

Beowulf* as a Philosophical Poem

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Criticism has treated *Beowulf* as a heroic epic with some Christian colouring or as a Christian parable thinly cloaked in heroic dress to indicate the extremes of interpretation, but *Beowulf* can be read as a philosophical poem grappling with problems inherent in the heroic and Christian faiths.¹ These are, first, the problem of evil troubling Christian thought and, secondly, the less frequently discussed problem of oblivion challenging the heroic world view. The poem implies, rather than states, the two philosophical problems it embodies in the narrative and in the contrasting tonalities of the hero's three great, or mythical, combats. Orthodox Christian faith holds that one all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect God created the world (in the largest sense: the universe) — which immediately raises the problem of evil. Michael Tooley acknowledges that “when one conceives of God as unlimited with respect to power, knowledge, and moral goodness, the existence of evil quickly gives rise to potentially serious arguments against the existence of God.”² The hero and the poem explicitly recognize God's power and clearly imply his uniqueness, though his perfect goodness is not explicitly asserted and sometimes seems erratic or contingent.

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1 The text cited throughout is *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th edition, edited by R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

2 Tooley, “The Problem of Evil,” 1.1.

Orthodox Christianity can hardly accept a morally ambiguous God, despite the physicist and wide-ranging intellectual Freeman J. Dyson's belief that God is evolving towards that perfection which orthodox theology attributes to him.³ Readers cannot assume, *a priori*, that because the *Beowulf* poet flourished in the Christian era, the poem's theodicy was completely sound.

The heroic age produced no scholastic thinkers to define, refine, complicate, and anatomize the heroic world view, but poets and story tellers in the heroic tradition, including the *Beowulf* poet, have promised undying fame as the reward of right action — or, to put it another way, heroic narratives offer deliverance from oblivion, but few can hope for this heroic form of salvation. In his review of *A Beowulf Handbook*, Fred C. Robinson objected to my claim that the poem makes enduring fame won by great deeds its “only sure value” and cited the Lament of the Last Survivor (*Beowulf*, 2247-66) and Ecclesiastes 1:11, “there is no remembrance of men of old,”⁴ as proofs that fame's a stuff will not endure. To be forgotten among the living hardly poses a problem for those who confidently expect eternal life as individual persons.⁵ Heroic texts promising immortal fame can arouse skepticism, as can the Christian claim that a perfect God created and governs this clearly imperfect world. J. R. R. Tolkien obliquely posed the problem of oblivion when he insisted that the *Beowulf* poet “saw clearly: the wages of heroism is death,”⁶ but the poem and its characters agree repeatedly that the wages of heroism is enduring fame in a world where nothing else endures (884b-87a, 953b-55a, 1387-89, 1534b-36). The heroic faith answers Tolkien's noting that the wages of unheroic behaviour are also death. The Old Norse wisdom poem *Hávamál* (“Sayings of the High One,” that is, Óðinn) bluntly sums up the prospects for the unheroic:

Ósnjallur maður
hyggst munu ey lifa
ef við víg varast;

3 Dyson, *Infinite in All Directions*, 119. In “Evil, the Problem of,” Hick begins by noting (p. 136) that the problem can make God's perfection problematic.

4 Robinson, Review of *A Beowulf Handbook*, 697. Clark, “The Hero and the Theme,” 275.

5 Tolkien observes that the extension of *lof* from praise in the world to everlasting praise in heaven as described in *The Seafarer* (ll. 72-80a) has no parallel in *Beowulf* and suggests that the *Seafarer* passage may have “suffered revision and expansion”; Tolkien, “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,” 282-83.

6 Tolkien, “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,” 269.

en elli gefur
 honum engi frið,
 þótt honum gearar gefi.⁷

[A spiritless man thinks he will live forever if he avoids fighting, but age will give him no truce even if spears do.]

The possibility of oblivion challenges the heroic faith that the fame and honour the hero earns will survive into future generations and distant realms. *Beowulf* treats basic problems confronting the ideals of the cultural world it depicts: evil and oblivion pose serious challenges to the Christian/monotheistic and the heroic world views. Though the poem has its roots in a pagan culture, it found a home and its present form in a society at once Christian and heroic, though not completely either. Christianity asserts God's benevolence and absolute power, the heroic faith the value of honour among one's peers and the permanence of a hero's deserved fame. The poem recommends the virtues essential to a heroic society — courage, loyalty, and generosity — as it admits God's power over the world.

Although Tolkien made the poem's action a struggle against evil adversaries, enemies of God, beings associated with hell, the first two drafts of his famous study omit the problem of evil to which the version presented to the British Academy alludes only obliquely.⁸ In the published essay, Tolkien claimed that the "southern mythology" had

to go forward to philosophy or relapse into anarchy. For in a sense it had shirked the problem precisely by not having the monsters in the centre — as they are in *Beowulf* to the astonishment of the critics. But such horrors cannot be left permanently unexplained, lurking on the outer edges and under suspicion of being connected with the Government.⁹

Those "horrors," or rather the problem of explaining them, are the problem of evil; the Government — capitalized in Tolkien's text — is divine providence or God, not Hrothgar's administration of Denmark.

7 *Hávamál*, 93-133 at stanza 16. Hereafter, line references are presented parenthetically in the text above.

8 See Tolkien, *Beowulf and the Critics*, ed. Drout, for complete texts of the two other versions of the paper Tolkien delivered to the British Academy.

9 Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 268. Tolkien compares Grendel who bore God's anger and the Cyclops, son of a god, as representative of the difference between the "northern and southern mythologies," but does not explain why the southern or classical mythology "had" to lead on to philosophy; Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 267.

The poem embodies the Christian problem of evil and the heroic problem of oblivion in a story pitting Beowulf against three monstrous enemies set within a world of stories treating human affairs and especially human conflicts. Though often interrupted, the hero's battles with Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon proceed in straightforward chronological narratives, each with a strikingly different tonality or colouring. The narrative becomes a variant of the "combat myth" in a form with a number of parallels in Norse literature.¹⁰ In *Beowulf*, however, these three episodes successively re-examine the problem of evil moving from what seems assured orthodoxy to an ambiguous or doubtful orthodoxy to the very position Tolkien feared, a powerful suggestion that evil is inherent in the nature of things, in the governance of the world.

The poem's contrasting narrative styles in the historical episodes, like the varied tonalities of the mythical combats, gradually make clear the poem's view of the world it creates and recreates. The historical-legendary episodes begin with a straightforward though brief chronicle of the Scylding dynasty down to Hrothgar, king of the Danes as the poem opens. Subsequent historical matter takes a more fragmentary — though sometimes more detailed — form. The fuller narrative of the fight at Finnsburg begins *in medias res* leaving the audience to guess how this violent and tragic story began. Later the story of Ingeld has a beginning and middle but the upshot remains unstated, and the poem's audience knows from other hints that the beginning had its antecedents in a past which the poem leaves obscure. The historical matter of the poem's final third takes the most fragmented and achronological form of all these stories, yet the intricate narrative becomes a coherent whole. One narrative strand leads to Beowulf's succession, the other to the dragon's devastation of the Geats. The last great battle joins the historical *Geatas* (Old Norse *Gautar*), legendary Beowulf, and mythical dragon and thus endows the poem with an extraordinary range of significance.

