



## The early bird is the *wyrm*: if and how the literary use of *wyrm* in *Genesis A & B* and *Beowulf* informs its linguistic meaning?

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The predominant linguistic factor that bleeds into any literary presence of the Old English *wyrm* is its three potential definitions: ‘worm, serpent, dragon’.<sup>1</sup> Derived from ‘Indo-European *uer-* (‘to turn, to bend’)<sup>2</sup>, with cognates such as ‘Old Norse *ormr*, Old Saxon and Old High German *wurm...*’<sup>3</sup> and so on, the multi-faceted word has significant presence in Germanic medieval literatures. Within *Genesis*, in the retelling of the first sin through *Genesis B* and surrounding *Genesis A* passages (until line 950), *wyrm* makes an unlikely occurrence in order to describe the well-known “serpent” within hagiographical literature. In *Beowulf*, *wyrm* is used to describe the final monster in particular: the dragon. However, the same word is used in vastly different texts to denote different serpentine creatures. Whilst this may initially stem from the heteroglossic definitions, this essay will question whether an overarching characteristic follows *wyrm* in surrounding physical appearance, physical movements, or function. By examining the literary presentation of the *wyrm* in each text, as well as the presence of an Indo-European verb-phrase, I will assess if and how the literary descriptions create additional meaning to the definition of *wyrm*.

*Wyrm* is principally used as a noun to describe the text’s serpentine creatures. As a heteroglossic word<sup>4</sup>, it cannot be reduced to a singular meaning. The three potential definitions help to inform the function of the character whom *wyrm* is ascribed to. In *Beowulf*, that character is the final ‘monster’<sup>5</sup>, a dragon, described when

*þa se wyrm onwoc, wroht wæs geniwad* (2287)<sup>6</sup>

“Then **the worm** awoke, accusation was renewed.”

Whilst in *Genesis B*, Satan’s lackey transforms himself into a *wyrm*:

*wearp hine þa on **wyrmes lic** and wand him þa ymbutan*

*þone deaðes beam þurh deofles cræft* (491-492)<sup>7</sup>

“He then cast himself into **a worm’s body** and then wound himself around the tree of death through devil’s craft.”

<sup>1</sup> Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, 1st edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.416.

<sup>2</sup> Haruko Momma, "Worm: A Lexical Approach to The Beowulf Manuscript", in *Old English Philology: Studies in Honour Of R.D. Fulk*, 1st edn (Boydell and Brewer, 2016), p.201.

<sup>3</sup> Calvert Watkins *How to Kill a Dragon*, p.416.

<sup>4</sup> Joyce Tally Lionarons, *The Medieval Dragon*, 1st edn (Trowbridge: Hisarlik Press, 1998), p.3.

<sup>5</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and The Critics", in *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, 1st edn (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002), p.103.

<sup>6</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all Old English *Beowulf* transcriptions are from John Porter, *Beowulf: Text and Translation*, 3rd edn (Pinner: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1993), and all translations are my own.

<sup>7</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all Old English *Genesis B* transcriptions are from A. N. Doane, *The Saxon Genesis*, 1st edn (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), and all translations are my own.

It is evident that these are two different depictions and uses of *wyrm* as a noun. The serpentine creature in *Beowulf* is not only that, but also synonymous with a *draca* “dragon, serpent”.<sup>8</sup> However, in *Genesis B* *se laða*, “the hateful one” (496), simply casts itself into a *wyrm*’s body; the *wyrmes lic* is a disguise. Consequently, the basic functions of *wyrm* is explicitly different between the two texts.

Descriptive nouns build on the difference functions of the two *wyrms* to showcase the respective characters’ motives. Satan’s serpent is repeatedly referred to as *lað* ‘[noun] hostile one, enemy, etc.’<sup>9</sup>, at least 6 times in *Genesis A & B*.<sup>10</sup> The significance of *lað* results from how *wyrmes lic* is a disguise in *Genesis B*; the creature’s appearance is not the character’s defining characteristic, rather his hatefulness and evilness is. The *wyrm* in *Beowulf* opposes this: the very existence of the mythological beast and its monstrosity as a creature is the focus of the section. The ‘Latin-derived word *draca*...occurs as a simplex in the poem [Beowulf] five times,’ whilst also appearing in 6 different compounds, including ‘*niðdraca*, “hostile dragon” (2273a) [and] *ligdraca*, “fire dragon” (2333a, 3040b)’.<sup>11</sup> The subscribed use of *draca* confirms the use of *wyrm* as a ‘real worm [dragon], with a bestial life’.<sup>12</sup> Despite introducing both serpentine creatures as *wyrm*, disguised or not, the distinct differing descriptions again show that *wyrm* does not necessitate the same type of being, proving *wyrm*’s heteroglossic linguistic nature.

