

«WUNDER ÆFTER WUNDRE»:  
RECOUNTING THE MARVELLOUS IN *BEOWULF*

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RIASSUNTO: L'epica in inglese antico del *Beowulf* è caratterizzata da diversi eventi sovranaturali in cui l'eroe compie delle gesta straordinarie. L'attività più notevole del Principe dei Geati è quella di essere in grado di combattere degli esseri orrendi come i mostri marini, Grendel e sua madre, e un drago. Tali contesti prodigiosi originano alcune delle maggiori manifestazioni del meraviglioso nel poema. Questo studio vuole analizzare la ricorrenza a livello lessicale di alcune parole chiave quali "wundor" ('prodigio'), "wrætlic" ('mirabile', 'meraviglioso'), and "sellic" ('fantastico', 'strano'). Il lavoro si prefigge inoltre di supportare la lettura di *Beowulf* unicamente in termini di un eroe dotato di forza inusuale, invece che un mostro buono fra quelli cattivi.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *Beowulf*, drago, epica antica inglese, Grendel, meraviglioso, mostri marini

ABSTRACT: The Old English epic of *Beowulf* is characterised by several supernatural events in which the hero performs wondrous deeds. The most outstanding ability of the Prince of the Geats is to be able to fight dreadful beings such as sea-monsters, Grendel and its mother, and a dragon. Those prodigious contests give form to some of the main manifestations of the marvellous throughout the poem. The present study analyses the lexical incidence of recurring key-words such as "wundor" ('astonishing thing'), "wrætlic" ('splendid', 'wonder-inspiring'), and "sellic" ('wonderful', 'strange'). It also aims at providing support to reading *Beowulf* merely as a hero with unusual strength, not as a good monster amid bad monsters.

KEY-WORDS: *Beowulf*, dragon, Grendel(kin), marvellous, Old English epic, water-monsters

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The marvellous is not an uncommon trope in Old English literature. It is characterised by the exaggerated, the miraculous, and the wonderful to account for monsters, fantastic or strange creatures, or *mirabilia*. Such works mainly occur in the Nowell Codex or *Beowulf*-Manuscript (s. x/xi) – which is part of London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv.<sup>1</sup> Besides the now incomplete *The Life of St Christopher*, *The Wonders of the East* and *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, the codex also contains two poems, *Beowulf* and *Judith*. One cannot but notice an underlying thematic unity; most critics agree that it is «a collection [...] of marvellous stories».<sup>2</sup> The three prose works and *Beowulf* portray monsters as foes to men, while *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and *Beowulf* share an interest in “nicoras” (‘water-monsters’).<sup>3</sup>

*Beowulf* is a hero with both prodigious physical force and wit, which allow him to win the monsters he fights.<sup>4</sup> Since his youth, he stands out in a swimming contest with Breca in which he kills nine sea-monsters (535-581).<sup>5</sup> Despite such a triumph, it is in Daneland that *Beowulf*’s fame climaxes as he frees King Hrothgar’s hall, Heorot, from a murderous monster, Grendel, and its revengeful mother. In addition, in his old age, with the aid of Wiglaf, *Beowulf* will also kill a dragon – though he will die soon after the fight.

<sup>1</sup> GNEUSS - LAPIDGE 2014: 322.

<sup>2</sup> SISAM 1953: 65. The trope of the marvellous in *Beowulf* is strictly related to the monstrous. TOLKIEN has started a heated debate as regards the relationship between the hero and the monsters, and paved the way for a new perspective as to the relationship between fabulous elements and heroic deeds in the poem (1936). Some decades later, CARLSON reanalysed the monsters of *Beowulf* as creations of literary scholars (1967). ROBINSON reconsidered the role of the hero, reading *Beowulf* as a non-monster despite his enormous strength (1974). Robinson’s views have been rediscussed by DRAGLAND (1977), who sustained a monstrous side of the hero. MELLINKOFF shed some new light on Grendel and its mother as Cain’s progeny (1979; 1981). ORCHARD’s book is a landmark as it compares the monsters in the poem to those in the other texts in the *Beowulf*-Manuscript (1995). ANLEZARK reconsiders the hero’s marvellous swimming, restating Robinson’s reading of *Beowulf* (2011). CAVELL has recently reanalysed the monstrosity of Grendel and its mother and offers an updated bibliography and status of the art of *Beowulf*-studies on teratology (2014).

<sup>3</sup> As regards the lack of monsters in *Judith* and its apparently unjustified presence in London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv, see LUCAS 1990: 471-474.

<sup>4</sup> RUGGERINI 1995: 202.

<sup>5</sup> ANLEZARK 2011: 225-232, 239-240.

Except for the episode with Breca, a scrutiny of the lines dealing with the marvellous shows that the episodes related to the combats with the Grendelkin and the dragon share a recurring lexis.<sup>6</sup> This essay aims at analyzing the incidence of key-words such as “wundor” (‘astonishing thing’), “wrætlic” (‘splendid’, ‘wonder-inspiring’), and “sellic” (‘wonderful’, ‘strange’).<sup>7</sup> The study also wants to provide support to reading *Beowulf* not as a romance hero, but merely as a hero with unusual strength.<sup>8</sup>

## 1. THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL

When Hrothgar retires for the night with his Queen, Wealhtheo, he leaves *Beowulf* and his men to protect the hall. There, Grendel has already slain many Danes; the poet highlights such an event with the alliteration of the compounds «win-sele» / «wæl-deað» (‘wine-hall’ / ‘death by slaughter’, 695).<sup>9</sup> The tale continues with a further assault by the enraged monster. The text juxtaposes the gloomy moors (710a, 764a) where Grendel and its kin dwell and the splendour of Heorot. While the hall typifies the “dream” – i.e., the «general contentment and unity of spirit of the participants»,<sup>10</sup> the monster is «dreamum bedæled» (‘cut off from contentment’, 721a) and is not admitted to the life of the community. Its attacks cease as *Beowulf* wounds it fatally.

The hall is once more the setting of bloodshed and destruction (771-775a):<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> ORCHARD 2003: 27-29. My research has benefitted from the search options powered by the *DOEC* 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Unless stated otherwise, words meaning refers to the glossary in *Beowulf* [Fulk - Bjork - Niles] 2008.

<sup>8</sup> ROBINSON 2000: 80.

<sup>9</sup> The compound “win-sele” also occurs in Hrethel’s account of the awful loss of his son, «winsele westne / windge reste» (‘the desolate wine-hall, wind-swept place of rest’, 2465-2457a; *Beowulf* [Fulk - Bjork - Niles] 2008: 246-247, n. 2455-9); for an interpretation of this passage, see POPE 1970: 60-61.

<sup>10</sup> MAGENNIS 1996: 64.

<sup>11</sup> All references and titles of the poetic texts are taken from the *ASPR* series (1931-1953). The lines from the poem are quoted from *Beowulf* [van Kirk Dobbie] 1953; the translations from *Beowulf* are taken from *Beowulf* [Fulk] 2010.

