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"*Beowulf*. The Monsters and the Critics" Seventy-Five Years Later

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Abstract

Scholar Guest of Honor speech, Mythcon 42. A discussion of the continuing influence of Tolkien’s famed *Beowulf* essay on its seventy-fifth anniversary. Shows how the essay both opened up and limited later *Beowulf* scholarship, and draws some interesting parallels with the current state of Tolkien scholarship. Along the way, questions the wisdom of believing everything an author says about his own work, and asserts the value of familiarity with critical history.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Critical history; Tolkien, J.R.R. *Beowulf* and the Critics; Tolkien, J.R.R. “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics”; Tolkien, J.R.R. “The Monsters and the Critics”; *Beowulf*—Critical history; Criticism



BEOWULF: THE MONSTERS
AND THE CRITICS"
SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER¹

MICHAEL D.C. DROUT

I WANT TO BEGIN BY SAYING how HONORED I AM TO BE HERE. The most flattering thing a professor can hear is that people who know what they're talking about are interested in his work, so I'm flattered to be invited and honored to speak to you today. Thank you.

And now...

HWÆT WE GAR-Dena	in geardagum
þeodcyninga	þrym gefrunon
hu ða æpelingas	ellen fremedon!
Oft Scyld Scefig	sceaþena þreatum,
monegum mægþum	meodosetla ofteah,
egsode eorl[as]	syððan ærest wearð
feasceaft funden;	he þæs frofre gebad,
weox under wolcnum	weorðmyndum þah,
oð þæt him æghwlyc	ymsittendra
ofter hronrade	hyran scolde,
gomban gyldan;	þæt wæs god cyning!

That is almost certainly *not* how J.R.R. Tolkien opened his famous British Academy Lecture, "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" on November 25, 1936, although I imagine it would have gotten the attention of the British Academy as much as it got the attention of Tolkien's Oxford students. He used to recite the first *fifty* lines of *Beowulf*; I only gave you first eleven.

"*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" does not start with the opening lines of *Beowulf* the poem, but instead with the Reverend Oswald Cockayne—best known for his three-volume *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England*. Rev. Cockayne, also the author of *The Shrine: A Collection of Papers on Dry Subjects* (no, I am not making that title up) did not like the *Anglo-Saxon*

¹ Scholar Guest of Honor speech, Mythcon 42, Albuquerque NM, July 2011.

Dictionary compiled by one of Tolkien's predecessors at Oxford, Joseph Bosworth. He took Bosworth to task for not having read all the books in and about Anglo-Saxon. Tolkien said that he hadn't either, but instead of focusing on what others had said about *Beowulf*, he would focus on the poem himself. Good advice, but I'm violating it a bit in my talk here, because instead of focusing on Tolkien's literary works, or *Beowulf* itself, I'm focusing on Tolkien's lecture about *Beowulf*, and I'm not sure that Tolkien would approve. But, fools rush in . . .

This is the seventy-fifth anniversary of "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," the single most influential article ever written on *Beowulf* in the poem's 200-year critical history (by the way, the 200th anniversary of the first edition of *Beowulf* will occur in just four years, so there's still time to plan a party). Truly there are no other essays as influential and important as "The Monsters and the Critics," not only on *Beowulf*, but perhaps in the entire 20th-century history of literary studies, and the essay was famous and influential long before *The Lord of the Rings* made J.R.R. Tolkien one of the most read writers in English. Seventy-five years is perhaps long enough, then, to have some perspective on "The Monsters and the Critics" and to determine if it really is all that great (it is) or is instead the subject of mindless veneration, as one critic put it (it's not), and more importantly *why* it has been so influential and whether this is a good thing or a bad thing.

My thesis is this: "The Monsters and the Critics" pulled *Beowulf* out of the academic ghetto in which it had been confined and allowed it to be elevated to its proper status as one of the great works of literature from England. But in the long run "The Monsters and the Critics" has also damaged *Beowulf* criticism, because it has been used as an excuse to avoid studying anything in *Beowulf* **but** the monsters, and Tolkien would have been, I think, very troubled by this.

There is a connection between scholarship about *Beowulf*, Tolkien's great essay, and fantasy literature, and this connection has a lesson for mainstream literary criticism, in fact the same lesson that Tolkien was trying to teach in "The Monsters and the Critics." But mainstream literary criticism, and a lot of mainstream writers, never learn the lesson and so keep making the same mistakes. Scholars and writers keep wanting either/or: it's either the history and legend and complex societies *or* the monsters. Tolkien was trying to say was that it's both.

Now if this were a regular conference paper, I would proceed to skip all the evidence and simply say a bunch of provocative things and criticize some people—preferably dead people. But since the Mythopoeic Society has invited me to give a real lecture, and my experience with the Mythopoeic Society is that the people in it, terrifyingly, know exactly what they are talking about, you will now have to listen to some evidence and what I hope is a supporting argument.

