The Purpose of Comparison Between Grendel, the Dragon, and the Hero in *Beowulf**

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to challenge assumptions that dilute these characters as mere antagonists of an ancient epic, this article analyzes the functions of two of the main monsters within *Beowulf*: Grendel and the dragon. By employing research ranging from historical to literary alongside close reading methodologies, readers can find parallels between the noble warrior, Beowulf, and his adversaries. Considering these parallels, guided by an understanding of societal virtues relevant to the early centuries of pagan Scandinavia, this piece determines whether these comparisons are deliberate measures on behalf of the *Beowulf*-poet to accentuate the hero's righteous qualities. Through the personification of corruption and mirroring characteristics linking Beowulf and his opponents, the *Beowulf*-poet appears to illustrate the differences between an upstanding ruler and rapacious killer. By clarifying these foils, supported by historic reports related to the poem's creation in ancient civilization, this article contends that the *Beowulf* monsters are measures for contextualizing the story and gleaning insight pertaining to bygone ideas of goodness and nobility. This paper finds that Beowulf's adversaries serve as literary tools for his characterization and provide significant knowledge related to moral conventions of ancient societies for readers of the 21st century.

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The study of literary monsters is expansive and ongoing. Still to this day, new perspectives and interpretations are brought forward that can entirely reshape the meaning of a text. As these examinations continue to develop, many critics have found themselves returning to the ancient classic *Beowulf*. Taking place during the fifth and sixth centuries of pagan Scandinavia, *Beowulf* tells the epic tale of a noble hero, Beowulf, and his treacherous conquests against monstrous foes. The story begins as Beowulf arrives at the land of the Danes to assist the king, Hrothgar, in taking back his great hall, Heorot, from the monster, Grendel. Beowulf continues to fight Grendel's hell-bent mother and later battles a bloodthirsty dragon that is torturing his kingdom. The poem has been long recognized as a staple of Old English literature and history.

With regard to *Beowulf*, the monsters were once thought of as irrelevant—merely frightening rivals serving as entertainment for audiences. Generally, it was not until writer and philologist J.R.R. Tolkien presented his lecture, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," in which he argues for the study of *Beowulf* and its monsters as not only a historical document but also literary art, that scholars began taking heed of the narrative's mythical creatures.

Coincidentally, these analyses have spotlighted the importance of these characters for understanding *Beowulf* as both literature *and* history, providing insight to both ancient culture and Beowulf's character. One aspect that has gained special attention is the consistent habit of the *Beowulf*-poet to draw parallels between the monsters and the main character. While these connections exist between Beowulf and all the monsters, Grendel and the dragon work to define heroism in a way that Grendel's mother falls short. Though she can be used as commentary on the patriarchal hierarchy associated with the Middle Ages, she does not necessarily work to characterize Beowulf as a hero in the same way as the other monsters. With respect to Grendel and the dragon, it is evident that their likeness to Beowulf serves to emphasize his heroism as a warrior and leader; Grendel by showcasing Beowulf's redemption and motivations for violence and the dragon by illustrating Beowulf's lack of greed, his established legacy, and his submission to fate.

Grendel and Beowulf come from somewhat similar origins. The former's existence is attributed to the biblical sin of Cain. As John Friedman points out, "[This] means that they [Grendelkin] belong to the same species as their victims" (106). Though he once lived amongst the race of giants, he was eventually exiled to the wilderness (*Beowulf* 105). Beowulf, similarly, is known to have a controversial predecessor; "Your father struck up the greatest of feuds, / when he killed Heatholaf by his own hand" (459-460).

Ecgtheow, like Cain, committed a crime (in Ecgtheow's case, being unable to pay *wergild*) and was consequently exiled. Though they are certainly on different levels, and Ecgtheow was later absolved while Cain was not, "the basic act is the same," and worthy of comparison (Bruce). Beowulf was somewhat socially exiled as well, having been "long despised," and thought of as "slothful," and "cowardly" (*Beowulf* 2183-2188). So, Grendel and Beowulf, both being born-from-humans with tainted ancestry and who have been isolated from their community, have similar traumas.

