The *Beowulf* Poet and His Real Monsters
A Trauma-Theory Reading of the Anglo-Saxon Poem

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Introduction

"[I]t is a drink dark and bitter: a solemn funeral-ale with the taste of death."

Thus wrote J. R. R. Tolkien of *Beowulf* in his prefatory remarks for the republication of John R. Clark Hall's 1911 prose translation (ix). The professor's dramatic metaphor captures what many readers sense when they engage the text of the poem, either in the original Old English or in one of the myriad languages into which it has been translated since Sharon Turner began the process in 1803, whether it be a student's first encounter or a scholar's innumerable one. To extend Tolkien's metaphor, the purpose of this monograph is to analyze the recipe of that dark and bitter brew.

The method by which I identify the various ingredients and discuss their influence on the poem's morbid flavor is trauma theory, a term that Cathy Caruth is given credit for coining in her 1996 book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*—though the idea of literary trauma theory as a discernible critical model can be recognized earlier in the decade in such practitioners as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. Of course, one can easily make a case for even earlier sightings of trauma theory, with Caruth herself pointing to Sigmund Freud's marriage of psychoanalysis and literary study via terms like the Oedipus and Elektra complexes. However, in spite of trauma theory's presence in the humanities for roughly two decades, a precise and universally acknowledged definition has yet to emerge, which provides me an opening to put forward a definition as I am using it in this work.

In the previous paragraph I quietly inserted *literary* as a qualifier to differentiate between trauma theory as it exists in the vocabulary of psychiatric professionals versus how scholars in the humanities may regard its meaning—though both groups are concerned with how traumatic experience affects the subject's mind, and they borrow freely from one another, explicitly or implicitly, to advance and articulate their understanding of trauma. In psychiatric medicine, the overarching goal of trauma theory, broadly put, is to use that understanding to assist victims of trauma overcome its devastating effects. In literary scholarship, the goal of trauma theory, broadly put, is to use that understanding to document the effects of traumatic stress on language production. To state it simply (in fact, overly so), psychiatric professionals examine the speech of patients (perhaps "clients" is a better word), while scholars examine texts (e.g., *Beowulf*).
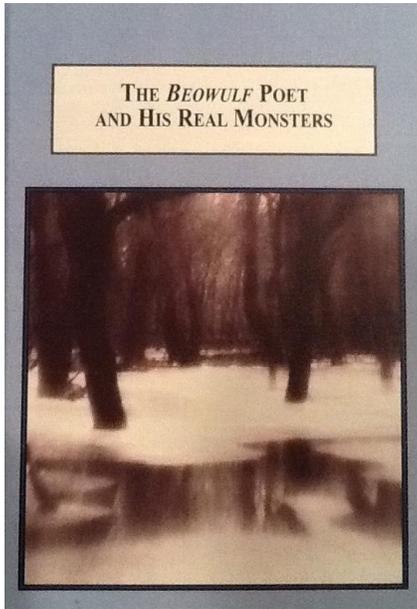
My specific purpose is to make the case that *Beowulf* reflects traumatic stresses which the anonymous poet and his fellow Anglo-Saxons felt in their day-to-day lives, and I concentrate my trauma-theory reading on the three monsters, who represented, in all likelihood unconsciously, particular sources of trauma to the poet: the terror of extreme violence, the dangers of sexual reproduction, and the deprivations of chronic disease. My training as a scholar is in English studies, a program that requires coursework in literature, linguistics, rhetoric, and pedagogy—also a program that has prompted me to draw from a wide range of fields, including medicine, history, anthropology, philology, sociology, and psychology, with special emphases on the branches of psychoanalysis and neuropsychology. In other words, English studies in general and this monograph in particular have allowed me to indulge my "attention surplus disorder," a phrase I commandeered from Susan Sontag, who uses it to mean that she is basically interested in everything.

