Hrothgar's Warhorse and the Audience of *Beowulf*

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Before his defeat at the hands of Beowulf, Grendel harassed the Danish court at Heorot, ceaselessly and with impunity, for a period of twelve long years (ll. 146b-149a). During that time, the Scyldings' misfortune at the mercy of the monster became so notorious that it even made its way into song and story (ll. 149b-154a). It made sense then that the Scylding king repaid Beowulf's unexpected and much longed-for victory over Grendel with gifts of extraordinary generosity. Thus, Hrothgar does not content himself with bestowing on the hero four splendid pieces of battle-gear (including the famous sword of Healfdene, Hrothgar's father; ll. 1020-1034). He also provides Beowulf with a team of eight horses, among which is Hrothgar's own warhorse:

> Heht ðā eorla hlēo eahta mēaras
> fǣtedhlēore on flet têon
> (in) under eoderas; þāra ānum stōd
> sadol searwum fāh, sinċe ġewurþad;
> þæt wæs hildesetl hēahcyninges
> ðonne sweorda ġelāc sunu Healfdenes
> efnan wolde — nǣfre on ōre læġ
> wīdcūþes wīġ þonne walu fēollon. (1035-1042)
>
> [Then the warriors' protector commanded eight horses with cheek-guards be brought onto the floor of the hall, in under the shelters; on one of them stood a skilfully decorated saddle, adorned with jewels; that was the high king's war-seat when the son

of Healfdene would participate in sword-play — the courage of the famous one never failed in the vanguard, when the slain in battle fell.][1]

As can be seen, the poet first singles out one horse from the rest (l. 1037b), then proceeds to remark on its lavishly ornamented saddle (l. 1038), and finally announces that it is none other than the steed upon which Hrothgar himself rode in battle (ll. 1039-1041a). The special focus accorded this particular horse, along with its meaningful bestowal on Beowulf (which marks him as a royal figure and a potential successor to the Danish throne), surely made it appear as quite an outstanding and memorable creature in the eyes of the audience.[2]

It is therefore rather remarkable that later in the poem, when Beowulf gives away the Danish king's gifts to Hygelac and Hygd, no mention is made of Hrothgar's warhorse. Immediately after handing out the four pieces of war-gear to Hygelac, Beowulf gives his uncle four of Hrothgar's horses, among which the royal war-steed does not seem to be included:

Hȳrde iċ þæt þām frætwum fēower mēaras
lungre, ġelīċe lāst weardode,
appelfealụwe; hē him ēst ġetēah
mēara ond māðma. (2163-2166a)

[I heard that four matching steeds, dapple-dun, forthwith brought up the rear of that equipment; he bestowed on him the gift of horses and treasures.]

Then, after a group of eleven verses in which the poet praises Beowulf for his loyalty to Hygelac (ll. 2166b-2171), the hero gives Hygd another three horses, in addition to the torque that Wealhtheow had handed to him, and again no reference is made to Hrothgar's warhorse or its saddle:

Hȳrde iċ þæt hē þone healsbēah Hyġde ġesealde,
wrǽtlicne wundurmaððum, ðone þe him Wealhðēo ġeaf,
ðēod(nes) dohtor, þrīo wicg somod

swancor ond sadolbeorht; hyra siððan wæs

æfter bēahðeġe br[ē]ost ġeweorðod. (2172-2176)

[I heard that he gave the ringed collar to Hygd, that amazing, stately ornament, which Wealhtheo, a lord's daughter, had given him, together with three horses, graceful and bright-saddled; in consequence of receiving the necklace, her breast was afterward ennobled.]

The four horses given to Hygelac and the three given to Hygd make up a total of seven. What happened to the eighth horse, presumably the one on which Hrothgar used to ride? Why is there no reference to it at this point, precisely when one should expect to see Hygelac's ideal retainer seize the opportunity to honour his king and uncle by presenting him with the most prominent horse in the team along with its magnificent saddle? It could be argued that the poet simply forgot that more than a thousand lines earlier Hrothgar gave his own war-steed to Beowulf. In the light of the careful attention to detail that is evident throughout the poem, however, it seems unlikely that the poet should have forgotten about a horse that was previously accorded so much narrative focus and significance.[3] There must be another explanation.

