



## FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

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*The Monsters of Beowulf: Heroic and Christian Values*

BA thesis, ÚALK, FF UK, Praha 2023, 59 pp.)

Supervisor's Report

The thesis addresses the central problem in reading *Beowulf*: the adaptation of pre-Christian material by the Christian poet and the attitude to the values and perspectives on the world contained therein manifested in the process; by extension, this reflects the ways in which the Christian Anglo-Saxon society interpreted and came to terms with its past. In exploring this issue, it focuses on the poem's representation of its protagonist's battles with his monstrous adversaries, an aspect famously analysed in Tolkien's seminal 1936 lecture and regularly thematized in subsequent scholarship.

The thesis first sets the context with a description of and a commentary on the state of the Anglo-Saxon society on its encounter with Christianity, focusing on the tensions and opportunities that arose in the interaction and the process of acculturation that Christianity had to undergo to attract converts among people with values so different from its own. The second chapter provides a conceptual framework for the analysis of the *Beowulf* monsters by briefly surveying the function of monsters in psychology, mythology and medieval Christian thinking. The third chapter looks at each of Beowulf's opponents in turn, mapping their role in the plot, their presentation by the narrator and the contextualization of their acts through the numerous narrative digressions, each of which provides them with diverse and often contradictory symbolic associations.

The choice of the topic and the contexts in which it is located is timely and pertinent. The nuanced account of the conversion situation could be said to add a New Historism aspect to the analysis, while studies of monsters and ideas of monstrosity represent a thriving field in contemporary theory. That said, it has to be noted that neither of these potential theoretical frameworks is employed in any systematic manner, which is to be regretted especially with respect to the second chapter, where a more sustained survey of the significance of the monstrous might serve better than the rather sketchy representation of Jungian theory as an introduction to the following account of the roles monsters were given in myths and in the thought of Christian authorities.



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At the same time, as has already been stated, this is an amply covered theme in *Beowulf* scholarship specifically, which means that the thesis cannot aim at much more than a reorganization and reinterpreting of existing positions. This, however, is done very well. The bibliography shows a wide range of texts. The second chapter, despite the reservation voiced above, provides a key for the analysis of the text, which shows how the poem builds its representation of Beowulf's adversaries by juxtaposing the mythological perspective, where "monsters and heroes [act as] inseparable polarities of a unified system of values and ideas underlying order itself" (23), with the two simultaneously existing Christian ones, one seeing monsters as "evil spirits [...] mortal enemies to be destroyed" (25), the other as creatures that "exist for the edification of men [...] to remind humanity of their sins" (24) and so have the role of portents, signs. This is a novel take on the issue and provides a fine scheme for an integration of the variety of perspectives in existing scholarship as well as a description of the poet's approach to his material.

While the overall organization of the argument is ingenious and the secondary material successfully integrated in the analytical chapter, it is not quite so well digested in the first and second chapters. To give just one example, Russell's point that Christianity had little to offer to the tribal Anglo-Saxon society with its strong sense of community (14-15) does not sit quite comfortably with Blair's vision of that society being profoundly transformed by the rise of new hierarchies in search of legitimizing ideologies at the moment of conversion (17). This is not to say that both claims may not be valid – merely that the thesis leaves this apparent discrepancy unaddressed and unexplained. Is it because Russell speaks of tenets of faith while Blair comments on institutionalized religion? Or does the former speak of the attitudes in the society at large and the latter of those of the elites?

Part of the problem lies in the formal presentation of the secondary material. I would definitely recommend a more frequent employment of paraphrase. It appears that the author considers only direct quotation as worthy of reference; at places this results in the text being almost a string of quotations, and sometimes it is not clear where the author develops her own point from the secondary literature and where she merely reproduces her source. Apart from a handful of anacoluthic constructions (e.g. "her thirst for vengeance is commonplace among the humans is highlighted by the Finn and Heathobard digressions", 56) the language is clear and competent. There are some inconsistencies in referencing, e.g. missing place of publication with some items.



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The point I would like to see addressed in the defence is the one I have suggested already: could the author briefly retell the substance of the first chapter, making clear how she understands the relationship between the points made by Russell and Blair respectively?

In conclusion, notwithstanding the reservations voiced above, I consider the thesis to be fully in conformity with the standards for an academic work on this level. I **recommend** the thesis for defence and propose a preliminary grade of **excellent** (1).

Vlčnov, 24 January 2023  
Mgr. Helena Znojemská, Ph.D.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'H. Znojemská'.