On Heroes and Monsters: The Proposed Influence of the *Aeneid* on *Beowulf*

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Since the inception of Beowulf scholarship, academics have proposed various possible influences for the authorless work, and while advocates of Biblical, Scandinavian, and Celtic influences have developed many convincing arguments.[1,2] However, more than a century of scholarship has generated relatively few such arguments for classical influences. This dearth could be due to the fact that advocates of classical influence take less into account the textual references and archeological evidence that gestures to the presence of Virgilian influence upon the text; or scholars may lack the necessary foundation for such an argument. Yet, these obstacles have not prevented the current consensus that Beowulf has Scandinavian origins, at least in part; moreover, this is an argument based only on textual features. Perhaps the lack of scholarship on classical influences of *Beowulf* is due less to a lack of evidence, and rather to the methodology that scholars have applied to this material so far.

In perhaps the most comprehensive study of classical influence on *Beowulf*, Tom Burns Haber exhaustively analyzes and compares the motifs, sentiments, and phraseology of *Beowulf* and the *Aeneid*. Yet, Haber's meticulous analysis proves little Virgilian influence on *Beowulf* because of his broad theoretical framework. For instance, Haber correctly points out that both Beowulf and Aeneas are proud and sympathetic to the causes of their companions. But these traits are so common among epic heroes that Haber's argument holds little weight in specifically advocating for Virgilian influence. On the other hand, convincing pieces of scholarship on *Beowulf*'s influences, such as Andy Orchard on the influence of Samuel 1 or Fidel Fajardo-Acosta on the poet's role in *Beowulf* and the *Aeneid,* share a common methodology: a comparison of lengthy passages or summaries of lengthy passages followed by an extensive discussion on their similarities.[34]

Scholars seeking to prove Virgilian influence on *Beowulf* based solely on textual features should adopt the above method. Doing so will bring such arguments to a more concrete theoretical foundation. The best demonstration of the technique mentioned in the previous paragraph is the application of this method to a comparative study of the heroes and monsters of *Beowulf* and the *Aeneid*. Therefore, the proposed study will take an in-

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[1] Frederick Klaeber et al., *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) 184-185.

[2] Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (New York: D.S. Brewer, 2003) 143-145.

[3] Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, 143-145

[4] Fidel Fajardo-Acosta, "Beowulf and the Aeneid," in *The Influence of the Classical World on Medieval Literature, Architecture, Music and Culture: A Collection of Interdisciplinary Studies* ed. Fidel Fajardo-Acosta (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1992) 17-29.

depth approach by examining two sets of passages to show that the similarities between the behaviors, descriptions, and lineages of the heroes and monsters are so precise that they exclude many other possible influences of *Beowulf*. Where it is found that a scholar has already applied the proposed methodology, attempts will be made to refute possible counterarguments, or to point to similarities missed or omitted by the scholar so as to strengthen the existing argument.

An application of this method applied to the exclusion of evidence outside of the passages chosen for comparison may, however, be unproductive. Instead, the analysis will be kept to the confines of the chosen passages while drawing minor points from others. The textual samples used for this argument are so large they border close to not having a limit at all, an approach directly opposed to the proposed methodology of the study (Appendix A). However, such a large sample functions here because the parallel plot points contained within are numerous and specific. They show the chosen passages to be singular, coherent units of narrative that parallel each other rather than collections of smaller passages.

In his search for shared motifs and sentiments in *Beowulf* and the *Aeneid*, Haber compares Beowulf's arrival in Denmark to Aeneas' arrival in Libya, listing several plot points and the similar motifs contained within them, such as the fact that the roads of Carthage and Denmark are well-decorated.[5] While Haber's analysis is convincing due to the sheer number of similarities, it fails to link the gap between similarity and influence. It is therefore vulnerable to criticism of the sort.[6] However, the effectiveness of this counterargument can be tempered if one can prove that the *Beowulf* poet was aware of Virgil, in which case the heroic similarities between *Beowulf* and the *Aeneid* are more likely to be imitative rather than coincidental in nature. Haber's cultural argument for this fact avoids addressing the lack of direct Virgilian reference in *Beowulf* by showing Virgilian awareness in several possible contemporaries but not the *Beowulf* poet himself.[7] By contrast, David Crowne makes a promising case for Virgilian influence in "The Hero on the Beach," in which he argues that poets' imitations of a tradition tend to reduce a scene to several small elements that they then reintroduce in their own narrative.[8] According to Crowne, these elements in Beowulf's landing are: a beach; a *comitatus*[9] relationship; a bright light; a voyage. Moreover, even though he uses this method to link Aeneas and Beowulf, Aeneas' arrival in Libya also involves him and his companions washing up on a beach at the end of a long voyage under a cliff containing a "twinkling forest."[10][11] Nevertheless, even Crowne concedes that shared motifs do not necessarily

