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Emily Bartz

Beowulf: God, Men, and Monsters

The central conflict of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* is the struggle between the decentralising and supernatural ways of the ancients (Shield Sheafson, Grendel, and Grendel's Mother) and the centralising and corporeal values of the modern heroes (Hrothgar, Beowulf, and Wiglaf.) The poet traces a definitive move away from the ancient's pagan heroic values to his own Christian heroic values. However, as in the poet's contemporary culture, certain pagan traditions, such as familial fidelity, persist in *Beowulf* due to their compatibility with Christian culture.

The poet's audience, the Anglo-Saxons, honoured their pagan ancestors through story telling. The Christian leadership discouraged story telling since the Anglo-Saxons' ancestors were pagans and thus beyond salvation. The poet needed a subtle means of dealing with the obviously pagan and foreign content of the *Ur-Beowulf*. In *Beowulf*, he simultaneously acknowledges God's will and the heroism of the Anglo-Saxons' Norse ancestors. In addition, since the poet had a limited knowledge of Germanic and Norse life, he tells the story through his own Anglo-Saxon perspective (Robinson 142, 151).

Shield Sheafson and the various monsters of old are archetypal violent heroes and chaotic supernatural beasts that freely roam the earth. The monsters of Beowulf's childhood are numerous and free. Beowulf "...bound five beasts, / raided a troll-nest and in the night-sea / slaughtered sea-brutes" (*Beowulf* 420-422). He battled "whale-beasts" and "nine sea-monsters" (*Beowulf* 541, 575). These creatures are free to harass any ship at sea and represent the overwhelming power of the pagan and supernatural. On a practical level, their existence prevents exploration and cultural exchange. On a supernatural level, they leave the people in

paralysing fear. By the twilight of Hrothgar's reign and Beowulf's adulthood, the only monsters left are buried underground, emerging when disturbed from their slumber by the clamour of societal advancement, familial obligation, or human desecration of their supernatural realm. Beowulf arrives at the Danish coast unmolested by any sea-faring creatures. To Hrothgar, despite the evidence of Grendel walking into his mead-hall every night, his mother's existence is so mysterious that Hrothgar did not find it worth mentioning to Beowulf. In *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, Orchard states, "Grendel's crime was precisely to make his secret presence felt" (195). Beowulf wishes he held onto Grendel to show him "panting for life, powerless and clasped / in my bare hands, his body in thrall" (*Beowulf* 964-965). He wanted to reveal Grendel as a physical being, not a mysterious monster of undefeatable magic and terror. The successive defeat of the sea monsters, Grendel, Grendel's Mother, and the Dragon at Beowulf's hand signals the end of the supernatural and pagan's right to enter and terrorise the central parts of society.

The first "Spear-Dane" from "days gone by" is Shield Sheafson, the Moses-like founder of the Danish ruling house (*Beowulf* 1). He is an orphan with unknown origins: "cast... away when he was child and launched... alone out over the waves" (*Beowulf* 45-46). The unwanted child grows up to become a violent and feared man known as the "scourge of many tribes", "wrecker of mead-benches", "rampaging among foes", and a "terror" (*Beowulf* 4-6). Despite his humble origins, he gains the loyalty of many thanes, the recognition of others, and power through his terrifying violence. Danish society is, by Shield Sheafson's accomplishments, permissive of upward social mobility as long as one's "worth [is] proved" (*Beowulf* 8). He proves his worth through violently overcoming neighbouring tribes and "each clan on the outlying coasts... / had to yield to... [and] pay tribute to him" (*Beowulf* 9-11). Obviously, he

did not accomplish this all by himself. Amongst the thanes he fought with, his style was notable enough to terrify other tribes into submission. Shield Sheafson and Beowulf share incredible strength. Shield Sheafson's strength is unrestrained rage. He is repeatedly described, "wrecking mead-halls" (*Beowulf* 4). Beowulf's strength is concentrated and controlled, demonstrated in his "handgrip harder than anything" (*Beowulf* 750). Despite this, Shield Sheafson is, by the poet's admission, "one good king" and his people honour him in death (*Beowulf* 11). Shield Sheafson's violent tendencies dilute in his descendents, Beow and Hrothgar. They are nation builders, not expansionists. They move the people, united under one royal house, towards centralised government.