Their response to hardship is comparable as well, as they both use murder as a means of coping. Where Grendel acts out of envy for mankind, Beowulf kills to prove himself a worthy hero. When Grendel is introduced, he is called, "[a] bold demon who waited in darkness / wretchedly suffered all the while, / for every day he heard the joyful din" (*Beowulf* 86-88). Not only is he an exile from the land of giants, but also the land of mankind. He fits in neither society and is constantly reminded of such when hearing the sounds of celebration from Heorot. Friedman observes, "He feels a human emotion—the envy of the exile at the joyous singing and communal feeling of the men in the meadhall" (106). Beowulf, however, continues to disprove his once-assumed inferiority through masterful feats. Unfortunately, readers are not given the complete history of this reinvention. Translator Roy Liuzza leaves a footnote on line 2183, writing "the reasons for ascribing to the hero an unpromising youth, elsewhere not mentioned, are not clear." Here, Liuzza confronts the fact that readers are given little insight into Beowulf's social shortcomings prior to the stories within the poem. Yet, he appears to agree that Beowulf has successfully overcome these beginnings, being consistently admired throughout the epic without his former lowliness being dwelled on. The poet reflects this assumption, writing "Reversal came / to the glorious man for all his griefs" (*Beowulf* 2188-2189). Grendel's killings are born from jealousy and exhibit no moderation. Jacek Olesiejko notes how Grendel serves to oppose the regulatory practices of civilization, writing, "the difference between Grendel and the society drawn by the poet is that Grendel does not recognise money and treasure as the cultural forces that civilise men by regulating violence and preventing feuds" (52). He did not care for peace or compensation (156), nor did he respect the conventions of the society he attacked (168-169). Beowulf, however, commands himself according to the societal expectations of him; he fulfills promises and does not seek to disrupt the order of the throne, evidenced by his refusal of early rulership in lines 2369-2375. Thus, their difference outlines the contrast between evil and heroic murder, and their battle illustrates one between a killer and warrior.

This evident dichotomy is stressed by the likenesses they share throughout the fight. Even before meeting, they are set up as equals to each other. In line 123, the poet states

that Grendel seized thirty men during his first killing spree. Beowulf, in lines 379-380, is described as having "thirty men's strength … in his handgrip." To balance the fight, Beowulf decides to battle without armor and weaponry. These two details work together as the foes clash, hand to hand, as readers are made to imagine what could practically be called a medieval arm-wrestle. This set-up portrays Beowulf and Grendel as reflections of one another, a true fight for heroism against wickedness. As they fight for control over Heorot, the *Beowulf*-poet continues the parallels through overt comparisons such as, "Both were angry, / fierce house-wardens" (769-770). This presents yet another mirror, calling to attention the fact that Grendel made himself a warden of Heorot through merciless force whereas Beowulf was granted the status through his bravery (Bruce). As the climax of the battle builds, the poet outlines Grendel's and Beowulf's rage: "Hateful to each / was the life of the other" (814-815). Tension is sustained as readers see that the primary difference between these opponents may not be strength or attitude as much as it is their virtue. Beowulf's eventual victory serves to alleviate this suspense, proving heroism can overcome the sin of envy and solidifying him as a noble warrior.

The dragon, a legendary motif within the Middle Ages, can be understood through a more historical lens. In *Beowulf*, it is said that the dragon came across the riches by accident, having unearthed the buried treasures of a lost civilization and laying claim to all that was there. Thomas Keller, in his analysis of the *Beowulf* dragon, asserts that its behavior aligns with typical expectations. In his words, "This is a very common attribute for Scandinavian dragons; they guard treasure in funeral mounds" (219). Keller then goes on to reference a point originally brought up by Tolkien, in which he refers to the medieval dragon as "… a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and the undiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good from bad (the evil aspect of all life)" (15). One can see how the dragon's hoarding is a clear representation of avarice. His overwhelming rage and destruction disproportionate to the assault he suffered demonstrates his immense greed. Though he is initially after only one man, the ruin he leaves in his pursuit is imbalanced. He was "greedy to find / the man who had sorely harmed him" (*Beowulf*2294-2295), and so he "would leave nothing alive" (2315). His gluttony then contributes to the vigor of his revenge, leading him to set fire to everything in a blind rage.

This attitude is echoed in Beowulf himself. Seeing the dragon's demolition, "his beast within groaned / with dark thoughts—that was not his custom" (*Beowulf* 2331-2332). Both Beowulf and the dragon are rulers who are brought to rage when their "halls" are disrespected (Bruce). The dragon rules his heap of treasure before his territory is trespassed and looted in the night, which he feels must be atoned with fire. Likewise,

Beowulf rules the land that the dragon incinerates in the darkness and feels he must avenge the dragon's actions by slaying the beast. Moreover, they are both respected as extremely powerful. Historically, dragons were used within medieval cultures "as processional figures and emblems on battle standards and heraldic devices. These usages draw on the concept of the dragon as a symbol of power" (Bildhauer 198). Dragons were respected beasts, capable of the utmost devastation. Beowulf, too, gained immense respect for his mental and physical power. He is known as "a wise king" (2209), and throughout earlier sections is regarded as "he who was the strongest of might among men" (789). Their principal difference lies in their priorities or what it is that they value. In some sense, they both seek treasure, but how they do so and what it is they do with that treasure demonstrates the differences between greed and righteous rulership.

