

**Warriors, Wyrms, and Wyrd:**  
The Paradoxical Fate of the Germanic Hero/King in *Beowulf*

**Kevin J. Wanner**

In the history of *Beowulf* criticism, the dragon episode has been subjected to wildly differing interpretations involving a wide set of elements, including character motivation, the symbolic significance of the dragon and its hoard, the degree of Christian revision of pagan source material, and, most importantly, the moral appraisal given to the title character's actions and temperament. In general, it is agreed that *Beowulf* was produced by a Christian poet (however the role and identity of that person or persons may be defined) who utilized narrative sources that pre-dated the introduction of Christianity into Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>1</sup> My purpose here is not to discern this Christian artist's primary motivations or intended messages, both highly-contested matters, but rather to examine the dragon-fight's symbolism, and by extension the motifs of dragons and dragon-slayers, in terms of what this inquiry may reveal about the sociopolitical ideologies of pre-Christian Germanic society. Accordingly, I will argue that *Beowulf*'s dragon-fight episode originated as an expression of a major contradiction inherent in pagan culture, an expression which was given shape through the vehicle of mythic narrative.

Of course, the poem itself could not have functioned as a myth in early medieval Christian England, at least not if myth is defined as an authoritative, morally-normative narrative that is given support and authentication through reference to the dominant religious doctrines and institutions of the relevant society.<sup>2</sup> The highest status *Beowulf* achieved in Christian society was likely as entertainment in which moral or cautionary overtones were discernible, for those who cared to look. However, the dragon-fight motif, and battles with monsters in general, could easily have attained mythic status and importance in pagan Germanic society and may well have preserved such overtones in

**start of page 2**

Christianized retellings and contexts.

Many critics have noted the way in which the presence of monsters affords *Beowulf* its mythic frame, allowing the poem to transcend the level of restricted meaning that a cast of exclusively human characters would impose. Paul Bauschatz, for example, has argued for the central importance of the non-human or monstrous in the Germanic worldview and religion, stating that monsters "all have a role to play in the central concerns of Germanic perception... How, when, and where such monsters act will give us some meaningful insights into the working structure of the Germanic cosmos."<sup>3</sup> Much earlier, J. R. R. Tolkien contested the consensus that *Beowulf*'s "weakness lies in placing the unimportant things [monster fights] at the centre and the important [human conflicts] on the outer edges."<sup>4</sup> Rather, Tolkien believed that *Beowulf*'s monstrous adversaries granted a "universal significance ... to the fortunes of its hero.... In fact, it is necessary, that his final foe should be not some Swedish prince, or treacherous friend, but a dragon: a thing made by imagination for just such a purpose."<sup>5</sup> While "universal significance" may be too strong a claim, the centrality of the monsters, along with the supernatural traits of the protagonist and the relative subordination of accounts of human conflict, frees the poem from a rigidly specific contextual significance, permitting it to represent an idealized, paradigmatic heroic career.

As stated above, I propose to demonstrate that *Beowulf*'s dragon episode performs one common and crucial function of mythic texts, namely the expression of a seemingly insoluble paradox that has been generated by contradictions inherent in the central ideologies and customs of the culture in question. As Claude Levi-Strauss asserts, "the structure of myth is a dialectic structure in which opposed logical positions are stated."<sup>6</sup> The structural ambiguity or paradox

with which I am concerned centers upon the idealized Germanic hero/king, a figure that embodies a normative method of securing power and wealth: he does so through conquest, and with the rewards obtained through deeds of physical prowess and courage. This figure attains prosperity, and most importantly for his followers and heirs, security and stability, benefits which are neither readily available nor easily sustainable. Even characters who are born into positions of authority, such as Hroðgar, find it necessary or at least profitable to employ violence. This violence is both defensive and aggressive in nature, the former posture aimed at protecting what kings have from those who would claim it, the latter augmenting their power and realm through the conquest of others. From the perspective of each particular sovereign and his subjects, both forms of violence are assessed positively; the first is perceived as necessary, and the second as laudable. In the Germanic worldview, might often does make right, at least in retrospect.

Nonetheless, an unfortunate fact faced by every king or upwardly mobile hero is that he cannot fulfill his quest for power in isolation. Each king's gain of wealth, territory, or men is balanced by a native subordinate's or foreign

**start of page 3**

rival's loss. Our paradox now becomes apparent. The very process that secures one's position simultaneously undermines that stability by perpetually renewing the potential for violence. The more successful a king is, the more likely he will suffer such negative ramifications. Oftentimes a prosperous rule breeds envy and covetousness among one's own kin (and thus potential rivals to the throne), as well as among foreign powers, and even the forging of successful alliances draws rulers into new sets of conflicts and feuds.

