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The Monsters of *Beowulf*

Creations of Literary Scholars

"HISTORY IS THE FRAME and the background, and the canvas is occupied by a couple of folktales seemingly as old as humanity," wrote Ritchie Girvan of *Beowulf*,[1] but literary scholars have had a hand in its delineation also. It is they who put the monsters in this greatest of Old English poems. Indeed, the word "monster" does not appear in English until the fourteenth century; to get it into *Beowulf* along with the creatures represented by the word, they had to go to Latin for *monstrum*—and even there it originally meant "a divine portent or warning."[2]

Although world folklore appears to accept "monsters" of a semi-supernatural sort, such as Grendel and the dragon, it is nevertheless possible, within the framework of freedom of inquiry, to challenge such acceptance. Recognition of this possibility may be implied in the observation by Melville Jacobs that "folkloristic writings are burdened with a dogma that folklores have animal, ogre, or monster actors."[3] Since *Beowulf* scholars generally agree that the Grendel tale is "an ancient and widespread type of story,"[4] and since dragons have been featured in literature and art from antiquity to the present, I decided that it would be intertesting to try to find out whether or not these creatures might have a factual basis.

In an earlier study[5] I undertook to follow some of the paths and trails of such an exploration by drawing on both humanistic sources and scientific reference material provided by anthropologists, archeologists, climatologists, demographers, paleontologists, and zoologists. I reached the tentative conclusion that there is indeed evidence supporting a basis in fact for the protagonists of the two major folktales in *Beowulf*. A study of this nature reaches out in so many directions that it is necessary to proceed only so far along one line, in order to be able to follow this track and that in a given amount of time. Understandably, much more research is required, especially in view of the dearth of such literary-scientific investigations, a condition deplored by some scholars.[6]

In the course of my study I discovered that the text of the *Beowulf* epic itself has apparently not been examined from the point of view of a basis in fact. This type of study, too, could fill years instead of weeks, but this aspect of the paring down or peeling back to the origin of these "monsters" is intended to be only a

beginning of what has been declared by some scholars as "impossible" and by others as "useless"—crushing or challenging terms, depending on the nature of the researcher.

With hardly any exceptions, scholarship in regard to Grendel, his mother, and the dragon is based on Christian allusions made by the *Beowulf* poet, often debatable scholarly emendations of the text, and highly interpretative translations and adaptations. Therefore, a logical starting point in an examination of the text is the recognition of literary accretions that may be attributed to scholars who have altered folk tradition to suit themselves. Since the *Beowulf* poet is the earliest acknowledged scholar connected with the poem, we should review his work first. The efforts of scribes who copied the extant manuscript, scholars who translated the poem, and critics who based their theories on the labor of scribes and scholars will be discussed briefly. The result of this analysis, while not conclusive, may be the raising of serious doubts about present stereotyped thinking on the subject of the "monsters" of *Beowulf*.

The Christian references in the poem have led scholars to believe that the *Beowulf* poet must have been a Christian. Since Grendel, his mother, and the dragon admittedly antedate both the poet and Christianity, Christian references to them are literary accretions. Examples of what we may place in this category are Grendel's descent from Cain, his being at war with God, his retreat to a rabble of "devils," his final judgment by the Lord, and the sword found in Grendel's cave on which is engraved the biblical stories of the giants and the flood. H. L. Rogers believes that the poet made Grendel a foe of God through line 1816 of the text, but that later references to him were as a creature of folktale.[7] He also feels that the Christian influence affects Grendel's mother to a lesser degree and the dragon not at all, unless one considers the dragon as the symbol of the archfiend.

Except for a conscious effort to work Christianity into his poem, the *Beowulf* poet retold the history and folklore of his people as accurately as he could[8] without the assistance of twentieth-century transcription techniques and devices. The poet's confusing description of Grendel's abode, a cave penetrated only after a plunge into the mere, may be explained by his lack of familiarity with the foreign topography of the land of origin of the Grendel tale or by the confusion of his informant or source. A corresponding description in the closely related episode of the Icelandic *Grettissaga* may clarify the setting of this portion of the story for the reader.

