

DE MONSTRO: AN ANATOMY OF GRENDEL

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: *De Monstro: An Anatomy of Grendel*

Demon, allegory, exile, Scandinavian zombie—Grendel, the first of the monsters in the Old English *Beowulf*, has been called all of these. But lost in the arguments about what he means is the very basic question of what he is. This project aims to understand Grendel *qua monster* and investigate how we associate him with the monstrous. I identify for study a number of traits that distinguish him from the humans of the poem—all of which cluster around either morphological abnormality (claws, gigantism, shining eyes) or deviant behavior (anthropophagy, lack of food preparation, etiquette). These traits are specifically selected and work together to form a constellation of transgressions, an embodiment of the monstrous on which other arguments about his symbolic value rest.

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CHAPTER I

GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF GRENDEL

*felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,
atque metus omnis et inexorabile fatum
subiecit pedibus*

Virgil, *Georgics*¹

Introduction

Since Grímur Thorkelin reintroduced *Beowulf* to the world in 1815, the poem has driven a good deal of scholarly work on genre, reception, poetic form, and hermeneutics. It has set off furious debates over dating and textual criticism, remained one of the few constants on English syllabi at Anglophone universities, and sparked the imaginations of authors, artists, and filmmakers. That is to say, it has achieved sustained popularity with both the academic and lay reader for almost two centuries.² What have not remained constant, however, are judgments about what are the salient aspects of the poem. For over a century after Thorkelin's edition, the monsters were little-discussed, and when they were it was to make a point about something else.³

In 1936, J.R.R. Tolkien changed all that with a single lecture entitled "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." He redirected the interpretation of *Beowulf* and legitimated the study of its monsters. The effect was powerful: Friedrich Klaeber published a response the next year, and R.W. Chambers followed with his own in 1938.⁴ In a relatively short time, any work examining Grendel, his mother, or the dragon referenced Tolkien's lecture as a matter of course. The 1950s saw a surge in studies of the dragon with T.M. Gang critiquing Tolkien's reading in 1952, Adrien Bonjour responding to Gang in 1953, and Arthur E. DuBois responding to Bonjour in 1957.⁵ Grendel and his mother would have to wait another decade, but with Joseph Baird's

publication of “Grendel the Exile” in 1966, a flurry of discussions about the pair began and continued virtually unabated. *Beowulf*’s monsters have finally arrived, and their arrival has largely coincided with an increasing academic interest in monsters, generally.

There are a number of different ways to think about *Beowulf* and its monsters. We may consider Grendel’s mother in light of feminist criticism, read the dragon as an allegory for destructive warfare, or explore the connections between Grendel and Christian sin. My current thinking on the poem’s monsters stems from a question posed by Martha Bayless when she asked, “why monsters?” What she meant was, why does the poet include monsters in a work that has its share of compelling villains?⁶ Unferth, Heremod, and Modþryð act in ways largely comparable to most of the actions perpetrated by monsters in *Beowulf*, and they are human characters with whom the audience could more easily associate. Surely the audience had never seen a dragon or a giant (though Anglo-Saxons believed in them), but each listener or reader had likely seen a murderer, a belligerent drunk, liar, a miser, or someone abusing a position of power. If her question was meant to get at my underlying assumptions, Bayless was more successful than she could have guessed.

In order to examine my assumptions about the importance of monsters, I had to look more closely at what monsters are—not only what they mean, but what traits are common to members of this category.⁷ Here, a significant deficiency appeared in *Beowulf* criticism, for there seemed to be precious few works that questioned and explored what qualities qualified the poem’s antagonists as monsters. There are a number, as we will see, that discuss what the monstrosity of Grendel, his mother, and the dragon mean, but they all proceed from the premise that all three are monsters. I soon

realized that in order to answer Bayless' *why*, the first order of business would be to create a basic understanding of *how*. How are monsters created in this poem? In what ways are they different from the human villains the poet could have chosen as his main antagonists, but who play relatively minor supporting roles in the poem?

Since each monster is different, a distinct “embodiment of a certain cultural moment,” the three main monsters in *Beowulf* are created and differ from human beings in dissimilar ways (Cohen, “Monster Culture” 4). It soon became clear that in order to undertake a sustained analysis, an anatomization whose purpose is to uncover the constituent matter of monstrous nature, breadth must be sacrificed. Excluding the dragon seems reasonable, and I am not alone in doing so. Tolkien separated the Grendelkin and the dragon from one another, ostensibly on theological grounds, but their morphological difference is, I think, what really drives his distinction.⁸ Grendel and his mother are humanoid, whereas the dragon is reptilian, so there are a great number of differences in their depiction, their actions, and their semiotic value. Because of this distinction, I have chosen to leave the dragon to his slumber for now.

Excluding Grendel's mother, however, is another matter. Their physical appearance is presumably alike, and their behavior is much the same (even if the reasons behind their attacks differ). But circumstances have conspired to make impossible any careful analysis of both Grendel and his mother. A result of delving as deeply into the evidence as I wished is that the report of that examination takes up a significant number of pages. In turn, it reduced the number of monstrous attributes I could study and effectively communicate; as it happens, the aspects chosen for examination—morphology and foodways—do not involve Grendel's mother in any significant way. Were this work

to cover weapon or language use, for example, she would certainly be a part of the discussion. Excluding her from this study is not an ideal approach, but given the circumstances and the nature of the project, it is the only prudent option.

The original question, then, has narrowed. Now I ask, how is Grendel depicted as a monster, and in what ways is he different from the human villains the poet could have chosen? In brief, my answer is that Grendel is a semiotic constellation of transgressive traits that, when taken together, signify monstrosity.⁹ This overarching thesis is rooted in two different interpretive schools: semiotics and historical materialism. In this introductory chapter, I will explain the methodological and theoretical approaches that inform the remainder of the work. Using triadic semiotics, I show that Grendel is a signifier because he is meant to be interpreted and to stand in for monstrosity. Basing my reading of the semiotic process on Walter Benjamin's concept of the constellation, I argue that Grendel's monstrosity is signified by the relation of specifically selected traits to one another: although he is a sign vehicle, he is comprised of numerous elements that work in concert to both mean Grendel and to make him mean.

Chapter II examines the category of the monstrous with regard to its formal aspects, since understanding what constitutes the monstrous is a prerequisite for understanding what constitutes Grendel as a monster. I argue that a monster is a character that violates both morphological and behavioral norms as they are depicted in a specific work. This will be the operational definition of *monster* throughout the study. Chapters III through VI will examine the formal semiotic properties of Grendel. Chapter III and Chapter IV are devoted to what little evidence there is for Grendel's physical appearance. The poet, I argue, is less concerned with gigantism and shining eyes as

abnormal morphology; instead, his interest is in their semiotic potential, their ability to connote unflattering character traits and tie Grendel to negative traditions. As to the question of Grendel's claws, I conclude that paleographical and linguistic problems with the textual evidence give us little reason to use this trait as evidence for monstrosity. Chapters V and VI are detailed analyses of Grendel's relationship with food and drink—its depiction in the poem and its effects on their association with the monstrous. I contend that his anthropophagy is a sort of false friend, promising an intriguing line of inquiry into his particular monstrosity, but also occluding other, subtler behavioral transgressions. Dividing up alimentary concerns into the four categories of taboo, food symbolism, cuisine, and etiquette, I examine how Grendel's consumption of thanes, lack of food preparation, and greed violate cultural standards as they are revealed by the poem.

Grendel, a Critical Review

Earlier, I observed that the monsters in *Beowulf* have become something of an academic darling in recent years, but I also lamented the dearth of studies examining Grendel qua monster. Both of these seemingly contradictory statements are true. The increased interest in the poem's monsters is, in a significant way, bittersweet because it has not necessarily translated into an increase in the quality of analysis devoted to them. The world of *Beowulf* criticism, mirroring the almost-frenetic character of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, has flitted from one aspect of Grendel to the next and has produced a myriad of statements about him. Those statements, unlike readings of *Beowulf* or Hrothgar, are not always based on detailed or apropos analysis.

Joyce Tally Lionarons, for example, has contributed an extended study of the dragon with *The Medieval Dragon: The Nature of the Beast in Germanic Literature*, which complements the article-length studies that preceded it.¹⁰ But Grendel has never received such a sustained, detailed analysis: rarely does he receive an entire chapter's worth of attention, most work being of article-length. Furthermore, those studies that do deal with him are rarely concerned with his monstrosity for its own sake; instead, they discuss it in service of a larger point—such as the heroic society presented in the poem or its narrative structure.

In the pages that follow, I will review a selection of these works. Since it covers a time span beginning before Tolkien's birth and running into the twenty-first century, my review is only partial. Nevertheless, the only common denominator is a concern with Grendel, so a clear grasp of scholarly interests in him is difficult. To help combat this, I have arranged the review thematically by grouping together specific methodologies, critical interests, or theoretical approaches. These works, however, were not undertaken in a vacuum but in the context of a long and winding conversation about Grendel; therefore, I have also opted for a synthetic approach and, where possible, put the works in conversation by referencing both conflicts and agreements between critics' ideas.

Criticism: Pre-War Apologists and Myth Critics

One of the earliest to produce any sustained study of Grendel is Walter W. Skeat, who labors to normalize the monster's supernatural traits.¹¹ Basing his argument on the connection of Beowulf to *bee-wolf*, Grendel's carnivorous diet, his rejection of weapons, and the resemblance of the episodes to the account of Grettir's fight against a bear, Skeat rejects him as a monster. Instead, he interprets Grendel as a bear mythologized via the

retelling of Beowulf's battle with him. Skeat's is but the opening salvo in an on-going examination of Grendel, though the embarrassment of early critics is evident in their attempts to place the monster in a context that might lend some gravitas to the poem. For example, Sivert N. Hagen attempts to root *Beowulf* in the well established Greco-Roman mythology when he argues that the model for Grendel to be the Lernæan hydra; E.D. Laborde opts to associate the poem with the well respected Scandinavian eddic tradition by linking Grendel with its trolls; and S.J. Crawford seeks validation in a proposed connection between Grendel and the sea monsters mentioned in Job 26.5.¹²

Criticism: Poetic Form and Narrative Structure

As already noted, Tolkien takes issue with critics like Skeat, Hagen, Laborde, and Crawford. He refuses to be embarrassed by the monsters in the poem and advocates a study of it as a poem (instead of a historical document) because he believes the focus on monsters is not an error on the poet's part. Attention to them is proper if we look at the thematic and formal aspects of the poem itself. In an argument that seems prescient for its time, he said the poem gives us a snapshot of the transition from Germanic paganism to Germanic-tinged Christianity; the monster's function, therefore, changes, too—from agent of chaos destined to succeed, to agent of evil destined to fail. Grendel remains a physical being, a creature with a devilish nature rather than a demon in physical form as we see in *Guðlac*. For Tolkien, the very monstrous qualities are what make Grendel mythical, capable of allegorizing cosmic themes in a way that purely human players like Heremod cannot.

Kathryn Hume (1975) reads the monsters as embodiments of social threats.¹³ According to her, Grendel is driven by his envy and social isolation, thus representing

localized trouble-making; his mother, motivated by vengeance, symbolizes the threat of out-of-control feuding. This interpretation also explains why Grendel's mother is more difficult to defeat: feuds are more difficult to set right than is trouble-making. Where Hume departs from her contemporaries, however, is her conclusion that the increasing danger of each monster—and the attendant social threat it represents—is *the* organizing principle of the poem. It is centered neither on the hero nor the narrative action, but on the monsters themselves.

