

THE NATURE OF BEOWULF'S DRAGON

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Although the dragon is not described in detail, the internal evidence of *Beowulf* reveals aspects of the dragon's natural history that are certainly dragonsque in nature. It is first referred to by what it does rather than what it looks like. In this respect we are told that the dragon *ongan / deorcum nihtum ... rīcs[i]an, / sē ðe on hēa(um) h(æþ)e hord beweotode, / stānbeorh stēapne*,¹ 'began to rule on dark nights ... he who on the high heath kept watch over a hoard, in a steep stone barrow' (lines 2211-13). Also, we are told that the dragon *nihtes flēogeð / fyre befangen*, 'flies by night encircled by fire' (lines 2273-4). It is clear that the dragon, by preference, is nocturnal, it has the ability to fly and it is able to produce fire. Regarding the latter point, apart from referring to the dragon as *fyrdraca*, 'fire-dragon' (line 2689) the nearest the poet gets to a direct description of flame issuing from the dragon's jaws is to state that the dragon began *glēdum spīwan*, 'to spew fire' (line 2312). Otherwise he describes the effects indirectly, in that the dragon began *beorht hofu bærnan*, 'to burn the bright houses' (line 2313). Also, Beowulf's *sylfes hām, / bolda sēlest brynewylmum mealt*, 'own home, finest of buildings, melted away in the fire-surges' (lines 2325-6). The dragon's ability *glēdum spīwan* is also evident in the poet's description of the flaming stream surging out from the barrow and in the fact that Beowulf could not survive near the hoard without burning in the dragon's flame:

	<i>strēam ūt þonan</i>
<i>brecan of beorge;</i>	<i>wæs þære burnan wælm</i>
<i>heaðofyrum hāt,</i>	<i>ne meahthe horde nēah</i>
<i>unbyrnende</i>	<i>ænige hwile</i>
<i>dēop gedýgan</i>	<i>for dracan lēge.</i>

(lines 2545-9).

Even in death the dragon is *glēdum beswæled*, 'flame scorched' (line 3041), indicating the ferocity of its flame as a weapon and re-enforcing the imagery of the dragon *fyre befangen*.

¹ All references to the text are to F. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and the fight at Finnsburg* (3rd edn, Boston: D.C. Heath, 1950). All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Although the dragon's wings are not described directly, it is clear that flight is one of the creature's major attributes. We are told that the dragon *nihtes flēogeð*, 'flies by night' (line 2273), and it is later referred to as *lāð lyftfloga*, 'hostile air-flier' (line 2315) and *wīdfloga*, 'far-flier' (line 2830). As a comparison it is interesting to note that Fafnir,² the other *eorðdraca* mentioned in *Beowulf*, does not appear to have wings and thus is incapable of flight. The evidence for this rests upon the fact that Fafnir is described as crawling to the stream,³ and the ability to fly is never attributed to him. Conversely, it is true that the ability to crawl is never attributed to the *fyrdraca*, Beowulf's bane, but this does not necessarily mean that he does not possess legs, a feature not described in relationship to this dragon.

A readily recognizable trait of the dragon is its reptilian nature. In this respect a comparison can be drawn from the serpent and lizard class of creatures. The dragon's body is somewhat serpent-like since it is described as *hringbogan*, 'a coiled thing' (line 2561). The dragon's movements certainly appear to be serpentine in character as it advances upon Beowulf, *gebogen*, 'coiled' and *scriðan*, 'gliding' (line 2569). Its movement is also perhaps described as rapid as it *stonc ðā æfter stāne*, 'rapidly moved over stone' (line 2288).⁴ In this respect it has been pointed out that if one observes the movements of lizards and snakes, they do seem to glide and slither over rocks,⁵ a characteristic, it could be argued, in common with this dragon. Although it may be a conventional heroic boast, Beowulf's vow not *oferflēon fōtes trem*, 'to yield a foot's-step' (line 2525) is perhaps an indication for the need to contain the dragon at the entrance of the barrow,⁶ for if it were given space, it would have the opportunity to employ its rapid movement and wings to its full potential.