The physical description of the two *wyrms* further expand the word’s different meanings, especially between the respective serpentine creatures. *Beowulf*’s enemy is implied to have wings, or at least the capability to fly, the ability to breath fire, and snake-like features. When entering the narrative, the *hordweard*, “hoard-guard” is presented as

*nacod niðdraca, nihtes fleogeð*  
*fyre befangen; (2273-2274)*

“[the] naked strife-dragon, flyer of night  
encompassed by fire.”

As a “flyer”, the *wyrm* is thus suggested to have wings, reinforced through descriptive nouns such as *lað lyftfloga* “hostile flier in the air” (2315). The passage’s use of *nacod* suggests that the creature has ‘scales like a serpent...[through] a term which may imply the smoothness of the scales.’ Despite no other explicitly serpent physical attributes, the *wyrm* is narrated to ‘[fight] coiled like a snake’<sup>13</sup> through depictions of ‘coiled’ action in *hringbogan*, “ring-coiled” (2561)<sup>14</sup>, and *wyrm wohbogen* “coiled worm”. Finally, the monster has the ability to breath fire, arguably its most devastating weapon. These physical attributes are repeated throughout the battle, highlighting the creature’s monstrosity, which culminates when

*...se gæst ongan gledum spiwan,*  
*beorht hofu bærnan; bryneleoma stod*  
*eldum on andan (2312-2314)*

<sup>8</sup> Marsden, *The Cambridge Old English Reader*, p.477.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Marsden, *The Cambridge Old English Reader*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.512.

<sup>10</sup> In lines 496, 592, 601, 647, 711 in *Genesis B* and in line 917 in *Genesis A*.

<sup>11</sup> Lionarons, *The Medieval Dragon*, p.28.

<sup>12</sup> Tolkien, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, p.114.

<sup>13</sup> Lionarons, *The Medieval Dragon*, p.30.

<sup>14</sup> Trans. Porter, *Beowulf: Text and Translation*, p.155.

“the guest began to spit fire,  
to burn bright homes; the fire-beam stood,  
malice to the leader.”

The physical disguise of the *wrymes lic* in *Genesis B*, on the other hand, does not contain many narrative descriptions. The suggestion of the *wyrm*'s reptilian appearance is evidenced when Eve calls the creature who deceived her a *nædre*, “snake”<sup>15</sup> (897):

*Me nædre beswac and me neodlice*  
*to forsceape scythe* (897-898)<sup>16</sup>

“The snake deceived me and zealously  
persuaded me to crime”

Eve's use of *nædre* suggests that the *wyrm* who deceived her had a reptilian undertone, and that the “messenger” was evidently still in *wrymes lic*. However, the most detailed description of the *wyrm* is made by Eve after she has eaten *þæs ofætes*, “the fruits [of the Tree of Death]” (599), as she convinces Adam to do so too, describing:

*...þes boda sciene,*  
*godes engel god, ic on his gearwan geseo*  
*þæt he is ærendsecg unces hearran,*  
*hefocyninges...* (656-659)

“this shining messenger,  
God's good angel, I see by his attire  
that he is a messenger to our lord  
king of heaven...”

The description itself is initially puzzling as Eve describes *se laða* as appearing like an angel, though only one transformation has occurred: Satan's servant into a *wyrm*. Therefore, Eve seems to be conflating the *wyrm* appearance with an angel's, suggesting they are similar in appearance. When Eve goes on to describe how she sees God, she describes what angels<sup>17</sup> look like:

*Geseo ic him his englas ymbe hweorfan*  
*mid feðerhaman,* (669-670)

“I see him [God] roam around his angels  
with wings.”

