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## The Beowulf Poet's Accommodation Of Pre-Christian Germanic Culture

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THE *BEOWULF* POET'S ACCOMMODATION OF PRE-CHRISTIAN GERMANIC  
CULTURE

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

Walter B. Beverly, Jr.

May 2014

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## ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of *Beowulf* scholarship, much debate has been given to whether the poet emphasizes the paganism of his pre-Christian characters, or the Christianity practiced by himself and his audience. Proponents for each stance have given sound arguments, often through comparing *Beowulf* to other works of heroic Germanic literature, particularly Icelandic sagas and Eddic poetry. In this thesis, I, myself compare *Beowulf* to works such as *Volsunga Saga*, *Hrolfssaga Kraka* and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*. As I acknowledge and expand on prior scholarship, I argue that the *Beowulf* poet portrays pre-Christian Germanic society as one accommodated within his own, by showing how the poet develops his hero according to virtues from the pre-Christian past, and which were still celebrated by his contemporary audience.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
LEGENDARY HISTORY.....	8
THE MODEL THANE AND HIS ADVERSARIES.....	24
THE MODEL KING AND HIS ADVERSARY.....	45
CONCLUSION.....	69
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	74
VITA.....	80

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars have examined *Beowulf* comparatively with other Germanic heroic and mythic literature since study of the poem began. With this kind of approach, scholars achieve a greater sense of unifying themes and motifs which various Germanic authors all use as a common basis for their various literatures, ranging from sagas to pseudo-historical chronicles to the epic form of *Beowulf* itself. Furthermore, scholars can not only argue for a unified sense of culture between the different Germanic peoples, but they can also effectively use a comparative study to argue for *Beowulf* individually as a unique, unified whole work within the greater tradition of such literature. Through comparing *Beowulf* to literature concerning parallel characters, themes and constructs, scholars can find not so much a commonly established narrative pattern to which the anonymous poet worked accordingly, but they can examine how he takes those stock themes, types and motifs to use in his own, unique development of character and narrative. While learning that a core group of hero-cycles circulated in all different parts of Germanic Europe, in varying degrees and forms, the differences in stylistics and tone taken by different authors from England, Denmark, Iceland, and other such countries, can be used as great evidence for how they all respectively feel about their pre-Christian heroic heritage. In the case of *Beowulf*, I will argue that the anonymous composer and transcriber incorporates and invokes those core stories in his narrative to reflect favorably, at least for the most part, on his people's culture before his own time. Although he narrates as a Christian himself, the *Beowulf*-poet creates and develops his own protagonist according to two different pagan Germanic heroic types, particularly arranging

the hero's expressions of those types so that he can accommodate his ancestors' pre-Christian culture within his own.

Since the nineteenth century, scholars have attempted to connect *Beowulf* in its structure and characters to other Germanic literature. In 1852-1854, Brynjulfsson first pointed out similarities between the exploits of Beowulf and Bothvar Bjarki from *Hrolfssaga Kraka* (Andersson 125). In a similar vein, other scholars such as Grundtvig earlier in 1820, and Sievers later in 1895, looked for the origins of Beowulf's dragon fight in myths concerning Thor and Danish kings (Fulk, Bjork and Niles xlv). In the early twentieth century, scholars such as Panzer tried to determine a common root story for *Beowulf* and other such tales in folklore, which would come to be classified as "The Bear's Son Tale"(Andersson 126). Ten years after Panzer, Neckel hypothesized that Beowulf's and Sigemund's dragon fights derived from the same original story, likely Geatish (Andersson 126). In spite of viewing the poem through these mythic, legendary and folkloric lenses, though, scholars as early as Grundtvig himself argued that such examinations of *Beowulf* should be considered secondary and auxiliary to the more historical material in the poem (see Malone 129-138). Then, in 1936, responding to criticism that the *Beowulf*-poet marginalized the important figures of his story, such as the different Germanic kings and warriors that appear in other literature, while highlighting the less important fantastical elements, Tolkien wrote "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," signaling a shift back to analyzing the poem through mythic and legendary lenses, particularly in regard to cosmology of Germanic end-times. Though scholars followed in Tolkien's footsteps to deepen the parallels between *Beowulf* and the larger context of mythic and heroic Germanic literature to which it belongs, with Dronke being a notable example in 1969, scholars such as Hill and Keller from the late seventies into the eighties primarily emphasized the difference of *Beowulf* in tone, style and

character from the literature to which it was thus aligned, to argue that the poet acknowledges the Germanic heroic tradition to depart from it, and create an altogether different type of hero and narrative assessment of the past through a more contemporary, Christian lens, a notion first espoused by an anonymous German reviewer of Thorkelin's edition in 1815 (Cooley 45-67). Such an interpretation continued through the nineties, and critics such as Earl and King still espouse it in the current century.

In the 1910s, Olson became the first scholar to disparage attempts to establish analogues with *Beowulf*, stating in particular that "the dragon story in the *Hrolfssaga* has no connection whatever with the Grendel story or the dragon story in *Beowulf*" (Andersson 126). This counter-tradition in criticism has continued into the present day, with Icelandic professor Magnus Fjalldal's 1998 publication, *The Long Arm of Coincidence: The Frustrated Connection between Beowulf and Grettis saga*, serving as one of the strongest examples from the past few decades. Highlighting differences in narrative structure, setting and character, Fjalldal argued for the illusiveness of supposed parallels between the two works pointed out by prior scholars, and used his counter evidence to argue further that parallels between *Beowulf* and any Norse literature could not be accurate. Fjalldal's greatest advantage to refuting the comparative approach to *Beowulf* comes from his use of an Icelandic analogue that can clearly be read as the weakest in connection to the Anglo-Saxon epic. By comparing the tale of a noble warrior prince from a not entirely identified tribe of pre-Christian Scandinavians to that of an opportunistic Icelandic outlaw from post-conversion Scandinavia, he successfully disproves any connection between two stories already fundamentally disconnected, due to the different social classes and contexts which the protagonists occupy. Oddly enough, scholars such as Andersson consider *Grettis saga* the "closest analogue" in Scandinavian terms to *Beowulf*, emphasizing the possible shared root

of the “two-troll” story type, while still acknowledging that the Icelandic work concerns the history of a common family rather than royal lines (125-148). Regardless of the similarities between Beowulf’s fight with Grendel and his mother and Grettir’s own fights with troll-like creatures, *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga* are not analogues because the respective authors focus on different character types to emphasize different themes. Had Fjalldal chosen to disprove connections between *Beowulf* and works such as *Volsunga Saga*, *Hrolfssaga Kraka* and Saxo Grammaticus’s *History of the Danes*, which feature strongly similar and some of the same characters in *Beowulf*, and in which the authors address the same society and culture of the pagan Germanic warrior elite, his task would likely have proven much more difficult for him. Even when addressing the considerable differences in date of composition between *Beowulf* and such works, previous scholars such as Johnson quoted here, have made sound arguments for not using such an issue to dismiss any possible connections:

The comparatively late dates of saga manuscripts need not deter this approach, for as G.V. Smithers remarks: “...the Scandinavian traditions are shown, by certain details in Eddic poems, to be Germanic in origin, and go back to German poems of the sixth or seventh centuries...a *fornaldarsaga* may contain material of considerable though unspecifiable antiquity.” This provides some foundation for using late literary sources to explain much earlier traditions. (42-43)

Comparative scholars such as Earl and King have continued the trend of scholarship found current in criticism by Hill, Keller and Johnson, proposing that the differences found in the *Beowulf*-poet’s renderings of characters and character types in common with the comparative literature reflect the poet’s desire to make his epic more palatable for his Christian audience, rather than his lack of substantial knowledge concerning the other stories. Though I find this a worthy argument, and I agree with such scholarship that the poet had substantial knowledge of stories concerning the other legendary figures he includes, I do not think the poet’s Christianity can be primarily accountable for his different treatment of the legends from those of the later

Germanic authors of sagas and histories. It should be noted that the authors of later Germanic literature are Christians themselves, and that they often more explicitly disavow their ancestors' paganism than the *Beowulf*-poet ever does, with Snorri Sturluson of Iceland being a strong example. More likely, the lesser distance in time between the *Beowulf*-poet and the society he examines would enable him to write a construction of the pagan past more favorably than the late medieval authors. With this thought in mind, the *Beowulf*-poet can be read as accommodating further the pagan past, rather than expressing a need to Christianize it.

Regarding the different degrees of anti-pagan sentiments, I find it necessary to address Fred C. Robinson's *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, from 1985. In this book, Robinson argues that the *Beowulf* poet uses appositive and paratactic language, with particular words that could have both Christian and pagan referents, to simultaneously establish common ground between his pagan characters and Christian audience, while also reminding his audience that his characters are damned for not knowing Christ. In support of this latter issue of damnation, Robinson relies heavily on lines 175-188, immediately following the brief description of the Danes' prayers to pagan idols. I disagree with this part of Robinson's argument for two important reasons. First, had the *Beowulf* poet intended to emphasize the damnation of his characters, he would have likely used more explicit phrasing to do so. Alcuin's famous question, "what has Ingeld to do with Christ," and sermons from clerics such as Wulfstan regarding pagan practices, show that the converted Anglo-Saxons made themselves as obvious as possible when intending to denounce their pagan forebears, and their contemporaries who reverted to such practices. Secondly, upon closer reading of lines 175-188, which appear to be a miniature sermon of sorts, the poet does not directly connect his statements back to the immediately aforementioned Danes. Rather, he directs this commentary to his audience, as a warning against

consciously reverting to practices that they know are false to their Christianity. Indeed, the summary of Scyld's life in the poem's prologue, especially with lines such as "the mighty lord went into the Lord's keeping," can be used to argue that the pagans of the poem achieve salvation by their natural nobility, similar to the sentiment of Pope Gregory in the much celebrated punning story of his meeting Anglo-Saxon youths in the Roman slave market. With this kind of alternate perspective in mind, I intend to show how the *Beowulf* poet actually uses his particular language to establish a fundamentally positive connection between his Christian audience and pagan characters, which should not be broken or undermined by religious differences.

To resist the established trend of using comparative scholarship to argue for the *Beowulf*-poet's departure from Germanic heroic tradition, I will analyze the poem myself, strengthening connections already made to other legendary and mythical content, to explain how the poet does, in fact, construct his characters and narrative according to, rather than in opposition to, the same heroic standards which inform the comparative literature. First, I will validate the relevance of the overall pagan context of *Beowulf*, by addressing the explicit and implicit allusions to Germanic gods and cosmology. Secondly, I will establish Beowulf's place among the different manifestations of the heroic-thane character-type, particularly in conjunction with literature concerning Boðvar Bjarki and Thor. Thirdly, I will establish Beowulf's place amongst the different manifestations of the heroic king character type, addressing other such heroes like the Volsungs and the Danish king Froði, who also fall into that category. In all three sections of this comparative examination of *Beowulf*, I will point out that the primary differences in character and narrative derive not from contrasting Christian and pagan tones and mentalities, but from how Beowulf fulfills the positive heroic standards of pagan society, a distinction noticed since

the time of Grundtvig, while the characters from the other literature almost always inevitably fall short of that fulfillment (See Malone 129-138). With this primary difference established, I intend to argue how the poet renders the pagan world of his ancestors not as a time and culture apart from his own, but more as an earlier stage of his culture with emphasis on the same heroic ideals, which transcend shifts in historical period and religion.

## CHAPTER I: LEGENDARY HISTORY

Scholars from Tolkien to Dronke to Orchard, to name a few, have already commented that the narrative structure of *Beowulf* reflects the cycle of stories concerning Germanic gods, particularly their end-times. Niles and Hill, among others, address the matter of the Geats as a largely legendary tribe, constructed by the Anglo-Saxons in their literature to be noble, inspirational ancestors. In this chapter, I intend to argue that the *Beowulf*-poet presents pagan Germanic cosmology in a manner acceptable to his Christian audience, by continuing the scholarly trend of examining these subjects in conjunction with each other. I will use as evidence his harmonization of pagan fatalism with his contemporary monotheism, and his euhemerizing of Germanic deities and their attributes. To begin, I will analyze the recurring invocation of *wyrd*, and trace its development as a concept throughout the poem, to the point near the end when it becomes practically synonymous with the single God the characters also invoke. Following that, I will analyze the endowment of the Geatish royal line with heirlooms from the Germanic gods, noting how the poet enhances the esteem of that family with those objects, in keeping with the pagan mentality, and thereby gives the Geats a special status between mythology and his poem's pseudo-historical backdrop. Lastly, I will analyze how the poet reframes the pagan concept of Ragnarok within his narration of the Geatish royal line's deterioration, retelling the myth as an example of an unfortunate family which maintains its nobility in the face of death and destruction.

## Divine Wyrð

When analyzing any part of *Beowulf*, it is nearly impossible to not also address the fatalistic tone which prevails throughout the poem. In his landmark essay from 1936, in which he brings monsters to the forefront of scholarship, Tolkien stresses the theme of ultimate doom for Beowulf and the pagan society in which he belongs. Thirty three years later, Dronke elaborates on this theme to establish *Beowulf* more explicitly and firmly in the context and tradition of the Norse Ragnarok. More recently, attention has been given to how the *Beowulf*-poet presents his characters' perception of fate as a particular force. Niles argues that the poet renders his pagan characters as "[recognizing] the controlling power of Providence," giving them innate Christian sensibilities (2007, 56). Wanner, in his article from two years ago on Beowulf's last fight, argues that the pagan concept of *wyrð* is subordinate to the Christian God in the poem's beginning, and vice versa at the poem's end. In this first section of this chapter, I mean to establish a middle path between these viewpoints, and argue that the poet emphasizes *wyrð* equally in conjunction with his own monotheism throughout his work, so that he can establish common spiritual ground between his characters, himself and his audience.