The first thing to do is explain where Tolkien was coming from in “The Monsters and the Critics.” That will then allow us to see what he actually wanted to accomplish and then how his work has been mis-read. Tolkien starts with Oswald Cockayne, but he leaves the Reverend behind and never returns, focusing his argument instead on a critic who was also dead (Cockayne died by his own hand in 1873) but unlike the Reverend, would have been remembered personally by many in the audience, as he had only passed away thirteen years before. This critic is W.P. Ker, whose *The Dark Ages* is a key foil, perhaps *the* foil, for Tolkien in “The Monsters and the Critics.” It might even be the case that Ker’s *The Dark Ages* was the immediate spur for the essay. After I published *Beowulf and the Critics*, Christopher Tolkien was looking through some of his father’s books and found—this was in 2002—some notes on a scrap of paper in Ker’s *The Dark Ages*. These are preparatory to *Beowulf and the Critics*, and though I can’t prove its not just coincidence, my hunch is that if the lecture didn’t start there, at least the end of it started there. That note, by the way, is in the new edition of *Beowulf and the Critics*, in which you can see that Tolkien got exercised by Archibald Strong (who?) and spent forever mocking J.J. Jusserand (who?—seriously, I am the only person among Anglo-Saxonists who knows or cares who these people were), but when it came to critics of his own time Tolkien was pretty circumspect. He said nice things about the three big names: William Witherle Lawrence, Friedrich Klaeber, and his own angel, R.W. Chambers. Although he politely criticized some aspects of Klaeber’s and Chambers’ work, he did so in such a way as to be obliquely praising Chambers, suggesting he had not gone far enough in following a particular idea.

Most of Tolkien’s criticisms of the field of *Beowulf* studies are summed up in the famous Babel of Voices passage, where Tolkien almost does what I tell my students never to do: set up a bunch of straw man arguments in the form of “some people say that . . .” But Tolkien, being Tolkien, was not really creating straw men or even just relying on his own general sense of the critical history, but, I can now show, had an identity and an argument in mind for each voice.

The Babel of Voices goes like this:

Beowulf is a half-baked native epic the development of which was killed by Latin learning; it was inspired by emulation of Virgil, and is a product of the education that came in with Christianity; it is feeble and incompetent as a narrative; the rules of narrative are cleverly observed in the manner of the learned epic; it is the confused product of a committee of muddle-headed and probably beer-bemused Anglo-Saxons (this is a Gallic voice); it is a string of pagan lays edited by monks; it is the work of a learned but inaccurate Christian antiquarian; it is a work of genius, rare and surprising in the period, though the genius seems to have been shown principally in doing something much better left undone (this is a very

recent voice); it is a wild folk-tale (general chorus); it is a poem of an aristocratic and courtly tradition (same voices); it is a hotchpotch; it is a sociological, anthropological, archaeological document; it is a mythical allegory (very old voices these and generally shouted down, but not so far out as some of the newer cries); it is rude and rough; it is a masterpiece of metrical art; it has no shape at all; it is singularly weak in construction; it is a clever allegory of contemporary politics (old John Earle with some slight support from Mr. Girvan, only they look to different periods); its architecture is solid; it is thin and cheap (a solemn voice); it is undeniably weighty (the same voice); it is a national epic; it is a translation from the Danish; it was imported by Frisian traders; it is a burden to English syllabuses; and (final universal chorus of all voices) it is worth studying.

It took me months and months of reading through early *Beowulf* scholarship—yes, I get paid for this—but I think I have now identified all of those voices. (Just to let you know, whatever Google's other faults, somebody there likes *Beowulf* and put up most of the out-of-copyright 19th-century scholarship on Google Books.) I shall now go one by one through the entire allegory. The first voice is W.P. Ker in *The Dark Ages*. The second voice is W.P. Ker in *English Literature: Medieval*. The third voice is W.P. Ker also in *English Literature: Medieval*. The fourth voice is J.J. Jusserand. The fifth voice is Ludwig Ettmüller. The sixth voice . . .

No, I won't do that to you. But I'll point out that there are approximately (depending on how you count) twenty-five voices and nine of these are W.P. Ker. The majority of the others are dead Germans, though there is a mix, and many are exactly the voices a *Beowulf* scholar would expect: Karl Müllenhoff on mythical allegory, the great Scandinavians on archeology, Elis Wadstein (whom nobody remembers) on the Frisian hypothesis (which nobody remembers). There's also a minor suck up to Ritchie Girvan, though I read between the lines and infer that Tolkien thought Girvan's dating of *Beowulf* was utterly wrong, as it almost certainly is. But mostly what Tolkien is doing in the Babel of Voices (and the rest of "The Monsters and the Critics") is tearing up the arguments of W.P. Ker who, I will point out again, had been dead for thirteen years.

So what was so bad about W.P. Ker? Why did Tolkien have to slay his influence? Ker was a polymath, knew all of European literature, knew enough medieval lit and philology to be worth paying attention to, and didn't think *Beowulf* was very good. By itself that isn't a problem, because Ker was dead and Tolkien didn't cower in fear of his authority. What was more problematic was that Tolkien thought that Ker got the reasons for not respecting *Beowulf* entirely wrong and that the field as a whole seemed to have accepted these incorrect and

contradictory reasons. What Ker identified as the worst flaw, in Tolkien's view, wasn't a flaw at all.