In “*Beowulf*, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human,” Katherine O’Brian O’Keefe (1981) focuses on Beowulf, but claims thinking about him demands one think about Grendel. She interprets Grendel as a negative reflection of the hero while focusing her analysis on Beowulf’s indistinct humanity (and Grendel’s indistinct monstrosity) during the fight in Heorot. This blurring of man into monster and monster into man, she argues, is achieved by the poem’s formal aspects—its linguistics, grammar, perspective, syntax, and diction. Thus, O’Keefe reads Grendel’s approach to Heorot as his transformation from inchoate creature to physical humanoid, while polysemous references grammatically and imagistically confuse hero and monster, heightening the terror for the audience.

Marilynn Desmond (1992) adopts a purely structuralist methodology in her study.¹⁴ Concurring with Hume that the monster fights are the organizing principle of *Beowulf*, she nevertheless disagrees that the increasing difficulty of the battles is the most important aspect. Instead, she tries to show that the narrative formula “The Monster Attacks the Hall” (MAH) structures the poem. Consisting of four motifs—monster approaches the hall, monster kills/takes men, monster departs hall, and men respond—

the MAH formula is repeated throughout the first half of the poem. Though one might wish she explained why a structural formula that places the monster at the center informs the construction of the poem, Desmond does not do so. Rather, she contends that the MAH formula is crucial for understanding *Beowulf*'s oral narrative structure and that the comparative project of finding analogues to Grendel is of little use, since all are iterations of a single, pre-existing oral tradition.

In "*Beowulf* and the Psychology of Terror," Michael Lapidge (1993) examines Grendel's physical form. In service of his larger argument that the poet used his poem to explore how fear functions, what causes it, and how it affects us, Lapidge looks to the descriptions of Grendel before the battle with Beowulf. His analysis shows that the portrayal evolves—from vagueness that has no real reference point, to Grendel's abode, to the association with Cain, to his solitary habits. Thus, they are purposefully chosen to describe the monster because they also hide much of Grendel's physical nature. This technique emphasizes the monster's incomprehensibility, since by presenting Grendel in the same way monsters appear in nightmares, the poet stresses his mysteriousness, which intensifies the terror of Grendel's final approach to Heorot.

Criticism: Moralistic and Robertsonian

Margaret Goldsmith, in *The Mode and Meaning of 'Beowulf'* (1970), largely follows Tolkien, but involves an exegetical dimension that he avoids. Her argument for the corporeality of Grendel is, therefore, tempered by her conviction that his antisocial behavior is a result of both a genealogical relation to antediluvian giants and a spiritual relation to Satan. Goldsmith uses this latter point to support a tropological reading of Beowulf's monster fights as a *psychomachia* against the sins of pride and greed.

In “*Beowulf* and the Book of Enoch” (1971), R.E. Kaske continues the exegetical trend as he mines the Jewish pseudepigraphal corpus to connect Grendel to the giants in I Enoch. Seeing similarities in action, nature, naming conventions, habitation, and phraseology, he concludes that the Jewish text indirectly influenced the poet, though he does so with some reservation. That reservation is not found in the patristic criticism of Stephen Bandy’s “Cain, Grendel, and the Giants of *Beowulf*” (1973). Using Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* as his starting point, Bandy argues that Grendel and the other *eotenas* are moral tests for the human heroes. The Grendel-fight should be understood in light of Sigemund (the successful giant-killer) and Heremod (the unsuccessful giant-killer), for only those free of sin will be victorious against this kind of enemy. With such an argument, Bandy effectively reduces the battle with Grendel to a variation on what he sees as the ever-present theme of the kin of Cain versus the kin of Seth, the struggle between good and evil.

Ruth Mellinkoff follows Kaske and further explores Grendel’s associations with I Enoch in “Cain’s Monstrous Progeny in ‘Beowulf’: Part I, Noachic Tradition” (1979).¹⁵ She links some of his more notable characteristics (such as anthropophagy, gigantism, aquatic and wilderness dwelling, ownership of the *enta geweorc*) to Enoch’s giants and fallen angels. Because of his connection to physical beings, Mellinkoff rejects the interpretation of Grendel as an ephemeral devil and moves closer to Tolkien’s view, concluding that he is a devilish hominoid, but a humanoid nonetheless.

Malcolm Andrew (1981) continues the kind of Robertsonian reading performed by Goldsmith and Bandy.¹⁶ He endeavors to uncover the meaning of Grendel’s appellation *feond on helle* and, like Bandy, argues that understanding the term in an

Augustinian context can solve translation difficulties. Using the theory that sin is a turning or falling away from God, Andrew connects Grendel's deformity and devilish nature to his transgressions against God and the Danes. The monster is, therefore, a *feond on helle* because he is distanced from God, burning in the fires of his own personal hell even as he treads the paths of exile.

Criticism: Germanic Concerns

Taking up a line of investigation that focuses on the Norse elements in Tolkien's examination of *Beowulf*, Nora Chadwick's "The Monsters and Beowulf" (1956) focuses almost exclusively on Scandinavian analogues to the Grendelkin and the dragon. The most interesting for our purposes is her examination of the "nature" of *Beowulf's* monsters, in which she investigates the terms *þyrs* and *helrunan*, taking the former to connote a fen-dwelling giant and associating the latter with the underworld of classical antiquity and sorcery. Paul Beekman Taylor's "Grendel's Monstrous Arts" (1984) is the only other work in this review to maintain a focus on the Germanic elements of the poem, depicting Grendel as an uneasy hybrid of human and devil because of his lineage. Though he does not deny the connection to Old Testament *gigantas* made by Goldsmith, Bandy, and Mellinkoff, Taylor nevertheless rejects their implicit claim that the Christian context is the more important of the two. In this speculative essay, he re-emphasizes Grendel's Scandinavian origins, concentrating on the technology and material artifacts the monster possesses.

Criticism: Monsters qua Monsters

Joseph L. Baird (1966) advocates an interpretation balanced on Grendel's monstrous and human aspects.¹⁷ He also has the distinction of being the first to identify

Grendel as a monster-man instead of a monster onto which are grafted metaphorical human epithets and characteristics, an element that clearly influences O’Keefe. Baird proposes that readers pay close attention to the interplay and overlap of Grendel’s monstrous and human traits: Grendel’s exile status signals the presence of some element of humanity, whereas his savage behavior reveals his monstrosity. By combining the two contradictory elements, the poet adds extra dimensions to his antagonist’s personality, evoking both pity and fear in the audience.

In “The Monsters of Beowulf: Creations of Literary Scholars,” Signe Carlson (1967) further extends Baird’s focus on the aspects of Grendel’s humanity as she pursues the monster’s factual and historical basis. Grendel’s true origin, she contends, lies in the encounters between Germanic and less advanced native peoples as the former spread throughout Europe. The conclusion is one that some cultural and post-colonial critics today may find inviting, but it is highly speculative and has gained little traction in the years since its publication. More reflective of the critical mainstream is Edward B. Irving, Jr.’s *A Reading of Beowulf* (1968), which also heavily influences both O’Keefe’s, and Harry Berger, Jr.’s and H. Marshall Leicester Jr.’s later articles. In this book, Irving devotes extensive attention to Grendel—though only insofar as he extends the *via negativa* established in previous chapters: how the monster tells us what Beowulf is by illustrating what he is not. Irving concludes that Grendel is an amalgam of Christian devils, Germanic exiles/outlaws, and the chaotic forces common in Scandinavian mythology. In short, he is a shifting signifier that takes his *esse* from the Christian-tinged heroic context in which he appears.

Marion Lois Huffines (1974), another contributor to O'Keefe's synthetic approach and interest in humanity, directs her examination toward the term *āglāca*, which refers not only to the monsters of the poem, but also to the heroes Sigemund and Beowulf.¹⁸ Settling on a definition in which an *āglāca* evokes terror and is associated with magic, she argues that because Grendel is referred to several times as an *āglāca*, the poet clearly distinguishes him from Beowulf. The word is used only once (as a compound) to refer to Grendel's mother, weakening the distinction and beginning Beowulf's moral decline that is complete when both he and the dragon are referred to as *āglācean*. Though Huffines does not explicitly say so, her interpretation of the poem suggests that Grendel is not an *āglāca* because he is a monster, but is a monster because he has been morally polluted by the magic that comes along with being an *āglāca*, just as Beowulf has been.

In "Grendel Polytopos" (1984), Raymond Tripp undertakes a word study devoted to cataloging and classifying the various epithets applied to Grendel. From his list of 163 nominal characterizations, one is confronted with the variety of appellations for the monster. Because of this variation and because different traditions are combined in Grendel's person, Tripp asserts that the poet means for the monster to be taken figuratively. His composite nature stems from a mindset in the Middle Ages that increasingly diluted and devalued speciation within the realm of the nonhuman.

Criticism: Socio-Historical and Cultural

In "Social Structure as Doom: The Limits of Heroism in *Beowulf*" (1974), Berger and Leicester continue and extend the line of thought begun by Irving. They focus, however, on structural flaws within the heroic societies depicted in *Beowulf*—an

approach that influences Hume's later work. Berger and Leicester interpret Grendel as an embodiment of gift-exchange's dark side, a symbol of those from whom Hrothgar took in order to be the generous gift-giver that he is. In the monster's shifting depictions, they read a changing signficatory function: early in the poem Grendel is presented in Christian terms as a form of cosmic evil, but later he symbolizes the much more localized problem of exile. He, therefore, externalizes these social threats, though projecting the internal social issue outside the community cannot remedy the problems.

Although he works within a psychoanalytic framework, S.L. Dragland (1977) views Grendel as a commentary on heroic society.¹⁹ He argues that the *Beowulf*-poet purposefully associates Beowulf with monsters in order to make an ironic statement about the limits of heroism. Much like Irving, he sees Grendel as a monster with specifically human qualities (an exile, Cain's kin) that make him a powerful alter ego for the hero. But, as O'Keefe does later, Dragland pushes past this reading to examine the gray area between the monster and the hero, questioning the previously stable dichotomies set forth by earlier critics such as Irving and Goldsmith.

Like Dragland, in "*Beowulf: The Hero as Keeper of Human Polity*" Norma Kroll (1986) rejects any sharp distinction between Beowulf and Grendel. Maintaining that the poem embraces an earthly view of sin, she grounds her interpretation in a social, instead of religious, framework and proposes—perhaps confusingly—that the hero and the monster are identical opposites (117). In *Beowulf*, Kroll sees not just the conflation of man and monster, but also a process of doubling. Beowulf's clear lineage inserts him into a human social context, whereas Grendel's hazy one casts him out of the same. However, their identities as hall guardians, their complicity in the death of Hondscio, and

their abandonment of weapons during the fight all underscore a close association with each other and a distance from “normal” members of the heroic society. The two are most alike, she concludes, when (and because) they stand in opposition to one another.

Kenneth Florey (1988) looks to balance the importance of the Christian cosmic and Anglo-Saxon social currents in the poem.²⁰ Taking a stance opposite that of Hume’s, he believes the poem begins in a mythical mode of Edenic social harmony and becomes increasingly concerned with historical and cultural elements as the narrative progresses. Grendel’s introduction breaks the harmony in the early scenes, inviting us to think of him and of Beowulf as representatives of cosmic good and evil. The poem’s later historical and cultural richness and its nuanced handling of psychological themes lead Florey to suggest that the *Beowulf*-poet narrows his attention to the problem of good and evil in an imperfect, human social setting; Grendel, therefore, eventually comes to represent a localized social threat instead of evil on a cosmic scale.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in “Old English Literature and the Work of Giants” (1993), turns his attention specifically to the analogues and cultural context that Desmond dismisses in her earlier work. In his short discussion of Grendel, Cohen follows Kaske and Mellinkoff in connecting the Anglo-Saxon monster and the antediluvian giants via I Enoch, but he also agrees with Taylor and reaffirms the monster’s place in Germanic traditions. Thus, Grendel functions as an Other that defines the self and operates in a Germanic context—law and restraint versus individuality and wildness. The Christian connotations of his monstrosity, however, evoke a cosmic scale in which the Christian present is defined against a Germanic and Old Testament past. Conflicting chronologies

and traditions overdetermine Grendel, making him a metaphor *par excellence* for a society that was itself a mixture of both Christian and Germanic elements.