Beow is tamer than his father, the great Shield Sheafson. He receives the least amount of lines for a major leader but is described as "prudent", a "cub in the yard, a comfort sent by God", "well-regarded" and "gives freely while his father lives" (*Beowulf* 20, 12-13, 54, and 21). Beow is a shrewd man. He sets the precedent for Hrothgar by strategically gaining the favour of thanes through gift giving. Beow's careful endowments ensures he has "steadfast companions" when the "fighting starts", suggesting a great leader's succession is marked with violent power grabs (*Beowulf* 22-23). He maintains his thanes and thus, maintains the order of the land. Beow's policy of currying favour rather than inciting fear and horror in those around him marks a transition away from the Machiavellian methods of his father. The (presumably celibate) poet emphasises Beow's sexual prowess. Beow is "four times a father" (*Beowulf* 59). While his story is a bit dull compared to that of his socially mobile and maniacal father, Beow establishes an economically and politically stable kingdom in which his son, Hrothgar, can construct a magnificent mead-hall for socialisation and government rule.

Hrothgar, Shield Sheafson's grandson, inherited a kingdom that does not know "feud or betrayal" (*Beowulf* 1018). He continues his father's public relations policy and "doled out rings / and torques at the table" (*Beowulf* 81-82). Hrothgar is not a "wrecker of mead-benches" like Shield Sheafson but a mind "turned to hall-building" (*Beowulf* 5, 67). He transforms the Danish nation through centralisation. That is, he builds a mead-hall at the heart of his kingdom; a centre for socialisation and unification. His main talent is not conquering or forcing tribute but constructing structures meant to be "a wonder of the world forever" (*Beowulf* 70).

In a fragmented world of clans, Hrothgar's resolution towards settlement and centralisation is radical. The Christian poet probably emphasised Hrothgar's actions because of the visual and symbolic similarities between the federal power of the mead-hall and the ecclesiastical power of the Church. Hrothgar's reign is marked by reconciliation and appeasement. In Hrothgar's "first flush of kingship, he healed the feud" between the Wulfings and Ecgtheow (Beowulf's father) "by paying" (*Beowulf* 465-466). His main stratagem is monetary compensation, which seems to work as the "fortunes of war favoured Hrothgar" (*Beowulf* 64). Despite the amount of reparations and gifts he pays, he does not have to "dispense... the common land or people's lives" (*Beowulf* 71-72). The arrival of a single supernaturally strong monster of the outer marches striking the heart of his empire is "a hard reversal" because it strikes at all of Hrothgar's social unity (*Beowulf* 1774).

Grendel has a similar effect of the biblical Tower of Babel curse. He scatters and isolates Hrothgar's people. It is "easy then to meet with a man / shifting himself to a safer distance" (*Beowulf* 138-139). Grendel's attacks are not just a reaction to *Pax Heorot* but also the unification of society that Hrothgar represents. Hrothgar cannot reign from his throne in the mead-hall with Grendel's attacks. Irving notes that the poet refers to Grendel as a "hall thane"

after the Danes' evacuation of the mead-hall (*A Reading of Beowulf* 18). Grendel unravels two generations of progress and centralisation in one onslaught.

Beowulf and Grendel are a clash of societal reactions to progress; both experience clan exclusion through their ancestors and difficulties finding their place in society. Out of resentment, Grendel, a rebellious and forlorn monster, decentralises Heorot through a war of attrition. His eventual dismemberment reflects the antediluvian threat that feuding and fratricide inflicts on progressive society. Inversely, Beowulf performs great deeds, that is, he uses his incredible strength and puts himself at risk for others, to prove his worth among men. Because of his life of continual sacrifice, he finds renown. When Grendel's Mother initiates a feud by killing Aeschere, Beowulf destroys her at the behest of God. Her demise, in her own realm rather than in the mead-hall indicates that the progress and centralising power that Beowulf and Hrothgar represent can conquer the supernatural and chaotic in their own underworlds. At the end of his life and reign, Beowulf signals the end of one-man duels against supernatural creatures by destroying the Dragon, a hidden relic of the old religion. After the Dragon's defeat, the only enemies left to threaten the Geats are the human masses at their borders.

