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TWO POSSIBLE EMENDATIONS OF BEOWULF 2088A

It has long been recognised that there are two different levels of theological knowledge in Beowulf.[1] While the narrator and his eighth-century Anglo-Saxon audience are aware of Christian eschatology and scriptural history, these are unknown to the fifth- and sixth-century pre-Christian Scandinavian characters in the poem.[2] To be sure, certain characters, like Hrothgar and Beowulf, evince the natural theistic wisdom that is universally accessible to pagans,[3] but revealed knowledge is beyond their understanding. At the beginning of the poem,

[1] Quotations from Beowulf are from R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (eds), Klaeber's Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburh, 4th ed (Toronto, 2008), hereafter referred to as Klaeber IV. All translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

[2] For more on the two levels of knowledge, see, for example, J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', Proceedings of the British Academy, xxii (1936), 284-7; Marijane Osborn, 'The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in Beowulf', PMLA, xciii (1978), 973-81; Fred C. Robinson, 'Beowulf', in Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (eds), The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature (Cambridge, 1991), 142-59, at 149; Rafael J. Pascual, 'Material Monsters and Semantic Shifts', in Leonard Neidorf (ed), The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment (Cambridge, 2014), 202-18.

[3] This natural wisdom includes, according to Pauline doctrine, knowledge of the Creator through his works and awareness of a universal ethical law (see Osborn, 979). On the influence of Pauline doctrine on Beowulf, see A. D. Horgan, 'Religious Attitudes in Beowulf', in W. W. Robson (ed), Essays and Poems Presented to Lord David Cecil (London, 1970), 9-17, at 10.

for example, the poet affirms to the audience outside the story that Scyld Scefing went after his death 'into the Lord's keeping' (on Frēan wǣre, l. 27b),[4] but the Danes who have just laid him in the funeral boat are said to be ignorant of the destiny of his soul:

> Men ne cunnon
> secgan tō sōðe, selerædende
> hæleð under heofenum, hwā þǣm hlæste onfēng.
> Men, counsellors in the hall, heroes under heaven, are unable to say as a fact who received that load. (50b-52)

Later in the poem, when Beowulf gives Hrothgar the giant sword hilt from Grendel's mere, the poet reveals to his audience that its inscription narrates the biblical story of the giants' struggle against God and their death by the flood (ll. 1688b-1693). This information, however, seems to be inaccessible to Hrothgar. He scrutinizes the hilt (hylt scēawode, l. 1687b), but he is never said to be able to read its inscription. In his long ensuing speech (ll. 1700-1784), he acknowledges the existence of an all-ruling God (1716-1718a, 1724b-1726), but he does not make any reference to the biblical story on the hilt or to any other piece of revealed knowledge.

The epistemological contrast between the world of the poet and the world of the story is most clearly perceived when one compares the Christian narrator's understanding of Grendel and his mother to that of the pagan characters. The narrator claims that the monsters are the evil descendants of Cain and hence the enemies of God and humankind (see, for example, ll. 104b-114 and 1258b-1268). The monsters' scriptural pedigree, however, is unknown to the characters, who see them only as mysterious, hostile creatures. Thus, spiritually charged designations for Grendel and his mother, such as Godes andsaca 'God's adversary', hæþen 'heathen', helle gāst 'creature of hell', and helrūne 'one skilled in the mysteries of hell', are

[4] The word frēan does not have an initial capital in Klaeber IV. It is capitalized, however, in R. D. Fulk (ed and trans), The Beowulf Manuscript (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

used only by the narrator, whereas the characters consistently refer to them in spiritually neutral terms, such as eoten 'giant', fēond 'enemy, fiend', and sceaða 'one who does harm, enemy'.[5] Ignorance of the monsters' diabolical origin is in fact explicitly articulated by the poem's protagonists. When Beowulf replies to Hrothgar's coastguard, for example, he refers to Grendel as sceaðona nāthwylċ 'some sort of enemy' (l. 274b), and dēogol dǣdhata 'mysterious persecutor' (l. 275a), expressions that unambiguously indicate that Grendel's nature is incomprehensible to the Geatish hero. In the same vein, when later in the poem Hrothgar reports the location of Grendel's mere to Beowulf, he says that the Danes have no knowledge of the monsters' ancestry:

> nō hīe fæder cunnon,
> hwæþer him ænigġ wæs ær ācenned,
> dyrnra gāsta.
> They know of no father, whether any of such mysterious creatures had been born before. (ll. 1355b-1357a)

The Danes' limited knowledge about the monsters' origin distinctly contrasts with the scriptural knowledge possessed by the poet, who is well aware that Grendel and his mother belong to a race of well-defined diabolical monsters that have inhabited the earth ever since Cain was expelled from human society on account of his fratricide. As the editors of Klaeber IV put it: 'the pagan Danes and Ġēatas may think of him [Grendel] as no more than a kind of man-monster; but we in the audience are privileged to recognize him as a descendant of Cain and an embodiment of satanic evil' (Klaeber IV, lxxvii).