The absence of Hrothgar's warhorse from the Geatish court has not attracted much scholarly attention, probably because it has not stood out as a particularly noteworthy feature to modern readers of the poem. The few commentators who have addressed this problem have only cursorily suggested that the omission of a reference to this single horse implies that Beowulf decided to hold on to it for himself.[4] This is a possibility raised by the editors of the fourth edition of *Klaeber's Beowulf* in their commentary:

> 2174[b]. These three horses, when added to the four mentioned in 2163[b], yield a total of seven that the hero gives over to his king and queen (out of a total of eight he received; see 1035 f.). No mention is made of Hrōðgār's ornamented saddle; does Bēowulf keep this to use with his remaining steed?[5]

On the face of it, this looks like a rather reasonable explanation for the missing horse. It seems only natural to suppose that Beowulf, a martial hero and a future king, should have wanted to keep the royal war-steed for his own use, perhaps in anticipation of prospective warfare. But this argument falls short of persuasiveness when given serious consideration. As Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur argued, the element in the characterisation of Beowulf that most frequently recurs throughout the poem is his unswerving loyalty and generosity toward Hygelac.[6] Hrothgar's warhorse, moreover, is the specimen in the team that a king would have presumably been most pleased to receive. It is therefore difficult to credit that, precisely at a moment in the narrative when Beowulf's fidelity and devotion to his uncle were being brought into focus (ll. 2166b-2171), the poet implied that the protagonist concealed the existence of this exceptional horse from Hygelac out of self-interest. Clearly the answer to this equine enigma must lie somewhere else.

The *Liber monstrorum* is a Latin catalogue of approximately 120 monstrosities composed in England around the beginning of the eighth century.[7] This encyclopaedic work, which achieved great popularity in the ninth and tenth centuries, is subdivided into three separate books of decreasing length, dealing respectively with monstrous humans, beasts, and serpents.[8] In the second chapter of Book I, a prodigious man named *Higlacus* is described in the following terms:

> Et fiunt monstra mirae magnitudinis, ut rex Higlacus, qui imperauit Getis et a Francis occisus est, quem equus a duodecimo aetatis anno portare non potuit. Cuius ossa in Rheni fluminis insula, ubi in Oceanum prorumpit, reseruata sunt, et de longinquo uenientibus pro miraculo ostendentur. (I.2)
>
> And there are monsters of an amazing size, like King Hygelac, who ruled the Geats and was killed by the Franks, whom no horse could carry from the age of twelve. His bones

are preserved on an island in the river Rhine, where it breaks into the Ocean, and they are shown as a wonder to travellers from afar.[9]

There can be little doubt that this *Higlacus* is the Hygelac of *Beowulf*. Not only is he presented as a former ruler of the *Getis* (a name very similar to Old English *Ġēatas*), he is also said to have been killed by the Franks (Hygelac's death by a Frankish army is referred to no less than four times in the poem, at ll. 1202-1214; 2354-2366; 2501-2508; 2913-2921).[10] Given this identification, it is natural that the *Liber monstrorum* in general, and its entry on Hygelac in particular, has always attracted the attention of scholars of *Beowulf*. Despite the notoriety of the *Liber monstrorum*, its well-known reference to Hygelac and horses has never been brought to bear on the issue of the omitted horse in the Old English epic. And yet the conclusion is hard to avoid that there is some connection between the two works in this regard. The protagonist of the poem fails to give the royal war-steed to a character who is described in a contemporary source as being unable to be carried by horses since he was twelve years old.[11] In all likelihood, it is in this passage of the *Liber monstrorum* that the solution to the mystery of the missing horse in *Beowulf* is to be found.

But what is the precise bearing of the Hygelac entry in the *Liber monstrorum* on this problematic aspect of the poem? The answer to this question depends on the nature of the relationship that is conjectured to exist between the two works. As several scholars have indicated, the evidence suggests that neither author relied on the work of the other for their respective portrayals of Hygelac.[12] *Beowulf* contains many more details about the Geatish king's life than the poet could possibly have derived from the entry in the Anglo-Latin catalogue. It is likewise highly unlikely that the author of the *Liber monstrorum* based his account of Hygelac on the one provided by the *Beowulf* poet, as there is no mention in the poem either of the king's gigantic size or of the exhibition of his bones on an island in the Rhine. Since there is no direct influence in either direction, it is probable that *Beowulf* and the *Liber*

monstrorum were composed in a cultural milieu in which a variety of legends about Hygelac circulated orally, and that it was through a process of selection from such varied legendary material that each author independently arrived at a particular depiction of the character.[13] This means that, rather than being an idiosyncratic feature of the *Liber monstrorum*, the representation of Hygelac as so enormous a man as to be incapable of riding on horseback was probably part of the popular culture of early eighth-century England.[14] The popular origin of the Hygelac entry is in fact suggested by the *Liber monstrorum* itself, in its claim that the Geatish king's gigantic bones were displayed on an island in the mouth of the Rhine to travellers from afar. The account thus appears to be based on pre-existing material ultimately derived from the oral testimonies of eyewitnesses (presumably English travellers who saw the purported bones of the renowned Geat in Frankish territory and brought the stories back to their native country).[15]