The poem's first mythic encounter finds the origin of evil in the crime and the kin of Cain from which Grendel descends. The serpent, the apple, and Eve find no place in *Beowulf*, but errant humanity in the person of Cain rather than Tolkien's "Government" seems to bear the ultimate responsibility for evil. Cain, Grendel's ancestor, let evil loose in the world when he killed his brother Abel.¹¹ Yet in the poem, Cain stands

10 For the "combat myth," see Fontenrose, *Python*, 1-11, and for *Beowulf* as an example of this myth, 525-34. Chadwick traces a northern variant of the "combat myth" appearing in a number of texts and in *Beowulf*; Chadwick, "The Monsters and Beowulf," 171-203.

11 See Ringler, trans., *Beowulf*, lxxxviii-lxxxix.

at the head of the monstrous races, not as the ancestor of the human race. The poem discovers the origin of evil in a single act, but that origin seems not to implicate humanity as the myth of Adam's fall does. Oddly enough, criticism has tended to interpret the poem from this first mythical combat (the Grendel story), flattening out tonal differences and the emerging contradiction between conceptions of evil the three combats seem to imply.¹² In contrast, I argue that the final section of *Beowulf* reaches the highest point of its complex artistry and concludes the poem's philosophic quest, challenging the solution to the origin of evil the Grendel episode posed. Grendel's story locates the origin of evil, and apparently leaves Tolkien's "Government" out of it. The story of Grendel's mother, however, puts that answer to the question.

Fragments of historical-legendary stories are interlaced with the narratives of mythic combats which most readers take for the poem's essence. In the first two great battles, the relationship between mythic narratives and the 'digressions' or historical-legendary materials create a human past as counterpoint to the mythic combats. These historical or legendary stories progressively appear in more disconnected and in achronological orders, disarming any inclination on the part of an audience to impose straightforward moral judgements on the principals in various violent and grim narratives. While Grendel twice bears the title of "God's enemy" (786, 1682) and approaches Heorot for the last time accompanied by God's anger (711), the

12 Of course, the first part of the poem (Grendel and his mother) has attracted more study than the second (the dragon); hence the large critical head can easily wag the smaller tail. In the new edition of the poem, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th edition, the notes to the first part occupy pages 110-237, the second part, pages 237-72 — 128 pages as against 36. Bishop N. F. S. Grundtvig, the poem's first competent reader after the end of the Anglo-Saxon age, reviewed the first printed edition of 1815, noting its many flaws. Grundtvig translated the poem freely into Danish ballad metre, edited it, and wrote many essays on its artistry and meaning over some fifty years. He first pointed out the poem's one clearly historical event and the approximate date of that event, the death of Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle and king, in Frisia. Grundtvig saw a problem in identifying the dragon as a figure of evil, but Tolkien took the dragon as personifying both "the evil side of heroic life" and "the evil aspect of all life" (moral and natural evil), but his appendix "Grendel's Titles" implies that Grendel represents moral evil; Tolkien, "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," 259 and 278-80. For excerpts from Grundtvig's writings, see Haarder, *Beowulf: The Appeal*, 72 and n. 30. Hamilton saw Grendel and the dragon (skipping, like Tolkien, Grendel's mother) as "fleshly inhabitants of the impious City," without distinction; Hamilton, "The Religious Principle," 329-30. Robinson treats Grendel and the dragon equally as figures of evil intimately connected with Cain and the Devil; Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, 31-32.

victorious Scyld's defeated enemies are not God's enemies. As the Danes return from following Grendel's bloody footprints to his mere, a court poet praises Beowulf's victory and tells the story of Sigmund's triumph, killing a dragon and winning its treasure; the dragon is not explicitly called evil or linked to Grendel or identified with the old serpent of Christian tradition. For all the violence and tragedy of the Finnsburg story, we cannot say 'who started it' or whether the poem represents any of the principals, Hnæf, Hengest, and Finn, as blameworthy. In the first two mythical episodes (the battles with Grendel and Grendel's mother), digressive elements, save for the story of the Scylding dynasty, are associatively rather than causally linked with the mythical story.

In the final section, all events in the narrative of Beowulf's fight with the dragon and the stories of the fates of kings and princes in what is now southern Sweden make a connected whole. These narratives, taken together, would answer the question Beowulf and the dragon might ask each other if they paused in their duel to ask — why are we here doing this? The stories of the Swedish-Geatish wars and of the raid on Frisia as well as the story or stories of the treasure and its former owners all relate the necessary circumstances that have led Beowulf and the dragon to their fatal encounter, while prophetic allusions darkly outline the Geatish future. The Frisian raid and the Swedish-Geatish wars made Beowulf king because all other descendants of King Hrethel died in battle and in one shooting accident. The treasures deposited in a tomb by the last survivor of an ancient race inevitably attracted the dragon because dragons must seek out and defend a treasure.¹³ Kings must defend their people, win and distribute treasures. Beowulf and the dragon were meant for each other.

One of the oldest and most persistent questions prompted by the poem weighs 'pagan' against 'Christian' elements and attempts to find the right balance between the two. However, these opposed elements might better be called 'heroic' and 'monotheistic.'¹⁴ That the heroic ethos in the old Germanic world had its roots in versions of pagan belief is a contingent fact of European history; but paganism is not a necessary or sufficient condition for a heroic ethos, as the *Chanson de Roland* illustrates. Nor does paganism necessarily imply a heroic world view as the cynical worldliness of the *Hávamál* frequently shows. The heroic ethos, however, necessarily finds its home in a shame/honour culture in which the meaning and value of the actor's life lies in his

13 See *Maxims II*, 55-57, ll. 26-27: "Draca sceal on hlæwe, / fród, frætsum wlauc" (A dragon must be in a barrow / wise, proud of adornments).

14 See Irving, "Christian and Pagan Elements," 175-92.

reputation, esteem, or honour in public opinion but the loss of that honour deprives life of meaning and value. Christianity recognized an inferior value in the desire for honour that would impel the virtuous to act rightly and significantly in the world, but a stricter Christian faith saw the desire for honour as a flaw. Milton's "Fame is the spur [. . .] / (That last infirmity of noble mind)" sums up Augustine's and Boethius's evaluation of fame.¹⁵ Boethius — or his Lady Philosophy — opposes to the ideal of lasting fame the commonsensical observation that fame, honour, the esteem of one's peers has only a limited circulation and will eventually perish as inevitably as one's body. Lady Philosophy convinces Boethius that fame, being local and transitory, has no value whatsoever. Beowulf the hero insists on the lasting value of fame (1386-89). The poem repeats gnomic statements affirming the real and lasting value of fame (24-25) but confronts the problem of oblivion in its final section even as it challenges the Christian/monotheistic conception of evil as an undocumented alien, resident within a world ruled by a benevolent and all-powerful God. Though evil has intruded into the world or nature, it seems to have come from outside of nature itself; hence Tolkien's "Government" apparently escapes responsibility for the origin of evil.

