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Using Indo-European Comparative Mythology to Solve Literary Problems: The Case of Old English Hengest

In both the mythic-historical and folk-literary traditions of Old English, a figure named Hengest is to be found. In the historical (or quasi-historical) account of the coming of the Anglo-Saxons to Britain, Hengest along with his brother is described as being one of the two leaders of the Germanic tribes; both are given a "divine" genealogy, being traced back ultimately to Woden, as in this example:

þæt hit wæste** wunige. Wæron
ærest (MS. B, p. 50) heora læ-
teowas⁵ J heretogan II gebroðor
Hengest J Horsa. Wæron hi Wiht-
gylses suna, þæs fæder wæs Witta
haten, þæs fæder wæs Wihta haten,
þæs fæder wæs Woden nemned.

Then at first their [i.e. the Angles and Saxons and Jutes] leaders and war-chieftains were two brothers, Hengest and Horsa. They were sons of Wihtgyls, whose father was called Witta, whose father was called Wihta, and Wihta's father was named Woden.¹

A character named Hengest also appears in Old English folk-literature, in the so-called Finn episode of Beowulf and in the manuscript fragment known as the Fight at Finnesburg.²

The occurrence of a character with the same name in these two traditions has naturally led to speculation on the part of scholars as to what connection, if any, there was between the two Hengests. The prevailing view held that the two Hengests were the same figure, until Grein in 1862 denied such an identification, claiming instead that the two Hengests were separate and unrelated figures.³ Grein's negative opinion held sway until 1921, when Aurner rebutted this stance and returned to the single Hengest hypothesis. That earlier view, in which the two Hengests were taken to repre-

sent the same (quasi-) historical figure, remains the current consensus.⁴ However, the question remains controversial, and thus is one for which any additional evidence is welcome.

Even though the Beowulf Hengest is embedded in Old English heroic tradition, nonetheless there are certain traits he displays which seem in certain ways to be distinctly unheroic. Thus, two interesting literary problems emerge from a consideration of the character of Hengest in Beowulf:

- (1) The source of his puzzling nonheroic behavior in the Finn episode, and
- (2) his relationship with the (quasi-) historical Hengest mentioned, for example, in Bede.

These problems are interrelated; an understanding of why Hengest acts as he does in the Finn episode helps to provide some further corroboration of the view that the Hengests are one and the same figure. In addition, the methodology that can be used to arrive at a solution to these problems is of some intrinsic interest: through a consideration of Indo-European comparative mythology--as reflected in Germanic folk-heroic tradition--one can gain insights into Hengest's actions in the Finn episode.

In the Finn episode, Hengest appears as one of the retainers of Hnaef of the Half-Danes, who are being besieged by the Eotens; they are joined by the king of the Frisians, Finn, who is married to Hnaef's sister Hildeburh. The exact cause of the struggle is not made explicit in Beowulf, but it seems to involve an attempt on the part of the Half-Danes to rescue Hildeburh from mistreatment at Finn's hands. After holding their position for five days, Hnaef and several of his men are killed in the fight. At this point, the command of the Half-Danes is assumed by Hengest, a valiant warrior, judging from the fact that Finn believes he cannot fight against Hengest without a large force.⁵ Thus, despite the death of their leader Hnaef, the Half-Danes seem to have an advantage in the battle.

However, instead of pressing this apparent advantage, Hengest agrees to the peace terms, generous to the Half-Danes, offered to him by Finn. This is the first of Hengest's seemingly nonheroic actions in this episode; one might expect, in keeping with standards of heroic conduct in Old English society, that Hengest should try to avenge the death of his lord Hnaef at the hands of the Eotens and Finn. The warrior Hengest seems here to be adopting a more peaceful and passive attitude.

After the peace settlement, Hengest stays on in Friesland with Finn through a long and hard winter. His motive for this, despite the peace terms that were agreed on, seems to be a desire for vengeance against the Eotens and possibly Finn also:

hē tō gym-wraece
swiðor þōhte þonne tō sǣ-lāde.

He [Hengest] thought more about vengeance than about a sea-voyage.