The picture here presented makes it possible to provide a conjectural yet not unreasonable explanation for the missing horse in *Beowulf*. If Hygelac's inability to mount on horseback was widely known among members of the poem's audience, it is understandable that the poet refrained from having the Geatish king receive a horse that he would obviously have been expected to ride.[16] Hygelac does indeed receive four horses from his nephew, but this does not necessarily imply that the audience would have expected him to ride them. Horses have an intrinsic value beyond their ability to be ridden.[17] Of the eight that Hrothgar gives Beowulf, only one is explicitly said to have been ridden by the Danish king, and so it is only that particular horse that the audience would have expected Hygelac to ride had he received it. It makes sense, therefore, that the poet felt the need to omit altogether any reference to this single specimen during the gift-giving scene in Geatland, even if that meant being inconsistent about the total number of horses in the team. Had Beowulf presented his uncle with it, and had he accepted it, contemporary hearers and readers of the poem would have felt alienated from

the story, as their traditional conception of Hygelac as too big for riding would have been contradicted by the poet's portrayal. Thus, rather than as a striking exception to the otherwise remarkably consistent characterisation of Beowulf as the most altruistic of Hygelac's retainers, the omission of Hrothgar's warhorse from the Geatish court (and the resulting lack of consistency in the number of horses between the two gift-giving scenes) is to be understood as a manifestation of the *Beowulf* poet's careful management of his audience's expectations.[18]

If Hygelac's gigantic size (and his concomitant incapacity to mount horses) is ultimately responsible for the poet's omission of the Danish war-steed from Geatland, why is there no explicit reference in the poem to such a remarkable attribute of the Geatish king? Mention of the king's immensity would have made it easier for modern readers to understand the absence of the warhorse, but a contemporary audience well-versed in traditional stories about Hygelac might have had no need for an explicit reminder of his physical characteristics. The *Beowulf* poet, moreover, tends not to provide detailed descriptions of the physical features of his main *dramatis personae*, preferring instead to refer to their appearance only indirectly, through the effect that it produces on other characters in the story.[19] The arrival of Beowulf and his companions first on the Danish coast and then in Heorot is a particularly illustrative example of this practice. In either of these two arrival scenes the poet could have described in some detail the physical attributes of the protagonist, but all that the audience is provided with are the impressionistic comments of the Danish coastguard (ll. 237-257) and Wulfgar (ll. 333-339 and 361-370) about the hero's appearance. In the light of this strategy, the purpose of which apparently is to invite hearers and readers to construct their own mental image of the characters, the absence of an overt reference to Hygelac's enormous dimensions should not be taken as a sign that the poet did not have such a physical trait in mind when he decided to omit the warhorse from Beowulf's gifts.

In spite of the poet's fondness for scant physical description, Beowulf's large size is at least briefly noticed by the Danish coastguard (ll. 247b-249a). Hygelac's gigantism, on the other hand, is not referred to even in passing by any character within the story. This, however, should not be thought to indicate necessarily that the poet was unaware of Hygelac's unusual largeness. Authorities such as Fred C. Robinson and Mark Griffith have compellingly argued that although supernatural elements abound in *Beowulf*, these are attributed exclusively to the non-human characters of the poem.[20] The poet thus took good care to portray the men and women of his story realistically, as human beings not endowed with miraculous or godlike abilities. Beowulf is exceptionally strong, to be sure, but he is also said to be limited and vulnerable, and it is only on his human strength and courage that he can rely in order to oppose his monstrous adversaries. According to this interpretation, the restriction of elements of the marvellous to non-human characters was a fundamental part of the poet's design, since otherwise *Beowulf* would have been a romantic fable of good monsters against bad monsters rather than a heroic poem.[21] Now, the fact that Hygelac was included in a catalogue of monstrosities on account of his gigantic size indicates that such a physical feature was perceived to be extraordinary and superhuman, and so it is only natural that our poet felt disinclined to allow it into his portrayal of the Geatish king. Unlike in the *Liber monstrorum*, Hygelac is in the world of the poem no more than an ordinary human, even though his reputation as a giant incapable of riding was probably too well-established among members of the audience for the poet to make him the beneficiary of Hrothgar's warhorse. The omission of this horse from Hygelac's court probably presented itself to the poet as the most satisfactory compromise between his desire to provide naturalistic portrayals of human characters and the need to acknowledge the traditional representation of the Geat as a supernaturally large individual.

