

Beowulf and Grettir: Comparison and Coincidence

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This essay will explore the title characters of the Old English poem *Beowulf* and the medieval Icelandic *Grettis saga* as analogues for one another. For years scholars have suspected a genetic literary connection between the two works, and many arguments have been presented which try to link them. In 1998, Magnús Fjalldal wrote a book largely condemning the scholarship to date, which he sees as flimsy. Fjalldal contends that all the connections that have been proposed so far are coincidental. This essay will briefly examine his beliefs as a basis for further discussion of the characters. I find that when we lay aside the issue of genetic relationship between the works, enlightening comparisons can still be made. This process of comparison is like tracing two similar objects on the same sheet of paper. When we take the objects away, the points of contact and points of departure between the lines we have drawn can show us patterns that we never would have thought possible.

The major subjects on which the characters will be compared are their childhoods, defining life events, relations with young male kinsmen, and death. A final note on the characters and their possible relationship to a common ancestor will conclude the essay.

Fjalldal spends the most of his 1998 book, *The Long Arm of Coincidence*, meticulously

reproducing and taking apart all the arguments offered to date for a genetic relationship between *Beowulf* and *Grettis Saga*. In his introduction he describes three reasons for why he is skeptical of a connection. The first is that the human mind is a “pattern producing machine” and that scholars who *want* to believe there is a connection have been unable to take the necessary unbiased stance when interpreting the works. Secondly, he cites the lack of an objective criteria for evaluating the evidence of a genetic connection. Each scholar has been able to take his or her own subjective set of criteria for evaluating the works, something which is made possible by the *a priori* belief in an implicit connection that was mentioned above. Thirdly, the passages that are most cited as being analogues take on such different roles in their respective works that, despite superficial similarities, to interpret them as equivalent is to ignore the literary context in which they are set.¹

After deconstructing the arguments of his colleagues, Fjalldal describes the well-established Icelandic literary traditions that can account for each of the details that *Grettis saga* may have appeared to borrow from *Beowulf*. I believe he makes a strong point. It is theorized that the author of *Grettis saga* was steeped in the Icelandic literary tradition. His explicit references in the saga display a knowledge of several texts of Icelandic literature, both histories and earlier sagas and it is suspected that he was familiar with even more. In an essay entitled, *Social institutions and belief systems of medieval Iceland (c. 870-1400) and their relations to literary production*, Sørensen argues that the Icelanders of the middle ages constructed a strong national identity for themselves based on their literary renown and their self-aware production of historical and legal texts (an effect which is termed *textualization*).² This powerful literary identity was certainly established by the time of the composition of *Grettis saga* and it seems likely that the saga author was a part of it. Fjalldal asks us to interpret this evidence using Occam’s Razor and he concludes that the saga author used sources that we know he

¹Fjalldal, viii-ix

²Ross, 14

possessed. It is likely that he never encountered *Beowulf* in the form in which now have it, and it is distinctly possible that there is no earlier common-ancestral text or oral tradition that unites the two.

In my own evaluation and response to Fjalldal's critique, I find that he was quick to condemn the notion that *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga* may share a common ancestor in folklore, and that that ancestor may be related to the Bear's Son tales that Panzer spent so much time collecting. However, Fjalldal's concerns are valid. He gives examples of how scholars have, on the basis of the genetic connection, attempted to use one text to explicate the other, for example: using Glámr's curse on Grettir to explain why the heroic *Beowulf* meets an inglorious end.³ These types of explications are tenuous and may be overlooking perfectly valid literary reasons that a text provides to explain itself. To find the only suitable explanation for *Beowulf* to die childless and unhappy to be an error in transmission from an earlier common ancestor seems to me to vastly underestimate the literary power and intelligence of the *Beowulf* poet. I believe that, as much as possible, the texts should be evaluated on their own merits and in their own unique social contexts and should not be used as "Cliff's Notes" for one another.