With “Prey Tell: How Heroes Perceive Monsters in *Beowulf*” (1993), Ward Parks continues the trend of interpreting Grendel as a hybrid creature set against Danish heroic society; his methodology, however, is novel. Using behavioral science, he categorizes the violence in each of Beowulf’s battles as either predatory or agonistic. Grendel’s attacks are predatory because they employ stealth and their object seems to be food. Parks nevertheless believes there is more to Grendel than the bestial, arguing that his human characteristics create a destabilizing hybridity within heroic society, an imbalance that Beowulf must remedy. This takes place during the first battle where Beowulf’s tactical and planned response turns the battle into a contest, effectively ending the role as prey that humans had played since the beginning of Grendel’s attacks. The predatory aspects of violence decrease with each successive battle, leading Parks to conclude that as the destabilizing hybridity dissipates, the battles become more contestative since the human society is stabilizing.

Lionarons (1996) takes a structuralist approach to *Beowulf*, using it to better explain the poem’s social function.²¹ Proposing a return to mythological criticism, she combines René Girard’s theory of ritual violence and the theme of the host-guest relationship to inform her theory that the social human and antisocial monster work together to maintain social order. The complex and contradictory host-guest relationships in *Beowulf* are symbolic of the dynamic distinction between monster and man. Whereas most critics view that inconstant distinction as a cause for social anxiety, Lionarons sees it as a natural result of maintaining social order. Because human and monster are the

result of a splitting, they should resemble one another, but they are not necessarily intermingled, as Dragland argues. Instead, the human may remain fully lawful and socially restorative—even as the monster remains fully chaotic and socially destructive—because they are separate(d) aspects of a whole. This interplay, Lionarons asserts, is essential for the continuity of social order because they sublimate each other in the Hegelian sense: the social human needs the antisocial monster to exist (and be conquered), just as much as the monster needs the hero.

In “Monsters and Criminals: Defining Humanity in Old English Poetry” (2001), Jennifer Neville takes the social and antisocial concerns about Grendel to their extreme limits. Using him as a case study, she attempts to discover the particular Anglo-Saxon criteria for monsters. Although she does not deny that Grendel exhibits many of the monstrous traits identified by previous critics, Neville subordinates these criteria to his deviant behavior. Thus, Grendel’s anthropophagy, his negative descriptions, and his travesty of a hall-thane’s role all link him with the antisocial and the monstrous. In the same essay collection, E.G. Stanley also explores the criteria informing the monstrosity of Grendel by analyzing four cultural traits he believes contribute to it.²² Grendel is a monster because he has no direct lineage, because he inhabits the *mor*, because his name is without signification, and because he has no language. All of these aspects work together, Stanley argues, to present us with a monster that responds to anxieties particular to Anglo-Saxon England.

Between Skeat’s and Stanley’s essays, over twelve decades’ worth of research and analysis on *Beowulf* has been done. What has not been done, however, is to study the intricacies of Grendel. Two-thirds of the entries in the above review discuss him either in

service of a larger argument or take as given his monstrosity, using it as evidence for something else.²³ Of those who do focus their attentions on Grendel as a monster, six take a comparative approach and attempt to identify an original source, a reason that he appears as a monster in the poem.²⁴ This leaves four that focus their analyses on Grendel. Without solid foundational work on Grendel before he is used as evidence, the broader thematic, structural, psychological, and socio-cultural arguments are in reality perched on largely unexamined assumptions. Kaske wrote that the depiction of Grendel “seems indefinably to take for granted a greater degree of recognizability than we have so far been able to find,” but it seems to me that he has it all turned around (431). The problem is not that the poem assumes a level of knowledge we do not have; rather, Grendel’s unexamined depiction invites us to take for granted a greater degree of recognizability than we have yet uncovered. To investigate the elements of Grendel that make him a monster is a basic task, but one that must be undertaken simply because it is basic—and remains unfinished. I will, therefore, follow the path suggested by the Virgilian epigraph to this chapter. We may do nothing about our doom, but let us at least in this know the causes of things and plant our feet on firm foundations.

Semiotic Constellations: Triadic Semiotics

In *A Reading of Beowulf*, Irving wrote: “It is almost as if the Danes in the poem (or at least the audience listening to the poem) were being invited to try to bring Grendel into some meaningful and familiar pattern of reference, some relationship to the structure of human society” (*A Reading*...19). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes, “the monster is...an exhibit, demonstrative of something other than itself” (*Of Giants* xiv). Put another way, what both are saying is that Grendel, like all monsters, is inherently semiotic. Pointing

out what has almost risen to the status of a commonplace among *Beowulf* scholars is, obviously, neither new nor especially insightful. The monster's function as a signifier, however, is deceptively complex because he is more than a word, a figure in a painting, or a semiotic icon. Instead what critics have long taken as *a* symbol—for sin, trouble-making, social anxiety, or even winter—is really *a collection* of symbolic elements. To ignore the intricacies of these elements and how they work together to generate the monstrousness that we so easily associate with Grendel is to accept a lack of information and analysis that should be intolerable by any scholarly standard. That is, to understand Grendel and his monstrous nature is to understand him as a semiotic constellation that produces meaning by virtue of selected traits and their relation to each other.

The phrase *semiotic constellation* demands some explanation, and I begin with the first half of it. By describing Grendel as a semiotic constellation, I simply mean he signifies. Anyone familiar with literary theory will likely recognize the following sentence because it is most often used to explain semiotics: *A interprets B as representing C*. It summarizes the triadic conception of sign relation that dominated semiotics until Ferdinand de Saussure's students introduced his signifier-signified dyad in 1916—and continues to have a strong presence in semiotics even now. One of the more useful articulations of the triadic semiotic is Charles Morris's.²⁵ In *Signs, Language, and Behavior*, he identifies the three aspects of *semiosis* as the sign vehicle (B in the example sentence), the significatum (C), and the interpretant (B/C's relationship to A).²⁶ The sign vehicle is said to be "a given sound or mark or movement" and that which stands in for another entity (C. Morris 20). The significatum is that entity represented by the sign

vehicle, and the interpretant is “the disposition of the interpreter to respond...because of the sign” (C. Morris 16).

If we were to think about Grendel in terms of Morris’s triad, we might recast the previous example sentence as *Virtually every critic of Beowulf interprets Grendel as representing monstrosity.*²⁷ Framing Grendel and monstrosity in this way organizes them along the points of the semiotic triad. Grendel is a sign vehicle, and he stands in for monstrosity, which would therefore occupy the position of the significatum. The process of reading him as monstrous would be the interpretant.

This is the point at which critics often begin. They take Grendel-as-monstrous as a given, insert it into the sign vehicle position, and then produce a new significatum based on it and readings of other theorists or texts. Thus, when Irving argues that Grendel defines Beowulf and heroic society by illustrating what they are not, he already assumes that Grendel is a monster outside the scope of that society. That is, Irving interprets Grendel-as-monster as representing the *via negativa*. Such undertakings are not invalid, but thinking about the monstrosity of Grendel in terms of a semiotic triad suggests other, more basic questions.

In pursuit of those more basic questions, I lay aside the interpretant and its attendant area of inquiry, pragmatics. Because this sort of study is concerned with questions about heuristics, the importance of context, and the extent to which discursive contexts restrict thought, it borders on intellectual history and reception theory (Dascal 754-757). Furthermore, it would place *Beowulf* in a subordinate position to the secondary literature written about it, but since it is the poem that has spawned this cottage

industry and the poem that is the root of interpretation, it is with the poem that I am largely concerned.

By removing the interpretant, we may reformulate our example sentence once again: *Grendel represents monstrosity*.²⁸ The relationship here depicted represents the syntactic and semantic fields of semiotics. Syntactics deals with the sign vehicle's ability to stand in for another entity and involves questions about what aspects comprise sign vehicles, how they relate to each other, and what sorts of grammatical systems govern their use (Posner 1045-1061). Semantics is concerned with meaning, the relationship between the sign vehicle and the significatum; its study poses questions about ranges of meaning, the manner in which the sign vehicle is associated with the significatum, and the formal structure of that meaning (Bierwisch 861-77). Since we are here concerned with the semiotic elements that comprise Grendel and how they work together to make him monstrous, syntactics and semantics are the analytical fields in which this study will operate.

Concentrating on syntactics and semantics also frames the general semiosis of our monster in such a way that demands fundamental questions be answered. The sentence *Grendel represents monstrosity* is essentially a copula, and as such, it simply insists on itself and its own truth. For that very reason, it is a poor assumption on which to base arguments, though the previous example from Irving illustrates just how pervasive that assumption is. In order to support it, we must ask questions about how the semiotic process works:

- How do Grendel and monstrosity fit together?
- How did the two come to be associated so strongly?

Those process questions, in turn, prompt more basic syntactics questions:

- What constitutes the monstrous?
- What traits constitute Grendel?

These four questions are at the heart of this project. The semiotic approach neatly frames my purpose, providing the core area of inquiry that will drive the remaining chapters.

Attention to Grendel as a signifying element of the poem demands that we also pay attention to his constitutive traits and how they coalesce into the character we know as Grendel and interpret as a monster.

Semiotic Constellations: Benjaminian Constellations

The coalescence of signifying traits points to the second term in *semiotic constellation*. We can think of Grendel as a constellation of sign vehicles that, when taken together, signifies monstrousness. This image of the constellation is taken from the historical materialist, Walter Benjamin.²⁹ *On the Concept of History (Über den Begriff der Geschichte)* contains sharp critiques of both traditional causative historiography and material historicism as practiced by his Marxist contemporaries in 1940. In this collection of short theses, he objects to previous attempts to write accounts of historical events as they “really” were. There is no way, he argues, to know an event as it really was because there is no way for historians to untangle themselves from the ideologies and traditions that shape their view of any past event. For Benjamin, therefore, history is always an interpretive act. He dismisses the façade of objectivity that envelops historical projects and supports the dominant/dominating mode of production and plutocracy in which most historians write. Causative historiography is actually a narrativization of events which were themselves not “historical.”

Benjamin's discomfort with traditional causative historiography is best articulated in Thesis A, which appears as an addendum:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history. But no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. The historian who proceeds from this consideration ceases to tell the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. He grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. (397)

Benjamin objects to traditional historiography because it lacks self-awareness. Works taking this approach do not present themselves as narratives based on the selection of events and the interpretation of their relationship to one another.³⁰ Historians' ideological, political, and economic contexts (though not necessarily their personal beliefs), therefore, are both at work and denied in the historical project. Benjamin's worry is that once a particular narrative crosses some threshold of popularity, it is no longer considered *a* narrative but *the* narrative—historical reality, history “the way it really was” (391).