It should be noted that many critics have already recognized *Beowulf* as an embodiment of the contradictory nature of heroic ideals. However, in reviewing several such critics' opinions, one important factor will be seen to differentiate their conclusions from my own. Specifically, whereas I wish to assert that the dragon episode closely reflects its pagan origins, and that, therefore, *Beowulf's* dragon-fight motif represents at its core an internal commentary of pagan culture upon its own conventions and institutions, previous critics have typically identified the Christian poet as the locus of the judgment made upon the protagonist's deeds and motivations.

Scholars have often viewed *Beowulf* as a Christian pronouncement upon, and ultimately a condemnation of, the essential instability of the Germanic social order. John Leyerle, a proponent of the latter view, has stated that *Beowulf's* theme is "the fatal contradiction at the core of heroic society. The hero follows a code that exalts indomitable will and valour in the individual, but society requires a king who acts for the common good, not for his own glory."<sup>7</sup> Here, Leyerle frames the problem in terms of the hero/king's life cycle. Tolkien argues in like fashion, identifying Beowulf's flaw as a form of "chivalry," an excess of pride and glory-seeking that is harmless enough in Denmark, when Beowulf "is still a subordinate with no responsibilities downward," but which proves disastrous in the dragon-fight, when Beowulf as king "does not rid himself of his chivalry... As it is, a subordinate [Wiglaf] is placed in greater peril than he need have been, and though he does not pay the penalty for his master's *mod* with his own life, the people lose their king disastrously."<sup>8</sup>

For both Tolkien and Leyerle, and for the poet whom they have posited, the problem revolves around the diverging social forces acting upon the ruler. Specifically, the code of personal glory, appropriate to the young hero in the process of establishing his reputation and social standing, continues to exert pressure on the king's choices and strategies, even when this model of conduct is no longer suitable. A problem with this reading, however, is the degree to which it relies on the specifics of the dragon-fight. In narrative terms, Beowulf does underestimate the danger posed by the dragon and is therefore foolhardy in dismissing his retainers (2532b-35a).<sup>9</sup> But by considering the symbolic value of the dragon and dragon-fight, thereby shifting our perception outside the narrative frame, we are able to discern a different type and set of reasons why Beowulf must face the dragon alone, or, more precisely, why the dragon is depicted as his ultimate and exclusive foe. In my analysis of the dragon-fight,

I will demonstrate that this strategy not only eliminates the need to view the climax as a Christian attempt to adjudge Germanic pagan society, but also broadens and complicates the paradox expressed in the text, at least to the point that it can no longer be constructed simply in terms of age and relative power.

This habit of viewing the poem as a Christian narrative with a Christian moral has proven tenacious. Margaret E. Goldsmith argues that *Beowulf's* climax is to be distinguished from the so-called "secular dragon-fight," and that whereas Beowulf "acts as a moral example in his early life ... in his last days he presents to the Christian audience the tragedy of fallen man, harassed by the Enemy and wanting in the supernatural strength of the *miles Christi*." <sup>10</sup> Andy Orchard has taken this view further, arguing that a number of Old English, Latin, and Old Norse texts, including *Beowulf*, the *Liber monstrorum*, and *Grettis saga*, exhibit a similar trend in their underlying messages. Orchard states that they "all are concerned with the relationship between pagan past and Christian present, and with the tension between an age which extolled heroic glory and an age in which vainglory was condemned.... heathen warriors, such as Hercules, Alexander, Beowulf, and Grettir, have themselves become monsters in Christian eyes." <sup>11</sup> For Orchard, Beowulf is not merely a fallen Christian warrior but literally embodies the ultimate Christian adversary, in accordance with a literature wherein "the old heroes were becoming slowly demonised," and in which Beowulf, the "lofgeornost" (3182b) of heroes, demonstrates "unforgettably how prodigious pride can make monsters of men." <sup>12</sup>

This sampling of committed Christian readings of *Beowulf* illustrates a prominent tradition of condemning the hero for the manner of his death and for the choices he makes which lead him to that end. A trajectory is evident, from Tolkien to Orchard, in which Beowulf is judged more and more harshly within the critics' models of the poet's intentions. This argument typically regards the dragon episode, both in its overall structure and in its details of language and event, as a crucial component in this portrayal. However, I contend that a close analysis of the dragon-fight, rather than entailing an external condemnation of Beowulf and the ideals he represents, reveals instead resurgent pagan sentiments and overtones. Beowulf should not be regarded simply as an autonomous individual whose actions and motivations are to be judged by Christian standards, but as a symbol that is used to express the paradox of the Germanic hero/king.