Ker thought the way he did because he compared everything to Homer and Virgil. *Homer and Virgil = good*, so *different from Homer and Virgil = not good*. (This is why, by the way, in *Beowulf and the Critics* Tolkien keeps quoting Virgil—he left a lot of that out of the final essay—to show that the same stuff that Ker criticizes *Beowulf* for having is found in *The Aeneid*). Tolkien thought he understood what was going on in *Beowulf* better than Ker (and he was right) and was trying to look at the work on its own terms. For example, Ker didn't like the structure and said *Beowulf* had none. Tolkien said "oh yes it does" and then proceeded to come up with an explanation that is incredibly convincing at first blush and then makes less sense the more you think of it. He claimed that the macro-structure of *Beowulf* mirrored the micro-structure of the Anglo-Saxon poetic line. That line is composed of two parts, separated by a caesura or, as Tolkien called it (and a better term) a "breath pause." The two parts of the half-line are united by alliteration: the same sound, consonant or vowel (all stressed vowels alliterate, so stressed *e* alliterates with stressed *a* and *o* and *i*, and vice versa) is repeated in a stressed position on each side of the breath pause. There can be two instances of the alliterating sound in the first half (called the A-verse), but only one in the second half (the B-verse). Some examples may help to illustrate the phenomenon (alliterative sounds are bolded; breath pauses are indicated by extra white space):

Grendles **g**rape under **g**eapne hrof

Tha se **w**yrm on**w**oc **w**roht waes geniwad

Out of Doubt, out of **D**ark, to the **D**ay's rising

That last one isn't Anglo-Saxon in language, but it is in prosody and as a bonus is familiar to this audience.

The connection Tolkien made between the Anglo-Saxon line and the macrostructure of *Beowulf* was this: just as the line has two alliterating elements in the first half, so too does the poem have two related monster fights linked through the location in Denmark and the relationship of Grendel and Grendel's mother (and the fight with Grendel's mother is slightly less significant and developed than the fight with Grendel). Just as the line has only one alliterating element in the second half, so too does the poem only have one significant battle, with the dragon.

This seems like a brilliant connection, but nowhere does Tolkien explain why making the macro-structure mirror the micro-structure makes the poem a good one. Nevertheless the entire Anglo-Saxon profession swallowed this part

whole. The only people who reject Tolkien's view are people who have come up with their own clever organizations of the poem: three monster fights instead of the two / one division, four funerals, counting the letters or the fitt numbers (I am not making that up). But pretty much nobody believes those organizational schemes except the clever people who come up with them. After all, although there are three monster fights, two are in Denmark against basically similar creatures in a very short time frame, the other is fifty years later in Geatland—wherever that is—against a dragon. And before the dragon fight the poet *tells the entire poem again*, making lines 1888-end a self-contained unit. No Homeric poem has anything like this structure. The poem is not, as Tolkien says much more clearly in *Beowulf and the Critics*, "The Life and Times of Beowulf," or "The Rise and Fall of Beowulf" (since the dragon doesn't arrive due to some flaw in what Beowulf has done). Ker and Chambers, who followed Ker, wanted a Greek tragedy. Tolkien thought: "you know, there are other kinds of tragedies, and they are pretty moving as well. Take this *Beowulf* thingy (. . . and, probably, my *Silmarillion* tales that I've been working on . . .)." There was a Germanic tragic aesthetic and Tolkien found it very powerful and wanted other people to see how it worked. So, to explain *Beowulf*—and maybe to explain the aesthetic of his own unpublished fiction—he had to defeat the dragon of Ker, and he did so by pointing out contradictions and poor arguments. He therefore ended up focusing on the monsters of *Beowulf*, since they had been ridiculed by Ker and, following him, his student Chambers, and this was a particularly vulnerable point for Ker, where his logic was at its weakest.

Tolkien didn't focus on the monsters only for this reason, however. The attention to monsters was rather what we in English departments sometimes call "over-determined": there wasn't just one reason for Tolkien to defend the monsters, there were many, and they reinforced each other. The treatment of monsters was a particularly vulnerable part of Ker's argument, but Tolkien also, and quite simply, liked monsters, particularly the dragon. (You'll note that most of the argument about the monsters in "The Monsters and the Critics" is about the dragon). Here I want to steal a point from Tom Shippey. In "The Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien writes that "even today (despite the critics) you may find men not ignorant of tragic legend and history, who have heard of heroes and indeed seen them, who yet have been caught by the fascination of the worm. More than one poem in recent years (since *Beowulf* escaped somewhat from the dominion of the students of origins to the students of poetry) has been inspired by the dragon of Beowulf, but none that I know of by Ingeld son of Froda." As Shippey points out, if you read *Beowulf and the Critics*, you'll see that Tolkien is telling the literal truth: both he and C.S. Lewis had written dragon poems, so there were indeed more than one poem about dragons. But it doesn't quite sound so magisterial if you say "I really like dragons and I wrote a poem about one, and

what's more, by best friend did, too." The larger point though is that Tolkien really did like dragons, and so when Ker left himself open to criticism on the monsters, Tolkien was happy to jump at the chance.

So the focus on the monsters is motivated by more than one reason: it was a good place to attack Ker, Tolkien liked monsters, and also, there is a real difference between the monsters in *Beowulf* and those in Classical Literature (as Tolkien pointed out, the classical monsters are actually in the families of the Gods—Poseidon gets peevisish about Odysseus's poking out the Cyclops's eye), so looking at the monsters is an opportunity to explain how *Beowulf* works. Notice that I did not claim that critics had never looked at the monsters before Tolkien came along, so this was an open opportunity. On this point the received history of "The Monsters and the Critics" is wrong. Critics had certainly noticed the monsters—they're kind of obvious—but had been more interested in other things (not uninterested in the monsters). And Tolkien was interested in those things—kings and family dynasties and double-bind situations—too, and thought it was perfectly fine to talk about the world of men (see, for example, *Finn and Hengest*), and it was even all right in some discussions to skip over the monsters, just not because the monsters were flawed or embarrassing. That's the key distinction. Tolkien did not think that the Germanic idea of tragedy was *solely* "men caught in a net of fate." Although the Anglo-Saxons liked their double binds, these were not only caused by fate or by wrong choices, but sometimes simply by the nature of the world.