Ða wæs wundor micel þæt se winsele  
 wiðhæfde heaþodeorum, þæt he on hrusan ne feol,  
 fæger foldbold; ac he þæs fæste wæs  
 innan ond utan irenbendum  
 searþoncum besmiþod.

‘It was a considerable surprise, then, that the wine-place withstood the battle-brave ones, that did not fall to the ground, that lovely earth-edifice; but it was firmly enough constructed inside and out, ingeniously with iron bands’.

To everybody’s dismay Heorot wondrously stands in its beauty. For Scribner, «the hall eventually becomes a sign of things horrible to the Danes when Beowulf and Grendel engage in battle». <sup>12</sup> Here, though, the marvellous is related neither to Beowulf’s strength nor to the monster’s wickedness, but to Heorot’s stability to undergo such a supernatural contest; <sup>13</sup> this aspect is emphasized by means of the alliteration “wundor” / “win-sele”. <sup>14</sup>

The next day, a feast is organised to solemnize the release from Grendel’s assaults. Many chieftains travel «geond widwegas wundor sceawian / laþes lastas» (‘across long distance to see that marvel, the remains of the antagonist’, 840-841a): the monster’s arm has been ripped off and Beowulf has put it on display above the entrance as a trophy. <sup>15</sup> The words “geond widwegas” are also used when the King praises Beowulf’s marvellous victory over Grendel’s mother: «blæd is aræred / geond widwegas [...] / ðin ofer þeoda

<sup>12</sup> SCRIBNER 2019: 125.

<sup>13</sup> CAVELL 2016: 72.

<sup>14</sup> The imagery of the wine-hall also occurs in Christian epic as a depiction of the “dream”, but often with an overturning of its community rites. In *Juliana* 483b-490a it represents the pagan world and its stigmatization, there the devil boasts how he turns men one against another so that they meet death by sword in the “win-sele”. After Juliana’s beheading, Eleusius and his warriors drown in the sea and cannot receive any longer the gold in the wine-hall (678b-688a). Instead, in *Christ and Satan* 85-95a, the “win-sele” has a positive connotation as in *Beowulf* 771-775a; yet it is set in a Christian context as it stands as a spiritual condition precluded to the wicked – i.e., the bliss in the heavenly kingdom.

<sup>15</sup> Grendel’s arm on Heorot’s door becomes an enthralling vision as it represents Beowulf’s sign of triumph, «Eode scealc monig / swiðhigende to sele þam hean / searowundor seon; swylce self cyning» (‘Many a firm-willed young man went to the high hall to see the curious wonder; likewise, the king himself’, 918b-920).

gehwylce» (‘Your glory is upraised [...] through the world’s wide ways over every nation’, 1703b-1704a, 1705a).<sup>16</sup> The words “wundor” + “sceawian” also occur when Beowulf is harassed by strange sea-dragons at the mere (1421-1441a).<sup>17</sup>

In his panegyric, Hrothgar tells how those wonderful deeds were God’s will: «ðisse ansyne alwealdan þanc / lungre gelimpe! [...] a mæg god wyrcan / wunder æfter wundre, wuldres hyrde» (‘For this sight let thanks be raised at once to the all-wielder. [...] God can ever work miracle after miracle, herder of glory’, 928-929a, 930b-931).<sup>18</sup> The poet highlights the celestial nature of such an event as if it were a theophany.<sup>19</sup>

The community is summoned to celebrate and cement the loyalty between the Danes and the Geats. Heorot is represented once again as a bright edifice, just as when the Geats first saw it (306-314). Its light and splendour can be related either to the building itself or to its furnishings and ornaments;<sup>20</sup> people are called to deck it in festive spirit (992b-996):

Fela þæra wæs,  
wera ond wifa, þe þæt winreced,  
gestsele gyredon. Goldfag scinon  
web æfter wagum, wundorsiona fela  
secga gehwylcum þara þe on swylc starað.

<sup>16</sup> The idea of fame spreading far also occurs in Cynewulf’s *Christ II* 481-482a with the Lord’s invitation to the Twelve to go and preach God’s *mirabilia*.

<sup>17</sup> For Beowulf’s fight with the sea-dragon in lines 1421-1441a and for a discussion on the «wratlic wurm» (‘splendid serpent’, 891a) in the Sigemund-episode, see RAMEY 2017: 463-464.

<sup>18</sup> The formula «wunder æfter wundre» also occurs in *Andreas* 620a, when the Saint tells the helmsman how Christ performed manifold miracles.

<sup>19</sup> There is still a heated debate among scholars as to the Christian or heathen origin of the poem, see IRVINE 1999: 175-192, MOLINARI 2008: 117-138, and NEIDORF’s essay and survey of the status of the art (2019: 137-139).

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed account of Heorot and its bright magnificence, see MAGENNIS 2007: 194-196.

‘There were many men and women who prepared the wine-hall, the guest-house. Gold-patterned textiles gleamed along the walls, a collection of wonderful sights for any who gaze on the like’.

The marvellous manifests itself through the eyes of those who look at the pictures embroidered on the tapestries; the poet highlights such a splendour by associating the compound «wundor-sion» (‘amazing sight’, 995b) of those gathered in Heorot with the verb «scinan» (‘to shine’, 994b) referring to the gleaming of the gold on the weaving.<sup>21</sup> Despite such wondrous handiworks, there is no hint to the content of the scenes thereon – though it is likely that the embroidering might depict some epic deeds. Old Norse literature might help to shed some light on the golden thread on the textile to portray an astounding, heroic context. *Guðrúnarkviða II* 15 tells how Guðrún and Hakon’s daughter embroider in gold, «Hqfðo við á skriptom, þat er skatar léko, / ok á hannyrðom hilmis þegna» (‘We also made pictures of men’s war-play together, and the warriors of the prince on our handiwork’).<sup>22</sup> In the *Völsunga saga* (ch. 25), instead, Brynhildr is shown while «hon lagði sinn borda með gulli ok saumaði á pau stórmerki er Sigurðr hafði

<sup>21</sup> See note 69. Such an imagery of splendour appears in the homiletic corpus to describe manifestations of sanctity or of the godhood: in Ælfric’s *Passio Sanctae Cecilie*, “wundor” + “scinan” + “gylden” also occur in the description of the Saint surrounded by golden-winged angels holding two wondrously shining crowns (ÆLFRIC [Skeat] 1966: 360, 361, ll. 74, 76). The combination “wundor” + “scinan” occurs in several other texts: *Exodus* 107b-111a narrates the wonder of God’s fire-pillar to shield the Israelites; *Bodley 343 Homily 6* compares the shining glory of the faithful to a star (*Bodley 343 Homilies* [Irvine] 1993: 170, l. 100). Besides, the light identifies a miracle as a shining wonder in Ælfric’s *CHI 36* on All Saints, and *CHI 38* on St Andrew (ÆLFRIC [Clemoes] 1997: 489, l. 108; 512, l. 141); in *CH II 11* (ÆLFRIC [Godden] 1979: 108, 109, ll. 575, 578) on St Benedict, and in *The Life of St Swithun* (see ÆLFRIC [Skeat] 1966: 468, l. 430). See also the account of the divine powers of the prophets before the birth of John the Baptist in *Blickling Homily 14* (*Blickling Homilies* [Morris] 1967: 160, ll. 16-18).