Although they regularly invoke a monotheistic God with Christian undertones, the *Beowulf*-poet also has his characters invoke a more abstract concept called *wyrð*, which comes from their own pagan cosmology. Often roughly translated as "fate," the word stands for the cosmic force which determines the ends of lives, including those of the gods in the Germanic pantheon (See Fulk, Njork and Niles lxxii-lxxviii). In his article on the cosmology of *Beowulf*, Whallon suggests *wyrð* to be a cognate of the Old Norse *Urðr*, the name of one of the Norns who determine the lifespans of men. Though initially referred to by Beowulf as an impersonal force with a set, predetermined direction regarding life, the poet and the characters thereafter express

*wyrd* more as an entity which actively participates in the poem's events as they develop, much like a deity. By emphasizing this one primary aspect of pagan Germanic cosmology, rather than the pantheon of gods, and by presenting it in the way he does, the poet establishes a strong parallel between his own society's Christianity, and the pagan religion of his ancestors. The pre-Christian culture then becomes reflective in its own terms of the poet's culture, and in this way the poet establishes a sense of continuity, rather than separation, from his ancestors' paganism to his and his audience's Christianity.

When Beowulf addresses the possibility that Grendel will kill him, he frames the hypothetical scenario within references to the allusively Christian God and to *wyrd*:

Let him put his faith  
in the Lord's judgment, whom death takes!  
I expect that if he is allowed to win, he will  
eat unafraid the folk of the Geats  
in that war-hall, as he has often done,  
the host of the Hrethmen. You'll have no need  
to cover my head—he will have it,  
gory, bloodstained, if death bears me away;  
he will take his kill, think to taste me,  
will dine alone without remorse,  
stain his lair in the moor; no need to linger  
in sorrow over disposing of my body!  
Send on to Hygelac, if battle should take me,  
the best battledress, which my breast wears,  
finest of garments; it is Hrethel's heirloom,  
the work of Weland. *Wyrd* always goes as it must! (Liuzza 440a-455)

In this passage, the *Beowulf*-poet appears to reinvent the Germanic past, in which Christian and pagan beliefs are both acknowledged and expressed with equal force. In an alternative reading, however, the poet's reference to "the Lord's judgment" can be an interpolation of his own beliefs, incorporated into the otherwise pagan connotations of Beowulf's speech, with its emphasis on performing heroic deeds, and its reverence for time-honored battle garb forged by the smith of the Germanic gods. By framing this section of Beowulf's speech with Christian and

pagan terminology, the poet demonstrates how his Christian audience and his pagan characters share a common feature between their respective religions which they equally emphasize: the acknowledgement of human mortality. By having his hero first make reference to the Christian God, the poet enables his audience to identify and sympathize more immediately with Beowulf as an otherwise pagan warrior. With this sense of connection between hero and audience established, the poet can then reference *wyrd* more like a pagan synonym of “the Lord’s judgment,” rather than a concept in opposition to his and his audience’s beliefs.

In his response to Beowulf’s statement of purpose, Hrothgar also refers to *wyrd* and God in conjunction with each other:

my warriors, are decimated; *wyrd* has swept them away  
into Grendel’s terror. God might easily  
put an end to the deeds of this mad enemy!  
Often men have boasted, drunk with beer,  
officers over their cups of ale,  
that they would abide in the beer-hall  
Grendel’s attack with a sword rush of terror.  
Then in the morning this mead-hall,  
lordly dwelling, was drenched with blood,  
when daylight gleamed, the benches gory,  
the hall spattered and befouled; I had fewer  
dear warriors when death took them away.  
Now sit down at my feast, drink mead in my hall,  
the reward of victory, as your mood urges. (Liuzza 477-490)

This passage from Hrothgar’s speech has parallels to the one from Beowulf’s, in how Hrothgar also recognizes human mortality as dictated by *wyrd* and by the will of God interchangeably.

With his account of Grendel’s reign of terror, Hrothgar parallels Beowulf’s hypothetical scenario with actual examples of such an outcome, thereby reinforcing more intensely this theme of mortality, prevalent in both pagan and Christian perspectives. By referring to the boasts of his fallen men, and with his implied prediction of Beowulf’s victory in combat at the end of this passage, Hrothgar maintains the overall pagan mindset expressed by Beowulf in his prior speech.

His exclamation that “God might easily / put an end to the deeds of this mad enemy” can be considered more of an implicit address by the poet to his audience, rather than Hrothgar’s acknowledgement of *wyrd*’s subordination to Christ, incorporated to maintain his Christian audience’s approval of Beowulf, as the hero pursues his pagan goal of fame through heroic deeds.

When *wyrd* gets mentioned for the third time, Beowulf identifies the concept as practically synonymous with God himself. When commenting on his swimming race with Breca, in his retort to Unferth, Beowulf states,

Light shone from the east,  
God’s bright beacon; the waves grew calm,  
so that I could see the sea-cliffs,  
the windswept capes. *Wyrd* often spares  
an undoomed man, when his courage endures! (Liuzza 569b-573)

In this context, *wyrd* is expressed as an entity with a legitimate consciousness and power of its own, which decides a man’s fate according to his behavior in current circumstances, rather than just as a pagan synonym for fate ordained by the Christian God. Having developed the concept of *wyrd* to this degree, the *Beowulf*-poet can render his pagan characters as legitimate monotheists according to their own particular terminology and cosmology, while he still maintains common ground between them and his Christian audience, by pointing out their shared emphasis on fortitude in the face of adversity. Much later, towards the poem’s end, the poet develops this parallel to the fullest extent, making his most explicit reference to *wyrd* as a deity in its own right, when Beowulf makes his final boast, before the dragon fight: “From the hoard’s warden / I will not flee a single foot, but for us / it shall be at the wall as *wyrd* decrees, / the Ruler of every man”(Liuzza 2524b-2527a).

## Trappings of the Gods

Of the Germanic royal lines presented by the *Beowulf*-poet, the Geats appear to have the least basis in actual history. Unlike Hrothgar and his relatives, who are accounted for by other authors of Germanic pseudo-history, Hygelac is the only Geatish king in the poem mentioned by other sources (see Fulk, Bjork and Niles li-lxvii). Grundtvig became the first *Beowulf* scholar to establish analogues to Hygelac in works by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gregory of Tours, and he argued the Geats of *Beowulf* are more significant as an idealized Germanic heroic society than as a particular historical family or group of people (See Cooley 45-67, Malone 129-138). The *Beowulf*-poet quite possibly invented the rest of the Geatish royal line for the sake of his work, an idea first ventured by Leake in 1967 (see Niles 1997 213-232). Evidence for such an interpretation can be found in the poem's connections of the Geats to characters and materials from Germanic mythology. With the particular references he makes, both direct and indirect, the *Beowulf*-poet euhemerizes his ancestors' pagan mythology, giving Beowulf a suitable background for a fictional hero amongst characters who otherwise have a basis in pseudo-history. By euhemerizing Germanic deities and their aesthetic trappings, the poet can present them as palatable examples of his pagan ancestors within their own context, and not distance his Christian audience by explicitly incorporating the pantheon of old gods.

With his single, brief reference to Weland, mentioning only his name and his occupation as a blacksmith, the *Beowulf*-poet invites much speculation from modern readers regarding the extent of his knowledge on that character from pagan Germanic myth, as well as his purpose for including that reference in his work. Orchard argues that the poet's brevity indicates his expectation of his audience's prior familiarity with Weland and his story. Niles argues that such a reference is consistent with pious literature that also mentions Weland, such as King Alfred's

translation of Boethius, and *Deor* (2007). While I agree with Orchard's argument, I disagree with Niles, in that the poet does not mention Weland to impart an explicitly Christian message regarding the past. More importantly, the poet mentions Weland and his work as subjects relevant to the present moment of his narrative, rather than subjects which have lost their significance over time, a point argued by Alfred and the *Deor* poet. In this section of this chapter, I mean to argue that the *Beowulf*-poet establishes Weland's current significance to his audience, as part of Beowulf's construction as a hero from the pagan past, while still rendering him to his Christian audience as virtuous.

The *Beowulf*-poet makes his first and most direct reference to Germanic mythology, in relation to Geatish kings, regarding Beowulf's armor. At the end of his declaration on how he will fight Grendel, Beowulf identifies his armor as "the best battledress, which my breast wears, / finest of garments; it is Hrethel's heirloom, / the work of Weland"(Liuzza 453-455a). As noted by translator R.M. Liuzza, "Weland is the legendary blacksmith of the Norse gods"(62). Beowulf has already set himself apart from the other thanes in Heorot, by listing his credentials to Hrothgar and announcing his intention to face Grendel alone. As he equips Beowulf with armor fit for the gods, and traces its ownership back to the hero's grandfather, the poet indicates that Beowulf and his Geatish royal family have literary origins beyond pseudo-history, in the realm of mythology. The poet could also identify Beowulf's armor as Weland's work to express a conventional literary description for such material. Russom considers Beowulf's particular skills and attributes analogous to the types mentioned for Germanic noblemen in Eddic poetry. The poet deems Beowulf's armor as Weland's work to establish his heroic legitimacy to the utmost within a pagan Germanic context, like Anglo-Saxon kings' claims of descent from Germanic gods such as Woden (see Thomas Hill 1986 37-47). With this distinction in character,

the *Beowulf*-poet presents his hero all the more as the only match for Grendel in combat, considering the monster's own mythological origins in the Germanic tradition of giants and trolls (see Cohen1-32).

Interestingly, Beowulf only identifies his armor as Weland's work after he announces his intention to fight Grendel without it. When he addresses the possibility that Grendel may kill him, Beowulf tells Hrothgar, "[y]ou'll have no need / to cover my head...no need to linger / in sorrow over disposing of my body," and requests that his armor be "[sent] on to Hygelac, if battle should take [him]"(Liuzza 445-451, 452). With the knowledge that Grendel will eat his remains if the monster overcomes him, Beowulf wants his armor returned to Geatish royalty as a substitute for his own body. By establishing a parallel between his hero's body and "the work of Weland," the *Beowulf*-poet indicates how he has constructed Beowulf's character from mythological elements in Germanic literature, similarly to how Weland literally crafts weapons for the gods in a mythological context.

By referencing Weland to describe Beowulf's armor as "the best battledress," passed down from generation to generation in the Geatish royal family, the *Beowulf*-poet differs markedly from how other Anglo-Saxon poets treat the smith's character for their purposes. In quite the opposite manner, the poet of *Deor* refers to Weland as an example of earthly impermanence:

Weland, by way of the trammels upon him, knew persecution.  
Single-minded man, he suffered miseries. He had as his companion  
sorrow and yearning, wintry-cold suffering; often he met with  
misfortune once Nithhad had laid constraints upon him,  
pliant sinew-fetters upon a worthier man.  
—That passed away: so may this. (Bradley I, 1-6)

King Alfred refers to the smith with this same theme in mind, in his translation of Boethius's *Consolations of Philosophy* (see Bradley 362-365). The likely reason why the *Beowulf*-poet takes a different approach to Weland's character would be his intent to evoke the pagan Germanic past primarily in its own context, rather than to examine it from a purely retrospective standpoint. When he has Beowulf request that Hygelac receive the armor in case of his death, the poet expresses how pagans revered their past just as he and his Christian audience do, with the mutual tradition of prestigious heirlooms continually passed on within a family as a heroic legacy. Rather than express this viewpoint as misguided, the poet indicates how Germanic pagans establish their propriety, through the praise they give to seasoned arms.

Regarding the *Beowulf*-poet's reference to the goddess Freyja's Broosinga necklace, Thorkelin holds the distinction of being the first scholar to identify it, though current scholars emphasize his major errors in his study of the poem (Cooley 45-67). Orchard addresses the myth behind her acquisition of the necklace, as well as the possible allusion the poet makes to Heimdall's and Loki's fighting over it, as told by Snorri in the *Prose Edda*. Dronke expands on the allusion to this episode from Germanic mythology, arguing that the story reflects a primal creation myth, in which a good and evil god fight over the earth. She also notes its probable significance as a symbol of fertility, in connection to Freyja. So far, however, I have not encountered scholarship which says that the Broosinga reference indicates Freyja's alternate role as a war goddess, though Orchard and other scholars address the matter of Hygelac possessing the necklace in his last battle.

The *Beowulf*-poet's second direct reference to Germanic mythology, in connection to the Geats, concerns the Broosinga necklace, which he mentions in section XVIII. Of the treasures given to Beowulf by Hrothgar and Wealtheow after the fight with Grendel, the poet pays special

attention to a certain “greatest neck-collar / ever heard of anywhere on earth”(Liuzza 1195b-1196). Immediately following his mention of this gift, the poet proceeds to state, “[under] heaven I have not heard tell of a better / hoard-treasure of heroes, since Hama carried off / to the bright city the Brosinga necklace”(Liuzza 1197-1199). In his first footnote on this section, Liuzza writes that “[the] Brosinga necklace had apparently been worn by the Norse goddess Freyja,” and in the poem’s Old Norse analogues, the necklace is referred to as “Brisingamen”(85; Brodeur 46). Though the *Beowulf*-poet does not directly identify the necklace given to Beowulf as the Brosinga necklace, he indicates by his immediate comparison that Beowulf’s reward has a similar if not identical aura. Though relevant to Freyja in her role as goddess of beauty and love (see Dronke 302-325), the significance of the necklace for *Beowulf*’s context derives from her alternate role as a goddess of war, who “wheresoever she rides to the strife, she has one-half of the kill, and Odin half”(Brodeur 38). In her commentary on Wealtheow’s character, Overing points out how she uses language to inspire action in the men around her. By possessing a precious necklace like Freyja’s, and by playing hostess to warriors in Heorot, the Danish queen can be seen as an analogue to Freyja in her role as the hostess to fallen warriors in Odin’s hall of Valhalla, as well as the one who inspires men to combat in arms. The *Beowulf*-poet makes a strong connection between Beowulf’s necklace and warfare when he first refers to Hygelac’s death:

Hygelac the Geat on his last journey  
had that neck-ring, nephew of Swerting,  
when under the banner he defended his booty,  
the spoils of slaughter. Fate struck him down  
when in his pride he went looking for woe,  
a feud with the Frisians. He wore that finery,  
those precious stones, over the cup of the sea,  
that powerful lord, and collapsed under his shield. (Liuzza 1202-1209)

When he addresses the Broisinga digression, Kaske interprets Hygelac's possession of the necklace on his raid as a negative reflection on the immediately prior account of Hama's acquiring of it, often considered analogous with the Norse god Heimdall's seizing of it from Loki to give back to Freyja. This interpretation deepens the connection between Wealtheow's necklace and that of Freyja, and "Hygelac's carrying the torque from safety into danger" can be considered an act inspired by the goddess's warlike aspect, with the explicit intent of war for more treasure like that precious object (Kaske). By implying that Hygelac got his inspiration to raid the Frisians from this necklace, the poet establishes the theme that treasure causes war. The poet continues this theme with Beowulf's forecast of Freawaru's marriage to Ingeld, continued references to Hygelac's raid, and the disturbance of the dragon's hoard, in which the theme arguably reaches its climax. As he begins this thematic trend in his narrative with a reference to Freyja's necklace, the poet indicates how it can be considered the archetype for any precious material in Germanic literature which causes fatal conflict among men.

