The Schizophrenic Warrior: Exploring Aglæca in the Old English Corpus

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THE SCHIZOPHRENIC WARRIOR: EXPLORING AGŁĘCA IN THE OLD ENGLISH CORPUS

by

DANI ROBINSON-HOLLAND

Under the Direction of Edward J. Christie, PhD

ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to create a more comprehensive catalogue of the appearance of the word aglæca throughout the Old English corpus. While the majority of these instances of the word appear in Beowulf, it also appears in such texts as Christ and Satan, Juliana, The Whale, Andreas, Daniel, Elene, and several of the Riddles from The Exeter Book. While Klaeber’s widely accepted binary glossing of “warrior/monster” is usually perfectly functional for translation, it is worth examining all instances of the word in attempt to better understand what the word would have meant to the contemporary Anglo-Saxon audience. A glossing that indicates “formidable adversary,” with the understanding that a figure characterized as aglæca exhibits a specific set of traits – strength, aggression, and skill – without commentary on that figure’s ethical makeup.

INDEX WORDS: Medieval literature, Anglo-Saxon language, Anglo-Saxon warriors, Medieval monsters, Old English etymology, Anglo-Saxon literary analysis
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DANI ROBINSON-HOLLAND

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Arts in the College of Arts and Sciences Georgia State University 2015
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Neal Holland, who has supported me from the start of this degree. When we both decided to go back to school at the same time, we had no idea what we were in for, and you were always there to support me and take turns being the “love Sherpa.” I could never have finished without your constant encouragement. I also dedicate this work to my father, who raised me to work for everything I want. In your mind, there has never been anything that I couldn’t do, and for that I am eternally grateful. To my mother, who I wish could see the fruits of this labor. And to my enormous circle of family and friends who never doubted that I could make this happen.
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1 INTRODUCTION

In lines 1652-1676 of the poem *Beowulf*, Beowulf tells Hrothgar and the Danes his experience fighting Grendel’s mother. He tells of the danger and his close call with death: about how Hrunting was useless, about the Giant-made sword, even about the serpents that he dealt with along the way; but what he fails to mention in over twenty lines of verse is Grendel’s mother herself. This is despite the fact that Grendel’s mother, *ides, aglæcwif*, “woman, woman warrior,” proves to be an even more dangerous and worthy opponent than Grendel himself. Her worthiness as an opponent is neglected in Beowulf’s retelling, but she is nonetheless not only a monster but a warrior. That she is introduced in the poem using this terminology (line 1259) seems to foreshadow Beowulf’s difficulties in defeating her. *Aglæcwif*, I believe, refers less to a sense of monstrosity and more to her formidable and adversarial nature. The fact that all of the monsters in *Beowulf* and the heroes Beowulf, Sigmund, and Andreas are characterized as *aglæca* suggests that the word offers a point of comparison between the two character types, rather than simply a point of contrast traditionally held of the “monster/warrior” dichotomy.

Because both monstrous and heroic character types are specifically defined with this word, sometimes in conjunction with one another, the *Beowulf* poet intentionally invites comparison between the two types, and pursuing this comparison may illuminate the Anglo-Saxon relationship with the monstrous and the heroic. The poet’s mastery of the language demonstrated throughout the poem strongly advocates that the poet’s frequent and varied use of *aglæca* is deliberate. As Andy Orchard in *Pride and Prodigies*, claims, “Whatever the precise connotations of the term, the fact that the poet employs the word to designate not only monsters but monster-slayers clearly underlines the linked contrasts between the worlds of monsters and men which run throughout the poem and the manuscript” (33). Therefore, while it is understandable that in modern translation the traditional glossing of this word divides it by
character type, doing so leads to a loss in translation of a meaningful linguistic construct intentionally created by the poet. By redefining the word to express a quality that can be attributed to both types of characters without dividing the word semantically, a better understanding of the adversarial relationship between monsters and heroes in Old English literature and Anglo-Saxon culture may be established.

My intention for this thesis is to create a comprehensive catalog of the uses of the word aglæca throughout the whole Old English corpus as a means of fully contextualizing the word. While much scholarship has attempted to parse out the precise meaning of the word in specific works, there have been few comparative studies of the word’s use across the corpus. Since Frederick Klaeber glossed aglæca, in his 1950 edition of Beowulf, as having a dichotomous and ethically fueled meaning, situating it as both “monster, fiend” and “hero, warrior,” many translators and critics have reasonably followed suit and have not consistently deliberated on whether this divisive translation obfuscates a meaning intended by the repetitive use of the word. Glossing aglæca as being related to the worthiness of a character as an opponent or adversary better captures the poet’s original meaning, and perhaps a better understanding of the word overall. The Venerable Bede, for example, is referred to in Byrhtferth’s Manual as aglæca: no one could reasonably interpret this to suggest that he was a monster or even a warrior, but he is demonstrably an impressive and perhaps imposing scholar. The word appears most frequently in the poem Beowulf, in which monstrous and heroic characters alike are attributed as being aglæca. I suggest a more cohesive gloss that captures the sense of the word as it applies to all such figures in the Old English corpus. If this definition can then be applied to the use of aglæca outside of the context of Beowulf, the Anglo-Saxon understanding of the aglæca as a figure

1 This is not to say that endeavors for a more accurate gloss have not been pursued; a plethora of scholarship has been dedicated to precisely this point, but rarely comes to a satisfactory conclusion. See below for Eto, Lotspeich, Menzer, Olson, and especially O’Keefe on a variety of ideas addressing this issue.
becomes less of a paradox. While the Beowulf poet may use aglæca in a manner distinctive from other works in the Old English corpus, his use of the term can certainly be reconciled with its definition as understood through those other texts.

Many scholars have attempted to reconcile the complicated meaning of aglæca to a comfortable modern English translation that functions for monstrous and heroic character types. Klaeber translates it both ways, probably in attempt to capture the spirit if not the slavishly literal meaning of the word; others have struggled to discover a more cohesive denotation. Melinda Menzer studies, among other things, its specific use to describe Grendel’s mother and how the compound aglæcwif affects the meaning of the root word as it is used elsewhere. Claude Lotspeich suggests “that aglæca meant ‘one who goes in search of his enemy,’ ‘an attacker,’ ‘stalker,’ ‘pursuer,’ and ‘adventuring hero’” (1). He goes on to further explain how the word could be used to describe both monsters and heroes by breaking it into āg “pursuing, stalking” and lāc “battle,” and lacan “to jump”. Alexandra Hennessey Olson also attempts to break it down into a compound which combines ag “law” with lacan “to move quickly, play, fight.” Yasuharu Eto argues that aglæca means “fighter,” and she explores its use in offensive versus defensive situations. There are many ways to explore the complicated nature of aglæca, and I believe that there is room in the conversation to consider a more nuanced meaning that speaks to the natures of both monstrous and heroic characters.

Stepping back a moment from the minutiae of examining one word in an entire language and culture, it may do well to ask, “Why does this word, among all others, matter at all?” particularly when so many other scholars have created such a rich conversation on the subject of aglæca. If we are to accept that the word consciously expresses multiple and distinct meanings in most every instance of its appearance, then we may also ask a variation of John D. Niles’
question in his “Locating Beowulf in Literary History”: “What work does this word do, culturally speaking?” (131). To answer this, I turn to a psychoanalytic approach to understanding many of the characters in Beowulf and what they would have represented to an audience in terms of aspirations or anxieties. If we take Beowulf, Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon as representing some ideal or fear (or more likely, a set of ideals and/or fears), a more cohesive understanding emerges of the Anglo-Saxon social psychology that would generate a text like Beowulf. The antithesis of this process, examining the heroes for their qualities that are not specifically heroic, can also be performed as a means of turning the critical dichotomy between the monsters and heroes of Beowulf on its head. Applying a combination of psychoanalytic and monster theory (from the likes of those such as Andy Orchard and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen) to each character type as they are connected through the sign aglæca will inform a more complex and reflexive association between these heroic figures and their monsters.

The schizophrenic definition of aglæca – “hero, warrior” and “monster, fiend” – encapsulates one of the ways the Beowulf poet recognizes and explores the anxieties of the original audience of the work. The poem complicates the relationship between monster and hero by focusing not on their moral or ethical makeups, but on the similarities between their motivations, actions, and behaviors. The repetitive use of aglæca in reference to each of these character types emphasizes their worthiness as adversaries rather than simplifying the characters into essential “good” and “evil,” or “hero” and “monster.” Kathrine O’Brien O’Keefe argues that “building such a distinction into the glossing of the word completely ignores the possibility that the poet has deliberately chosen to use the same word to describe two sets of characters” (485). O’Keefe suggests that such a translation is problematic, based on a history of “glossing, editing, and translating of the text [which has] substantially affected our picture of Grendel” (485).
other words, choosing to accept disparate meanings for this vocabulary limits our perception and understanding of characters described as such. Surely, Beowulf, Andreas, Grendel, the Whale, Satan, and the venerable Bede, cannot all be understood as the same type of character; nonetheless, they are all described using the same terminology, which suggests that they must have some commonality. *Aglæca* can be used, not unlike the Hebrew *satan*, to indicate the sense of “adversary,” as in one who stands in opposition to another, above any other definition (*OED*).

“Aversary” indicates both opposition and worthiness. The *aglæca* figure is not just an enemy, or someone in conflict with another character; nor is *aglæca* a rival, someone who is in some way competitive in terms of strength or skill. Rather, when a character is described as *aglæca*, he or she must be both: an enemy or opponent whose strength or skills are very comparable to his or her opponent. A battle between *aglæcan* is by nature high-stakes, with both sides risking death in entering the fight. This is why Beowulf’s battle with Grendel makes Grendel *aglæca*: Grendel’s reputation as a fierce and monstrous predator has spread from Denmark to Geatland, and Beowulf has come to pursue him as a means of increasing his own reputation in the event of Beowulf’s victory. A challenger who can be easily defeated because of an inferior something cannot be considered *aglæca*. For instance, characters like Unferth or even Hrothgar could not really qualify as *aglæca* to Beowulf because the former has a limited and low reputation (he is expressly inferior to Beowulf in essentially every possible way) and the latter is an old man, wise but considerably past his prime as a warrior. The ethical or moral code of the *aglæca* is not relevant to his or her status as such; the relationship between *aglæcan* has more to do with “threat” versus “threatened” as opposed to “hero” and “monster”. I argue that the only quality that this term can truly define, based on its appearances in both *Beowulf* and other texts in
the Old English corpus, is whether or not a character being described this way is worthy of being fought and defeated.