One might well wonder why the poet decided to have Hrothgar give Beowulf his warhorse in the first place, if this was going to be problematic later in the poem. Would it not have been easier to make Hrothgar give the hero just seven instead of eight horses, thus avoiding any reference to the royal warhorse altogether? This would have saved the poet from a discrepancy, to be sure, but, as seen above, Hrothgar's warhorse played an important narrative function in the poem, signalling Beowulf both as a kingly figure and as one of Hrothgar's possible successors. There is some evidence, moreover, that the gift of a king's personal horse would have been perceived as a gesture of extraordinary generosity and significance by an eighth-century audience. In chapter XIV of Book III of *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, Bede relates how King Oswine of Deira found no better way to honour Bishop Aidan of Lindisfarne than by giving him one of his personal riding steeds (one that, like Hrothgar's warhorse, stuck out on account of its splendid regal equipment).[22] Bede also tells how later Aidan gave away this exceptional horse to a poor man who was asking for alms, and how an amazed and incredulous Oswine, upon hearing about the fate of the horse, felt the need to ask the bishop himself in person how he could have so readily donated such a generous and lavish gift. This story suggests that Hrothgar's bestowal of his personal, elaborately decorated steed on Beowulf would have been regarded as the very summit of generosity, and so it is understandable that the poet opted for its inclusion in the gift-giving scene at Heorot, even if its existence would have to be silently disregarded during the equivalent scene at Hygelac's court.[23]

As stated earlier, Beowulf's loyalty to his uncle is praised with unusual emphasis immediately after the hero gives Hygelac the war-gear and four of the horses that he had received from Hrothgar:

Swā sceal mæġ dôn,

nealles inwitnet ōðrum breġdon

dyrnum cræfte, dēað rēnian

hondġesteallan. Hyġelāce wæs

nīða heardum nefa swȳðe hold,

ond ġehwæðer ōðrum hrōþra ġemyndiġ. (2166b-2171)

[That is what a kinsman ought to do, not to weave a web of malice round another with covert craftiness, plot the death of a comrade. To Hygelac, firm in adversity, his nephew was very loyal, and each watched out for the benefit of the other.]

It is unlikely to be coincidental that this parenthetical comment occurs precisely at this juncture in the narrative. The poet might have been aware that Beowulf's failure to present Hygelac with the warhorse could be taken by the audience as an indication that the hero concealed its existence to his uncle out of self-interest. If so, the poet might have wanted to emphasise Beowulf's generosity and goodwill toward Hygelac in order to dispel from the minds of the audience such a possible negative judgement about the protagonist's character. In fact, it seems likely that by inserting this emphatic comment here the poet managed to put the troublesome omission of Hrothgar's warhorse to good narrative use. A reminder of Beowulf's loyalty to Hygelac at this point, in conjunction with the audience's awareness that the Geatish king was unable to ride horses, might have prompted contemporary hearers and readers of the poem to construe the absence of the war-steed in exactly the opposite way to modern commentators: Beowulf, always mindful of his uncle's benefit and well-being, and out of consideration for him, would have preferred to get rid of Hrothgar's war-steed unobtrusively before arriving at the Geatish court, rather than showing up with a gift that would have obviously been of no use to Hygelac – and one that would have embarrassed him at that.

There is one more narrative benefit that the poet was conceivably able to obtain through the omission of the royal warhorse from Hygelac's court. In the first speech that Beowulf delivers to Hrothgar in Heorot, the hero remarks that, if he dies fighting against Grendel, then

at least the Danish king will have no need to worry any longer about providing him with food (ll. 450b-451). In his lecture commentary on the poem, J. R. R. Tolkien argued that Beowulf's unusual observation constitutes a veiled reference to the popular image of the hero as a man with an insatiable appetite. To put it in his own words:

> All the same, when Beowulf offers (at a feast in which he is being honourably entertained and welcomed) the consolation to the king that feeding him will no longer be a matter of anxiety (*sorgian* *451 – a strong word, always referring to 'cares' which cause painful thought), this has a very odd ring. It sounds like an echo of the underlying folk-tale. At least (derived from this) it must already have been part of the character of Beowulf, as already known to the author's audience, that he was a prodigious eater: even perhaps as much more voracious than the norm as was his thirty-fold strength greater. Humour is not obvious in *Beowulf* – it would indeed be out of place if obtrusive – but a careful reading will often detect irony in what is said, either within the tale itself or appreciable by its hearers. A fleeting smile might well here pass over the face of a listener (well versed in old tales), and a fleeting thought come: 'the king did not realize what Beowulf's upkeep would have cost!'[24]

If Hygelac was popularly conceived of as a giant incapable of riding horses, as the *Liber monstrorum* suggests, then it is reasonable to suppose that the poet, through the omission of Hrothgar's war-steed, injected into the Geatish gift-giving scene another humorous note of the kind described by Tolkien.[25] The recitation of ll. 2152-2162, in which Beowulf presents Hygelac with the four pieces of battle-gear that Hrothgar previously gave to the hero, probably raised in listeners the expectation that the Geatish king would next be given the Danish royal warhorse. The subsequent realization that Beowulf never handed the war-steed to his uncle might then have brought a fleeting and complicit smile to the faces of some members of the

audience, who, aware of Hygelac's incapacitating gigantism, might well have thought: 'the king did not realise from what embarrassment Beowulf just saved him!'[26]

[1] The text of *Beowulf* is cited from R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (eds), *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th ed. (Toronto, 2008); the translation here and throughout is that of R. D. Fulk (ed. and trans.), *The Beowulf Manuscript: Complete Texts, and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

[2] If, as has been recently proposed, *wīġ* 'war-making' at l. 1042a is a scribal error for *wicg* 'horse', then ll. 1041b-1042 would also refer to Hrothgar's war-steed, and so the focus accorded this particular horse would be even greater. For further details, see Rafael J. Pascual, 'A Possible Emendation of *Beowulf* 1042a', *Notes and Queries*, 66 (2019), 166-168.

[3] Thus, during the exchange of gifts in Geatland, the poet remembers with precision the four pieces of battle-gear that Hrothgar gave to Beowulf. In their edition of the poem, Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson pointed out that '[t]he gifts specified in ll. 2152–4a coincide with those described in ll. 1020–4a', a sign that they found such a degree of exactitude remarkable. See their *Beowulf: An Edition* (Oxford, 1998), 121. Also, Beowulf leaves his native country for Denmark as one of fifteen in l. 207b, but in l. 1641b only fourteen Geats leave Denmark. We are thus not allowed to forget that one of the Geats, Hondscio, was left behind (a clear indication that the poet paid careful attention to numbers). Scholars have long noticed that Beowulf and Breca spent seven nights at sea according to Unferth (l. 517a) but only five according to Beowulf (l. 545a). As Andy Orchard has argued, however, there is no need to assume a real discrepancy here. See Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2003), 250 n. 47.

[4] See, for example, T. A. Shippey, *Beowulf* (London, 1978), 18; Jennifer Neville, 'Hrothgar's Horses: Feral or Thoroughbred?', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 35 (2006), 135; and Pascual, 'A Possible Emendation of *Beowulf* 1042a', 167.

[5] Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 236.

[6] Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley, 1959), 80-81.

[7] On the origin and dating of the *Liber monstrorum*, see Orchard, *Critical Companion*, 133-134; and *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-manuscript* (Toronto, 2003), 86. See also Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), 47-49; R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem*, 3rd ed., with a supplement by C. L. Wrenn (Cambridge, 1963), 339, 537; Michael Lapidge, '*Beowulf*, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and Wessex', *Studi Medievali*, 23 (1982), 164-167.

[8] For an appreciation of the artistry behind the work's structure, see Andy Orchard, 'The Sources and Meaning of the *Liber monstrorum*', in E. Menestò (ed.), *I 'monstra' nell'inferno Dantesco: Tradizione e Simbologie*, Atti del XXXIII Convegno storico internazionale, Todi, 13-16 ottobre 1996 (Spoleto, 1997), 73-105.

[9] Edition and translation by Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 258-259.

[10] The identification of *Higlacus* in the *Liber monstrorum* with the Hygelac of *Beowulf* was first made by Jacob Grimm. See Kemp Malone, 'Hygelac', *English Studies*, 21 (1939), 110.