The problem of evil challenges a Christian world view, or perhaps the world view of any idealistic monotheism. If an all-powerful and benevolent Providence governs all, whence comes evil? In various pagan mythologies, a god or gods create the world, not *ex nihilo* but from the inchoate stuff of a watery chaos often embodied in a chaos-monster.¹⁶ The Great War then arises between order and chaos, or representatives of these fundamental opposites. Evil or disorder originates in chaos and threatens to break in on the ordered world. Evil, then, could have a place of origin in the part of chaos not fashioned into the ordered world. Orthodox Christian belief claims that God indeed created the world *ex nihilo*, hence evil cannot originate in that unordered world of the chaos-monster. From St. Paul onward, orthodox Christianity found the origin of evil in Adam's disobedience. As J. M. Evans puts it, "If asked to account for the apparent contradiction between the benevolence and omnipotence of God on the one hand and the imperfection of Nature on the other, a well-educated Christian living at any time in the sixteen hundred years that separate Milton from St. Paul would have pointed to the third chapter of Genesis,"¹⁷ that is, to the story of Adam, Eve, the serpent, and the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Between St. Paul and Milton,

15 *Lycidas*, ll. 70-71.

16 See Fontenrose, *Python*, 217-73; and Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 44-50, and *The Satanic Epic*, esp. 25-37.

17 Evans, *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition*, 10.

Christian thought had degraded the serpent into Satan who, in turn, had been transformed from an apparent member of the “heavenly court” into the archetypal enemy of God and humanity.¹⁸ Christian tradition metamorphosed the serpent of Genesis into the Devil.

Remarkably, *Beowulf* omits any reference to Adam, Eve, the serpent, or the apple — but no scholar seems to remark on the untold story. Adam’s free will and the serpent’s, or the Devil’s, temptation play no part in *Beowulf*. Though the poem names devils three times, they never seem implicated in the origin of evil, nor in the temptation of individual human beings. As Grendel flees Heorot, he intends *secan deofla gedræg* (to seek the mob of devils, 756a), which might mean that he proceeded into the clutches of tormentors in hell or wished to rejoin the company of the mere, perhaps the swarming monsters who seem to share Grendel’s home and his hostility to humankind. Later the hilt of the sword with which Beowulf beheaded Grendel’s mother, comes into Hrothgar’s possession after *deofla hryre* (after the fall of devils, 1680a), evidently Grendel and his mother. In Beowulf’s light and non-threatening account of his fights in Denmark,¹⁹ Grendel carries a game bag made of dragon skins *deofles cræftum* (with devilish skill, or with a devil’s art, 2088a). “Devil” and *deoful* derives ultimately from the Greek *diabolos* via Latin *diabolus*, but mythical or supernatural beings defy ordinary taxonomy. The text of *Beowulf* leaves its idea of *deoful* or *deoflas* uncertain but certainly does not attribute the origin of evil in the world or humanity to its *deoflas*. For the *Beowulf* poet, the term *deoful* apparently joined the vocabulary for monsters and enemies of the human race without locating the origin of evil. The only tempter in *Beowulf* appears in Hrothgar’s speech to Beowulf (1724-68) where a supernatural enemy called a killer (*bona*, 1743b) whose perverse suggestions are those of an “accursed spirit” (*wergan gastes*, 1747b). This enemy shoots invisible arrows at a complacent nobleman who then grows selfish and niggardly and fails to distribute wealth to his followers, but dies leaving his hoard to another who spends it. Hrothgar’s rhetoric seems derived from Christian sermons, but the content echoes the ethics of a heroic age and the folk belief in the power of the shooting of *esa*, *ylfa*, or *hægtessa* (of pagan gods, of elves, or of witches).²⁰

18 Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 107 and 112.

19 Lerer, “Grendel’s Glove,” 721-51.

20 See the charm “For a Sudden Stitch” in *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, 122-23, ll. 23-26.

If within *Beowulf* evil has its origin in an act and actor, Cain, his brother's killer and Grendel's progenitor, seems to have narrative and historical priority. Evans observes that although eating the fruit "was the first sin, there is no suggestion in the biblical narrative that it in any way vitiated the moral nature of their [Adam and Eve's] descendants."²¹ At least in the first major episode of *Beowulf*, evil seems to originate in Cain's fratricide and medieval tradition frequently looks to Cain for the origin of the monstrous.²² Like his ancestor, Grendel seems to live as an exile in the wasteland. If evil originates in Cain's murder of Abel, humanity and nature itself remain untainted. As the supposed ancestor of all humanity, Adam might have passed the taint of original sin to all his progeny, but Cain could not. He might have — save for the text of Genesis — engendered the monstrous brood enumerated in *Beowulf* (111-14), but no dragon appears in that list. A learned Christian should have known that the seed of Cain perished utterly in the Flood despite the "cultural legend" of Cain in popular Christianity before and throughout the Middle Ages.²³ In some folk beliefs, Satan rather than Adam sired Cain, which would give Grendel the worst possible ancestry, but he also seems to be a descendant of the primeval chaos-monster in his habitat, a watery wasteland, and in his antipathy to the construction of Heorot, to the merriment within the hall, and especially to the song about the creation of the world.

Grendel moves from an uncanny locale, a mere which seems directly connected with a sea resembling the watery chaos of some creation myths, invades the ordered realm of the Danish king, and assaults the very citadel of civilization, the royal hall. The sound of joy in Heorot — above all a professional poet's song about the creation of the world — enrages Grendel and drives him on to a series of nocturnal attacks on Heorot which empty the hall and make it useless from sundown to dawn, just the time for feasting and entertainment and rejoicing. The hall, a site of noisy merriment and song, falls silent just when the sound of hall-joy would be most appropriate. The *Beowulf* poet repeatedly associates joyful sound and light; hence the resounding and brightly lit hall confronts the darkness and silence of Grendel's realm. The monster imposes his darkness and silence upon Heorot.