## Euhemerized Divine Blood-Feud

Concerning euhemerizing of Germanic gods, perhaps the most attention has been given to the Herebeald and Hæthcyn episode near the poem's end. In their fourth edition of Klaeber's *Beowulf*, Fulk, Bjork and Niles summarize Klaeber's early opposition to the Balder myth as an analogue to this episode, and note the later trend in favor of such an interpretation, citing scholars such as Orchard. Dronke also supports such a view, arguing that the differences between the stories can be accounted for by the myth's translation into a story about humans. Orchard argues that the Balder myth is an analogue by not only pointing out the similarities in name and scenario between the stories, but also Hrethel's characterization as similar to Odin. Bjork points out the blurred lines of distinction between Beowulf's voice and the poet's in the narrative recounting of this event, as support for his argument that the poet intentionally breaks down the linguistic and narrative structure to reflect the breakdown of social order within his poem's setting, and so ends his poem with apocalyptic connotations. In his article on the episode, Hill argues the case for an analogue, in that the euhemerized details of the story in *Beowulf* allow for a greater meditation on Old English and Germanic law over such incidents, as well as on the theme of fratricide which pervades the poem. In this final section of this chapter, I mean to expand particularly on the arguments from Dronke, T. Hill and Bjork, to support the interpretation of the last part of *Beowulf* as reflective of Ragnarok, modified in structure by the poet to be in greater accord with his own overall story's context.

The *Beowulf*-poet most significantly references Germanic mythology's connection to the Geatish kings indirectly, when Beowulf recounts the Geatish royal line's history up until himself, prior to the dragon fight. The first noteworthy episode Beowulf mentions concerns the accidental death of Herebeald by Hæthcyn:

For the eldest, undeservedly,  
a death-bed was made by the deeds of a kinsman,  
after Hæthcyn with his horn bow  
struck down his own dear lord with an arrow—  
he missed his mark and killed his kinsman,  
one brother to another with a bloody shaft.  
That was a fight beyond settling, a sinful crime,  
shattering the heart; yet it had to be  
that a nobleman lost his life unavenged. (Liuzza 2435-2443)

This particular incident echoes the story of Balder, the god of light, and his accidental death by his blind brother Hoð (see Thomas Hill 2012 210-221). Etymologically, the parts of the princes' names “-beald” and “Hæth-“ correspond to the names of the two gods. Hæthcyn's fatal arrow shot parallels Hoð's throwing of the fatal mistletoe arrow or dart at his brother. Just as Hoð is blind and unaware that the weapon given to him will kill Balder, during the game the gods play over Balder's supposed immunity, Hæthcyn has a parallel sense of blindness in his deed, since he has no intention of actually killing Herebeald. Both instances can be considered “a fight beyond settling,” because they occur within families, and cannot be compensated for besides the further injustice of killing the other brother as well.

Two primary differences between these stories of gods and kings should be examined before further analysis. First, unlike Hæthcyn, Hoð does not literally “[miss] his mark,” because he intentionally aims for Balder, albeit while manipulated by the trickster Loki. Second, unlike Hæthcyn, Hoð does indeed get executed by the Aesir for his brother's death. However, on a psychological level, Hoð does in fact “[miss] his mark,” because he meant for his throw to be part of the harmless game set up by the gods, rather than to kill Balder. Furthermore, though Hoð does get executed for his unintentional deed, the situation of the gods then becomes even more “a fight beyond settling,” because the brothers' deaths are the first in a chain of events which lead up to Ragnarok, the doom of the gods. As told by the Volva seer to Odin, in the “Voluspo” lay from *The Poetic Edda*, the event will be preceded by war all over Midgard, in

which “[b]rothers shall fight and fell each other”(Bellows 45). This worldwide fraternal blood-feud can be interpreted as an emulation of the violent response taken by the Aesir to Balder’s death.

When examining the context of Beowulf’s speech on the Geatish kings before him, the theme of end times becomes the strongest connection between the Balder story and the *Beowulf*-poet’s narrative. Similar to the story of Balder and Hoð dying right before Ragnarok, Beowulf tells the story of Herebeald and Hæthcyn immediately prior to his fatal dragon fight, after which Wiglaf and his messenger forecast the inevitable demise of the Geatish race. Just as the Volva predicts war spreading across Midgard before Ragnarok, Wiglaf and his messenger predict how the Geats’ neighboring peoples will declare war on them. After he brings up the particular past feuds with the Franks, Frisians, and Swedes, which will likely renew upon Beowulf’s death, the messenger describes the overall future atmosphere in the Geatish kingdom in the following terms:

Thus many a cold morning  
shall the spear be grasped in frozen fingers,  
hefted by hands, nor shall the sound of the harp  
rouse the warriors, but the dark raven,  
greedy for carrion, shall speak a great deal,  
ask the eagle how he fared at his feast  
when he plundered corpses with the wolf. (Liuzza 3021a-3027)

With his emphasis on perpetual warfare and the “beasts of battle,” as referenced by Liuzza in his footnote on page 140, the messenger’s words resemble those of the Volva, when she responds to Odin with “Axe-time, sword-time, shields are sundered, / Wind-time, wolf-time, ere the world falls; / Nor ever shall men each other spare”(Bellows 45). As the *Beowulf*-poet follows the messenger’s words with his narration, “[t]hus that brave speaker was speaking / a most unlovely truth; he did not lie much / in words or facts,” he indicates how the messenger’s words should be

taken as prophecy, rather than as probable assumption (Liuzza 3028-3030a). Later, at Beowulf's funeral, a more direct parallel to the "Voluspo" Volva can be found when the poet describes a grieving old woman:

and a sorrowful song sang the Geatish woman,  
with hair bound up, for Beowulf the king,  
with sad cares, earnestly said  
that she dreaded the hard days ahead,  
the times of slaughter, the host's terror. (Liuzza 3150-3154)

As footnoted by Liuzza, "her advanced age is indicated by her bound-up hair"(143). With this information, along with her grief expressed as a forecast of impending doom for the Geats, scholars can identify her as the Volva of the Geats, a role for which the Volva in "Voluspo" can be considered the archetype. Concerning the anonymity of such characters as the old woman and the messenger, as well as the addressing by such characters to the collective whole nation of Geats, Bjork comments that it "contributes to our sense of a dissolving social structure, a world gone out of joint," and that "the internal, listening audience turns elastic, tenuous, misty" as a result (1000, 1002). To extend this reading of the poem further in support of my present argument, I venture that the overall anonymity pervasive at the poem's end enables the poet to make the impending demise of the Geats more representative of the end of the pre-Christian Germanic world as a whole, rather than of just one group of people within it.

Between the sequence of events leading up to Ragnarok in "Voluspo," and the sequence leading up to the Geats' impending doom in *Beowulf*, a difference in the arrangement of two parallel episodes should be examined. In "Voluspo," Balder's death is followed by war on Midgard, which in turn is followed by the final confrontation between the Aesir and their monstrous foes, such as the *jotuns* and the Midgard Serpent. In *Beowulf*, on the other hand, the hero's recounting of Herebeald's death is followed by his final confrontation with a monster, the

dragon, which in turn is followed by the prediction of certain war between the Geats and their old enemies. In his 1861 study, Grundtvig comments that Beowulf “wishes to anticipate Thor and slay the midgarðsorm too early”(See Malone 129-138). By having his hero and last monster die prior to the wars of men, the *Beowulf*-poet can more effectively euhemerize the concept of Ragnarok, for the otherwise pseudo-historical context of his work. When he rearranges the human and supernatural conflicts in this way, the poet can indicate how the mythological Ragnarok is based on pagan Germanic society’s internal destruction, through wars between its related peoples.

## CHAPTER II: THE MODEL THANE AND HIS ADVERSARIES

When Russom gives his viewpoint on Beowulf's most valuable characteristic, he comments that "during a considerable part of the poem, Beowulf is neither king nor hero, but a loyal retainer," going on to say "[in] his relations with Hrothgar and Wealtheow, he is a model of proper deference, anxious to earn favor, less an apprentice king than a perfect thane"(14). In this chapter, I intend to argue for Beowulf's characterization as a model thane according to his genealogy, and as a part of the same tradition as Boðvar Bjarki from *Hrolfssaga Kraka*, as well as Thor from Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*. First, I will analyze the establishment of Beowulf's heroic identity through initiatory interrogations in Denmark, expanding on commentary from scholars such as Niles, Fulk, Clover and Liuzza, which concerns that episode's structure in narrative and character. Then, to elaborate further on parallels noted by Byock, Earl, Orchard, Zanten and Lerer, I will examine all three characters as comparative examples of a ruler's warrior elite, who protect the civilized world from chaotic forces from without. In like manner, with acknowledgement of scholarship by Tolkien, Cohen, Lapidge, Lionarons and Falk, I intend to place Grendel and his mother in the same tradition which the other two heroes' adversaries come from, emphasizing common points such as ambiguous identities, and dwellings described as dark, uncanny reflections of the civilized world. While acknowledging significant differences regarding all three of these subjects between *Beowulf* and its comparative literature, brought up by scholars such as Lapidge and Heatt, I mean to account for them as different expressions of the same heroic mindset, rather than fundamental points of separation between the works.

## A Heroic Thane's Establishment of Credentials

In his sixth diagram concerning the “ring-structure” of *Beowulf* from his 1979 article, Niles lays out a pattern of greetings to Beowulf in Heorot from Hrothgar, Unferth and Wealtheow. If these greetings are examined in the larger context of Beowulf’s arrival to Denmark, though, which includes the more cautionary addresses to him by the coastguard and Wulfgar, Beowulf arguably undergoes a series of primarily interrogations. The reading of Hrothgar’s initial hospitable welcome as the first part of a ritual interrogation, with Unferth’s slander as the second, is persuasively argued by Clover in her 1980 article, in which she analyzes the flyting episode within its larger context as part of a Pan-Germanic tradition, with analogues in literature such as the *Eddas*. Indeed, only after Beowulf bests Unferth at flyting does the poet identify Hrothgar as “greatly pleased,” because he then “recognized Beowulf’s firm resolution”(Liuzza 607, 610). Beowulf’s declarative retort establishes his individual heroic identity, culminating from and legitimizing his prior declarations to the coastguard, Wulfgar, and Hrothgar, in which he repeatedly defines himself initially by his noble genealogy. Both Clover and Fulk, in his 1987 article on Unferth, examine the pagan Germanic standard of validating a man’s worth and potential by his lineage. In this first subsection of this chapter, I intend to argue with this theme in mind for Beowulf’s successful establishment of himself as a model thane entering Heorot, by analyzing his first four interchanges with the Danes.

Throughout his work, the *Beowulf*-poet emphasizes the genealogies of his primary characters. When Beowulf arrives at Heorot, the poet establishes a narrative and thematic pattern, as the Danes who receive him repeatedly ask for and address his genealogy to verify his heroic identity. This pattern begins when the Danish coastguard interrogates the Geats, after they land and set out on foot for the mead-hall:

I have never seen  
a greater earl on earth than that one among you,  
a man in war-gear; that is no mere courtier,  
honored only in weapons—unless his looks belie him,  
his noble appearance! Now I must know  
your lineage, lest you go hence  
as false spies. (Liuzza 247b-253a)

Though the coastguard can sense Beowulf's heroic character, beyond the aesthetic trappings which indicate his noble rank, he requires from Beowulf an appropriately heroic pedigree, to match and prove that aura about him. Beowulf's response shows that he understands this criteria of the coastguard:

We are men of the Geatish nation  
and Hygelac's hearth-companions.  
My father was well-known among men,  
a noble commander named Ecgtheow;  
he saw many winters before he passed away,  
ancient, from the court; nearly everyone  
throughout the world remembers him well. (Liuzza 260-266)

In this statement, Beowulf not only vouches for his men as Geatish thanes, but also confirms the coastguard's observation about him personally, by establishing his father as a man of great renown. Beowulf undoubtedly indicates here that he has inherited from his father the legacy of performing heroic deeds so that he, himself will be remembered well.

When Beowulf and the Geats approach the mead-hall, Hrothgar's retainer Wulfgar echoes the sentiments of the coastguard when he "[asks] those soldiers about their ancestry," and then tells Hrothgar, "notable indeed is that chief / who has shown these soldiers the way hither"(Liuzza 332, 369-370). As Hrothgar responds to Wulfgar's report, he expresses more explicitly the idea of inherited heroism previously expressed by Beowulf:

I knew him when he was nothing but a boy—  
his old father was called Ecgtheow,  
to whom Hrethel the Geat gave in marriage  
his only daughter; now his daring son  
has come here, sought a loyal friend.

Seafarers, in truth, have said to me,  
those who brought to the Geats gifts and money  
as thanks, that he has thirty  
men's strength, strong in battle,  
in his handgrip. Holy God  
in His grace has guided him to us,  
to the West-Danes, as I would hope,  
against Grendel's terror. (Liuzza 372-384a)

With this statement by Hrothgar on Beowulf's lineage, the poet now shifts his focus from the legacy left by the father, to the current extraordinary capabilities of the son. When examining these lines in conjunction with Beowulf's earlier declaration of his lineage, one can read how the poet fully illustrates the concept that a thane's heroic deeds reflects his paternity. When Wulfgar calls the Geats into the hall, telling them "My conquering lord commands me to tell you, / ruler of the East-Danes, that he knows your ancestry, / and you are to him, hardy spirits," he reinforces this concept, and expresses it as a standard held for all men among the warrior elite in pagan Germanic society (Liuzza 391-393). During the flyting episode between Unferth and Beowulf, the two warriors address and invoke this standard as a means to undermine each other's accomplishments, and assert their respective heroic identities over each other (see Clover 444-468, Fulk 2012 113-127).