What is more, I consider myself primarily a creative writer—a novelist, short-story writer and sometimes poet—which, I believe, gives me further insight into what I call "the psychic origins of creativity" when I take on the roles of critic and scholar, further, that is, than someone who has never tried to devise characters and plot and setting, and to coax them through a narrative arc via dialogue, metaphor and a plethora of other storytelling techniques. That is to say, I feel a brothers-in-arms kinship with the *Beowulf* poet and an affinity for the task he set before himself that many literature scholars, simply, do not.

In bringing to bear on the poem knowledge from so many different fields, my reading represents a departure from what has been the dominant discourse in *Beowulf* studies for at least the last thirty years, a discourse that has tended to focus on the extant Cottonian manuscript,

a discourse that has resisted critical theory "in the name of empiricism, objectivity, or common sense," according to John D. Niles ("Introduction" 9). However, as James W. Earl points out in his introductory remarks to *Thinking About Beowulf* (1994), intense study based on the extant manuscript has failed to yield much that is irrefutable about the poem and even less about its poet. In fact, Earl draws on the concept of the Strange Attractor from chaos theory, meaning "that underlying presence, or nonpresence, that gives its shape to chaos" (10), to conclude the following about new directions in *Beowulf* scholarship: "If we cannot anchor our thinking about *Beowulf* in history any longer, we may have to entertain at long last the freedoms of modern and postmodern critical thinking—at least within the parameters set by the fractal text, and its Strange Attractor, the poet" (27).

That is, to better understand the poem, we must do all that we can to better understand the poet.

The trauma-theory reading of the poem rests largely in Chapter 4 of this monograph, while Chapters 1, 2 and 3 lay the groundwork necessary to the reading. The first chapter, for example, discusses the close association between thought and language by examining the work of pioneering psychoanalysts Freud and Jacques Lacan, as well as contemporary trauma theorists and neuropsychologists. Key concepts in the chapter include the effects of trauma and how these effects can be passed from generation to generation, and from location to location. Integral to these concepts are discussions regarding the establishment of trauma cultures and the production of trauma texts. The next chapter focuses on the mimetic parallel between postmodern narrative technique and the narratival characteristics of someone who has been traumatized. In this chapter and elsewhere, the theories of Michel Foucault are engaged, especially those related to analyzing the minds of past peoples via the texts they left behind. When I introduce Foucault to my students, I use the model of the double helix with one strand representing *thought* and *language* the other. When a culture has passed, like the Anglo-Saxons', it is as if its double helix has been stretched and flattened, and we view it from an angle that makes it appear as though only the language strand remains (i.e., its texts), but Foucault tells us that inseparably bonded to that language is the thought that shaped it; therefore, by studying a past culture's language, we can come to know the culture's thought as well. In short, the *Beowulf* poet's mind produced the topography of the text, so by carefully studying the text we can discern the topography of the poet's mind.

Chapter 3 is less theoretical and more practical as it examines aspects of the lives of Anglo-Saxons that likely would have resulted in traumatic stress and in particular the traumatic stress I believe to be represented by Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. That is to say, if the poet and his people were in fact traumatized, what events and day-to-day features of their lives could have caused that trauma? For this chapter, I rely principally on the writings of Bede and Eddius Stephanus, the anonymously composed *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and the period's medical texts: the *Herbarium*, *Leechbooks*, and *Lacnunga*. Then, finally, Chapter 4 brings all of this diverse knowledge together in a trauma-theory reading which focuses on the original language of the poem.

It is important to note, too, that while my reading is a departure from much of the traditional scholarship, I incorporate and build upon a great deal of that scholarship, bringing into the conversation (to name a few) Klaeber, Tolkien, Malone, Mitchell, Robinson, Niles, Bjork, Orchard, Kiernan, Earl, O'Brien O'Keeffe, Chance, Howe, Lerer, Lapidge, Liuzza, Acker, and Foley, as well as newer voices like Joy, Ramsey, Kim, Mizuno, and Warren. All of whom have contributed mightily to what we know about the poem, and thus contribute mightily to what we could possibly come to understand by pursuing critical approaches born of postmodernism, like trauma theory.