[5] On this point, see Pascual, 206; see also Tolkien, 279.

There is an artistic rationale behind these two levels of knowledge. As Alain Renoir observed, the epistemological gap between the audience and the characters is the major source of dramatic tension in the poem:[6]

> The tension, however, is not exclusively intrinsic to the action, but is primarily due to a divergence in points of view between the audience and the participants in the action. From our position outside the poem, we know far more about the participants than they do about each other, and we have access to information necessarily unavailable to them.

The systematic characterization of the poem's protagonists as pagans ignorant of the specifics of Christian revelation, which is thus best understood as integral to the poet's artistic purpose, is nonetheless noticeably disturbed on two separate occasions. First, when Beowulf replies to Unferth's taunt and reminds him of his fratricide, the Geatish hero says:

> þēah ðū þīnum brōðrum tō banan wurde,
> hēafodmǣgum; þæs þū in helle scealt
> werhðo drēogan, þēah þīn wit duge.
> although you proved to be your brothers' slayer, your closest relatives; for that you must endure punishment in hell, astute as you are. (ll. 587-589)

Second, during Beowulf's retelling to Hygelac of Grendel's last attack on Heorot, he refers to the monster's wide glove in the following terms:

> Glōf hangode
> sīd ond syllic̀, searobendum fæst;
> sīo wæs orðoncum eall ġeġyrwed
> dēofles cræftum ond dracan fellum (ll. 2085b-2088).

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[6] Alain Renoir, 'The Heroic Oath in Beowulf, the Chanson de Roland, and the Nibelungenlied', in Stanley B. Greenfield (ed), Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur (Eugene, OR, 1963), 237-66, at 245.

A glove hung wide and strange, assembled with cunning bands; it had been skilfully made with the devil's devices and dragon skins.

The awareness that Beowulf evinces of damnation of the soul in the first passage (l. 588b) and of the devil in the second (l. 2088a) is at odds with his otherwise consistent portrayal as a noble pagan lacking in knowledge of Christian revelation.[7] It is therefore reasonable to entertain the possibility that the words helle in 588b and dēofles in 2088a are not the product of the Beowulf poet's mind, but the result of non-authorial intervention at some point during the poem's textual transmission.

Scholars have in fact adduced several arguments in support of the hypothesis that helle at l. 588b is either non-authorial or pre-Christian in meaning. Fred C. Robinson, for example, argued that the reading helle is a modern editorial substitution for original healle.[8] He demonstrated that the sole authority for the reading helle, of which there is no trace in the manuscript today, is the transcript made by Grímur Jónsson Thorkelín's copyist not long before Thorkelín produced his own transcript sometime between 1789 and 1791. As Robinson pointed out, the manuscript reading at l. 588b must have already been hardly legible when Thorkelín's copyist was transcribing it. Given the copyist's tendency to miswrite diphthongs even if they are perfectly readable – he writes, for example, bedwa for beadwa in 709b, begas for bēagas in 3105a, and, of particular relevance in the present context, halle for healle in 89a – Robinson

[7] Beowulf and Hrothgar, to be sure, believe in some sort of judgement after death (see, for example, 440b-441, 977b-979, 2741-2743). They are, however, conspicuously ignorant of theological heaven and eternal reward (on this point, see Tolkien, 282-3), and so it seems likely that the final judgement that they have in mind is not that of Christianity. The notion of a final judgement, moreover, is not incompatible with pre-Christian Germanic belief, as attested by the *Völuspá* (see Tolkien, 285).

[8] Fred C. Robinson, 'Elements of the Marvelous in the Characterization of Beowulf: A Reconsideration of the Textual Evidence', in Robert B. Burlin and Edward B. Irving (eds), Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope (Toronto, 1974), 119-37, at 31-3.

concluded that he mistakenly wrote helle in 588b for authorial healle, and that ll. 588b-589 should therefore be translated as 'for that you must endure condemnation in the hall'. Andy Orchard, who also finds healle preferable, accounted for the reading helle as an instance of the Anglo-Saxon scribes' tendency to substitute Christian for secular terminology.[9] In lines 1816a and 2250b, for example, the manuscript respectively reads helle and fyrena 'sins', but most editors emend to hæle 'man, hero' and fȳra 'fires', which are much more appropriate in their specific contexts. According to Orchard's interpretation, condemnation in the hall would have struck a monastic scribe as too gentle a fate for a fratricide, and so he would have administered Unferth a much more exemplary punishment by slightly altering the word healle in his exemplar to helle. Charles Donahue, on the other hand, would retain the reading helle, but he would construe it in this context not as the Christian hell, but as the Germanic realm of the dead.[10] Thus, regardless of whether the form helle is authorial, it seems unlikely that Beowulf is here referring to the afterlife destination of Christianity.

