



## FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Patricia Howe

The Monsters of Beowulf: Heroic and Christian Values

BA Thesis

Opponent's Report

The thesis addresses an important question in *Beowulf* scholarship, highly relevant ever since Tolkien's seminal essay "The Monsters and Critics" (1936). Focusing on the monstrous adversaries of the eponymous hero, it explores their significance in various cultural contexts in which the poem partakes. The point of departure is the mixed character of the poem (and of much other Old English literature) – it was composed by a Christian poet speaking about the pagan past at a time when paganism was still a force to be reckoned with. After exploring various interactions between Christianity and paganism in Anglo-Saxon England, the thesis briefly explores the significance of monsters in psychology, various mythologies and Christianity, and then embarks on a detailed analysis of monsters in *Beowulf*, focusing, in turn, on Grendel, his mother and the dragon.

Given the fact that the candidate did not work with the original and the theme is an often-explored one, the ambition of the thesis does not go beyond giving a summary of the extant critical opinion. This is, however, no meagre achievement and the thesis often does it very successfully: the view of *Beowulf*'s monsters as simultaneously material beings of Germanic folklore, evil spirits of Christianity, personifications of destructive forces in society and nature, as well as portents of future disasters with entirely human causes, is, for instance, very informative and convincing. Of particular interest is the analysis of various overlaps between the human and the monstrous – the human characteristics ascribed to Grendel and his mother and the use of the monsters to criticise certain aspects of heroic pagan society.

While the thesis is generally strong in analysing critical opinion concerning the poem itself, it tends to be sketchy and inconclusive when more general themes are addressed, such as the significance of monsters in (world) mythology and psychology. While the view of monsters as a projection of the Jungian shadow is convincing, the claim that the killing of monsters amounts to the shadow's integration would merit much more explanation within the tenets of Jungian psychology. In the section on the Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity, otherwise enlightening, the candidate sometimes makes clumsy or illogical conclusions from the secondary material, such as that "nearly all kings who died a violent death were made saints, even the pagan ones sometimes" (17), or that "to the church authorities however, any heathen beliefs remained reprehensible throughout the period" (13), directly after the quotation of Pope Gregory's letter in which the ultimate church authority advises certain tolerance to established folk practices in England.

There are some shortcomings in the formal aspects of the thesis – the use of quotation marks, for example, is rather chaotic, there are some instances of parenthetical citation in place of footnotes, and the formatting of the citations is not always according to the stylesheet. The



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thesis does not indicate which translation of the poem it works with – the reader can guess that it is Donaldson’s prose translation from the Norton edition, but it is nowhere stated. While it is admissible to work with translations of medieval texts on the BA level, this should be explicitly stated at the beginning of the thesis. While particular Old English terms are discussed in quotations from secondary sources, this has a peculiar effect on page 40 where a single term *niðsele* is translated as “hateful dwelling” in one quotation and “war-hall” in another. This ambiguity would merit some explanation (which would further feed into the argument of the thesis).

The language is clear and appropriate most of the time, with occasional clumsy or opaque sentences, e.g., “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” (7), or “this motif shares many similarities with *Beowulf* is called ‘The Hand and the Child’” (23-24). At times, informal language slips in as well: “both seem to be pretty good at killing” (35).

All in all, the thesis could have benefited from one more careful reading.

I suggest the following questions at the defence:

- a) Could the candidate elaborate on the reading of *Beowulf*’s monsters through the lens of Jungian psychology? Can the same lens be used for the reading of the double-sided nature of the hero? As noted above, the conclusions made in the thesis are somewhat sketchy.
- b) The chapter on the Anglo-Saxon conversion presents a variety of opinions from secondary sources as to why the society was (not) susceptible to the acceptance of the new religion. What were, in the candidate’s opinion, the main reasons why the Anglo-Saxons turned Christians in the end?

I **recommend** the thesis for defence and propose a preliminary grade of **very good** (2).

Prague, 10 January 2023  
Radvan Markus, PhD