<sup>22</sup> *Edda* [Neckel - Kuhn] 1983: 226 and *Poetic Edda* [Larrington] 1996: 198. As to the analogues to *Beowulf* 992b-996 and the archaeological evidence of pictorial weaving in the Germanic Middle Ages, see *Beowulf* [Fulk - Bjork - Niles] 2008: 176, n. 994<sup>b</sup> f. NORTH wonders whether the scenes on the textile in *Beowulf* 992b-996 should be linked to the marvels carved on the early English stone sculptures in the Church of St Mary and St Hardulph in Breedon Hill, Leicestershire (2006: 181-184, esp. 183).

gert» ('she was working her tapestry with gold thread and embroidering on it the great deeds performed by Sigurd').<sup>23</sup>

After the narration of the Finn's episode, Heorot is pervaded by the "dream". The *scop* sketches again a marvellous scenario, «Gamen eft astah, / beorhtode bencsweg; byrelas sealdon / win of wunderfatum. Ða cwom Wealhþeo forð» ('Amusement rose again, bench-noise brightened; serving-boys distributed wine from wonderful vessels. Then Wealhtheo came forward', 1160b-1162). In the early English society, the cup was «an essential part of the poet's evocation of the good life in the hall»; this passage recalls the words «wundor micel» and «win-sele» already used to describe Heorot's grandeur (771).<sup>24</sup> «Wunderfatum» is a *hapax legomenon*; the occurrence of "wundor" as a premodifier of the nominal head "fæt" binds the hero's wondrous deeds to the ceremony of the giving of treasures and that of the drinking cup,<sup>25</sup> in which Wealhtheo plays a central role.

## 2. THE FIGHT WITH GRENDEL'S MOTHER

The "dream" vanishes the same night Grendel's mother visits the hall to avenge her son, taking away its arm and slaughtering those she met. Beowulf promises Hrothgar to kill the she-monster. The King instructs the hero about the awful abode of the Grendelkin, «Ðær mæg nihta gehwæm niðwundor seon, / fyr on flode. No þæs frod leofað / gumena bearna, þæt þone grund wite» ('There every night a dire portent can be seen, fire on the flood. There lives no offspring of men so well informed that he knows the bottom', 1365-

<sup>23</sup> *Völsunga saga* [Finch] 1965: 42, l. 3; 43.

<sup>24</sup> MAGENNIS 1985: 517.

<sup>25</sup> The words "fæt" + "win" + "wundor" also occur in *CH II* 4; there, Ælfric describes Christ's miracle at the marriage at Cana as a marvel when water is turned into wonderful wine, see ÆLFRIC [Godden] 1979: 33, l. 120.

1367).<sup>26</sup> Then, Beowulf sets off to the lake and Unferth gives him a fabulous sword to fight the «brim-wylf» ('she-wolf of the sea', 1596a).

As soon as they reach the mere, both Danes and Geats see «wyrmcynnes fela / sellice sædracan sund cunnian, / swylce on næshleoðum nicras licgean [...] wyrmas ond wildeor» ('many species of serpents, strange sea-dragons testing the waters, likewise water-monsters lying on cliff-ledges [...] serpents and wild beasts', 1425b-1427, 1430a). The *scop* sketches the terrible presence of the aquatic marvellous beings with the adjective "sellic" ('strange', 'wonderful').<sup>27</sup> Such creatures are called "nicoras" ('sea-monsters') – a term which occurs twelve times in the Old English literary corpus: five in *Beowulf* (422a, 575a, 845b, 1411b, 1427b) and four in the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*.<sup>28</sup> For Orchard, the texts in the *Beowulf*-Manuscript show a «shared association of frequently occurring terms in both *Beowulf* and *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* [...] with regard to monstrous creatures that both Beowulf and Alexander encounter». <sup>29</sup> This statement can also be extended to the occurrence of the words "wyrm" + "wildeor" in *Beowulf* 1430a and in its occurrences in *The Letter of Alexander* (§§ 26, 33, 36).<sup>30</sup>

In the same description of the monster-mere, before Beowulf enters Grendel's mother's den underwater,<sup>31</sup> the account offers some details about such a supernatural fight marked by the adjective «wundorlic» and the verb «sceawian» (1437-1441).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>26</sup> For a reading of the mere as a terrifying hell related to a distressing afterlife, see McNABB 2011: 147-149.

<sup>27</sup> The words "sellic" + "wyrm" also recur in the narration of the hero's death after his fight with the dragon (3038) and in Ælfric's *CH* 16 (*Appendix*) in a funerary context as to the body being left to worms (ÆLFRIC [Clemoes] 1997: 534, l. 20).

<sup>28</sup> The word "nicor" also occurs thrice in *Blickling Homily* 17 to relate a vision of the tormented souls standing before evil (water)-monster devils (*Blickling Homilies* [Morris] 1967, 209, ll. 24, 25; 211, l. 5); both imagery and lexis offer a parallel with the account in *Beowulf* 1421b-1433a.

<sup>29</sup> ORCHARD 2003: 28.

<sup>30</sup> The words appear among the marvels Alexander meets in § 33, 10-11 (ORCHARD 1995: 246); "wyrm" + "wildeor" have wide currency in Christian literature, mostly related to a supernatural event which is the result of a sinful action, a manifestation of the devil or the torments to the soul.

<sup>31</sup> For the monstrous characterization of a supernatural enemy, see MEARNs 2015: 222.

<sup>32</sup> As to the distribution of "wund(o)r/wunder-" + "(-)sceaw-", see ORCHARD 2003: 29.



Hræþe wearð on yðum mid eoferspreotum  
 heorohocyhtum hearde genearwod,  
 niða genæged, ond on næs togen,  
 wundorlic wægþora; weras sceawedon  
 gryreligne gist.

‘Quickly, on the waves it was firmly constrained with barbed boar-javelins assailed violently, and dragged onto the cliff, that amazing wave-roamer; the men examined the grisly guest’.

The hero finally kills the monster; the creature’s awful form is both strange and marvellous and Beowulf’s men are enchanted by it. In *The Letter of Alexander*, the terms “wundorlic” + “sceawian” occur in the list of noteworthy things the Macedonian leader makes – thus strengthening the affinity as to monstrosity and otherness within the *Beowulf*-Manuscript.<sup>33</sup>

Before diving into the waters to reach Grendel’s mother’s dwelling, Unferth offers Beowulf Hrunting, and the hero promises Hrothgar’s thyle a «wrætlic wægsweord [...] / heardecg» (‘splendid, hard-edged wave sword’, 1489a, 1490a).<sup>34</sup> Further in the poem, he will fight the dragon with a «wigbord wrætlic» (‘wonderful battle-shield’, 2339), especially made of iron.<sup>35</sup> The words “wrætlic” + “sweord” are also found in the Sigemund-episode as to the killing of the ‘wondrous dragon’ («wrætlic wyrm», 890) by means of the hero’s sword.