My opinion that the dragon episode adheres closely to pagan sources echoes a claim made by H. L. Rogers. Rogers contends that by the last third of his work the Christian poet "was tiring of his task and becoming aware that what he had done earlier with Grendel and his mother could not be done with the Dragon." <sup>13</sup> Whether or not fatigue is actually to blame, the Christian element is clearly more pronounced in the first 1800 or so lines. As Rogers further states: "Grendel was God's foe; the Dragon is not." <sup>14</sup> Accordingly,

overtly Christian phrases such as "Godes andsacan" (786b, 1682b), "Godes yrre bær"(711b), "he fag wið God"(811b), "feond on helle"(101b), "Caines cynne" (107), "þa wið God wunnon lange þrage"(113b-14a),<sup>15</sup> which are so often applied to Grendel and his kin, are never leveled against the dragon. Rather, the dragon is Beowulf's foe, and Beowulf's foe alone. As such he is named his "ealdorgewinna" (2903b), his "life-enemy," a term that not only identifies the dragon as the cause of Beowulf's death and the loss of stability for his people, but also as the ultimate, culminating, even life-long enemy of Beowulf, the foe to whom fate, or *wyrd*, has led him.

*Wyrd* was a central concept in the religious and metaphysical worldview of Germanic paganism. One quality of *wyrd* often remarked upon by scholars is its seemingly impersonal and inscrutable operation.<sup>16</sup> While there is not room here to offer an in-depth analysis of this term and the crucial principles it represented for Germanic peoples, I would note that in *Beowulf* its activity is often discernible in patterns between sets of important events. Bauschatz is

correct when he states that use of *wyrd* "in any text brings the power of all past actions explicitly to bear on the material presented," and further when he argues that the influence of this force is evident "in many other contexts.... where *wyrd* is not explicitly mentioned at all."<sup>17</sup> Still, the influence of *wyrd* varies widely over the course of *Beowulf's* narrative; not coincidentally, we again find a perceptible split between the first two thirds of the poem and its conclusion. In the initial monster fights, the poet depicts God as overriding *wyrd* with ease, thereby asserting the dominance of the omnipotent Christian deity over the older pagan understanding of the cosmic principles of causation and consequence (477b-79, 1056). However, in the climactic dragon-fight, *wyrd* is much less subject to God's tinkering, reasserting its role as the chief arbiter of the battle's outcome. For example, *wyrd's* dominance is affirmed in Beowulf's speech preceding the combat (2526), *wyrd* fails to allot him victory for the first time (2574), and it is *wyrd*, which has carried off all of his kin, that compels the dying king to follow his ancestors into death (2814). Most significant is this description of Beowulf: "the spirit was within him mournful, restless and ready for death; fate was exceedingly near, which must greet the old man, to seek (his) soul-ward, to part asunder life from body" ("Him was geomor sefa, wæfre ond wælfus, wyrd ungemete neah, se ðone gomelan gretan sceolde, secean sawle hord, sunder gedælan lif wið lice" 2419b-23a). Here, *wyrd* has been equated with the *wyrm*, each identified as the entity that will end Beowulf's life.

Given the sentiments expressed in these passages, and in accordance with Bauschatz's view that the use of *wyrd* evokes the determinative power of all past actions upon current events, it seems reasonable to draw a causal chain between the hero's demise and his earlier deeds. It is no longer God who determines whether the hero will succumb or triumph. Rather, it is *wyrd*, the combined influence of Beowulf's previous actions, which makes his death inescapable. In short, a pagan conception of causality has been reintroduced

**start of page 6**

in the poem's final third. Therefore, while I disagree with Goldsmith's and Orchard's view that Beowulf dies because he abandons Christian principles, I agree with them on several points. For one, God does not play an instrumental role in Beowulf's last fight. Secondly, while I disagree that the poem as a whole denigrates the hero, I do believe, as Orchard suggests, that the text reveals an increasing sense of identification between the dragon and Beowulf. Furthermore, it is through this conflation that the causal link between the hero's formative triumphs and the king's downfall is most fully expressed.

Although some have developed the notion literally,<sup>18</sup> dragon-human equivalencies will here be considered solely in terms of shared attributes and descriptive epithets which indicate congruencies between dragons and their human rivals. This symbolic approach has typically equated dragons with evil sovereigns, such as King Heremod (901-13a, 1709-24a). Edward B. Irving sees stinginess as the common link between this king and dragons; both hoard their gold, preventing it from entering into the system of circulation and exchange wherein it becomes a meaningful vehicle and sign of status and reciprocity.<sup>19</sup> But while this comparison is well-founded, it should be noted that Heremod is never mentioned in tandem with dragons, nor is he referred to by any term that is also applied to monsters. On the contrary, it is good or idealized rulers who are most intimately linked with dragons. We will begin to consider evidence for this equation by examining the tale of the dragon-slayer Sigemund as it is related in *Beowulf*.