Neil Forsyth acutely remarks that narratives — even those relating the conflict between Christ and Satan — have no given good and evil characterizations; markers

21 Evans, *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition*, 17.

22 For some of the legends of Cain, see Williams, *Cain and Beowulf*.

23 Williams, *Cain and Beowulf*, 5.

which may be reversed or omitted must provide the required evaluations.²⁴ *Beowulf* explicitly applies moral markers for Grendel, but not, or not clearly, for Grendel's mother, and not for the dragon. Similarly, the narrator provides no moral markers for persons involved in the various human conflicts in the poem. The poem associates Grendel with a Christian idea of evil: Grendel's complex pedigree traces his lineage back to Cain, the first fratricide and, indeed, homicide. That descent draws on a Christian superstition — a correct reading of Genesis reveals that none of the kin of Cain survived the Flood. Grendel, unlike the poem's other monsters, labours under God's anger. On his way to Heorot and his fatal encounter with Beowulf, Grendel *Godes yrre bær* (bore God's anger, 711b). The poem refers to Grendel as *Godes andsacan* (God's enemy, 786b), and in his report to the Geatish king, Beowulf also characterizes Grendel as *Godes andsacan* and asserts that the monster was *morðres scyldig* (criminally guilty, 1682b-83). The poem insists on Grendel's criminality or moral guilt but does not apply the same terms to Grendel's mother or the dragon. Notably, the word *fyren* (crime, sin), implying a strong sense of moral condemnation, repeatedly characterizes Grendel and his deeds (101, 137, 153, 164, 628, 750); Grendel's deeds are *fyrendæde* (1001a), and just once *fyrendæde* applies both to Grendel and his mother (1669b), where both are guardians of the same house. In that episode, Beowulf, not the more impartial narrator, speaks. Hrothgar, but not the poet, calls Grendel's mother a *sinnigne secg* (guilty warrior, 1379a), as he urges Beowulf to avenge the death of Æschere.

As the champion of the afflicted Danes, Beowulf fights a 'just war' against Grendel, an unjust, evil, and, indeed, demonic enemy. Beowulf's victory brings on another terrible enemy, Grendel's mother, who acts according to a traditional and accepted motive for violence, revenge for the violent death of a member of the kinship group. She is never called "God's enemy" and may not be descended from Cain. Nor does the narrator claim that she is criminally guilty. Though the first mythical battle seemed to locate the origin of evil in the moral failure of one individual, Cain, transmitted somehow to his descendants and even his non-descendants, the second contests that finding. Whereas Grendel waged war against the Danes out of his fury at the sound of the joys of the hall, Grendel's unnamed mother takes up the universally acknowledged duty of revenge.

It has been claimed that casting a female, a mother, in the role of avenger would fill an Anglo-Saxon audience with horror, an argument that might link Grendel's

24 Forsyth, *The Satanic Epic*, 26.

mother with moral evil.²⁵ In various feuding societies, a woman may take on the role of avenger when no capable male relative survives. Carol Clover points out that in Icelandic law (with parallels in continental Scandinavia) “when the slain man has no male relatives in the first tier (no son, brother, or father) but *does* have a daughter (unmarried), that daughter shall function as a son.”²⁶ Icelandic law takes a woman out of the systems of revenge and compensation when she marries, not when she bears a child.²⁷ Grendel’s mother occupies a position Icelandic law did not envision: a woman and, indeed, a mother with apparently no male relatives in the first or any other tier. That she seeks revenge herself rather than inciting her non-existent kinsmen to revenge seems more understandable than horrifying. The poem seems to represent Grendel’s mother as a “female warrior” or even as an “awe inspiring female warrior” whereas critics often overread her as an evil monstrosity and shade the poem’s vocabulary for her accordingly, as Christine Alfano argues with some care.²⁸ Though Tolkien left Grendel’s mother out of his lecture, he fed this tendency to equate Grendel and his mother; in the appendix “Grendel’s Titles,” he wrongly claimed that the poem has the same set of descriptive terms for both.²⁹ Grendel’s mother apparently has no hope of a male kinsman who might avenge her son. Paul Acker claims, “Grendel’s dam may have seemed monstrous not only because she was a female exacting revenge but more specifically because she was a mother,” but the argument owes more to speculation than to the text.³⁰

The final mythic combat opposes an enemy who plays out his predestined role, observing the rules of the game for dragons as Beowulf plays out his part observing the rules for kings. The poem treats these two adversaries with the formal impartiality of an umpire at a cricket match. The first and probably the greatest critic of *Beowulf*, Bishop Grundtvig, saw Grendel and the dragon as embodiments of evil but admitted that the poet had erred “in putting the dragon to some extent in the right.”³¹

25 See, for example, Chance, “Grendel’s Mother as Epic Anti-Type,” which reproduces chapter seven of Chance’s *Woman as Hero in Old English Poetry*. Chance’s rhetoric of horror seems overwrought. Another view of horror is discussed below.

26 Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 369-70 (emphasis Clover’s).

27 Clover, “Maiden Warriors,” 46, and “Regardless of Sex,” 369 and 370 n. 28. For similar statutes in early Norwegian law, see also Clover, “Maiden Warriors,” 46 n. 30.

28 Alfano, “The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity,” *passim*.

29 Tolkien, “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,” 280.

30 Acker, “Horror and the Maternal,” 707.

31 Haarder, *Beowulf: The Appeal*, 72 and n. 30.

Unlike Bishop Grundtvig, I will not quarrel with the poet's judgement. The dragon's hoard was treasure trove, not temporarily concealed for future use, and therefore the property of its finder or of the owner of the wasteland which the dragon claimed. The poem does not challenge the dragon's right to his barrow or the treasure, but his intention to leave nothing alive in the land of the Geats may seem excessive. If, with Bishop Grundtvig, critics wish to see both the dragon and Grendel as expressions of the force of evil for which humanity is uniquely responsible, they must admit with him that the poet has blundered. But can a poet mistake his meaning and if so, who can recover it?

The contrasting tonalities of the three mythic combats progressively encode the discovery that evil is inherent in the order of the world, connected indeed with Tolkien's "Government" and that humanity cannot be held responsible for the origin of evil. Irony dominates the story of Beowulf's first monster-fight against Grendel, suspense the second, against Grendel's mother. The story of the fight against Grendel involves an ironic relationship between the poem's audience and its characters: the narrator makes Grendel's descent from Cain known to the audience, but neither Beowulf nor the Danes know the monster's origin. In another ironic pattern, Grendel approaches Heorot confident that he will feast on Danes while the poem repeatedly makes clear that the monster moves inexorably towards his destruction. Grendel's advance has three stages marked by *com* (came) with an infinitive of motion, "came advancing," "came walking," and "came adventuring" (*com . . . scriðan* 702b-703, *com . . . gongan* 710, *com . . . siðian* 720), but each stage ends with an assurance that Grendel's raid will end badly for him. First, the audience is assured that God and an angry Beowulf can prevent Grendel's design, then that this time Grendel will meet tougher luck and tougher warriors than ever before, and finally that fate and the hero will see to it that this will be the last night of Grendel's raids. Irony has its victims, and in this story, Grendel has that part.³² The episode includes suspense, but it envelops the Danes (660-61) and Beowulf's own companions (691-93) rather than the poem's audience. This ironic mode suits an encounter between a demonic enemy and a virtuous defender who enjoys God's favour in a well-governed world. A just war

32 Ringler, "Him séo wén geléah," 49-67. Grendel's approach to Heorot (702-21) has been much discussed since Brodeur's seminal essay "Design for Terror in the Purging of Heorot," which was revised and expanded as chap. 4, "Design for Terror," in *The Art of Beowulf*, 88-106. Renoir's "Point of View and Design for Terror" deserves special attention. For a discussion and bibliography of studies on this episode, see *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th edition, 158.

should end with poetic justice and the defeat of evil; the ironic narrative emphasizes that justice is being meted out to God's enemy, the descendant of Cain. In the comforting certainty of Beowulf's victory, destined by God, the audience could forget the problem arising from the twelve years of Grendel's depredations, accepting that 'all's well that ends well.'