<sup>33</sup> In § 26, 1-2 one reads an account of more wonderful and more splendid things (ORCHARD 1995: 242). The words “wund(o)r/wunder-” + “(-)sceaw-” also occur in *The Letter to Sigeward*. There, Ælfric tells that he has translated the *Heptateuch* in Old English so that men may contemplate the great wonders of God (ÆLFRIC [Swain] 2020: 209, l. 186). Psalm 118:18 «considerabo mirabilia» is often glossed «ic (be)sceawige wundru» (‘I shall behold the wonders’; for the text of the Bible, see *Biblia* [Weber] 2007); “sceawunge” + “wundorlic” are also found in Wæferth’s Old English rendering of Gregory the Great’s *Dialogi*. In § 35 one reads that, in the darkness, St Benedict beheld a light clearer than daylight and how a marvellous thing occurred after that sight (WÆFERTH [Hecht] 1965: 171, l. 7).

<sup>34</sup> This passage recalls Hrunting’s previous description, see *Beowulf* [Fulk - Bjork - Niles] 2008: 205, n. 1459<sup>b</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> For the use of “wrætlic” to portray Beowulf’s weaponry, see RAMEY 2017: 463-464.

Once in the lake, the she-monster snatches the hero and drags him to the bottom of the mere into her den.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, Beowulf is harassed by some marvellous sea-creatures (1506-1512):

Bær þa seo brimwylf, þa heo to botme com,  
hringa þengel to hofe sinum,  
swa he ne mihte, no he þæs modig wæs,  
wæpna gewældan, ac hine wundra þæs fela  
swencte on sunde, sædeor monig  
hildetuxum heresyrcan bræc,  
ehton aglæcan.

‘When she came to the bottom, the she-wolf carried the prince of rings to her court, so that he could not, no matter how courageous he was, wield weapons, but such a multitude of prodigies assailed him as he swam, many a sea-beast attempted to break into the war-shirt with battle-tusks, afflicted the troublemaker’.

Beowulf’s heroism is rather overpowered by the supernatural dimension, and acted upon by the monsters.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the poet highlights the craft of the forging with the alliteration “wæpen” / “wundor”, though the sword will not help the hero. The same words also occur earlier when Beowulf puts on his helmet, «swa hine fyrndagum / worhte wæpna smið wundrum teode» (‘just as the armorer had constructed it in days long gone, formed it amazingly’, 1451b-1452).<sup>38</sup>

Once in the cave-hall, the fight begins furiously; Beowulf cannot but attack the she-monster with his bare hands as he has not succeeded at hitting her with Hrunting.

<sup>36</sup> Both characters are unable to act; Grendel’s mother cannot overcome the power of the armour, while Beowulf cannot even start any act of hostility against the “brim-wylf”, see HUISMAN 1989: 220.

<sup>37</sup> BONJOUR 1949: 115-116. As to Beowulf’s (voluntary) loss of control and Grendel’s mother guarding him from the sea-monster not to kill him, see WHITE 2004: 63-64.

<sup>38</sup> In line 2687a scholars adopted the emendation «wundrum heard» for «wundum heard». Yet, for the sense of the passage, the reading «wundum» remains more suitable, see *Beowulf* [Fulk - Bjork - Niles] 2008: 254, n. 2687.

Grendel's mother, instead, desperately attempts at killing the hero with her long knife; yet he is shielded by his strong armour.<sup>39</sup> Suddenly, Beowulf spots a large sword on the den's wall; with it, he kills the "brim-wylf" and subsequently rips off Grendel's head – whose dead body laid in the cave.<sup>40</sup> Besides the spectacular fight with the she-monster, the *scop* explains that such a supernatural blade was a «sigeeadig bil, / eald sword eotenisc, ecgum þyhtig, / [...] god ond geatolic, giganta geweorc» ('victory-blessed weapon, an ancient ogreish sword firm in its edges [...] good and richly equipped, the work of giants', 1557b-1558, 1562).<sup>41</sup>

After the killing of Grendel's mother, two more marvellous events unfold before the hero: the cave-hall starts shining revealing great treasures, and the sword he has used begins to melt «æfter heaþoswate hildegicelum, / wigbil wanian. Ðæt wæs wundra sum, / þæt hit eal gemealt ise gelicost» ('on account of the battle-sweat, the war-weapon, to be reduced to combat-icicles; that was some miracle that it melted completely', 1606-1608).<sup>42</sup> This imagery recalls the icy bonds in the Finnsburh-episode (especially 1132b-1134).<sup>43</sup>

### 3. BEOWULF'S ACCOUNT OF HIS DEEDS

When Beowulf enters Heorot triumphally holding Grendel's head as a gift for the King, he horrifies the Queen and the court who stare at it in awe. The *scop* has moulded this part of the tale by juxtaposing the Danes gathered in joy with the abrupt interruption of the bliss due to the gigantic trophy the hero brings in to prove his resounding victory (1647-1650):

<sup>39</sup> See OSWALD's (2009: 68-69) analysis of the combat and critical background; see also ROBINSON 1994: 1-7.

<sup>40</sup> NEVILLE 1999: 136.

<sup>41</sup> For a scrutiny of the sword's ambivalent qualities and its reference to a remote age, see PAZ 2013: 242-243.

<sup>42</sup> The nouns "wundor" + "wig" also occur in a metaphorical war context in *Riddle 50* 1.

<sup>43</sup> CAVELL 2016: 113.

Ða wæs be feaxe on flet boren  
Grendles heafod, þær guman druncon,  
egeslic for eorlum ond þære idese mid,  
wliteseon wrætlic; weras on sawon.

‘Grendel’s head was then carried by the hair into the hall where men were drinking, gruesome for men and the lady among them, a beautiful, treasured sight; the men looked on’.

The display of the cut-off head as a terrifying and wonderful view is conveyed by the alliterative string “wliteseon” + “wrætlic” + “wer”.<sup>44</sup> In fact, Grendel’s arm earlier and its head now are a metonymy for its entire body – an intimidating and constant threat to the Danes.<sup>45</sup> Since the *scop* gives no physical details about the monster, the latter can be neither pictured nor described. Accordingly, Lapidge has noticed that the sight of the head generates awe since it typifies the «instinctual human fear of the unknown».<sup>46</sup>

Beowulf starts telling his deeds in the cave-hall, of how he was not able to hit the she-monster with Hrunting, and of the prodigy of the sword he found, recalling its first portrayal in lines 1557b-1562. The hero gives Hrothgar a wondrously hammered gold hilt, «wundorsmiþa geweorc» (‘the artifice of marvellous smiths’, 1681a). For Stanley, the head “-smið” of the compound refers to the craft of smiths metaphorically, «the half-line is more about *wundor*» and that «in verse ‘smith’ compounds are so often used in

<sup>44</sup> “Wrætlic” + “wer” are also found in *Andreas* 1200 and in *Christ II* 509 to describe, respectively, St Andrew’s wondrous words while preaching, and the angels instructing the men of Galilee at the Ascension. The couple “wrætlic” + “wer” also occurs in the double entendre *Riddle 44* 1, to denote either a key hanging by a man’s thigh or a dagger sheath.