The Sigemund episode (874b-900a), a legend also found in the Norse heroic Eddic poems and the later *Völsunga saga*,<sup>20</sup> is an important one in *Beowulf*. It foreshadows the final combat and death of the hero and offers the first intimation of the identification between dragons and their slayers, an equation which in turn symbolizes the dangerous contradictions inherent in the hero/king's standard means of gaining power. Many critics have viewed this passage primarily as a means of positioning Beowulf within the pantheon of Germanic heroes and have therefore ignored its darker undertones and allusions. However, nearly every word applied to Sigemund or his actions is imbued with negative connotations. "Fæhðe ond fyrena" (879a) and "niða" (882a) all refer to deeds stemming from feud, revenge, or hatred.<sup>21</sup> The choice of such words may indicate a familiarity with the motives and behavior of the *Völsungs* in

Norse variants. Another seemingly negative label is found in this line: "He was of *wreccas* the greatest, far and wide over all nations" ("Se wæs wreccena wide mærost ofer werþeode" 898-99a). *Wrecca*, cognate with modern English "wretch" and closely related to OE *wræc*, meaning "misery" or "distress," refers to an exile, one subjected to misery through deprivation.<sup>22</sup> It therefore seems a strange term to apply to a man who has just won an unmatched hoard of treasure. Perhaps it implies further details of the Norse story, specifically the curse on the gold and the tragic end its ownership brings.

#### start of page 7

A final crucial term in this episode is *aglæca*: "The *aglæca* had accomplished through his courage, that he might make use of the ringhoard according to his own judgment" ("Hæfde aglæca elne gegongen, þæt he beahhordes brucan moste selfes dome" 893-95a). This word reappears several times in Beowulf's last battle, and my analysis of it in that context will prove central to the task of locating the expression of the hero/king paradox within the dragon-fight. For now, I wish to stress only that we find in the Sigemund passage an uneasiness regarding the status of the hero, the nature of his victory, and the benefits of the treasure. As we will see, the ambiguity relating to these three elements is revived and reinforced throughout Beowulf's dragon-fight.

In my analysis of the poem's climax, I will concentrate on several features. First, I will examine the manner in which the dragon's introduction is linked with Beowulf's previous exploits through the mechanism of *wyrd*. I will then map out the ways in which the poem equates the motivations, interests, and roles of the adversaries, gradually identifying or assimilating one with the other through ambiguous and double references, repetition of formulaic phrases, and shared terminology. A discussion of the hoard and its ultimate fate will show the result of this process to be the usurpation of the dragon's role by Beowulf himself. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion concerning how the present reading of the dragon-fight may offer some insight into pagan Germanic perceptions of heroism and the dangers of the institution of kingship.

The dragon is first aroused by a thief, who delivers a stolen cup to Beowulf in atonement for an unspecified crime or grievance (2281b-86). Immediately after Beowulf's reception of this "fated cup" ("fæted wæge" 2282) the poem states that "Ð: a se wyrm onwoc, wroht wæs geniwad"(2287), a phrase which, despite Klaeber's interpretation,<sup>23</sup> literally means "then the worm awoke, strife was *renewed*." Here, we encounter several key features. First, fate, or *wyrd*, is alluded to in the form of a cup. This portion of the fated treasure has been received by Beowulf to add to his accrued wealth. Second, the hostility between king and monster is said to be a resurgence of an old conflict, despite the fact that, in narrative terms, neither has been previously aware of the other. This statement is therefore best understood as a comment on Beowulf's heroic career, on the continuation after a long interval of his encounters with monsters. The dragon embodies the reassertion at the close of Beowulf's life of the consequences of his formative deeds, which can be characterized as acts of violence rewarded with prestige and material wealth.

Other elements in the dragon's introduction imply links with the hero's earlier fights. Goldsmith observes that the *wyrm* "is introduced ... in words remarkably like those which introduce Grendel."<sup>24</sup> She also notes the way in which descriptions of men at the height of joy are interrupted by a monster's incursions.<sup>25</sup> This is an instance of a jarring technique often employed by the

#### start of page 8

poet, who will recount, typically in the same sentence, both the pinnacle of something's existence and the circumstances of its downfall. A crucial example is found in Heorot's introduction: "The hall towered, high and horn-gabled; it awaited the battle-surge of hostile flame" ("Sele hlifade heah ond horngeap; heaðowylma bad, laðan liges" 81b-83a). The poet's purpose seems to be more than establishing a pattern wherein, as Leyerle argues, "beginnings and endings are juxtaposed ... reminding us of impermanence and change,"<sup>26</sup> or, according to John Hill, merely reporting "the [hall's] full, temporal history ... a slice of [which] ... may be benign, another malignant--neither has priority."<sup>27</sup> Rather, the poet seems to be positing a causal relation between the contrasted events. A description has just been given

of the ways in which the greatest of winehalls depended for its existence upon Hroðgar's conquests and plunder; its end will also be violent. As for Beowulf, his entire reign is summarized in three and a half lines of bland but approving terms: "he geheold tela" (2208b) and "wæs ða frod cyning" (2209b). The poet does not care about the details. His attention is on the dragon, whose arrival forever interrupts the prosperity gained through Beowulf's martial deeds, of which Grendel and his mother were the monstrous representations.

