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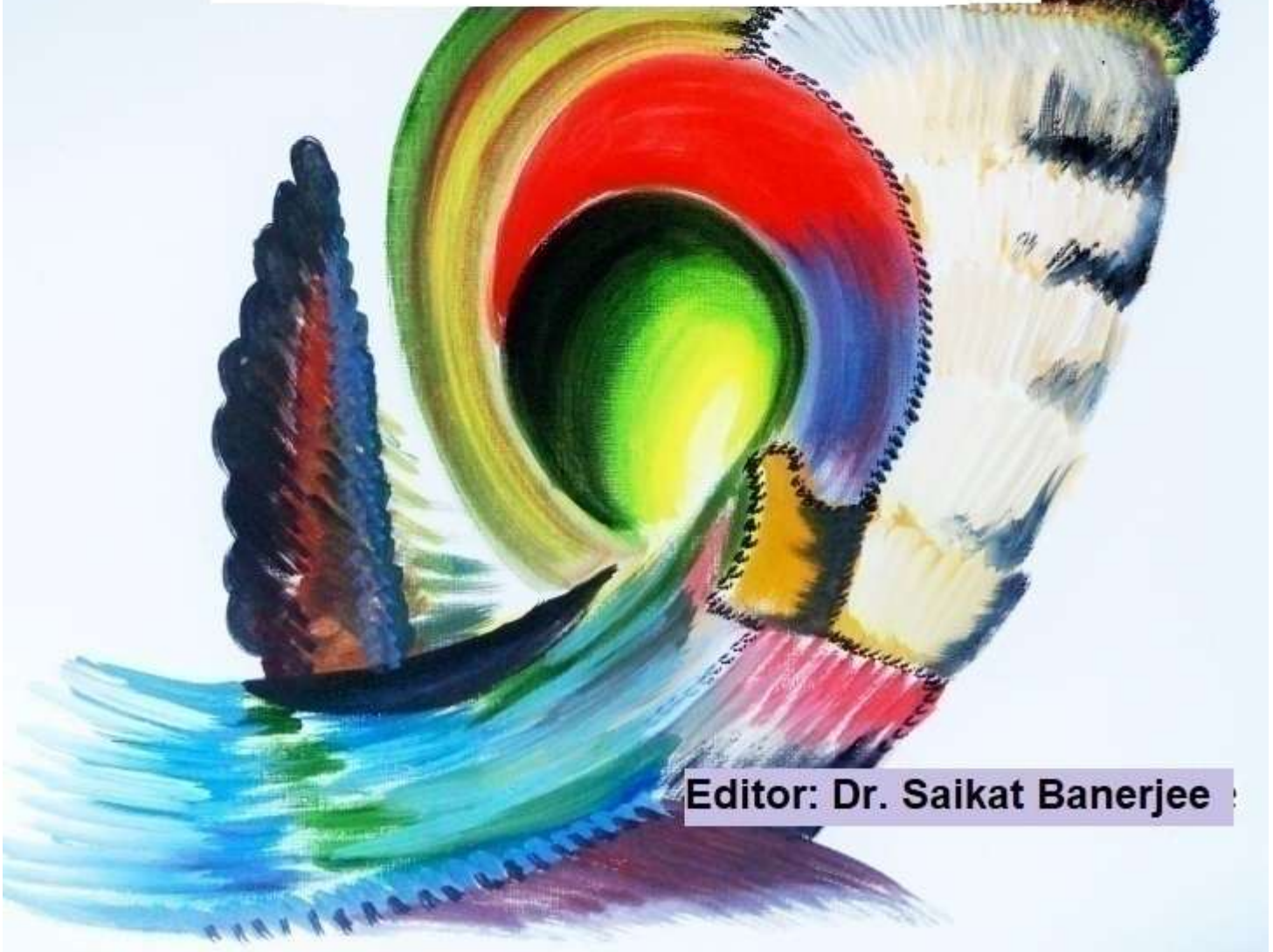

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The Alleged Monstrosity of *Beowulf*

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Abstract: Present-day *Beowulf*-criticism is obsessed with detecting traits of monstrosity in the titular hero. A close-reading of key passages in the poem, as well as relating the narrative to Tacitus' *Germania* and the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon* reaffirms the near-flawless nature of the protagonist and his undisputed stature as the protector of human society against the depredations of supernatural monsters, despite certain words and expressions being common to him and his adversaries. Such correspondences attest to the fact that he has to extend his abilities and nature to a level where he becomes more than ordinarily human and a match for the monsters.

Key words: Flawed heroes – *bolgen*, 'swollen' – *comitatus* – virtuous pagans.