Throughout this thesis, I address the most commonly accepted definitions of the word as a means of pointing to how these definitions might come together to form the archetype of *aglæca*. Each of these definitions – warrior, fiend, monster, miserable foe, wretch, fierce combatant – individually appear as disparate and contrary, which we often reconcile by treating such disparities as simply two sides of the same coin, as Klaeber’s gloss suggests. Thus, at its semantic core, the term “adversary” may be the best candidate for locating commonality between these frequently used translations. I would like to assess the word in all of its iterations to demonstrate what qualities an Anglo-Saxon audience would have perceived and understood about a being described as *aglæca*. I argue now that *aglæca* is a set of qualities or traits that, when combined and expressed in this way, gives a measure of the man (or woman, or monster) so described.

The question then, is why is it important to understand what the contemporary audience of *Beowulf* would have thought of such characters? Niles suggests that *Beowulf* “represents a broad collective response to changes that affected a complex society during a period of major crisis and transformation” (133). The poem is elegiac in nature, not only in terms of the characters themselves but also in terms of the unsustainable culture of the Anglo-Saxon ancestors. Beowulf, though a great hero and warrior, ultimately fails to save his people as a result of a justice system based on vengeance. The poem does not merely celebrate and mourn the life and death of Beowulf but of his entire culture, or the possible ancestral culture of the poem’s contemporary audience. *Beowulf* is important culturally because it is a secular poem of a post-conversion Christian society that “reconstruct[s] in imaginary form that period of the past
that was felt to have the most direct influence on the present, or on what people wanted the present to be, or not to be” (Niles 142). If this is the case, then the poem must explore both what it does or does not mean to be heroic or monstrous. Thus, whatever commonalities appear between these character types must demonstrate some idea that the poet wanted the audience to understand about them. I will explore what possibilities may exist in the contemporary understanding of the term aglæca as a way of viewing extraordinary literary (and occasionally historical) figures.

Looking, then, at the appearances of aglæca in the rest of the Old English corpus serves to contextualize the word culturally. Since most of these instances appear in thematically religious texts, it is typically very easy to establish the ethical make-up of any given character, which allows more time to be dedicated in understanding the other qualities of that character. The word is used to characterize several heroic and monstrous figures throughout the corpus, so this common word between these characters should be examined as a way of figuring out the different available meanings of the word and how it may have been abstracted or cemented in its meaning as it developed as a piece of the language. Of course the ideal Anglo-Saxon reader who would have been familiar with this breadth and depth of literature must be largely fictitious, but it can be helpful to imagine such an audience as a means of better understanding the term. Not only does this exercise allow us to examine at least a part of the word’s etymology to figure out how aglæca is used similarly or differently between stories, but also it can help determine whether the Beowulf poet may have been taking some liberties with the meaning of the word for his own purposes.
2 AGLÆCA ACROSS THE OLD ENGLISH CORPUS

Several variants on the word *aglæca* suggest the divisive meanings of the word and also the complications of translating it into present-day English. The primary definition of *aglæca* itself is, according to Bosworth-Toller\(^2\), “a miserable being, wretch, miscreant, monster, fierce combatant.” This is consistent with *agleca* – “a wretch, miscreant,” – and *aglæcea* – “A wretch, miscreant, monster.” *Aglæcwif*, the feminine counterpart of the *aglæca*, appears only once in the entire Old English corpus, describing Grendel’s mother in her grief. Each of these is a noun used to describe a person or creature. *Aglac* or *æglæc* expresses a state of being, “misery, grief, trouble, vexation, sorrow, torment,” and *aglachad* follows suit as “misery-hood, a state of misery.” While these dictionary definitions show a pattern that points to a concrete definition involving the concept of misery, the use of the word in Old English poetry (and prose in the case of *Byrhtferth’s Manual*) conveys a much more complex idea. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus primarily on the weak masculine noun which can indicate not only misery, but also monstrosity and combativeness, unless the grammar of a passage necessitates examining other options.

Variations of this word exist in other Germanic languages as well as in later versions of English. The Old Icelandic adjective *æligr* means something like “vile” or “wretched.” Bosworth-Toller points to the Old High German *aigi-laihi* as one of the points of origin for the word. To look forward from the texts in which *aglæca* initially appears in English, the Middle English word, *ēglēche*, which is a clear descendent of *aglæca*, means “brave” or “fearless” (*MED*). The Oxford English Dictionary observes the sharp distinction between the Old English *aglæca* and *aglac* — “cruel person, fierce warrior,” and “misery, sharp conflict,” respectively — and the Middle English *egleche* as “valiant.” Though the original meaning of the Old English

\(^2\) All definitions from this passage come from Bosworth-Toller.
*aglæca* is one that indicates a combination of formidability and aggression, it is easy to see how such a term might ameliorate to a more positive characteristic that indicates courage. The Middle English Dictionary also suggests that the root –*glæcea* may be related in some way to *glæm*, meaning “radiance” or “splendor.” I am inclined to think that this commonality again reinforces the idea that the qualities possessed by a figure characterized as *aglæca* should be understood to be admirable, even if the actions or motivations of that figure are not.

Returning to the word in Old English, the number of *aglæca* variants expressing some sort of misery suggests that this is the most concrete and possibly earliest definition of the word. However, the characters who are described in this way throughout the Old English corpus do not always meet with this particular connotation. Figures like Beowulf, Sigmund, the Whale, Andreas, and the dragon (of *Beowulf*) are not necessarily (or maybe even likely) meant to be read as miserable or wretched (read here as one driven out of his native country as an exile; see *OED*); the commonality between such a wide variety of characters is their formidable opposition against either specific opponents or against some community in general. Devilish or demonic figures, such as Satan or Juliana’s devil, are certainly wretched and miserable, but this is again in addition to rather than dependent on their status as *aglæca*. *Beowulf*’s Grendel is the character that most closely adheres to the set of definitions of *aglæca*, being a combination of miserable, monstrous, and adversarial.

The word in question appears in some syntactical or grammatical variant in several texts: *Christ and Satan, Juliana, Guthlac, The Whale, Elene, Andreas, Daniel*, several riddles, and *Byrhtferth’s Manual*. The first four clearly point to not only monstrous but specifically demonic figures. The others present rather different possible interpretations. Each instance of *aglæca* will be analyzed and categorized to best explore all possible meanings of the word in context.
While *aglæca* itself is a weak masculine noun, there are moments in which an adjective reading would make more sense than a descriptive noun. One of the most demonstrable examples of this syntactical variation comes in the form of a description of the Venerable Bede.

In *Byrhtferth's Manual*, dated at the beginning of the eleventh century, Bede is characterized as *se æglæca lareow*; Alex Nicholls suggests that taking *æglæca* as a weak adjective instead of an appositional phrase clarifies the reading (147). This particular instance also doesn’t seem to make much sense if “monstrous” is applied to the word, since it doesn’t appropriately characterize Bede at all as a renowned and respected scholar. The more likely meaning of the word lies in his *worthiness* as a scholar or teacher. “The formidable teacher” (Nicholl’s translation) is certainly the most reasonable way of understanding this phrase, and it supports a definition of *aglæca* in general that indicates worthiness, formidability, or opposition. Because the *Manual* can be dated within a few decades of the *Beowulf* manuscript, it can be presumed that the word probably did not undergo such a dramatic shift in semantics as to render this description of Bede completely unrelated to identical descriptions of figures elsewhere in the OE Corpus.

While Byrhtferth was possibly being playful in his description of the formidable Bede, this characterization is clearly one of esteem. Indeed, the *Old English Thesaurus* offers alternative glosses that include one of “reverence” or “respect,” which certainly makes sense in regard to the Venerable Bede, but this sense also fits in with the “formidable adversary” archetype, since a certain amount of regard would be required to name an enemy as such. Orchard suggests that the use of this word to describe Bede, “with no apparent trace of irony,” is among the best arguments for a meaning like “the awe-inspiring one” or “the formidable one” (33). Thus, one of the most compelling arguments for *aglæca* as representing the quality of
impressiveness and formidable character lies in a description of a man of the church and not a (traditional) hero or monster at all.

Most texts in which this term appears, in fact, are religiously thematic in nature (read: most of the Old English corpus), while *Beowulf* is distinctly secular, however influenced by Christian doctrine the narrative may be. Because *Beowulf* is a literary text rather than a religious one, there is greater opportunity for interpretation for the motivations and features of the characters. The monsters of *Beowulf* often have sympathetic characteristics while Beowulf’s behavior (and perhaps Sigmund’s to a lesser degree) is not always strictly heroic. Conversely, in the more thematically religious texts, there is little wiggle room for understanding the role a character plays in a narrative. The demonic characters are distinctly evil and antagonistic, while the heroic characters only ever work in concert with God and Christ. For instance, in *Christ and Satan*, Satan is characterized more than once as *aglæca* because he is the ultimate opponent of God, his Hebrew name again literally meaning “adversary.” Isidore of Seville catalogs this in his *Etymologies* VIII.xi.19: “Satan (Satanas) means “adversary,” or “transgressor” in Latin,” so learned Anglo-Saxons would have been familiar with this term (184). Satan in *Christ and Satan* of course adheres to this moniker as well as several of the characteristics that would mark him as *aglæca*.