A further reptilian feature of the dragon is its venomous bite. Beowulf's wound caused by the dragon's bite began *swelan ond*

² Although not named by the *Beowulf*-poet, it is generally considered that the dragon slain by Sigemund (lines 884-97) was Fafnir who had metamorphosed from man to dragon. However, the ascription of the dragon-slaying to Sigemund is peculiar to *Beowulf*. In the *Volsungasaga* the dragon-slaying is attributed to Sigemund's son, Sigurd. J.L. Byock, intro. and trans., *The saga of the Volsungs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

³ Byock, *Saga of the Volsungs*, 63.

⁴ M.E. Goldsmith, in *The mode and meaning of 'Beowulf'* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), 142, has postulated that *stonc* refers to the dragon 'snuffing ... the thief's scent,' therefore the clause *stonc ðā æfter stāne* can be interpreted as 'followed the scent over the rocks'. If this interpretation is approved it could be argued that it demonstrates a dog-like quality in the dragon. Klaeber, *Beowulf*, 210, has noted that *stonc* has been associated with *stincan*, 'emit a smell' in the sense of 'sniffed'. However, Klaeber glosses *stonc* as 'move rapidly', also the Bosworth-Toller dictionary gives 'move rapidly' as the definition. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary and Supplement*, eds J. Bosworth and T.N. Toller, with enlarged Corrigenda and Addenda by A. Campbell, 2 vols (Oxford: University Press, 1972).

⁵ T.L. Keller, 'The dragon in *Beowulf* revisited', *Medium Ævum*, lv (1981), 220.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

swellan; hē þæt sōna onfand, / þæt him on brēostum bealonið(e) wēoll / attor on innan, 'to burn and swell; he at once understood that the poison within his breast welled-up with deadly evil' (lines 2713-15). Such ability to produce venom is commonly associated with snakes, and furthermore, the delivery of the venom to the victim via fangs is a well known route of transmission in this class of creature. Before the fight Beowulf declares *ic ðær heaðufýres hātes wēne, / [o]rēdes ond attres*, 'I expect there hot hostile fire of breath and venom' (lines 2522-3), thus indicating that he was aware of and anticipated this method of attack.

Comparative anatomy of the dragon's integument can also be shown to be compatible with a reptilian nature. The *Beowulf*-poet's description of the dragon as *gry(refāh)*, 'terrible patterned' (line 3041) perhaps reflects the variegated skin colouring found in the reptilian world. Also of significance is that in Beowulf's initial attack on the dragon, he wields his sword in such a way *þæt sīo ecg gewāc / brūn on bāne*, 'that the edge broke, bright on bone' (lines 2577-8) suggesting that the dragon's skin is bone hard. Such a structure can be seen in the common iguana, a lizard that has bony scales covering the whole of its visible skin surface. Conversely, the skin on the underside of a lizard tends to be relatively soft and thereby vulnerable. This factor is demonstrated in *Beowulf* in that the dragon is defeated only when Wiglaf strikes the dragon in its vulnerable spot *on middan*, 'in the middle' (line 2705), in its soft underside.

That dragons had a vulnerable underside seems to be a feature that was known in Northern literature. The slaying of the dragon Fafnir was achieved by Sigurd digging a great pit in Fafnir's usual path. As Fafnir crawled over the pit, Sigurd, concealed in the pit, struck with his sword from below. Sigurd was obviously well acquainted with the anatomy of dragons and constructed his ambush accordingly, penetrating Fafnir in his soft ventral region and driving his sword to the hilt into Fafnir's heart.⁷ Contained in *Danish History* by Saxo Grammaticus are two further incidents involving dragons which reveal their anatomical vulnerability. Frotho, who is required to kill a dragon in order to win the dragon's treasure, is advised that his spear thrusts are likely to be repelled by the dragon's hard scales, but that a soft area exists on the dragon's underside. Frotho finds this to be so, and dispatches the dragon accordingly.⁸ Similarly, Fridlevus attacks a dragon who guards a buried treasure. It is apparent that spears are of little use on the upper part of the creature's body, so Fridlevus attacks the underside and fatally wounds the dragon.⁹ It is notable that in both of these accounts the dragons are described in terms indicative of a reptilian nature, in

⁷ Byock, *Saga of the Völsungs*, 63.