Following the attack on the Geats' hall, the poet, by reciting a series of events, offers another clue as to the portent of the dragon's appearance: first, Grendel's defeat and the cleansing of Heorot is reviewed, followed by a description of the deaths of Hygelac and his son Heardred, and lastly, of Beowulf's ascension to the throne (2351b-90). The impression given by this chronology is that Beowulf's services in Denmark, and the subsequent rewards bestowed upon him by Hroðgar, paved the way for his becoming a candidate for and eventually assuming the throne of the Geats. The monsters in Beowulf's career function as a substitute or symbol for the customary pattern of accumulating power through conquest. The dragon re-enters at the chain of events' close: "So he (Beowulf) each one of hostilities had survived, of dangerous conflicts, the son of Ecgþeow, of courageous deeds, until one day, when he against that worm had to fight" ("Swa he niða gehwane genesen hæfde, sliðra geslyhta, sunu Ecgðiwes, ellenweorca, oð ðone anne dæg, þe he wið þam wyrme gewegan sceolde" 2397-2400). While this is perhaps no more than a simple statement of fact, it adheres to the pattern identified above, wherein the rise and triumphs of an individual are dictated alongside and presented as determinative of the means of his undoing.

The last speech Beowulf delivers to the retainers who accompany him to the barrow gives further evidence that a function of the dragon episode is the expression of the hero/king paradox. In this monologue, Beowulf offers a lengthy digression consisting of two narratives, one historical (in the context of the poem), the other hypothetical (2426-2462). In the former he describes the anguish felt by Hygelac's father Hreðel over his inability to exact vengeance for his eldest son's death, owing to the fact that the latter's slayer was his own

#### start of page 9

brother. Next, Beowulf imagines the equal grief and impotence felt by an old man who watches his only son hang on the gallows for an offense committed against society. Laurence N. DeLooze has recognized that in both stories, Beowulf "investigates modes of response to conflicting and irreconcilable demands;"<sup>28</sup> the first story deals with resolving issues of violence and compensation within the family, the second with the conflicting obligations each person has towards kin versus society. Indeed, the paradoxes mentioned here are, along with that of the hero/king, probably the principal structural contradictions that existed in Germanic culture, at least of those pertaining primarily to males.<sup>29</sup> DeLooze further comments that Beowulf is compelled to relate these anecdotes by a realization "of the complexity of his situation. And complex it is, for it binds him to honor mutually conflicting obligations."<sup>30</sup> The fact that such tales appear here and are given voice by the hero may indicate an acknowledgement by the poet of the underlying purpose of the traditional dragon-fight motif as a vehicle through which contradictions inherent in the culture find expression.

Returning to the narrative, we first find a conflation of the dragon and king in descriptions of both characters' fates, intentions, and expectations. Line 2341 reads: "the ever-good noble had to await the end of transitory days, of life in the world, and the *wyrm* also, although he might have held the hoarded wealth for a long time" ("Sceolde lændaga æþeling ærgod ende gibidan, worulde lifes, ond se wyrm somod, þeah ðe hordwelan heolde lange" 2341-44). Similarly, after the battle has ended, the poem states that "each had brought about for the other the end of transitory life" ("hæfde æghwæðer ende gefered lænan lifes" 2844-5). Irving has remarked upon the leveling effect such phrases have upon the two characters, a parallelism he feels "is hard to face, but the final sentence [just quoted] draws it."<sup>31</sup> The first example may exhibit yet another conflation of the foes in the phrase "þeah ðe hordwelan heolde lange," which, while it may appear to refer only to the dragon, could logically or grammatically apply to either foe, both of whom presided over a great collection of gold and wealth.

Further correspondences are found in lines that, while not referring to both adversaries, in mentioning one, invoke the other. For example, it is said that the dragon "trusted in the barrow, in warfare and in walls; that expectation deceived him" ("beorges truwoðe, wiges ond wealles; him seo wen geleaf" 2322b-23). A similar expectation of Beowulf's is thwarted when "the shield protected well the life and body of the glorious king for a lesser while than his desire sought" ("Scyld wel gebearg life ond lice læssen hwile mærum þeodne, þonne his myne sohte" 2570b-72). Here, both are failed by their expectations, or, more significantly, by something that they had considered formidable, trustworthy defenses in the past. Another parallel is found where it is said that although the dragon long guarded the "hæðen gold," "it is not for him at all the better" ("ne byð him wihte ðy sel" 2278b). A nearly identical judgment

#### start of page 10

is made of Beowulf concerning his sword: "it was not for him at all the better" ("næs him wihte ðe sel" 2687b). This formula indicates that, like the monster who fails to benefit from his vast treasure, the material rewards of violent conquest, Beowulf will not be saved by a weapon, the means through which the hero/king attains wealth and security. If viewed in these terms, both sets of parallel statements quoted above function as commentaries on the ambiguous benefits of owning either key facet of the heroic life, weapons or gold. In the final evaluation, the warrior or treasure-keeper benefits little from war, weapons, or wealth. His involvement with these entities will rebound to cause his demise, and yet the hero or king is constantly compelled by the central ideologies of his culture to concentrate both his faith and energies upon the valorous and violent acquisition of treasure.