Through their respective attitudes towards riches, Beowulf displays an honorable king's priorities to his reputation and citizens as it compares to the rapacity of a lowly beast. The dragon seeks wealth on account of his natural instinct, and his wrath conveys his craving for ownership. As the *Beowulf*-poet writes, the dragon feels that the thief "sorely harmed him" (2295). He sees the violation as a disrespect to his authority as ruler. Beowulf, in comparison, shows himself to be rather disinterested in riches. When defeating Grendel's mother in her mere, described to be full of fortune, the poet says, "The man of the Geats took no more precious treasures / from that place—though he saw many there— / than the head, and the hilt as well" (1612-1615). He only takes those trophies that speak to his greatness and success. The wealth that Beowulf acquires throughout his life is merely a byproduct of his heroism, rather than something he sought and cared for like the dragon. When the dragon terrorizes his land, it is not the lost gems Beowulf is enraged by, but the fact that his citizens have been left defenseless and frightened. His anger comes from his being a caring lord rather than being menacing like the dragon; he seeks to claim the treasure in his last moments, and it is not for personal want (Bruce). Rather, he sees it as a victory for his subjects, saying, "Now that I have sold my old lifespan / for this hoard of treasures, they will attend / to the needs of my people" (2798-2801). He views the wealth won from the fight as an opportunity for his citizens, not for his own collection. Keller offers a possible explanation for this difference as he explains how the dragon is more beast-like than Grendel; he expresses that the dragon should be thought of as amoral, similar to a disease (220). From this, one can conclude that the dragon can also be thought of as a ruler devoid of humanity. Contrary to Beowulf, who serves as the leader of a society that could benefit from opulence, the dragon is simply a creature acting on instinctive greed fueling his want for dominance and control.

Unlike the battle between Beowulf and Grendel though, Beowulf does not leave the dragon's cave victorious. Notably, Beowulf's death at the hands of the dragon serves to grant the hero a noble death. As Keller asserts, "The significance of the dragon in *Beowulf* is that it is the appropriate adversary for a heroic king. It is, by nature, huge, fierce and evil. In short, it is the perfect counterpart to Beowulf, and it will provide the harrowing circumstances necessary for a heroic but triumphant death" (228). The dragon, undeniably the most ferocious of the monsters in *Beowulf*, is meant to provide a realistic yet honorable death for the seemingly unbeatable warrior. Beowulf is maintained as nearly superhuman—his strength and reputation exceed his peers and grant him immense fame. With this characterization, only the greatest of enemies could defeat him without tarnishing his legacy. In Medieval society, dragons were viewed as largely unconquerable, and those warriors who managed such a feat were to be considered incredible (Bildhauer 198). Tolkien goes as far to say that triumph over a dragon was "the chief deed of the greatest of heroes" (13). The *Beowulf*-poet's choice to parallel these two through statements such as, "Each of the two / hostile ones stood in horror of the other," and referring to them as "two great creatures" (2564-2592), emphasizes Beowulf's heroism by implying that he is a worthy opponent to the great beast. Even though it was his own demise as well, having slain the beast leaves him with a well-secured legacy.

This balanced death of both the dragon and Beowulf additionally establishes Beowulf's heroism through his lack of greed for life. Before facing the dragon, Beowulf exclaims to his men that, "I will not flee a single foot, but for us / it shall be at the wall as wryd decrees" (2525-2526). He submits himself to fate, whatever it may choose for him. During the battle with the dragon, when Beowulf had three chances to flee, he stands his ground. When Wiglaf arrives on the scene, Beowulf still does not give up but rather fights alongside the younger man to defeat the beast together. This type of submission was a pillar within Medieval heroism. As Keller explains, "A proud refusal to struggle against fate seems to have been one of the most admired characteristics of Icelandic heroes in general. To go unflinchingly to their doom with foreknowledge of it was the only way of proving themselves superior to it" (228). Though Beowulf's death is inevitable, he does not lament, nor does he show fear. Instead, he reflects on his life and declares that he is joyful, for "the Ruler of men need not reproach [him]" (2741). Beowulf leaves his body with gratitude for his accomplishments and lordly commandment for what should follow his death. Unlike the dragon, who sets fires for nothing but gold, Beowulf refrains from allowing his want for life to overtake his heroism, instead accepting what is to come and departing honorably.

Viewing the monster as complex rather than a mere villain proves effective in understanding societal values and ideals of heroism as they exist within *Beowulf*. Grendel is more than an antagonist for the sake of battle; he is a symbol of what could have come from Beowulf's social exile. His likeness to the hero only highlights those qualities that make Beowulf a hero and Grendel a monster. The same can be said for the dragon, representing greed for wealth and power while acting as a foil to Beowulf, who is led by kingship and bravery rather than his own desires. The continued parallels act as a method of highlighting Beowulf's heroism through his lack of envious rage and selfish cravings, proving Grendel and the dragon as vital components of this epic poem. Contrary to former assumptions, the *Beowulf* monsters prove to characterize Beowulf through collation, in which the societal values of ancient civilization are illuminated. In this way, analysis of *Beowulf* beasts works to situate the text within the context of Old English societies, providing audiences with further insight into what is largely a blank page of history alongside a rich and complex characterization of nobility.

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