Suspense becomes the dominant tonality of the hero's battle with Grendel's mother. Klaeber suggests that the poet disregarded suspense in his narrative, observing that "in the account of the three great fights of the hero, care has been taken to state the outcome of the struggle in advance."³³ He cites four such anticipations of the outcome for Grendel, one for Grendel's mother, and five for the dragon. The poem predicts Grendel's future defeat as he begins his journey from the mere, and before Beowulf and his company reach the dragon's fortress, the poem anticipates that both the hero and the dragon will perish in the battle; in contrast, Beowulf's victory over Grendel's mother is announced in what seems a split second before the event. In effect, the poem keeps the outcome in suspense to the last moment; hence, no irony marks the female warrior's strong defence of her hall beneath the mere. The poem's audience cannot be sure Grendel's mother, like her son, descends from Cain and, thus, cannot certainly link her with the origin of evil. The audience of the poem does not enjoy the same superiority in knowledge over the actors as on the matter of Grendel's origin.

The second mythic combat lacks irony. Uncertainty and suspense dominate the narrative as the issue of the battle seems to hang in the balance almost to the end. Anxiety accompanies suspense. Beowulf admits a doubt about the battle's outcome when he delivers a nuncupatory will of sixteen lines (1474-90a) before plunging into the mere. One provision reminds Hrothgar that he must provide for the Geatish troop if Beowulf does not survive the battle (1480-81).³⁴ At the crucial moment of the fight, Grendel's mother throws, straddles, and stabs at Beowulf with a broad-bladed knife. His coat of mail, made by Weland, saves Beowulf's life, and just then, in what seems a matter of seconds, the tide of battle turns: after the hero breaks free and stands up, God decides the battle in Beowulf's favour (1551-56). But on the shore of Grendel's mere, the Geats wait, hoping for but not expecting Beowulf's return while the Danes,

33 Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf*, lvii.

34 In contrast, Beowulf's remarks (442-51) on the possibility that Grendel will win the battle seem like instances of black humour and oblique revelations of the hero's confidence. The hero's oral will occupies only lines 452-55a.

having no obligation to avenge the hero, return to Heorot (1591-1605a). The sense of an uncertain outcome continues even after the audience has seen Beowulf's victory.

God's favour seems contingent on Weland's craftsmanship and Beowulf's strength rather than on a fixed animosity towards Grendel's mother.³⁵ Once on his feet, Beowulf catches sight of and immediately seizes a gigantic sword, part of the hall's equipment. Despairing of his life (*aldres orwena*, 1565), he strikes, separating his opponent's head and body. The contrasting modes of irony and suspense suggest that Beowulf's first victory represents divine retribution and poetic justice in action, but the second great victory depends in part on last-minute, almost capricious, help from a supernatural source. While an idealized Christian God must be free of such faults, Yahweh in some of the books in the Hebrew scriptures, the Germanic gods at least as represented in Old Norse, and the gods of classical antiquity at times seem capricious, vindictive, irascible, and irrational. In the poem, fate, like God, may favour an *unfæge* (undoomed) man, but the first example is Beowulf (573) and the second the thief who stole the dragon's cup (2291) and survived thanks to being *unfæge* and to God's favour (2291-93). The rough and tumble struggle, Beowulf's near escape, the sudden change of fortunes for the two adversaries, and last-moment victory give the story suspense rather than irony; hence this encounter communicates no sense of a struggle between good and evil, which, in a well-governed world, must end with the defeat of evil.

The poem's audience has some difficulties in seeing Grendel's mother as an embodiment of moral or natural evil. Hrothgar regards her attack on Heorot as an act of revenge for Beowulf's violent killing of Grendel, and almost seems to blame Beowulf for Æschere's death before acknowledging that Beowulf had avenged the deaths of too many Danes at Grendel's hands (1333-37). Both Beowulf and Grendel's mother act according to the rules of the feud. Grendel's mother, of course, has no recourse in law for her son's death since she (like Grendel himself) has no standing in Danish jurisprudence and can neither bring nor defend a case there. As an outsider, Grendel had no rank in Danish society and thus no defined wergeld which his mother might attempt to claim. In the unimaginable event that she succeeded in bringing a case to a Danish assembly, the defence might claim that Grendel was an outlaw for whom no compensation could be demanded. Tolkien might join the case as an *amicus*

35 Clark, *Beowulf*, 101-102.

curiae, since he claims in his appendix “Grendel’s Titles” that four of Grendel’s titles refer to “his outlawry.”³⁶ The terms Tolkien cites (*heorowearh*, *dædhata*, *mearcstapa*, and *angengea*) might mean “outlaw” metaphorically, but the *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* and supplements gloss none of them “outlaw.” The poem treats Grendel as an alien (*ellor-gæst*, 807a, 1617a, 1621b). The only two “titles” Grendel and his mother share make them both *mearcstapan* and *ellorgæstas* (1348a, 1349a), that is, frequenters of the margins of the ordered world and alien spirits, not quite part of the natural order, or briefly, reflections of the chaos-monster or chaos itself.

If Grendel’s mother sued for compensation rather than exacting blood revenge for her son’s death, the Danish defence would have her in a double bind: if she pleaded that Grendel enjoyed the protection of Danish jurisprudence, the defence would answer that then Grendel fell as an outlaw, but if she pleaded that Grendel was outside of Danish law, the defence could invalidate the action arguing that Grendel kin, being aliens, could bring no action under Danish law. In *Brennu-Njáls saga* (*Njáls saga*, or *Njála*), Gunnar’s kinsmen ask if it would do any good to bring a lawsuit against his killers, but Njáll replies that a lawsuit would be impossible since Gunnar died as an outlaw. Njáll suggests that the better course would be to kill some of Gunnar’s attackers and thus put a dent in the honour of the rest.³⁷ Högni Gunnarsson and Skarpheðinn Njálsson eventually take that course of action.³⁸

Beowulf’s final and most mythical enemy, the dragon, paradoxically has the most distinct and psychologically convincing character of the hero’s opponents. He should be farthest from a realistic enemy, but is somehow closest. The Icelandic sagas often refer to male and female trolls and giants or semi-giants and revenants called *draugar* as believable enough to be met in Iceland, but treat dragons as too improbable to play a part at home though a hero might encounter one in distant lands or even in Norway. In *Beowulf* the dragon has been quietly guarding an ancient and immense treasure for three hundred years — *Draca sceal on hlæwe, / fród, frætwum wlanc*, “A dragon in his barrow must be old, proud of his treasures,” goes an Anglo-Saxon compilation of truths universally acknowledged.³⁹ The dragon does what he must by his nature as the maxim defines it. A man fleeing revenge for an unknown cause enters the dragon’s underground home and takes a precious cup, hoping that material

36 Tolkien, “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,” 280.

37 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chap. 78, pp. 191-92.