Let me digress with an example from *Beowulf*, not only because it is interesting but also because it also explains the whole section in "The Monsters and the Critics" where Tolkien brings up Ingeld (and Tolkien brings him up because Ker and Chambers had invoked Ingeld as part of their arguments). Ingeld is important for two reasons. Alcuin, who was sort of the Minister of Education for Charlemagne, famously wrote a letter to Bishop Speratus (who is traditionally said to be at Lindisfame, but he wasn't). In this letter Alcuin asks the question "Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?" ("What has Ingeld to do with Christ?") in the context of a small rant about the problems of monks having what appears to be Germanic epic read or recited to them while eating. Alcuin says that instead of songs about pagan kings who are now lamenting in hell, the word of God should be read aloud in the refectory. Scholars are excited by this criticism because it suggests that heroic tales were being recited in monasteries, or else Alcuin wouldn't be in high dudgeon about it. And even more exciting, the name "Ingeld" shows up in *Beowulf*, so although that isn't direct evidence for *Beowulf* being read aloud, it's at least evidence for something connected to or similar to *Beowulf* being read aloud.

So what has Ingeld to do with anything? (See what I did there?) His is a Germanic story about the world of men. The plot, as best as we can reconstruct it,

goes something like this: Froda, king of Heathobards, kills Hrothgar, who is the father of the Hrothgar who is the king of the Danes in *Beowulf*. Hrothgar's family gets revenge by killing Froda, but after this Hrothgar tries to negotiate a peace between the Danes and the Heathobards by marrying off his daughter, Freawaru, to Ingeld, who is Froda's son. So far, so good, but at the wedding feast there's an old warrior who had survived whatever battle led to the death of Froda. He says to a young warrior: "See the guy over there carrying your father's sword? How do you feel about that?" The young warrior then starts a bloodbath at the wedding. Hrothgar and his nephew Hrothulf end up repelling an attack on Heorot, but the hall is destroyed. And Ingeld? He's caught between avenging his father, as a good Germanic warrior should, and keeping his oath of peace to the Danes, and possibly he is also trapped between his duty to his new wife and the revenge he wants. Thus twice, maybe thrice faithless (and, Tolkien says, easily led).

We infer from Alcuin's letter that English audiences in the eighth century—even in a monastery—loved this stuff. We can't be precisely sure why, but we infer that the Anglo-Saxons were very interested in what can be called a double bind: conflicting duties, perhaps of tradition (avenge your father) and politics (keep the peace we just negotiated). There is a more obvious and visible double bind in *The Dream of the Rood*, where Christ is depicted as a Germanic warrior and the Cross is his thane or retainer. The Cross is put in the bind between its duty to protect its lord at all costs and its duty to obey that lord: what should it do if its lord commands it to be the instrument of His death?

The point of this digression on the double bind is to note that you can write great stories around these kinds of dilemmas, but they aren't predicated on the characters having particular tragic flaws or being subject to overbearing pride and then getting poetically just punishment. It's just the nature of the world that sometimes you're damned if you do and damned if you don't, and that outlook is very Germanic. Tolkien cared about this point because he thought that the Germanic outlook was aesthetically and emotionally powerful. But remember, this main story of Ingeld isn't in *Beowulf*. Chambers wanted more Ingeld, less monsters, to make the poem more like Homer or Virgil. But other critics wanted more Ingeld, less monsters for other reasons, and Tolkien needed to squash that argument, too.

Since we know so little about the history of early northern Europe, and since *Beowulf* is so old compared to just about everything else we have, people wanted to use it as a historical document. But the presence of a flesh-eating Grendel and his mom and a fire-breathing dragon was a bit of a problem there. Also, if the most interesting thing to you about the Ingeld material is that it might be linked to a real Ingeld, Tolkien though you would be missing the point of *Beowulf* being a story, a poem, a piece of literature. *That's* the "historical

document fallacy” that Tolkien attacks. We’re finally coming around to realizing that the poet of *Beowulf* (not the scribe, nor any later redactor, but the original poet, whoever he was) seems to have known his history pretty well. So you *can* get history out of *Beowulf*, but it itself is a poem, so you shouldn’t criticize it for not being more historical and less poetic.

Tolkien kills off the historical document fallacy (though honestly it was on its last legs before he arrived on the scene), and Ker’s argument on heroism (that you need heroes with tragic flaws) is pretty much trashed, but you still have the monster problem. Ker’s student Chambers criticized the dragon for being there, saying that more Ingeld would be better than “a wilderness of dragons.” That *really* rubbed Tolkien the wrong way. Chambers and Ker were saying in effect that killing monsters just wasn’t as artistically interesting as killing people, noting that there are plenty of Greek heroes who kill monsters, but they also do other things. Ker specifically says that *Beowulf* doesn’t do anything besides kill monsters. First, that’s not true, and second, if it were true, would it be a problem? That argument is that monster-slaying is interesting only if there’s other stuff for the hero to do (because obviously fighting a 50-foot long, fire-breathing dragon isn’t as interesting as the defeat of some obscure warrior in some minor skirmish in some useless war—but I digress . . .). This is a point that—I guess—could be defended, but Ker makes a mis-step, and Tolkien lands a devastating blow because of it. Ker says that the problem is too many monsters. I can picture him saying this directly to the poet: “Yes, well, there are simply too many monsters. Please remove some.”

