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Lore of Logres: "Very Few Good Dragons"

Lore of Logres

by Rand Kuhl

"Very Few Good Dragons"

J. R. R. Tolkien's essay, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," has, in an incisive and stylish manner as Donald K. Fry says, "completely altered the course of Beowulf studies." In this essay (which is available in The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Donald K. Fry, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968 - a \$1.95 Spectrum Book) Tolkien took on the foremost Beowulf critics and critical opinion of the day (1936) and proceeded to replace their "conflicting babel" with good sense and to demolish its straw men. This cacophony of "conflicting babel" produced such opinions as Beowulf "is feeble and incompetent as a narrative; the rules of narrative are cleverly observed in the manner of the learned epic; ... it is rude and rough; it is a masterpiece of metrical art; ... it is singularly weak in construction; it is a clever allegory of contemporary politics; ... and (final universal chorus of all voices) it is worth studying." Why?

The first problem was that Beowulf had been for numbers of years a mine for historical research and not an object for literary criticism. As a source of information on archaeology, Anglo-Saxon history, folklore, mythology, or legend it had supplied a great deal of data, but it was not being examined as poetry. "Beowulf is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content, and is largely independent even of the most important facts ... that research has discovered." Only when Beowulf is considered as a poem with poetic significance can we achieve any unity or consensus in the convictions we hold about it. "For it is of their nature that the jabberwocks of historical and antiquarian research burble in the tulgy wood of conjecture, flitting from one tum-tum tree to another."

The criticism generally begins with Beowulf has no story, is weakly constructed, and is poorly proportioned and concluded as W. P. Ker did, "The thing itself is cheap; the moral and the spirit of it can only be matched among the noblest authors." So the Beowulf Paradox was established: poor theme, great style; flawed matter, superb manner. Tolkien sees that "higher praise than is found in the learned critics, whose scholarship enables them to appreciate these things, could hardly be given to the detail, the tone, the style, and indeed to the total effect of Beowulf. Yet this poetic talent, we are to understand, has all been squandered on an unprofitable theme ..." But Tolkien challenge's this understanding of Beowulf by attacking head on. The special virtue of Beowulf lies precisely at the point of the critic's complaints - in the theme. For Tolkien there is no paradox; "... if there were a real discrepancy between theme and style, that style would not be felt as beautiful but as incongruous or false."

Well, who is right? Tolkien goes on to support his point in convincing fashion by confining himself "mainly to the monsters - Grendel and the Dragon, as they appear in what seems to (him) the best and most authoritative general criticism in English - and to certain considerations of the structure and conduct of the poem that arise from this theme." First he gives three reasons the critics have been mistaken in their assumption of the Beowulf Paradox. One, the habit of using Beowulf for everything but literary criticism has relegated the poetry to the background and encouraged study of a summarized plot. Two, the allusions have been studied as keys to historical understanding, while their poetic function within the work and the poem as a whole have been ignored.

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The third reason for the critic's error has been a matter of taste, "Correct and sober taste may refuse to admit that there can be an interest for us - the proud we that includes all intelligent living people - in ogres and dragons; we then perceive its puzzlement in the face of the odd fact that it has derived great pleasure from a poem that is actually about these unfashionable creatures." The answer to this problem of taste involves Tolkien's view of myth and how the critics have underestimated the power of myth to ensnare the mind and imagination. "For myth is alive all at once and in all its parts, and dies before it can be dissected. It is possible, I think, to be moved by the power of myth and yet to misunderstand the sensation, to ascribe it wholly to something else that is also present: to metrical art, style, or verbal skill."