Added to problems arising from badly damaged pages of the manuscript, problems resolved to the satisfaction of most scholars by educated guesses as to what the missing words or lines were, is the controversial issue of scribal errors and inconsistencies. An examination of the manuscript in the second edition of Zupitza's facsimile[9] and a sampling of scholarship on the manuscript and scribal errors provide convincing evidence that some disputes may never be settled. One example affecting Grendel, his mother, and the dragon is the varied spellings of the words *gaest* and *gǣst* as *gest, giest, gist, gyst,* and *gāst,* which contribute to the difficulty of deciding whether a meaning of "stranger" or "spirit" is intended. Another questionable word, applied to Grendel's mother, is *brimwyl* (line 1506), emended to *brimwylf,* "sea-wolf," presumably because the spelling *brimwylf* appears in line 1599. Since the account of Beowulf's struggle with Grendel's mother includes, in

line 1519, the descriptive noun *merewīf,* "sea-woman," it is possible that the scribe should have written *brimwīf*, "ocean-woman." Such perplexities as these contribute to the reasonable doubt one may have as to the true nature of the "monsters."

After eliminating Christian allusions to Grendel, his mother, and the dragon, and after recognizing possibilities of scribal error and controversial scholarly emendations, we may now consider interpretations of the text by translators and adaptors. The influence of these interpretations is not readily apparent to the average reader of a translation that is purported to be faithful to the text. I shall summarize rather copious and detailed notes into a brief analysis of translations of a few words used in connection with Grendel, his mother, and the dragon, the emphasis being on Grendel. The words are *fēond, āglæca, fīfelcyn, eoten, gaest, wer, guma,* and *ides.* In order to avoid repetition I shall provide a random sampling of these words from the text of the poem. For example, I shall limit my discussion of *fēond* to lines 101, 164, and 725, although there are twenty-four occurrences of the word.

Fēond was originally the present participle of the Old English verb *fēon* ("to hate") and its meaning is "enemy." Although dictionaries recommend the translation of *fēond* as "fiend" in later Old English works like *Guthlac* and the *Leechdom Hymns* because of their religious nature and definite reference to Satan, they suggest "enemy" for the same word in *Beowulf*. However, of twenty-two translations and adaptations consulted, only two translate *fēond* as "enemy" or "foe" in lines 101 and 725, while sixteen use "fiend" in both cases and others use "demon," "devil," and "spirit." On the other hand, *fēond* in line 164 is translated "enemy" or "foe" by the majority, because the context makes it mandatory (*fēond mancynnes,* "enemy of mankind"). *Fēond*, in all three cases, refers to Grendel.

The fact that "fiend" is a modern derivative of *fēond* does little to recommend it as an accurate meaning of the Old English word and its association with the Satan or Devil of the Christian faith makes it unacceptable in reference to a pre-Christian figure. Therefore, it seems that the interpretation of *fēond* as "fiend" must be replaced by the translation "enemy" ("foe," "adversary"), if we are to trace the origin and true nature of the folktale Grendel.

From twenty-one occurrences of *āglæca* I have selected lines 433, 893, and 2520 to illustrate the double standard maintained in the interpretation of this word. The compound *āglæcwīf*, line 1259, is also mentioned. *Āglæca* is traced from the Gothic *aglo* ("trouble") and Old Norse *agi* ("terror") and *lâc* ("gift," "sport") to a meaning of "misery" or "vexation" and on to "bringer of trouble."[10] Dictionaries suggest translations of "monster," "demon," and "wretch" for references to Grendel and the dragon, but "great hero" and "mighty warrior" in regard to Sigemund, Beowulf, and Beowulf and the dragon together. Nevertheless, Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie concludes that ". . . in the historical period of Anglo-Saxon it [*āglæca*] did not need to have any more specific meaning than 'formidable (one)'."[11]

"Monster" prevails in the above-mentioned translations and adaptations for lines 433 and 2520, referring respectively to Grendel and to the dragon. In contrast, for line 893 "hero," "warrior," or "champion" are of highest frequency. Benjamin Thorpe's translation appears to be the only one in which no marked differentiation in meaning is indicated between the references to Grendel or the dragon and the one to Sigemund.[12] Two thirds of the translators describe Grendel's

mother as a "monster" or "monstrous" (*āglǣcwīf*, line 1259), while others use variations like "troll-wife," "witch-wife," "dam of evil," "female horror," "vile crone," "ogress," or "terrible woman."

Since neither the etymology of *āglǣca* nor the text of the poem seems to justify these different translations, Dobbie's "formidable (one)" or some synonymous word or phrase may more clearly convey the meaning intended by the *Beowulf* poet. This change should help to give a more just picture of Grendel, his mother, and the dragon.