As the *Beowulf*-poet introduces Unferth as "son of Ecglaf, / who sat at the feet of the Scylding lord," he indicates how the thane has distinguished himself in connection to his own father's identity (Liuzza 499b-500). As noted by Liuzza, in his second footnote on this section, "[his] position at Hrothgar's feet appears to be one of honor"(64). When Unferth addresses Beowulf, he breaks the pattern of Hrothgar's retinue identifying the hero positively, by disregarding Beowulf's lineage, and acknowledging that of another warrior who he believes bested the hero in a competition. Reporting his version of Beowulf's swimming race with Breca, he states that Breca "outswam [Beowulf], / and had more strength," and concludes his account of

the event with “[he] truly fulfilled, / the son of Beanstan, his boast against you”(Liuzza 517b-518a, 523b-524). By referring to Breca as “the son of Beanstan,” Unferth argues that Breca lived up to the heroic standard set by his father before him. By not acknowledging Beowulf’s paternal lineage at all, Unferth implicitly argues that Beowulf has no such legacy to live up to, and therefore cannot achieve the heroic feats which he attempts.

When he retorts to Unferth, Beowulf takes the opposite strategy: he acknowledges Unferth’s family, and points out how Unferth has tainted its legacy through treachery and cowardice. After giving his own heroic account of his swimming race, Beowulf tells Unferth that his own heroic potential will forever be overshadowed by the fact of his fratricide:

In the play of battle  
Breca has never—nor you either—  
done a deed so bold and daring  
with his decorated blade—I would never boast of it!—  
though you became your brother’s killer,  
your next of kin; for that you needs must suffer  
punishment in hell, no matter how clever you are. (Liuzza 583b-589)

In his first footnote on this section, Liuzza brings up an alternative translation to “hell,” when he points out that “Mitchell and Robinson read *healle*, i.e., ‘hall’”(67). Whitesell interprets such moments in the text as intentional puns by the poet, to invite double-meanings as well as more developed descriptions of things. With this more pagan reading of the text, Beowulf argues that Unferth should be identified by his fellow thanes and lord primarily as a brother killer, and not by the heroic legacy left by his father. When he points out “how clever” Unferth is, Beowulf argues that Unferth’s primary capability is the use of words to embellish his own reputation, and to slander his rivals. Beowulf continues this particular argument in the lines immediately following:

I will say it truly, son of Ecglaf,  
that never would Grendel have worked such terror,

that gruesome beast, against your lord,  
or shames in Heorot, if your courage and spirit  
were as fierce as you yourself fancy they are. (Liuzza 590-594)

Considering the context of these lines, Beowulf arguably refers to Unferth as “son of Ecglaf” sarcastically. With his immediate juxtaposition of a reference, usually meant as an honorific, with Grendel’s reign of terror, Beowulf explicitly argues that Unferth has not lived up to such a title, and that he can only identify himself as “son of Ecglaf” in words but not deeds.

## Beowulf and Boðvar Bjarki

In early comparative examinations of *Beowulf* with *Hrolfssaga Kraka*, scholars such as Klaeber and Jones draw the conclusion that Beowulf and Boðvar are variations of the same hero in different versions of the same story (Hieatt). More recently, scholars do not establish a connection quite that directly between the two works and heroes, but they still acknowledge notable parallels, as Fulk, Bjork and Niles do in their introduction to Klaeber's *Beowulf*, and as Byock does in the introduction of his edition of *Hrolfssaga Kraka*. When he compares and contrasts the two works in his article concerning possible *Beowulf* source material, Earl speculates that the *Beowulf*-poet emphasized different characters and restructured certain episodes from Danish pseudo-history, to create a story more palatable to his audience. In his article on comparative berserker literature, Zanten points out Beowulf and Boðvar as similar examples of heroes naturally strong, without assuming a battle-rage as traditional berserkers do. In a counterargument against emphasizing the parallels, Hieatt notes the differences in tone between Beowulf's and Boðvar's last words, to identify the former as a more Christian hero in opposition to the latter as more pagan in his characterization. In this section of this chapter, I mean to elaborate further on and strengthen the parallels already established, with analysis inspired by Earl's ideas, to identify Beowulf and Boðvar not as opposites, nor as identical, but as equally model thanes of the pagan Germanic tradition, who establish themselves as such by the same types of feats, though in slightly different manners.

During his career as a thane, Beowulf bears similarities to Boðvar Bjarki, one of the primary heroes of *Hrolfssaga Kraka*. The names of both warriors have their etymological roots in the words for a bear, and both men have close associations with that particular animal (see Byock xxv-xxviii). While a thane to Hrothgar in his fight with Grendel, Beowulf wrestles his

opponent in the manner of a bear, and Boðvar has a bear for a father. Both men are related to Geatish royalty, Beowulf being Hygelac's nephew and Boðvar as Thorir's brother, and they travel from Geatland to Denmark on the advice of elders. While in Denmark, they both slay ambiguously defined monsters which terrorize that region, and later set up the monsters' bodies as trophies for display. Prior to those incidents, both men silence disruptive behavior in the Danish hall. In terms of their places in society, both men prefer the role of retainer to that of king. Boðvar voluntarily steps down from ruling Norway, and Beowulf evades implications from Hrothgar and Wealtheow of his eligibility for Danish kingship, and refuses the Geatish throne until he is the last surviving candidate for it. Perhaps their greatest literary connection, though, is that they serve members of the same immediate Danish royal family. Beowulf champions Hrothgar, known as Hroar in *Hrolfssaga Kraka*, and Boðvar champions Hrothgar's nephew Hrolf, known as Hrothulf in *Beowulf* (see Fulk, Bjork and Niles xxxvi-xlii).

Despite these similarities in their storylines, Beowulf and Boðvar act out their heroic deeds in markedly different manners. Whereas Beowulf arrives at Denmark with much ceremony, accompanied by fellow Geatish thanes, Boðvar enters King Hrolf's hall stealthily and unannounced. When Unferth challenges Beowulf's credibility on his arrival at Heorot, Beowulf fights back verbally to silence him. When Boðvar arrives at Hrolf's hall, he silences the disruptive thanes who bully Hott by throwing back a knuckle bone, and killing the man who initially launched it. While Beowulf performs his deeds alone, Boðvar first brings his companion Hott with him to face the monster of his saga, and then acts later as one among Hrolf's whole elite fighting unit of heroic thanes. If Pearce's interpretation of Beowulf sacrificing Hondscio is accepted, then this action taken by Beowulf can be read as another contrast to Boðvar, who brings Hott along to help him overcome his fear. Grendel has

anthropomorphic qualities, while the unnamed monster of *Hrolfssaga Kraka*, though identified as a “troll,” bears closer similarities to a dragon in its description, once Boðvar encounters it (Byock 50). Whereas Grendel targets thanes in Heorot for twelve years, the troll-dragon confines his reign of terror to the areas outside Hrolf’s hall, rather than entering the hall itself, and threatens Denmark for only two, going on three years. Furthermore, Boðvar encounters only one monster in the saga, while Beowulf faces three primary monsters, including many others which he references from his past, as well as those which he encounters on his descent into Grendel’s mere. Finally, while Beowulf presents the severed limbs of Grendel to Hrothgar as tokens of victory, Boðvar initially props up the troll-dragon’s corpse as if it still lived, to test the credibility of Hrolf and his champions.

Aside from these differences in narrative detail, the two heroes contrast primarily in their motivations and their development within their societies. Beowulf comes to Heorot upon learning of Grendel’s reign of terror, and desires to rid Heorot of the monster, on the advice of his Geatish elders, as well as presumably to repay Hrothgar for the asylum he earlier granted to his father Ecgtheow (see Liuzza 63). Boðvar, on the other hand, comes to Hrolf’s hall on the advice of his brother Elk-Frodi, because his brother tells him the greatest of king’s champions reside there. Also, while Beowulf eventually moves up in the social strata of his society to become king of the Geats, Boðvar remains a thane to Hrolf, until he and his fellow champions all die in battle alongside their king.

Though noteworthy, the differences in narrative detail and character development between Beowulf and Boðvar do not undermine the significance of the parallels between the two heroes, and certainly do not indicate that the two heroes come from separate literary traditions, regarding the conduct of thanes in service to their kings. Rather, the differences should be

examined as different expressions of the same heroic type depicted in Germanic literature. Both heroes establish themselves in the hall of a foreign king not by how they enter that space, but by overcoming one of the king's own champions within that hall. Though Beowulf does not respond to Unferth's verbal attack with physical aggression, as Boðvar does to Hrolf's bullying thanes, he fights back with his own words as the two warriors engage in *flyting*, a Germanic tradition of verbal combat through insults (Clover). The *Beowulf*-poet's description of Hrothgar immediately following Beowulf's winning retort indicates how Beowulf has now become the thane of most distinction within his hall:

Then the giver of treasure was greatly pleased,  
gray-haired and battle-bold; the Bright-Danes' chief  
had faith in his helper; that shepherd of his folk  
recognized Beowulf's firm resolution. (Liuzza 607-610)

In much the same way, Hrolf indicates his recognition of Boðvar's superiority to his own champions both in physical prowess and in character when he chastises his men for their bullying:

It is a bad habit that you have adopted,  
throwing bones at innocent men. It brings dishonour to me and shame  
to you. I have repeatedly spoken to you about this matter, but you  
have paid no attention. I suspect that this man, whom you have now  
attacked, is no weakling. Summon him to me, so that I can find out  
who he is. (Byock 49)

Upon winning the favors of Hrothgar and Hrolf respectively, Beowulf and Boðvar proceed to further establish their superiority to their Danish peers, as the only warriors brave enough to confront and kill the supernatural threats to the Danes.

Before they actually perform these heroic deeds against the monsters, both men comment on the inadequacy of the Danes, and say that they will succeed where the Danes have not. Irving analyzes the language from the Grendel fight to argue about the Danes that "only a foreigner can cleanse their hall for them; they cannot do it for themselves" (1966, 163). In his retort to

Unferth, Beowulf remarks that Grendel “has found that he need fear no feud / no storm of swords from the Victory-Scyldings, / no resistance at all from your nation,” and a few lines later he states, “But I will show him / soon enough the strength and courage / of the Geats in war”(Liuzza 597-597, 601b-603a). Likewise, when Boðvar learns that no warrior from Hleidargard has come back from facing the dragon-troll, he remarks, “This hall is not so well manned as I had thought, if one animal alone could destroy the king’s lands and his livestock,” and upon going out to face the creature, he tells Hott “Things will turn out for the better”(Byock 50).

Though Grendel and the unnamed troll-dragon have obvious aesthetic differences, the *Beowulf*-poet and the *Hrolfssaga Kraka* author both emphasize the ambiguity in their identities as monsters, rather than their distinct features. When the *Beowulf*-poet introduces Grendel, he refers to him as a “fiend from hell” and “grim spirit”(Liuzza 101-102). Five lines later, the poet designates Grendel as one of “Cain’s race,” and then implicitly categorizes him amongst “all misbegotten things, / trolls and elves and the living dead, / and also the giants who strove against God”(Liuzza 107, 111-113). Rather than identify Grendel as one particular type of monster, the poet instead renders Grendel as an embodiment of “all misbegotten things,” i.e. all creatures which live outside the boundaries of human society, and threaten it with chaotic evil. When the poet later refers to Grendel as “a dark death-shadow,” he indicates further that Grendel’s lack of a certain identity is his most terrifying attribute (Liuzza 160). In like manner, the *Hrolfssaga Kraka* author first identifies the troll-dragon in vague terms as a “huge, monstrous beast”(Byock 50). Through Hott’s description of the creature to Boðvar, the author aligns the creature with multiple types of monsters from the context of Germanic literature, just as the *Beowulf*-poet does for Grendel. First, Hott tells Boðvar, “The creature has wings on its back and it usually flies...No weapon can bite into it,” attributing to the monster features usually given to describe a

dragon (Byock 50). However, in his reply to Boðvar's disparaging remark about the inadequacy of Hrolf's thanes to kill the monster, Hott tells him "it is the greatest of trolls"(Byock 50). Like the *Beowulf*-poet's description of Grendel, the *Hrolfssaga Kraka* author renders his troll-dragon as an amalgamation of the particular types of monsters which threaten Germanic society from without, making it more of an embodiment of the overall chaos which heroes must overcome, rather than one particular type of supernatural creature (Cohen, see also Lapidge 373-402). In his article on Grendel's characterization as a *maere*, or night-demon, Kiessling establishes another analogue to *Beowulf* from *Hrolfssaga Kraka*, by connecting Grendel to the undead *draugar* Boðvar fights, and so strengthens the argument that Grendel comes from the same tradition as his Norse counterparts, while also stressing further Grendel's fundamental ambiguity.

Though they emphasize their monsters' ambiguous identities, the *Beowulf*-poet and the *Hrolfssaga Kraka* author both point out two significant physical characteristics which Grendel and the troll-dragon have in common: their invulnerability to weapons, and their distinct physical locations of vulnerability, which the heroes must identify. Just as Hott tells Boðvar "[n]o weapon can bite into" the troll-dragon, when the Geats try their weapons on Grendel, the *Beowulf*-poet narrates, "not the best iron anywhere in the world, / could even touch that evil sinner, / for he had worked a curse on weapons"(Liuzza 802-804). When Beowulf and Boðvar defeat the monsters, they not only prove their superior courage to their fellow thanes in the hall, but also their greater cunning, by identifying where and how in particular the creatures can be mortally wounded. Interestingly, both creatures have their vulnerable spots located at their shoulders. Beowulf's victory over Grendel comes when "a gaping wound opened / in [Grendel's] shoulder-joint, his sinews sprang apart," so that "Grendel was forced / to flee, fatally

wounded, into the fen”(Liuzza 816b-817, 819b-820). In a similar manner, Boðvar overcomes the troll-dragon when “[i]mmediately he thrust [his sword] up under the beast’s shoulder, striking so hard that the blade reached quickly into the heart. Then the beast fell dead to the ground”(Byock 51).

In his boast before Grendel’s arrival at Heorot, Beowulf explains his decision to wrestle bare-handed as a matter of honor, when he states, “and so I will not kill him with a sword, / put an end to his life, though I easily might; / he knows no arts of war, no way to strike back”(Liuzza 679-681). However, when he immediately “sat up against [Grendel’s] arm” upon the monster’s attack, Beowulf demonstrates his knowledge that Grendel can only be defeated by removing the primary limb he uses to fight and kill (Liuzza 749). In the context of *Beowulf*, this first monster’s source of strength becomes his weakness. In a similar manner, when Boðvar “immediately” targets the troll-dragon’s underside of its shoulder, he demonstrates his prior knowledge of where exactly the monster can be killed, in contrast to the common belief of Hrolf’s thanes that “[n]o weapon can bite into it.”