Now that we have reviewed Fjalldal's position, we move on to the comparison of the two heroes. Both characters had troubled childhoods, which has led scholars to categorize them as *kol-bitar* and to use this as further evidence of the genetic link. The *kol-bitr* character type belongs to heroes who were possessed of precocious strength and intellect, and yet were idle in their youth, lounging around by the fire all day doing nothing. As Fjalldal is quick to point out, neither Grettir nor *Beowulf* really fits this character type.⁴

We know that Grettir was born into a good family. His father Asmund Grey-locks is well liked and has many friends.⁵ The first description that we get of Grettir as a

³Fjalldal, 8

⁴Fjalldal, 18-19

⁵Fox and Pálsson, 22

boy is that he was “self-willed, taciturn, and harsh, sardonic and mischievous.”⁶ This mischief-making would seem to suggest a precocious intelligence, but the saga author soon refutes this, saying that Grettir was good-looking, “but he developed slowly” and “when he was ten years old he began to take on strength.”⁷ We may compare this description with the hero of *Egils saga*, a text which we know the author of *Grettis saga* to have read. Egil was a precocious youth who rode horses, got inebriated at parties and was a decent poet all by the age of three. Grettir does not at all fit this description. In fact, as he grew Grettir was notably unsociable: “he was not in the habit of laying by the fire in the large hall, and he usually did not have much to say.”⁸ He did display violent tendencies and played several mean-spirited pranks on his father when asked to do some chores around the house. Fjalldal decides that this behavior is not entirely unheroic, as Grettir must believe these simple tasks to be beneath him.⁹ For this reason, Grettir is not considered by Fjalldal to be a good match for the kol-bitr archetype.

Beowulf’s childhood is mysterious, as the hero’s life is presented thematically, not chronologically as in *Grettis saga*. Some scholars do not believe a coherent picture is possible given the evidence,¹⁰ but we shall try to piece things together in a way that makes sense. In Beowulf’s first appearance in Denmark, we believe that he also comes from a noble family. In lines 262 and following he speaks of his father Ecgtheow, who is well remembered throughout the world.¹¹ We later find out that when Beowulf was a boy, Ecgtheow had had a violent run-in with a neighboring tribe, the Wylfings, and Hrothgar sheltered him when his own people refused to do so. Beowulf went with him in this exile to Denmark, and this is how Hrothgar later recognizes him.¹²

The next we hear of Beowulf’s upbringing is much later in the poem, upon Be-

⁶Fox and Pálsson 24

⁷Fox and Pálsson 24

⁸Fox and Pálsson, 27

⁹Fjalldal, 19

¹⁰Fjalldal, 19

¹¹Liuzza, 61

¹²Liuzza, 67

owulf's return to Geatland and his meeting with King Hygelac. We are told that as a youth, "He had been long despised,/...for they [the Geats] assumed that he was slothful,/ a cowardly nobleman."¹³ Liuzza acknowledges in a footnote that the reasons for giving an ill account of Beowulf's youth at this point are not clear. It is conceivable that the Beowulf poet is attempting to draw on a folkloric, *kol-bitr* archetype, despite the fact that it conflicts with his earlier character description. Fjalldal thinks that the conflicting accounts are both true, and that Beowulf's youth, though troubled, was not entirely without promise. Therefore he is ineligible for *kol-bitr* status. Viewed together, we see that Beowulf and Grettir are not very alike in their childhood. Grettir is given everything good that an Icelandic farm boy can hope to have and yet he is ungrateful, while Beowulf has a troubled home life, including disgrace and banishment, and yet he still grows to become the strongest man in the world, and also the nicest and most gentle.

As they grow, both men begin to build reputations as monster-slayers. Grettir dispatches Kar the Old, an undead barrow-dweller, when he is about 16.¹⁴ And Beowulf takes a detour to kill some sea-monsters in his swimming match with Breca when he is still just a boy¹⁵ It is interesting, then, that the single most important event in the life of each man is a monster fight. In *Beowulf* this is the battle against the Grendel-kin. In *Grettis saga* I believe the parallel to be the fight with Glámr. This has been the subject of much debate, and many scholars believe that the Sandhaugar episode shows more of connection between the works. There are certainly many details in the Sandhaugar episode that are superficially reminiscent of the fight with Grendel's mother, including a nasty she-troll, a watery hall beneath a cliff, and a despairing companion. However, I feel that because of the placement of this passage in the last third of the saga, when Grettir has already been outlawed for many years, it's lack of emotional force in the

¹³Liuzza, 120

¹⁴Fox and Pálsson, Chapter 18

¹⁵Liuzza, line 536.

story makes it a weak comparison to the encounter with the Grendel and his mother, which is central to the *Beowulf* poem. For this reason, I believe that the Glámr fight makes a much more interesting comparison to Beowulf's fight with Grendel. These are the climactic battles that determine the fortunes of each man for the rest of his life.