<sup>45</sup> MICHELET 2006: 103.

<sup>46</sup> LAPIDGE 1993: 402.

negative contexts».<sup>47</sup> Stanley's statement is fully supported by the reference to the devilish nature of Grendel and its mother earlier in line 1680a.<sup>48</sup>

Hrothgar gives his speech to commemorate the defeat of the dreadful "nicoras". It is the utmost praise to Beowulf's deeds and is endowed both with wisdom and a prophetic tone. He also advises the hero not fall victim to warrior-like *ἔβρις* as it occurred to Heremod (1709-1722).<sup>49</sup> The sermon is a reflection on the gnomic theme of the heroic ideal of *sapientia et fortitudo*. It begins with a reflection on how wisdom is bestowed by God; for Hrothgar, such a gift to mankind is a celestial manifestation of the marvellous («wundor», 1724b).<sup>50</sup> Then, he warns Beowulf against pride, as it generates the slumber of the spirit thus causing the guardian of the soul not to be able to shield himself from the shafts of evil, «Þonne bið on hreþre [...] biteran stræle [...] wom wundorbebodum wergan gastes» ('He is then struck in the breast [...] with a bitter dart [...] with the perverse, astonishing directives of an accursed spirit', 1745a, 1746a, 1747).<sup>51</sup> The compound «wundorbebodum» has a negative connotation as it is associated to the phrase «wergan gastes» ('wicked demon') – an epithet the *scop* has already used to designate Grendel (133a).<sup>52</sup>

Before Beowulf's departure, Hrothgar foretells him that, ultimately, he will become the king of the Geats and gives him twelve more treasures. As he reaches his homeland, the hero is eager to recount before King Hygelac his deeds in Daneland (2000-

<sup>47</sup> For the negative connotation of the head "-smið" on extant Old English verse due to a religious perception of the world as a wicked one, see STANLEY 2017: 293-294.

<sup>48</sup> "(Hond)weorc" + "smið" occur in *Riddle 5* and *Riddle 20*, solutions are respectively "shield" and "sword". Though it does not refer to a weapon, in *Riddle 26*, the string "wratlic" + "weorc" + "smið" describes a gospel-book, whose glittering decorations are the wonderful work of smiths, see RAMEY 2017: 463.

<sup>49</sup> LEYERLE 1965: 92-93.

<sup>50</sup> For a religious reading of this passage and the theme of *sapientia*, see KASKE 1958: 426, 432 and note 84.

<sup>51</sup> This imagery recalls the arrows stricken by the devil in Ephesians 6:13-17 or Psalm 10:3. For the bowman in *Beowulf* and in the early English medieval Psalter, see ATHERTON 1993: 653-657.

<sup>52</sup> For «wom wundorbebodum», see *Beowulf* [Fulk - Bjork - Niles] 2008: 215, n. 1743<sup>b</sup> ff.; even though with the opposite connotation, "bebod" + "wundor" occur in *Andreas* 735-736a (in the warning not to neglect God's command and wonder) and in Ælfric's *CHI* 14 (as to the Apostles' predication of God's commandments and their miracles, ÆLFRIC [Clemoes] 1997: 291, l. 49; 292, ll. 50-51).

2151). Through this account, one learns new details about the fight with Grendel, expressly the fact that the anthropophagus giant brought along a sinister “glof” (‘glove, pouch’) – a food container to fill with the warriors he wanted to slaughter, «Glof hangode / sid ond syllic, searobendum fæst; sio wæs orðoncum eall gegyrwed / deofles cræftum ond dracan fellum» ([its] ‘glove hung wide and weird, fastened with cunning clasps; it was all ingeniously constructed with the devil’s devices and dragon’s skins’, 2085b-2088).<sup>53</sup> The “glof” is “sellic” (‘strange’, ‘marvellous’) and the poet relates it to the supernatural as to Grendel’s otherness and supports the depiction of the evil nature of the monster – and its longing not to leave the hall empty-handed.<sup>54</sup> Scholars have offered different readings of the “glof”, from its literal meaning, to its physical inexistence, to its imagery ascribable to Grendel’s stomach or byrnie.<sup>55</sup> For Pigg, the “glof” well depicts human culture, thus making Grendel «even more terrifying since it somehow seems to be related to the human species».<sup>56</sup>

Before he tells Hygelac about his fight with the she-monster, Beowulf recounts the celebrations in Heorot and uses the adjective “sellic” once more to refer to a type of lays shared there, «hwilum gyd awræc / soð ond sarlic, hwilum syllic spell» (‘at times he pursued a tale, true and magic; at times [...] an unusual account’, 2108b-2109).<sup>57</sup> Given

<sup>53</sup> For an analysis of lines 2085b-2088 and their analogues, especially for the use of gloves by trolls in Old Norse sagas, see ANDERSON 1982: 1-8.

<sup>54</sup> PASCUAL suggests emending «deofles» into «dernum» / «dēoglum», as are «spiritually neutral terms meaning ‘mysterious’» (2019: 8); he parallels this episode with the account of Thor unable to undo a knapsack fastened with trick wire in Snorri Sturluson’s *Gylfaginning* ch. 47 (SNORRI STURLUSON [Faulkes] 1982: 43, l. 1). WEISKOTT rejects Pascual’s emendation (2021). In homiletic literature, the words “deofol” + “draca” are mostly related to the torments in hell or to the devil, mainly in Wulfstan’s *Homily 29* and *Homily 46, Larspell*, (WULFSTAN [Napier] 1967: 141, ll. 23-24; 241, l. 11), or in the *Vercelli Homily 2 (Vercelli Homilies [Scragg] 1992: 58, l. 45)*.

<sup>55</sup> For LERER, the “glof” is just a metaphorical item, made up by an engaging storyteller (Beowulf) to recount his deeds (1994: 741-743). PFRENGER goes back to interpreting it on a physical level, as a magical byrnie or an armour-like skin (2008: 229). For a complete recollection of critical readings, see CAVELL 2016: 85-87.

<sup>56</sup> PIGG 2020: 316.