While Grendel and the troll-dragon differ in their particular targets in their nocturnal attacks on the kings’ domains, they pose the same basic type of threat to Hrothgar and Hrolf respectively. In both situations, the monsters undermine the king’s authority, and effectively deprive the Danes of their society’s center both in place and person. When the *Beowulf*-poet narrates that Grendel “ruled, and strove against right, / one against all, until empty stood / the best of houses,” he depicts Grendel through his particular vocabulary as Hrothgar’s usurper, by rendering useless the physical space where Hrothgar establishes his authority (Liuzza 144-146a). In regards to the troll-dragon’s attack on Hrolf’s livestock, the king decrees to his men “It is my wish that tonight men remain calm, making no noise, and I forbid any of my men to put

themselves in danger with the beast. The livestock will be left to their fate, because I do not want to lose any of my men”(Byock 50). Though he phrases this statement as a command, in this decree Hrolf admits to his powerlessness in terms of stopping and killing the troll-dragon. By his allowance of his livestock to be taken by the troll-dragon, Hrolf essentially pays tribute to the monster, and in that way abdicates his authority at that time to the troll-dragon.

The *Beowulf*-poet and the *Hrolfssaga Kraka* author both present Beowulf and Boðvar as model thanes who slay creatures of chaos, and restore the social order in the communities they have come to dwell in (Byock). When Grendel receives his mortal wound, the *Beowulf* poet says “[t]he wishes of the Danes / were entirely fulfilled in that bloody onslaught!”(Liuzza 823b-824). By referring to Beowulf’s deed as “[t]he wishes of the Danes,” the poet indicates Beowulf’s primary motivation as the restoration of Hrothgar’s authority, so that Danish society can begin to operate again. When Hrothgar sees Grendel’s claw hanging as a trophy, in his celebratory speech he tells Beowulf, “[y]ou shall have no lack / of any worldly goods which I can bestow,” reestablishing his identity within his hall as a ring-giver to his thanes (Liuzza 949-950). After Boðvar kills the troll-dragon, and then gives Hott courage with its blood to drink and heart to eat, he restores Hrolf’s authority and identity as king, by giving him the opportunity to recruit and name another champion within his hall. After Boðvar’s presentation of Hott stabbing the troll-dragon, Hrolf realizes the prank and comments on both men:

I knew when you came here that few would be your equal, but it seems to me that your finest achievement is that you have made Hott into another champion. He was previously thought to be a man in whom there was little probability of much luck. I do not want him called Hott any longer; instead, from now on he will be called Hjalti. You will now be called after the sword Golden Hilt. (Byock 52)

By renaming Hott, Hrolf redefines him within the particular context of his champions in his hall Hleidargard; and emphasizes Boðvar’s greatest attribute as a thane who can inspire men to reach

his own rank by example, and thus reinforce the strength of Hleidergard, the center of the king's authority.

## Beowulf and Thor in Utgarðr

Though many scholars compare Beowulf to Thor in his career as a king, a subject for the following chapter, surprisingly little scholarship has been devoted to Beowulf's parallels to Thor while still a thane. Orchard briefly touches on similarities between hero and god, regarding the moments they wrestle, their tendencies to fight alone, and the parallel of Grendel's sack to Utgarda-Loki's glove. In his essay "Grendel's Glove," Lerer points out a stronger parallel to Thor's Utgarðr experience, in which Beowulf's fall wrestling Grendel's mother bears resemblance to Thor's while wrestling Elli, the embodiment of old age. Lerer connects the two episodes primarily as examples of a warrior's recognition of his own vulnerability. In this last section of the chapter, I will expand on this last particular parallel with a comparative examination of *Beowulf* with Snorri's *Prose Edda*, to argue for Beowulf as a more positive and affirming example of how a pagan Germanic warrior comes of age.

As guardians of their societies against chaos, Beowulf and Boðvar echo on a heroic level the role played by the god Thor, on the mythic level of Germanic literature. In his fight with Grendel, Beowulf defends Heorot, representative of established society, from a creature of Utgarðr, or the "Out-World" regions, inhabited by monsters which seek to destroy that society; and in much the same way, Thor defends Asgard, the established society of the gods, against chaotic forces from without, usually manifested as giants and trolls (see Orchard 2003 98-129). When introducing himself to Hrothgar by means of his previous deeds, Beowulf even states that he "slew a tribe of giants," granting himself a distinction almost exclusively reserved for Thor among the pantheon of Germanic gods (Liuzza 421). In his character description of Thor in *The Prose Edda*, Snorri Sturluson renders him with the same type of honorific, when he lists as one of Thor's greatest assets "the hammer Mjollnir, which the Rime-Giants and the Hill-Giants

know, when it is raised on high; and that is no wonder,—it has bruised many a skull among their fathers or their kinsmen”(Brodeur 35). Regarding his preferred style of fighting his opponents, Beowulf bears a similarity to Thor in how he particularly *crushes* them. Beowulf directly states this preferred method by his own narration, recounting how he had “crushed [his] grim foes” in his career prior to his arrival at Heorot, and implies his same intention for Grendel when he says immediately following, “and now with Grendel, / that monstrous beast, I shall by myself have / a word or two with that giant”(Liuzza 424-426a). By identifying Grendel as a “giant,” only five lines after he declares he killed a “tribe” of them, Beowulf identifies Grendel as a creature outside the known human society, and thus an occupant of the same literary space inhabited by the *jotun* giants, who Thor battles. The *Beowulf*-poet’s narrative detail of “a tribe of giants” indicates his perception of such creatures as having communities of their own. When scholars examine this detail from the poet in conjunction with Snorri’s own descriptions of how the Norse giants congregate, they can identify this shared authorial and cultural perception as common to Germanic literature overall (Cohen). In his declaration that he will confront Grendel “by [him]self,” Beowulf echoes how Thor fights giants and trolls alone.

When Beowulf journeys to and within Grendel’s mere, he parallels Thor’s own adventures to Jotunheim, as they both battle the monsters in their own elements. With this shared detail in character development and narrative structure, Beowulf’s career as a thane has its strongest parallel to Thor’s career as a giant-slayer. Just as both characters travel to the Utgarðr regions beyond established society, so too do they encounter parallel scenarios within, and descriptions of, those regions (Orchard 2003). Upon Beowulf’s entrance into the actual underwater space where Grendel and his mother dwell, the *Beowulf*-poet narrates,

Then the earl perceived

that he was in some sort of battle-hall  
where no water could harm him in any way,  
and, for the hall's roof, he could not be reached  
by the flood's sudden rush—he saw a fire-light,  
a glowing blaze shining brightly. (Liuzza 1512b-1517)

By this description, the poet renders Grendel's and his mother's abode as a dark, uncanny reflection of the established society as represented by Heorot. Abram interprets Grendel's mere as reflective of the hall of Aegir, the sea-*jotun*, referred to in both the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda* as the setting for an episode of the gods, in which Thor plays a central role. In a similar manner, Snorri describes the *jotun* hall of Utgarðr which Thor enters in the same terms he would use to describe the homes of gods and men: "They saw a great hall and went thither; the door was open; then they went in, and saw there many men on two benches, and most of them were big enough"(Brodeur 61). In both descriptions, the authors of the works present the abodes of monsters in familiar societal terms, which make the settings all the more unsettling, as more chaotic reflections of the societies the protagonists come from (see Lerer 721-751).

In their parallel experiences outside their societies, Beowulf and Thor both become aware of their own vulnerability for the first time (Lerer). While fighting Grendel, Beowulf constantly has the upper hand, both in a literal and figurative sense. The *Beowulf*-poet narrates that episode with no uncertainty regarding the outcome. Before the fight even actually begins, the poet forecasts the outcome twice when he writes, "But the Lord gave / a web of victory to the people of the Weders," and about thirty-seven lines later, "But it was not his fate / to taste any more of the race of mankind / after that night"(Liuzza 696b-697, 734b-736a). When he anticipates the fight between Beowulf and Grendel's mother, however, the poet provides no forecast of the outcome. In his account of the fight, the poet heightens the sense of uncertainty by narrating a moment when Grendel's mother has the upper hand:

Quickly she gave him requital for that  
with a grim grasp, and grappled him to her—  
weary, he stumbled, strongest of warriors,  
of foot-soldiers, and took a fall. (Liuzza 1541-1544)

Prior to this episode, in both his own accounts of monster fights and in the poet's narration of the Grendel episode, Beowulf has not lost any ground to an opponent. With this moment from the Grendel's mere episode, the *Beowulf*-poet establishes his hero's limitations, instead of emphasizing his indomitability. The poet even goes so far as to state that Grendel's mother would have killed Beowulf, "had not his armored shirt offered him help, / the hard battle-net, and holy God / brought about war-victory"(Liuzza 1552-1554a). On his return to Heorot, Beowulf expresses his own awareness of his limitations when he reports to Hrothgar, "Not easily did I escape with my life / that undersea battle, did my brave deed / with difficulty"(Liuzza 1655-1657a).

Just as Beowulf "[takes] a fall" for the first time in his known career while fighting Grendel's mother; Thor is similarly forced to yield while wrestling a female opponent in Utgarðr (Lerer). After his apparent failures in two prior challenges the *jotuns* had posed for him there, Thor calls out to his giant hosts, "Little as ye call me, let any one come up now and wrestle with me; now I am angry"(Brodeur 65). His challenge to wrestle parallels Beowulf's own decisions to grapple with Grendel and his mother, to prove the prowess of his own arms. When Thor's host, Utgarda-Loki, answers the challenge with "let the old woman my nurse be called hither, Elli, and let Thor wrestle with her if he will. She has thrown such men as have seemed to me no less strong than Thor," he presents the god with a female foe, and describes her as a fitting match for him in strength, similar to how the *Beowulf*-poet compares Grendel's mother to Beowulf in their ferocity and strength (Brodeur 65). Though Utgarda-Loki's response to Thor can certainly

be interpreted as sarcastic, Snorri summarizes the wrestling match as a legitimate defeat for the god:

There is no need to make a long matter of it: that struggle went in such wise that the harder Thor strove in gripping, the faster she stood; then the old woman essayed a hold, and then Thor became totty on his feet, and their tuggings were very hard. Yet it was not long before Thor fell to his knee, on one foot. (Brodeur 65-66)

Upon Thor's departure from Utgarðr, Utgarda-Loki reveals to him that "[i]t was also a great marvel...wrestling Elli; since none such has ever been and none shall be, if he become so old as to abide "Old Age," that she shall not cause him to fall"(Brodeur 67).

Like how Snorri narrates Thor's match with Elli, the *Beowulf*-poet also narrates his hero's fight with Grendel's mother to address the theme of inevitable mortality. However, in his particular narrative context, the poet expresses this theme through Beowulf's victory over a more tangible, though ambiguous, monster, rather than his defeat by a more allegorical foe. When Beowulf returns to Heorot with the trophies of Grendel's head and the golden sword hilt, and recounts to Hrothgar the great difficulty of the fight, the poet sets up his narrative for the celebrated passage deemed "Hrothgar's Sermon." Upon his inspection of the sword hilt, and inspired by its antiquity, Hrothgar lectures Beowulf on being conscious of his own mortality. Toward the end of this extensive passage, Hrothgar addresses the theme of age most explicitly when he declares, "The glory of your might / is but a little while," and then proceeds to list for the hero all the potential ways in which "death, o warrior, will overwhelm you"(Liuzza 1761b-1762a, 1768). By having Hrothgar cite examples of past kings, himself included, the *Beowulf*-poet uses "Hrothgar's Sermon" as the pivotal moment of his work, in which he begins to redirect the development of Beowulf's character from a thane to a king. At this point in his narrative, already forecasted by Beowulf's comparison to Sigemund, the poet now identifies his hero's

character more so in terms of the kingly heroic type in Germanic literature, thus leading to parallels with works such as *Volsunga Saga* and Saxo Grammaticus's *History of the Danes*.

### CHAPTER III: THE MODEL KING AND HIS ADVERSARY

In this chapter, I intend to argue for the poet's identification of Beowulf as a model pagan Germanic king, according to the terms set by the *Beowulf*-poet with his prologue on Scyld, as well as the terms found in Germanic analogues concerning fellow dragon-slayers, with a particular emphasis on the connection of *Beowulf* to literature concerning heroes of the Volsung family. While acknowledging the more obvious differences in character between Scyld and Beowulf, as pointed out by scholars from Niles to King, I will expand on commentary from scholars such as Thomas Hill and John M. Hill, to argue that Scyld and Beowulf have more traits in common than not, and that Beowulf's more developed exemplification of the qualities first summarized in Scyld's character indicates continued rather than changed criteria for a model king. Concerning Beowulf's literary connection to fellow dragon-slayers, I will emphasize the common Germanic motif of slaying a treasure-guarding dragon as a rite of passage to achieve kingly status, a detail first pointed out by nineteenth-century scholars such as Sievers, with continued acknowledgement in early twentieth scholarship from Tolkien. While acknowledging explicit differences in scenario and character pointed out by scholars such as Thomas Hill, Johnson and Keller, I will expand on ideas from scholars such as Earl, Orchard and Wanner, to argue that the differences from the comparative literature mark Beowulf's dragon fight as a more heroic example of pagan kingly virtue than the ones in the analogues. Lastly, in this chapter, with the support of scholarship from Tolkien, Dronke, Orchard, Keller and Lionarons, I will further validate the concept of Beowulf's dragon-fight as a modified version of Ragnarok on the scale of a civilization rather than the pagan Germanic cosmos.