38 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chap. 79, pp. 194-96.

39 *Maxims II*, 55-57, ll. 26-27.

compensation will satisfy his adversary. The poem confirms the traditional wisdom regarding the dragon, but adds an ironic touch:

He gesecean sceall
 hearh on hrusan, þær he hæðen gold
 warað wintrum frod; ne byð him wihte ðy sel.
 (2275b-77)

[He has to seek out a sanctuary in the earth where, old in years, he guards
 the heathen gold. He's not any better off.]

The dragon of the *Maxims* has appeared in Geatish history as an individual being with a character and sensibilities we can recognize. *Pace* Tolkien, the dragon has a vivid reality, not the abstract quality of *draconitas*.⁴⁰ An avatar of the primeval chaos-monster, like the Leviathan, Typhaon, Python, and the World-Serpent, or Miðgarðsormr of Old Norse mythology, the dragon in *Beowulf* has no known origin unless in the universal origin of the world. The poem by C. S. Lewis notwithstanding, a Germanic dragon's story does not begin *ab ovo*.⁴¹

If Miðgarðsormr ranks first among dragons in Old Germanic mythology, Fáfnir seems the most famous of the world-serpent's progeny. In the *Poetic Edda*, he begins as a giant (whose brother Reginn is also called a giant), but transforms himself into a dragon to defend his ill-gotten treasures. When Sigurðr has killed Fáfnir, Reginn insists the hero would have left the old giant (*inn aldna jötun*) in the heath without the help of Reginn's sword.⁴² When Sigurðr, having tasted Fáfnir's blood, understands the speech of birds, he hears one saying that it would be foolish not to leave *inn hrimkalda jötun* (the frost-cold giant) shorter by a head.⁴³ The Old Icelandic prose preface to *Fáfnismál*, which is much later than the verse, calls Hreiðmarr, father to both Reginn and Fáfnir, a "dwarf" rather than a giant, probably because later tradition gave dwarves the craft of metal working. Snorri does not identify Hreiðmarr and his sons as dwarves, men, or giants,⁴⁴ but both the prose and poetic Eddas agree on the main point: Fáfnir transformed himself into a dragon, equipped with the helmet of terror and a sword, in order to defend his blood-stained gold.

40 See Clark, *Beowulf*, 127-28.

41 For the text of the poem, see Tolkien, *Beowulf and the Critics*, ed. Drout, 113-14.

42 Briem, "Fáfnismál," 335, stanza 29.

43 Briem, "Fáfnismál," 338, stanza 38.

44 *Skáldskaparmál*, 45-46.

The transformation from a giant, a chthonic being, to a dragon takes Fáfnir from an ancient race to one still more ancient, but even ordinary mortal men were sometimes said to become dragons.

In various sagas, men transform themselves into dragons, usually with the intention of defending their wealth. In *Þorskfirðinga saga*, the Viking Valr hides his treasure in a tumulus that he enters along with his sons whereupon they all become dragons armed with helmets and swords. Þórir and his companions win the gold (and Þórir the addition to his name — “Gold-Þórir”), but all his companions yield their share of the dragons’ treasure to Þórir.⁴⁵ In his old age, Þórir becomes antisocial; after a false report of a son’s death in battle, he disappears and people say that he made off with his chests of gold won from the dragons and became a dragon himself and lay on his treasures.⁴⁶ Dragons sometimes have their origin in an ordinary serpent (*ormr* in Old Icelandic), as in *Ragnars saga Lóðbrókar*, where a nobleman’s daughter places gold beneath a small heather-serpent (evidently one to be found in heather or whortleberry bushes) which her father has sent for her amusement. The serpent grows into a dragon, and as it grows, the gold it lies on also grows. The dragon becomes dangerous and finally surrounds the building, its head taking its tail (like the world-serpent). Despite the nobleman’s generous offers, no one dares attack the dragon until Ragnarr appears.⁴⁷ Though one might say *that* dragon began *ab ovo*, the egg was not a dragon’s. The archetypal dragon was ‘present at the creation’ or existed before a creation from chaos rather than *ex nihilo*.

The dragon in *Beowulf* presents the poem’s characters and audience with the mystery of his origin or descent. The audience or even the poem’s actors may have assumed that a human owner of the treasure became a dragon to guard it forever, but the text gives that potential explanation no support. The dragon arrives as if from beyond the poem’s known world and takes possession of the treasure. The poem’s audience knows more about Grendel’s descent than the Danes and Geats and may assume it has more knowledge of Grendel’s mother than the actors within the story, but the poem’s audience and its actors have no knowledge of the dragon’s origin. This shared sense of the unknown makes part of the colouring of the episode that contrasts the first two mythic combats. The variation of tonalities in the mythic combats mark the poem’s progressive discovery that the problem of evil cannot be

45 *Gull-Þóris saga*, chaps. 3-4, pp. 1123-25, or *Þorskfirðinga saga*, chaps. 3-4, pp. 344-48.

46 *Gull-Þóris saga*, chap. 20, p. 1142, or *Þorskfirðinga saga*, chap. 20, pp. 381-82.

47 *Ragnars saga Lóðbrókar*, 1:99-102, chaps. 2-3.

solved without implicating the “Government,” the order of the world, in the existence of evil.

In the final episode of *Beowulf* we know from the first that both the hero and the dragon will die, but that knowledge involves no ironic superiority for either. When the two great enemies first confront each other, the poet reports *æghwæðrum wæs / bealohycgendra broga fram oðrum* (each of the warlike ones felt fear of the other, 2564b-65). That a battle-hardened warrior should feel a frisson of terror at the sight of a raging dragon seems unsurprising, but that a dragon should feel the same chill at the sight of a human enemy takes us by surprise and makes them equals and “mighty opposites.” In his battle with Grendel, Beowulf apparently felt no fear whatsoever, and at the crucial moment of the fight with Grendel’s mother, he grasped the ancient sword *aldres orwena* (despairing of life, 1565a) but without fear.⁴⁸ Just as Beowulf’s moment of fear makes him more realistically human than ever before, the dragon’s moment of fear conveys at once a perception of the hero’s immense power and the dragon’s almost human sensibility.