In each appearance in *Christ and Satan*, *aglæca* describes Satan himself, who is among Christ’s most formidable adversaries, but who is in context of the poem no longer an active threat to God’s power (being already chained up in Hell). The term seems to be rarely used in this way; in most other appearances *aglæca* refers to an enemy that continues to pose a great threat rather than one that has been defeated. For example, Satan is described in this way in one of the several moments in which he addresses his cohorts with whom he is bound:
Let þa up faran ece drihten;
wuldre hæfde wites clomma
feondum odfæsted, and heo furðor sceaf
in þæt neowle genip, nearwe gebeged,
þær nu Satanus, swearte þingað,
earm aglæca, and þa atolan mid him,
wtum weerge.

Then the Eternal Lord let them go up to glory –
With chains He inflected the fiends, he further thrust them
Into that infernal darkness, crushed into constraint,
Where now Satan darkly addresses them,
Wretched opponent, and those terrible ones with him,
Wearied with tortures. (443-449a) (emphasis mine)

This perhaps alludes to the fact that no matter how Satan is bound and punished by God, his very existence marks him as a permanent threat and enemy, even when he is not actively fighting or rebelling against Christ’s power. This terminology is also consonant with the etymological meaning of “wretch” as one who is exiled from his native country. Because he is the only figure to ever actively wage war against Christ, it stands to reason that his status as a combatant would be permanent. Though he is trapped in Hell, without the hope or even desire to be restored to Heaven, he remains God’s adversary in his efforts to steer Christ’s children, man, toward sin. Several other stories in the Old English corpus detail the actions of Satan’s devils as they go out into the world and tempt Christians away from God through manipulation or violence.

The devil in Juliana, for instance, presents perhaps the most straightforward case for aglæca as adversary: he “includes among his list of triumphs his frequent blinding of human judgment with hostile thoughts and violent desires” (Fox 435). While a monstrous, in fact demonic, figure, his role in the poem is to serve as a direct adversary to Juliana, who attacks and pins him down to interrogate him when he appears to her to tempt her away from God. Juliana fights and overcomes the devil physically, verbally, and spiritually, though he is formidable. He is called aglæca three times, naming him her specific enemy, one worth defeating. The first time
occurs just after the demon lies to Juliana, who is frightened by her doubt of his words, to try to convince her that he is an angel sent from God:

\[
\text{ða wæs seo fæmne} \quad \text{for þam færspelle}
\]
\[
egsan geaclad, \quad \text{þe hyre se aglæca},
\]
\[
wuldres wiþerbreca, \quad \text{wordum sægde.}
\]

The woman was then terrified for the sudden news frightened with terror from the words said by the monstrous opponent, the adversary of glory. (267-269)

He is unable to convince her of his lie, and she binds him in chains and interrogates her, placing her in a position of formidable authority herself. Her capacity for resisting and overcoming this devil in the name of God reiterates the devil’s nature as an adversary against God and his followers. It should not be taken for granted that the devil is a powerful opponent against Christ; rather the audience should understand the danger that Juliana is facing, which emphasizes the sheer power given to the truly faithful, such as the chaste Juliana.

Indeed, the devil’s characterization as aglæca does not change after Juliana has bound him in chains. In the second instance, he confesses his true identity as a citizen of hell, as well as his motivation for seeking her out:

\[
\text{hyre se aglæca} \quad \text{ageaf ondsware},
\]
\[
\text{forhtafongen, fripes orwenas:}
\]
\[
\text{hwæt, mec min fæder on þas fore to þe,}
\]
\[
\text{hellwarena cyning, hider onsende}
\]
\[
\text{of þam engan ham, se is yfla gehwæs}
\]
\[
\text{in þam gornhofe geornfulra þonne ic.}
\]

*The adversary* gave answer, fear-stricken, peace despairing: “So, my father, king of the hell citizens, sent me forth to you, here from that troubled home, in his house of sadness, he is more yearnful than I.” (319-324)

Thus, Juliana is a specific target for Satan, chosen for her strong faith. A catalog of his acts of manipulation and violence reveals a pattern that foreshadows Juliana’s fate: he is often present at the point of martyrdom of saints (Fox 435). The devil tortures Juliana because she is meant to be
the next martyred saint, and he is attempting to thwart such a destiny. His characterization as *aglæca* is then all the more appropriate because he stands not only in opposition to God but also in opposition of Juliana fulfilling her destiny as a Christian saint.

The final characterization of the demon as *aglæca* occurs when he has given up and realizes that he has been overwhelmed by Juliana and cannot tempt her away from God:

> Hyre þa se werga wið þingade,  
> *earm aglæca:* “þu me ærest saga,  
> þu þu gedyrstig þurh deop gehygd  
> wurde þus wigþrist ofer eall wifa cyn,  
> þæt þu mec þus fæste fetrum gebunde,  
> æghwæs orwigne.

The accursed one answered her, *the miserable adversary:* “First say to me, how you, bold through deep thought, became thus battle-bold over all woman kind, that you may thus bind me fast in chains, in all ways helpless.” (429-434a)

In this instance, the word *earm* is used to specifically indicate the demon’s wretchedness and misery. This seems to emphasize the *aglæca* idea of misery, but it also indicates that the word has additional meaning, rather than merely repeating the other descriptor in the phrase. The idea of misery through the use of *earm* leaves room for *aglæca* to indicate the devil’s (perhaps) formidable nature. Juliana’s victory further demonstrates the strength of her faith, and the devil leaves in disgrace, unable to deliver the fated saint to the “king of hell citizens.”

Demonic figures appear in many forms throughout the Old English corpus, some more monstrous than others, such as the Whale of the *Exeter Book*. An allegory for Satan, the whale travels the seas tricking men into approaching him by producing a sweet smell from his mouth that acts as something like a siren song, luring the sea-farers to their doom:

> Þonne hine on holme hungor bysgað  
> ond þone *aglæcan* ætes lysteð,  
> ðonne se mereweard muð ontyned,  
> wide weleras.
When hunger troubles him and the monster wishes to eat, then the sea-warden opens his mouth, the wide lips (51-54a).

The whale consumes the men, and the men ultimately end up in hell. In this instance there is little to question as to what is meant by the word aglæca. While the whale is in fact an adversary of all sea-faring men (who he tempts into wrong)\(^3\), it has no opposition anywhere in this section of the poem; it is a predator looking for prey, a monster swallowing men and sending them to Hell. Rather than posing an immediate threat as a direct opponent for a hero, the Whale is something more akin to a force of nature, or rather a force of the supernatural. Thus, a reading of this passage that indicates monstrosity is appropriate and captures the anxiety or terror caused by the creature.

Aglæca suggests a variety of qualities that range from esteem to ferocity. Among the different uses of the word aglæca is aglac, a neuter noun that may be best translated as merely “conflict” or “misery.” When used in this way, the word refers to a state of being rather than a characteristic. Bosworth-Toller’s definition of this version of the word includes “misery,” “grief,” “trouble,” “vexation,” “sorrow,” and “torment.” Aglac appears in Daniel as well as Riddles 3, 53, and 81. In Daniel, the word indicates the immediate and acute suffering undergone by Daniel’s friends (Ananias, Misael, and Azarias) as the King attempts to burn them to death:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Engel in þone ofn innan becwom} & \quad \text{þær hie þæt aglac drugon}, \\
\text{freobearn fæðmum beþeahte} & \quad \text{under þam fyrenan hrofe}
\end{align*}
\]

The angel came from within the oven where they suffered in vexation, covering the freeborn sons with his embrace under the fiery roof. (237-238)

\(^3\) “Swa bið scinna þeaw,/ deofla wise, þæt hi drohtende/ þurh dyrne meaht dugucoðe beswicað;/ ond on teosu tyhtæþ 

\[\text{tilra dæda;/ wemæð on willan, þæt hy wræþ secen;/ frofre to feondum, oþþæt hy fæst ðær;} \]

\[\text{æt þam wærlogan wic geceosað.}” (ll 31b-37) “The Whale.”
This seems to be the only time in which any variation of the word *aglæca* is used to describe an urgent, acute situation. In all other uses of the word, especially when the word indicates “misery,” it suggests a long term rather than a temporary feeling. For instance, in the riddles, *aglac* seems to connote an ongoing state of being, rather than a point of immediate suffering as it does in *Daniel*. The word in the riddles appears as follows. Riddle 3, which is not completely decipherable reads:

Nah ic hwyrfweges  
of þam *aglace*, ac ic eþelstol  
hæleþa hrere; hornsalu wagiað,  
weræ wicstede, weallas bofiað,  
stape ofer stiwitum.

“I do not have a way out from that *misery*, but I roil the homeland of heroes, shaking the horned halls, men’s homesteads, quaking the walls, steep over their stewards.” (6b-10a)

And in Riddle 53:

Wæter hine ond eorþe  
feddan fægre,  opþæt he frod dagum  
on oþrum wearð *aglachade*

“Water and earth fed it fair, until it wizened in days to come, met with *misery*.” (3b-5)

Finally, in Riddle 81, which is also difficult to read in some places, the riddle says:

Aglac dreoge,  
þær mec wegeð se þe wudu hrereð,  
ond mec stondende streamas beatað,  
hægl se hearda, ond hrim þeceð,  
[..]orst> […..]eoseð, ond fealleð snaw  
on þyrelwombne, ond ic þæt ..[..]ol[………]  
[………..] mæ[..] wonsceaf mine.

Vexation I suffer, where he moves me who roils the forest, and standing streams beat me, hardened hail, and thick rime covers me, and snow falls in my hollowed belly.” (6b-11)
When used in this way, *aglac* refers to a state of being, not a quality possessed by the speaker or a character. The only time that the word seems to appear for such purposes using the *-æ* form (*æglæce*) with this definition is in *Elene*.