## Beowulf and Scyld

From Niles's 1979 article on the multilayered "ring composition" of *Beowulf*, to Owen-Crocker's more recent book on the epic's four highlighted funerals in 2000, much commentary and analysis has been devoted to the *Beowulf*-poet's framing of his work with the funerals of the two most idealized kings in the poem, i.e. Scyld Scefing at the poem's beginning and Beowulf himself at the poem's end. Most often, scholars such as Niles, Orchard, Owen-Crocker and King emphasize the differences in character between the two, regarding their kingly conduct, and how the framework structure of their funerals gives the poem a strong sense of conclusion. Specifically, the poet appears to make a full narrative revolution, by ending his poem more or less just as he began it, as noted by Niles, as well as Bruce in his book primarily on Scyld and Scef. By this interpretation, one shared between Orchard and Owen-Crocker, the poet encapsulates the pagan Germanic past within his work, and explicitly sets it apart from his own historical period. However, Orchard addresses Scyld's and Beowulf's similarities along with their differences. Irving goes so far as to argue that Beowulf, alone, of all the kings after Scyld, lives up to the standards set by the Danish patriarch (1993). Also, after reading Thomas Hill's article on Scyld, in which he stresses the theme of true kingship as given, regardless of tribal origin, and subsequently examining more closely the two kings myself, I find that their similarities outweigh their differences substantially, particularly when noting the parallels between their humble beginnings, as well as between their transcendent identities, beyond any particular Germanic group of people. The latter concept can certainly be interpreted as reflective of Anglo-Saxon identity in England, as noted by Thomas Hill, being an amalgamation of the various Germanic groups which migrated to the island. *Beowulf* scholars from the late eighteenth century and onward have identified Old English and Danish analogues to Scyld,

establishing a larger context for the idea of model Germanic kings transcending national identity, and thus providing support for such a theme's presence in the poem (Cooley 45-67).

Furthermore, considering the great distance in time between the two kings and their funerals, this particular aspect of the poem's structure can be interpreted rather as the poet's indication of a cyclical repetition of customs over the course of generations, a point brought up by John M. Hill in *The Cultural World in Beowulf*. By highlighting and expanding analytically on these particular details in character and narrative, I mean to argue that the *Beowulf*-poet can be read as expressing a sense of continuity, regarding what makes an ideal king and how they should be honored, from his ancestors' pagan past into his own time.

When scholars such as Niles and Owen-Crocker argue that Scyld and Beowulf are opposite examples of model kings, they note how Scyld presumably became a king through his aggression, indicated by the early lines "Often Scyld Scefing seized the mead-benches / from many tribes, troops of enemies, / struck fear into earls"(Liuzza 4-6a). Regarding Beowulf's ascension to the Geatish throne, on the other hand, the poet writes much later that, "then came the broad kingdom / into Beowulf's hands," expressing how Beowulf received his kingship more passively, as the next in the Geatish line of succession (Liuzza 2207-2208a). However, a closer examination of the respective contexts in which the two become kings not only undermines, but practically disproves the notion that Scyld and Beowulf conduct themselves oppositely in their regal careers (see Thomas Hill 1986 37-47). Though the poet introduces and initially defines Scyld as aggressive and violent, he does not explicitly narrate that Scyld takes the Danish throne by such actions as described in lines 4-6a. A king later referred to as "friend of the Scyldings" and "dear land-ruler" could not have been given such honorifics by the poet or his people, had he taken the throne by violent usurpation (Liuzza 30, 31). On the contrary, in the lines "Though he

first was / found a waif, he awaited solace for that— / he grew under heaven and prospered in honor,” the poet arguably expresses how Scyld legitimately earned his rank in society by performing heroic deeds (Liuzza 6b-8). The poet’s later commentary on Beowulf can be considered a thematic echo of those lines (see Clark 271-290):

He had been long despised,  
as the sons of the Geats considered him no good,  
nor did the lord of the Weders wish to bestow  
many good things upon him on the mead-benches,  
for they assumed that he was slothful,  
a cowardly nobleman. Reversal came  
to the glorious man for all his griefs. (Liuzza 2183b-2189)

As shown throughout the poem, Beowulf’s own legitimate heroic deeds inspire both the Danes and Geats to view him as a desired king. The poet narrates his most explicit example of Beowulf earning his status as a kingly candidate, as judged by his heroic deeds, upon his hero’s return from Hygelac’s fatal Frisian raid:

By no means did the Hetware need to exult  
in that fight, when they marched on foot to him,  
bore their linden shields; few came back  
from that brave soldier to seek their homes.  
The son of Ecgtheow crossed the vast sea,  
wretched, solitary, returned to his people,  
where Hygd offered him the hoard and kingdom. (Liuzza 2363-2369)

Though he is already a much celebrated member of the Geatish tribe, and he refuses the throne in deference to Heardred, this passage on Beowulf parallels the earlier ones on Scyld not only in how he earns this particular rank, but also in how he comes to a people alone from the sea, and is given a kingship due to their gratitude for him (see Orchard 2003 98-129). The poet’s repetition of his earlier line on Scyld, “that was a good king,” at the end of this Fitt XXXIII, now in regards to Beowulf, can be interpreted as his phraseological connection of Beowulf to Scyld over generations of time, as mutual examples of model heroic kings who express the same virtues in the same manner (see Carruthers 19-29) (Liuzza 2390).

Though the *Beowulf* poet establishes Scyld as the progenitor of the particular Danish royal line chronicled in his work, a detail of which he reminds his audience of throughout the poem, by using “Scyldings” as a synonym for Danes, the circumstances of Scyld’s arrival as a mysterious orphan, come from the sea, is a clear indication by the poet that Scyld himself is not a native of Denmark (T. Hill 1986). This theme established by the poet at his work’s beginning, of an ideal king whose identity transcends that of the people he rules, gets reinforced by the poet’s development of Beowulf’s character, both before and after he becomes king of the Geats (T. Hill 1986). Upon the celebration of Beowulf’s victory over Grendel, Wealhtheow says to Hrothgar, “I have been told that you would take this warrior / for your son”(Liuzza 1175-1176a). Though she clearly indicates with her immediately following comments her desire for the Danish throne to pass to her own children, Wealhtheow’s acknowledgement of Hrothgar’s regard for Beowulf reflects how the hero has inspired a group of people, other than his own, to potentially adopt him as a king, just as the Danes adopted Scyld generations beforehand (T. Hill 1986, see also Overing 1995 219-260). Towards the poem’s end, when Beowulf speaks his dying words to Wiglaf, he reveals that his tribal identity is, in fact, not exclusively Geatish: “You are the last survivor of our lineage, / the Waegmundings”(Liuzza 2813-2814a). Considering the *Beowulf*-poet’s careful attention to his characters’ particular identities throughout his work, this detail regarding his hero could not simply be an afterthought on his part. Rather, it should be considered one of the reasons why the poet presents Beowulf as the most exemplary of the Geatish kings. As he ends his work with “they said that he was of all the kings of the world / the mildest of men and the most gentle, / the kindest to his folk and the most eager for fame,” the poet arguably expresses how Beowulf, like Scyld before him, stands as a model king for the

overall Pan-Germanic “world,” rather than for just one particular group of people (Liuzza 3180-3182).

## Beowulf and Fellow Dragon-Slayers

In the nineteenth century, *Beowulf* scholars began to connect the dragon episode to Germanic literature concerning both the gods and heroes. Scholars such as Grundtvig began to establish parallels between this episode and Thor's fatal fight with the Midgard Serpent, as well as Sigurd's dragon-slaying from *Volsunga Saga* (Bjork, Fulk, and Niles xlv, Malone 129-138). Later, towards the turn of the century, scholars such as Sievers argued that the episode had its roots in the legend of a Danish dragon-slaying king, identified possibly as the Beow(ulf) mentioned at the poem's beginning, or Froði, as he is known in other texts concerning the Danish royal line (Klaeber, Fisher). More contemporary scholarship, however, has emphasized the primary differences between the *Beowulf* dragon episode and its analogues, concerning the respective natures of both the dragons and their slayers. Scholars such as Keller and Rauer highlight Beowulf's old age in contrast to the youth of the other Germanic slayers, along with the *Beowulf* dragon's different physical attributes from the other dragons. Scholars such as Hill emphasize the difference in temperament between Beowulf and the more youthful dragon-slayers, such as Sigurd from *Volsunga Saga*. In this section, I aim to acknowledge both the similarities and differences between the *Beowulf* dragon episode and its analogues, and ultimately reconcile the differences by arguing that the *Beowulf*-poet employs the same themes and motifs as the other Germanic authors, but resituates them in his poem's context for the sake of narrative continuity and of a more redeeming portrayal of such heroes and kings according to pagan Germanic standards.

The poet's account of Beowulf's slaying a treasure-guarding dragon bears significant similarities to two other Germanic accounts of famous dragon-slayers, that of Sigurd in *Volsunga Saga* and that of Froði in Book II of Saxo's *History of the Danes* (see Fisher, II, 39-50). In all

three accounts, a lone warrior from a royal bloodline confronts the dragon alone to take its treasure and win renown, the dragon jealously hoards its treasure with no other apparent motivation, and it also has a vulnerable spot at its underbelly (Fisher). Along with these points in common, all three dragons are described as serpentine and venomous to certain degrees. Just as in *Volsunga Saga*, the particular treasure guarded by the dragon in *Beowulf* is referred to as cursed, and brings about the deaths of the epics' primary heroes. In his article primarily on Grendel's mere, Abram points out underwater gold as a shared motif between the poem and the saga. To extend this connection, the burial of the dragon's treasure in Beowulf's Barrow can be considered a parallel to the burial of Fafnir's treasure in the Rhine by Gunnar and Hogni, with the same motivation of preventing it from falling into the hands of enemies. Just as in Book II of *History*, in which Froði aims to enrich his warriors with the acquired treasure, Beowulf seeks the dragon's treasure with the intent to enrich his kingdom, most likely by maintaining loyalty among his thanes and distributing the wealth to them in particular. Perhaps the most unifying characteristic of all three dragon conflicts, though, is that in each text they stand as landmarks for the moments in which each protagonist becomes defined as a great king (see Wanner 1-12).

Despite the great similarities between Beowulf's dragon fight and the Norse parallels, explicit differences between the three must be examined. In contrast to both *Volsunga Saga* and *History*, Beowulf fights the dragon as an old man, already well-established as a warrior, while Sigurd and Froði slay their dragons in their youthful prime as launching points for their heroic careers. Furthermore, whereas Sigurd slays his dragon without actual combat, and Froði slays his with only a minimal struggle on the dragon's part, Beowulf's dragon proves to be just as fatal an adversary to the warrior-king as Beowulf does to it, and their combat lasts for three rounds. Wiglaf's assistance to Beowulf after the first round is perhaps the greatest point of difference

between the Anglo-Saxon and Norse accounts of dragon fighting, as Sigurd and Froði act entirely alone in their endeavors. The *Beowulf*-poet arguably implies this difference particularly between Beowulf and the Volsung dragon-slayer, be he Sigurd or Sigemund, when he refers to the earlier account of Sigemund by Hrothgar's scop, who sings that he, "had killed a dragon, keeper of a hoard; / alone, he dared to go under gray stones, / a bold deed—nor was Fitela by his side"(Liuzza 887-889). Other, more aesthetic differences exist between the descriptions of the respective dragons. Unlike Froði's and Sigurd's dragons, the dragon of *Beowulf* has the two attributes of flight and fire-breath. In contrast to the dragons of *Beowulf* and *History*, Fafnir of *Volsunga Saga* was once a human, presumably transformed by greed for the treasure he hoards, and he has a prophetic voice which anticipates the future action of the saga. The dragons of the other two texts do not have any real motivation besides a desire to keep treasure for themselves (see Keller 218-228).

Though noteworthy, these explicit differences in detail do not have to mean that Beowulf's dragon fight comes from a separate tradition from the Norse ones, and it is certainly not antithetical to them. To expand on the point made by Kaske concerning the Sigemund digression's connection to Beowulf's own fight, Fafnir of *Volsunga Saga* and the *Beowulf*-dragon both represent the vice of covetousness, with Fafnir being a more explicit example because of his greater development in character and more literal dual identification with humanity and monsters. The most crucial point to be raised again, though, is that dragon-slaying is a particularly kingly heroic deed, and Beowulf's slaying of the dragon is the only direct action taken by him in his career as king which the poet presents to his audience. Otherwise, the poet describes Beowulf's regal career in a decidedly passive way, writing "then came the broad kingdom / into Beowulf's hands," only after he deferred the kingship to Heardred, until the

prince's death in the Swedish conflict (Liuzza 2207-2208a). By using this type of language to describe the transition of roles for Beowulf from thane to king, the poet gives the reader a sense of the transition occurring without any sort of conflict needing to be resolved beforehand. The poet furthers this sense when he continues with, "he held it well / for fifty winters—he was then a wise king, / old guardian of his homeland—until / in the dark nights a dragon began his reign"(Liuzza 2208b-2211). With fifty years of presumed peace for the Geats, Beowulf has not had to assert himself as a king. Though Beowulf maintains the alliance established by Heardred with the Swedish prince Eadgils, noted when the poet writes, "he gave support to the son of Othere / with warriors and weapons," the poet implies through this language that he does not directly enter the combat himself (Liuzza 2394-2395a). This action taken by Beowulf can be considered a parallel to the earlier account of Hrothgar's hospitality to Ecgtheow in the midst of a blood-feud, and in this sense he behaves as good kings do who are referenced by the poet (see Cooke 207-224). However, this particular trait of kingship in the other rulers is accounted for only after they have established their authority as kings by prowess in combat (Wanner). The two most significant kings from the first part of the poem, Scyld and Hrothgar, are both initially defined by this type of capability when the poet writes of them respectively, "Often Scyld Scefing seized the mead-benches / from many tribes, troops of enemies, / struck fear into earls," and "Then success in war was given to Hrothgar, / honor in battle, so that his beloved kinsmen / eagerly served him"(Liuzza 4-6a, 64-66a). Only after these introductions do the two Danish kings get described honorably with the title of "ring-giver." Beowulf has previously performed more than his share of heroic deeds in combat, but only as a thane in the service of kings. Until the dragon disturbs his kingdom, Beowulf has not performed any heroic deeds of his own to explicitly define himself as king of the Geats, and has stayed within his earlier role of a model

thane who supports royalty in need (Carruthers). Though aged and past his prime as a warrior, Beowulf must face the dragon in combat to firmly establish his identity as a king who protects his people from an outside threat, and who also enriches his people from the bounty acquired from such a battle (Wanner). As the dragon is first introduced to the poem when the poet writes that it "...began his reign," the dragon then becomes the only true challenge to Beowulf's kingship, and Beowulf must assert himself as king by overcoming that challenge through slaying the dragon. Beowulf goes through a reversal of the poem's established process of becoming a king, by first becoming a ring-giving king to the Geats for lack of anyone else left in the royal line, and then confronting the only challenge to his rule later in life.