Hrothgar is no figure of violence like his grandfather or Beowulf. When the Dragon awakens in Geatland, Beowulf goes after the creature directly. When Grendel returns the corpses of Hrothgar's young thanes, Hrothgar sits "stricken and helpless" and "numb with grief" (*Beowulf* 130, 134). Like Beowulf and the Dragon, he is also in his fiftieth year when Grendel arrives. Perhaps the true villain of Beowulf is Hrothgar, drawing young thanes to Heorot, getting them intoxicated on his famous mead, and leaving them to be devoured by Grendel. It would fit with Hrothgar's policy of appeasement over direct confrontation.

Grendel, Shield Sheafson, Beowulf, and Wiglaf share a common bond of a fatherless upbringing. Grendel comes from a long line of exclusion. He “nursed a hard grievance” against his segregation from society (*Beowulf* 86). Grendel is displaced in the world; he is a “fiend out of hell” and not of this earth but “in misery among the banished monsters” (*Beowulf* 100, 105). He is supernatural and evil but not the Devil. After all, if he were the Devil, the people of Heorot, when turning to “killer of souls” for aide, would have been praying to Grendel (*Beowulf* 176). Tolkien explains in *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* that Grendel lacks “real devilish qualities” (89).

Grendel must then be a corporeal monster (Tolkien 90). After all, the poet devotes several lines to describing his physical form and descent from Cain (Whitelock 76). He is a paradox. Caught between the supernatural and the corporeal, Grendel can only “haunt... the marches, maraud[e] round the heath / and desolate fens” (*Beowulf* 103-104). Therefore, Grendel, a creature split between worlds and unacceptable in both, represents familial and societal fragmentation. His inherited sin, fratricide, spawned “ogres... elves and evil phantoms / and giants who strove with God” (*Beowulf* 112-113). His supernatural inheritance deems his war on Heorot as another in a very long line of skirmishes against God, his people, and civilisation. Grendel’s war on Heorot is irresistible because it is in his very nature to destroy the social order (Tolkien 90). Grendel “has no idea of war” and stand alone in his conflict. No other magical creatures come to his aide. Grendel’s Mother lives in another subterranean lair further beyond the Pale. She only awakens out of familial obligation. Therefore, his means of attack must be unique. It must terrify. He invades the mead-hall, snatches “thirty men / from their resting places and rushed to his lair... blundering back with the butchered corpses” (*Beowulf* 122-125). Perhaps, Grendel is an ancient archetype for a sexual predator. His loneliness drives him to

invade the centre of the nearest civilisation, Heorot, to steal away young men. His effect on society is similar to that of a modern day baby snatcher; people are terrified of the unknown. The poet does not specify the type of mutilations Grendel performs on these men but it is enough to horrify Hrothgar “stricken”, “helpless”, and “numb” (*Beowulf* 130, 134). Grendel’s attack style is effective in its terror because it takes away the mystery of their disappearance. The men do not merely vanish without a trace. Grendel returns their corpses to confirm not only his corporeal existence but also his supernatural power to breach Heorot’s boundaries and violate Danish laws without consequences. The people of Heorot have visual proof that a creature from beyond the Pale can breach their walls and protection, steal one of their warriors, torture him to death, and return the evidence. Grendel’s twelve-year campaign succeeds in reducing Heorot from a bustling centre of society to his own wilderness, “the greatest house in the world stood empty, a deserted wallstead” (*Beowulf* 145).