In *Elene*, the word appears in regard to a weapon given to Constantine:

\[
\text{Þis bið beorna gehwam wið æglæce unoferswĩðed wæpen æt wigge.}
\]

This is to any man an indomitable weapon against the torment of war\(^4\). (1186b-1188a)

The weapon here is the bridle made from the nails of Jesus’ cross, given to Constantine, which will make him win all of his battles\(^5\). The presumption seems to be that since Constantine is the first Christian-converted Emperor of Rome, his enemies may also be enemies of God or Christ. Since it is in the dative singular, it makes sense to translate it as a neuter noun that captures the spirit of the phrase without attempting to change the grammatical foundation rather than forcing a plural where there isn’t one. However, though I have used “torment” in my own translation, it still seems not to entirely capture the full meaning of this sentence. A translation that doesn’t at least capture the idea of opposition seems to decontextualize what the bridle does. It doesn’t protect the user from the maladies of war but rather guarantees victory against one’s opponents or adversaries, so perhaps a translation that indicates the bridle’s ability as a weapon “against enmity (or the enemy) in war” would be more appropriate. However, such an emendation seems to deviate dramatically from traditionally accepted translations and would necessitate further defense elsewhere in the scholarship.

\(^4\) The word *unoferswĩðed* seems to me like it could be modifying *æglæca* rather than *wæpen* so it could also be translated as something close to “This is to any man against an undefeated adversary a weapon of war.” However, for my purposes here I have chosen to adhere to the more widely accepted understanding of this passage.

\(^5\) This story is told by several scholars, including Sozomen and Theodoret.
There is much more play in the meaning of *aglæca* in the verse telling of *Andreas*⁶, which demonstrates the nuanced range of characteristics that the word can signify. It appears three times, but unlike in *Juliana*, it refers to three wildly different types of characters. The first refers to the cannibals, who after discovering that their store of prisoners meant for consumption was gone, attempted to reconcile the situation by turning against the son of one of their own with the intention of making him into the next meal.

Hæfdon æglæcan
sæcce gesohte.

The wretched opponents had sought for strife. (1131b-1132a)

There is a strong connotation not only of misery but also monstrosity in this passage. Cannibalism is a nearly universal taboo, the crime that made Grendel in *Beowulf* seem to be more monster than man. Here is an entire society of human beings who partake in the flesh of their own, though they are still entirely distinct from the devils of the same narrative. In the end, while the devils are still irredeemable, the cannibalistic society converts to Christianity and is forgiven by God. Thus, the description of *aglæca* also must indicate their enmity against God and against Andrew. The second use of *aglæca* refers to one of Andrew’s tormentors, who has come to interrogate him after he has been captured:

₆ The prose version of the story of St. Andrew does not seem to take such descriptive license using this term as the verse version.

Then came one of seven going to the hall, *loathsome evil-minded adversary*, murderous prince of evil murk-cloaked, death-cruel devil deprived of blessings.
He began then to speak words of contempt to the saint: “What were you thinking, Andreas, to come hither to this wrathful place?” (1311-1317a).

The *aglæca* of this passage is distinctly demonic. His interrogation of Andrew places him as a direct opponent, although here he is more of a mental and spiritual adversary than a physical one; this devil orders Andrew to be physically tortured rather than engaging him in combat. Finally, the last and most interesting appearance of *aglæca* actually comes from a line of dialog from a devil to Satan himself, in which he is referring to Andrew:

```
Habbað word gearu
wið þam æglæcan
eall getrahtod.
```

“Have words, completely considered, ready against that adversary.” (1358b-1359)

This moment is particularly compelling because it is a demon referring to the explicit hero of the story. The ethics and the boundaries between good and evil are fixed in *Andreas*; in other words, the devils know that they are on the side of evil, rebels against God. Andrew qualifies as *aglæca* because he has withstood mental, spiritual, and physical torments and not only survived but also continued to rejoice in God and Christ: he is a fierce opponent against Satan and the citizens of hell. Here *aglæca* is used in several passages in one work to consistently indicate an adversary or opponent, regardless of the ethical standing of the character so described.

In looking at each of these works and analyzing the context of *aglæca*, a pattern slowly emerges that demonstrates a complex nuance of the word that suggests that whoever or whatever is described in such terms cannot merely be miserable but must exhibit other extraordinary qualities that can and are set in opposition to other characters. These extraordinary qualities are not bound by ethics and can be possessed just as easily by a monster as by a hero. The monster
with extraordinary strength is just as much *aglæca* as the hero whose immense strength never fails him.
3 THE MONSTERS OF BEOWULF

Understanding that the *aglæca* figure must demonstrate extraordinary skills of strategy and aggression and must be in opposition to another is the key to understanding the word overall. Particularly in the context of *Beowulf*, the audience cannot avoid making a comparison between the monsters and the heroes in their characteristics and actions. The *Beowulf* poet, while using the word in similar ways to how it has been used in other works, seems to complicate the word, perhaps intentionally questioning what identifies a hero or a monster.

The majority of the characters in the OE corpus are not only combatants but they also seem to demonstrate a specific strategy in their combativeness. For example, there is a specific difference between Beowulf’s fighting style and Grendel’s that is worth examining as a means of trying to understand the poet’s use of *aglæca*. Grendel’s predatory nature is contrasted by Beowulf’s more battle-oriented fighting: “In brief, Grendel wants to ravage like a predator, whereas Beowulf insists on contesting with him like a con-specific adversary (that is, as a member of the same biological species)” (Parks 2). Parks elaborates on the difference between agonistic and predatorial aggression, in which predatorial aggression tends to victimize other species while agonistic aggression is directed at members of the same species (Parks 2-3). Beowulf does not treat Grendel as a monstrous opponent but sets the terms of battle between two human warriors, though Grendel would not only slaughter but also consume his opponent. Throughout the poem, *aglæca* is used to describe characters in a combative situation that necessitates not only ferocity but also strategy.

W. P. Ker’s criticism of *Beowulf* was written at a point in which medieval scholars were attempting to establish definitions and boundaries for what made medieval literature, frankly, literature. Tolkien, thirty years later, respectfully disagrees with his idea of a “disproportion [in *Beowulf*] that puts the irrelevances in the centre and the serious things on the outer edges” (qtd.
Tolkien does not see a problem with the idea that *Beowulf* might just be a serious poem that is also about monsters. This viewpoint changed the way we look at *Beowulf* from a rather poor record of some history to a work of great art from the height of the Anglo-Saxon period. By accepting the centralized monsters as an asset rather than a flaw of *Beowulf’s* poetry, Tolkien provided a mode of looking at the Anglo-Saxon culture and their understanding of heroism through the monstrous figures.

Each of the monstrous characters of *Beowulf* – Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon – embodies a different type of anxiety and behaves distinctly from the others. Their commonality is therefore not in the specific nature of their monstrosity but in their worthiness as opponents. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s popular idea about monsters “that the monster became a kind of cultural shorthand for the problems of identity construction, for the irreducible difference that lurks deep within the culture-bound self” (348) is perhaps a bit limiting in terms of all of the things a monster could represent, but this theory at least provides a good foundation for reading the monsters of *Beowulf*. Each monster plays on a cultural anxiety that would have been common to the audience of the poem: Grendel shows the awful loneliness and peril of being an exile, his mother demonstrates the consequences of a justice system based on blood vengeance, and the dragon’s attack has many similar destructive qualities to an all-out invasion. Because of this, the monsters are necessarily reflective of the human nature of the culture that created them. The descriptor *aglæca* is a result of this human reflection rather than a monstrous one.

To elaborate, Grendel and his mother are both characterized as *aglæca*, as worthy adversaries of Beowulf, skilled opponents who are willing to aggressively confront their perceived enemies. They are, however, vastly more complex than this. They are not mere creatures inserted as a tool to demonstrate the awesome power of the main character. Instead
they do several things that subvert the greatness of both the society and the system that would
generate a figure such as Beowulf. The Danes subscribe to a system of justice that involves two
options for punishment for violent crimes: paying *wergild*, or violent revenge (*Beowulf* lines
154-158). Besides her genetic inheritance and the fact that she is a maternal figure, Grendel’s
mother performs actions that are all well within the parameters of this Danish vengeance system.
Grendel is not in a position to pay *wergild* and the poem declares that he wouldn’t anyway, and
the only reason that vengeance hasn’t already been taken against him is that apparently no one in
Denmark is strong and aggressive enough to do so.

Grendel is described as *aglæca* more frequently than any other character in *Beowulf* and
is a good starting point for observing the variability of the word. A survey of the moments
within the text when he is so characterized demonstrates the liberality with which the poet uses
the term. He fits all of the standard understandings of what the word means, from “adversary” to
“monster” to “warrior,” and to “miserable wretch.” His *aglachad*, or “misery-hood” is readily
apparent throughout the text; he is fueled by his misery in every one of his actions, fight or flight.
He is most definitely a “fierce combatant” though only evenly matched with Beowulf when
Beowulf is unarmed and without armor. His predatory nature suggests a level of monstrosity
that may be the point on which the modern understanding of *aglæca* developed to include
“monster” in its definition.

Grendel is an understood outsider by the Danes, more than just a predator, though the
Danes themselves do not recognize him as the kin of Cain. Though a monster, he seems to be
“inhuman in the sense that it is no longer human” (Phillips 41). This does not suggest that he
and his kind have always already been non-human but that he has, through the sins of his
ancestry, had his humanity stripped away. I would argue that this makes the monstrous Grendel
more warrior than predator, in spite of his anthropophagous nature. The use of *aglæca* for Grendel places him alongside the more specifically warrior characters than it does the Satanic or demonic ones of other works in the Old English corpus. Grendel wreaks violence and vengeance but he has no verbalized or explicitly expressed motivations, which the Satanic and demonic characters typically do (e.g., tempting their foes to turn against God, leading adversaries to Hell, etc.). His motivations for killing the Danes have less to do with his biblical genealogy and more to do with his status as an outsider. However, he also does not fall solely within the category of a warrior. His bloodlust is motivated by revenge rather than a desire for glory or as a means of defense, and anthropophagy certainly stands out as a habit outside of those of the average warrior. But before Beowulf comes along, he has no one to fight against; the presence of another warrior, another *aglæca*, might actually be what makes Grendel *aglæca*.