Better, Benjamin proposes, to recognize the interpretive mode of historiography, acknowledge and embrace one's ideology, and use history to resist the dangers and conformism of one's current situation. Thus, he re-envision the practice of writing history as a weaving together of chronologically and geographically disparate events to produce a sign, to produce meaning in the minds of historians and their readers. Slavoj Žižek gives a surprisingly lucid description of Benjamin's dream in semiotic terms:

Every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way.... The past exists as it is included, as it enters (into) the synchronous net of the signifier—that is, as it is symbolized in the texture of the historical memory—and that is why

we are all the time “rewriting history”, [sic] retroactively giving the elements their symbolic weight by including them in new textures—it is this elaboration which decides retroactively what they “will have been.” (58-59)

Žižek’s use of the future perfect in the last sentence is an important part of Benjamin’s brand of historiography. Pointing simultaneously forward to the ideological, political, and cultural moments of historians and backward to the historical event they study, “will have been” posits a relationship between the two that so-called objectivity seeks to obviate by denying. That relationship is the constellation.

Benjamin’s metaphor is an apt one and indicates the importance of semiotics to his philosophy of history, for a constellation is nothing if not a signifier. The constellation is a constructed figure and is therefore always contingent: as Umberto Eco wrote, “everything depends on how you draw the lines. You can make a wain or a bear, whatever you like, and it’s hard to decide whether a given star is part of a given constellation or not” (124). To the uninitiated, the constellation is merely a smattering of stars. Only after some organizing principle is applied to it does it become an image and a sign. The astronomical constellation Orion, for example, bears no explicit relation to a hunter: it is simply seven (or ten) out of about 6,000 visible stars. Only by selecting a particular set do we even identify them, and only by creating a relationship between them do we create the image of a hunter. Select a different set of stars, and a dangerous giant, walking bird, or antelope might be created.³¹ That is, the constellation—whether of the astronomical, historical, or semiotic variety—is the result of selection and relation.

In astronomical constellations, celestial objects are the raw materials; in historical constellations, they are events and people. In semiotics, the makings of sign vehicles are other sign vehicles. Each, however, demands that we select which ones are important.

For Grendel, we select the characteristics that obtain in a representation of monstrosity, so anthropophagy, giant stature, greed, glowing eyes, and speedy consumption of food are considered important, but the fact that Grendel had hair or required nutrition is not. Just so for relation: the selected sub-sign vehicles are the elements that support an interpretation of Grendel as a monster, but their relationship to each other makes Grendel a monster. If we were to consider their traits, as does Neville, in isolation, we could make some shockingly errant conclusions: Grendel's anthropophagy would not distinguish him from the cannibals in *Andreas*, and his shining eyes are a trait shared with St Christopher. No one argues that Grendel is a saint or an African cannibal because we look at these traits in relation to one another to form our image of Grendel. He is a constellation, a selection of transgressions functioning as sub-sign vehicles, whose relation to one another creates an image, a monstrous identity, a creature that violates both morphological and behavioral norms.

Notes

¹ *Georgics*, Bk. 2, ll. 490-92. [Happy is he who was able to know the causes of things, and indeed he throws down all fears and unyielding fate beneath his feet.] See *Virgil*. Ed. and Trans. H. Rushton Fairclough. Vol. 1. Loeb Classical Library 63N. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1916. 2 vols.

² One of the reasons for this is the poem's seemingly endless complexity and elasticity. To be sure, the plot itself is not complex. W.P. Ker describes it thusly: "The fault of *Beowulf* is that there is nothing much in the story," and later: "It is too simple....It is curiously weak, in a sense preposterous" (252, 253). Yet he also recognizes that "all about [the main plot], in the historic allusions, there are revelations of a whole world of tragedy, plots different in import from that of *Beowulf*, more like the tragic themes of Iceland" (253). But it is not just the historical depth we get in the so-called digressions, though they play a part. The atmosphere of the poem, the characters themselves with their spoken and unspoken loyalties and betrayals, the tension in which even kingdoms are held, the narrative and ethical blind alleys all work in harmony to make that beautiful disaster that Ker describes. The poem is, in Umberto Eco's words, one that "produces in the interpreter acts of conscious freedom, putting him at the center of a net of inexhaustible relations among which he inserts his own form" (4). That is, *Beowulf* can spawn formal, Marxist, feminist, and post-modern readings—and can support *all of them at the same time*. That complexity and elasticity is a product of its "net of inexhaustible relations" that allows it to be considered historical record of Danish civilization by Archibald Strong in 1925 and a subtle exploration of Anglo-Saxon gender by Shari Horner in 2001. See Ker's *The Dark Ages*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904; Eco's *The Open Work*. Trans. Anna Cancogni. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989; Strong's *Beowulf, Translated into Modern*

English Rhyming Verse. London: Constable, 1925; and Horner's *Discourse of Enclosure: Representing Women in Old English Literature*. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2001.

³ A favorite approach was to cast Grendel, his mother, and the dragon as allegories of vice, and *Beowulf* as a sort of national myth; this was used to explain why an otherwise sophisticated, layered, and popular poem was far too concerned with monsters—the stuff of children's tales, after all. See N.F.S. Grundtvig's "Om Bjovulfs Drape eller dat af Hr. Etatsraad Thorkelin 1815 udgivne angelsachsiske Digt." *Danne-Virke, et Tids-Skrift* 2 (1817): 207-89; Walter Skeat's "On the Significance of the Monster Grendel in the Poem of Beowulf: With a Discussion of Lines 2076-2100." *Journal of Philology* 15 (1886): 120-31; and Ludvig Schrøder's *Om Bjovulfs-drapen: Efter en række foredrag på folkehøjskolen i Askov*. Copenhagen: Karl Schønberg, 1875.

⁴ See Klaeber's review in *Beiblatt zur Anglia* 48 (1937): 321-22 and Chambers's in *Modern Language Review* 33.2 (1938): 272-73.

⁵ See: Gang's "Approaches to *Beowulf*." *Review of English Studies*, ns. 3.9 (1952): 1-12; Bonjour's "Monsters Crouching and Critics Rampant: Or the *Beowulf* Dragon Debated." *PMLA* 68.1 (1953): 304-12; and DuBois' "The Dragon in *Beowulf*." *PMLA* 72.5 (1957): 819-22.

⁶ It is with exasperation that I choose the singular form of the word. It seems to me very likely that there was more than one poet involved in *Beowulf's* evolution, but it seems just as likely that there was one Bloomian "strong" poet who took the extant material and created most of what we have before us today. Or perhaps there was not and "redactor" is a better term for the last man to have his hands on the poem. Until we know for certain, I have chosen—mostly for clarity's sake—to employ the singular "poet" over the slightly more awkward "poets" or the infinitely more cumbersome "poet or poets."

⁷ I did not then and do not now have a satisfactory response to Bayless's question. Asa Simon Mittman gamely attempts to answer it, arguing that monsters explode and remake the systems—epistemological, moral, legal—with which we order our lives, and they do so in ways impossible for fully human or fully animal characters. See "Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monstrous Studies."

⁸ I use the term "Grendelkin" to refer to both Grendel and his mother despite E.G. Stanley's objection to its use on the grounds that the -kin ending is both obsolete and refers to a "kin" which neither Grendel nor his mother seem to have. I have chosen to risk Stanley's ire because "the Grendelkin" is a less obtrusive substitute for "Grendel and his mother" or "Grendel and the like". See Stanley's "A Very Land-fish, Languagelesse, a Monster": Grendel and the Like in Old English." *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe*. Eds. Karin Olsen and L.A. Houwen, Jr. Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 2001. 79-92 (especially 79).

⁹ In addition to framing an examination of Grendel in a way that allows deep analysis, thinking of him as a semiotic constellation also avoids the ontological dead-end that some critics have attempted. That is, if we want to learn about him, we should be less concerned with whether Grendel is a human exile, a demon, a *draugr*, an elemental/natural force, an allegory for anterior "barbaric" cultures, etc. As one animated by his spirit of inquiry, I would be interested to know such a thing if I thought it were at all discoverable; prior research, however, has forced me to conclude that an *ur*-Grendel is unavailable for analysis.

¹⁰ See *The Medieval Dragon: The Nature of the Beast in Germanic Literature*. Enfield Lock, UK: Hisarlik P, 1998.

¹¹ Skeat, op. cit. (n. 3).

¹² Sivert N. Hagen. "Classical Names and Stories in the *Bēowulf*." *Modern Language Notes* 19.3/4 (1904): 65-74; Laborde, E.D. "Grendel's Glove and his Immunity from Weapons." *Modern Language Review*

18.2 (1923): 202-04; Crawford, S.J. "Grendel's Descent from Cain." *Modern Language Review* 23.2 (1928): 207-08.

¹³ "The Theme and Structure of *Beowulf*." *Studies in Philology* 72 (1975): 1-27.

¹⁴ "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Tradition." *Oral Tradition* 7.2 (1992): 258-83.

¹⁵ A second essay followed soon after, but it is about the theological and textual evidence for the survival of giants after the Flood. It will not, therefore, be discussed. See "Cain's Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*: Part II, Post-Diluvian Survival," *Anglo-Saxon England* 9 (1981): 183-97.

¹⁶ "Grendel in Hell." *English Studies* 62.5 (1981): 401-10.

¹⁷ "Grendel the Exile." *Neophilologische Mitteilungen* 67.4 (1966): 375-81.

¹⁸ "OE *āglāēce*: Magic and Moral Decline of Monsters and Men." *Semasia* 1 (1974): 71-81.

¹⁹ "Monster-Man in *Beowulf*." *Neophilologus* 61 (1977): 606-18.

²⁰ "Grendel, Evil, 'Allegory,' and Dramatic Development in *Beowulf*." *Essays in Arts and Science* 17 (1988): 83-95.

²¹ "*Beowulf*: Myth and Monsters." *English Studies* 77.1 (1996): 1-14.

²² Stanley, op. cit. (n. 9).

²³ Tolkien, Chadwick, Irving, Goldsmith, Kaske, Bandy, Berger and Leicester, Huffines, Hume, Mellinkoff, O'Keefe, Kroll, Duncan, Florey, Desmond, Cohen, Lapidge, Parks, Lionarons, and Neville.

²⁴ Skeat, Hagen, Laborde, Crawford, Baird, and Carlson.

²⁵ I have chosen to follow Morris' explanation over Pierce's partly because the latter's explanations bend toward the kind of taxonomic work (at one point he suggests that there are 59,049 separate kinds of signs) that is of little use. Morris' tripartite explanation is not exactly the same as Pierce's, of course, but it is analogous and is more elegantly constructed. Since the triadic semiotics I am using enjoys such a long history (beginning with the Greek Stoics, continuing through the works of Augustine and Locke, and culminating in the likes of Morris, Pierce, and I.A. Richards) I see neither the need to defend its veracity nor to explain the intricacies of the theory. For the purposes of this study, then, Morris' explanation is the most useful.

²⁶ These naming conventions are refinements of those first introduced in *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* in 1938. The term *designatum* was replaced by *significatum*, and the term *sign vehicle* is further nuanced into the *sign vehicle* and the *sign family*. In Morris' work, *interpretant* is always retained.

²⁷ I am obviously departing from a semiotics of language or logic like that practiced by Saussure and Morris. In doing so I am following Claude Lévi-Strauss' and Roland Barthes' extensional definitions of sign and code to non-linguistic phenomena like the exchange of goods within human culture or amateur French wrestling matches (see Lévi-Strauss' *Language and the Analysis of Social Laws*." *American Anthropologist* 53.2 (1951): 155-63 and Barthes' "The World of Wrestling." *Mythologies*. Trans. Anette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972). Where I do not follow, however, is into the sort of structuralism that seeks a Unified Theory to explain *all* significations in *all* places at *all* times (it is significant that Barthes retained the methodology of semiotics in his later work but rejected the universalizing project of structuralism). There may indeed be such a universal code, but what structuralists

have presented to us is a far cry from the shield of Achilles. Like Augustine's God, Saussure's *langue*, Freud's unconscious, and Borges' Library of Babylon, such a universal concept seems beyond full comprehension, impossible to analyze, and thus ultimately of limited explanatory use.

