True Monstrosity and the Uncanny in *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost*
Matt Gillis

Matt Gillis wrote the following essay for English 2001, British Literature to 1800. It is in some respects an ideal essay for that class, using the idea of the uncanny as it does to illuminate both Beowulf and Paradise Lost, in a striking comparison of otherwise very different texts across a chronological range of eight or nine hundred years. Matt uses not only Freud as well as Tolkien as his way in to these earlier texts, but also An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, based on the manuscript collections of the late Joseph Bosworth and the Oxford English Dictionary. His ambitious philological work goes well beyond the requirements of the essay, and produces good fruit in his examination of how a monster (whether ogre, dragon, or demon) makes its most disturbing impact on human cultures: from within those cultures' own systems of value.

- Dr. Melissa Furrow

Tolkien's seminal essay, "The Monsters and the Critics," has given rise to a tradition of *Beowulf* criticism that insists upon the importance of the poem's monsters and their purely physical nature. As a result, there has been a tendency to explain the monstrosity of these beings according to those same physical terms, an endeavour that is misdirected. Instead, the true monstrosity of *Beowulf*'s antagonists seems to lie in their uncanny relation to the human beings of the poem, as they share in man's humanity rather than diverge from it. In a similar way, Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* can be seen as an uncanny figure, not because he negates human qualities, but because he approaches them in similitude – his use of rhetoric, a human device, is what causes both Eve and the reader to perceive him as attractive. In both cases, the evidence suggests the same conclusion: monsters are not feared by man because of their radical otherness, but rather because they are a reflection of the human experience, perverted and twisted enough to shake man's own conception of humanity.

Recent critical interpretation of *Beowulf* has largely focused on the physicality of the monsters of the tale, but if one is to fully understand the significance of these so-called monsters, we must look beyond this quality. This vein of criticism, which follows in the wake of Tolkien's interpretation of *Beowulf*, presupposes the idea that the monsters are "mortal denizens of the material world, in it and of it," and therefore are not allegorical symbols (Tolkien 23). For Tolkien, because the monsters of *Beowulf* pose a very real threat to the Danes, their monstrosity lies in their appearance and physical power. This attitude corresponds with the pre-modern view of a monster as a thing that "is part animal and part human…and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance" ("monster," def. n.1a). The treatment of these monsters as literal *monstrous* entities – beings of ferocious appearance and perverted human stature – is somewhat due to a convenience of translation. It is unclear whether these antagonists are monsters or wretches or miscreants, and the Anglo-Saxon word *āglǣca* is at fault for this ambiguity. Seamus Heaney translates *āglǣca* as "monster" in his rendition of *Beowulf*, but the word equally encompasses the English terms "wretch", "miscreant", and "fierce combatant" ("*āglǣca*," Bosworth). "Wretch" is a particularly interesting entry because it means "one driven out of or away from his native country; a banished person; an exile" ("wretch," def.

n. 1a). This definition suggests that the monsters of *Beowulf* participate in the social order of the Danes and the Geats, albeit in a perverted fashion. They are perversions of human society just as much as they are examples of a distorted human form. For this reason, the treatment of the monsters as something alien to the Danes is misleading. Rather, the monsters are intrinsically and by definition tied to Danish society, regardless of how abhorrent the Danes perceive them to be. By rooting the monsters in the framework of Danish society, their monstrosity can be more accurately understood: they are monstrous because they participate in a slightly twisted form of Danish cultural custom, not because they are radically other to it.

As *Beowulf* progresses, the physical monstrosity of the antagonists becomes magnified, but so does their adherence to Scandinavian cultural practices. Apart from the cultural similitude implicit within the term *āglǣca*, an increasing resemblance of the monsters to the Danes and Geats is also expressed. For example, the attack on Heorot by Grendel's mother, in which she engages Beowulf in individual combat in an effort to avenge her son, is much more sophisticated than the attacks made by Grendel. Her efforts to single out Beowulf show that she is attacking with a premeditated motive, and further illustrate her comprehension of the same familial justice code that is so integral to Danish culture. When Beowulf seeks out her lair, he finds that she lives a distinctly human lifestyle. Her cave is glowing in torchlight and is full of hoarded gold, suggesting that she shares Danish cultural values (Furrow).