Tolkien takes up this point as if it is central to Ker’s argument and says that, ok, if Grendel is the right beginning for the hero, are you seriously going to have him killed off in a Swedish invasion? It’s too bad that Tolkien didn’t have our expression of “lame” in the way my kids use it, because that’s a perfect description for what he says Ker and others are proposing. If Grendel is a good beginning, then the dragon is a good ending. You can make an argument for no monsters, but to make an argument for only one is stupid: *Beowulf*’s fame comes from killing Grendel but then he dies in some Swedish war? What would be up with that? *Beowulf* is worth hearing about because he’s a monster-slayer; he does something that no one else can do. But—and here’s the part that people forget when they read excerpts of *Beowulf* or just remember the poem and don’t delve deeply into it—*Beowulf* does other stuff as well, he just does a fair bit of it off stage. Mostly. There is the little episode where he crushes the opposing champion to death, oh, and the part where he swims back from a battle with 30 suits of armor. And he rules his kingdom and protects his people for 50 years. But apart from *that* stuff, yes, he only kills monsters. He does die by dragon venom and not in a Swedish war, but notice something Tolkien never says. He never says that the Swedish wars are stupid, or uninteresting, or should be

deleted from the poem to make it better. So while he's criticizing Ker and Chambers for wanting more Ingeld and less dragon, he's not saying the opposite, either: that the monsters should completely replace the material from the world of men. Unfortunately that's what *Beowulf* criticism did after "The Monsters and the Critics"—not completely and not everybody, but the broad tides of the field went in the direction of "all monsters all the time," an approach that is still messing up the criticism today. That's the collateral damage of the great success of "The Monsters and the Critics," and it's all Ker's (and Chambers') fault, not Tolkien's—you can't blame him for doing what he had to do to refute Ker (well, actually you can, but just a little bit). I don't think Tolkien wanted to argue that the history and culture and social life in *Beowulf* weren't important and that the poem was all just monsters. But because he had to do so much work to rehabilitate the monsters, "The Monsters and the Critics" ends up *seeming* as if it was opposed to the study of the world of men, and that's not only just wrong, but also completely antithetical to what Tolkien did in his own work.

This is a key point, and worth looking at in some detail, because in the same way that Ker and Chambers went wrong looking at *Beowulf*, so too do many modern critics of Tolkien go wrong when looking at his work. The problem is that the monsters—and the hobbits, dwarves, Nazgûl, fell beasts, elves, ents—are so striking, so amazing, that people think that, well, that's all there is to it, and so they miss the point that all of the "fantasy" elements are set against a very detailed, plausible world. Let's talk about the *Beowulf* poet for a moment, because the details of his world are known to fewer people in this room than the details of Tolkien's world. *Beowulf* is not set in Fairyland but in early sixth or maybe seventh-century Europe. The poet knows who the tribes are, where they live, who is leading them and why they're fighting with each other. He knows the background. Sometimes his knowledge is so subtle that we can't figure out what exactly he means, but that's because he assumed that his audience knew the same things he did.

For example (and this gets technical, but as I say to my students: technical is fun! and sometimes they believe me): In line 6a of *Beowulf* the manuscript says "egsode eorl," but this is probably not right. Why? Because the line is "terrified the X." Scyld Scefing is so great because he terrorized *one* earl (a mere earl, not even a king)? So we figure that there's an error here and emend the text. Tolkien, following Chambers, thought that originally the poet had written the name of a particular tribe, the Heruli (so the line would be something like "egsode erle"). If he's right, that changes how the feel of whole opening of *Beowulf*, because we're talking about *specific* tribes being terrified by the Danes rather than some generic terrifyingness. And if we look into what paltry historical sources we have, we find that one of the things the Danes did is commit what is essentially genocide on the tribe of the Heruli in Scandinavia (a

place mentioned also towards the beginning of *Beowulf* in the phrase “Scedelandum in” in line 19). So if the Heruli are those who are being terrified, the line would be historically accurate. Yet Freidrich Klaeber says “the mention of an individual tribe would be extremely doubtful in this place.” Why? Because even Klaeber, the poem’s greatest editor, is *assuming* that the poet must be talking in generalities rather than noting specific historical facts. This is exactly what Tolkien understood, and what his predecessors like H. Rider Haggard often got wrong, and what so many of his imitators have messed up. The fantasy, the marvelous, whatever you want to call it, is much *more* powerful when it’s in a complex and complete and sophisticated world. Good fantasy writers and good fantasy readers know this, and they don’t need me to tell them or Tolkien’s essay to tell them, though they may have extracted the same lesson from Tolkien’s work. Many have learned the trick of being allusive. So whereas bad fantasy launches into the dreaded Chapter-Two-Explication, where you get the entire back story of everything in the world, good fantasy writers figure out how to leave things out, refer to them later, and make the reader work a little to piece together the world (Tolkien does this in “The Shadow of the Past” and some more at “The Council of Elrond”). What Tolkien learned from the *Beowulf* poet is that just mentioning something as if everybody already knows it—the Cats of Queen Beruthiel—is the way to create the feel of “vast depths” in a story. It’s not just that you have a back story, but that the back story is a natural part of the life and discourse of everyone in the front story, so the characters act relatively normal about it. By the way, and perhaps this is an irony, I think it’s more than likely that the *Beowulf* poet himself did not think he was doing any such thing. If we had him here and asked why the Heruli in line 6a he’d say “Duh, because everybody knows the Danes are famous for beating the Heruli. You don’t mention who World War II was against every time you mention that somebody was a veteran, do you?”