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[5] Tom B. Haber, *A Comparative Study of the Beowulf and the Aeneid* (New York: Phaeton Press, 1968), 122-123.

[6] Ibid, 121-128.

[7] Ibid, 5-19.

[8] David Crowne, "The Hero in the Beach: an example of Composition by Theme in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 61* (1960), 362-72.

[9] A *comitatus* relationship is a term commonly used when discussing *Beowulf* to reference the relationship between a vassal warrior and his lord

[10] Crowne, "The Hero on the Beach," 371.

[11] Virg. *Aen*. 1.157-165.

imply imitation but they do make a likely case that the Beowulf poet belonged to some larger tradition with knowledge of Vergil's work.

Haber's analysis could have been further strengthened. Further analysis into the may have shown that the first third of both epics are parallel in nature. One such plot point is that both heroes impress their hosts with a retelling of their past deeds. For instance, Aeneas impresses Dido with his recounting of his voyage to Libya to the point that she falls in love with him.[12] Similarly, Beowulf's retelling of his adventure with Breca impresses Hrothgar and drives him to trust Beowulf's assistance.[13] [14]

However, Haber's argument has been questioned. Gilbert Highet criticized Haber, calling some of his supposed parallels "ludicrously far-fetched,"[15] and in principle, Highet is right. A hero landing on a beach and encountering someone who inquires of his origins is nothing extraordinary. However, criticism such as that of Highet is not applicable to this study for two reasons: first, far-fetched points such as the fact that the heroes are allowed to proceed after answering the interrogator's questions have largely been excluded from Appendix A; second, the similarities that Highet suggests are far-fetched are much less so when one sees them in the context of the numerous other similarities proposed by Haber, as described in previous paragraphs.

Yet, Aeneas' influence does not end at Beowulf. When it comes to lineage, Aeneas and Hrothgar share a number of similarities. The passages in which these similarities are most apparent are the introductory lines of *Beowulf* and the prophecy on Vulcan's shield.[16] [17] Although Hrothgar is not the primary hero of Beowulf, he does embody the heroic values of his society by having *wiges weorðmynd*[18] and participating in the gift-giving economy— a behavior held in high esteem by the poet himself. Therefore, Hrothgar should be considered as much a hero as Beowulf, who exhibits the same traits.

Both passages contain a semi-historical narrative of the founding of a great nation, beginning with likely mythical, orphan founders. While Beowulf's Scyld Scefing[19] was *feasceaft funden,*[20] Romulus in *Aeneid* is raised by a she-wolf.[21,22] Additionally, rulers in the epics conquer surrounding nations to form their own kingdom. Scyld conquers the *ymbsittendra*[23] from whom he demands tribute, and Augustus defeats

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[12] Virg, *Aen.* 4.13-27.
[13] *Beowulf* 607-610.
[14] A summary of Haber's work—too long to be included in its entirety—as well as the augmentations necessary to show a plot parallel for the first third of the poems can be found in Appendix A.
[15] Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press 1949), 563.
[16] *Beowulf,* 1-100.
[17] Virg. *Aen*. 8.626-731.
[18] Literally, "War–honour," a term used to denote that one has participated enough battles to be recognized as a great warrior
[19] Name of one of the legendary leaders of the Danish clan, to which Beowulf belongs
[20] Literally "found wretched," a reference to the fact that Scefing was found as orphaned in destitute conditions
[21] *Beowulf*, 7.
[22] Virg. *Aen*. 8.626-634.
[23] sc. "ordering tribes"