⁸ G.N. Garmonsway and J. Simpson, *Beowulf and its analogues* (London: Dent, revised edn, 1980), 336-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 337.

that they are coiled and serpent-like, and they are envenomed. They do not, however, possess the ability to fly. In this respect it is perhaps interesting to speculate whether the *Beowulf* dragon's wings were based upon a received paradigm or whether they were an inspiration of the *Beowulf*-poet.

Regarding the size of the dragon, *sē wæs fiftiges fōtgemearcas / lang on legere*; 'in length it was fifty foot-paces as it lay' (lines 3042-3). Although the poet clearly states that the dragon measured fifty feet, it may not specifically signify the exact number of fifty, but it could simply be a figure indicating a large number, as in the years of Beowulf's kingship; it might even have been selected to balance the length of his reign, just as Grendel's ability to seize thirty men is balanced with Beowulf's strength in carrying thirty mailcoats. No matter what the interpretation of fifty is, it is clear that in the world of the poem the dragon is huge, and is thus a formidable opponent. It is by no means unusual for reptilian creatures to be inordinately large. A modern-day comparison is the python, a serpent which reaches lengths of thirty feet, but a more apt comparison is perhaps the man-eating Komodo dragon, a lizard with an average length of twelve feet.¹⁰ Immense size is almost certainly an aspect of the paradigm of the occidental dragon as portrayed in Northern literature. Fafnir's huge size, for example, although not described directly, is implied by the excessively large track which was hollowed out by his body as he crawled.¹¹ Similarly, the dragon fought by Fridlevus hollowed down the ground to the rock forming a bank of earth on either side of his body as it dragged itself along.¹²

The *Beowulf* dragon, in Wright's words, is 'the most fearsome of all' the monsters.¹³ This view is also expressed by Brodeur who states that the dragon is 'far more terrible than Grendel or Grendel's dam'.¹⁴ The dragon's terror resides in its armament and weaponry, the most intimidating being envenomed fangs, fire, flight and the fury of its onslaught. Equally daunting are its immense size, strength and mostly impenetrable skin.

That the Anglo-Saxons had a literal belief in fiery dragons as natural creatures seems a reasonable supposition. Gang claims that to the Anglo-Saxons dragons were 'solid fact'.¹⁵ Evidence for this is the entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 793 which reports

¹⁰ The Komodo dragon (*Varanus Komodoensis*) is the world's largest lizard, discovered in 1912 on the island of Komodo. J.M. and D. Lutz, *Komodo, the living dragon* (Salem, Oregon: Dimi Press, 1991).

¹¹ Byock, *Saga of the Volsungs*, 63.

¹² Garmonsway and Simpson, *Analogues*, 337.

¹³ H.G. Wright, 'Good and evil, light and darkness, joy and sorrow in *Beowulf*', reprinted from *Review of English Studies*, viii (1957), 1-11 in *An anthology of 'Beowulf' criticism*, ed. L. E. Nicholson (Notre Dame: University Press, 1963), 257-67, at 261.

¹⁴ A.G. Brodeur, *The art of 'Beowulf'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 129.

¹⁵ T.M. Gang, 'Approaches to *Beowulf*', *Review of English Studies*, iii.9 (1952), 8.

that fiery dragons were seen flying in the air.¹⁶ Of less significance, yet worthy of note is that in *The Fight At Finnsburg*¹⁷ a warrior concludes that a light that suddenly appears in the night is not dawn in the east, or a burning building, *nē hēr draca ne flēogeð*, 'nor does a dragon fly here' (line 3), thus suggesting that a fiery dragon is as natural as the dawn or a burning building.

The frequency of place-names associated with dragons, for example Drakelow in Derbyshire, and in Worcestershire,¹⁸ gives support to the Anglo-Saxons' belief in the existence of dragons and their in habitation of mounds and barrows. Such place-names associated with the natural topography of the landscape give support to the statement in the *Old English Maxims II* that: *Draca sceal on hlæwe, frod, frætsum wlanc*,¹⁹ 'a dragon shall be in a mound, old, proud of its treasure' (lines 26-7). That the dragon was considered a mysterious creature there seems little doubt. According to Lawrence the dragon 'was regarded much as we look upon the hippopotamus or the rhinoceros — a strange animal, not met with every day, to be sure, but not outside the pale of human experience'.²⁰ However, these animals are, in a general sense, docile vegetarians and are perhaps not the best of examples with which to make such an analogy. In my view, the Komodo dragon, given its aggressive, carnivorous nature and its reptilian form, is of greater similitude.