In the poem’s final third, the narrator or narrative treats Beowulf and the dragon with remarkable impartiality. The dying Beowulf has experienced all his *eorðan wynne* (joy of the earth, 2727a) and the dragon *lyftwynne heold* (had possessed the joy of the air, 3043b) in life. The narrator reports their deaths together: “hæfde æghwæðer ende gefered / lænan lifes” (both had reached the end of passing life, 2844-45a). As the dragon sets out to avenge the loss of a cup from his hoard, an epigrammatic sentence of elegant balance sums up the story and its outcome from the Geatish point of view:

Wæs se fruma egeslic
léodum on lande, swa hyt lungre wearð
on hyra sincgifan sare geendod.
(2309b-2311)

[The beginning was terrible for the people of the land, just as the ending
was swift and painful for their lord.]

⁴⁸ *aldres orwena* can be translated “without hope of life” or “without expectation of life;” Klaeber’s 3rd edition and the new *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 4th edition, translate “despairing of life.” Or in short, Beowulf executes the perfect sword-stroke, accurate and powerful, without hope of life (or fear of death). One may compare the idea with the parable ending Eugen Herrigel’s *Zen in the Art of Archery*, 107-108, where the master declares that “the ultimate secrets of swordsmanship also lie in being released from the thought of death.”

A few lines later, the poem anticipates the outcome as the dragon might see it:

beorges getruwode
wíges ond wealles; him seo wen ge Leah.
(2322b-23)

[He trusted in his stone fortress, his war power, and his protecting wall; his hope deceived him.]

Beowulf as a king must defend his people and attempt to win treasure for them — a king is the people’s protector and giver of gold — and the dragon in his natural role must occupy and defend a treasure. The last great battle pits two unalterable natures, each obedient to its own laws, against each other, not a conflict of good against evil.⁴⁹

In the poem’s last act, the mythical and historical (or legendary) narratives intersect and coalesce. The principals and mighty opposites clash not as representations of good and evil but as agents obedient to the laws of their natures. Most of the historical matter relates, in achronological segments interwoven with the mythic combat and its origins, the wars of the Swedes and the Geats. As in the mythic story, the historical narrative represents the opposed forces with striking impartiality. When Onela, the Swedish king, invades the land of the Geats and kills Heardred, their young king, the narrator calls him an illustrious prince and the best of the Swedish kings concluding *þæt wæs god cyning* (that was a good/brave king, 2390b), the poem’s highest accolade.⁵⁰

Some critics have argued that the poem reads the assumed moral clarity of the mythic combats into the historical narratives, linking the fratricidal Unferth with Grendel, a monster of the seed of Cain. The argument has been extended to

49 Rejecting Tolkien’s claim, Gang finds “little evidence that the dragon-fight symbolizes the tragedy of the human struggle against the forces of evil”; Gang, “Approaches to *Beowulf*,” 7-8. Niles writes that “However essential the contrast of good versus evil or God versus Satan may have been in the first part of the poem, by the time of the hero’s final combat such terms of moral opposition have ceased to apply,” and again, “the poet does *not* want this episode to be considered a new chapter in the continuing feud of God against His enemies” (emphasis original); Niles, *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition*, 27 and 184.

50 Greenfield suggests that “if” line 2390 refers to Beowulf, we could then assume that the poet approved of Beowulf’s part in avenging Heardred’s death on Onela. The rightness of Beowulf’s action is hardly in doubt even if Onela is the *god cyning*); Greenfield, “‘Beowulf’ and the Judgement of the Righteous,” 399. But the high praise of ll. 2381-84 must refer to Onela and strengthens his claim to be the “good king” of 2390. As *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 4th edition, notes, “Most observers assume that the subject of *let* is *Ongendōes bearn* (i.e. Onela)”; *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 244 note on ll. 2389f.

Grendel's mother, who apparently had to inhabit cold and terrible waters following Cain's killing of his only brother:

Grendles modor,
ides aglæcwif yrmþe gemunde,
se þe wæteregeſan wunian ſcolde,
cealde ſtreamas, ſiþðan Cain wearð
to ecgbanan angan breðer,
fæderenmæge.

(1258b-63a)

[Grendel's mother, the terrifying woman warrior, thought only of her grief, she who (lit. 'he') had to live in fearful waters, cold currents, after Cain killed his only brother, his paternal kinsman, with a sword.]

In line 1260, *se þe* is masculine, but seems to refer to Grendel's mother and to link her with Cain. Grendel's mother attracts masculine pronouns (*he* rather than *heo*) in lines 1392b and 1394b. Taking *se þe* as referring to Grendel seems difficult, but the meaning of the passage seems too doubtful to securely derive Grendel's mother from Cain.⁵¹

The apparent clarity of the mythic combats in *Beowulf* may seem sure in the Grendel story, but that assurance breaks on the rocks of the poem's final section having been storm-tossed in Grendel's mother's mere. The failure to find an external source of evil unconnected with the "Government" in the mythic combats parallels the failure to find a nice separation of good and evil actors in the historical episodes interwoven with the story of Beowulf's last battle.

In human affairs, unjust war might seem an appropriate parallel to the monstrous as the manifestation of evil and perhaps the place to find the responsibility for the origin of evil in humanity. Though wars and feuds dominate the narrative background to Beowulf's fights against monstrous enemies, the narrative mode of this background of stories defeats any attempt to locate the origin of war in the phrase so often articulated when warring nations claim, 'they started it' — the search for a wrong at the origin of a war usually leads to an endless regression. The poem makes that search all the more futile as an achronological sequence of events gives each an antecedent which itself clearly has an antecedent that may or may not be reported. This puzzling narrative style, much commented upon by the poem's troop of scholars and critics, implies that the audience of *Beowulf* knew at least part of the legendary history

⁵¹ See *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th edition, notes on ll. 106 and 1260.

which the poet draws on, but, more importantly, the tangled density of these narratives builds a part of the poem's meaning. The father of *Beowulf* criticism, Bishop Grundtvig, mused over the poem for fifty years and eventually argued that *Beowulf* has too many episodes and digressions.⁵² The poem's greatest editor, Fr. Klaeber, labelled a section in his edition "Lack of Steady Advance."⁵³ The poem's digressions into history, like its mythical combat narratives, merge in the final third to complete its philosophical quest. Despite Tolkien, the poem aims at movement, not at a balance of ends and beginnings;⁵⁴ despite Klaeber, it advances steadily but on multiple fronts towards a vision of the human condition in an imperfect world.

The heroic world view rarely becomes a topic for scholastic introspection — no codified statement of belief or faith appears in heroic literature. But heroic age texts repeatedly hold out the possibility of enduring fame in a world where nothing else endures. The Old Norse *Hávamál* ("Sayings of the High One") states that faith in successive stanzas:

Deyr fé,
deyja frændur,
deyr sjálfur ið sama,
en orðstír
deyr aldregi,
hveim er sér góðan getur.

Deyr fé,
deyja frændur,
deyr sjálfur ið sama,
Eg veit einn,
að aldregi deyr:
dómur um dauðan hvern.⁵⁵

[Cattle die, kinsmen die,
the self must also die,
but glory never dies,
for the man who is able to achieve it.

52 Haarder, *Beowulf: The Appeal*, 59-67, esp. 66-67.

53 Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf*, lvii-lviii.