Cleopatra and the *Aegyptus et Indi, omnis Arabs* [24] in the battle of Actium. [25,26] Lastly, the rulers in both epics earn the praise of the poets, who interrupt their own narrative to applaud the rulers. For instance, the *Beowulf* poet attributes one of three uses of *þæt wæs god cyning* [27] to Scyld while Vergil openly praises Augustus, calling his victory at Actium a *triplici triumpho* [28] [29] [30] These similarities are neither as plentiful nor as direct as that between Aeneas and Beowulf, but they do provide some precise parallels that are effective in excluding other possible influences and thus increase the likelihood that the *Aeneid* influenced the first lines of *Beowulf*.

While many scholars have compared the heroes of *Beowulf* and the *Aeneid*, any comparison of the monsters between the epics is scarce. This shortage is probably due to the fact that while *Beowulf* is structured around three fights with monsters, the *Aeneid* contains little about monsters and offers no monster descriptions of a comparable length. The scholarship that does exist compares Grendel's approach on Heorot to Vergil's Cyclopes. While they provide some sample methodologies, description of the Cyclopes is short and scattered, and similarities to Grendel are rare and vague, which explains why scholars have found no other comparable passage. [31,32] Nevertheless, the Beowulf author's approach in describing Grendel and Vergil's approach in describing Rumor exemplify numerous specific similarities. The following comparison of the two monsters—citing no sources, for none exist—will demonstrate the effectiveness of the proposed methodology than those put forth on Grendel and the Cyclopes, which cite numerous sources. [33][34]

Both creatures are gigantic in stature, yet size alone does not make a compelling argument for Virgilian influence on Beowulf, for larger-than-life size is a common feature among epic monsters. The argument, therefore, is based on the similarity of techniques that both poets apply judiciously to create slow, labored verses that in turn reflect the massive size of their monsters. For instance, Vergil uses apposition, describing Rumor as *celerem*, [35] *horrendum*, [36] and *ingens*. [37][38] This technique rarely occurs in Latin poetry, which is known for its word economy. Yet, Vergil's application of it here effectively creates a verse that drags on the description of Rumor beyond the norm to

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[24] sc. "Arabs, Egyptians, and Indians"
[25] *Beowulf,* 4-10.
[26] Virg. *Aen*. 8.705-731.
[27] sc. "That was a good king;" this is an expression often repeated by the *Beowulf* poet
[28] sc. "a triple triumph"
[29] *Beowulf*, 11.
[30] Virg. *Aen*. 8.714.
[31] Richard North, *The Origins of Beowulf: From Vergil to Wiglaf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 86-87.
[32] J.R.R. Tolkien and Michael D. C. Drout, *Beowulf and the Critics* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies 2002), 117.
[33] *Beowulf* 702b-749.
[34] Virg. *Aen*. 4.173-188.
[35] sc. "fast"
[36] sc. "horrible"
[37] sc. "giant"
[38] Virg. *Aen*. 4.180-181.

give it a sense of weight and sluggishness that reflect Rumor's massive size. A comparable technique in *Beowulf* is repetition with variation. Between lines 703-720, "com"[39] repeats three times, each time followed by a prepositional phrase describing a different location. This repetition conveys a sense that Grendel is so massive that it requires three separate acts of "coming" stretched over 18 lines for him to actually arrive at Heorot.[40]

Along with repetition, both poets also apply metrics to create spondaic verses that show the massiveness of their monsters. A good example of this in the *Aeneid* is lines 180-181[41]:

~ v v/~   v v/ ~   v v/   ~   ~/ ~ v v / ~ ~
progenuit pedibus celerem et pernicibus alis
 ~   ~/ ~   ~/ ~   ~/   ~   ~/   ~ v v / ~   ~
monstrum^horrendum ingens cui quot sunt corpore plumae
~   v v/~ ~ /~ ~/ ~ ~/   ~v v/ ~ ~
tot uigiles oculi subter mirabile dictu[42,43]

Whereas line 179 shows a fairly typical distribution of long and short syllables in dactylic hexameter, lines 180-181 are almost entirely spondaic except the fifth foot, which must always follow a long-short-short pattern. Based on the meter of these verses, one may argue that Vergil intended the form of these heavily spondaic lines to reflect their meaning, which is Rumor's massive size. Similarly, the alliterative verses of *Beowulf* constantly offer stressed syllables in oral performance.[44] This stressing of syllables combined with the repetition of "com"[45] gives the poem an onomatopoeic quality that one could construe as the sound of Grendel's heavy footsteps as he approaches Heorot.