<sup>57</sup> The words “(god)spell” + “sellic” occur in Ælfric’s *CH II* 31 about how the preaching of God’s spell can seem “sellic” (‘extraordinary’) to the foolish but pleasing to the righteous (ÆLFRIC [Godden] 1979: 271, l. 103).

the two types of lays, the former seems to refer to a heroic narration, while it is hard to ascertain the content of the latter marvellous tale. For Taranu, the «sellic spell» might be «more akin to a *Wonders of the East* type of tale, telling of strange faraway lands or perhaps more fantastical tales of supernatural beings».<sup>58</sup>

Beowulf brings Hygelac some gifts Hrothgar gave him: a banner, a helmet, a breast-garment, the weapons, and four steeds. Besides, he donates Queen Hygd three horses and «ðone healsbeah [...], / wrætlicne wundurmaððum, ðone þe him Wealhðeo geaf» ('the ringed collar [...], that amazing, stately ornament, which Wealhtheo had given him', 2172a, 2173). One ought to notice the *amplificatio* created by the pairing of the adjective "wrætlic" + the noun "wundur" to define the marvellous jewel Beowulf was given by Wealhtheo:<sup>59</sup> "wrætlic" is used to designate «expertly fashioned material artifacts»,<sup>60</sup> "maððum" ('precious thing, treasure') to signify a jewel or a weapon.<sup>61</sup> The words "maððum" + "wundur" also occur further, when Wiglaf finds «magoþegn modig maððumsigla fealo, / gold glitnian grunde getenge, / wundur on wealle» ('many objects of value, glittering gold lying on the ground, wonders on the walls', 2757-2759a) in the dragon's den.

<sup>58</sup> TARANU 2021: 110.

<sup>59</sup> The words "wrætlic" + "wundur" are present in *Andreas* 712 to portray the angels carved on the Temple walls, the allegory of the fantastic beasts in *The Phoenix* 63a, 307, 367, or in *The Panther* 19, 27. In the Exeter Book riddles, they describe a wonderful creature – be it a mysterious being whose solution is difficult (*Riddle* 36, 1), a moth devouring a manuscript page (*Riddle* 47, 2), or an iceberg (*Riddle* 68, 2).

<sup>60</sup> RAMEY 2017: 463, see also notes 27-28.

<sup>61</sup> In *Beowulf*, the word "maððum" as a modifier of a nominal head also occurs in the compounds «maþðum-gifu» ('treasure-giving, 1301a), «maððum-sigle» ('precious jewel', 2757b), «maþpum-sweord» ('precious sword', 1023a), «maððum-wela» ('wealth of treasure', 2750a); for an analysis of the occurrence of "maððum" in Old English verse, see TYLER 2006: 40-52.

#### 4. THE FIGHT WITH THE DRAGON AND BEOWULF'S DEATH

The plot continues with a narrative ellipsis of fifty years. Beowulf's reign is troubled by the theft of a gem-covered goblet from a dragon's mound by an intruder. There, the treasure was positioned by the survivor of an extinct dynasty in far-flung days and the dragon got hold of it over three hundred years. Morbidly jealous of its hoard, the enraged supernatural creature burns down the lands by breathing fire far and wide – including the royal hall (2325b-2327, 2333-2334a). Thus, the hero decides to fight the dragon by himself, as he did with Grendel and the “brim-wylf”.

Realizing the daring feat, Beowulf commands his men to build a «wigbord wrætlic» ('splendid shield', 2339a) fully covered in iron like the «wrætlic wægsweord [...] / heardecg» ('splendid, hard-edged wave sword', 1489a, 1490a) he bestowed upon Unferth.<sup>62</sup> Man and dragon fight among the flame billows, but Beowulf cannot kill his enemy with his sword as it broke during the fight. Wiglaf helps his bleeding lord by stabbing the creature's belly. Beowulf's lethal blow pierces the dragon's flank fatally. Yet, the King's triumph is dwarfed by a lethal wound inflicted by the venomous creature. Despite the gloomy echoes depicting Beowulf's pending death, that final battle recalls Sigemund's digression and his marvellous fight with the dragon (890b-895a):

Hwæpre him gesælde ðæt þæt swurd þurhwod  
 wrætlicne wurm, þæt hit on wealle ætstod,  
 dryhtlic iren; draca morðre swealt.  
 Hæfde aglæca elne gegongen  
 þæt he beahhordes brucan moste  
 selfes dome.

<sup>62</sup> This passage recalls Hrunting's previous description in line 1459; for a complete overview and references to analogues, sources and critical literature, see *Beowulf* [Fulk - Bjork - Niles] 2008: 205, n. 1459<sup>b</sup>.



‘Still, he had the good fortune that the sword passed through the scaly serpent, so that it stood in the wall, that lordly iron; the dragon perished in that killing. The troublemaker had accomplished a heroic act such that he could partake of the hoard ad libitum?’

The imagery of the the Sigemund-episode and that of Beowulf’s final battle is somewhat similar, so it is for their weapons entirely made of iron. The adjective “wrætlic” is used to sketch both Beowulf’s shield and the «wrætlicne wyrm» (‘wondrous dragon’, 890) killed by means of Sigemund’s sword.<sup>63</sup>

The nouns “sweord” + “wyrm” also recur in the account of the magic blade ‘with serpentine ornamentation’ («wyrm-fah», 1698a) Beowulf found in Grendel’s cave (1696b-1697a) and, primarily, in the hero’s speech before his fight with the dragon, «Nolde ic sweord beran, / wæpen to wyrme [...] / swa ic gio wið Grendle dyde» (‘I would not bear a sword, a weapon against the reptile [...] as I did once with Grendel’, 2518b-2519a, 2521b).<sup>64</sup> Beowulf’s words are «almost ludicrous» as it is clear that, because of his old age, he cannot win through an «unarmed combat», but he feels rather «obliged to explain and justify carrying weapons, especially a sword».<sup>65</sup>

Beowulf orders Wiglaf to bring him some valuables from the dragon’s possessions so that death might be easier while beholding parts of the treasure he has just won. Then, the *scop* offers an account of what Weohstan’s son saw under the barrow’s roof (2757b-2760a):

maððumsigla fealo,  
gold glitinian grunde getenge,  
wundur on wealle, ond þæs wyrmes denn,  
ealdes uhtflogan.

<sup>63</sup> See RAMEY 2017: 464. For the Sigurðr/Sigemund affinity in *Beowulf* 874b-915, see LENDINARA 2010: 164-168.

<sup>64</sup> The words “sweord” + “wyrm” also occur in Wulfstan’s *Homily* 42, ‘De temporibus Anticristi’, in the list of supernatural and apocalyptic events that will harm the soul in the last days (WULFSTAN [Napier] 1967: 197, l. 10).

<sup>65</sup> For a detailed reading of Beowulf’s fight with the dragon, see SEBO 2011: 646.

‘many objects of value, glittering gold lying on the ground, wonders on the walls, and the lair of the serpent, of the old flier’.

