27.4 (1978) 36. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26290046>. Accessed 24 Jun. 2022.

<sup>195</sup> O’Brien O’Keeffe, “Heroic Values and Christian Ethics.” 109.

that “the wages of heroism is death.”<sup>196</sup> Beowulf’s self-sacrifice is primarily motivated not by desire for glory but by a willingness to protect his people. Beowulf’s attitude to the treasure itself may also be interpreted in a number of ways. “Those critics taking an ascetic Christian stance can condemn treasure as evil.”<sup>197</sup> However throughout the rest of the poem, the giving of treasure is presented as an obligation every good king must perform. Niles writes that “a king who does not distribute treasure scarcely deserves the title of king. Giving gifts is an act of the highest social importance.”<sup>198</sup> Beowulf’s desire for the treasure is likewise motivated by wanting to protect his people, to secure their needs after he is gone, not for his own personal gain, as he is clearly resigned to death. He says: “Now that I have bought the hoard of treasures with my old life, you attend to the people’s needs hereafter: I can be here no longer” (47). Wiglaf’s decision to bury the treasure with Beowulf may seem like Beowulf’s last wishes were disregarded but according to the customs of their society, a king must not be sent off on his journey to the afterlife empty handed, as we are shown with Scyld’s funeral in the beginning. Wiglaf’s choosing of the formerly cursed treasure, the spoils of war, as Beowulf’s parting gift could symbolise a wish to bury the legacy of feud and warring.

After Beowulf’s death, his people speak of him as “the mildest of men and the gentlest, kindest to his people, and most eager for fame.” (52) Beowulf succeeded as a king, as he brought peace and prosperity to his community for many years. However, the ending also brings to mind Hrothgar’s warning that glory is temporary and that one should seek ‘eternal gains.’ The fame Beowulf gained is probably not eternal, since the poet lets us know all his people are going to die out, and soon there might not be anyone left to tell the tale. The fact that the treasure was buried by a lone survivor of an extinct race, who no one remembers anymore, suggests this possibility. The point being made here seems to be that all earthly things

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<sup>196</sup> Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, 26.

<sup>197</sup> Hume, “The Theme and Structure of ‘Beowulf.’” 19.

<sup>198</sup> Niles. *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition*, 214.

are only temporary, and one should seek to transcend one's earthly existence. To the audience, the detailed accounts of past and future feuds and wars demonstrate that Beowulf's society is trapped in an endless cycle of violence. It is filled with too much irresolvable feud and strife, and a symbolic death of values that encourage this is necessary in order to move to a more enlightened stage.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this thesis, I have looked at the different functions and meanings the monsters of Beowulf have in the poem. By giving these formerly Germanic monsters a scriptural history, the poet was able to elevate the conflict of the story into the Great Feud, and a part of the battle between good and evil. This elevation is only known to the poem's audience, as such knowledge would not have been accessible to sixth century Danes and Swedes. This separation of perspectives allows us to examine the sometimes contrasting heroic and Christian values, to find commonalities but also see where the old could be improved by the new.

When Christianity came to Anglo-Saxon England, it had to reckon with a society which valued loyalty to kin, bravery and heroic deeds, and did not resonate with the moral ideals that Christianity aspires to, such as altruism or the principle of turning the other cheek. Much less with the concept of individual salvation, which went against their concepts of *comitatus* and *êre*. Therefore, the missionaries had to adapt, and find parallels to make Christianity more palatable to the heathen warriors. The warrior mentality permeated the Anglo-Saxon society, as it consisted of small kingdoms and clans who were in constant conflict but was undergoing a shift to a more 'political' organisation. Christianity appealed to this society by positioning itself as a cult of the strongest god, but it also would have been attractive to rulers who wanted to wield more systematic power. Despite condemning heathen practices throughout the period, we can see that in reality, the native culture influenced Christianity just as much as the other way around. The ambivalent approach of Christianity towards Anglo-Saxon society can be

observed in *Beowulf*, as many aspects of it are praised, but others implicitly condemned. It is therefore not surprising that “*Beowulf* is a smooth blend of pagan/secular elements with Christian ones.”<sup>199</sup> This blend is primarily evident in the monsters in the poem, which are in a mid-point between being material beings of Germanic folklore and spiritual demons of Christianity.

Because monsters represent universal fears, and are an integral part of most world mythologies, (and also because mediaeval people believed them to truly exist) Christianity could not disregard them but had to somehow integrate them into its worldview. They became part of God’s larger plan, part of his creation and not contrary to nature, as in the tradition of Augustine or Isidore, who assumed they must have a purpose, which is to remind people of their sins. In countries that were converted later and where paganism was still prevalent, monsters were made into demons, enemies of God, associated with heathenism and having no larger purpose to God’s plan. In *Beowulf*, all these views are intermingled, as on the British Isles, all these influences were present. The monsters in *Beowulf* are undergoing a transition from the material to the spiritual domain. They are all at once the monsters of pagan folk mythology, portents of Isidore, and simply evil-spirits, enemies of God.

The Grendel-kin are associated with the hostility of nature, they are predators who prey on humans, coming out at night and attacking when people are most vulnerable. Grendel’s attack on Heorot, the heart of civilised life, symbolises the chaotic forces of nature that humans have to struggle against. The Grendel-kin’s habitation in the dark moors further confirms this, as it is presented as a world outside the human realm. However, Grendel is also human, or at least humanoid, and that along with his biblical ancestry gives his antics another dimension. He is one who has rejected social order, or rather been cast out of it. He chooses not to follow the societal code of conduct, the rules established for keeping order. Given the scriptural

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<sup>199</sup> Irving Jr., “Christian and Pagan Elements.” 191.

pedigree he receives from the poet, which makes him a descendant of Cain and therefore a result of fratricide, his acts of troublemaking are presented as sin which makes the audience see that such behaviour threatens both a heroic/pagan and Christian society. His presence draws attention to the darkness present in human society; the threat he poses is also coming from within. Grendel's mother's behaviour is presented in a more sympathetic way; her thirst for vengeance is commonplace among the humans is highlighted by the Finn and Heathobard digressions. Both serve as portents, calling attention to and foreshadowing the characters' wrongdoings.

The dragon is Beowulf's last opponent that he faces in his old age. In a way, the dragon is the successor of Grendel, as he too attacks a king's hall after fifty years of good rule, the reason being an ancient unresolved feud. He attacks Beowulf's land like an invader and is thus a portent of war that has been plaguing the society. The dragon episode makes Beowulf mirror Hrothgar's fate, and we are reminded of the warnings Hrothgar gave to Beowulf upon Grendel-kin being slain. Though the characters view him as a physical threat, the dragon is associated with Christian evil, the kind of spiritual evil they are not aware of. Though Beowulf slays the dragon and gains treasure for his people, there is still danger looming ahead and the end of the Geats is foretold.

Though Beowulf is successful at slaying physical monsters, his ignorance of the spiritual danger they represent leads him to only temporary victories. The heroic values of his society are to be admired, however they alone cannot ensure lasting peace and cannot grant eternal salvation. The poet celebrates his ancestors' courage in the face of overwhelming odds, but nudges us to consider whether those alone are enough to keep the forces of darkness at bay.



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