[11] It is assumed in this essay that *Beowulf* was composed in the early eighth century. For a variety of supporting arguments, see Leonard Neidorf (ed.), *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment* (Cambridge, 2014). See also R. D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia, 1992), 381-391; Michael Lapidge, 'The Archetype of *Beowulf*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 29 (2000), 5-41; George Clark, 'The Date of *Beowulf* and the Arundel Psalter Gloss', *Modern Philology*, 106 (2009), 677-685; Leonard Neidorf and Rafael J. Pascual, 'Old Norse Influence on the Language of *Beowulf*: A Reassessment', *Journal of Germanic Linguistics*, 31 (2019), 298-322.

[12] See Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, 52-53; Margaret E. Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf* (London, 1970), 98-99; Lapidge, '*Beowulf*, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and Wessex', 176-179.

[13] This is the standard account. For the alternative theory that the *Beowulf* poet relied directly on the *Liber monstrorum*, see Jane Acomb Leake, *The Geats in Beowulf: A Study in the Geographical Mythology of the Middle Ages* (Madison, WI, 1967), 121-126. For a refutation of Leake's theory, see L. G. Whitbread, 'The *Liber Monstrorum* and *Beowulf*', *Medieval Studies*, 36 (1974), 464-465. In his article, Whitbread conversely argued that there is direct influence from *Beowulf* in the *Liber monstrorum*. For a counter-argument, see Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 110.

[14] That the legendary king of the Geats was popular in early Anglo-Saxon England receives some corroboration from the four occurrences of the name 'Hygelac' in the *Northumbrian Liber Vitae*. See Leonard Neidorf, 'Beowulf before *Beowulf*: Anglo-Saxon Anthroponymy and Heroic Legend', *The Review of English Studies* 64 (2012), 571. One factor contributing to the conferral of this name on four individuals might have been their parents' acquaintance with stories about the Geatish character.

[15] See Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, 50.

[16] Hygelac thus resembled saga-characters like Gǫngu-Hrólfr, whom no horse could carry on account of his size. See Orchard, *Critical Companion*, 134 n. 25.

[17] As the editors of *Klaeber's Beowulf* point out, 'the absence of horses from an aristocratic court is equated with the loss of happiness in general' (Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 165). The mere presence of horses

at an aristocratic court was then a positive feature in the world of Old English heroic poetry, and so the poem's original audience would have seen value in the team of eight horses beyond their practical use for riding.

[18] It should be noted that if the explanation here presented is correct, then the omission of a reference to Hrothgar's warhorse lends support to the notion that Hygelac was better known than Beowulf to members of the audience: the poet preferred to be inconsistent about the number of horses owned by Beowulf (a relatively minor character in legendary tradition) rather than contradict the popular conception of the Geatish king as a gargantuan figure. On the greater notoriety of Hygelac as compared to that of Beowulf, see most recently Francis Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2020), 126-127.

[19] Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ciii.

[20] See 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, Jr (eds), *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope* (Toronto, 1974), 119-137; and Mark Griffith, '*Beowulf* 1495: *hwil dæges = momentum temporis*?', *Notes and Queries*, 241 (1994), 144-146.

[21] Robinson, 'Elements of the Marvelous', 119.

[22] See Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (eds), *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969), 256-259.

[23] *The Battle of Maldon* ll. 186-188, moreover, suggest that the gift of horses was a gesture of exceptional generosity in the Old English poetic tradition.

[24] See J. R. R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary* (Boston, 2014), 241-242.

[25] For more on humour in Old English literature, see Jonathan Wilcox (ed.), *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Cambridge, 2000).

[26] During one of our numerous animated conversations, Mark Griffith, with characteristic insight and generosity, proposed to me an alternative explanation to the one here presented. If Hrothgar's royal warhorse was intended as a very personal gift to Beowulf, then it would have been inappropriate for the Geatish hero to hand that horse over to Hygelac (a parallel is offered by Bede's story of Oswine's disgruntlement with Aidan for his giving away of the king's gift of an excellent horse). That the *Beowulf* poet would have thought of some gifts as inappropriate or excessive seems to receive support from ll. 2991-2998, in which the treasures bestowed by Hygelac on Eofor and Wulf are referred to as *ofermāðmum* 'exceeding treasures'. This is no doubt an ingenious and appealing idea, but it leaves the connection between *Beowulf* and the *Liber monstrorum* unexplored. I will leave it to readers of this paper to decide which of the two accounts is more satisfactory.