Fīfelcyn (*fīfelcynnes*, line 104), a word found only in *Beowulf*, is most frequently defined as "a race of (sea) monsters." American, British, and German dictionaries record the fact the *fīfel* is derived from or related to the Icelandic (Old Norse) *fífl*, meaning either "fool, clown, boor" or "monster, giant," but three Scandinavian-edited dictionaries of Old Norse and Icelandic do not suggest meanings of "monster" or "giant."[13] They give "simpleton," "fool," "clown," and "madman" for *fífl* and list many other words with the same root, all containing the meaning or idea of folly: *fífla, fíflahlátur, fíflalaeti, fífldirfska, fífldjarfur, fíflska, fíflskaparmál, fíflslegur, áeggjunarfífl, fífldjarfr, fífling, fíflskapr, fíflskr*, and *fíflyrði*.

Of the translations checked, most favor "monster," "sea-monster," and "giant" for *fīfel*. In none of the translations, adaptations, or criticism have I been able to find any discussion of the possibility of translating *fīfelcyn* as "foolish race" or "race of simpletons," rather than as "race of monsters." The acceptance of the latter interpretation appears to be unanimous, although the context could support the former. The lack of scholarly research on this subject may suggest a need for re-examining the background of this word. Herbert Dean Meritt comments: "Once a word is placed in a dictionary the very fact of its niche there tends to induce its inclusion in later dictionaries and to give it a usually quite fitting garb of authenticity; not all of them deserve it."[14] Whether or not this is true in the case of *fífl* and *fīfel* remains to be seen, but in the meantime I shall consider a translation of "foolish folk" as a distinct possibility for *fīfelcyn*. The supernatural aura surrounding this folk may be thereby rapidly dispersed.

Discussions regarding the common noun *eoten* and what has been determined to be the proper noun *Eotan* (not seen in this form and not capitalized in the *Beowulf* manuscript) seem to be inconclusive, although there is general acceptance of a distinction between them. *Eotan* is usually translated "Jutes" and *eoten* (also spelled *eten*) "giant" or "monster." *Eoten,* a cognate of Old Norse *iǫtunn* and Swedish *jätte*, both meaning "giant," is traced to the Old English verb *etan*, "to eat." Schoning bases his theory that all giants were "corpse-eaters"[15] on this etymology. If cannibalism or "corpse-eating" did give rise to *eoten,* then this word is an apt one to apply to Grendel.

For the four instances of *eoten*, translations of "monster" and "giant" prevail, with a scattering of "ogres," "trolls," "titans," fiends," and the like. It has been easier to add *eoten* to the growing list of words neatly disposed of by translating them as "monster" or as some other vague supernatural and fearsome creature than to ponder on the real meaning of the word. If *eoten* has the same root as *etan*, "to eat," and does perhaps point to some connection with cannibalism, then it is possible that the word originally applied to man-eating primitives. In this case,

"blood-thirsty one" or "cannibal" could be used to translate *eoten*. This interpretation is no more conjectural than the traditional and increasingly tiresome "monster" and "giant" and it does bring these creatures back into the real world.

Summaries of scholarship concerned with the problem of distinguishing between *gaest* (*gest, giest, gist, gyst*) and *gǣst* (*gāst*) show that critics are divided, with some translating *gǣst* whenever in doubt and others *gaest*.[16] For the most part, dictionaries define *gǣst* as "spirit, ghost, demon" and *gaest* as "guest, stranger, enemy."

The following three examples of (-)*gaest* refer to Grendel or Grendel and his mother. For the *-gaest* of *ellengaest*, line 86, twelve translators choose "spirit" and others "fiend," "demon," "monster," "Hobgoblin," "guest," "being," and "creature." *Gaest*, line 102, and *ellorgaestas*, line 1349, are most often translated "spirit(s)," with a few "monster(s)," "fiend(s)," "goblin(s)," "being(s)," and "guest(s)."

An arbitrary decision that (-)*gaest* should always be interpreted as (-)*gǣst* or that it should be so interpreted when used in reference to Grendel and his mother may be convenient, but it may also interfere with the accurate representation of the characters or creatures described. The choice of such deliberately supernatural-oriented translations as "fiend," "monster," and "goblin" is misleading. Even "spirit" may be construed as a "ghost" rather than as a real being because of the environment of other words translated in a slanted way. It would seem that "stranger" or "spirit," depending on the context and not on any fixed formula, might more adequately convey the poet's intended meaning of *gaest* or *gǣst* without prejudicing the reader and might thereby provide a clearer picture of the creatures of folktale.