<sup>15</sup> Marsden, *The Cambridge Old English Reader*, p.524.

<sup>16</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all Old English *Genesis A* transcriptions are from A. N. Doane, *Genesis A: A New Edition*, 1st edn (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), and all translations are my own.

<sup>17</sup> When Adam reveals that Eve has been looking at Hell, not Heaven, it implies that the “angels” she saw were the Hell's “angels” who were cast down.

If the *wyrm* and angel's appearance are the same, as evidenced when Eve describes the deception, the comparison of the *wyrm* to winged angels suggests that the *wyrm* disguise also possesses wings.

The *Genesis B wyrm* may also have a physical connection to fire, implicit through Eve's description of the *boda sciene*. After eating the fruit, Eve's mistakenly identifies Hell and the *englas* there as Heaven. After Adam eats the fruit, he admonishes Eve for not realising it was the bright fire of Hell:

... *Nis heofonrice*

*gelic þam lige*

(794-795).

"Heavenly Kingdom is not like that fire [of Hell]"

However, if Eve mistook the fire of Hell for the Heavenly Kingdom's glow, it is possible she mistook fire, or some Hellish glow on the *wyrm* who she sees as *godes engel god*, as heavenly *sciene*. The "bright", and potentially fiery, attribute of the *wyrm* in *Genesis* does thereby suggest a similar physical appearance between it and the *wyrm* in *Beowulf*. Nevertheless, the physical description of *Genesis B's wyrm* is conjecture: its matching wings, fire, even reptilian nature to the *wyrm* in *Beowulf*, are mixed in with its evil purpose to Eve. The *wyrm*, who is repeatedly stated as deceiving *mid ligenum*, "with lies" (496), is a slippery character. The physical shell still remains a disguise in the end, and unlike the *wyrm's* physical ferocity in *Beowulf*, the defining attribute of *Genesis's wyrm* is its deceptive nature.

Despite the difference in the literary purpose of *wyrm*, its linguistic etymology and the consequential proposed Indo-European dragon slaying formula provides a sense of an ancient tradition to both, and sets up the *wyrms* as the greatest adversaries. In *How to Kill a Dragon*, Calvert Watkins derived a linguistic formula to describe the bidirectional 'slaying of or by a "dragon"'<sup>18</sup> Indo-European verb phrase used and developed throughout linguistically connected literatures. Of all Old English works, *Beowulf* demonstrates the dragon slaying formula most clearly. The focus on heroic deeds within *Beowulf* is made none clearer than when 'a mounted scop is prompted by *Beowulf's* exploits to tell of previous Germanic heroes (and villains)<sup>19</sup> The potentially 'common...dragon-slaying myth' of Sigurd and the dragon<sup>20</sup> foreshadows the interaction between *Beowulf* and the *wyrm*, paralleled in literary theme and linguistics, particularly through the use of the following formula:

'HERO

SLAY (\*g'hen-)

SERPENT/HERO'<sup>21</sup>

Watkins further rationalises the fact that the Indo-European dragon-slaying formula is bidirectional: the dragon can be killed and it can kill<sup>22</sup> (416), which occurs in the following statement<sup>23</sup>:

...*bona swylce læg,*

*Egeslic eorðdraca ealre bereafod,*

*bealwe gebæded. Beahhordum leng*

<sup>18</sup> Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, p.422.

<sup>19</sup> Marsden, *The Cambridge Old English Reader*, p.307.

<sup>20</sup> Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, p.415.

<sup>21</sup> Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, p.422.

<sup>22</sup> Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, p.416.

<sup>23</sup> The coloured text corresponds to the appropriate terms in the formula.

*wyrm wohbogen wealdan ne moste...* (2824-2827)

“killer [wyrm] likewise lay,  
fearful earth-dragon, stripped of life,  
maliciously oppressed. The coiled serpent  
could not control the ring-hoard...”