Belief that dragons were created by a process of metamorphosis from man to dragon is represented in Northern literature, the most celebrated being the metamorphosis of Fafnir, recounted in the *Volsungasaga*. As a result of killing his father, Fafnir obtained a considerable amount of treasure, became ill-tempered and withdrew to the wilds where he selfishly hoarded the treasure. He eventually physically transformed into a dragon.²¹ The metamorphic concept is based upon two fundamental points. Firstly, the subject is known to have a proclivity towards malice and avarice, features shared by dragons, at least by the dragons of *Beowulf* and *Maxims*. Secondly, the subject physically transforms and henceforth appears as a dragon. Davidson has pointed out that the dragon is sometimes 'identified with the dead man buried in the mound ... it is said that a man after death became a dragon and guarded the treasure which he had taken into the howe with him'.²² Smithers develops this

¹⁶ *Two of the Saxon chronicles parallel*, eds C. Plummer and J. Earle (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), 54-5.

¹⁷ Klaeber, *Beowulf*, 245-7.

¹⁸ D. Whitelock, *The audience of 'Beowulf'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 73-4.

¹⁹ *The Anglo-Saxon minor poems*, ed. E.V.K. Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon poetic records*, vi (New York: Columbia Press, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1942), 56, lines 26-7.

²⁰ W.W. Lawrence, *'Beowulf' and the epic tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 207.

²¹ Byock, *Saga of the Volsungs*, 59.

²² H.R.E. Davidson, *Gods and myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 161. Davidson (loc. cit.) comments that the winged dragon came from the east, via the Romans.

theme further, suggesting that the dragon in *Beowulf* must at an early stage in the development of the story 'have been identical with the nameless "last survivor"', that is, the last survivor took his treasure into the mound and metamorphosed into a dragon, possibly at death.²³ Smithers's contention is not that the dragon is the last survivor, but that the presence of the last survivor in *Beowulf* is a remnant of the metamorphic concept in the received story material. It is therefore an example of the poet's handling and manipulation of an originally heathen theme. Whereas Tripp, who refers to the *Beowulf* dragon as a man-dragon, postulates that the last survivor 'is not a man who outlived all his countrymen, but the last man to avoid death by surviving as a dragon'.²⁴ Thus, the last survivor literally becomes the dragon. Tripp's view therefore is clear, the *Beowulf* dragon is not a natural dragon, but a man-dragon. This argument is strengthened by the suggestion²⁵ that the interpretation, in respect to the dragon, of (*earm*)*sceapen* (line 2228) as 'miserable' or 'wretched',²⁶ and as 'frightful shape',²⁷ may overlook its connotations of metamorphosis, in that (*earm*)*sceapen* can be interpreted, according to Tripp, as 'a change overtook the wretch'.²⁸ This interpretation is based on the argument that (*earm*)*sceapen* is formed from *earm*, meaning 'miserable' or 'wretched', and the past participle of *scippan*, meaning 'to create' or 'to shape', which when combined with the prefix *for* in *forscippen* means 'to transform'.²⁹

Interpretation of lines 2228-9 is disputed due to the difficulty in deciphering the manuscript, in that the lines in question are not legible except for *sceapen* which appears in both. Interpretation is therefore to a certain extent a matter of conjecture.³⁰ Editors have generally accepted the restoration of line 2228; for example, Klaeber edits as follows:

hwæðre (*earm*)*sceapen*
*sceapen*³¹

²³ G.V. Smithers, *The making of 'Beowulf'*, inaugural lecture of the professor of English language (Durham: University of Durham, 1962), 11.

²⁴ R.P. Tripp, *More about the fight with the dragon: 'Beowulf' 2208b-3182* (New York: University Press of America, 1983), 60.