Concerning the *Beowulf*-poet's substitution of Sigemund for Sigurd as the Volsung dragon-slayer in the celebratory song of Hrothgar's scop, scholars have hypothesized that the poet may have known a different version of the Volsung legend, and/or Sigemund was the original dragon-slayer of the story cycle (see Byock 11-26). With either of these hypotheses, scholars can argue for a greater connection for *Beowulf* to a common Germanic tradition which also produced the Volsung legends (see Johnson 42-53). In his article concerning the poet's acknowledgement of oral heritage, Creed argues for a translation of Hrothgar's scop as telling multiple tales of Sigemund, and thus reads this section as evidence for knowledge of very old, heroic lays on the poet's part. Hrothgar's scop's highlighting of Sigemund's relationship with Fitela (first identified as a character by Grundtvig and Rask in 1816), and of his dragon-slaying, foreshadows Beowulf's own fight with a treasure-guarding dragon in the poem's latter half, as well as his relationship with Wiglaf in that episode (see Cooley 45-67). As stated before, though, these parallels are potentially undermined by the explicit difference between Sigemund's dragon-slaying, in which "nor was Fitela by his side," and Beowulf's, in which Wiglaf's

assistance is necessary to slay the dragon. If scholars emphasize this primary difference, they could make a valid argument for the *Beowulf*-poet as speaking through Hrothgar's scop to fundamentally juxtapose Sigemund and Beowulf, regarding their respective heroisms (Keller). If Beowulf's eventual dependence on Wiglaf is examined in conjunction with Sigemund and Fitela's in the larger contexts of their respective stories, however, another hypothesis could be formed which argues for the two stories as more interconnected than not. Perhaps the modifications made by Hrothgar's scop to the Volsung legends reflect the *Beowulf*-poet employing his own creative license in his reference to the tales (see Earl 2010 289-305). In this particular reading, the *Beowulf*-poet modifies the Volsung legends himself, so that he can in turn take necessary components of the heroic tradition it comes from, and rework them in his poem's second half, to agree stylistically and thematically with the first (see Orchard 2003 98-129, Abram 2010 198-216). Evidence which supports this hypothesis can be found when the poet relates, "For Sigemund / no small fame grew after his final day, / after that hardened soldier, prince's son, / had killed a dragon"(Liuzza 884b-887a). Though unclear about the hero's age at the time of this event, the poet's use of "final day" and "hardened soldier" could indicate that his version of the story has Sigemund past his prime as a warrior, which would align him closely to the point in Beowulf's career when he fights his dragon. Wiglaf's assistance to Beowulf can be accounted for the sake of literary and thematic continuity within the *Beowulf*-poet's work. In the first part of the poem, the poet establishes the theme of a model thane serving a model king through Beowulf's relationships with Hrothgar and Hygelac. It would make sense for him to reemphasize this theme in the second part of his poem, by having another young thane in Wiglaf come to Beowulf in his greatest time of need as a king (Carruthers). The difference between Beowulf's initiative against the dragon, and Hrothgar's lack thereof regarding Grendel, can be

accounted for by identifying the poem's first part as an emphasis on a thane's exploits, while the second part emphasizes those of a king. This interpretation of the poet's narrative agenda is supported in part by Irving, who argues that Hrothgar is actually the one receiving advice from Beowulf in the poem's first part, and that Beowulf's ideal dynamic with Hygelac in the first part prepares him to be a model king as the focus of the second, then passing on his positive energy to Wiglaf (1993). These potential literary reconstructions by the poet would agree stylistically with creating his original character of Beowulf according to traditional heroic types. It would agree thematically in terms of particular dynamics between characters which the poet has emphasized from the beginning.

To establish a stronger parallel of Sigemond and Fitela's relationship to that of Beowulf and Wiglaf, I will examine their respective familial connections and situations beyond their dragon fights. Hrothgar's scop identifies Sigemond and Fitela as uncle and nephew. Scholars such as J. M. Hill and Eliason have hypothesized that the *Beowulf*-poet implies the same relation between Beowulf and Wiglaf. Just as the scop relates how Sigemond only confides in Fitela "when of such things he wished to speak to him, / uncle to nephew," Beowulf's only moment of private dialogue comes at the end when he speaks to Wiglaf, uncle to nephew (Liuzza 880-881a). The scop's recounting of how Sigemond and Fitela as a duo "a great many of the race of giants / they slaughtered with their swords," parallels how Beowulf and Wiglaf slay the dragon together, in that both pairs act as a team to combat supernatural foes (Liuzza 883-884a). The most compelling parallel, however, concerns how both pairs of men represent the last survivors of their families and tribes. When Sigmund and Sinfjotli (the Norse equivalents of Sigemund and Fitela) perform deeds together, they do so when all of Sigmund's brothers and father have been killed by their enemy Siggeir. As Sigmund's sister and Sinfjotli's mother Signy allows herself to

be burned with Siggeir upon Sigmund's vengeance, the two warriors effectively become the last of their race. Beowulf's final words to Wiglaf reflect a strongly similar though not identical situation for the two of them:

You are the last survivor of our lineage,  
the Waegmundings; fate has swept away  
all of my kinsmen, earls in their courage,  
to their final destiny; I must follow them (Liuzza 2813-2816).

It could not be an accident that the *Beowulf*-poet chose to add this detail of a dying family in conjunction with the more or less inevitable doom of the Geatish race at the poem's end. Along with Beowulf's death by the dragon, this parallel detail of demise enables the poet to render the impending annihilation of the Geats with an utmost legendary aura. Considering the Anglo-Saxon claim of descent from the Geats, the poet would, in all probability, want to valorize that part of his heritage to the best of his abilities (see Niles 2007 39-49). By incorporating the literary tradition of heroic families that perish in their acts of heroism against mythical creatures, the poet gives his ancestry legendary legitimacy amongst the related Germanic groups of people who do likewise.

## Beowulf and End Times

When examining the poem's apocalyptic connotations at its end, it is essential to do so in conjunction with the connotations of creation at its beginning. Analysis of these elements not only furthers the connection of *Beowulf* to Germanic literature's heroic tradition of thanes and kings, but also to its pagan cosmology regarding the beginning and end times (see Niles 1997 213-232). The poem begins by recounting not only the creation of the Danish royal line, but also the creation of the world within the framework of the Danish court (see Dronke 302-325). In the prologue, the poet establishes the beginning of the Danish royal line under mysterious circumstances, when he recounts how Scyld Scefing "...first was / found a waif," and then specifies later to a slight degree the nature of Scyld's arrival to the Danes when recounting his funeral, during which he reveals how unidentified people from an unidentified place, "at his beginning first sent him forth / alone over the waves while still a small child" (Liuzza 6b-7a, 45-46). The nature of Scyld's arrival to the Danes, along with his violent assertion to and assumption of power as a king, bears strong parallels to the account in *Volsunga Saga* of the establishment of Sigi, the first prominent member of the Volsung royal line (T. Hill 1982):

Then Odin guided Sigi out of the land on a journey so long that it was remarkable. They continued until Odin brought him to where some warships lay. Sigi next took to raiding with the troops his father had given him before they parted, and he was victorious in the raids. Matters progressed until the end Sigi was able to seize a kingdom to rule. (Byock 35-36)

Like Sigi, Scyld begins his career as an exile, who acquires his kingship not through family succession, but through martial prowess. With the details that he "...seized the mead-benches / from many tribes, troops of enemies, / struck fear into earls," the *Beowulf*-poet presents Scyld as a raider, just as the *Volsunga Saga* author does for Sigi. Furthermore, the scholarly hypothesis that Sigi comes from a Germanic "Otherworld" as the son of Odin should be considered and

examined in conjunction with Scyld's mysterious arrival and departure from the Danes (T. Hill 1982). As the *Beowulf*-poet ends his prologue with "Men do not know / how to say truly—not trusted counselors, / nor heroes under the heavens—who received that cargo," he reflects the same sense of unknown which he established concerning Scyld's origins (see Johnson 42-53) (Liuzza 50b-52). In Anglo-Saxon literature, the unknown is often connected to, and sometimes synonymous with, the realm of the supernatural (Johnson). As a Christian poet with Christian sensibilities, the *Beowulf*-poet states his comment on the ambiguity of Scyld's departure in the present tense, as opposed to the otherwise dominant past tense he has used so far in his writing. This shift in tense has the poet referring to people of his own time, rather than those of Scyld's and his descendants. As Christians themselves, the poet's contemporaries cannot determine what kind of afterlife awaits a heroic pagan such as Scyld (Owen-Crocker). By giving Scyld an unknown origin as well as final destination, however, the poet associates him with the Anglo-Saxon version of the "Otherworld," just as the *Volsunga Saga* author does for Sigi in the Norse sense (Johnson).

After finishing his narration of the Danish royal line's foundation, the *Beowulf*-poet briefly summarizes the careers of Scyld's descendants up until Hrothgar. The poet begins his narrative proper with Hrothgar's kingship, and relates the creation of Danish society through the construction of Heorot in lines 67b-73:

It came to his mind  
that he should order a hall-building,  
have men make a great mead-house  
which the sons of men should remember forever,  
and there within he would share everything  
with young and old that God had given him,  
except for the common land and lives of men. (Liuzza)

In this description, the poet establishes the dynamic between a king and his subjects which enables Danish society to function prosperously, with Heorot as its framework and focal point. This particular account of creation by the poet gets reflected and paralleled by Hrothgar's scop within Heorot, as he sings of the world's creation in lines 90-98:

the clear song of the scop. He who knew  
how to tell the ancient tale of the origin of men  
said that the Almighty created the earth,  
a bright and shining plain, by seas embraced,  
and set, triumphantly, the sun and moon  
to light their beams for those who dwell on land,  
adorned the distant corners of the world  
with leaves and branches, and made life also,  
all manner of creatures that live and move. (Liuzza)

As the scop sings the world's creation in Heorot, Heorot then becomes the *Beowulf*-poet's framework and focal point for creation beyond that of Danish society, to that of the world as a whole. The "great mead-house" established by Hrothgar parallels the "bright and shining plain" of the earth created by God. Hrothgar's distribution of his God-given gifts to his thanes parallels God's gifts of the celestial bodies and life on earth. Just as Hrothgar has men come to "adorn the folk-stead" from "far and wide," so too does God "adorn[ed] the distant corners of the world"(Liuzza 76, 79). Though the poet has the scop sing of creation with Christian undertones, by giving narrative precedence to Heorot's creation, the poet emphasizes the concept of creation primarily in terms of a pagan society's structure. In his article addressing this matter, Taylor finds descriptive parallels to these accounts of creation in "Voluspo" from the *Poetic Edda*, as the Volva seer recounts the creation of the world to Odin. By placing the creation of Heorot before God's creation of the world in his narrative, and by having Hrothgar's scop sing of God's creation within Heorot, the *Beowulf*-poet effectively establishes Heorot as a pagan prototype for his own beliefs regarding the creation of the world (Dronke). The scop's dependence on Heorot for a place to sing his song, as well as for an audience, enables the poet to reflect his own

religious and social sensibilities while also portraying a pagan version of creation in a favorable and sympathetic manner.

Immediately following his account of Heorot's creation, the *Beowulf*-poet anticipates its destruction when he writes, "—it awaited hostile fires"(Liuzza 82). The poet likely uses this line to also foreshadow the fate of Beowulf's own mead-hall, at which the "hostile fires" come from the dragon. In the latter part of the poem, the report to Beowulf, "—that his own home, / best of buildings, had burned in waves of fire, / the gift-throne of the Geats," echoes the poet's earlier statements about Heorot (Liuzza 2325b-2327a). Not only does Beowulf's hall suffer the same destruction predicted for Heorot, but the poet also describes the Geatish hall in similarly idealistic terms with "best of buildings," and, just as he wrote for Heorot, he refers to Beowulf's hall by its primary function, as a place for a generous king to distribute his wealth, with the title "gift-throne of the Geats" (Carruthers). Though this latter destruction occurs in Geatland, the *Beowulf*-poet's overall narrative structure of beginning with an ideal mead-hall's creation, and then ending with the destruction of one, can be read as his chronicling of the rise and fall of the overall Pan-Germanic pagan civilization, rather than simply the rise and fall of just one particular race. The poet's countless and constant references to all the different Germanic groups identified throughout his poem help to argue for such an all-encompassing and inclusive statement about his ancestors' pagan society. Perhaps the most significant detail which unifies the poem's early and latter parts, with this theme of a civilization's rise and fall, is the poet's emphasis on ideal heroic kings and their deeds during the creation and destruction of their civilization (see Niles 1979 924-935).

Although the *Beowulf*-poet parallels the fates of Heorot and the Geatish mead-hall through their mutual destructions by fire, he provides no Geatish parallel to the creation of the

Danish royal line and its society. On the contrary, whereas the poet narrates the establishment of Danish royalty and society as a creation myth, he narrates the progressive deterioration of the Geatish royal line and society as a myth of end-times. As he begins his poem, the *Beowulf*-poet renders the Danish kings, up until and including Hrothgar, all as triumphant warriors who enjoy success throughout their careers, with the exception of Hrothgar's Grendel episode. As he writes towards the poem's end, however, the poet renders the Geatish kings, up until and including Beowulf, as doomed to untimely deaths by fatal accident, grief, and warfare both human and monstrous. In lines 2200-2208a, the poet's account of the Geatish kingship directly juxtaposes his earlier account of the Danes:

Then it came to pass amid the crash of battle  
in later days, after Hygelac lay dead,  
and for Heardred the swords of battle held  
deadly slaughter under the shield-wall,  
when the Battle-Scylfings sought him out,  
those hardy soldiers, and savagely struck down  
the nephew of Hereric in his victorious nation—  
then came the broad kingdom  
into Beowulf's hands. (Liuzza)

He distinctly contrasts how the Danes maintain their royal line by military success, while the Geats constantly face the threat of their royal line's demise, through their overall lack of military success. The description of Geatland as a "victorious nation" appears ironic, when read in the overall context of this passage. However, this small detail in language could be read as a clue, concerning not only why the *Beowulf*-poet does not give an account of Geatish creation, but also why he does not narrate more concerning Heorot's fiery destruction in comparison to the Geatish mead-hall. Though the poet establishes the immediate context of the Geatish realm as unstable and precarious at this latter point in his work, by deeming Geatland as a "victorious nation" he implies that it once enjoyed the same prominence with its society and kings as Denmark had in the poem's beginning. This one positive detail in the poet's negative presentation of Geatish

kingship juxtaposes with the one negative detail of “it awaited hostile fires,” within his otherwise positive earlier presentation of Danish kingship.