The *wyrm* is equally “stripped of life” as much as it is a “killer”. As a result, the *wyrm* is the ultimate adversary for Beowulf. Although Tolkien describes the *wyrm* as ‘not dragon enough’<sup>24</sup>, it is the only monster that could deliver a *wunde wælbleate*, “mortal wound” (2725), to Beowulf. Through battle with the *wyrm*, Beowulf thereby establishes himself as part of the Old Germanic heroic literary tradition<sup>25</sup> with their verb phrase, part of an “ancient” literary tradition and ‘common [linguistic] inheritance’.<sup>26</sup>

However, *Genesis*’ use of the formula is complicated in the technical linguistic sense. The verb phrase *to bonan weorðan*, “to slay”<sup>27</sup>, is not present within the creation of sin narrative as no one is killed. But, if we view ‘the basic verb [as denoting] violent action’, the theme and myth of *wyrm* smiting man can be applied to *Genesis*. When explaining to God why she ate the fruit, Eve states

*Me nædre beswac and me neodlice*  
*to forsceape scyhte and to scyldfrece,*  
*fah wyrm þurh fægir word,* (897-899)

“The snake deceived me and zealously  
persuaded me to crime, and guilty greed,  
that inimical worm, through fair speech.”

Admittedly, this language does not initially seem to match the violence of phrase in *Beowulf*. Yet, for violence within the context of *Genesis* and the story of sin, it is the most violent it could be. The “guilty greed” refers to Eve eating the *þæs ofættes* from the Tree of Death. Whilst no immediate violence occurs, in terms of death or injury, the consequence of Eve’s “greed” is that *him beon deað scyred*, “death is ordained to him” (485). In other words: *to bonan weorðan*. The use of the “dragon slaying” myth within *Genesis* gives it a sense of ancient tradition, and helps ‘explain and legitimates the religious...status quo’, as it does with other “creation” myths.<sup>28</sup> And so, the *wyrm* achieves the most violent of acts in *Genesis* with powerful weapons, *þæs ofættes* and *mid ligenum*, ensuring death for mankind and thus is the ultimate adversary towards the human race and God.

The position of the *wyrms* as ultimate adversary is reinforced through compounds using – *sceaða* [meaning] ‘one who does harm, an enemy’<sup>29</sup> in each text. In *Genesis*, the *wyrm* is also called and *se hellsceaða* “hellish enemy” (694) and *lað leodsceaða* “hateful enemy of people” (917), whereas *Beowulf* refers to the *draca* as *se ðeodsceaða*, “enemy of the people” (2278), *se guðsceaða Geata leode*, “water enemy of the leader of the Geats” (2318), and *se*

<sup>24</sup> Tolkien, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, p.114.

<sup>25</sup> Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, p.415.

<sup>26</sup> Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, p.414-416.

<sup>27</sup> Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, p.422.

<sup>28</sup> Lionarons, *The Medieval Dragon*, p.6.

<sup>29</sup> Lionarons, *The Medieval Dragon*, p.29.

*mansceaða*, “enemy of mankind” (2514). In particular, *lað leodsceaða* “hateful enemy of people” (917) in *Genesis* and *se mansceaða*, “enemy of mankind” present the *wyrm* in each text as positioned against all else. As the “ultimate” adversary, their hatred towards all others ties the bow on a presentation focused on maintaining adverse characteristics of an old tradition. Whilst the *wyrms* cannot be shown as an adversary through noun alone, these compounds help highlight the position of ‘enemy’ that each *wyrm* occupies.

The problematic motives of the *wyrm* in *Genesis* complicates any comparative literary analysis and any conclusions. Eve does suggest *Genesis*' *wyrm* has a very similar physical description to the *wyrm* in *Beowulf* through the reptilian appearance, wings and possibly fiery attitude. But the characteristics she describes are potentially flawed as she is in the midst of deception. Consequently, the literary analysis cannot explicitly inform the meaning of *wyrm* beyond suggestion. Instead, it is the linguistic background to *wyrm* which supports the existence of an overarching characteristic of *wyrm* felt beyond the definitions of ‘worm, snake, dragon’. Both *Beowulf* and *Genesis* ingrain the sense of an ultimate adversary through pre-medieval use of *wyrm* through the use of the dragon slaying Indo-European formula. The extreme adversity informs the same basic characteristic and moral of a dragon: the *wyrm* ‘[is] dangerous to man’.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Louise W. Lippincott, “The Unnatural History of Dragons”, *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin*, 77.334 (1981), 2-24 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3795303>>, p.3.

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