Another feature that is specific to Grendel and Rumor is that their size is altered based on both poets' story-telling needs. For example, while Grendel is so large that Heorot's doors burst open at the touch of his hands, he has no problem fitting inside a hall built for humans.[46] Vergil takes similar liberties with Rumor by making the gnomic statement that she is the fastest creature of all when only three verses later, she is large enough to stride on the ground and hide her head in the clouds simultaneously. His

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[39] sc. "came"
[40] Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, 193.
[41] Here a tilde represents a long syllable, "v" represents a short syllable, slash represents a foot break, and a circumflex represents an elision.
[42] Virg. *Aen.* 4.179-181.
[43] sc. "She bore a horrible, giant monster swift on her feet and pernicious wings, who has as many feathers on her body as vigilant eyes below–miraculous to recount

[44] Robert Stockwell and Donka Minkova, "Prosody." in *Beowulf: A Handbook*, ed. Robert Bjork, John Niles (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 55-84.
[45] sc. "came"
[46] *Beowulf* 720-725.

decision shows that he has no qualms about altering Rumor's size to the needs of his narrative.[47]

Size is not the only similar feature between the two passages. Another trait that Rumor and Grendel share is their inhumanity. Klaeber, in summarizing existing scholarship on Grendel, writes: "scholarship has explored Grendel's close relation to humans, interpreting him as representing the dark side of humanity or the anti-*thegn*[48], a dualistic creature."[49] Although Klaeber's summary is concise and simple, an analysis of neither Grendel's nor Rumor's inhumanity cannot be, for their inhumanity is inextricably tied to all aspects of their existence. This essay will address two ways in which their inhumanity manifests itself: appearance and motivation.

Grendel's appearance has made him the subject of much scholarly debate. On the one hand, Grendel does not appear to be entirely different from humans. One can surmise that Grendel is a large humanoid creature with human features such as *eagum*[50] and *folmum*.[51] [52] On the other, the poet ascribes some quality that highlights Grendel's inhumanity to every aspect of Grendel's appearance that he mentions. For example, Grendel's eyes emit a *leoht unfæger*.[53][54] In a similar vein, Vergil balances his mention of Rumor's facial features with the statement that her eyes *nec dulci declinat lumina*[55] making clear that while she possesses human features, Rumor is far from human.[56]

Before discussing the manifestation of inhumanity in lack of motivation and divine favor, one must first consider how these factors interact. After all, the statement that one with a singular motivation or without divine favor is inhuman cannot be correct without the appropriate context. In discussing motivation and divine favor, one must accept that both monsters are only inhuman because they are set in opposition to their respective human heroes.

The monsters' lack of motivation in both poems highlights their inhumanity in contrast to the heroes' complex incentive for action. For all the visceral texture in Grendel's attack, the *Beowulf* poet offers little motivation for his behavior in text.[57] One could only argue that Grendel kills for food;[58] nevertheless, other passages suggest that he kills because he is annoyed by the sounds coming from Heorot.[59][60] The poet is silent on the issue otherwise. This lack of motives sets him in direct contrast to Beowulf, who

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[47] Virg. *Aen.* 4.174-177.
[48] sc. "thane"
[49] Klaeber et al., *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 44.
[50] sc. "eyes"
[51] sc. "hands"
[52] *Beowulf*, 720-726.
[53] sc. "unholy light"
[54] *Beowulf*, 727.
[55] sc. "do not close in sweet sleep"
[56] Virg. *Aen.* 4.182-183.
[57] *Beowulf*, 702b-749.
[58] *Beowulf*, 733-734.
[59] *Beowulf*, 87-88
[60] *Beowulf* 733-734

has a complex network of motivations including his desire for treasure and glory, the safety of his men, and his allegiances to Hrothgar and Hygelac. Applying the above mentioned logic, one sees that while Beowulf has very human motives for his behavior, Grendel's single-minded and primal motivation reflects his inhumanity. Similarly, Vergil, despite calling Rumor a *nuntia veri*[61], writes that she is also *tam ficti pravique tenax*[62][63] This description suggests that Rumor's only motivation is the spread of information as opposed to Aeneas, whose motivations are many such as his desire to rebuild his fallen nation, the safety of his people, and his lust. Therefore, like Grendel, Rumor's inhumanity is manifest in her single-minded motive.