Introduction

We like our literary characters flawed. What reinforces this preference is that many such characters are so: consider Homer's Achilles, Sophocles' Oedipus, or Shakespeare's and Hardy's tragic heroes. And this is where the apparently-flawless Beowulf becomes a problem. Since possibly the nineteenth century, and certainly the early twentieth, critics have desperately tried to 'humanize' the character by superimposing on the figure, as he appears in the poem, some 'defect'. To quote from the Call for Papers for the 59th International Congress on Medieval Studies which took place from 9th to 11th May 2024 at Western Michigan University:

> Although *Beowulf* has long held place as a praise poem, a rising tide of critique has noted various elements that frame the central protagonist and other heroic figures in the poem as monstrous in key respects … (ICMS, 2023)

The logic seems to be: Beowulf fights monsters – three individual ones, and a host of sea-beasts during his swimming match with Breca. *Ergo*, he must share with his monstrous adversaries some monster-like traits.

Earlier Studies of Beowulf's 'Monstrosity"

Among the host of scholars who have written on Beowulf's allegedly 'monstrous' traits, Manish Sharma has done a particularly close reading of the text of the poem to focus on two features the hero shares

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with his three main adversaries. He deals with the words *(ge)bolgen* and *bolgenmod*, which he translates as 'swollen [with rage]' and 'swollen in spirit'. Sharma relates the words to Andy Orchard's observation about the other monsters and their killers in the *Beowulf*-manuscript, that 'Alexander, like Hercules in the *Liber Monstrorum,* can be depicted as a monstrous figure of pride, a monster-slayer who, in Christian eyes, is every bit as outlandish and inhuman as the creatures he fights, [which] is surely instructive in considering *Beowulf* in the context of the manuscript which contains it.' (Orchard, 139)

Beowulf and Grendel

Let us turn to Beowulf's first monstrous adversary, Grendel. He is a formidable antagonist, though physically peripheral, inhabiting the marshes and fens outside the human habitation of the Danes. Spiritually too, he is peripheral, the offspring of the ultimate exile, the First Murderer, Cain. His strength and his ability to inflict damage are described in gory detail. He seizes thirty men at a time during his first visit. Incidentally, after Beowulf arrives at Hrothgar's hall, the king does say that the hero has the strength of thirty men in the grip of his hand. Later in the poem, we are told that Beowulf swam back from Frisia carrying 'the war-gear of thirty men'(Swanton, 62). Perhaps critics have not homed in on this detail because they choose to see it as a rhetorical rather than a literal device to refer to excessive strength. However, excess, whether of body and/or mind, is seen as something that links man and monster, according to Sharma.

Soon after Grendel begins his depredations, the Danish *comitatus* abandon Heorot to seek *gerumlicor ræste* (l. 139), 'repose farther away', in the ancillary buildings (*buras*), which, as Michael Swanton points out, mostly 'provided lodging for women ('bower'), or for cattle ('byre').' He goes on to add that this makes 'the demoralising effects of Grendel's depredations … clear' (Swanton, 189). That the peripheral has usurped the place of the mainstream is established by the ironic application of the sobriquet *healðegn* (l. 141^{a}), 'hall-thane', to Grendel.

Following the arrival of Beowulf, the monster approaches Heorot, and the doors of the hall cannot withstand the battering by the creature who is *gebolgen* (l. 723^{b}), 'swollen', with murderous rage. But, for the first time in his visit to the human abode, Grendel meets resistance from Beowulf, who, we have already been told, *bad bolgenmod* (l. 709^{a}), 'awaited, swollen in spirit', the attacker. In other words, to be able to confront – and defeat – an opponent who is gigantic, the hero has to be someone who is similarly 'enlarged' both in body

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and spirit. The hero 'contains' the monstrous body of Grendel by holding the latter firmly in his grasp, and this act of Beowulf physically 'diminishes' the monstrous corpus of Grendel when the arm of the creature is torn apart from his body:

Licsar gebad
atol æglæca; him on eaxle wearð
syndolh sweotol, seonowe onsprungon,
burston banlocan. (ll. 815^{b}-818^{a})

(The wretched, evil monster experienced a mortal wound, on his shoulder became manifest a grievous wound, his sinews burst asunder, the limb joints burst apart.)