²⁸ It is tempting to see this as an analog for Saussurean sign theory, but I caution the reader against such a mistake. For Saussure, the *signifier* and the *signified* work together to create a *sign*. To repeat his famous example, the word *arbor* is a signifier representing the concept of a tree. The connection is intimate, and the sound-image and concept combine into a sign. In the case of Grendel, however, there is no such intimate connection. Grendel is not *synonymous* with monster since there are aspects of the monstrous not displayed in Grendel and there are aspects of Grendel that are not necessarily monstrous. He is instead categorized as a monster, is representative of monsters. Just as we would distinguish between *arbor*'s connection to nouns and its connection to the concept of a tree, we should distinguish between Grendel's participatory representation of the monstrous and some sort of metonymic representation of the category. See *Course in General Linguistics*. Eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Trans. Wade Baskin. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983.

²⁹ Benjamin's ideas are not new to the field of medieval studies. See Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (especially 16-18) and Renée R. Trilling's *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia: Historical Representation in Old English Verse*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2009. I thank James W. Earl for bringing the latter to my attention.

³⁰ Classical Marxist and Whiggish views of history, for example, present historical events as progressing through stages toward a final goal, and in each the narrative is fairly easy to recognize. Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, however, showed that causative historiography is sometimes much harder to identify. "In that inevitable taking of sides which comes from selection and emphasis in history," he writes, "I prefer to try to tell the story of the discovery of America from the viewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves, of Andrew Jackson as seen by the Cherokees, of the Civil War as seen by the New York Irish, of the Mexican war as seen by the deserting soldiers of Scott's army, of the rise of industrialism as seen by the young women in the Lowell textile mills, of the Spanish-American war as seen by the Cubans, the conquest of the Philippines as seen by black soldiers on Luzon, the Gilded Age as seen by southern farmers, the First World War as seen by socialists, the Second World War as seen by pacifists, the New Deal as seen by blacks in Harlem, the postwar American empire as seen by peons in Latin America" (10). Writing a history of people who not only wrote very little about their historical moment, but also are rendered virtually silent and invisible by the dominant historical narrative is both difficult and inherently interpretive, a circumstance acknowledged by Zinn but not by Henry Kissinger, whose causative approach Zinn criticizes.

³¹ Ancient Babylonians identified Orion as a bird that functioned as divine messenger; ancient Bedouins identified Orion as a giant and extended the constellation into what we now call Gemini; and Vedic astronomers identified it as an antelope. See John H. Rogers's "Origins of the Ancient Constellations: I. The Mesopotamian Traditions." *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 108.1 (1998): 9-28 (especially 14, 16, 23), and P.V. Holay's "Vedic Astronomers." *Bulletin of the Astronomical Society of India* 26 (1998): 91-106 (especially 96).

CHAPTER II

DEFINING THE INDEFINABLE

“It’s poor judgment”, said Grandpa “to call anything by a name. We don’t know what a hobgoblin or a vampire or a troll is. Could be lots of things. You can’t heave them into categories with labels and say they’ll act one way or another. That’d be silly.”

Ray Bradbury, “The Man Upstairs”¹

What Is a Monster?

In the previous chapter I argued that, as a semiotic constellation, Grendel should be understood in terms of the sign vehicle and significatum.² In order to understand the formal components of Grendel as a sign vehicle, we must understand that which he signifies. That is, before we can understand how Grendel signifies monstrousness, we have to understand what is meant by the term *monstrous*.³ In this chapter, then, I will sketch out what, exactly, I have in mind when I use the words *monster* and *monstrous*. My approach will be a formal one, an investigation of the traits or elements that characterize the category of the monstrous.

The definition of Grendel as a monster I finally propose is that he exhibits both abnormal morphology and deviant behavior. Morphology and behavior are, I think, the two characteristics that are most important for monsters in general and absolutely crucial for any analysis of Grendel as a monster. This is not necessarily to deny that there may be other characteristics that obtain to different monsters, but to propose that Grendel is best studied along these two avenues of inquiry.⁴ But even concluding that the monster is a combination of abnormal morphology and deviant behavior—a definition that, upon beginning this project, seemed to me general enough to garner widespread acceptance—has not been an easy task simply because defining the monster is itself so difficult. Most of those working in monster studies either put forth vague—and therefore safe—

definitions of their object of study, or they revel in the monster's instability and refuse any definition on the grounds that defining the indefinable monster is both impossible and unnecessarily limiting for the field.⁵

They have good reasons for doing so. First, monster studies is founded upon post-structuralist thought. From the likes of Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard comes a healthy distrust of transcendent structures and metanarratives; from likes of Gayatri Spivak and Raymond Williams comes a careful attention to cultural variation and specificity. The art historian Partha Mitter sums up this issue as well as anyone could:

the word “monster” is full of ambiguity and changes its meaning according to the context. Are ghouls actually monsters? We may hold that monsters are living creatures and unlike zombies or ghosts. But this is not always true, as demonstrated by the *Vetala* in the ancient Indian compendium of stories, the *Vetalapanchavimshati*, who hovers between the world of the living and the dead. (335)

Thus, the distrust of grand narratives and the cultural variation of the monster—of which we are becoming more aware all the time—combine to, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts it, expose the “epistemological spaces between the monster’s bones,” to reveal an overdetermined monster that is inaccessible to full analysis (“Monster Culture” 4). There is simply too much at work, so the argument runs, to ever hope for a universal definition.

Mitter’s statement also raises the second issue that seems to make a universal definition so difficult. The monster is a hybrid, a *mearcstapa* that resists and destroys stable categories. Like Grendel bursting open the doors of Heorot and shaking the very foundations of the hall to reveal its transience, monsters demonstrate the permeability and instability of our comfortable (legal, geographical, historical, moral, political, scientific, theological) boundaries and turn our knowledge systems on their heads. They are overdetermined “precisely because monsters transform the fragments of otherness into

one body” (Halberstam 92). The monster, by its very nature, “defies the human desire to subjugate through categorization” (Mittman 7).⁶

These are so sensitive to cultural context and the inherent polysemy of monsters that one cannot help but admire those giving voice to the arguments. There are, however, two unintended consequences of this common approach to monsters.⁷ The first is a lack of precision. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, for example, decline to present any definition in their collection of essays titled *The Monstrous Middle Ages* since, they argue, “there is something in the monster that cannot be subsumed into the categories of identity that the monster is perceived to disrupt” (21). So, too, with W. Scott Poole, who refuses to define his subject because monsters “do not mean one thing but a thousand. Only by looking at a multitude of monsters can we come to understand something about them” (xiv).

Such an approach is self-limiting. When the precision needed even to differentiate Grover from Grendel is not present, argumentative stasis becomes difficult or impossible to reach and blunts the otherwise-insightful analysis that is offered. For instance, in *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles*, Timothy Jones and David Sprunger seem to distinguish between the categories of marvelous and monstrous in both their title and their editors’ introduction. In practice, however, the definitional boundaries regularly break down or are ignored—such as when they call the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*’s flying dragons “marvels” and the Holocaust “monstrous” (xi). Such definitional laxity defeats any attempt at comparison or analysis. How could we apply insights from a study of the Giant of Mont St Michel or the *Jiang Shi* (Chinese Hopping Zombie) to the Holocaust? Or vice versa? How may we examine the *Chronicle*’s dragons qua monsters if they are

not categorically distinct from such marvelous creatures as Troglodytes and Tribbles? Such open definitions leave us with a category that has little more denotative power than *creature* or *thing*.⁸ In fact, because they allow the equation of inherently dissimilar creatures and disallow sustained analysis or comparison, such imprecise definitions may actually be harmful to the field of monster studies.

My second concern about the unintended consequences of the current approach to defining the monster is subtler—and that is its very danger. An operational definition is, indeed, at work in many academic studies of monsters, but it is either unacknowledged or explicitly denied. Although not about monsters per se, Dorothy Yamamoto’s wonderful study of the wild man in the Middle Ages is a fine example. Taking the wild man as a culturally and historically constructed figure, she argues for “negotiable meaning and focus” in the examination because “a statement such as ‘the wild man symbolizes wildness’ requires us to jettison our assumption that we know, in essence, what ‘wildness’ is, and to explore instead the meaning it is accorded within particular contexts” (146). At first blush, Yamamoto’s impulse seems correct: cultural specificity creates significant differences between Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Merlin and Chrétien de Troyes’s uncouth churl. With a bit more interrogation, however, we see what seems to be a certain lack of awareness. If, as she argues, we cannot know the *esse* of wildness, the remainder of her study is suspect, for how could she properly identify wild men in the *Vita Merlini* or *Yvain*? How could she study the wild man’s meaning in the various contexts that she does?

The issue is also, of course, present in monster studies proper. Asa Simon Mittman and Susan Kim, for instance, argue that the monster is “not absolute, stable, or

firmly outside the boundaries of the normative” (333). In the same work, however, they observe that Pliny, Solinus, Isidore of Seville, and the unknown author of the Old English *Wonders of the East* (the version found in MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv) follow the same pattern of interest: the name, location, appearance, and behavior of the creatures it treats (338). The examples they cite and their discussion of these texts, therefore, largely follow those concerns. Additionally, the creatures who populate the *Wonders of the East* are categorized by Mittman and Kim as hybrids, creatures who “deviate from the norm through excess, lack, or displacement,” and those who differ because of their behavior (339). The common denominator here is a combination of appearance and behavior—whether in their discussion of the cynocephalic St Christopher or the apple-sniffing Astomi.⁹

In the introduction to *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* published three years later, Mittman reaffirms the indefinability of the monster even as he again identifies the relevance of morphology and behavior: “I would argue that the monstrous does not lie solely in its embodiment (though this is very important) nor its location (though this is, again, vital), nor in the process(es) through which it enacts its being, but also (indeed, perhaps, primarily) in its *impact*” (7). Although he includes geography, and downplays both morphology and behavior in favor of the affective quality of the monster (a point to which I will return), these two characteristics appear yet again as elements of the monstrous.

I take Mittman’s point that “the common ought not to be substituted for the constitutive” and think it is an important warning; I do not wish to unnecessarily limit what has proven to be a fertile and exciting field of inquiry (7).¹⁰ To my mind, some

limitation is necessary: the operation of an unacknowledged and ostensibly rejected definition in the shadows of such insightful academic work as can be found in (especially medieval) monster studies *already functions* as a limiter. As Howard Zinn reminds us, “behind every fact presented to the world—by a teacher, a writer, anyone—is a judgment. The judgment that has been made is that this fact is important, and that other facts, omitted, are not important” (658). Monsters are certainly not facts, but Zinn’s analysis nevertheless obtains: what we choose as examples and subjects of study when we profess to examine monsters communicates a judgment about what we believe monsters to be. At its best, the unacknowledged definition lingers in the background and serves as a unifying theme between works—as in the case of Mittman and Yamamoto. At its worst, it undergirds a study and, having found a foothold, propagates itself in successive studies. What makes such a definition intellectually dangerous is that, because denied, it remains unavailable for analysis even while controlling thought and study—an ideological academic apparatus, as it were.¹¹ Rather than allowing the limiting definition to function in the background, I think a wiser course is to drag the thing into the light of day, so to speak, where it can be further interrogated, analyzed, and critiqued.