One cannot but notice the link the poet establishes through the alliteration of the words “wundor” + “weall” and “weall” + “wyrm”. As to “wundor” + “weall”, on the one side, the marvellous unfolds before Wiglaf as he finds the old hoard – which is said to be «eald enta geweorc» (‘the ancient work of giants’, 2774a). The words «wundur under wealle» occur further, when Weohstan’s son collects the treasure, «Uton nu efstan oðre siðe, / seon ond secean searogimma geþræc, / wundur under wealle» (‘Let us now go at once another time, to view and visit the heap of intricate ornaments, marvels within walls’, 3101-3103a).<sup>66</sup> Amid the precious rings, cups, gems and vessels, Wiglaf spots a golden standard, «hondwundra mæst, / gelocen leoðocræftum» (‘the greatest piece of workmanship, woven by skilful hands’, 2768b-2769a). On the other side, “weall” + “wyrm” occur solely in *Beowulf* to define the environment in which dragons live or where they die. At the end of the thirty-third fitt, one reads «Ða wæs dæg sceacen / wyrme on willan; no on wealle læg» (‘Then day was departed, to the serpent’s satisfaction; it did not care to wait longer within the walls’, 2306b-2307). This image is reinforced by the paronomasia which binds the nouns “willa” (‘desire’) + “weall” (‘wall’). In fact, the dragon flies off from its mound to shoot flames to avenge the theft.<sup>67</sup> Though it does not

<sup>66</sup> The nouns “wundor” + “weall” portray a marvellous scenario either in religious or lay accounts. The former is more similar to those in *Beowulf*. It can have a Messianic tone as in the Old English adaptation of Psalm 117: 21 (the stone the builders refused is marvellous in one’s eyes as it became the headstone of the wall’s support), so it does in Ælfric’s rendering of the same verse of the Psalm in *Homily 3* (POPE 1967: 249, ll. 33-34). In the prose translation of Psalm 47:11, it can indicate a place for worship with regard to praising God around Jerusalem’s walls. Yet it can also portray a heavenly manifestation or a miracle, respectively in *Andreas* 735, 1492-1493, or in Ælfric’s *CH II* 11, on St Benedict (ÆLFRIC [Godden] 1979: 98, ll. 215-217). Despite the typology of the text which contains them, there are also physical descriptions of wondrous walls in a secular context: in poetry, in *Riddle 297*, and in *The Ruin* 20; or in prose in Orosius’s *Historiarum adversum paganos* IV.4, IV.5, in *A Letter from Wynfrith to Eadburga* § 11 (SISAM 1953: 219, ll. 134-135), or in Wæferth’s Old English adaptation of Gregory the Great’s *Dialogi* § 9 (WÆFERTH [Hecht] 1965: 192, ll. 12-14).

<sup>67</sup> For the dragon’s guardianship over its treasure, see KNIGHT 2019: 47-48. As to the hero slaying the “wyrm” in the Sigemund-episode with specific reference to his blade which gets stacked in the wall, see note 74.

refer to the mound, one finds the collocation “weall-(clif)” + “wyrm” when Wiglaf’s men push the dragon over the cliff, «Dracan ec scufun, / wyrm ofer weallclif, leton weg niman, / flod fæðmian frætwa hyrde» (‘the dragon they also shoved, the serpent, over the steep embankment, let the waves take possession of, the flood embrace the keeper of those splendors’, 3131b-3133).

## 5. THE DEATH OF THE HERO

Beowulf bestows on Wiglaf the authority to look after his people.<sup>68</sup> A band of warriors reaches the cliff, «wollentear e wundur sceawian» (‘with welling tears to regard that wonder’, 3032), to hail the body of their lord and pay their last respects to the memory of his feats. The solemnity of such an event is rendered with the use of the noun “wundor” and the verb “scinan”, regarding the dragon next to Beowulf’s dead body. As already noted, the aforesaid nouns occur elsewhere to recount wondrous deeds – viz. Grendel’s arm displayed in Heorot (840-841a) or the sea-dragons at the mere (1426a).<sup>69</sup> Here one reads the warlords’ recognition of their leader’s final battle: «þa wæs endedæg / godum gegongen, þæt se guðcyning, / Wedra þeoden, wundordeaðe swealt» (‘The closing day had come then to the good one, so that the war-king, lord of Wēders, died a strange death’, 3035b-3037). Fulk views Beowulf’s death as an abnormal event almost to the degree that it generates awe and wonder; he reads “wundor” ‘strange’, while others (Chickering and Swanton) interpret it as ‘wonderful’ or ‘wondrous’.<sup>70</sup> The compound “wundor-deað” is a *hapax legomenon*, and the words «wundordeaðe swealt» should be related to «draca morðre swealt» (‘the dragon perished in that killing’, 892b) in the Sigemund-digression.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> For a thorough reading of Beowulf’s death (2711b-2820), see PAROLI 1982: 59-81, esp. 68-76.

<sup>69</sup> For “wundor” (and its compounds) + “scinan”, see note 21.

<sup>70</sup> *Beowulf* [Chickering Jr] 1977: 233; *Beowulf* [Swanton] 1997: 179.

<sup>71</sup> FOX 2020: 199-200.

Despite such a terrible end, the marvellous manifests itself in the utmost fight with the supernatural “wyrn”.<sup>72</sup>

Subsequently, the narrator juxtaposes the heroism to the dragon’s miserable death. The monster lies slain on the ground, and it is shown as a victim of both the hero’s valour and its own fire – even though he has silenced such a gallant antagonist (3038-3041):

Ær hi þær gesegan syllicran wiht,  
wyrn on wonge wiðerræhtes þær  
laðne licgean; was se legdraca  
grimlic, gryrefah, gledum beswæled.

‘They had already seen there the fantastic creature, the repellent reptile lying opposite there on the ground; the fire-drake, grim and with grisly markings, was scorched by the sparks’.

As regards the noun phrase «syllicran wiht», Fulk does not render the adjective “sellic” in its comparative form. The poet seems to point out a contrast in this marvellous account: Beowulf’s death against the dragon is a ‘prodigy’, but it is the creature’s monstrosity to make it a ‘stranger being’ («syllicran wiht»)<sup>73</sup> “Sellic” is also used to describe other supernatural beings as the «sellice sædracan» (1426a). The *scop* further characterises the monster with the nouns “wyrn” and “draca” – which also occur in the Sigemund-episode (890-892), and the dragon’s deadly fall from the cliff (3131b-3132a).<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup> The nouns “wundor” + “deað” occur 21 times in the Christian corpus to narrate some glorious deeds such as Saints entering celestial bliss after a pious existence, or worldly trials, or martyrdom. They can also describe Christ’s resurrection in the Old English translation of John 14:2, in *Elene* 778-779, in Ælfric’s *CHI* 15, on Easter (ÆLFRIC [Clemoes] 1997: 304, l. 149), in *The Gospel of Nicodemus* xvii.1 (*The Old English Gospel of Nicodemus* [Cross] 1996: 195, ll. 1-3); similarly, in the account of Lazarus awakened from the dead in *Blickling Homily 6* (*Blickling Homilies* [Morris], 67, l. 6).

<sup>73</sup> The phrase “sellic” + “wiht” is also used to refer to some being of disputed interpretation both in *Riddle 31* 3-4 and in *Riddle 32* 5. As to the use of “sellic” in its comparative form, see INGERSOLL 1976: 185-186.