As in the Sigemund episode, labels further reveal how each character is meant to be perceived. A recurrent element of the dragon's titles is *gæst*, meaning "guest," "stranger," or "visitor."<sup>32</sup> It first appears as he spews fire upon the Geats' homes ("Ða se gæst ongan gledum spiwan" 2312), an instance which accords with this word's use throughout the poem. For example, when Beowulf enters Grendel's mere, he is invading another's dwelling and so is repeatedly referred to as a guest.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, the term is ironically applied to the *wyrm* as he sets Beowulf's hall aflame. But the last appearances of *gæst* fail to adhere to this pattern, as in this description of the foes' first meeting: "The warrior under the barrow swung his shield against that dreadful guest" ("Bior under beorge bordrand onswaf wið ðam gryregieste" 2559-60a). The dragon is also called an *atol inwitgæst* after Wiglaf has joined the battle (2670a), and a *niðgæst* at the moment of his death (2699a). All three examples express the same idea, but the first is the most interesting. If this scene followed the pattern previously established, we would expect Beowulf to be labeled the outsider; as in the mere, he is entering a monster's lair. Instead, we find this pattern inverted: the intruder is situated within the barrow, while the customary occupant is labeled a guest in his own home. The implication is that the dragon has already been divested of his claim to the hoard by the king, who, as we will see, is about to assume the position previously occupied by his enemy.

At this point we will revisit the term *aglæca*. Line 2592 reads, "It was not long to that, that they, those *aglæcan*, again met" ("Næs ða long to ðon, þæt ða aglæcan hy eft gemetton" 2592-93). Klaeber lists *aglæca* as appearing twenty times in the poem.<sup>34</sup> To eighteen of these he attributes the meaning "wretch," "monster," "demon," "fiend." Only twice does he permit the alternate meaning "warrior" or "hero": first, where it is used of Sigemund, and second, in the line just quoted, where it refers jointly to the battle-locked king and *wyrm*. Many translators have adopted this inverted meaning, while others have offered more neutral renderings, such as "a combatant, belligerent (one),"<sup>35</sup> "the awe-inspiring" or "formidable one,"<sup>36</sup> "inspirer of fear,"<sup>37</sup> or "any savage fighter."<sup>38</sup> But while such suggestions may help to account for the word's

#### start of page 11

varied application, they fail to explain its overwhelming use in designating the non-human and monstrous. According to Bosworth and Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, *aglæca* typically denotes a "miserable being," "wretch," "miscreant," "monster." Latin terms it translates include *miser*, *perditus*, *monstrum*, *bellator imminus*. *Aglaeca* therefore seems to convey the sense of one who is miserable and malevolent as a result of loss or desire. This perfectly suits its

application to Grendel, his mother, and, in other texts, Satan. However, its suitability for the dragon slayers or the *wyrm* itself is less evident.

It may prove instructive, therefore, to look at this term's distribution in the dragon-fight. Within 37 lines the dragon is called an *aglæca* three times, twice by Beowulf (2520a and 2534a), once by the poet (2557a). Not only is this the densest use of *aglæca* in the poem, but the last instance comes only 35 lines before the joint reference to Beowulf and the dragon. It seems odd to apply a term three times in rapid succession to a patently evil monster, only to use it of the hero soon afterwards. Furthermore, Beowulf's identification as an *aglæca* stands in stark contrast to his own use of the word. Twice he says "wið ðam aglæcean," explicitly declaring his opposition to the dragon, that he is "against the *aglæca*." And yet he is identified as one. At this point, the clearest link between the two characters is their desire for the treasure, and it is in this sense that the term *aglæca* may apply to both. Specifically, the dragon and Beowulf, like Sigemund before them, are prompted towards extreme acts of violence in order to satisfy an almost irrational desire for cursed gold. Accordingly, I will now trace the intensification of Beowulf's attention on the hoard, a process which, through the transference of the gold from one *aglæca* to the next, completes the identification of hero and monster.

Several times the poem comments upon the ambiguous benefits of the hoard. It is twice described as cursed, and in a strongly-worded passage its owners are said to be doomed to the torments of hell (3051-57, 3069-75). Still, Beowulf's yearning for it quickly eclipses all other motivations. His words before the fight are "I with courage shall obtain the gold, or battle will carry off ... your lord!" ("Ic mid elne sceall gold gegangan, oððe guð nimeð ... frean eowerne!" 2535b-37). Beowulf's desire intensifies as the fatally wounded king commands Wiglaf to bring him the treasure, "that I might examine the ancient wealth, the possessions of gold ... so that I might more easily on account of treasure-wealth give up my life and lordship, which I long have held" ("þæt ic ærwelan, goldæht ongite ... þæt ic ðy seft mæge æfter maððumwelan min alætan lif ond leodscipe, þone ic longe heold" 2747b-51). Just before death Beowulf grows even more emphatic: "Now I will sell my old allotted-life for that hoard of treasures" ("Nu ic on maðma hord mine bebohte frode feorhlege" 2799-2800a). A progression is evident. First, Beowulf will win the treasure or die, second, ownership of it will ease his death, and in the end, he is willing to make a direct exchange, his life for the gold.