Grendel is the most recognizably human-like monster that Beowulf encounters. He is recognized as a descendant of Cain, who, if not human himself, is very like a human. Orchard points out Grendel and his mother are “not of precisely the same race of giants” as Cain’s original descendants, but creatures who can elicit a degree of “pity” (58-59). His motivations are not “the standing invitation to predators that is protein and fat, but the sound reaching him in his lair of a recital in the hall of the Danes” but the noise associated with the community of Heorot, from which he is excluded (Phillips 43). He is consumed with emotion—“onbræd þa bealohhydig, þa he gebolgen wæs” – he pulled open the door with bloodlust, filled with rage, rather than the hunger or fear that might be associated with an aggressive animal (line 723). Grendel represents the conflicting nature of humanity as a creature that lives next to, but always outside of, society; he “is unsettling not simply because it is intent on our destruction, but also because it is related to us: the uncanniness of the monster is tied up with the questionability of
what it means to be human” (Phillips 42). Grendel’s complex nature invites the audience to think about which of his qualities are truly monstrous and which are human nature.

One function of Beowulf is to compel the audience to reflect on their own identities and to see themselves and their anxieties in these extraordinary figures. Freud describes the uncanny as “the word heimlich exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, unheimlich. What is heimlich thus comes to be unheimlich,” with “heimlich” meaning “concealed” or “hidden away” (Freud 420). For example, within the poem, Beowulf’s brutality, a quality which is useful but also dangerous, is often concealed by his heroism. Conversely, that which is hidden within the monsters is their human quality, those characteristics that would prey on the anxieties of the audience – exile, loss, extinction. The true natures of the monsters and of Beowulf are not immediately transparent. The monsters are the unfamiliar made familiar with human characteristics, while Beowulf as a hero becomes unfamiliar in his invasive actions against the monsters. Or rather, Beowulf’s actions become suddenly too familiar, too much like Grendel’s own. The concealed identities of the creatures belie their immediate terror; rather than producing anxiety or fear because of their actions, they create a sense of horror based on their human nature.

Grendel exhibits an explicit duality of human and supernatural elements that make him especially terrifying. Additionally he performs acts that are not only universally horrifying but biblically sinful: “The full horror of this cannibalistic feasting is savoured in detail, and to Christian ears must have sounded an unholy offence” (Orchard 64). Grendel (and possibly though without explicit confirmation his mother) is an eater of human flesh. This seems to be taken as read in the text as cannibalism, which seems to place Grendel precisely on the boundary between human and monstrous, a liminal space in which he can behave like a monster while
maintaining enough humanity to make his behavior abjectly terrifying. Grendel’s commonalities with humans make him almost more terrifying than his distinctions. His designation as aglæca then reinforces the terror that he invokes when he (or just the thought of him) is present.

The next time Grendel is described as aglæca is during his cinematic entry into Heorot to wreak havoc, at the moment when he is most worthy as an adversary and precisely Beowulf’s motivations for visiting the Danes. At lines 730b-734a, Grendel enters Heorot, with the intention of slaughtering and consuming everyone inside:

Then his heart rejoiced; he intended to rend before day came, the terrible adversary, each one’s life from their body, when there came to him the hope of a lavish feast.” (730b-734a)

This is a decided invasion of Hrothgar’s territory; he is aggressively approaching the hall with the intent of causing death and destruction, with a certain joyous malice. Very quickly afterwards, Grendel is renamed aglæca, as he commits the sin of eating human flesh. In lines 739-742a, he finds the first sleeping Geat on the floor and eats him:

“The fierce assailant did not delay, but he quickly seized the first sleeping warrior he came across, rent him without restraint, bit into his muscles, drank blood from his veins, swallowed the sinful bites.” (739-742a)

Liuzza comments about this passage, stating that aglæca “literally means ‘awesome one’ or ‘terror’ is elsewhere applied to the dragon-slaying Sigmund… and to Beowulf himself.” (75,
footnote). Liuzza here translates *aglæca* as “monster,” admitting that the translation is “tendentious.” This is Grendel at his most monstrous and terrifying, so it makes sense that this is one of the places where *aglæca* is uncontested in being translated as “monster” or “horror.”

As I noted earlier, this may be a point upon which Grendel’s status as *aglæca* in the sense of fierce combativeness rather than merely monstrosity becomes apparent. Before this point, Grendel has primarily acted as a predator; the introduction of Beowulf, an opponent both strong and aggressive enough to contend with Grendel, gives him the opportunity to combat with an enemy rather than merely preying on him. Parks suggests that “he symbolic accomplishment of Beowulf the hero is to reject the role of prey and to establish himself as Grendel's worthy opponent” (2). I see this idea functioning dynamically for both characters; Beowulf proves himself *aglæca* by fighting Grendel on his level, and Grendel becomes *aglæca* by virtue of Beowulf having named him so and pursued him not in a predatory relationship but on a consanguineous, to borrow a term from Phillips, footing (41-42). This ferocious but still combative nature of the fight between Beowulf and Grendel is one the points on which they are bonded by comparison rather than contrast. Orchard in fact suggests that “the fury experienced by both Beowulf and Grendel is a further factor which links the combatant” (32). It may be useful to think of *aglæca* as a term that is most usually (though not always) used to describe a figure who is actively opposing another. In this sense, Beowulf and Grendel are each characterized as *aglæca* specifically because they are each the opponent of the other.

Lines 999-1002a mark the moment that Grendel is reduced from a worthy adversary to a “destitute man,” *feasæft, guma*:

```
hrof ana genæs
  ealles ansund, þe se aglæca
  fyrendædum fag on fleam gewand,
  aldres orwena.
```
The roof alone survived wholly un-sundered, when that awful adversary, stained with wicked deeds went in flight, despairing of his life. (999-1002a)

He is no longer *aglæca* but a dying warrior, more reflective of the human condition than ever. He is ”aldres orwena,” “despairing of life,” hurt, bleeding, and runs home to his mother to die among his own kind, as any human might (1002). Grendel is humanized here, made into an object of our pity through the graphic description of his suffering, to remind us that even though he is a monster and descendant of Cain, he is among the last of his kind, an exile, and uncannily similar to any individual living on the periphery of society. The destitute, lonely Grendel “represents the frightening prospect that any of the poem's readers might suffer such a fate” (Sandner 166). At this moment, Beowulf becomes an enemy in this story rather than just a hero. He shifts from protecting the threatened Danes to being an aggressive threat to Grendel (and quickly, his mother). His heroism is secondary to his formidable nature; he’s simply *aglæca* and still an adversary. The purpose of the poem is not to describe the epic adventures of Beowulf the hero, but to examine the flaws of a feuding tribal society that would fight each other out of existence. The consequence of Grendel’s slaying is retaliation from Grendel’s mother, the very last of her kin, and just as worthy an *aglæca* as Grendel ever was, if not more so.