So even if the trick wasn’t *devised* by the *Beowulf* poet but was just an epiphenomenon of the loss of so much culture from that time, Tolkien learned this trick from *Beowulf*, and that trick has been invisible to most *Beowulf* criticism for a long time. Notice what Tolkien says at the end of “The Monsters and the Critics”: *Beowulf* “would still have power had it been written in some time or place unknown and without posterity; if it contained no name that could now be recognized or identified by research.” That sentence is a conditional. Critics, if they notice at all, focus on the idea the *Beowulf* would have power even without the history and the names, but the point of the sentence is that it has *more* power with them. Tolkien says we have a hero “walking the named lands of the North.” Let me emphasize the *named* lands of the North and note that this is extremely important to the effect that the poem creates. But here you can’t entirely blame the critics for getting confused, because Tolkien also is defending the monsters,

and he even says that the thing that makes Beowulf the character great is not that he has enmeshed loyalties or hapless love, but simply that "he is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy." What Tolkien is working up to here, which you can see more clearly in *Beowulf and the Critics*, is that you don't have to have the net of fate, the tragic flaw, the pride before the fall, to get a powerful story. You just need to have a single person alive in the world and you'll get all the tragedy you could need because "man, each man and all men and all their works shall die." Want tragedy? There it is.

Now you can see why the critics get confused, because this seems to allow for a level of abstraction that doesn't need any particular individual setting or circumstances—just being a human would be enough. But that's not how *Beowulf* works. There is never any hint that Beowulf is Everyman except in a much more sophisticated way, that if Death even comes to the great monster slayer, than it comes to everyone, which makes Beowulf representative of the human even if he has the strength of 30 men and—possibly—can hold his breath for a really long time. So again, I don't really blame Tolkien for the collateral damage, and I'm not entirely sure that I blame the critics who came after him for misreading "The Monsters and the Critics" or, more accurately, taking from what it what they wanted and ignoring the rest. Tolkien was anticipating the advice of Ray Davies and the Kinks: "Give the people what they want," which is a recipe for success if you can figure out what it is that the people want. In terms of "The Monsters and the Critics," I'm pretty sure Tolkien knew, as the evolution of all the revisions from the A-Text of *Beowulf and the Critics* to the published lecture is mostly a toning down of the harsher criticisms in order to make the essay palatable to colleagues rather than the students for whom it was originally written. Tolkien's audience wasn't Ker's generation, it was the next generation, his own generation and his immediate superiors, and they were quite happy to hear that the previous generation had been wrong and that they were right. They were also keen to learn that there were good reasons for them to talk about *Beowulf* as a poem, and because the source-study and historical document material was so significant to the previous approach of *Beowulf* as a source, as history rather than literature and art, they seem to have felt that they could leave all that confusing history and legend behind and talk about what was right in front of them. As Tom Shippey points out, there was something in the air, something in the *Zeitgeist* in the 1930's that wanted to take literary works, even medieval, Germanic, epic literary works, as wholes rather than stitched-together messes. Mostly because the "stitched-together-mess" hypotheses had gotten so complicated that nobody could follow them anymore. So the critics in the audience at the British Academy lecture, and Tolkien's students, and his readers, were very receptive to the idea that *Beowulf* was an organic whole.

There are a couple of ways to deal with that wholeness. First, you can talk about the Monsters and the problem of Heroism in BIG, ABSTRACT TERMS: WHAT DO MONSTERS MEAN? And so forth. I would say that this has been the mainstream approach now for several decades. And though in a minute I'm going to criticize it somewhat harshly, I don't want to suggest that all this criticism is bad. The very best of it, Ted Irving's *A Reading of Beowulf*, teaches a lot about the poem and explains many of its aesthetic effects. But there's another approach to *Beowulf* as a Whole that is also problematic, but which doesn't focus only on the monsters and the heroism in the poem. This approach does look at the world of men and the complexity of *Beowulf's* structure, but in order to produce an organic whole out of the poem, these critics argue that all the digressions and messy side-steps, etc., were not in fact digressions at all, but brilliant facets of the whole. For seventy-five years there's been an industry showing how smart the *Beowulf* poet is, and how stupid everyone is to doubt him. It's a machine for writing papers. Find something that seems a failure, be clever, and explain how it's really great.

Tolkien, however, never claimed that everything in *Beowulf* was perfect. He had issues with the recapitulation of the entire story back in Geatland, and he wasn't sure that it was a great idea for Beowulf to journey to Denmark and conquer Grendel rather than doing something for his own people, though he thought that the poem in the end handled this pretty well during the recapitulation. But with the success of "The Monsters and the Critics," subsequent scholars were in the good position of no longer having to defend the study of *Beowulf*; they didn't have to deal with the snottiness of Arthur Quiller-Couch saying that they had no taste or discernment. But they went the whole hog in the other direction. If you read *Beowulf* criticism post Tolkien, and particularly in the past two decades, it seems that critics are very relieved that they are free to avoid exercising any judgment at all about the poem. It's all great: let me use my cleverness to show you how perfect even this seeming flaw is. This is definitely an improvement on the earlier dismissal of *Beowulf*, but it's also unbalanced.