Our last piece of evidence concerns the hoard's final fate. Despite Beowulf's

**start of page 12**

repeated wish that the gold be used to benefit his people after his death (2794-2801), it is in the end entombed in his funerary mound. To many, it has seemed unreasonable that an entire culture's wealth should be interred in this way. Irving feels this gesture is best read as "a measurement, however indulgent, of [Beowulf's] worth and heroic power ... a sacrifice in repayment for the life."<sup>39</sup> However, no explicit reason for this disobedience is supplied by the text. There seem to be two plausible explanations. On the narrative level, awareness of the curse would explain the Geats' reluctance to keep the gold. But this information is restricted to the poet and audience. The second explanation involves this action's symbolic value. The king's burial with the cursed gold completes the process of identification between monster and hero. Like the dragon before him, Beowulf is now the perpetual, immobile, subterranean guardian of the hoard.

I began this paper by identifying a contradiction inherent in Germanic society's ideally conceived roles of the ascendant hero and martial king. I then traced the ways in which *Beowulf's* dragon-fight confronts and expresses this paradox in the form of a mythic narrative. In the model I have suggested, the monster fights symbolize the career trajectory of the Germanic hero who later becomes the ruler of a people. And while actual kings did not found reigns on the profits and reputation garnered by defeating trolls or fire-breathing serpents, the model as it applied to reality involved the same basic structure: perform singular deeds of heroic violence, and use the spoils to consolidate and improve one's social standing. The dragon represents the final fate which potentially, or most likely, awaits each



sovereign who gains and maintains power through such mechanisms. In arguing against those who view *Beowulf's* climax as a Christian condemnation of outmoded pagan ideals, I have observed that the poem's final third, which overall fails to explicitly condemn the hero, is marked by resurgent pagan overtones, concepts, and principles of causality, chief among which is the force of *wyrd*. Finally, I have attempted to show that the identification of hero and dragon reflects this society's perception that rulers will grow increasingly beset by multiple sources of hostility as they attempt to protect what they possess. This process results in a king's attention becoming intensified upon the violent defense of his realm and riches, the very retention of which is highly equivocal, in that while such possessions provide the foundation for a king's power, they also contribute to his downfall. In the end, the hero, like the gold and social standing he fights so strenuously to keep, has been simultaneously blessed and cursed.

University of Chicago

Notes

1. This observation is supported by the many and widespread analogues of *Beowulf* to be found throughout other Germanic materials dating from the early Christian era, many of which feature correspondences to the three battles with the monsters, figures who naturally continued to evince strong

start of page 13

connotations of the pagan worldview. See especially *Grettis saga* and the *Völsunga saga*, as well as *Beowulf and its Analogues*, ed. G. N. Garmonsway, Jacqueline Simpson, and H. R. Ellis Davidson (London, 1968).

2. This definition of myth relies in part upon that of Bruce Lincoln, who defines a myth as a narrative that exhibits three crucial traits: the initial assertion of truth-claims, and the subsequent achievement of first credibility and then authority. See *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual and Classification* (New York, 1989), pp. 24-26.
3. Paul Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree: World and Time in Early Germanic Culture* (Amherst, 1982), p. xvii.
4. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London, 1983), p. 5.
5. Tolkien, *Monsters and the Critics*, p. 31.
6. Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *Myth: A Symposium*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington, 1958), p. 64.
7. John Leyerle, "Beowulf the Hero and the King," *Medium Ævum* 34 (1965), 89.
8. J. R. R. Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York, 1966), p. 23.
9. All citations of *Beowulf* will be given parenthetically by line number from *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Frederick Klaeber, 3rd ed. (Lexington, 1950).
10. Margaret E. Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf* (London, 1970), p. 239.
11. Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 167.
12. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, pp. 170, 171.
13. H. L. Rogers, "Beowulf's Three Great Fights," in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, 1963), p. 251.
14. Rogers, "Beowulf's Three Great Fights," p. 251.
15. Respectively, these phrases, referring to Grendel, Grendel and his mother, or Grendel's kin, the *etins* or giants, are translated as "God's adversary" (786a and 1682b), "He bore God's anger" (711b), "he was hostile toward God" (811b), "fiend in hell" (101b), "Cain's kin" (107a), and "Those who have fought against God for a long while" (113b-114a).
16. See especially Bauschatz, *Well and the Tree*, p. 28, and Bertha S. Phillpotts, "Wyrd and Providence in Anglo-Saxon Thought," in *Interpretations of Beowulf*, ed. R. D. Fulk (Bloomington, 1991), p. 1.
17. Bauschatz, *Well and the Tree*, p. 87.
18. One of the most thorough attempts to do so is found in Raymond P. Tripp, Jr., *More About the Fight With the Dragon: Beowulf 2208b-3182, Commentary, Edition, and Translation* (New York, 1983); see especially pp. 13-17. Tripp's argument revolves around a reconstruction of the *Beowulf* manu-