The introduction of Grendel’s mother immediately characterizes her as *aglæca* but also as the sympathetic figure of a mother who has lost her son. Lines 1258b-1263a describe her misery, but also remind the audience that she and Grendel suffer because of the sins of their ancestor.

```plaintext
ides aglæcwif
se þe wæteregesan
cealde streamas,
to ecbanan
fæderenmæge
Grendles modor,
yrmþe gemunde,
wunian scolde,
siðdan Ca[ín] wearð
angan breþer,
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“Grendel’s mother, woman warrior, her misery on her mind, who dwelt in the fearsome waters, cold streams, since Cain was the sword-slayer to his brother, his father’s kin.” (1258b-1263a)

Shortly after this she makes her way to Heorot herself to avenge her son; for this, she “is clearly right by human law in carrying on a feud for her son,” but the mention of Cain here reminds the audience not to be overly sympathetic towards her (Olsen 67). There is much scholarship surrounding Grendel’s mother and the importance to the story of her gender and of her motherhood, as well as her importance to the code of vengeance. In Paul Acker’s “Horror and the Maternal in Beowulf” he states that “through her is projected an anxiety over the failure of vengeance as a system of justice and that her ‘powers of horror’ (borrowing Julia Kristeva’s phrase) partly reside in (or are attributed to) her maternal nature” (703). Grendel’s mother causes anxiety because she is a woman, and more importantly, a mother who is taking an active role in seeking out vengeance for her dead son, which is not a social role normally attributed to a maternal figure. Menzer points out that “Grendel’s mother cannot be just a female aglæca because the morpheme wif does not act as a female marker in Old English; wif cannot be added to aglæca to make the word female” (2). Wif, by all accounts, means “woman,” not “female.”

Her monstrosity here is less fundamental to her identity than her status as aglæcwif, which “denotes a woman, a human female, who is also aglæca” (Menzer 2). She takes on a nontraditional role because she is the last of her tribe. The “misery on her mind” as she grieves her son is then a humanizing agent that renders her sympathetic, though that grief comes with the reminder that she is evil at her roots.

The translations for many of the words that describe Grendel’s mother have been notoriously unsympathetic and, more importantly, inhuman in nature. Perhaps it is largely

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7 See Bosworth-Toller, the Dictionary of Old English.
because she is Grendel’s mother, and Grendel is so readily recognized as a monster, but over the years translators have used words about her, such as “wif” and “ides” as opportunities to add to her monstrosity, even when they only indicate that she is a woman. The phrase from above, for instance, “ides aglæcwif,” which literally translated says “woman, woman warrior,” has been translated as “monstrous hag,” “she-monster,” and “monstrous hell-bride,” all of which seem to be taking some significant poetic liberties (Hennequin 520). The passage that best exemplifies the importance of Grendel’s mother’s sex is in lines 1282b-1287, when she first enters Heorot to seek revenge:

Wæs se gryre læssa
efne swa micle swa bið mægþa cræft,
wiggryre wives be wæpnedmen,
þonne heoru bunden, hamere geþruen
sweord swate fah swin ofer helme
ecgum dyhtig andweard scireð.

“The terror was less just as much as a woman’s skill, a woman’s war terror is to an armed man’s, when sword-bound, hammer forged blood streaked blade, edges strong, cuts the boar from an opposing helm.” (1282b-1287)

Of all of the monsters of Beowulf, Grendel’s mother actually most closely exemplifies the warrior definition of aglæca, based on this description. She has a specific cause to fight for (vengeance for her son) rather than the nearly impotent vengeful rage that Grendel exhibits through his attack on Heorot. She is certainly strong enough and battle-savvy enough to hold her own against Beowulf, who recognizes the threat she poses and thus troubles himself with armor and weaponry. Though he himself does not name her as his specific adversary, he certainly recognizes it and prepares himself for a fight in accordance with the system of blood justice in place for the Danes. While Grendel could not be counted on to pay out for his bloody attacks on Heorot, Grendel’s mother swiftly takes revenge for her own loss. She is ruled completely by her misery, her own aglachad as it were, as she plots and carries out her revenge
for Grendel. She, like Grendel, exemplifies the status of *aglæca* in agreement with several of the available understandings of the word. Not only is she wretched by any definition, but she is also a very worthy opponent for Beowulf when he seeks to retaliate for her revenge attempt on Æscere.

Grendel’s mother often gets reduced even more to a monstrous form than Grendel does, proven by some of the less than flattering translations assigned to her as stated previously, but this is a significant oversight to the nature of her character’s horrifying fate. Her roles throughout the poem complicate her, making her effectively more reflective of human nature than the other monsters, especially as they are stripped from her one by one. Throughout the narrative, Beowulf destroys her status as a mother by killing her son, which forces the role of *aglæcwif* or adversary on her as she pursues justice; he then defeats her, effectively eliminating her role as adversary (the last remaining piece of her identity) and kills her, eradicating her tribe altogether. Grendel’s mother is not just beaten; she is completely destroyed on every level of her personal and cultural identity, and Beowulf is left the victor. She is rendered monstrous because she does not follow the typical roles of her gender as *ides* or *wif* when she takes matters into her own hands and fights alone, but in reality the poem does not truly depict her as a monster or a villain (Hennequin 504). She is exactly *aglæcwif*, a woman who is an adversary, an active threat to the Danes and Beowulf.

Grendel’s mother puts up a much more dangerous fight against Beowulf than her son had been able to. Even Beowulf cannot deny in his rather detail-absent rendition of the story later on in Heorot, that she nearly killed him and his armor saved him, and that only a magic giant-made sword allowed him to defeat her (lines 1652-1676). The text in the lines translated above “is not comparing the strength or prowess of men and women, but rather the terror that opponents feel
when attacked by men warriors as opposed to women warriors,” which suggests that the warriors severely underestimated her (Hennequin 506). After all, Beowulf bravely pursues her onto her own turf, but he makes certain to grab his battle gear first. She may then be a more formidable opponent than Grendel, and Beowulf’s own status as *aglæca* is thus more strongly cemented (at least to the audience if not the other characters of the poem) through his pursuit of her. Slaying one monster is a heroic feat alone, but to then kill a more dangerous opponent and simultaneously destroy one side of an aggressive feud can only further enhance the hero’s glory in battle. It is helpful to remember that even Beowulf recognizes her as an escalated threat, a more worthy *aglæca*, as it were; he may have battled Grendel on his own terms, but he was prepared with weapon and armor when he pursued Grendel’s mother in her mere.

Beowulf’s obliteration of Grendel and his mother provides him with enough credibility to help him maintain a fierce reputation for fifty years. The entire rest of his career is very quickly summarized before the trouble with the dragon is introduced\(^8\). This passage between Beowulf’s return to Geatland and his battle with the dragon is so brief that it emphasizes the importance of Beowulf’s monster-slaying abilities, the qualities that characterize him as *aglæca*, over all of his other characteristics and accomplishments. Though he has aged fifty years and has acted as advisor to rulers and ruled in his own right, it is his continued worthiness as an opponent against terrifying monsters that makes up the core of his identity. Beowulf is not just the only warrior who can go against the dragon; his identity as a formidable adversary coming against a threat to his people will not allow him to behave otherwise.

The dragon, fire-breathing and larger than life, is less animal and supernatural creature, a “legend is a potent creation of men’s imagination, richer in significance than his barrow is in gold” (Tolkien 16). The dragon’s treasure in this narrative is almost trivial; it is merely the

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\(^8\) See Fred Robinson, T.A. Shippey, and Christine Rauer for more on this transition passage.
catalyst that begins the conflict between the dragon and Beowulf. What is more important is the threat that the dragon represents and the resulting destruction of a community over something like treasure, resources, and an absence of a leader fit to defend his people. The dragon encompasses many of the challenges that a hero of Beowulf’s caliber faces; he is a monster that Beowulf can directly (though fatally) engage with, but he is also not unlike an oncoming invasion of other tribes that might eradicate the Geats as easily as Beowulf dispatches the kin of Cain. Though the dragon is defeated, Beowulf does not survive the fight and leaves his community open to the danger of a literal rather than metaphorical invasion. The two adversaries cancel each other out in death, demonstrating that Beowulf’s truly worthy opponent comes in the shape of a monstrous, fire-breathing serpent, which is why during this battle the two are actually described as an adversarial pair.

The two opponents are, more than any other combative pairing within the narrative, most directly comparable. For context, once again we examine this particular appearance of the word:

\[\text{Næs ða long to ðon þæt ða alglæcean hy eft gemetton.}\]

“It was not long until the fierce adversaries came together again.” (2591b-2592)

Beowulf is considerably more cognizant of the dangers involved in a dragon battle than he has been in previously. He specifically prepares armor and a new shield for the battle, and for the first time in the entire narrative, he contemplates exactly what he’s going to be doing. Even at this point he struggles to confront his own mortality and his fear of the future, instead comparing his own feelings to that of a mourning father. However, he is still a formidable opponent even well into his old age, still *aglæca* even when in battle with the dragon.
Similarly, the dragon is described as *aglæca* up until the point of his death, perhaps foreshadowing that because he and Beowulf are so equally matched, neither of them will be able to survive the battle. In lines 2903-2906a, both opponents lay awaiting their fate:

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him on efn ligeð ealdorgewinna
sexbennum seoc; sweord ne meahte
on ðam *aglæcean* ænge þinga
wunde gewyrcean.
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Beside him lay the deadly foe sick with seax-wounds; he could not with his sword work a wound in that *fierce assailant* in any way.

The dragon dies, leaving Beowulf mortally wounded, allowing for the (perhaps momentary) salvation of the Geatish people, though at the expense of their greatest and seemingly only truly formidable adversary against potential enemies. There is no indication that Beowulf has a successor of any kind who will be able to step up in the role of *aglæca* as he did fifty years previously. This points directly to the elegiac nature of the narrative which dictates that the type of community from which Beowulf is generated is by nature not sustainable. The *aglæca* may be formidable, powerful, aggressive, and occasionally monstrous, but it is by virtue a temporary figure in society.
4 THE HEROIC AGLÆCA IN BEOWULF

Most of the *aglæca* characters in the Old English Corpus are either religious or at the very least allegorical. The fact that the characters in *Beowulf* are distinctly literary and not specifically Christian makes a material difference in how they are to be read. Grendel’s lack of description matters. The dragon’s lack of an expressed allegorical moral or meaning matters. Because the characters are fantastic rather than allegorical (and this must include Beowulf and Sigmund, for though they are heroic figures, they are still supernatural), they do not come pre-equipped with a specific meaning that can be implicitly understood by their very existence. As Sandner says, “The fundamental characteristic of the fantastic is displacement; the fantastic signifier does not point, even superficially, to any clear signified and so causes the reader to experience a lack, a disruption, inviting (if not provoking) an interpretation” (163). Thus, the reader should not strictly delineate the monsters and heroes as being morally or ethically absolute but rather complicate the situations of each character.

It is, then, perfectly appropriate that both the monsters and the heroes are defined as *aglæca*. The term is meant to instill fear and emphasize the physical and mental fortitude needed to be extraordinary, regardless of ethical makeup. 9 Beowulf’s behavior in Heorot, which first allows him to be distinguished as *aglæca*, “defines him as a hero, for the degree of risk he takes distinguishes him above other men” (O’Keefe 492). The relationship between monster and hero is necessarily a close one. To be either one is to inhabit certain qualities, particularly in terms of being violent, skilled, and perhaps most importantly, willing to accept the consequences of taking action, particularly in terms of mortality. A large part of the identity of either character type lies in being the adversary, which is the part of any given character’s identity that is the foundation of being *aglæca*. While Beowulf is most certainly the hero of his own story, his role as such is

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9 See Dobbie, Huffines, and O’Keefe.
fundamentally less important than his role as an adversary, a formidable opponent of the dangers to his followers.

The term *aglæca* then must be understood as a description that helps to bridge the gap in the dichotomy between monster and hero. Andy Orchard suggests, in “Psychology and Physicality: The Monsters of *Beowulf*,” that “whatever the precise connotations of the term, the fact that the poet employs the word to designate not only monsters but monster-slayers clearly underlines the linked contrasts between the worlds of monster and men which run throughout the poem and the manuscript” (33). I would push this further and say that it is not merely a matter of “linked contrasts” but that the monsters and heroes are inextricably linked to one another in the poem. The heroes literally cannot be what they are without the existence of the monsters; and the monsters’ characteristics, from their formidability to their humanity, can only be understood through the actions of the monster-slayers that they encounter. Beowulf is most himself, and more importantly most characteristic of a hero, when he is in the midst of battling a monster. He can give the audience the entire sum of the rest of his career in one brief speech that describes everything that happened in the last fifty years because the really defining moments of his life involve his killing monsters. This is part of what makes Beowulf *aglæca*: his identity as a hero is defined not by his leadership but by his combined ability and willingness to confront the fears that no one else in a community can.

When Beowulf first arrives in Heorot, he is so eager for the glory of a new tale about his defeating a monster that he determines to fight Grendel without armor or weapons. Grendel is a persistent invader of Heorot, and Beowulf’s plan is to allow him to invade once more as *aglæca*, so that Beowulf can ambush and destroy him. Beowulf’s determination to do this without weapons puts him on even footing with Grendel, allowing him to create a less predatory and
more combative atmosphere in their battle. In order to prove himself heroically and as
“supremely human”, Beowulf must forego his weapons and fight Grendel on this level, “to
challenge Grendel with his own primitive weapon, his grip” (O’Keefe 492). In this, Beowulf
effectively interpolates Grendel’s characteristics onto himself to better imbue the role of aglæca.
In fact, the first time aglæca appears in the poem is in 420b-426a, when Beowulf introduces
himself to Hrothgar and explains his visit to the Danes:

```
þær ic fife geband,
yode eotena cyn,  ond on yðum slog
niceras nihtes,    nearoþearfe dreah,
wræc Wedera nið     —wean ahsondon—
forgrand gramum;     ond nu wið Grendel sceal
wið þam aglæcan     ana gehegan
díng wið þyre.
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“When I bound five, laid waste to a tribe of giants, and in the waves slew water
monsters by night, fought through that dire place, avenged the rancor of the
Weders – they sought trouble! – and crushed those fierce foes; and now with
Grendel, with that warrior, I would alone encounter with this formidable one.”
(420b-426a)

Beowulf is in search specifically of an adversary that will help him further improve his own
reputation as a worthy opponent. He lists the other types of battles that he has fought—always
with monstrous creatures—and now he is ready to fight Grendel also, partly for his own
reputation and partly because his family owes Hrothgar’s for services to Beowulf’s father
Ecgtheow during a previous encounter. This is the most explicit example of the word aglæca as
a term used to describe a character’s worthiness as an opponent. Beowulf is specifically seeking
out Grendel because he has a fearsome and bloody reputation for invading the Danish hall which
should be a place of civilization and society. Olsen points out that most of the time that the poet
uses aglæca, the character described in that way is in the midst of or about to invade the territory
of another (66).
Thus, the vocabulary used to describe such larger than life characters can do much to reveal both the reverent affection and the recognition of the failings of those ancestral figures. That Beowulf is *aglæca*, a fierce adversary capable of fighting both human and supernatural enemies, does not address his skills as a leader and in fact puts him in company with the very monsters that he fights. Beowulf is a “man of action [who] will never give up the external world on which he can try out his strength” (Freud 31). When the dragon’s attack is imminent, Beowulf makes preparations for weapons and armor, but he never considers sending a younger, stronger hero to try his strength as Beowulf did in his youth. To Beowulf, this is the only reasonable course of action, despite the fact that he recognizes that his death may lead to the destruction of his community. Freud’s “man of action” archetype works here because, as *aglæca*, Beowulf’s way of interacting with the world is as an adversary against those who would commit violence against his people, even if it is at the expense of their ultimate safety. While Wiglaf puts himself forward as Beowulf’s apparent successor, he does not appear to have the advantage of many of Beowulf’s heroic qualities (and does not appear to have been groomed for a leadership role) and we already know from the end of the poem and other works that the Geats are eradicated after Beowulf’s death.

There is in fact a pattern of ambiguity in the verse whenever Beowulf is being characterized as *aglæca*. The poet seems to deliberately complicate the language to force the audience to think about which character or characters should be understood as *aglæca*. For instance, the first time that Beowulf is called *aglæca* is in 1269-1274a is a description of Beowulf’s fight with Grendel.

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Þær him* aglæca ætgæpe wearð;
hwæþre he gemunde mægenes strenge,
gimfæste gife ðe him God sealed,
ond him to Anwaldan are gelyfde,
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*aglæca*
frofre ond fultum; ðy he þone feond overcwom,
gehnægde helle gast.

There the fierce warrior grappled him*, but he remembered his powerful strength, the great gifts that God gave him, and he trusted in the Almighty for solace and support; thus he then overcame the fiend, held down the hell guest.

There strange ambiguity in this phrase makes it difficult at first to discern whether aglæca is meant to represent Beowulf or Grendel. The “he” in 1270a is clearly meant to denote Beowulf, but some scholars have argued that line 1269a could represent one or the other, and perhaps the ambiguity is deliberate to indicate both. Liuzza translates the beginning of this passage as “When the great beast began to seize him,” and Heaney translates it “The monster wrenched and wrestled with him.” Klaeber too, cites that Grendel is the aglæca subject here. However, because the Beowulf poet often uses deliberate ambiguity as a feature of the poetry, it seems worth contemplating the different ways this passage could be read. The fact that Beowulf’s formidable nature is so frequently described alongside that of his monstrous opponent again insists on comparison as well as contrast, to indicate that he “is both the worst as well as the best of a violent heroism” (Sandner 169). This pattern of ambiguity, which will be examined further throughout this chapter, demonstrates the insistent need to compare the explicitly heroic character of Beowulf with the overtly monstrous ones and conclude that though these character types exhibit many differences, they have in common a status created by their skills as warriors and by their willingness to act out against their enemies.

In this sense, aglæca acts as a type of social status related to a figure’s fighting skills and aggression. As Beowulf slays monsters, his reputation as a fierce warrior increases. When he goes to the mere to fight Grendel’s mother, he does so not as a defender but as an aggressor, which is more in line with the other uses of aglæca in the text. In lines 1506-1512a, Beowulf and Grendel’s mother battle in the water:
Bær þa seo brimwylf, þa heo to botme com,
hringa þengel to hofe sinum,
swa he ne mihte, no he þæs modig wæs,
wæpna gewealdan, ac hine wundra þæs fela
swenc te on sunde, sædeor monig
hildetusum heresyrcan bræc,
ehton aglæcan.

“Then the she-wolf of the sea swam to the bottom and bore the ring-clad prince to her dwelling, so that he might not, no matter how hearty he was, wield his weapon, but many wonders set after him in the water, many sea-beasts, pierced his war-shirt with battle-tusks, attacking their adversary.” (1506-1512a)

This passage is again ambiguous as to whom aglæca refers. It has been translated as either “fierce assailants pursuing him,” or “pursuing their adversary.” There is a strong argument that Beowulf is the aglæca in this passage, though there is a possibility that the word refers to both. Again, at this point in the poem, Beowulf is not a defender but a vengeful invader. He is entering the mere to kill Grendel’s mother and reach the logical conclusion of a feud, the extermination of his enemy’s entire tribe, which in this case consisted only of the two descendants of Cain. This makes him an adversary, a warrior, an enemy, and (for Grendel’s mother) a monster, which covers all of the standard definitions of aglæca.

The battle in the mere places Beowulf in a position in which he both heroically kills a monster that has acted violently against Heorot and also murders a maternal figure and ends the genetic line of his enemy. The duality of this act muddies the boundary between monster and hero. Beowulf and Grendel have as many similarities as they do differences. Each character has an impact on the audience in terms of the familiar versus the unfamiliar, the canny versus the uncanny. Grendel, though monstrous, represents something that we can see in ourselves: the fear and anxiety and suffering of being an exile. It is in this rather than his apparent monstrosity in which he exhibits the uncanny – that sense of being familiar in a way that the audience does not wish to reflect on. Grendel is the familiar de-familiarized, in the sense that he experiences the
conditions which would cause the contemporary audience of *Beowulf* extreme anxiety: exile, excommunication, extinction. His response, however, becomes de-familiarizing because he turns to extreme, unrepentant, and impotent violence.

As a result, Beowulf's attack and slaying of Grendel’s mother is familiar in an uncomfortable way. In his invasion, he becomes the aggressor that the audience would fear, the powerful entity that would end an entire tribe or civilization. Though he is the hero of the poem, he is certainly not guileless in his role. In keeping with the idea that Beowulf may be more aptly described as *aglæca* with each victory over a monster that is also described as such, it stands to reason that his formidable nature would be expressed in concert with his final and most dangerous foe. The last time that Beowulf is characterized as *aglæca* is in 2591b-2592, when he is in the heat of his final battle with the dragon:

\[
\text{Næs dā long to dōn} \\
\text{þæt dā *aglæcean* hy eft gemetton.}
\]

“It was not long until the fierce adversaries came together again.” (2591b-2592)

Here, both the dragon and Beowulf are explicitly included in *aglæcean*, which puts them alongside each other as well as against each other as combatants. There is a similarity between Beowulf and the dragon that causes the poet to group them together in this way. This construction is unique to the other monster fights. The fact that Beowulf and the dragon are described collectively emphasizes the point they are equal opponents, without commentary about their motivations.

Also of importance is the fact that both Beowulf and the dragon act as aggressor and defender in this final battle. The dragon, though defending his treasure from theft, is still instigating the violence between itself and the Geatish tribe. Beowulf, though seeking out the dragon for a combat to the death, is defending his people at the expense of his own life. Their
mutual destruction is guaranteed because they are equally skilled and equally aggressive and equally motivated to kill their own and defend their own interest. These are the qualities that make both monster and hero specifically *aglæca* and why they can be described as such in tandem.

Sigmund, whose story would likely have been familiar to *Beowulf’s* contemporary audience, is also described as *aglæca* by a *scop* in Heorot after Beowulf defeats Grendel (Griffith). Sigmund is hailed as a hero for his slaying of his own dragon, though the story portraits him as more of a thief than a hero. In lines 893-897 Sigmund kills a dragon and takes his treasure for his own use:

Hæfde *aglæca* eune gegongan
þæt he beahhordes brucan moste
selfes dome; sæbat gehleod,
bar on bearm scopes beorhte frætwa
Wælses efera; wyrm hat genealt.

That *fierce combatant* with valor had gone forth that he could bring about a ring-hoard for his own; that son of Wæls loaded the sea-boat, the ship’s bosom bore gleaming treasure; the serpent melted in its own heat.