Grendel’s eventual death by dismemberment is a twisted crucifixion, sacrificial and fitting for a lonely creature of terror. This may not be too far-fetched, as the Christian poet did not just put attach Christian statements at the ends of lines but wove his beliefs into the symbolism and imagery of the piece (Whitelock 4). According to Danish law concerning feuds, he needed to offer his life for his crimes against humanity. When he flees Heorot, leaving behind his arm, it is an “involuntary offering” that gains him no respite (*A Reading of Beowulf* 20). Beowulf, post-mortem, crucifies Grendel’s claw arm by nailing it to the rafters. Grendel’s Mother, in a sick variation on the Passion, retrieves the last bit of her son from the mead-hall. As the cup removed from the Dragon’s lair, the supernatural must return the supernatural and the corporeal to the corporeal. Even in death, the poet does not allow Grendel to find companionship in this world. He is “driven... to his desolate lair” (*Beowulf* 818-820). Only in

death it seems, does Grendel finally find kinship among his supernatural comrades when “hell claim[s] him” (*Beowulf* 851).

The arrival of Grendel’s Mother is a surprise because, despite her son’s twelve-year campaign, she remains a legend from the distant “upland country” (*Beowulf* 1346). She is identified through her son. Like Hrothgar’s nameless sister, the nearly unnamed wife of Hrothgar (Wealhþēow), and the anonymous mourners at Beowulf’s funeral, she does not have her own identity set away from men. She is seen “prowling the moors... beyond the Pale” with her son (*Beowulf* 1352-1354). Anglo-Saxon society was patriarchal and women often portrayed as evil. The portrayal of Grendel’s Mother as a vengeful exile aligns with the negative portrayals of women in medieval Christian literature (Overing 228). Since Grendel is an “unnatural birth”, Grendel’s Mother receiving her identity through her son hints at an incestuous relationship (*Beowulf* 1353). Her evil ancestry buries her further from civilisation. She inhabits an alien netherworld, “forced down into fearful waters” (*Beowulf* 1260).

Like her son, she can interact with the corporeal world of humans and experience human emotions such as revenge and grief. However, in appearance, she is more alien than her son is and less human (*Introduction to Beowulf* 59). Her attack epitomises the obligations of reprisal that bind every character from Beowulf to the nameless slave. For Scandinavian society, even up to the Anglo-Saxon poet’s Christian time in England, honouring a feud was an obligation that aligned with both the law and culture of even civilised society (Whitelock 19). By emerging and fulfilling her duty, she revives the eye-for-an-eye ways that Hrothgar has been avoiding his entire reign. As the kin of Grendel, she is obligated, like Sigemund’s sister, to avenge the death. She fulfils her duty, “grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge” (*Beowulf* 1278). Ironically, she only removes one, Aeschere, paying the blood price. Beowulf’s pursuit of her

reflects the cyclical nature of the ancient feuds that harass his people upon his death. Curiously, Hrothgar does not mention Grendel's Mother until she has already taken a life. By withholding information and allowing the celebrations to occur prematurely, Hrothgar is technically to blame for Aeschere's death, not Beowulf. By once again promising monetary compensation to Beowulf, Hrothgar deflects responsibility away from himself and Heorot. Despite Heorot's development, it is still bound by familial obligations.

Beowulf is "Hygelac's thane" and always identified through his affiliation to others such as his father "a noble lord named Ecgtheow" (*Beowulf* 194, 263). He acts, building a boat, before he speaks one line of dialogue (*A Reading of Beowulf* 47). When Beowulf was a child, his father "killed Heatholaf" and was exiled until Hrothgar pays off the Wulfings (*Beowulf* 460). His uncle, Hygelac, raised Beowulf as a ward. Beowulf saw more familial destruction when his cousin Haethcyn accidentally killed his older brother, the heir, Herebeald, devastating Hygelac (*Beowulf* 2432-2446). This must have had some effect on young Beowulf's psychology and may explain his quick decision to rush to the aide of the paralysed Heorot. He grows up to be an infusion of Hrothgar's nation building and Shield Sheafson's strength. Unlike Shield Sheafson, however, he always remains in control of his power.