Beowulf and Grendel's Mother

We only get to hear of the next antagonist after Grendel's departure. Grendel's Mother does not attack unprovoked as her son had, but because she wants to avenge the mortal wound inflicted on her son at Heorot. Unlike with the build-up when Grendel was introduced, the poet is at pains to emphasize that she is a lesser threat

Wæs se gryre læssa
efne swa micleswa bið mægþa cræft,
wiggryre wifes, be wæpnedmen
þonne heoru bunden, hamere geþuren,
sweord swate fah swin ofer helme,
ecgum dyhttig,andweard scireð. (ll. 1282^{b}-87).

(The terror was less, even as much as is the strength of women, the war-terror of a female by a weapon-man when a patterned blade, a sword stained with blood, forged by hammer, with doughty edges, shears through the boar-image atop a helmet.)

Once her presence is detected, she is frightened and in a hurry to get away to her periphery:

Heo wæs on ofste, wolde ut þanon,
feorre beorgan, þa heo onfunden wæs.
Hraðe heo æþelinga anne hæfde

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fæste befangen, þa heo to fenne gang. (ll. 1292-95).

(She was in haste, wished to go out from there to protect her life when she was found out. Quickly, she had taken hold of one of the chiefs when she went away to the fens.)

Her son had also shown fear, but only after meeting resistance for the first time – from our hero. And unlike her son's record of devouring thirty human beings at one go, she does not eat anyone and makes off with just one: Asher, one of Hrothgar's favourite retainers.

However, once Beowulf visits her lair at the bottom of the mere, she assumes the upper hand in a manner her son was never capable of. Beowulf, too, retaliates in a manner that has attracted the disapprobation of critics who are clearly labouring under the weight of 'chivalric' behaviour towards women being the expected norm. To this has been added the latest cry against Beowulf's 'toxic masculinity'. Let us see the poet's account of the two battling each other:

Gefeng þa be feaxe (nalas for fæhðe mearn)
Guðgeata leod Grendles modor;
brægd þa beadwe heard, þa he gebolgen wæs,
feorhgeniðlan, þæt heo on flet gebeah.
Heo him eft hraþe andlean forgeald
grimman grapum ond him togeanes feng;
oferwearp þa werigmod wigena strengest,
feþecempa, þæt he on fylle wearð.
Ofsæt þa þone selegyst ond hyre seax geteah,
brad ond brunecg, wolde hire bearn wrecan,
angan eaferan. (ll. 1537-1547[a])

(The leader of the warlike Geats seized Grendel's Mother by her hair, he did not worry at all about the deadly feud. He dragged the deadly foe when he was swollen with rage so that she bowed down to the floor. She gave him back retribution rapidly with grim grasps and made a grab towards him. The foot-soldier, strongest of warriors, weary in spirit, stumbled and fell down. She then pressed down on the hall-guest and drew her knife, broad and with a gleaming blade, and wished to avenge her child, her own son.)

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Stanley says, '[i]t has been argued that it would have been ungentlemanlike [sic] in our hero so to have treated a lady. R. W. Chambers, defending … the emendation to *feaxe* adopted in line with the metrical considerations advanced by Rieger … says, "… Mr. Wyatt writes 'William Morris agreed with me that it debased Beowulf's character, turning a wrestle into an Old Bailey brawl. Hair-pulling is a hag's weapon.'" (233)

I would argue that it is precisely this kind of 'delicate sensibility', which has now transformed itself into the diktat of political correctness, which compels the modern mind to find 'monstrosity' – to say nothing of 'toxic masculinity' – in the moral constitution of Beowulf. Firstly, to continue quoting Stanley, '[w]e know little about the ethics of the poem or of its age and cannot be sure that the ethics of the battle of Grendel's mere were those of the playing fields of Eton. Beowulf may well have made Grendel's mother suffer an indignity well attested by the Laws of the Anglo-Saxons and Frisians' (233). What is more, irony would die a thousand deaths if our politically correct sensibilities of the twenty-first century carelessly agreed with all that Chambers and Wyatt say, especially in the light of the last sentence quoted above. Not only is the word 'hag' applied to the opposite sex, but hair-pulling is considered particularly debasing as it is felt to be appropriate only to such members of womanhood (233).

To return to the question of monstrosity, Beowulf does indeed match Grendel's Mother as far as ferocity is concerned. To quote Stanley again, 'an aggravated form of *faxfang* was *faxfang binetha an tha buke*, "pulling (an opponent's) hair down to the belly": that disposes of Hoops's objection that, if Beowulf forces the she-monster to the ground (1539f.), he will have grabbed her more firmly than just by her hair, viz. by her shoulder [*eaxle*] as the manuscript says' (233). What is more, after she gains the upper hand, God directs Beowulf's attention to the ancient giant sword, the *ealdsweord eotenisc* (l. 1558[a]), in the lair of the monsters which alone has the power to kill them, unlike the manmade Hrunting which fails when Beowulf hits Grendel's mother with it. One must add that Beowulf, in wielding that sword of giants, displays gigantic strength which makes him more than a match for the monster he is fighting.