Most scholars have translated this phrase using “opponent” or “fierce warrior.” Heaney takes an extremely liberal approach and basically eliminates the phrase altogether. However, Liuzza translates this as “The fierce *creature*” (emphasis mine), which almost seems more suggestive of the dragon than of Sigmund, advocates a deliberate ambiguity in the descriptions between the hero and the dragon. The dragon, Fafnir, had killed his own brother in order to take the treasure (which is cursed to bring misfortune to anyone who possesses it) for himself. Sigmund, killing Fafnir on behalf of Regin (Fafnir’s brother), is in many ways just starting the cycle over again. If we read *aglæca* as referring to a character’s combined traits of skill and aggression, then it is
entirely sensible to consider that this passage may be commenting on both Sigmund and the
dragon simultaneously.

In this specific telling of Sigmund, he is really only given a few lines alluding to the fact
that he had killed a dragon and gotten glory, as a means of indirectly praising Beowulf. The rest
of this passage is dedicated to contrasting Sigmund’s (and thus Beowulf’s) good qualities with
Heremod’s bad ones. This style of praise is important for heroes like Beowulf, whose reputations
are spread across the land through such stories. To directly compare Beowulf to Sigmund is to
suggest that his story will be told and retold, thus securing his newfound glory gained through
his victory over Grendel. Because this is distinctly a positive comparison between the two
figures, it stands to reason that aglæca, at least as it is used in Beowulf, is a quality that a hero
should strive for, though it gives them something in common with their enemies.

It should not be taken for granted that Beowulf is strictly a heroic poem. Because the
poem defies many of the accepted conventions of heroic poetry, including but not limited to
primarily telling of action, making its appeal through narrative, and avoiding symbolic
language\textsuperscript{10}, it seems that Beowulf is too reflective and linguistically complex to serve only as a
heroic poem. Instead, it is a combination of heroic poetry, folklore, and a meditation on of the
social atmosphere. Thus, it may be helpful to approach the poem as “a polyphonic work whose
messages are contingent and sometimes contrary” (Niles 133). While Beowulf is undoubtedly
heroic, especially in the eyes of his contemporary audience, the poem itself means to reflect on
the nature and perhaps the failures of the Heroic Age. Beowulf’s effectiveness as a hero come
from the same skills that make him as fierce and as dangerous as any of the monsters that he
slays. As Freud suggests in Civilization and its Discontents, “in circumstances that are
favourable to it, when the mental counter-forces which ordinarily inhibit it are out of action, it

\textsuperscript{10} See C.M. Bowra, Joseph Campbell, W.P. Ker, H. M. Chadwick, among others.
also manifests itself spontaneously and reveals man as a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien” (59). While he consistently achieves victory over his adversaries though, his monster-slaying does not necessarily bring lasting peace and in fact often results in future conflict.

The human warriors of Beowulf play a big role in complicating the definitions of “hero” and “villain.” The evidence of the two men being simultaneously heroic and antagonistic allows us to see the importance of the social structure and the Beowulf poet’s concerns about vengeance as justice. They are the protagonists in each of their stories, but their antagonistic traits are equally obvious in their treatment of the “other” within each. In Beowulf, the dermarcation between monsters and heroes is fuzzier than a simple protagonist/antagonist relationship. Rather, the aglæca dynamic indicates “threats” and “the threatened,” a dynamic which shifts as the characters interact. The Beowulf poet is not only praising Beowulf and Sigmund for their accomplishments, although they are legitimately the heroes for their societies and for their readers. Though he celebrates their actions, there is little space between their actions and the often negative consequences. In the case of Sigmund, we know (as would have the contemporary audience of Beowulf) that Sigmund is ultimately betrayed and killed for the sake of the cursed treasure that he has just stolen. As for Beowulf himself, his solutions to problems are not permanent: Grendel’s death is immediately avenged by Grendel’s mother; the destruction of the kin of Cain does not prevent Hrothgar’s people from succumbing to feud; and though the dragon is slain, so is the hero whose reputation protected his people from invaders.

Beowulf’s status as aglæca is necessarily exclusive from his inherent goodness. The word aglæca, again, does not have an ethical or moral content in any of its potential glosses. His

11 Also see Volsungasaga, Nibelungenlied, and the Poetic Edda for several versions of this story, each of which ends with Sigmund’s death by the hands of his wife’s family.
heroism overall is a combination of those two qualities; while his qualifications as a “formidable one” or *aglæca* do not explicitly make him into a good leader, his goodness is not what keeps the people he protects alive and safe. As Dorothy Whitelock says, “[t]he poet seems determined not to let us forget how temporary are the effects even of good actions in this world” (Whitelock 98). No matter the size of the monster that Beowulf defeats, the safety and security brought on by his victory is typically very short-lived. Even if the audience does not see the fallout from his battles, the future conflict is foreshadowed. Though he saves Hrothgar and the Danes from the kin of Cain, the audience knows that the Danes are doomed to tear themselves down in a familial dispute. When Beowulf sacrifices himself to save the Geats from the dragon, his funeral is performed with the anxiety of expected future invasions. This is not to say that Beowulf’s actions were futile or unnecessary, or less heroic, but more that their inherent goodness is not necessarily as important as their aggressiveness. Goodness, a quality that can be reasonably attributed to many of the characters in the poem, does not necessitate victory or sustainability; if it did, then wise and generous Hrothgar may not have needed Beowulf’s help. While Beowulf can be considered on the ethical side of good, his more material qualities of deadly skill and bull-headed aggressiveness are far more useful in sustaining the community which he leads or at least protects.
5 CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the point that Beowulf attempts to criticize (gently and respectfully) the violent culture propagated by the Danes and Geats by demonstrating the failings of both societies, Janet Thormann suggests that the poem “works toward imagining a history that will limit the deadly repetitions of feud” (288). The poem’s subversion is that it uses the Danish and Geatish system of feud as a way to point to a different, better (read perhaps Christian) social structure. Several times throughout the poem’s primary narrative and its digressions we see the social failure that results from either feuding or invasive tribal warfare: Unferth’s kin-slaying ruins his reputation (lines 587-89); it is suggested that Hrothgar’s family is ultimately destroyed by in-fighting (lines 1162-65); we know from other versions of the story that Sigmund the dragon slayer meets his end through a family feud (fit 13); a scop tells of the “Frisian slaughter” which abruptly ends a truce between the feuding parties (fit 16); Hygelac and his son are both killed in war, leaving Beowulf to lead (lines 2354-59 and lines 2384b-2390, respectively); and finally, when the dragon appears, Beowulf recognizes that he will not survive the battle (lines 2419b-2424), and the Geatish people express an anxiety that there will be no lasting peace for his people after Beowulf’s death (lines 3148b-3155). The common factor, of course, in all of these feuds is that, even if it is not explicitly stated in the poem, is that it takes an aggressive, skilled, formidable set of individuals to instigate and follow through any of these given situations.

In other words, it takes a figure (or figures) that could be characterized as aglæca to perform the acts of feud and war. Niles tends to argue that such poetry should not be understood as ironic or critical, but rather that “the Anglo-Saxons never seriously questioned the legitimacy of the principle of blood vengeance, undertaken by members of a victim’s kin-group (or guild, in the later period) in response to a perceived crime” (Niles 165 Myth of the Feud). However, I cannot help but think that Beowulf questions the wisdom of relying on such formidable,
adversarial figures to uphold the social structure when their involvement almost necessarily
dictates that such structures would be unsustainable. While I agree with Niles that this type of
poetry is not an ironic portrayal of the past or a scathing criticism, I cannot follow him all the
way to his conclusion that the poetry is completely or even mostly sincerely ideological. The
elegiac nature of Beowulf’s conclusion points specifically the sorrow that this ancestry (however
fictional) was not a sustainable way of life.

Again, I would not claim the poem is admonishing this ancestral past, or that the use of
the word aglæca should be understood as a criticism. Indeed, much of Beowulf praises the
larger-than-life characters of the narrative. If anything, the use of the term seems, at least within
the confines of the poem if not throughout the corpus, representative of an exceptional character
quality. The heroes of the story are understood to be exceptional and great in their ability to rise
to the challenge of slaying monsters that no one else within a community can. Conversely, the
monsters to be slain would not make interesting enemies if they were not equally exceptional,
equally up to the challenge of battle. Beowulf treads a fine line between lauding a version of an
Anglo-Saxon ancestral past and recognizing the social failings that led to their destruction. The
use of the word aglæca by the Beowulf poet in a way illustrates the liminal space in which both
heroic and monstrous characters must exist; they extraordinary beings that are fundamental to the
building up of an ancestral past and are also responsible for the ending of that past. The word is
used in a semantically similar way to other works in the Old English corpus, but the connotation
when it is applied to such a diverse cast of characters seems to be unique.

As Tolkien says in his essay “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” “He [the poet] was
in fact, like Virgil, learned enough in the vernacular department to have an historical perspective,
even an antiquarian curiosity” (22). The audience who would observe the word aglæca in all of
these texts or in any given number of them might be fictitious but a conceptual ideal reader is vital to any close word study. It is important to assume that this audience exists as a means of developing the most comprehensive understanding of what the word originally meant, how it functioned differently between different figures, and how the word’s meaning did or did not alter in meaning for the texts observed. There has not been a comprehensive, inclusive examination of the word across the Old English corpus. I have done so in an effort to better contextualize the use of the word for that imagined, contemporary audience. Future research may include a more theoretical approach to the word in its literary context, or perhaps a comparative word study that looks at other words that describe the types of figures I have discussed throughout this thesis.

The word *aglæca* is a powerful term that captures a somewhat ineffable quality in the characters it describes. In examining the word as it is used throughout the Old English corpus, I have attempted to question whether there may be another way to interpret and translate this word that does not necessarily supersede the traditional dichotomous definition used over the last century of scholarship, but instead builds on that understanding and complicates it. My intentions for this thesis have been to encourage readers to think critically about this word when it appears throughout the OE corpus.
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