   Lastly, Grendel and Rumor's relationship with the divine is, barring a few minor differences, identical. The first similarity between their divine standings is that both bear the disdain of their contemporary deities through no fault of their own. For example, although the poet mentions that Grendel *godes yrre bær*, [64] Cain is the one who first began the feud with [*se*] *metod*. [65][66] As mentioned above, Grendel's relationship with God is only a reflection of his inhumanity in that he is in opposition to Beowulf, to whom God grants *guðhréð* [67] in battle against Grendel.[68] Similarly, Rumor is the abhorrent result of Earth's feud with the gods. Earth, who was *ira inritata deorum,*[69] bore Rumor. Furthermore, Rumor is *Coeo Enceladoque sororem,*[70] both of whom were children of the titans whom the gods cast out from heaven after a great battle. On the other hand, Vergil describes Aeneas as pious twenty times throughout the *Aeneid*, and for his piety, Jupiter allows him to overcome Rumor's destructive nature and grants him success in his quest. [71]

   The combination of Haber's analysis and the research done for this study brings precision to the argument for Virgilian influence on *Beowulf* that surpasses the broad labels of heroism and monstrosity in some of Haber's work and the concept of archetypal scenes in Crowne. The numerous parallels between the heroes and monsters of *Beowulf* and the *Aeneid* exclude other possible influences on *Beowulf*. With so many plot points occurring in approximately the same chronological sequence and numerous similarities between Grendel and Rumor, it is difficult to deny the absence of Virgilian influence in at least the first third of *Beowulf*. Nevertheless, the application of the proposed methodology in this essay is by no means exhaustive. Passages such as Priam's Fate and Grendel's Attack on Heorot, with their shared motifs of bursting doors and slaughter, merit further exploration of the epics using the proposed methodology.[72][73]

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[61] sc. "messenger of truth"
[62] sc. "tenacious about falsehood and wrong"
[63] Virg. *Aen.* 4.188
[64] sc. "he bored god's ire"
[65] sc. "the creator"
[66] *Beowulf*, 100-114.
[67] sc. "victory–in–battle"
[68] *Beowulf*, 819.
[69] sc. "incited by the anger of the gods"
[70] sc. "a sister to Coeus and Enceladus"
[71] Haber, *A Comparative Study of the Beowulf and the Aeneid*, 53.
[72] *Beowulf*, 720-836.

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Appendix A

(1) Both heroes sail because of the destruction of a famed place (115-185, Aeneid I, 12-49).

(2) Both heroes are interrogated upon their arrival at shore, Aeneas by Venus and Beowulf by the coastguard, who asks them to explain their origins and their business there (Haber, 121).

(3) Both heroes introduce themselves through boasting their own fame (Haber, 122).

(4) After satisfying the interrogators' demands, both heroes are lead to the established settlement of ruler of the land, Dido and Hrothgar (Haber, 122).

(5) Both heroes are stopped once again and introduced through another one of the ruler's henchmen (Haber, 123).

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[73] Virg. *Aen*. 2.486.

(6) When both heroes finally meet their respective rulers, they address the rulers without being invited to do first (Haber, 124).

(7) In response, the rules already know of the fame and past deeds of the heroes (Haber, 125).

(8) Both heroes then sit and feast with the rulers, during which they elaborate on the deeds of their past, earning the affection of the lands' rulers (529-6010; Aeneid II, 1-804, III 1- 718, IV 13-23).

(9) Both heroes are first afflicted by a monster one third of the way through the poem (702b- 749; Aeneid IV, 173-188)