Some ambivalence on Hengest's part, though, is evident, for he makes peace (admittedly with Finn but indirectly, therefore, with the Eotens as well) and then decides on vengeance.

Furthermore, two aspects of Hengest's taking vengeance may be significant here.⁶ First, Hengest does not actually take vengeance against the Eotens until someone else, namely Hunlafing, spurs him on by presenting him with a sword, an act which in the Old English heroic code indicated a retainer's duty to avenge his lord. Second, revenge against Finn is taken not by Hengest himself, but rather by two Danes, Guthlaf and Oslaf; they are presumably in Hengest's command and therefore may be carrying out Hengest's orders, though Hengest is not directly responsible for Finn's death.

Throughout the Finn episode, therefore, Hengest displays a certain ambivalence toward fully pursuing his heroic role. He does not immediately avenge Hnaef's death but rather makes peace first with Finn. He stays on with Finn, apparently to exact vengeance

against him and the Eotens, but does not take the initiative--rather he must be spurred to action by Hunlafing. Last, he does not personally oversee Finn's death, the final act of vengeance for the death of Hnaef.

Thus, despite his heroic stature and warrior role, Hengest has a passive and even docile streak in his character. He therefore seems to embody both a warrior function and a nonwarrior, i.e. peaceful, function as well. This duality of function is at the heart of the problems in literary interpretation caused by Hengest's actions in the Finn episode; however, it is this duality of function which becomes understandable in terms of Indo-European comparative mythology, if the Beowulf Hengest is the same figure as the (quasi-) historical Hengest.

Running throughout Indo-European mythology are references to divine twin-heroes, perhaps the most famous of which are those of the Greek tradition, the Dioskouroi, Castor and Polydeukes. Divine twin-heroes are, however also found in Indo-Iranian, Italic, and Baltic folk-traditions, as well as in other Indo-European sub-groups. Despite the fact that twin-heroes are to be found outside Indo-European traditions (compare the Hebraic Jacob and Esau, for example), Ward has attempted to isolate specifically Indo-European thematic traits associated with twin-heroes.⁷

Among the features Ward lists are the following: a connection with horses (e.g. Castor is called hippodamos "a breaker of horses" in Illiad 3.237, and an Indic twin-pair is known in the Rig Veda as the Asvinau "the two horsemen"); an association with swans (e.g., Zeus approached Leda in the form of a swan when he begot Castor and Polydeukes, and the Asvinaue are said to be pulled by hamsa's, i.e., geese or possibly swans, in one Vedic hymn, RV 4.45.4); a dichotomy of function between a warrior twin and a twin who has a more peaceful disposition⁸ and is concerned more with domestic tasks (e.g., the twin-sons of the Asvinau, Nakula and Sahadeva, who figure in the Indic epic the Mahabharata, are a warrior and a peaceful sort, respectively;⁹ an episode in which there is the

rescue of an abducted maiden (generally the betrothed of one or both of the twins), along with other characteristics as well.¹⁰

The Indo-European twin-hero characters appear in Germanic heroic and historical tradition also, in folk-hero pairs such as Sorli and Hamoir, the Norse rescuers of Svanhild, and in king-pairs such as Ibor and Aio, mentioned by the Lombard historian Paulus Diaconus, as well as Hengest and Horsa, the leaders of the Anglo-Saxon invasions of Britain. Among the evidence connecting Hengest and Horsa with Indo-European divine twin-figures are the following considerations: they are said to have a divine genealogy, descending ultimately from Woden (see above); their names link them with horses, for Hengest means 'stallion' and Horsa means 'horse' in Old English;¹¹ they are connected in some accounts (for example, the history of Suffridus Petrus) with swans, in that they are said to have had a sister named Swana; and finally, they are associated with different functions (Ward suggests that in later Anglo-Saxon legends "Hengest. . . was revered by the warrior classes [while] Horsa. . . was revered chiefly by farmers and herdsmen"¹².)