What a Monster Is

Although I am unyielding in my argument that both morphological abnormality and deviant behavior combine to make the monstrous, the definition here offered will, I hope, be specific enough to avoid the problems I have outlined while at the same time elastic enough to honor the polysemy and inconstancy that make the monster such a dynamic and exciting subject of study. I am heartened by the fact that, although such a definition has never to my knowledge been explicitly stated, it is implicit in much of the

best scholarship on monsters. Therefore, I begin to define what a monster is with a short review of the sixty-plus years of modern scholarship.¹² The review, like all attempts to present such extensive literature, will be partial, but I will again attempt a certain level of synthesis, pointing out indebtedness, agreement, and conflict where possible.

With his 1942 essay, “Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters,” Rudolf Wittkower produced what is likely the first modern study to treat monsters as more than just incidentals or ornaments. In it, he presents what now seems a rather mundane argument: that the classical tradition—the “ethnographical monsters” of Ktesias, Megasthenes, and Pliny—persisted throughout the medieval and Early Modern periods, pushed out only by the Scientific Revolution (159). What make Wittkower’s essay so useful and formative for monster theory in general and this study in particular are the conclusions he reaches:

Monsters—composite beings, half-human, half-animal—play a part in the thought and imagery of all peoples at all times. Everywhere the monster has been credited with the powers of a god or the diabolical forces of evil. Monsters have had their share in mythologies and fairy-tales, superstitions and prognostications. . . . They shaped not only the day-dreams of beauty and harmony of western man but created at the same time symbols which expressed the horrors of his real dreams. (197)

Wittkower’s essay deals specifically with those monsters populating the Wonders of the East genre of *mirabiliae*, texts that tell of the dog-headed cynocephali, blemmyae whose faces are in their chests, and “fabulous animals” like the mantikhora or unicorn (160-61). Because the creatures’ behavior is of little interest to his sources, Wittkower’s article centers on physical appearance. From these depictions we see that, for Wittkower, the basic prerequisite is physical aberrance—mixtures of different species or a morphological

rearrangement of a single species. This concern with the monster's physical nature will resurface again in other studies, especially that of Georges Canguilhem.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin produces a singular addition to the field of monster studies. Although his work is in some ways indebted to Wittkower's essay, unlike his predecessor and most successors, he reads monsters as a positive force—likely a product of his focus on François Rabelais's satirical depictions of the giants Pantagruel and Gargantua.¹³ Nevertheless, Bakhtin produces a compelling interpretation of monsters as comic, gay figures whose unnatural bodies are emblematic of, rather than set against, the human. So well known because it introduced “grotesque realism” and “the carnivalesque,” in this work Bakhtin's interest in the structural study of culture often overshadows the fact that monsters are both the first literary forms to which these ideas were applied and the vehicles by which they have been communicated to literary criticism at large.

Grotesque realism is described as “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19-20). In Bakhtin's theory, monsters are a subset of grotesque realism largely because the exaggeration, dismemberment, excessiveness, and transferability of the monster's body are key elements of the grotesque (315-17). The interest in embodiment runs parallel to that shown by Wittkower, but Bakhtin breaks with his predecessor when he discusses the carnivalesque—unofficial culture based on laughter that stands “as a second world and a second life outside” official economic, legal, political, and religious cultures (5-6). Because the term is strictly concerned with the social sphere, Rabelais's giants are not a subset of the carnivalesque as they are in the

case of grotesque realism. Instead, they function within its context. This unofficial culture, a parody of official cultures, is a world in which the behavior of monsters is not transgressive, but normative and amusing. Although Bakhtin's interpretation of the monster differs greatly from what we will see in most studies of monsters, he nevertheless includes physical and behavioral characteristics.

In a short essay, Georges Canguilhem produces an impressively nuanced understanding of the monster's negative positioning and prefigures a great deal of the current thinking on the subject. As a physician, he focuses on the physicality of monsters, carefully distinguishing between the monstrosity and the monster: the morphology of the former is abnormal in degree and its study rooted in medicine, whereas the morphology of the monster is abnormal in kind and rooted in the law (28, 30). For Canguilhem, the abnormality of the monster shakes our belief in the morphologically normative standards by which we define ourselves, throwing "doubt on life's ability to teach us order" and causing "radical fear" (27).¹⁴ This is why, he argues, monsters proliferate in the imaginative (art and literature), but are rarely to be found in the "real" world. The monstrosity survives only a short time because it is physiologically unstable, but the monster exists forever—and forever stalks just beyond the light of our campfires, at once reinforcing and questioning the "normal."

In 1975 Michel Foucault gave a series of lectures on the "abnormal" in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought. Maintaining his interest in the body's connection to fluid power and systems of control, he charts the development of the "juridico-biological domain," a term that seems to incorporate Canguilhem's medical and legal concerns (56).¹⁵ Foucault, however, develops the idea far more than did

Canguilhem, illustrating it through the figure of the human monster.¹⁶ The monster was once external, transgressing “the law while leaving it nothing to say”; over time, however, it was absorbed into Europe’s legal and medical structures, ending its threat and finally morphing it into a “pale monster” that is subject to punishment and treatment (56).

Interested as he is in the power systems of the judiciary and medical science, it is unsurprising that Foucault, too, would look to morphology and behavior as constitutive of monsters:

For medieval thought, and definitely for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought, the breach of natural law is not enough to constitute monstrosity. Monstrosity requires a transgression of the natural limit, of the law-table, to fall under, or at any rate challenge, an interdiction of civil and religious or divine law. There is monstrosity only when the confusion comes up against, overturns, or disturbs civil, canon, or religious law. The difference between disability and monstrosity is revealed at the meeting point, the point of friction, between a breach of the natural law-table and a breach of the law instituted by God or by society, at the point where these two breaches of law come together. (63-64)

Foucault sees monsters—at least in their earlier forms—as discomfiting hybrids, transgressing not only “natural” morphological laws, but also legal behavioral standards. Like Wittkower, Bakhtin, and Canguilhem, he argues that the monster is a product of physical abnormality, combining binaries such as human/animal, male/female, living/dead, self/other (63).¹⁷ Unlike Wittkower and Canguilhem, who did not treat behavior, and Bakhtin, who discussed it only glancingly in the carnivalesque, Foucault argues that physical abnormality is not enough. It must be accompanied by some sort of behavioral transgression, and the combination of the two, “where these two breaches of law come together,” is the point at which monsters are made.

Six years after Foucault gave his lectures, John Block Friedman published *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, which returns to Wittkower’s subject of

the Plinian races and is the first work to thoroughly treat medieval monsters. Though clearly indebted to Wittkower, Friedman is far more concerned with the depictions of monstrous races as cultural products. From the beginning of the book, he conveys his definitional bases, though without stating them outright:

I call [the Plinian races] ‘monstrous’ because that is their most common description in the Middle Ages. But many of these people were not monstrous at all. They simply differed in physical appearance and social practices from the person describing them. Some took their names from their manner of life, such as the Apple-Smellers, or the Troglodytes who dwelt in caves; some were physically unusual but not anomalous, such as the Pygmies and Giants; and some were truly fabulous, such as the Blemmyae or men with their faces on their chests. (1)

Friedman here accepts the physical and the behavioral as bases for difference: “physical appearance” in the cases of Pygmies, Giants, and Blemmyae, and “social practices” in the cases of the Apple-Sniffers and Troglodytes. He also assumes a sort of hierarchy of monstrousness—Plinian races, since they “are not supernatural or infernal,” set above “real” monsters and closer to human beings. For Friedman, neither the morphologically aberrant Blemmyae nor the behaviorally deviant Troglodytes are fully monsters; a malformed, evil creature like a demon, however, is. This hierarchy reveals an unstated definition of the monster in keeping with Foucault’s, for at least some members of the Plinian races are not monsters because they do not combine these two transgressions in the same entity.¹⁸

In the *Philosophy of Horror*, Noël Carroll examines monsters as a part of a larger project to create a theory of horror, but for him, there is no horror without the monster. Like Friedman, Foucault, and Canguilhem, he distinguishes between marvelous creatures and monsters.¹⁹ Unlike any of the previous writers, however, Carroll understands the monster in affective terms, offering the emotional responses of characters (and, by

extension the audience) as the interpretive frame by which a monster might be identified.²⁰ Although these responses run the gamut between nausea and confusion, he contends that they can be gathered into the dual categories of disgust and fear:

it is crucial that...the monster is regarded as threatening *and* impure. If the monster were only evaluated as potentially threatening, the emotion would be fear; if only potentially impure, the emotion would be disgust. Art-horror requires evaluation both in terms of threat and disgust. (28)

He concludes that the monster—by combining morphological abnormality and threatening behavior—is the basis for the horror genre. Carroll follows Wittkower and Canguilhem by focusing most closely on the physical impurity of the monster, creating a taxonomy of the different monstrous types. A monster might disrupt categories and be coded as impure by fusion (in which it combines categorically distinct characteristics), fission (in which categorically distinct aspects are spread out over separate entities), magnification (in which an otherwise normal creature is enlarged), or massing (in which hordes of otherwise normal creatures are animated as a unified entity).²¹

The application of any of these four types will produce a creature that transgresses natural or biological categories, and when it combines categorical impurity with a threat against the individual or community, Carroll argues, it becomes a monster. For him, the behavioral is an important aspect, but he spends far less time on it. If their actions are dangerous to the characters, the requirement is fulfilled:

this can be satisfied simply by making the monster lethal. That it kills and maims is enough. The monster may also be threatening psychologically, morally, or socially....Monsters may also trigger certain enduring infantile fears, such as those of being eaten or dismembered, or sexual fears, concerning rape and incest. (43)

As long as the potential monster activates an identifiable fear in the character—and therefore the audience—it is threatening. As long as the potential monster violates a

standard of categorical purity to the character—and therefore audience—it is disgusting. For Carroll, as for Mary Douglas before him, the two aspects of disgust and fear are powerful social forces, and monsters are the only things that can deliver them both.

Judith/Jack Halberstam's *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* takes as its task to trace the development of the monster in the Gothic genre—beginning with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and ending with Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). As the title might suggest, Halberstam is acutely interested in the production of monstrous bodies, for “the monster itself is an economic form in that it condenses various racial and sexual threats to nation, capitalism, and the bourgeoisie in one body” (3). In the shift from textual fiction to cinema, however, some of the concern with appearance is lost and replaced by behavioral monstrousness simply because “in the horror film, the monster must always fail to be monstrous enough and horror therefore depends upon the explicit violation of female bodies as opposed to simply the sight of the monster” (3). Halberstam does not mean this to be a limiting factor:

The monster's body, indeed, is a machine that, in its Gothic mode, produces meaning and can represent any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative. The monster functions as monster, in other words, when it is able to condense as many fear-producing traits as possible into one body....Monsters are meaning machines. They can represent gender, race nationality, class, and sexuality in one body. And even within these divisions of identity, the monster can still be broken down. Monsters and the Gothic fiction that creates them are therefore technologies, narrative technologies that produce the perfect figure for negative identity.... Monsters have to be everything the human is not and, in producing the negative of human, these novels make way for the invention of human as white, male, middle class, and heterosexual. (21-22)

Although the focus is particularly on gender and sexuality as it relates to and is embodied by the monstrous, Halberstam makes room for other concerns like race and class. But what is most interesting about her/his study is the way that it continues the project of

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* by applying the performative to monstrous bodies.²² That is, the monstrous body—in all its deformed, disgusting, and abnormal glory—is not only culturally constructed, but also signifies both the behavioral transgressions we associate with monsters and the cultural mores which mark them as deviant. Halberstam maintains the two elements of morphology and behavior that are now familiar, but she/he breaks with the likes of Foucault and Carroll by rearranging their relation: behavior is subordinated to the body and functions as a constitutive element of it.