The dragon in *Beowulf* is bound by a similar code of honour. He attacks Beowulf's kingdom with a clear motive, but the dragon is a danger beyond the threat of his physical presence. The dragon is inimical to Geatish society not because he unleashes random attacks akin to Grendel's, but because he hoards gold and lets it amass in his lair. For a society that praises gold so highly that it treats it more like an heirloom than a currency, the hoarding of gold by the dragon is simultaneously a waste of resources and a squandering of history. Thus the dragon is the absolute antithesis of the good gift-giving king, who bestows riches upon his followers to convey his respect and gratitude. For this reason, if the antagonists of *Beowulf* can be called "monstrous," it is not because they are physical perversions of the human form. Rather, it is because they are "something extraordinary or unnatural" ("monster," def. n. 2) lying within the framework of Scandinavian culture that they are monstrous. Ultimately, the monsters are dangerous not because they are alien to human values, nor because they are purely physical forces to be reckoned with, but because they approach humanity so closely that they pervert it profoundly.

The Danish characters' severe reaction to the monsters in *Beowulf* could ostensibly be seen as disproportionate to the monsters' near humanity and participation in Scandinavian culture. With Freud's concept of the uncanny in mind, however, it can be understood that the monsters in *Beowulf* are all the more frightening precisely because they mimic Scandinavian values so closely. As Freud notes in his definition of the uncanny, the word does not refer to that which is simply frightening, but that which is frightening because it is so eerily familiar (123). One of the examples he uses to illustrate this idea is the *Doppelgänger*, a creature that unnerves others with mimicry. Generally

speaking, *Doppelgängers* are doubles that, through their appropriation of the afflicted individual's knowledge, emotions, and experience, threaten to dissolve the self-identity of that individual (141-2). The *Doppelgänger* has a profound similarity to the dragon in *Beowulf*, the monster who threatens to pervert the values of Geatish society by mimicking them. In his discussion of the unnerving nature of the *Doppelgänger*, Freud notes that other afflictions can produce the same effect: "The uncanny effect of epilepsy or madness has the same origin. Here the layman sees the manifestation of forces that he did not suspect in a fellow human being, but whose stirrings he can dimly perceive in remote corners of his own personality" (150). The uncanny is rooted in the mind of the observer, who perceives a thing as frightening because it is similar to something they recognize in their own consciousness. In *Beowulf*, the dragon is more dangerous and more frightening than Grendel, not just because he is physically larger or stronger, but because he perverts the familiar. The fear experienced by the Geats is not assuaged but rather exacerbated by the dragon's humanity.

Freud's notion of the uncanny also pertains to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which Satan is an uncanny figure. In contrast to Dante's depiction of Satan – a figure who is decidedly inhuman – Milton's character approaches the human through his use of rhetoric. Milton succeeds in creating a more repulsive Satan, as he emphasizes Satan's perverse humanity rather than Dante's merely physical monster. And it is Milton's characterization of the uncanny Satan that perseveres in modern popular culture. As in Freud's explanation of Albrecht Schaeffer's *gettatore*, Milton's Satan can be understood as uncanny due to his poetic attractiveness:

> We can also call a living person uncanny, that is to say, when we credit him with evil intent. But this alone is not enough: it must be added that this intent to harm us is realized with the help of special powers. A good example of this is the *gettatore*, the uncanny figure of Romance superstition, whom Albrecht Schaeffer … has turned into an attractive figure by employing poetic intuition and profound psychoanalytic understanding. (149)

In the same way, Milton's Satan is attractive on the basis of his persuasive rhetoric, which penetrates the heart of Eve (Milton 549-551). The reader, observing the fall of Eve, also becomes persuaded by Satan's rhetoric. Milton scholar Lana Cable attributes this phenomenon to the "artistic effect," a process through which "art's affective dimension … implicates not just the artwork but also the sensibility of the one who experiences it – the viewing, listening, tasting, scenting, tactilic, affective perceiver" (13). Satan, with his power to deceive, appeals to man because he is simultaneously attractive and repulsive. Like the monsters of *Beowulf*, Satan is monstrous because of his understanding of humanity, not because of his radical otherness.

Attempting to locate a being's monstrosity in its radical otherness, as it pertains to *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost*, is a fallacious approach. Milton's Satan and the antagonists of *Beowulf* are defined as monstrous by their affinity to man, rather than by their

divergence from him. In one case, the antagonists' participation in and consequent perversion of cultural values is monstrous. In the other, the monstrosity lies in the perversion of man's means of communication and persuasion. Freud's work reinforces why this similitude is more horrifying than a complete polarity, while Cable links the reader's reaction to that of the characters. Ultimately, if we are to understand how a monster can destroy our conception of humanity, it will not be through observing its physical features. Rather, it is by probing the intellectual sympathies between man and monster that we identify their true monstrosity.

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