One additional feature of Hengest and Horsa connects them with Indo-European twin-heroes, namely the fact that "Horsa gradually fades from the scene, leaving Hengest as the sole leader of the Anglo-Saxon invaders." Among Indo-European twin-heroes, it is often the case that one member of the pair disappears--generally the passive, docile one. For example, "the Avesta speaks of only one of the pair (Naghaithy) [and] in Roman heroic tradition, Castor alone [and not Pollux] is patron of the soldiers in the cavalry."¹³

It may well be the case, then, that Hengest's appearing alone in Beowulf is a reflection of that part of the Indo-European twin-hero myth in which one of the twins is lost. Ward feels this to be the case, saying "there can be little doubt that the Hengest of the Finnesburg legend is identical to the famed Hengest who led the conquest of Britain," and further suggests that the role of the missing brother Horsa is taken over by Hnaef in the Finnesburg

episode.¹⁴

However, in view of Hengest's actions in that episode, another interpretation suggests itself. It has already been shown that Hengest reveals both a docile and a war-like side to his character. In terms of the functions of the Indo-European twins, Hengest actually displays traits of both twins, being both a warrior and a more passive type embodied in one figure. Thus, if Hengest in Beowulf is taken to be the reflection in one character of a set of Indo-European twin-heroes, then the ambivalence he displays in the Finnesburg episode becomes understandable, for he continues both the war-like Hengest and the passive Horsa.

In that case, the Hengest of the Finnesburg legend would have to be the same figure as the quasi-historical Hengest who led the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain; for in order to make sense out of the occurrence of traits of both quasi-historical figures, Hengest and Horsa, in the single literary figure Hengest, one would have to accept a connection between the two Hengests, and thus subscribe to the single Hengest hypothesis. If the two Hengests are indeed identified with one another, then a blending of contradictory characteristics in the Beowulf and Finnesburg Hengest is understandable since the literary figure alone is continuing the tradition of the quasi-historical pair, Hengest and Horsa. Moreover, such a blending of traits in one figure is perhaps even to be expected, under the assumption that Hengest and Horsa represent an Indo-European twin pair, since as noted above one member of a twin pair in Indo-European mythology often disappears.

Therefore, a consideration of Hengest's characteristics in the Finnesburg legend in the light of Indo-European comparative mythology leads to answers to both literary problems associated with him. Hengest's ambivalence, and consequent unheroic attitude, can be taken to be a reflection of his origin in Indo-European twin-hero mythology, with the corollary that he must therefore be identified with the quasi-historical Hengest, who appears together with no apparent "twin," Horsa. Ward paved the way for this

interpretation and actually answered the question of the relationship of the two Hengests himself; however, an extension of his work is pursued here to answer the question of Hengest's behavior in the Finnesburg episode; this extension, in turn, provides a further confirmation of the identity of the two Hengests. The example, then, provides an illustration of the utility of Indo-European comparative mythology and of the ways it can be exploited to deal with specific problems in Indo-European folk-literary traditions.

It is instructive to look also at the treatment suggested in the literature for another figure in the mythology of an Indo-European sub-group, namely Nestor of the Greek heroic tradition. Nestor is the epitome of wisdom and rationality, famous in Homeric epic as a wise old counselor; he is the person who, for instance, de-emphasizes strength (such as a warrior might have) and stresses intelligence in his advice to his son Antilokhos in Iliad 23.315:

meti toi drutomos meg ameinon ee biephi
(For it is) through intelligence [meti] rather than force
[biephi] (that) a woodcutter becomes much better.

In this regard, Nestor seems to be somewhat passive in that he does not take action himself but rather advises others. This is not unlike the docile traits displayed by one member of the Indo-European twin-heroes. On the other hand, though, Nestor, in his youth, displayed fierce warrior skills, for example in the cattle-raid he led against the Epeians and in a subsequent battle with the Elians related in Iliad 11.670ff. Thus, Nestor appears to embody aspects of both members of an Indo-European twin pair.