The last entry in this review is Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, the person most closely associated with the study of medieval monsters. As the editor of a collection of essays called *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, he includes as the introduction “Monster Culture: Seven Theses,” one of the most important contributions to the study of monsters.²³ His theses vary in scope and relevance—from Thesis II, in which he proposes that monsters are floating metaphors recurring in a same-but-changed form, to Thesis VII, in which he deconstructs his earlier theses by implicating the monster in human knowledge systems, in the advancement of humanity, and in our process of becoming more human(e).

For this discussion, two of Cohen's ideas, Theses III and IV, deserve special attention. The third thesis, “The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis,” is concerned with unnatural monstrous bodies:

This refusal to participate in the classificatory “order of things” is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions. (6)

For Cohen, the morphology of monsters defeats the very categories on which it is based. As such, monsters are destabilizing forces, Derridean “supplements” that blast open binary categories, resist incorporation into existing epistemological structures, and demand the creation of contingent, fluid knowledge systems. This interpretation of the monster’s physicality shares much with Canguilhem, Foucault, Carroll, and Halberstam—though Cohen’s insistence that the monster cannot be incorporated into epistemological systems obviously conflicts with Foucault’s theory of the pale human monster.

In his fourth thesis, Cohen’s ideas on the behavior of monsters generally agree with those of Foucault, Friedman, and Halberstam. By claiming that “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference,” he reads the monster’s behavior as culturally based transgression:

One kind of difference becomes another as the normative categories of gender, sexuality, national identity, and ethnicity slide together like the imbricated circles of a Venn diagram, abjecting from the center that which becomes the monster. This violent foreclosure erects a self-validating, Hegelian master/slave dialectic that naturalizes the subjugation of one cultural body by another by writing the body excluded from personhood and agency as in every way different, monstrous. (11)

Thus, all transgressive behavior is culturally transgressive to a particular group or community, even if characterized as universal. Cohen contends that specific deeply held or especially threatened identity markers are selected and recombined in the figure of the monster so they may be confronted and ritually destroyed to reinstate an illusion of wholeness.

What seems to me a clear trend throughout the most significant works of monster studies is that there is widespread—though implicit—agreement on the importance of morphology and behavior in defining the monstrous (see Figure 2.1). As with Foucault and Carroll, these two criteria are sometimes the lynchpin of a writer’s argument. But to be sure, the two do not always enjoy the same level of attention. For Friedman, the definition is incidental to his purpose, and Bakhtin’s interest in morphology and behavior can only be inferred from the ideas set forth. Halberstam subordinates behavioral deviance to embodiment; Cohen includes them as two among many other characteristics; and Wittkower and Canguilhem ignore behavior altogether. However, at some level or other the double criteria of morphological abnormality and behavioral transgression dominate the criteria for monstrousness—whether it is Foucault writing about eighteenth-

Morphology	Behavior
Wittkower (p. 197)	
Bakhtin (pp. 315-17)	Bakhtin (pp. 5-6)
Canguilhem (p. 29)	
Foucault (p. 63)	Foucault (pp. 63-34)
Friedman (p. 1)	Friedman (pp. 1, 26-34)
Carroll (p. 28)	Carroll (p. 28)
Halberstam (p. 3)	Halberstam (pp. 21-22)
Cohen (pp. 6-7)	Cohen (pp. 7-12)

Figure 2.1: Table of authors included in critical review and their reference to morphology and/or behavior

century hermaphrodites, Friedman about the Plinian races, Carroll about horror, or Halberstam about the Gothic.

It is this well-founded but implicit definition of the monster that I will adopt in the current study. That is to say, anything that will henceforth be called a monster *violates both the morphological and the behavioral norms of the context in which it appears.*²⁴ This definition is especially relevant to an examination of Grendel, for rather than tying our understanding to the contradictory appellations given to him (*rinc, feond, whit unhælo*, etc.), I base Grendel's status as a monster on his traits, morphological and behavioral. With these dual criteria, we can frame a detailed discussion about what makes him a monster. This definition breaks naturally into four different issues, each of which will be covered at length below. The first two are the most obvious: what is meant by morphological violation and behavioral violation must be discussed in greater detail. So, too, should their combination be explained as a *sine qua non* of monstrosity. Lastly, I will address the monster's affect as the method by which we judge what characteristics do and do not fall into the previous categories.

What a Monster Is: Morphology

I begin with morphological abnormality because it is what we see—either when we imagine Grendel as we read *Beowulf* or when we actually see him represented in any number of the film adaptations. Unusual physical make-up has a history of association with the monstrous stretching back long before the earliest scholarship on monsters: Wittkower and Friedman both observe its relative importance for Greco-Roman concepts of the monster. It appears as a specific criterion for judgment as early as the eighth century in the so-called Affatim collection, which defines *monstrum* in terms of physical

appearance, but does not offer the same connection with its definition of *prodigium* (Friedman 111).²⁵

What, then, does abnormal morphology look like in its literary manifestations? How is it, in practice, different from the outer edges of what would be considered normal? As I argue later, crafting some sort of taxonomic chart with physical abnormalities placed in neat little boxes is of little use for the study of monsters (and is probably impossible even if it were something we should attempt). In the main, however, there are two types of morphological abnormalities: combinatory and single-category violations. The first, and most common by far, is the combinatory, in which a monster combines two or more incompatible categories into one being. For instance, what we now regularly term *undead* is an unnatural combination of the living and the dead. Scheherazade's ghouls, the *draugr* Glámr, Bram Stoker's Dracula, J.R.R. Tolkien's barrow-wights, and George Romero's cinematic zombies have all, according to their texts, died. They, nevertheless, continue to exist in their physical bodies, continue to interact with other characters, and in some cases continue to pursue desires (eating) and goals (revenge) usually reserved for the living. Others combine traits from two or more different species. Thus, Homer's fire-breathing chimera is part-lion, part-goat, and part-snake; Wyclif's cockatrice is a flying snake with the head of a rooster; the Japanese dream-eating *baku* has an elephant's trunk, ox's horns, and tiger's feet; and the chupacabra of Latin America has reptilian skin, a forked tongue, quills along its back, and a canine-type snout and fangs.

Combinatory monsters are, however, more freighted with meaning when they bring together the human and non-human. The primacy of the human being was all-

important in medieval theology and still plays a crucial part in modern-day religion, philosophy, biology, and zoology, so combining the human and the non-human into one entity posed serious problems for questions of salvation and even the veracity of biblical creation stories.²⁶ The most common method is the mixing of human and animal: Pseudo-Apollodorus' Minotaur has the head of a bull and the body of a human; many depictions of Saint Christopher show him with a dog's head; and centaurs like Chiron have the bodies of horses but human torsos and heads.

The second main category of morphological abnormality consists of creatures that, rather than combining distinct categories, transgress the governing principles of a single category—either by violating its set of constitutive traits or by drastically increasing or decreasing its scale. In the first case, creatures deviate from the morphological category to which they are supposed to belong. They might retain all of the normal constitutive features, but shuffle them into abnormal arrangements: for example, the Blemmyae are acephalous, instead having their faces in their chests, and the Antipodes (owing to mistranslation) have feet that grow backwards. Creatures of this type might also add or subtract the normal number of traits, so Homer and Virgil's Polyphemus is born of a species that has only one eye; the Plinian Sciapods are a species of hominid with but one centrally-placed leg and foot; and the Greek Cerberus is a three-headed dog.

Then there are monsters whose features are all proportional to their supposed species—their parts are in the right places, and they have the correct number—but their overall size is either greatly exaggerated or reduced. The Nephilim of the Old Testament and the Arthurian Giant of Mount St Michel are human in visage, but giant in aspect; and

the Scandinavian Fenrir is an enormous wolf whose gaping maw can stretch from heaven to earth. On the other end of the spectrum, the Plinian race of Pygmies (whose name comes from the Greek *πυγμή*, which refers to the length from the elbow to the knuckles) was a diminutive race.²⁷

In *Beowulf*, there is morphological abnormality not only in Grendel, but also in the titular hero. Beowulf's earliest exploit, the swimming match with Breca, lasted for at least five nights (l. 545); he, as Stanley B. Greenfield points out, dives to the bottom of Grendel's mere "for a *long* time" in ll. 1495-96; and in ll. 2359-62, the poet says he swam with thirty pieces of war-gear as the only living survivor of Hygelac's disastrous Frisian raid ("A Touch..." 296 ff.).²⁸ If we accept the dominant reading that Beowulf swims in these feats, we must, according to Fred C. Robinson, accept that "hero's physical powers...grow embarrassingly far beyond human dimensions" ("Elements of the Marvellous..." 120).²⁹ All of these are physical actions beyond the abilities of human beings and speak to some sort of morphological abnormality on Beowulf's part; thus, with this representation the poem does not explicitly violate typically human morphology, but instead forces the reader to infer that he exceeds the limits of this category by virtue of his impossible deeds.³⁰

Although I will respond to more general objections later, there is one I wish to address now because it deals specifically with morphology and the Anglo-Saxon context of the poem. It might be said that a normal/abnormal criterion imposes a post-Enlightenment structural principle on a medieval context in which it did not exist. Jennifer Neville, for example, argues that Anglo-Saxons actually had no abstract conception of the natural world as separate from the supernatural (*Representations... 1*,

3). Without such a distinction, the argument runs, it is impossible to differentiate between the abnormal and the normal based on morphological traits, for if there were no distinction between natural and supernatural, then there was no distinction between natural and unnatural.

It may well be that Anglo-Saxons and others did not have abstract concepts corresponding to natural and supernatural, and that they truly believed in the existence of monsters.³¹ It does not, however, follow that they made no distinction between the abnormal and the normal. Neville points out that Anglo-Saxons had plenty of words to denote normalcy for a specific category: *cynd*, *cynde*, *gecynd*, *cyn*, and *æðelo* just from the list she provides (1-2). This means that they were not somehow anomalous among virtually all Western European peoples and that they could—and did—distinguish groups of things according to perceived similarities and differences. While the average Anglo-Saxon may not have been able to understand a cow, for instance, in terms of Plato's world of Forms, he certainly would have been able to identify a two-headed calf as outside the normal morphological range. There is no reason to think that the *Beowulf*-poet and his audience would not have identified Grendel's gigantism and the ugly light that shine from his eyes as equally abnormal.

What a Monster Is: Behavior

The second criterion for defining the monstrous is behavior, and it, like morphology, has quite a range. The behavior exhibited by monsters is best classified as deviant in the sociological understanding of the term, as “a formal property of social situations and social systems” (“Deviance, Sociology of”). That is, deviant behaviors are those, like Grendel's anthropophagy, that violate the norms of social systems or those,

like his unceremonious feast in Heorot, that violate the norms of specific situations. The two contexts—social systems and situations—are important, for there is no action that is inherently deviant. Killing another, for instance, is not murder if it takes place during wartime and conforms to the rules of engagement; likewise, incest was standard practice to preserve the Egyptian noble lineage in the Ptolemaic period.

This understanding of deviant behavior is, as I see it, implicit in most interpretations of monsters. Carroll, for example, clearly prefers physically threatening behavior, but he also opens the definition when he writes, “the monster may also be threatening psychologically, morally, or socially” (43). These types of threats are important, as they illustrate the depth and scope of deviance. Clearly, the Donestre are deviant since their *modus operandi* is to lull European travelers into a false sense of security and then eat them. But the relatively non-threatening Troglodytes also show deviance by virtue of their dwellings: caves, it is understood, are abodes unacceptable to any “right-thinking” and civilized human being. This sort of social deviance is the focus of Friedman’s work, in which he offers five behavioral vectors of transgression that typify the monstrous races and run along the familiar lines of foodways, language use, social structure, and use of material artifacts like clothing and weapons (26-34). Thus Friedman’s Plinian races are deviant in their behavior because their different practices conflict with the accepted “normal” practices of their European creators and readers.