Wer, used fifteen times, is defined as "man, male being, husband." There seems to be no controversy over the meaning of the word. However, translations vary between the two instances in which *wer* refers to Grendel. In line 1352, where Grendel is described as being *on weres waestmum*, "in the form of a man," eighteen scholars use "man" and one uses "human." In line 105, on the other hand, where Grendel is a *wonsaeli wer*, "unhappy man," only two scholars use "man," while others choose "creature," "being," "wight," "wretch," and "(forlorn) flesh." The context of line 1352 leaves no room for free interpretation as does line 105. One may agree that "creature," "being," "wight," "wretch," and "(forlorn) flesh" at least indicate the world of reality, but the vagueness of these words does little else to express the poet's idea of Grendel.

Guma, used thirty-six times, refers to Grendel twice (lines 973 and 1682) and is defined as "man, human being." In line 973 "creature" is used by six scholars, "man" by four, "being" by three, and "wretch," "caitiff," and "one" by others. The same comment as that made concerning translations of *wer* applies to those of *guma*.

Ides, used eight times by the poet both for regal ladies and for Grendel's mother, means simply "woman." The context of line 1351 explains the choice of "woman('s)" in seventeen translations, but not so much chivalry is evident in line 1259 where only twelve use "woman" and others write "she-(monster, Thing)," "female," "witch," "beldam," and "dam."

The "monster" influence pervading interpretations of *Beowulf*, as can be seen

by the above examples, is also noticeable in the translation of what should be uncontroversial words. *Folm* means "hand" or "palm of the hand." In line 745 *folma*, referring to Grendel's victim, is rendered "hands" by the translators, but in line 748 *folme*, referring to Grendel himself, is translated "hands" by only ten, "fist" by one, "claws" by six, and "talons" and "fang" by others. *Hond* ("hand"), sometimes translated "claw" in line 834, and *eardode* ("inhabited"), sometimes translated "haunted" in line 166, are additional examples of words whose interpretations may be considered literary accretions. The "drooling spit" and "red ferocious eyes and ravening jaws" of Grendel and the "hairy chest" and "shaggy frame" of Grendel's mother heighten the horror of these creatures, but have no textual basis whatsoever.

Criticism regarding Grendel, his mother, and the dragon seems to fall into two main categories, the one treating of symbolic interpretation of these creatures and the other examining parallels and analogues in folklore. The ultimate origin of Grendel, his mother, and the dragon is not a matter of concern in either group. Symbolic interpretation is based on Christian allusions and the interpretative translations of key words of the type discussed above, while the comparison of episodes corresponding to those in which Grendel, his mother, and the dragon play their parts is limited primarily to the related folktales, although a few scholars have expressed an interest in a connection between the dragon's barrow and Stone Age treasure and burial mounds. Knut Stjerna's study of archeological counterparts for almost everything in *Beowulf*[17] is in a class by itself and indicates his belief in a possible basis in fact for much of the folktale material of the poem.

Now that we have noted many of the literary accretions to be found in connection with Grendel, his mother, and the dragon, what do we have left? Since we can no longer assign Grendel to a descent from Cain, we shall have to depend on the Danes for an account of his origin. The land-dwellers did not know of his father (line 1355), but they had seen Grendel and his mother walking in the nearby wastelands often enough to give him his name. He was surely a large man, but must not have been a real threat to the land-dwellers. The fact that he recognized Heorot as the seat of power of the Danes, not some poor peasant's hut, may be indicative of Grendel's intelligence. His enormous strength, wrestling ability, and blood-thirsty cannibalism are contrasted with his very real pain and anguish on having his arm wrenched off by Beowulf and his agonized return to his cave, where he died.

Grendel's bewitching of the weapons of Beowulf's men, so that they were unable to come to his aid, may have its ultimate origin in a folk rationalization of the hero's men's unwillingness or inability to render assistance. Having feasted and drunk freely of mead the night before, they may have been in no condition to wield their weapons. The hugeness of Grendel's head seems out of proportion to the land-dwellers' more conservative estimate of his size. Either the poet made Grendel's head so large that it took four men to carry it on spear-shafts (lines 1637 ff.), or that was the way the poet had heard the story, inconsistent as it is with the earlier, less astounding description. It is interesting to note that Herodotus writes in the fifth century B.C. of the Neuri, neighbors of the Scythians, who sacrificed human victims and placed the heads on poles.[18] The custom may also be traced to Neanderthal caves where evidence of bears' heads placed on

poles has been found.[19] I have discussed the above examples to point out that, instead of accepting the magical and the incredible as supernatural, a little common sense and sleuthing may be in order.

Grendel's mother, "in the likeness of a woman" (line 1351), grief-stricken, sought revenge for the death of her son and was in turn hunted down and killed by Beowulf. That Grendel and his mother were not the only ones of their kind is revealed in Beowulf's report to Hygelac on his return to the land of the Geats. Beowulf claims that none of Grendel's kin over the earth will be able to boast of the din of that night when he defeated Grendel (lines 2005 ff.).