Beowulf and the Dragon

With the final – and fatal – battle of Beowulf against the dragon, critics since very early times have taken their cue from the following lines to 'humanize' our perfect hero by finding some defect in him, of which, they

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assert, Beowulf himself is aware, though he is not very clear as to what his fault is. Hearing about the ravages the beast is wreaking in his kingdom:

> þæt ðam godan wæs
> hreow on hreðre, hygesorga mæst;
> wende se wisa þæt he wealdende
> ofer ealde riht, ecean dryhtne,
> bitre gebulge. (ll. 2327[b] – 2331[a])

(There was sorrow at heart for the good one, the greatest of griefs. The wise one thought that he might have sorely offended the Ruler, the Everlasting Lord, against ancient custom.)

It is worth quoting Sharma at length here as being something of a metonymy for the mindset that is determined to impose its preconceptions on a text which, I would argue, simply does not support such convolutions of 'logic' (or, lack of it):

> … the term used to describe his fear that he has "offended" ("*gebulge*") the Ruler is grammatically and semantically related to precisely the terms (*gebolgen* and *bolgenmod*) that have suggested his prideful, monstrous, and potentially antisocial propensities. In a sudden flash of insight inspired by the ravages of the dragon, therefore, Beowulf's apprehension appears to turn inward, toward what is conceivably monstrous and "offensive" in his own nature, relying upon the very imagery associated with the swelling of pride (the source of the monstrous corpus) and the "surging" of the body that strains against the bonds of society (and Heorot, a symbol of that society). Beowulf's fear that he has swelled/offended ("*gebulge*") is absolutely and literally accurate – he has become "swollen," and within a Christian frame of reference this state would signify his "offence." [sic] Such transgressive movement would be in direct opposition ("*ofer*") to the constraining force of "law" (the "*ealderiht*"), re-enacting the dynamic of swelling and constraint we have seen earlier in the text. P[e]rhaps the "*ealderiht*" can then be read as that law which from the beginning of human society has separated monsters from men and by which Grendel himself has been "proscribed" (106) ("*forscrifen*") along with the kin of Cain. But Beowulf's moment of self-awareness still occurs in the ironical mode established throughout the poem: the reason behind the destruction of his hall is not any offence [sic]

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> of the hero, but the theft of a cup from the monster's hoard by a desperate fugitive. He has a glimpse of the deeper truth, therefore, even as he is in error. While the poet is at pains throughout his poem to circumscribe the limits of pagan knowledge, Beowulf's clearly limited perspective here is accompanied paradoxically by the suggestion of an awareness of the transgressive and offensive potential of his own nature – an awareness that itself transgresses the boundaries of narration. In other words, the text gives Beowulf some insight into the very means by which the text condemns him. (263)

As it has been suggested in a recent article (Bhattacharya, 2021), this sense of guilt may simply be because, against the heroic code of one not surviving one's lord on the battlefield, Beowulf had done just that, having come back alive from Frisia, although his uncle and king Hygelac had perished there:

> þonan Biowulf com
> sylfes cræfte, sundnytte dreah;
> hæfde him on earme [eorla þritigra]
> hildegeatwa, þa he to holme beag. (2359^{b}-62)

(Beowulf came away from there exercising his own strength and undertook a swimming feat. He had on his arm the war-gear of thirty men when he turned to the sea.)

This goes against what Tacitus said in *Germania*, and what Byrthtwold was to declare in *The Battle of Maldon*. Tacitus wrote:

> Furthermore, for one of the retainers to come back alive from the field where his chief has fallen is from that day forward an infamy and a reproach during all the rest of his life. (Tacitus, 67)

Byrhtwold said:

> Her lið ure ealdor eall forhawen
> god on greote. A mæg gnornian
> se ðe nu fram þisum wigplegan wendan þenceð.
> Ic eom frod feores; fram ic ne wille,
> ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,
> be swa leofan men licgan þence." (*Maldon*, 309-19)

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(Here lies our lord, all hewn down, the good one in the dust. Ever may he mourn, the one who thinks of turning away from this game of war. I am advanced in life; I will not go from here, but I intend to lie beside so dear a man.)

That is, perhaps, why the aged king of the Geats chooses to keep his followers away from the dragon. It is possible that he wishes for the death he should have embraced at Frisia, as enjoined by *ealde riht*.