²⁵ P.C. Braeger, 'Connotations of (*Earm*) *Sceapen*: *Beowulf* 11.2228-2229 and the shape-shifting dragon', *Essays in Literature*, xiii (1986), 327-8.

²⁶ Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary*, 234.

²⁷ H.D. Chickering, Jun., *Beowulf: a dual language edition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1972), 181.

²⁸ Tripp, *More about the fight with the dragon*, 423.

²⁹ Braeger, 'Connotations of (*Earm*) *Sceapen*', 328.

³⁰ The condition of lines 2228-9 in the *Beowulf* manuscript can be seen at the bottom of fo. 179^v in the facsimile edition, J. Zupita, *Beowulf*, ed. N. Davies, *Early English Text Society*, o.s. ccxlv (Oxford: University Press, 1959).

³¹ Klaeber, *Beowulf*, lines 2228-9.

Tripp suggests a possible reconstruction:

hwæðre him is ham sceapen.....
atolic gewrixl wearo earmsceapen

'But for him a home is fashioned, a terrible change
overtook the wretch'.³²

However, even if this reconstruction were acceptable, it is perfectly feasible that the 'terrible change' referred to can be interpreted as an emotional transformation from happiness to misery, rather than a physical shape-shifting transformation.

Regarding the probability of a man-dragon metamorphosis, I do not dispute the contention that the *Beowulf* dragon may have been identified with the last survivor in an earlier version of the story, and that the *Beowulf*-poet either misunderstood or actively manipulated the material to his own design. However, regarding the contention that the last survivor and the dragon are one and the same in *Beowulf*, the internal evidence clearly indicates that this is not the case. The *Beowulf*-poet explicitly reveals that *Hordwynne fond / eald ūhtsceaða opene standan, / sē ðe byrnende biorgas sēceð*, 'The old dawn-harmer who, burning, seeks out barrows, found the hoard-joy standing open' (lines 2270-2). Thus it is clear that the dragon's *modus operandi* is to seek out barrows, and furthermore, regarding this particular barrow the dragon *fond*, 'found' it standing open, a point that is ineluctable. The text does not reveal any blurring of understanding on the part of the poet, and in Jones's words, 'in *Beowulf* the last survivor is the last survivor, the dragon is a dragon and the poet sees neither as anything else at any time'.³³ The *Beowulf* dragon is a real dragon, it is a primordial creature, a beast. Conversely, the metamorphosed Fafnir, although a beast in appearance, reveals his human origins in that as a dragon he retains the capacity for human speech.³⁴

The *Beowulf* dragon then is a natural creature with a flesh-and-blood solidity, and a bestial indifference to mankind. The poet presents the dragon as one who *biorgas sēceð*, 'seeks out barrows' (line 2272) rather than one who seeks out the halls of men to wreak havoc and destruction. When it does disrupt and destroy, it does so in response to a theft from its hoard. Also, when it fights Beowulf, it does so in response to Beowulf's challenge. In both instances, the dragon does not seek conflict until it is provoked into action. The poet never imposes moral condemnation on the dragon, rather the terms employed tend to imply respect for the dragon's function as *hordweard*, 'hoard-guardian' (line 2554). The poet refers to the

³² Tripp, *More about the fight with the dragon*, 423.

³³ G. Jones, *Kings, beasts and heroes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 19, n.1.

³⁴ When Fafnir receives his death wound, he converses with Sigurd, his slayer. Byock, *Saga of the Volsungs*, 63-4.

dragon as *āglācean* (lines 2520, 2534, 2557 and 2905), a term which is also employed to describe Beowulf, Sigemund and admittedly Grendel and his mother, who is described as *āglācwif* (line 1259). Indeed as Orchard has pointed out, the poet in describing the dragon fight, links *Beowulf* and the dragon together as *ða āglācean* (line 2592).³⁵ Orchard goes on to suggest that the most likely meaning of *aglæca* is 'the formidable one' or 'the awe inspiring one', the etymological interpretation being based on the first element of *aglæca* which is related to Old English *ege* and *egesa*, meaning 'awe', 'terror', and the second element with Old English *lacan* meaning 'to move quickly'. Irrespective of the precise interpretation of the term, it is clear that the poet utilizes the term to describe both Beowulf and his monstrous adversaries; however, Grendel is condemned as *Godes andsacan*, 'God's enemy', whereas the dragon is not.