Such an analysis, on different grounds, has been proposed by Douglas Frame; he notes that (1) Nestor's regular epithet in Homer is hippota "horseman," linking him to the horse-association of the Indo-European twins, and that (2) there are formal parallels in the root of Nestor's name (nes-) and that of the name of a set of Vedic Sanskrit twin-heroes, the Nas-atya (also called the Asvinau or

"horsemen"). He further suggests that "the question of . . . Nestor's origins [may] have to do with Indo-European twin mythology" and asks whether "the Greek Nestor, like the Avestan *Nayhaioya*, [has] become separated from a twin brother."¹⁵ The answer to this particular question awaits further work, but the parallels between this possible analysis of Nestor and the one proposed here for Hengest are striking indeed.¹⁶

It seems, therefore, that Indo-European comparative mythology, especially but not exclusively the twin-hero mythology, has much to contribute to an understanding of many classical literary figures in various traditions. It is hoped that the example of Hengest given here shows the mutual benefits both to folklore and to literary studies that this methodology can offer and that it might stimulate others to use it on similar problems.

NOTES

1. This quotation is from Alfred's ninth-century translation Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, 1, chap. 15, and follows the edition of J. Schipper (*König Alfreds Übersetzung von Bedas Kirchengeschichte*, Bibliothek der Angelsächsischen Prosa, ed. C. W. M. Grein and R. Wulker, vol. 4, pt. 1 [Leipzig: Georg H. Wigand's Verlag, 1897]). Hengest is mentioned in many other historical sources, including the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (for example in the Laud [Peterborough] Chronicle) in the entry for the year 449. For a review of the early historical accounts regarding Hengest, see Nellie S. Aurner, *Hengest: A Study in Early English Hero Legend*, University of Iowa Studies, Humanistic Studies, vol. II, no. 1 (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1921), esp. 10-21 and the charts on 78-79, 89-90, 97-98, 105-107, 114-115.
2. The Finn episode covers lines 1063 through 1159 of *Beowulf*, as, for example, in the edition of C.L. Wrenn, *Beowulf, with the Finnesburg Fragment* 2nd edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973). Wrenn's edition also contains the text of the Finnesburg fragment. The events told of in the fragment and those mentioned in the *Beowulf* episode seem clearly to be related in some way, although the exact nature of this relationship is somewhat controversial; see Donald Fry, ed., *Finnsburg Fragment and Episode* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1974), esp. 5-25, for some discussion of this issue.
3. C. W. M. Grein, "Die historischen Verhältnisse des

Beowulfsliedes", Eberts *Jahrbuch für romanische und englische Literatur*, 4 (1862): 260-285.

4. See Jan de Vries, "Die beiden Hengeste", *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 72 (1953): 125-143, and Donald Ward, *The Divine Twins: An Indo-European Myth in Germanic Tradition*, University of California Folklore Studies, No. 19 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), esp. 72.
5. This is shown, for instance, by the following passage from Wrenn's edition of *Beowulf* (p. 138), lines 1080-1085, given here with Wrenn's own translation:

worolde wynne. Wig ealle fornam
 Finnes þegnas, nemne fēaum ānum,
 þæt hē ne mehte on þām meþel-stede
 wig Hengeste wiht gefeohtan,
 nē þā wēa-lāfe wige forþringan,
 1085 þēodnes ðegne;

"War had carried off all Finn's retainers excepting only a few, so that he could not in that place of strife at all carry to a finish the fight against Hengest, the prince's [H n a e f ' s] thane, nor by warfare dislodge the survivors of the grievous disaster."
6. I am indebted to Prof. Lawrence McKill (of the Department of English of the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta) for certain aspects of the following interpretation, presented in his class lectures and handouts. I assume full responsibility, though, for any misinterpretations here.
7. See Ward, 10-27.
8. These essentially represent two of the three functions posited by Dumézil for the Indo-European gods: religio-political, warrior, and economic; see, for instance, Georges Dumézil, *Les Dieux des Indo-Européens, Mythes et religions* 29 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952), esp. 5-36.
9. As shown by Stig Wikander, "Nakula et Sahadeva", *Orientalia Suecana* 6 (1957): 66-96.
10. For a fuller account, see Ward, 10-27.
11. It is not uncommon for such twin-figures to have names with the same meaning or with a close connection of some kind; compare *Romus* (earlier form of *Romulus*) and *Remus* in the Latin tradition.
12. Ward, 55.
13. Ward, 55.

14. Ward, 72.
15. Douglas Frame, The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 152, n.72.
16. Frame at the end of his book (152, n. 72) in fact promises such a study.