

## Abstract:

This thesis deals with the Old English poem *Beowulf*, exploring the dichotomy between the Christian poet and the pre-Christian material he tackles. *Beowulf* was written at least a few hundred years after Christianity was already established in England, yet still had to reckon with the remnants of a culture that had radically different values. The attitude Christianity had to these was ambivalent, at times choosing to conform and integrate some aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture, and at others taking a confrontational approach and condemning them. This is reflected in *Beowulf*, which has both praise and censure for the society it depicts. The poem's overarching theme is community<sup>1</sup>, and the fight against forces that would threaten to destroy it. These forces are personified by monsters, who are literal as well as metaphorical threats to social order. I argue that in *Beowulf*, by putting secular material in a Christian framework, the poet is able to explore which values are the most conducive to the fight against these threats.

The monsters of *Beowulf* have long been recognized as “crucial to the very structure of the poem”<sup>2</sup>. They are the point where the secular and the Christian world meet, as they are both material creatures and evil spirits. The Grendel-kin and the dragon are material monsters, analogous to creatures commonly found in mythologies and folktales all around the world, and therefore they still carry the meaning associated with them. The Christian poet also gives them a scriptural pedigree, making them enemies of God. This puts the pagan characters, albeit unbeknownst to them, on God's side in the Great Feud against the forces of evil. Even though, from a Christian perspective, these people are tragically ignorant of the true faith, they still have virtues that even a Christian can appreciate. However, the kind of social order they have set up is faulty, as the poet makes clear by showcasing the constant feuding and warring that plagues their society. The three monsters of *Beowulf* represent troublemaking, vengeance, and war<sup>3</sup> - threats that come both from without and within, and threats that the Germanic order struggled to mollify, on the contrary, that the heroic values even encouraged. The Christian poet commends the pagan hero's valour in overcoming physical threats, clearly appreciating some aspects of the heroic code, while at the same time making clear even those praiseworthy values *Beowulf*'s society espouses alone cannot grant eternal victory.

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<sup>1</sup> John Niles. *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition* (Harvard University Press, 1983) 226.

<sup>2</sup> Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript*, p.28

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Hume, “The Theme and Structure of ‘Beowulf.’” *Studies in Philology* 72.1 (1975): 5. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173860>. Accessed 15 Jun. 2022.