If the creation of Heorot can be read to represent the pagan creation of the world, then the destruction of the mead-hall, be it Heorot or Beowulf’s, can be read to represent the pagan end-times. The particular destruction of civilization by fire is reminiscent of Ragnarok, the pagan Germanic end-times, during which the gods and their monstrous foes destroy each other and the world gets enveloped in fire before its rebirth (Dronke). As the *Beowulf*-poet chronicles a legendary heroic history of the pagan Germanic past, rather than a mythological one, he euhemerizes the theme of Ragnarok by substituting model kings and thanes for the gods, and pitting them against monstrous foes who seek the destruction of their peoples, rather than monstrous foes who seek the destruction of the established order of the universe. By this euhemerizing, the poet not only has the ability to reflect the most prominent theme of pagan Germanic mythology, but he can also maintain his ability to base his characters and events on Germanic heroic types of legendary mortals and their exploits (Dronke). This particular fusion of gods, heroes of legendary history, and the respective destinies of their worlds and themselves, becomes most apparent at the poem’s end, during Beowulf’s fight with the dragon. In this fight, the poet reflects the heroic theme of a warrior king from a dying family, who slays a dragon, and acquires a treasure which only furthers his and his family’s demise (Dronke). By his particular situating of this event, in which the hero and monster kill each other, and the twilight of the hero’s people is further assured, the poet simultaneously reflects the mythological theme of Ragnarok, narrating a fight which bears close similarities to the cosmic final confrontation of Thor, protector of gods and men, and the Midgard Serpent, the dragon which threatens both human and divine civilization (Dronke).

Prior to the dragon episode, Beowulf has displayed characteristics which the Norse tradition attributes to Thor, the designated protector of gods and men from all chaotic forces. In his fight with Grendel, Beowulf defends Heorot, representative of established society, from a creature of Utgarðr, or the “Out-World” regions, inhabited by monsters which seek to destroy that society; and in much the same way, Thor defends Asgard, the established society of the gods, against chaotic forces from without, usually manifested as giants and trolls. When Beowulf journeys to and within Grendel’s mere, he parallels Thor’s own adventures to Jotunheim, as they both battle the monsters in their own elements. When introducing himself to Hrothgar by means of his previous deeds, Beowulf even states that he “slew a tribe of giants,” granting himself a distinction almost exclusively reserved for Thor among the pantheon of Germanic gods (Liuzza 421). In their respective fights with serpentine dragons, Beowulf and Thor not only parallel each other in their final battles, but their fatal foes also parallel each other by their fundamental contrast in scope from the previous monsters (see Lionarons 301-316). Whereas the previous monstrous foes for both heroes have had some human characteristics in their physical and psychological descriptions, the dragon and the Midgard Serpent have no human elements ascribed to them at all. Furthermore, while Grendel and his mother seek to break down human society, as the *jotuns* and trolls do for the gods, the dragons seek to destroy worlds. This contrast in motivation is apparent in *Beowulf*, when the poet narrates that Grendel “...ruled, and strove against right, / one against all, until empty stood / the best of houses”(Liuzza 144-146a), and then narrates much later of the dragon:

Then that strange visitor began to spew flames  
and burn the bright courts; his burning gleams  
struck horror in men. That hostile flier  
would leave nothing alive. (Liuzza 2312-2315)

When Grendel empties Heorot during his reign of terror, he deprives the Danes of their means for an established society, but he does not explicitly seek to annihilate the Danish people as a whole. The dragon, on the other hand, directs his hostility to all the Geats, seeking not only to destroy their entire nation of people, but their land as well. The magnitude of the dragon's destruction, directed towards an entire race and land, parallels the magnitude of the Midgard Serpent's destruction, directed toward the entire Norse universe.

Immediately following his slaying of the Midgard Serpent, Thor paces back and dies from the serpent's venom he inhales. In Beowulf's parallel scenario with the dragon, immediately after he slays the monster, the poet narrates that "he soon realized / that in his breast was an evil force, / a poison welling"(Liuzza 2713b-2715a). When Beowulf's thanes push the dragon over the cliff and into the sea, the monster then occupies the same space which the Midgard Serpent does both before and after Ragnarok, when the entire earth ultimately sinks into the sea. Aside from this more immediate parallel, this final placement of the dragon in a body of water also connects the creature to all the prior monsters in the poem, from the sea monsters during the swimming race to Grendel's mere. In his section on *Beowulf's* connection to Norse mythology, Orchard points out descriptive evidence from the earlier Sigemund digression to indicate that the poet also placed that earlier dragon's lair by the sea, in his version of the Volsung legend (2003). Fafnir of *Volsunga Saga* also keeps his treasure in a cave near a pool, and is slain by Sigurd while on his way to drink from it, while Saxo has Froði go by boat to the island where that dragon keeps its treasure. In *Beowulf* and these analogues, water is established as the chaotic source of monsters, with dragons being the most archetypal and representative of cosmic chaos. By having Beowulf slay the dragon at the poem's end, and the thanes subsequently dispose it into the sea, the *Beowulf*-poet concludes his work with the culmination of

his hero's ultimate triumph over forces of chaos, sending them back to their aquatic origins and away from the society he has always protected.

The impending doom of the Geats after Beowulf's death leaves open for debate how redeemable the poet considers the hero, as well as the society which condones his actions, at the end of his work. Wiglaf's second to last speech before Beowulf's funeral appears to be intentionally ambivalent in his judgment of his king:

Often many earls must suffer misery  
through the will of one man, as we have now seen.  
We could not persuade our dear prince,  
shepherd of a kingdom, with any counsel,  
that he should not greet that gold-guardian,  
let him lie there where he long had been,  
inhabit the dwellings until the end of the world:  
he held to his high destiny. (Liuzza 3077-3084)

Though his initial words may indicate resentment, Wiglaf's loving references to Beowulf as a "dear prince" and "shepherd of a kingdom" with a "high destiny" indicate more so that he does not, in fact, consider his king deserving of reproach. On the contrary, not only do these words correspond with the poem's final lines of praise, but they also reflect the poet's consistent viewpoint of acquiring fame as a redeeming virtue of his pagan characters. Although the *Beowulf*-poet has the pagans of his story invoke one god and express piety in a manner that could be Christian, he noticeably never has them explicitly refer to salvation in the sense of a Christian afterlife. Rather, he defines them as fundamentally pagan in outlook by their emphasis on winning fame as every warrior's end goal in life, whether as thanes or kings. Kaske argues that Beowulf and Sigemund are positive intra-textual parallel characters, because they both "preserved [their] fame by continuing deeds of prowess and courage"(490). This argument can be extended to include the Geatish nation at the poem's end, considering its more legendary status than the other Germanic nations in *Beowulf* and its comparative literature. Beowulf

specifically intends for his burial mound to “be as a monument to my people,” thus passing along his fame he acquired personally to the nation he leaves behind (Liuzza 2804). By their remaining presence in Germanic literature as the most valorized of people, Beowulf and the Geats endure their own Ragnarok which will occur within the poem’s context, continuing to serve as a positive example for the *Beowulf*-poet’s audience and other future generations of Germanic people beyond their own time.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion to this thesis, in which I have established *Beowulf* within the larger context of Pan-Germanic heroic literature, by noting its parallels and connections to a variety of other works from England, Iceland, and Denmark, I find it necessary to point out perhaps the most fundamental difference between *Beowulf* and the larger body of literature with which it should be considered. Whereas the authors of the comparative literature emphasize the corruption of pagan Germanic heroic ideals, the *Beowulf*-poet actually emphasizes how his hero lives up to those ideals, and in so doing, renders them in a positive light. This thematic difference can be accounted for by the poet's particular presentation of pagan Germanic cosmology, his illustration of how his characters maintain social order in the mead-hall, and his hero's maturation, when examined in conjunction with the comparative literature.

Though the protagonists in *Beowulf* and *Volsunga Saga* address fate with the same stoic acceptance, appropriate for Germanic heroes, the authors of the respective works characterize the playing out of fate in opposite manners. The *Beowulf*-poet presents fate, or *wyrd* more specifically, as a necessary force which his heroes must adhere to for glory and fame. Wiglaf expresses this mentality, albeit begrudgingly perhaps, in the aftermath of the dragon fight: "he held to his high destiny. The hoard is opened, / grimly gotten; that fate was too great / which impelled the king of our people thither"(3084-3086). The author of *Volsunga Saga*, on the other hand, presents fate primarily as a force which materializes as the characters break their oaths and familial bonds with each other, and practically all die treacherous deaths. In the first of his three

deathbed statements, Beowulf comments on how his interactions with fate have enabled him to live blameless of such faults:

The decrees of fate  
I awaited on earth, held well what was mine,  
I sought no intrigues, nor swore many  
false or wrongful oaths. For all that I may  
have joy, though sick with mortal wounds,  
because the Ruler of men need not reproach me  
with the murder of kinsmen, when my life  
quits my body. (Liuzza 2736b-2743a)

The *Beowulf*-poet presents his euhemerized versions of the Germanic gods in the same idealized manner. Unlike the accounts of Balder's death and the events following in the *Eddas*, in which the gods become embroiled in repeated kin-slaying and oath-breaking; the Geatish patriarch Hrethel, Odin's counterpart, chooses to maintain harmony in the wake of Herebeald's death, as noted by Beowulf when he recounts that Hrethel "gave up man's joys, chose God's light; / he left to his children his land and strongholds / —as a blessed man does—when he departed this life"(2469-2471). Though this passage contains Christian undertones with "God's light," Hrethel can be regarded as a king and father who upholds the pagan value of kinship, by not avenging Herebeald's death on Hæthcyn and thereby bringing further shame to his family.

Upon his arrival to Heorot, Beowulf does not find the same internal strife as Boðvar does at Hleidargard. The potential for such disruption arises, though, once Unferth challenges his credibility. In response to Unferth's insult, Beowulf could very well challenge him to actual physical combat, and kill him as Boðvar killed one of Hrolf's bullying retainers. However, Beowulf decides to limit his combat with Unferth to flyting, and thereby maintain what is left of the social order in the mead-hall, the center of pagan society, in the wake of Grendel's destruction. By all indications given by the *Beowulf*-poet, neither Unferth nor any other of Hrothgar's retainers have any further motivation for discord in the hall; and the poet makes a

point to note in the aftermath of Beowulf's fight with Grendel that "[then] the son of Ecglaf was more silent / in boasting words about his battle-works"(980-981). The poet even goes so far as to indicate that the two warriors have become friends, in the aftermath of Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother:

The hardy one ordered Hrunting to be borne  
to the son of Ecglaf, bid him take his sword,  
lordly iron; he thanked him for the loan,  
and said that he regarded it as a good war-friend,  
skillful in battle, and the sword's edges  
he did not disparage; he was a noble man. (Liuzza 1807-1812)

Since this is his final act in Heorot, before he and Hrothgar exchange parting words, Beowulf has fully extended his gracious influence in the mead-hall, and left it in a state of complete stability.

As a euhemerized version of Thor, Beowulf benefits far more from his journey to the Utgard regions than Thor does himself. Upon learning of Utgarda-Loki's multiple deceptions, Thor simply raises his hammer in a rage to strike the jotun, only to find that Utgarda-Loki has vanished, along with his retinue and hall. Although he now becomes aware of his own vulnerability, Thor feels humiliated rather than humbled, and does not become any wiser from the experience. Beowulf, on the other hand, acquires not only greater self-knowledge of his limitations, but also explicitly states to Hrothgar on his return to Heorot how the experience has humbled him. By acknowledging a greater self-awareness, Beowulf also expresses a greater understanding of the elements which make up the pagan Germanic world around him, both within and outside of society. Hrothgar explicitly acknowledges Beowulf's maturation at this point in the poem, in the beginning part of his "sermon": "your glory is exalted throughout the world, / over every people; you hold it all with patient care, / and temper strength with wisdom"(Liuzza 1704-1706a).

The primary similarities and differences between Beowulf and his dragon-slaying counterparts have already been examined and analyzed. However, I find it necessary to briefly reexamine the respective motivations for Beowulf and Froði to acquire treasure from the dragons, in light of my overall concluding point. While the two kings both mean to enrich their people with the treasure, Froði means to use it as inspiration for his thanes to join him in campaigns against neighboring peoples. Beowulf, on the other hand, intends for the treasure to be used by his people to maintain stability within the Geatish realm in his absence, as indicated by lines 2794-2801:

For all these treasures, I offer thanks  
with these words to the eternal Lord,  
King of Glory, for what I gaze upon here,  
that I was able to acquire such wealth  
for my people before my death-day.  
Now that I have sold my old lifespan  
for this hoard of treasures, they will attend  
to the needs of the people; I can stay no longer. (Liuzza)

As noted by scholars, pagan Germanic kings sought primarily to maintain order within their own kingdoms, more so than to disrupt their societies with war. Judging by the *Beowulf*-poet's account of his hero's peaceful reign, it can be reasonably inferred from these lines that Beowulf views the treasure as a means of continuity for such a state for his kingdom, though his people choose to do otherwise with it upon his death.

Unlike authors such as Saxo, Snorri, and the *Deor* poet, the *Beowulf*-poet integrates his Christianity within the pagan context of his work as best as he can. He simultaneously maintains that his characters and setting are still from pagan Germanic pseudo-history, by having his characters invoke one omnipotent God, without making any explicitly Christian references themselves. Whereas the other authors make a special point to disconnect their own faith from that of their ancestors, with significant commentary on the falseness of the old gods, the

*Beowulf*-poet avoids such a critique with the exception of one passage early on, in lines 175-188. Even then, the poet does not phrase the critique as a condemnation of his ancestors' practices, but more so as cautionary advice to his contemporary audience. By expressing his own Christian values through his pagan characters, the *Beowulf*-poet establishes fundamental parallels between the pagan past and Christian present, instead of a fundamental disconnection between the respective societies, and thereby redeems his ancestors' culture with a sense of continuity in heroic ideals, regardless of particular religious beliefs.

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