Beowulf's fight with Grendel is easy. It is visceral and full of gruesome details (the cracking of bone-locks, etc.), but at no point is it really a challenge for the hero. We are told explicitly before the fight who will win: "... the lord gave them [the Danes]/ a web of victory... so that they completely,/ through one man's craft, overcame their enemy..."¹⁶ Beowulf uses no weapons, but trusts in the strength of his hand, which has been appraised by the poet as being equal to that of thirty men (the exact number of Danes Grendel has killed). The hero and the monster are more than evenly matched, and halfway through the battle we are shown Grendel deciding that this was a terrible idea.¹⁷ Grendel's arm is torn off and he flees the hall, whimpering, as good as dead.

Grettir's fight with Glámr stands in stark contrast to Beowulf's rout of his troll. We are in no way assured of Grettir's victory by the saga author. In fact, there is no question that Glámr is the stronger of the two, and he is always getting the better of Grettir during their brief tussle: "... Grettir leapt under his arms, grasped him around the waist, and clasped him as hard as he could, hoping to bring him down. But the thrall gripped his arms so tightly that he was forced to break away."¹⁸ Grettir is the mightiest man in Iceland, and yet his wrestling moves are clearly having no effect. Once Grettir realizes that the monster is going to succeed in dragging him outside, he is able to win by trickery, by feigning resistance all the while and then in one decisive moment changing his momentum and flinging himself at Glámr, knocking him down just outside the door.

But, in *Grettis saga*, the monster still gets the last laugh. Not only are the walking

¹⁶Liuzza, lines 696-700

¹⁷Liuzza, line 786

¹⁸Fox and Pálsson, 78

dead in Iceland vastly stronger than the living, but apparently they are gifted with dark magic as well.¹⁹ In this moment, at the cusp of Grettir's apparent victory, the clouds part and Glámr's terrifying eyes are bathed in moonlight. Glámr then lays a curse on Grettir that will be his doom. He tells Grettir that he will now be robbed of half the strength he would have had possessed, had he not met Glámr. He also says this:

Up until now, your deeds have brought you fame, but from now on outlawry and slaughter will come your way, and most of your acts will bring you ill luck and misfortune. You will be made an outlaw and forced to live by yourself. I also lay this curse on you: you will always see before you these eyes of mine, and they will make your solitude unbearable, and this shall drag you to your death.²⁰

Grettir swiftly dispatches the monster and places its head against its buttocks, but that cannot take away the sting of the curse. Though the curse does not appear to have any immediate consequences, it will prove to plague Grettir for the rest of his life. In contrast, Beowulf's killing of Grendel provokes a swift and vicious attack from a vengeful mother, but otherwise has no ill consequences to speak of. In fact, it is the event that catapults Beowulf from minor-league monster slayer to king of the Geats. On one hand we have a decisive victory that launches a career, and on the other, a tragic event that unravels a man's life.

Next, the matter of the death of the heroes. Despite their very different lives (Beowulf enjoyed years of peace as king of the Geats while Grettir had twenty bitter winters) both men come to their end in surprisingly similar ways. They are both brought low by supernatural powers before the end. When Grettir is camped out on Drangey Isle, he accidentally deals himself a wound which festers due to the dark magic of an old crone, foster-mother of Thorbjorn. This puts Grettir in a rather sad state of affairs and allows Thorbjorn's and his men to overcome him when they arrive on the island. The saga author writes: "He could make no resistance, for he was already at

¹⁹There is actually debate as to whether Glámr's magic is an undead feature or whether it was something that he possessed also in life.

²⁰Fox and Pálsson, 79

the point of death because of his wounded leg; his thigh had festered all the way up to his intestines."²¹ Beowulf's supernatural wounds are caused by the dragon: "When the wound... began to burn and swell, he soon realized that in his breast, with an evil force, a poison welled..."²² We can imagine the last, tortured gasps of the heroes as they lay dying, covered in gore. Though one is a king and the other an outlaw, neither receives a dignified death.