The nature of the beast is evil, although, as Irving points out, 'he [the dragon] may be evil, he is not Evil. There is an amoral aspect to him, alien and remote'.³⁶ This evil aspect is distinct from and dissimilar to the immoral and spiritual evil of Grendel and his mother. The dragon's evil is evil in the sense that a natural phenomenon is evil, and in this respect is likened by Bonjour to a 'lava-stream which overwhelms the village on the flanks of a volcano'.³⁷ The volcano, like the dragon, lies dormant until it is aroused. Then it becomes an inimical destructive force of nature, as does the dragon. Although it is evil and extremely dangerous, it is not immoral. The dragon, provided it is not disturbed, lies at peace upon its treasure as *hordweard*. We are told that it has done so for *prēo hund wintra*, 'three hundred years' (line 2278), and its destructive capacity is aroused only when its hoard is disturbed. The dragon responds to such provocation in kind by mounting a punitive expedition in the form of an incendiary raid. Thus the previously dormant dragon, fuelled by the desire to appease its anger and malice, and avenge the loss of the stolen cup, wages war on the habitation of men.

Tolkien saw the dragon essentially as a 'real worm, with a bestial life and thought of his own',³⁸ but he also recognized an element of symbolism and as such saw the dragon as a 'personification of malice, greed, destruction (the other side of heroic life)'.³⁹ Such a

³⁵ A. Orchard, *Pride and prodigies: studies in the monsters of the 'Beowulf' manuscript* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995), 33.

³⁶ E.B. Irving, Jun., *A reading of 'Beowulf'* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), 214.

³⁷ A. Bonjour, *Twelve 'Beowulf' papers 1940-1960* (Neuchâtel: University Press, 1962), 109, n.3.

³⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *'Beowulf' the monsters and the critics* (1936), 16, reprinted from *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xxii (1936), 245-95.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

blending of symbolism with a real flesh-and-blood dragon is reiterated by Bonjour (following Fisher), who points out the compatibility of a symbolic and literal interpretation;⁴⁰ whereas Gang suggests 'that the arguments by which Professor Tolkien shows that the poem may be symbolic are not cogent, and that the internal evidence is against this view, or at least against the particular symbolism that he discerns'.⁴¹

Gang's contention is that if the poet regarded the dragon as symbolizing Evil, he would have 'told us so quite clearly and repeatedly'.⁴² This is not necessarily the case. The poet uses concrete imagery, in this case the dragon, as symbolism the meaning of which is not revealed openly and clearly, but is merely hinted at. Thus from the symbol object, the dragon, meaning is evoked little by little by a series of decipherings. Firstly, the dragon is described as an *atol inwitgæst*, 'terrible malicious stranger' (line 2670). Secondly, the dragon's barrow is referred to as a *inwithrōf*, 'malicious roof' (line 3123), a detail, Kaske points out 'so slenderly related to reality as to suggest allegorical intent'.⁴³ Thus the terms employed by the poet reflect the emotion of malice which Tolkien adjudged to be personified in the dragon. Thirdly, the traditional dragonsque occupation of lying dormant upon a hoard as this dragon had done for *þreo hund wintra* provides the connection with avarice. Contrary to Gang's view therefore, it can be shown that the internal evidence is not against the view propounded by Tolkien that the dragon is an element of symbolism, and according to Kaske 'comes a long step nearer to allegory than any other figure in the poem'.⁴⁴

The view that the *Beowulf* dragon possesses diabolical qualities and is therefore symbolizing Satan is an interpretation based upon the premise that in Christian tradition the dragon is depicted as the natural enemy of man and of the saint.⁴⁵ Man is traditionally juxtaposed to the dragon representing Good against Evil or God against Satan. Such an interpretation applied to *Beowulf* is supported by external evidence only. The internal evidence, the most valuable and final criterion for analysis of the poem, reveals that 'no single phrase or descriptive epithet applied to the fire-drake can be tortured into any connection with devils, or creatures of evil in the Christian sense'.⁴⁶ Irving supports this viewpoint by suggesting that

⁴⁰ Bonjour, *Twelve 'Beowulf' papers*, 107.