The poet introduces Beowulf as "high-born and powerful" and "the mightiest man on earth" and "dear to [the Geats]" (*Beowulf* 197-198, 203). His departure is accepted but sad. Later revealed, upon his glorious return, the poet reveals that the court of Hygelac "had poorly regarded" him, and "for a long time, [he] was taken by the Geats / for less than he was worth" because they "believed he lacked force" (*Beowulf* 2183-2184, 2188). The poet, essentially, raises the reader's impression of Beowulf by introducing him as mighty and valuable and then reveals another perspective that further exalts him in the reader's mind. Like the socially mobile

Shield Sheafson, Beowulf's very public battles against the supernatural raise his status among the Danes and the Geats. As the king's ward, he could have remained a random thane but he directly chooses to seek out danger and monsters, channelling his incredible strength for the good of the people.

Beowulf, by facing Grendel at an equal level, naked and using only his bare hands, he removes the trappings of civilisation from the equation. He also denotes his kinship with Grendel as a fellow of the corporeal world, but also demonstrates a superiority of intelligence and strength with a "handgrip harder than anything" (*Beowulf* 750). When he tries to defeat Grendel's Mother with Hrunting or the Dragon with Naegling, they fail and he must use his wits and God's providence complete the task. Grendel's uncontrolled strength wrecks Heorot's mead-hall. Shield Sheafson's un-tempered rage leads to a culture of fear. Beowulf, in battle, "kept his temper" and "never cut down / a comrade who was drunk" (*Beowulf* 2180, 2179). The uncontrolled violence of those around him leads to his ascendancy to the Geat throne for fifty semi-peaceful years. Beowulf, despite his father's exile, uses feuds for political advancement. Beowulf is both shrewd and sacrificial. His land never stagnates under his power. When the Dragon attacks, he sacrifices his life in a fight to save the Geats from the culture of terror that the Danes lived under Grendel.

Beowulf, however, is not perfect. Like any Christian hero, he has a fatal flaw he must conquer. Beowulf's reaction to the Dragon reminds the reader of Hrothgar's warning of too much pride. The "prince of rings was too proud / to line up with a large army / against the sky-plague" (*Beowulf* 2345-2347). Instead, the aged Beowulf announces that he "shall pursue this fight / for the glory of winning" (*Beowulf* 2513). The verb used is "'oferhogode' recalling the twin use of the related noun... [*oferhygda*]... in Hrothgar's 'sermon'... in which [he] warns

Beowulf of the dangers of pride” (Orchard 260). When Beowulf faces the Dragon, he comes face to face with his own inadequacies and age. The Dragon is not just a symbol of greed but also of Beowulf’s desire for glory. He cannot conquer the Dragon alone. Valiantly failing to hurt the Dragon, Wiglaf, a young thane, must aid him. The recompense for Beowulf’s impure motivations is his life. His last battle completes a trinity of Christian symbols: crucifixion through Grendel’s dismemberment, a baptism in the subterranean world of Grendel’s Mother, and a purifying fire fight with the Dragon. Beowulf’s death marks the end of an era of supernatural monsters and epic heroes like Sheafson and Beowulf. In addition, by denying himself the heathen gold, only a barrow by the sea, he is somewhat humbled, attaining a form of Christian enlightenment.

The Dragon is a subterranean pagan guard. As a major character, his existence is actually a rarity in Anglo-Saxon literature (Tolkien 59). Thus, the Dragon cannot merely be a dragon but a symbol of something more than terror (Tolkien 64). He is a remnant of the supernatural and pagan ways. His attacks are provoked by an invasion of his supernatural realm. After all, the Dragon was conjured up and enslaved to guard the treasure of an ancient pagan leader. He is bound to his duty to keep the supernatural in the supernatural realm and the corporeal out of the supernatural realm. He is a gatekeeper between the corporeal living and supernatural dead. When a slave of the corporeal world stumbles upon his lair and enters the world of the supernatural, his theft is not just a theft of a gold cup but also the removal of the supernatural from the supernatural world. By taking even a small cup up to the light of the corporeal world, he provokes the Dragon’s fury. The cup may be a religious symbol, for it reminds one of Communion. To the Dragon, its removal is a violation of the uneasy pact between the

progressive humans and supernatural creatures. It is a desecration. Thus, the Dragon must desecrate the land of the corporeal, bathing it in fire until the pact is renewed.