<sup>74</sup> The words “draca” + “wyrn” have wide currency in apocalyptic contexts in reference to the torments of the soul as in *Christ and Satan* 334-336, and in several homilies; in Ælfric’s *De falsis diis* (ÆLFRIC [Pope] 1968: 700, ll. 432-434), the *Vercelli Homily 4* (*Vercelli Homilies* [Scragg] 1992: 92, l. 46), and Wulfstan’s

The second to last *fitt* opens with the narrator's remarks on the death of the monster and how it has not profited from the treasure it wrongly kept hidden under the barrow's wall. However, the dragon has cruelly pursued its vengeance by killing «*feara sumne*» ('one of a few', 3061a). The gnomic tone in the next lines (3062b-3065) shifts the narrative focus from the "wyrn" back to the hero:

Wundur hwar þonne  
 eorl ellenrof ende gefere  
 lifgesceafta, þonne leng ne mæg  
 mon mid his magum meduseld buan.

'It is a mystery, after all, where a courageous person will reach the end of his allotted life, when a man can no longer occupy the mead-hall among his kin'.

Yet again, the marvellous manifests itself with Beowulf's death after the fight with a supernatural being. The poet endows this passage with gnomic authority, thus creating a sense of awe as to where a hero will find the end of his mortal life.<sup>75</sup> Though lines 3062b-3065 might first appear just as a mere contemplation of the transience of the human condition, they rather deal with the fear of the unknown.<sup>76</sup> The real focus is the wondrous mystery about the place where a man dies rather than his voyage after death.<sup>77</sup>

The noun "wundur" occurs one last time when Wiglaf returns to the dragon's mound to collect the treasure Beowulf has gained with his life. Once again, the word depicts the old hoard and the valuables therein, which are defined «wundur under

*Homily 46, Larspell*, (WULFSTAN [Napier] 1967: 241, ll. 11-12). They also occur in Psalm 90:13 to gloss the imagery of the serpents and the "draco" therein in the Cambridge, Junius, Vespasian and Vitellius Psalters. In *Beowulf* 3040-3041, the dragon is also portrayed as a «grimlic» ('fierce') and «lað» ('hateful') being. The same adjectives are used to describe the persecution of God's people in the last days in Wulfstan's *Homily 11, 'De Anticristo'* (WULFSTAN [Bethurum] 1957: 121, l. 53).

<sup>75</sup> GREENFIELD 1976: 60.

<sup>76</sup> See, respectively, TAJIMA 1980: 91, and MCGALLIARD 1978: 250-251.

<sup>77</sup> KARKOV - FARRELL 1990: 297.

wealle» ('marvels within walls', 3103a).<sup>78</sup> The *scop* has already used the alliteration "weall" + "wundor" earlier in the poem (2759a) to relate Wiglaf's first survey of the den. Both the barrow and Grendel's mother's den are marvellous settings due to the presence of old treasures; as Orchard points out, «the monsters inhabit a waterside home, from which light shines».<sup>79</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has addressed the marvellous and its manifestations by means of the scrutiny of the occurrence of "wundor", "wætlic" and "sellic" in *Beowulf*. Lexical analysis has shown that such words can refer to Heorot and the "dream" therein, to Grendel's disfigured parts of its defeated body or to its glove, to strange sea-creatures, to "nicoras" and dragons and their dwelling, and to magical weapons or amazing jewellery. The sole instance which refers to the character depicts Beowulf's "wundor-deað" in his utmost epic fight with a monster – which ends with both the hero's and the monster's defeat. In addition, even when Beowulf narrates his battles in first person, he never uses any of the three key-words related to the marvellous to portray directly himself or his deeds.

Since the dawn of *Beowulf*-studies, scholars have pointed out various references to the hero's unusual physical strength. In this respect, Beowulf shares some features with the marvellous creatures he fights against. For Rosier, the hero has some monstrous characteristics, which bring him closer to Grendel and its mother.<sup>80</sup> Dragland has read Beowulf as a monster-man and recognises Grendel as the hero's «monstrous double» and «alter-ego».<sup>81</sup> In addition, among the adjectives to portray Beowulf and his physicality, the monsters and their habitat, the *scop* chooses «eacen» ('prodigious', 198a) to describe the mighty hero, as well as the vast Grendel-mere (1621a,) the magic sword in the den

<sup>78</sup> For the use of "weall" to denote the hoard-chamber in the barrow, see PRINCI BRACCINI 2009: 18-19.

<sup>79</sup> ORCHARD 1995: 29.

<sup>80</sup> ROSIER 1963: 8-14.

<sup>81</sup> DRAGLAND 1977: 607, 610.

(1663a, 2140a), and the «eacen-cræftig» ('excitingly powerful') dragon and its treasure (2280a, 3051b).<sup>82</sup>

Yet, in its recurrent contrastive and nearly paradoxical descriptions, the ideal of *sapientia et fortitudo* draws a dividing line between Beowulf and the monsters.<sup>83</sup> Though the hero may be as strong as the supernatural beings he vanquishes, he is different from them because he owns opposite virtues and, especially, a sharp wit – just as he demonstrated in Grendel's den as to the weapon to use to kill the she-monster.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, even if Beowulf plays a vital role in the marvellous element of the poem, the fact that the words “wundor”, “wrætlic” and “sellic” are not used to describe him further strengthens Robinson's view that, in characterizing the hero, the *scop* systematically eschews the elements of the marvellous.<sup>85</sup> Thus, Beowulf is neither a good monster amid evil monsters, nor a superhuman despite his strength; he is «conceived of as a heroic man and not as a romance hero».<sup>86</sup>

Beowulf defeats Grendel because of his force, Grendel's mother owing to his wit once his physical faculties have faded away, and, in his old age, he triumphs over the dragon thanks to Wiglaf's aid.<sup>87</sup> Despite such heroism and his alleged supernatural strength, Beowulf dies as an ordinary man by achieving a wondrous deed. Such a gloriously tragic event is the last of several and multifaceted aspects of the marvellous that the poet has beautifully unfolded «wunder æfter wundre».<sup>88</sup>

<sup>82</sup> ORCHARD 2003: 240.

<sup>83</sup> For the theme of *sapientia*, see note 50.

<sup>84</sup> SCOWCROFT 1999: 51.

<sup>85</sup> ROBINSON 2000: 80.

<sup>86</sup> Ivi: 121.

<sup>87</sup> RUGGERINI 1995: 202.

<sup>88</sup> Though Hrothgar's words «wunder æfter wundre» (931a) refer to God's mighty marvels, in the poem the *scop* rather uses the noun “wundor” to describe similarly prodigious events such as the manifestation of the marvellous, mostly related to Beowulf's deeds against the monsters, see note 18. This essay is dedicated to Professor Giuseppe Brunetti, outstanding authority on *Beowulf*, and cherished mentor in my doctoral years.

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