⁴¹ Gang, 'Approaches to *Beowulf*', 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴³ R.E. Kaske, 'Sapientia et fortitudo as the controlling theme of *Beowulf*,' in *An anthology of 'Beowulf' criticism*, ed. L.E. Nicholson (Notre Dame: University Press, 1963), 269-310, at 304, reprinted from *Studies in Philology*, iv (1958), 423-57.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁴⁵ Goldsmith, *The mode and meaning of 'Beowulf'*, 125.

⁴⁶ O.F. Emerson, 'Legends of Cain, especially in Old and Middle English', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, xxi (1906), 831-929 at 882, cited by Bonjour, 'Monsters crouching and critics Rampant', in *Twelve 'Beowulf' papers*, 97-113, at 98.

'Christian references are in no way *necessary* concomitants of evil monsters', and further suggests that exegetical analysis in relationship to the dragon is poorly supported by the internal evidence of the poem.⁴⁷ The dragon may be evil, frightful and monstrous, but it is not therefore Satanic. It is perhaps worthy of note that Grendel and his mother, as God's enemies, are the only creatures in *Beowulf* who are impervious to ordinary swords. The dragon is impervious to ordinary swords on its upper-body only, but this is by virtue of the natural protection of its hide rather than the supernatural protection enjoyed by Grendel and his mother. A clear contrast exists between those creatures who are vulnerable and those who are not, the inference being that Grendel and his mother are God's enemies, whereas the dragon is not. Furthermore, Grendel and his mother are decapitated, a traditional method of dispatching a troll.⁴⁸ Whereas the dragon is disposed of by pushing it over the cliff-wall and giving it to the sea:

	dracan ēc scufun,
wyrm ofer weallclif,	lēton wēg niman,
flōd fæðmian	frætwa hyrde.

(lines 3131-3).

An interesting observation, made by Leyerle⁴⁹ is that the giving of the dragon to the sea in this way can be compared to the launching of a longship, and that it is possible that the poet imagined the dragon's disposal in terms of a ship funeral. Indeed, Leyerle suggests that the dragon's end is reminiscent of Scyld's funeral. Also of relevance to the argument is that longships were built to resemble dragons with a carved dragon's head at the prow, and a carved tail at the stern. Conversely, rather than the respectful giving of the dragon to the sea, Irving's interpretation of the event is that the Geat's 'rude and forceful' disposal of the dragon reflects their contempt for the creature.⁵⁰ However, I do not favour this interpretation for I would argue that the disposal of the dragon's corpse as a natural creature is dealt with a little more respectfully than the decapitation of Grendel and his mother as God's enemies. I am not suggesting that the dragon should be vindicated, but clearly it is not an Evil creature like Grendel and his mother.

The *Beowulf* dragon then is a natural creature, an elemental force, and in the world of the poem it is an existing reptile with a flesh-and-blood solidity. Blended with the literal dragon is the

⁴⁷ E.B Irving, Jun., *Rereading 'Beowulf'* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 12.

⁴⁸ Smithers, *The making of 'Beowulf'*, 9.

⁴⁹ J. Leyerle, 'Beowulf the hero and the king', *Medium Ævum*, xxxiv (1965), 91 and n.7.

⁵⁰ Irving, *Rereading 'Beowulf'*, 129.

dragon as symbol, representing the evil side of heroic life⁵¹ in the form of avarice, malice and destruction. However, although basically evil in nature it is presented with a quasi-supernatural aura as a magnificent creature, in that it is both monstrous and marvellous: monstrous in terms of its huge size and ferocity, and marvellous as a legendary creature of great power and splendour, presented here in the world of the poem as a real, natural creature. A number of scholars⁵² have expressed the view that it is a fitting end for Beowulf to die as a result of a dragon fight. Indeed, it is a fitting end for the dragon to die at the hands of the mighty Beowulf. Probably no other end is grand enough for either.

⁵¹ Tolkien, *Monsters and the critics*, 16.

⁵² For example, Tolkien, *Monsters and the critics*, 34, and K. Hume, 'The theme and structure of *Beowulf*', *Studies in Philology*, lxxii (1975), 1-27, at 10.