Here is another place where the history of *Beowulf* criticism parallels the history of criticism of Tolkien: Because we started out having to defend our interest, Tolkien scholarship is defensive, not just psychologically, but in general focused very closely on emphasizing all that's great about Tolkien. And there is a lot that is great, as this audience knows. But like the Beowulfians, we end up defending even the minor flaws in our literary object of admiration. There are minor flaws in every work, and *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* are not exceptions. For example, I hate the talking fox in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (yes, I know, it doesn't actually speak: we get its thoughts reported. The point is the same), because I think it is a failure of tone, a bit of the older style of *The Hobbit*

creeping in to *The Lord of the Rings* in the wrong place, and I just cannot understand why Tolkien didn't revise it out. I could be wrong on this particular point, and on any single other one, but I don't think it's a real stretch to say that in general there's a reflexive approach to defending little failures (or potential failures), places where the writing or the conception isn't as strong as it is in the many undeniably masterful passages (say what you will about the fox, but I don't think *anyone* suggests that that passage of writing is as emotionally evocative as the Ringwraiths coming over the lip of the dell in "A Knife in the Dark").

Part of this critical stance towards Tolkien is caused by Tolkien's own approach to his texts, where if he found a seeming contradiction, he wouldn't usually just revise it out but would instead explain it through additional depth in the story. But there's also a lamentable tendency sometimes—and I see this more in the articles we don't end up publishing in *Tolkien Studies*—to take Tolkien's work as some kind of Gospel and then get very upset when someone suggests that there might be mistakes or minor failures. This isn't to say, by the way, that it's not possible to go too far in the other direction and emend away a whole pony (that, as John Ratliffe shows, really should be left in there). But when we are making aesthetic judgments we should recognize where things are amazingly well done (so many places) and where they aren't. I love the line "dishevelled dryad loveliness" for Ithilien, but that's a darling that Tolkien should have murdered, as it just doesn't work in the Middle-earth context or the Red Book of Westmarch conceit.

But because we come from a position of defense, where we have to deal with foolishness like Catherine Stimpson's claim that characters never just come to an island but "to the eyot they came," a sentence that never appears in *The Lord of the Rings*—doh! (And, I might add, it turns out that the *eyot* is perfect terminology for what Tolkien is describing, but Stimpson turns her own ignorance into the argument for an aesthetic failure). The bigger point is that we as lovers and scholars of fantasy literature have had to defend so much that we end up carrying that defense forward into our analysis even when defending isn't necessary. We then run the risk of being cheerleaders rather than scholars, and that isn't good for criticism, and it isn't good for art, because if you don't see what Tolkien did *wrong* as well as what he did *right*, it's harder to improve your own fantasy.

This is also what happened with Tolkien's approach to *Beowulf*. He defended monsters and Germanic heroes because no one else was defending them, and so the subsequent scholarship has stayed tight in certain paths when perhaps it should have expanded more widely. The lesson is that knowing the critical history—for example, studying Tolkien's *essay* in addition to his more aesthetically accomplished fiction—matters. Critical history can seem boring or

tedious. Why should I care what those old guys said if they were wrong? But ignoring critical history is a mistake, first, because the history shapes what we do and where the argument goes long after anyone remembers it, and also because the critical history of *Beowulf* is a beautiful thing, a gigantic monument of knowledge created by hundreds of brilliant—and not so brilliant—scholars trying their best to understand the poem.

But like all history, critical history is quirky, contingent with elements of randomness, which is why we're stuck with a weird view of the monsters in *Beowulf* thanks to Tolkien. Because of his defense of the monsters in contrast to the world of men, a lot of critics dumped the world of men and focused on the monsters. This makes sense (and is over-determined) because the monsters are really interesting and (over-determined again) mainstream criticism is not particularly well-equipped to deal with the monsters. A lot of critics develop their taste on psychological novels, on the heirs of Jane Austen (shudder) and Henry James (yawn) and say "that's good, and Tolkien isn't like that, so Tolkien must not be good." But the psychological novel or the realistic novel is just one kind of literary production, and when you attempt to judge all other forms according to the same approach, you're just like Ker judging *Beowulf* for not being Homer or Virgil: the aesthetic standard has evolved to fit one particular form, but that doesn't mean that the form is better, only that the critical history has followed a particular path.

In *Author of the Century*, Shippey demonstrates again and again that Tolkien does exactly what the theorists of Modernism say a book should do in their theories, and then shows these same theorists rejecting Tolkien's work even though it meets all their explicit criteria for great works. I love what Shippey is doing rhetorically, but he goes a different direction than me, showing the Modernist theorists to be hypocrites and therefore making the argument that Tolkien is good in their own terms. But I never had much use for the abstract Modernistic expressions of aesthetics, anyway, so I don't think Tolkien's fitting them is any evidence at all that Tolkien's work is good. I would say instead that Tolkien's work fitting perfectly the abstract theories even though the Modernist critics who make the theories—like Edmund "Bunny" Wilson—hate Tolkien's work shows that the Modernist theories are platitudinous bilge.