The *Beowulf* poet's description of the appearance, behavior, and habitat of the dragon is such that the poem is reported to have been valued for its information about natural history.[20] This winged reptile with his hide of variegated colors, hot breath, and venomous bite had minded his own business until he was disturbed in his barrow retreat. The vulnerability of his belly, as opposed to the toughness of his sides and back, is compatible with nature. The traditional dragon trait of spewing forth flames may be a folk means of describing the constant flicking of the tongue common to many reptiles, but the dragon's enormous length of fifty feet may be a wee bit of exaggeration, not unusual in folktales. It is hard to believe that a mortally wounded and aged Beowulf could cut such a large creature through the middle by himself.

A vague and arbitrary assignment of the origin of Grendel, his mother, and the dragon to "remote antiquity" or the "distant past," or conceding the existence of such creatures "from time immemorial" seems out of place in this day when we can strike a target on the moon. A recognition of the likelihood that Germanic invaders encountered primitive indigenous inhabitants in Europe, just as European settlers later encountered the Indians of the Americas, can be a point of departure for further research along this line. A study of climatic changes and the rapidly declining numbers of many species of wildlife in Europe and elsewhere during the last two thousand years may lead to more insight into the existence and plight of the dragon.

There seems to be no reason for assuming that tales of such continuous and everyday occurrences as conflicts between invaders and native inhabitants and between man and beast should be thought of as "figments of imagination" with supernatural overtones, although humanitarian sensibilities of the *Beowulf* poet and succeeding scholars may have been soothed by placing "outside the normal order of things"[21] what really belongs inside.

NOTES

1. Ritchie Girvan, *Beowulf and the Seventh Century; Language and Content* (London, 1935), 57.
2. See *The Oxford English Dictionary*.
3. "A Look Ahead in Oral Literature Research," JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE, LXXIX, No. 313 (July–September, 1966), 422.
4. Raymond Wilson Chambers, *Beowulf, an Introduction to the Poem* (Cambridge, England, 1932), 51.
5. Signe M. Carlson, "The Giant and the Dragon of the Folk Epic" (doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1966).
6. John Greenway, *Literature Among the Primitives* (Hatboro, Pennsylvania, 1964), x, xi.
7. "Beowulf's Three Great Fights," in Lewis E. Nicholson (ed.), *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1963), 250.
8. Kemp Malone, "Beowulf," in Nicholson, 140.

9. Julius Zupitza, *Beowulf, Reproduced in Facsimile from the Unique Manuscript British Museum Ms. Cotton Vitellius A. XV*, The Early English Text Society (2nd ed., London, 1959).

10. James A. Harrison and Robert Sharp (eds.), *I Beowulf: An Anglo-Saxon Poem. II The Fight at Finnsburg: A Fragment* (4th ed., rev., Boston, 1894), glossary.

11. Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie (ed.), *Beowulf and Judith*, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, A Collective Edition, Vol. IV (New York, 1953), 160.

12. *Beowulf, Together with Widsith and the Fight at Finnsburg in the Benjamin Thorpe Transcription and Word-for-Word Translation,* Barron's Educational Series (Great Neck, New York, 1962).

13. Christopher Andreas Holmboe, *Det Norske Sprogs, oaesentligste Ordforraad, sammenlignet med Sanskrit og andre Sprog af samme Aet* (Wien, 1852); Erik Jonsson, *Oldnordisk Ordbog ved det kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab* (Kjöbenhavn, 1863); G. T. Zoëga, *Íslenzk-ensk Orðabók* (Reykjavík, 1904).

14. *Fact and Lore about Old English Words* (Stanford, 1954), viii.

15. *Dödsriger i Nordisk Hedentro* (Kopenhagen, 1903).

16. Johannes Hoops, *Kommentar zum Beowulf* (Heidelberg, 1932), 29.

17. *Essays on Questions Connected with the Old English Poem of Beowulf*, trans. John R. Clark Hall, Viking Club Extra Series, Vol. III (Coventry, 1912).

18. Herodotus, trans. A. D. Godley, (rev. ed., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1957), IV. 103.

19. Herbert Wendt, *In Search of Adam; The Story of Man's Quest for the Truth about His Earliest Ancestors*, trans. James Cleugh (Boston, 1956), 502.

20. William Witherle Lawrence, *Beowulf and Epic Tradition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1928), 14.

21. E. Talbot Donaldson, *Beowulf* (New York, 1966), xi.

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