start of page 14

script (which is heavily damaged in the area of the dragon-fight episode) that is at severe variance with most accepted emendations, such as Klaeber's. The end result of Tripp's emendations is that the dragon, the last survivor, and the thief are all one and the same character, and that it is this character who actually stole a treasure from Beowulf, thereby triggering the feud between them. Needless to say, the majority of Tripp's hypotheses are neither being considered nor adopted in this paper. Other critics, such as Klaeber (*Beowulf*, note to lines 2231 ff.) and H. R. Ellis Davidson ("The Hill and the Dragon," *Folklore* 4 [1950], 181), have, however, suspected that such a story, in which the solitary and greedy guardian of a vast hoard transforms into a dragon in order to guard his treasure, lies behind the identity of *Beowulf's* dragon. The most important examples of this motif are from Iceland, the most famous being Fáfnir, either a giant or man who assumes the form of a dragon after his nefarious acquisition of an accursed hoard.

19. Edward B. Irving, Jr., *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven, 1968), p. 209.
20. Of course, in the extant Germanic legends it is Sigurðr, the son of King Sigemund, and not Sigemund himself who slays the dragon Fáfnir at the bidding of the smith Regin. Nevertheless, most critics have chosen to gloss over this discrepancy. Tolkien, for example, neatly sidesteps the issue by referring to the slayer of the dragon only as "the Wælsing" (*Monsters and the Critics*, p. 12). This paper will adopt a similar approach, taking as the important points of correspondence the elements of the hero, the dragon, and the hoard of cursed gold.
21. See the entry for *nið* in Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (1898; rpt. Oxford, 1972).
22. Elsewhere in *Beowulf* the word *wrecca* is used twice to refer to characters who are clearly in a state of exile. The first is Hengest, a king who longs to return home following a disastrous battle but is forced to dwell as an exile in the court of his enemy Finn during a long winter (1137b). Later, it is used again for Weohstan the father of Wiglaf, who lived as a "friendless exile" ("wraecen wineleasum" 2613a) before his deeds in battle in the service of Onela, King of Sweden.
23. See his note to line 2287, which he translates as "strife arose which previously did not exist" (*Beowulf*, p. 210).
24. Goldsmith, *Mode and Meaning*, p. 140.
25. In full the relevant passages are as follows: "Swa ða drihtguman dreamum lifdon, eadiglice, oð ðæt an ongan fyrene fremman feond on helle" (99-101) (So those retainers lived with joy(s), happily, until a certain hellish fiend (lit: fiend in hell) began to perform crimes); "syððan Beowulf brade rice on hand gehwearf; he geheold tela fifting wintra wæs ða frod cyning, eald eþelweard oð ðæt an ongan deorcum nihtum draca ricsian" (2207-11) (Afterwards, a broad kingdom passed into the hands of Beowulf; he

start of page 15

ruled (it) well for fifty winters--that was a wise king, the old guardian of the nation--until a certain dragon began to rule in the dark nights).

26. John Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*," *Interpretations of Beowulf*, ed. R. D. Fulk (Bloomington, 1991), p. 157.
27. John M. Hill, *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (Toronto, 1995), p. 56.

28. Laurence N. DeLooze, "Frame, Narratives, and Fictionalization: Beowulf as Narrator," *Interpretations of Beowulf*, ed. R. D. Fulk (Bloomington, 1991), p. 245.
29. It is also interesting to note that these two instances of conflicting obligations are central themes in the *Völsunga saga* and *Grettis saga*, important Norse texts that have already been mentioned several times.
30. DeLooze, "Frame, Narratives," p. 244.
31. Irving, *A Reading*, p. 236.
32. While this term, which also has the form *gist*, is difficult to distinguish at times from *gast* or *gæst* with a stressed vowel, in which case the proper translation would be "spirit," "sprite," "demon," Klaeber in this case and the other relevant occurrences leans toward the definition chosen here. Also, the entries for these terms in Bosworth and Toller's dictionary unequivocally choose the sense of "guest" or "stranger" over that of "ghost" or "spirit."
33. Beowulf is labeled a *gist* in line 1522b and a *selegyst* in line 1545a.
34. For one occurrence, Klaeber offers a duplicate interpretation; see his note to line 1512. In the passage describing Beowulf's descent into the pool of Grendel's mother, Klaeber feels that *aglæcan* could refer to either Beowulf or the monsters assailing him. He decides on grammatical grounds, however, that the latter choice is the more likely and that Beowulf is therefore the implied object of the sentence.
35. Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 5th ed. (Oxford, 1995), p. 302.
36. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, p. 33.
37. Irving, *A Reading*, p. 20.
38. Goldsmith, *Mode and Meaning*, p. 142.
39. Irving, *A Reading*, p. 243.