Put another way, Tolkien's work is kryptonite for weak literary theories. A really simple test of any supposedly brilliant literary theory is to put Tolkien's work in it. If the theory breaks, then the theory wasn't that good. So far Tolkien's work destroys just about every literary theory from the past 30 years. So you may not be surprised that I reject (mostly) a current minor industry in Tolkien studies: claiming that Tolkien really was *post-modernist*. That project is in most ways an extension of Shippey's approach that I've discussed above, and it works like this:

- Here's what some post-modernist theory says is good (meta-narrative, creating a whole world, invented documents and textuality, etc.).
- Tolkien does this.
- Therefore Tolkien is good and a post-modernist.

I think the approach is fundamentally misconceived. Not that there's no comparison between Tolkien and post-modernism or modernism, but it's kind of silly to go down this road too far. Tolkien just wasn't doing the things that writers like Donald Barthelme or Dom DeLillo or Angela Carter or Robert Coover were doing, and that's OK. You can point to frame narratives and meta-textual relationships all you want, but Tolkien and Italo Calvino or Umberto Eco are *fundamentally* different. Post-modernism, if there's even such a thing, is about irony. But Tolkien's aesthetic, which he shares with the *Beowulf* poet, is that although there is in-story, minor irony (like when Aragorn says that all his choices have gone wrong, but, in hindsight, we see that if he'd done *anything* differently there would have been disaster), Tolkien *never* treats his main characters ironically. There's no stance of authorial or audience moral superiority to the characters—there's nothing but acknowledgement of their humanity and their tragedy. And there's nothing ironic about the treatment of the monsters in either Tolkien or *Beowulf*, whether the monsters are Grendel or Gollum or the Dragon or the Ringwraiths.

That non-ironic treatment of monsters leads us to the final problem that Tolkien's brilliant essay caused. Tolkien said that the monsters in *Beowulf* were important, and critics cried: "Yes! Now we can talk about monsters!" But for non-philologists, for mainstream critics, there just aren't a lot of good approaches for talking about monsters, because they don't have a psychology and a realism like that of the humans in *Beowulf* (You could also argue that the humans in *Beowulf* don't have a psychology and a realism like the humans in the sorts of texts that mainstream literary scholars are trained to read, but that's another discussion). So what you get is the application of mainstream literary psychological and ideological approaches to the monsters in *Beowulf*, but this can't work unless you do some violence to the text in the same way that techniques and norms developed around Homer and Virgil don't work for *Beowulf* unless you read *Beowulf* all wrong. So in contemporary study of the monsters in *Beowulf*, the central idea seems to be "the monsters are us." I think this is one of those ideas—like Tolkien's suggestion that the micro-structure and the macro-structure of *Beowulf* mirroring one another makes for a good poem—that is superficially appealing, but when you press it more, it doesn't necessarily work. "The monsters are us" allows us to import all kinds of material from scholars and theorists, and all of a sudden we're not talking about monsters, we're talking about us. I think that's a category mistake.

In John Gardner's *Grendel* (though I hate it) "the monsters are us," and in Neil Gaiman's works the monsters are the protagonists (and therefore us), and these and similar cases, the kind of subtle psychological analysis that mainstream critics are so good at doing is appropriate and useful. But that is not what is going on in *Beowulf*. The monsters are not us. They symbolize *some aspects* of warrior and courtly life: Grendel has characteristics of an evil warrior, his mother of an evil avenger, dragon of an evil king. But they have a character of their own, and it is not our character: that's actually the point. Smaug might be *like* a grumpy old Colonel on the train, but in the end the Colonel doesn't eat ponies or burn down a town or physically attack his interlocutor. The monsters are, in *Beowulf* and in Tolkien's work, fundamentally different from us. The warriors and kings who are criticized in *Beowulf*, like Heremod, are not criticized in the same terms as Grendel and the dragon, and Boromir is not criticized in the same terms as Sauron or even Saruman. There is a distinction, and observing that distinction, and finding the interface between the world of monsters and the world of men, is the key difference between fantasy literature and, well, everything else.

This is, I think, the point where all the strands of the argument come together—and to a great extent why we are gathered here today, because that interface between the world of the marvelous and the world of men is where fantasy literature exists. Tolkien and the *Beowulf* poet understood that it was just at this point, where Beowulf the monster-slayer is also Beowulf the politically savvy king, and where the dragon is killed by the king of the Geats and a prince of the Waegmundings, that the literary magic occurred. There is a balance between the world of men and fairyland, but in the great works both are present in their interaction.

But the purposes of the *Beowulf* poet had been obscure to later readers because of the critical history of the poem and the desires and politics and limitations of the critics. Tolkien fixed a lot of that, but because the later critics did not understand the creation of fantasy, the importance of myth that is *both* a tradition and a new invention, they seized upon certain aspects of Tolkien's argument, and in this way his essay broke the tradition of *Beowulf* scholarship. We can fix this by going back to the critical history, by reconnecting, by being philologists and historians. But we also need to be open to what the *Beowulf* poet and Tolkien were trying to do.

At the beginning of this paper I talked about the allegory of the Babel of Voices, and I noted that it came after a much more famous and studied allegory, the Allegory of the Tower:

A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: 'He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did he not restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.' But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.

"But from the top of that tower, the man had been able to look out upon the sea." A glimpse of that sea, whatever exactly it is—the sea the surrounds fairyland that a character might circumnavigate, the actual sea, memory, the past and future, the afterlife—is what we readers, writers and scholars are seeking. Tolkien's fiction, the *Beowulf* poet's work, and even Tolkien's great essay all give us a chance to catch that glimpse, and for this reason they will ever call to us with a profound appeal. Until the dragon comes (and if we are lucky, afterwards as well).

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