Unlike helle in 588b, the reading dēofles at 2088a has not received any scholarly attention,[11] perhaps due to the fact that Beowulf's retelling to Hygelac is not as prominent a

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[9] Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2003), 253. For more on this scribal tendency, see Kenneth Sisam, Studies in the History of Old English Literature (Oxford, 1953), 29-30; Andy Orchard, 'Reading Beowulf Now and Then', Selim (Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature), xii (2003-2004), 54; and Leonard Neidorf, The Transmission of Beowulf: Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior (Ithaca, 2017), 62-4.

[10] Charles Donahue, 'Beowulf and Christian Tradition: A Reconsideration from a Celtic Stance', Traditio, xxi (1975), 92. See also Tolkien, 283, 285, 294 n. 33.

[11] Of editorial dēofles, only d and uncertain traces of eo are left; see Julius Zupitza, Beowulf, Reproduced in Facsimile from the Unique Manuscript British Museum MS. Cotton Vitellius A.xv, revised by Norman Davis (London, 1959), 96. The reading dēofles is thus based on the authority of the Thorkelín transcripts, the first of which reads dieofles and the second deofles. As Kemp Malone noticed, Thorkelín's amanuensis erroneously

passage as his exchange with Unferth. The appearance of the word dēofles in Beowulf's mouth, however, is problematic, since it implies that the Geatish hero is aware of Grendel's diabolical connection.[12] In this note, I should like to raise the possibility for the first time that dēofles is not authorial and to propose that it could be emended to either dernum or dēoglum, both of which are spiritually neutral terms meaning 'mysterious'. Ll. 2085b-2088b could therefore be translated as follows: 'A glove hung wide and strange, assembled with cunning bands; it had been skilfully made with mysterious devices and dragon skins'. The new sense 'mysterious' would accord well with Beowulf's description of the glove in 2086a as syllic̣ 'strange, weird'.[13] The alternative dernum cræftum would be stylistically consistent with the rest of the poem: the adjective dyrne, with Late West Saxon y,[14] and the noun cræft appear together as a formula in l. 2168a, dyrnum cræfte, and 2290a, dyrnan cræfte.[15] These last two verses are not far from l. 2088a – 2168a in fact occurs in the same scene as l. 2088a, the Geatish court – and dyrnum in l. 2290 alliterates with dracan, just as dernum would do in l. 2088 if this emendation is

inserted i immediately after d; see Kemp Malone (ed), The Thorkelin Transcripts of Beowulf in Facsimile (Copenhagen, 1951), 18.

[12] In addition to 2088a, there are two other instances of the word dēofol in the poem: 756a and 1680a. In both of them, the word is in the narrator's mouth.

[13] It should be noted that both suggested emendations underline the parallel with the Skrýmir episode in Snorri Sturluson's Gylfaginning, where Þórr cannot open the jötunn's knapsack because it has been fastened með grésjárni 'with magic wire'. See Anthony Faulkes (ed), Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning (Oxford, 1982), 42-3.

[14] Late West Saxon spellings of this word in the *Beowulf* manuscript are likely to be scribal modernizations of Anglian derne. That the exemplar would have read dernum instead of dyrnum is suggested by the occurrence of the Anglian form in l. 2911b, syððan underne (cf. Christ and Satan 1a, þæt wearð underne). See Neidorf, 50-1; Klaeber IV, cxxxi, §3.2(a); A. Campbell, Old English Grammar (Oxford, 1959), 79, §200.2.

[15] The formula also occurs in Maxims II, l. 43b: Ides sceal dyrne cræfte 'A girl or a woman must [seek out her lover] with secret art'. This translation is by Tom Shippey (ed and trans), Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English (Cambridge, 1976), 78-9.

accepted.[16] The manuscript reading dēofles might be understood as one more instance of the well-observed tendency among scribes to substitute Christian terms for secular ones, perhaps because original dernum in the exemplar was mostly obliterated and only its initial d and e remained legible. It is not unreasonable to think that, under such circumstances, a monastic scribe confronted with a passage about the glove of a diabolical monster would have filled in the gap with the word dēofles.[17] Alternatively, the exemplar at this point might have originally read dēoglum, which resembles dēofles more closely. If the hypothetical form dēoglum was partly deteriorated, with its g and um illegible, dēofles would have presented itself to the scribe as a more than satisfactory solution.[18] Regardless of how dēofles might have crept into the text, however, the words dernum and dēoglum are more respectful of the poet's thoughtful characterization of his protagonist as a pagan ignorant of Christian demonology, and so it is worth considering dernum cræftum and dēoglum cræftum as two possible emendations of Beowulf 2088a.

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[16] Notice also that the proposed alternative readings, dernum cræftum and dēoglum cræftum, are metrically regular type A verses, just like dēofles cræftum.

[17] The phrase dēofles cræft is common elsewhere in Old English literature, especially in Ælfrician prose. If the scribe was faced with a damaged word beginning with de immediately before cræftum, dēofles must have struck him as the obvious reading at this point.

[18] The advantage of dernum over dēoglum is that dyrne and cræft occur together as a formula elsewhere in Old English poetry, as stated above.