Like Beowulf and Shield Sheafson, Wiglaf has a severely abbreviated family. His father, like Ecgtheow, participated in a blood feud that ended poorly. He is not as heroic or fearless as Beowulf. In fact, his motivation to help Beowulf is that “sorrow welled up” in him (*Beowulf* 2600). This small act of loyalty leads to him inheriting the Geat throne; “it is up to you / to look after their needs” (*Beowulf* 2798-2899). Wiglaf is also the “last of us, the only one left of the Weagmundings” (*Beowulf* 2813). Unlike Beowulf, Wiglaf does not stand alone. When his king dies, Wiglaf blames the death on the cowardly thanes who fled. O’Keeffe notes that “the price [for] their cowardice [is] the loss of land rights for themselves and their kin” (109). Their cowardice is the highest form of familial destruction because it not only led to their leader’s death but leaves the people open now to outside destruction. Other tribes, knowing there is only one brave thane in Beowulf’s kingdom will invade and Wiglaf reasons that “our whole nation, / will be dispossessed, once princes from beyond / get tidings of how you turned and fled / and disgraced yourselves” (*Beowulf* 2887).

Through the final Dragon story, the poet reveals the consequences of conquering the supernatural. Beowulf destroyed all of his supernatural enemies, having only the corporeal masses of human warriors on the borders to deal with. “This bad blood between us and the Swedes, / this vicious feud, I am convinced / is bound to revive” because of their cowardice (*Beowulf* 2999-3002). Beowulf, the superhuman leader, is dead and unable to save his people from the real feuds he too was bound to uphold. Compared to the constant “small” deaths done by human characters, the defeat of the supernatural creatures suddenly seems easy. With no

mysterious creatures left to assault civilisation, all that remains are the Geats, Swedes, and Danes own abilities to annihilate each other.

In conclusion, Beowulf, the epitome of social progress and federal might defeats the supernatural and decentralising forces of Grendel, Grendel's Mother, and the Dragon, resolving the central conflict between the supernatural and corporeal. Unfortunately, with the supernatural suppressed, the only enemies left are corporeal, the vast number of Swedes at their borders. Shield Sheafson and the various monsters of old are archetypal violent heroes and chaotic supernatural beasts. His descendents, Beow and Hrothgar, move away from a culture of fear to a centralised government built on fraternity and fidelity. Grendel's twelve-year war is a reaction against their progress. Grendel and Beowulf share the experience of facing exclusion from society by their ancestor's sins. Beowulf finds acceptance through his great deeds while Grendel violently rebels against his exile. He never attains acceptance in this world from other supernatural creatures and the human populace. Grendel's Mother represents the old familial obligations that bind the Geats and Dane. She battles Beowulf as a supernatural power in her own supernatural realm and is defeated by her own world's magic. The corporeal can defeat the supernatural by turning its own devices against itself. The remnant, the revived Dragon, an enslaved subterranean guardian, is destroyed through Beowulf's sacrifice. The Dragon's death cleanses society of the pagan monsters. However, Beowulf leaves behind a people beset on all sides by corporeal enemies that cannot be defeated through the wit and providence of a single man like Wiglaf or even all the thanes. Its corporeal enemies are less exciting tribulations than perhaps a dragon or sea monster but are still just as threatening. Beow, Hrothgar, Beowulf and Wiglaf may have driven the supernatural underground but their people's own traditions and

feuds remain entrenched in the culture of the people, not matter how much centralisation and reform they muster, and will continue to harass their progress for years to come.

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