54 In Tolkien's view, "the poem was not meant to advance, steadily or unsteadily"; Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 271.

55 Briem, *Eddukvæði*, 109-110, stanzas 76-77, and *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, 24.

Cattle die, kinsmen die,
 the self must also die,
 I know one thing which never dies:
 the reputation of each dead man.]

In the same heroic spirit, the opening of *Beowulf* includes a maxim on the subject of fame: *lofdædum sceal / in mægþa gehwære man geþeon* (in every nation a man must prosper by praise-worthy deeds, 24b-25). Later, the young hero assures the old king, Hrothgar, that since everyone will die *wyrce se þe mote / domes ær deaþe; þæt bið drihtguman / unlifgendum æfter selest* (let him to whom it is granted achieve fame before death; that is best for the lifeless warrior, 1387b-89). The poem *Widsith* closes with the same sentiment, noting that a poet will meet a nobleman

se þe fore duguþe wile dom aræran,
 eorlscipe æfnan, oþ þæt eal scæceð,
 leoht ond lif somod: lof se gewyrceð,
 hafað under heofonum heahfæstne dom.
 (140-43)⁵⁶

[who wishes to enhance his honour among the warriors, to act nobly until all departs, the light and life together. He will achieve fame, will have long-lasting honour beneath the heavens.]

In the *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy takes a common-sense view of the supposed value and permanence of fame as she persuades Boethius that noble minds not yet perfect in virtue long for fame which has no real or lasting value. The great men of the past — she names Fabricius, Cato, and Brutus in the metrum — perished and no one knows where their bones lie; the men themselves are mere names now, and eventually even the fame those men earned will, like them, die. Lady Philosophy's metrum ends

56 In his edition and study, Chambers translates the final lines of *Widsith* "he gaineth glory, and hath, under the heavens, an honour which passeth not away"; Chambers, *Widsith: A Study*, 224. I take *gewyrceð* and *hafað* as futures, though the tense is ambiguous. Tolkien observes that the word *heofon* and its plural, *heofonas*, "refer usually either to the particular landscape or to the sky under which all men dwell"; Tolkien, "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," 283.

Quodsi putatis longius uitam trahi
 mortalis aura nominis,
 cum sera uobis rapiet hoc etiam dies
 iam uos secunda mors manet.⁵⁷

[For if you think that fame can lengthen life
 By mortal famousness immortalized,
 The day will come that takes your fame as well,
 And there a second death for you awaits.]

A second death, the death of fame, awaits the greatest men. In Lady Philosophy's argument, fame offers no abiding reality and thus no real value. True wisdom will despise fame like all other earthly and transitory things. King Alfred's translation of Boethius adds a Germanic hero to Boethius's *ubi sunt* lament: *Hwæt synt nu þæs foremeran 7 þæs wisan goldsmiðes ban Welondes?* (What are now the bones of that pre-eminent and wise goldsmith, Weland?)⁵⁸ Perhaps the name Fabricius suggested the master of a *fabrica*, an artisan's shop or a smithy, and thus the inclusion of Weland. Alfred acknowledges that the memory of great men has been lost in the ancient world which Boethius invokes and in his own time. In Metrum X and its prose version, Alfred's *Wisdom* treats oblivion as the reward due those eager for fame, and almost mocks the forgotten, but Alfred's additions to the metrum imply that although oblivion may extinguish deserved honour, that loss of memory is unjust, an evil. Turning from the ancient past, Alfred laments *ac hit is wyrse nu* (but now it's worse) because many men who merited fame by praise-worthy deeds are little spoken of or entirely forgotten.⁵⁹ Alfred's additions to Boethius's text challenge Lady Philosophy. Alfred was a king and a military commander; he knew fame as the necessary spur to noble minds, probably including his own, and assumes the importance and reality of the transient. While he lives, a king has duties, and these duties require human and material resources for their accomplishment. Alfred has the reputation of a serious Christian, a nobleman who avoided many temptations open to princes, but he accepts the real value of deserved fame, honour, and respect. For him, as for Abbot Ælfric, vainglory consists of the desire for undeserved fame, not the desire to earn fame or such fame itself.⁶⁰

57 Boethius, *Philosophiae consolatio*, 2.m.7:23-26. Trans. Watts, *Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy*, 76.

58 *King Alfred's . . . Boethius*, xix, ll. 16-17 (p. 46).

59 *King Alfred's . . . Boethius*, metrum x (pp. 165-66).

60 Clark, "Beowulf: The Last Word," 21-23, 26, and 27 n. 4.

The *Beowulf* poem incorporates a number of gnomic statements on the subject of fame as a lasting, or even *the* lasting, value. Hrothgar, king of the Danes, proclaims that Beowulf's victories over Grendel and Grendel's mother have secured the hero's immortal fame. *Beowulf*, unlike the *Hávamál*, confronts the problem of oblivion in narrative terms. The dragon's treasure in the last part of the poem originates with an ancient people who gained it from the earth, flourished, and then declined until their last survivor hid the treasure in a burial chamber. After the passing of an indefinite time, a dragon finds and takes possession of the treasure, holding it for three hundred years — that is, for an immensely long period. The original possessors of the treasure can only be known by it, their names and their stories having drowned in time's abyssal deep. Buried with Beowulf's ashes, the treasure sinks into the earth forever. Against this narrative embodiment of oblivion and eternal loss, the poem places Beowulf's barrow, his surviving name, and itself. The poem's close implies — despite historical fact — that the Geats themselves disappeared save for its recreation of their story.⁶¹ The opening lines of *Beowulf* situate the power and the glory of the Danes and their great kings *in geardagum*, in days gone by (1), but preserved by the poem or by the poetic tradition.⁶² In due course, the Danes made themselves known again in England as a powerful nation.

At the end of the story, the poem has left us no out. Evil has its origin in the nature of things, in the "Government," just as Tolkien feared, and an abyss threatens to swallow up a hero's fame in eternal night. But Beowulf's verbal monument still stands, more enduring than brass or half-acre tombs.

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61 That the Géatas of *Beowulf* are the Gautar of Old Norse seems clear despite Leake, *The Geats of Beowulf*. See the discussion in *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th edition, lxiv-lxvii. Lindkvist succinctly sketches what little is known of the early period of Swedish history: Karl Sverkersson, addressed in a papal bull of 1164 as king of the *Svear* and the *Götar*, was probably the first to claim authority over both peoples, but "There were great difficulties in maintaining royal rule over both Svealand and Götaland at the same time"; Lindkvist, "Kings and Provinces in Sweden," 224-26 at 225.

62 The interpretation of the poem's first three lines is difficult, but *Klaeber's Beowulf* notes that *in geardagum* "is to be understood with reference to *þrym*, not *gefrunon*"; *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th edition, 110. Thus, the poem places the great age of the Danes in "days gone by" rather than in its living present. From the poem's perspective, the Danes have achieved lasting fame through their great deeds, but are, in the poem's present, history.

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