So dragons are disliked but the power they have in the mind of man cannot be denied nor merely attributed to style. For "a dragon is no idle fancy ... the dragon in legend is a potent creation of men's imagination, richer in significance than his barrow is in gold." And the primary deed of glory for the hero in Norse legend is to be the dragon-slayer. Beowulf's dragon, if anything, is not dragon enough for it incorporates "a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and of the indiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or bad (the evil aspect of all life)," but this is the right dragon for Beowulf. For Beowulf is faced with an enemy more evil than men or institutions, but still an enemy "incarnate in time, walking in heroic history, and treading the named lands of the North." Thus the theme of Beowulf - "man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time" - attains cosmic dimensions which liberate it from a too specific parochialism. And the monsters are the very element which contributes to the high seriousness and dignified tone of the poem.

Here I think it is important to indicate Tolkien's approach to the mind of the Beowulf poet. The poet is an artist with a serious purpose who was able to think about and evaluate his own time and the past. He was not a "confused semi-pagan" for he brought two things to his writer's task: first, "a knowledge of Christian poetry, especially that of the Caedmon school, and especially Genesis," and second, "a considerable learning in native lays and traditions." This knowledge had to be gotten by learning and training just as surely as children today have to learn history, science, and poetry. Also these influences which were particularly significant at that time in history represent a special convergence. "The key to the fusion-point of imagination that produced this poem lies, therefore, in those very references to Cain which have often been used as a stick to beat an ass - taken as an evident sign (were any needed) of the muddled heads of early Anglo-Saxons." The critics have taken the Beowulf poet to task for confounding the Scriptures and Northern bogies, but Tolkien demurs. Again Tolkien says this is a strength not a weakness, this is a fusion not a confusion, this is vitality and freshness not muddledness and half-heartedness - a convergence "that has occurred at a given point of contact between old and new, a product of thought and deep emotion."

Now let us examine the elements of this fusion more closely. There are two elements: Northern courage and Christendom and the Scriptures. The disciplined and steadfast will was central in the Norsemen's creed in spite of the fact that it caused them to be on the losing side. The gods in their struggle against Chaos and Unreason (mythologically, the monsters) make men their allies. Even though Chaos and Unreason win out in Time, men do not feel that that defeat is degrading for they have had a chance to be heroic, to be on the right but losing side, to share in this "absolute resistance, perfect because without hope." (I realized at this point that the atheistic existentialism of our century is hardly a new idea. Here was man against a hostile world, chaos, with the gods on his side; then came the twilight of the gods and man suddenly found himself alone. Alone in unreason and chaos man must wage war against the darkness for that is right and courageous even though Time spells final defeat for all his efforts. The weed that flowered as twentieth century atheistic existentialism came from some seed that was sown well over a thousand years ago.)

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In England the dark conflict requiring courage and an unyielding will converged upon and fused with Christendom and the Scriptures. The Beowulf poet though close to the old traditions viewed them from a different perspective which made them at once "more ancient and remote, and in a sense darker." And as things faded into the long ago they become more susceptible to poetic handling and interpretation. Thus Beowulf "moves in a northern heroic age imagined by a Christian, and therefore has a noble and gentle quality, though conceived to be a pagan." Not only is Beowulf conceived to be a pagan, but the environment is also pagan which requires exclusion of specifically Christian elements. However, if particular Christian elements were suppressed so were the old gods and this for three reasons: they had not really existed, their names had been potent and were still part of active heathen religion and idol-worship, and they were not essential to the theme.

While the gods disappeared the monsters did not. They became spiritualized for in the new perspective the battleground was the human soul. "... The old monsters became images of the evil spirit or spirits..." But this last shift is not complete in Beowulf; Grendel and the Dragon are real monsters, extant in time and history.