What is more, against the dragon, Beowulf, in his old age, is unable to muster up the energy to be 'monstrous' enough, though he certainly tries, letting out a challenging cry, *gebolgen*, 'swollen with rage', that resonates against the cliffs, unlike the silent encounter with the two humanoid monsters earlier:

Let ða of breostum, ða he gebolgen wæs,
Weder-Geata leod word ut faran,
Stearcheort styrmede; stefn in becom
heaðotorht hlynnan under harne stan. (ll. 2550-53).

(The chief of the Weder-Geats, when he was swollen with rage, let issue out of his breast an utterance, the stout-hearted one cried aloud. His voice came in resounding, glorious in battle, under the grey stone.)

Once the battle begins, we are reminded of the setback Beowulf suffered against Grendel's mother. Against the dragon, too, Beowulf's sword fails. In fact, when he strikes with it a second time, Nægling bursts asunder. What is more, his *comitatus* do not come to his aid in their cowardice, with the solitary exception of Wiglaf. Thus, Beowulf's prowess is further diminished. This is no longer a single combat as the two earlier ones had been. He has the unasked-for yet vital help of one of his thanes, without which Beowulf would not have been able to kill the beast.

Implications

Our critics, to their credit, do articulate the truth about these speculations concerning the 'monstrosity' of, I insist, our flawless hero. '[T]he hero must move beyond human limits in order to have the capacity to combat the monstrous forces that threaten the social order,' says Sharma. But, he is compelled by modern ideological compulsions to which he and his kind feel obliged to submit, to declare, in an exercise in self-contradiction, that 'this very movement is identified with the pride and murderous, antisocial rage from which

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the monstrous corpus itself originates.' What eventually redeems this approach is the final admission of the 'existential dilemma, the vicious circle of pagan heroism from the poem's Christian perspective, which so perturbs Beowulf and contributes to his dark and fatalistic mood prior to his final battle' (Sharma, 264-65).

This is something that Stanley had identified way back in 1963 in his '"Hæþenra Hyht" in *Beowulf*':

> By the standards of asceticism the Germanic heroic ideals are insufficient. The poet depicts the ideal of secular Germanic society in such a way that it seems glorious, with an emphasis for the most part on the glory, but sometimes on the seeming. Doubts of Beowulf's salvation come with each re-reading of the poem: the poet meant them to come. (Stanley, 192)

In the article '*Beowulf* – Proselytism Practised and Subverted', it has been argued that, despite his doubts, the poet remained unambiguous, at a time when Dante was yet to appear and formulate his 'Limbo of Virtuous Pagans', about the fact that he found Scyld Scefing, and, particularly Beowulf, admirable souls. Following the ship-burial of the former at the beginning of the poem, we were told:

> Men ne cunnon
> secgan to soðe, selerædende,
> hæleð under heofenum, hwa þæm hlæste onfeng. (ll. 50^{b}-52)

(Men, heroes under the heavens, hall-rulers, did not know, to tell the truth, who received that cargo.)

After the cremation of Beowulf, like Scyld's funeral, conducted according to pagan, and not Christian custom, inevitable, the characters and their civilization are pre-Christian – our poet is even less ambiguous:

> him of gewat
> sawol secean soðfæstra dom. (ll. 2819^{b}-20)

(From his heart, the soul departed to seek the judgment of those firm in truth.)

The poet cannot send his heroes to a Christian heaven, but nor will he condemn these heroic and virtuous souls to any kind of hell.

The only monsters in the poem, then, are those Beowulf battles and defeats – in the last case with the help of Wiglaf. That he, at least during the two earlier encounters, matches their ferocity with his, is because, as Beowulf says to his followers about the dragon

> Nis þæt eower sið

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ne gemet mannes, nefne min anes … (ll. 2532[b]-33)

(That is not your adventure, nor what is measured out to you men, but mine alone…)

None of them can be estimated by *monna gemet*, 'the measure of men,' a phrase Sharma has found also in *Genesis A*, l. 1677 (264). None of them is human anyway, the first two are merely humanoid. With due apologies to the sensibilities of venerable scholars, Grendel's Mother is no 'lady', she is a *merewif mihtig* (l. 1519[a]), 'a mighty lake/sea-female' who merely has *idese onlicnæs* (l. 1351[a]), 'the form of a woman/lady'. They cannot be judged by the standards of a normal human being, who could not possibly combat them! Beowulf, in the tradition of protagonists in heroic narrative, is simply larger than life who can match the monsters in ferocity, at least in his prime. A monster is a malevolent creature that causes harm to human beings. Beowulf is a protector of mankind. He is not a monster, or even monstrous.

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