However, just before the end, when all seems grim, both heroes are graced by the appearance of a young, male kinsman. This is quite interesting. Of the retainers which Beowulf selects to accompany him to face the dragon, the only one who does not flee is a young man named Wiglaf, a cousin of Beowulf on his father's side.²³ Beowulf is able to kill the dragon only with Wiglaf's help, and Wiglaf is with him as he passes away. Similarly, Grettir visits his mother just before shipping off to Drangey, to explain what he is about to do. His brother Illugi decides to go with him and offer Grettir his protection and company, as Grettir is now haunted terribly by Glámr's curse. Illugi is fifteen years old and does not know his brother, who has been outlawed for a longer time than Illugi has been alive. But now he is prepared to die for him. Grettir graciously accepts, saying, "Of all the men in the world you are the one who would give me most comfort..."²⁴

The presence of these young male kinsmen in each work is very poignant. Even if the reader fails to respond emotionally to the death of the hero, the reader cannot help but feel for the adoring teenage boy in the depths of his grief. I also believe that the fresh-faced young Wiglaf and Illugi cause emotional tension in their naive devotion to the old, bitter heroes. We feel the trepidation in each old man as he accepts the help of his young kinsman and wonders if he will ruin the poor boy. Unfortunately, each man does. Illugi goes to his death with vengeance in his heart for Grettir's killing, and

²¹Fox and Pálsson, 167

²²Liuzza, line 2712

²³Liuzza, 133

²⁴Fox and Pálsson, 144

Wiglaf loses all hope for the future of his people.²⁵ Both young men are left shattered in the wake of the hero's passing.

The consequences of the heroes' deaths are quite different. In *Grettis saga*, Grettir's death is the loss of a single man. But in *Beowulf*, the death of the hero signifies the death of an entire people. At the end of the poem, a Geatish messenger speaks the unhappy truth to his people:

... many a cold morning
shall the spear be grasped in frozen fingers,
hefted by hands, nor shall the sound of the harp
rouse the warriors, but the dark raven,
greedy for carrion, shall speak a great deal
ask the eagle how he fared at his feast
when he plundered corpses with the wolf.

With *Beowulf* gone his people will no doubt face slavery and death. The tone of the poem after this point, is understandably quite grim. In contrast, after the death of its eponymous hero, *Grettis saga* goes on for a dozen more chapters, relating a comical and generally light-hearted tale of Grettir's brother Thorstein the Galleon and his adulterous adventures in Byzantium. This difference in tone leaves us to evaluate the heroes quite differently as the poet and saga author reflect on their lives one last time.

In the final chapter of *Grettis saga* the saga author steps back from the finished story and brings in Sturla the lawman, a sort of medieval talking-head figure, to comment on the reputation of Grettir the Strong. Sturla is of the belief that Grettir is the most distinguished of Icelandic outlaws for three reasons: he was the most intelligent and longest lived of the outlaws, he was the strongest man in Iceland and the best monster killer of his day, and that he was avenged in Byzantium, which had never happened before, and has never happened since.²⁶ By distancing himself and us from the narrative, the saga writer allows us to disconnect and to feel satisfied with Grettir's story.

²⁵Fox and Pálsson, 169; Liuzza, lines 2884-2891

²⁶Fox and Pálsson, 187

We may wonder what could have become of him had he not had such ill luck, but in the end we accept it.

In contrast, the end of *Beowulf* is raw and leaves us mourning. There is no distancing effect here, rather we are standing at the hero's funeral pyre amidst the despairing Geatish people. The poet leaves us with the words of the Geats remembering their king. He was of all the kings of the world, the most mild and gentle, most eager for his peoples' esteem.²⁷ Beowulf's legacy on Earth, much like the fate of his soul, is unclear. Despite how outstanding he was in life, we do not truly know whether the Geatish people have been improved by his rule. The poet purposely leaves us in the dark on both the theological and secular score.

In conclusion, it seems possible to me that *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga* share some common thread in storytelling tradition. However, the similarities in the texts are, by no means, as emphatically stated as scholars have proclaimed. Beowulf and Grettir are not two expressions of one man. They are born into different circumstances, have different goals, and identify with different values. Whether or not they fit a character archetype depends on how loosely that archetype is constructed, and will continue to be debated for a long time. The debate is healthy. It means that these stories still have the power to capture the imagination. That is good, because from them we can learn what it is like when a man is pushed to his limits, and through them we can ponder the meaning of choice when all intention and reason break down.

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²⁷Liuzza, lines 3181-3182

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