Some critics felt that the monsters being central to the poem weakened it, but Tolkien by comparing southern (Greek and Roman) and northern mythologies shows how necessary it is to have the monsters occupy the center of the work. Although the monsters have much the same appearance in southern and northern mythologies (compare the Cyclops and Grendel), their position in relationship to the gods is vastly different. The Cyclops is a god-begotten creature and "his maiming is an offence against his begetter, the god Poseidon." But Grendel is the object of God's ire. Again while the Northern gods are involved in a war in heaven, the Southern gods are timeless and do not worry about war or impending doom. "The interest of the (Southern) gods is in this or that man as part of their individual schemes, not as part of a great strategy that includes all good men, as the infantry of battle. In Norse, at any rate, the gods are within Time, doomed with their allies to death. Their battle is with the monsters and the outer darkness." The southern mythology left off the horrors of life, left them on the edge, unexplained. "It is the strength of the northern mythological imagination that it faced this problem, put the monsters in the centre, gave them victory but no honour, and found a potent but terrible solution in naked will and courage." The Northern mythology is better because it deals with the defeat of man in Time by the hostile world, and its use in poetry can revive the spirit of doom and finality even in our day. It has greater spiritual resiliency and vitality. "The poet of Beowulf saw clearly: the wages of heroism is death."

If one talks of the structure of Beowulf the necessary word would be - balance. The work is not a narrative poem which deals sequentially with its subject rather it is a balance of oppositions: beginnings and ends, rising and setting, youth and age, and achievement and death. Even metre is to be appreciated by balance for there is not a single rhythmic pattern flowing through any one line or from line to line. The critics have erred by considering the poem as a narrative and by listening for rhythm and pattern in the verse. It is "more like masonry than music. We have... in Beowulf a method and structure that within the limits of the verse-kind approaches rather to sculpture or painting. It is a composition not a tune."

"In structure, 'it was said of Beowulf, 'it is curiously weak, in a sense preposterous,' though great merits of detail were allowed. In structure actually it is curiously strong, in a sense inevitable, though there are defects of detail. The general design of the poet is not only defensible, it is, I think, admirable." Even the monsters fit the design and balance of the work: Grendel and his mother are the more than human adversaries of the achievement period and the Dragon is the terrible foe which is encountered in the death struggle, the final defeat. Finally Beowulf is not an "epic" or a "lay" but rather an elegy - to be specific Beowulf is an heroic-elegiac poem.

Beowulf then is a heroic-elegiac poem, anchored in history and written by a learned man about times long past. It is the product of the fusion of pagan tradition and the new and greater truth of Christendom and the Scriptures in the poetic imagination. Its monsters are real, not just images of evil, and central to the theme of man's struggle against a hostile world and his ultimate defeat in Time. The monsters by being more than human adversaries have given a cosmic dimension and light to the whole work. "Beowulf is indeed the most successful Old English poem because in it the elements, language, metre, theme, structure, are all most nearly in harmony."

In the above look at Tolkien's essay I have liberally used numerous quotations to exhibit the fine style which Tolkien possesses. His style includes the use of allegory, satire, parody, and a certain romantic longing (see the last sentence of one of his short allegories which is about a man (the Beowulf poet) who uses old stones to build himself a tower, which his friends tear down while looking for historical information and exclaim "a nonsensical tower!" - "But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea"). He makes reading scholarship seem as enjoyable as eating dessert.

The spirit of fun, the love of entering the lists, the joy in words and mystery, and the drive for truth are all met here in the happy (for the monsters at any rate) collision of "the monsters and the critics."

Anonymous Poetry

Lovingly deceives one now sylvan blade
Gollum's frightened hobbit was dark
and sylvan

Fair and dwarvish was the elf
Lowering jovially, Bilbo's dwarf jumps
several dark pipes

One orc soon stole Gollum's dwarvish
hobbit

Bilbo's pipe harshly and manfully
swallows

Must power kill and kill those fair trees
This forest terribly and helpfully dies
And my, would our Nazgul beware

Frodo's ent sweetly and sweetly steals
And now clearing sweetly Elrond's ring
Steals five sylvan terns

Faith was valliant
Beneath dark strength birth burned
His ring betrayed justice

Gollum's hobbit deftly betrayed Frodo's
magical forest

Mithril was Gollum's frightened ring
And thus, and, and Gad

Without killing and flying
Justice was misty above the flying elf