In *Beowulf*, the character of Modþryð is an excellent, if subtle, illustration of deviant behavior and its identification by the characters of the poem. She is initially depicted as a queen guilty of *firen’ ondrysne* [terrible crimes] like having men executed because they look her in the eyes or because she falsely accuses them of impropriety (l.

1932 ff.). After her marriage to Offa, however, she seems to regard herself as on notice; she conforms to social behavioral norms, eventually becoming *gode mære* [renowned in goodness] and a model for normative behavior in the poem (l. 1952). Modþryð is such an interesting character with regard to deviancy simply because the poem identifies her behavior as such. After the violations in social and situational norms are identified and condemned, the poem further depicts the corrective—Modþryð's marriage to Offa and his apparent rehabilitation of her.³² Thus, her tale is a microcosm of the ideal society in which deviant behavior is, once identified as such, treated or punished in order to maintain social control and cohesion.

What a Monster Is: Morphology + Behavior = Monster

At this point, the careful reader might ask why, if I am discussing morphology and behavior as elements of the monstrous, I have given Beowulf and Modþryð as examples instead of actual monsters such as Grendel, his mother, or the dragon. The decision was a conscious one and was meant to reinforce how crucial both morphological abnormality and deviant behavior are for this definition. Beowulf possesses just as abnormal a physical body as does Grendel, and Modþryð exhibits just as objectionable behavior.³³ But few would argue that either should be placed in the same category as Grendel.³⁴

Instead, monsters are transgressions of both morphology and behavior collected together into a single entity. That is, they are constellations of transgressive traits—and these traits are their *esse*, what differentiate monsters from all others. They make a character like Grendel different in kind from a normal human being like Wiglaf, a deviant woman like Modþryð, or a marvelous man like Beowulf. Thus, monsters are monsters

because their morphological abnormality positions them outside the scope of human knowledge structures *and* their deviant behavior threatens the social order.

The definition is perhaps best expressed in terms of a Venn diagram, as shown in Figure 2.2. In the central portion where abnormal physical traits overlap with deviant behavior is the realm of monsters. Both of these criteria enjoy widespread use—from paleoanthropologists differentiating between *homo sapiens* and *homo neanderthalensis*, to the monster theorists previously discussed.³⁵ But it is the combination of the two that makes this particular definition so powerful and avoids some of the issues which crop up when only one criterion or the other is applied. Ignoring the behavioral dimension of monsters, for instance, creates some strange bedfellows. When Lesley Kordecki focuses only on the morphological, she includes both dragons and unicorns in the category of the

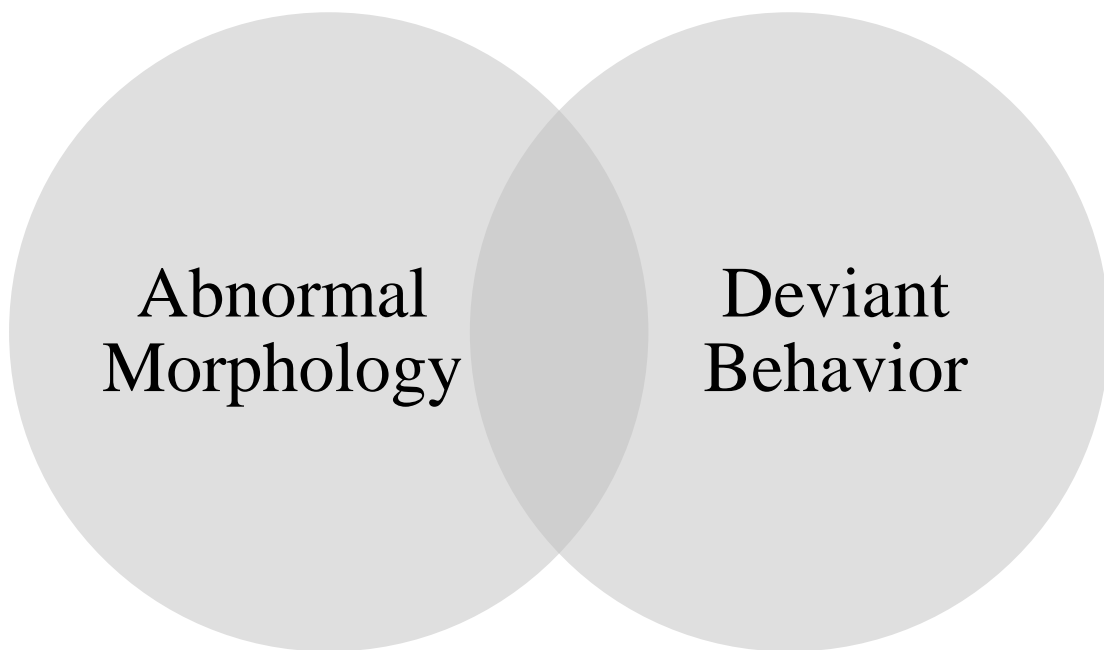


Figure 2.2: Diagram illustrating the relation between abnormal morphology and deviant behavior in monsters. The darker area in which the areas overlap indicates the combination of traits required to create a monster.

monstrous, though she admits they have “morally opposite connotations” (31). Calling the unicorn a monster boxes her into a position in which she is forced to differentiate between “good” monsters like the unicorn with its head in a virgin’s lap and “bad” monsters like the wonderfully odd man-eating unicorn that lives in a pit (32). Debra Higgs Strickland, too, characterizes some images of Prester John as representative of “positive monsters,” producing a monster that exhibits normative behavior, but must be morphologically abnormal (248-49). The problem with this sort of definition is that it leaves the term *monster* equally available to Muppets, Milton’s Satan, babies with spina bifida, and the xenomorphs from the *Alien* film franchise. Though neither Kordecki nor Strickland would likely equate Gonzo the Great with an alien that uses human beings as incubators and gene banks, their partial definitions, in fact, make such a linkage possible.

If, on the other hand, the morphological is abandoned in favor of the behavioral, equally incongruent reference groups are produced. Richard Olsen and Karin Olsen propose that monsters are “natural or unnatural oddities, as well as supernatural deformations and hybrids. They may be physical beings...with anomalies...or they may have a perfectly normal...appearance but an abnormal (inhuman) nature, appearing to be morally rather than physically ugly” (9). Here the monster is defined so liberally that it no longer must appear abnormal: instead of “good” and “bad” monsters, the authors attempt to convince us that there are physically “normal” and “abnormal” ones. In “Monsters and Criminals: Defining Humanity in Old English Poetry,” Neville follows suit, arguing that the monster’s physical appearance is largely irrelevant. She thinks the real distinction between *Beowulf*’s human beings and Grendel is behavioral: the former uphold social conventions whereas the latter “inverts (and thus defines) humanity so as to

threaten society” (103). By overemphasizing the deviant behavior of monsters, however, these critics create an unwieldy category that would apply equally to Delilah, Dracula, Pol Pot, and Freddy Krueger. Such a relaxed category would gather together characters that are quite different in some essential ways—and it is hard to imagine what analytical fruits we might reap by considering both Delilah and Freddy Krueger as monsters.

Affect and Context

It is at this point that some objections to my insistence that Grendel must combine morphological abnormality and behavioral deviance in order to be considered a monster must be addressed. First, does crafting—or even desiring to craft—such a transcendent definition not also demand an essentialist understanding of the monster? To a certain extent, it does in that the definition posits two non-trivial characteristics that Grendel must possess in order to be considered a monster. My thinking here follows the specific strain of philosophical essentialism espoused by Stephen Yablo and his defense of contingent or circumstantial identity. That is, the Donestre, Grendel, Stoker’s Dracula, and Freddy Krueger share categorical properties: even though they have obvious differences, these, according to their categorical identities as monsters, are accidental instead of essential (305, 307). In another sense, however, my definition is not essentialist at all because the reverse—that accidental characteristics possessed by Grendel with respect to his monstrosity are trivial—is most certainly not true. Although I do not, for example, think the geographical location of his home (metaphysically, though not physically, far removed from Heorot, under a lake of burning water, tucked into foreboding rocky crags, etc.) is an essential characteristic to his

monstrous identity, it is obviously non-trivial in that it tells us a good deal about what sort of monstrosity is expressed in the poem.

My answer, in turn, prompts another possible issue. If morphology and behavior are categorical characteristics of Grendel as a monster, we must, as Cohen does, ask “what is the standard of normality, and by whom is it being promulgated” (Cohen “The Use...” 48). Certainly, there is a danger that a universal definition such as I have proposed takes contemporary concerns and knowledge systems, and projects them backward on Anglo-Saxon England. How do we, therefore, avoid creating monsters where there may have been none and ignoring creatures that actually functioned as monsters to the Anglo-Saxons?

This is the root, I think, of Mitter’s objection to defining the monstrous. He argues that in India the term *monster* does not correlate; according to him:

in Sanskrit, the words that closely correspond to “monster” are *danava*, *rakshasa*, and *pishacha*, which are more aesthetic or ethnological categories. Among these non-human mythical creatures, the *danavas* are closer to the European giants, while the *rakshasas* have physical attributes that were considered ugly by the ancient Indians.³⁶ (333)

Mitter, however, then goes on to describe the *rakshasas* as anthropophagic creatures with “bulging eyes, large protruding teeth, snub noses, and black skin” (333). Though they distinguish *rakshasas* from Grendel, Greco-Roman Sirens, or Freddy Krueger, all of these traits nevertheless conform to the morphological and behavioral criteria that I have previously outlined. Mitter’s examples illustrate the problem with these kinds of objections: causation, history, cultural context, and/or linguistic elements that affect a particular monster have been conflated with the definition of what a monster is. My definition does not presume to circumscribe the monster by defining what specific

behaviors do and do not qualify as deviant, nor does it suggest a taxonomy of monstrous physical traits à la Friedrich Panzer or Vladimir Propp. The former is the task of those studying specific monsters, the latter a boondoggle.

Lists and tables of abnormal behaviors or morphological attributes are of little use for defining the monster because what is coded as normal and abnormal is bound up in cultural matrices and therefore changes based on specific temporal, geographical, religious, and/or political contexts. They must be identified in relation to normative standards, and their particular manifestations are not constant—or even consistent with manifestations in other contexts. For instance, gorillas were considered monstrous when Europeans first “discovered” them because they seemed part ape and part human, an unsettling combination of species. Paul Belloni Du Chaillu, the first Westerner to see and make a record of live gorillas wrote in 1861:

This unexplored region was the home of that remarkable ape, the fierce, untameable gorilla, which approaches nearest, in physical conformation and in certain habits, to man, and whose unconquerable ferocity has made it the terror of the bravest native hunters—an animal, too, of which hitherto naturalists and the civilized world knew so little, that the name is even not found in most natural histories. (1-2)

The vicious ape topos began to appear soon after in everything from the World War I propaganda of the Allies (see Figure 2.3) to films like *King Kong* (1933).³⁷ Until the Linnaean classification system absorbed the gorilla as a species, it *was* morphologically abnormal. So if we think about the gorilla as characterized by Du Chaillu, Allied propaganda, or *King Kong*, we would be right to call it morphologically abnormal. However, in contemporary characterizations, such as Dian Fossey’s, there is nothing abnormal about the gorilla’s appearance—as demonstrated by the distinction between the “normal” gorilla, Amy, and the gray gorilla hybrids in Michael Crichton’s *Congo*.³⁸

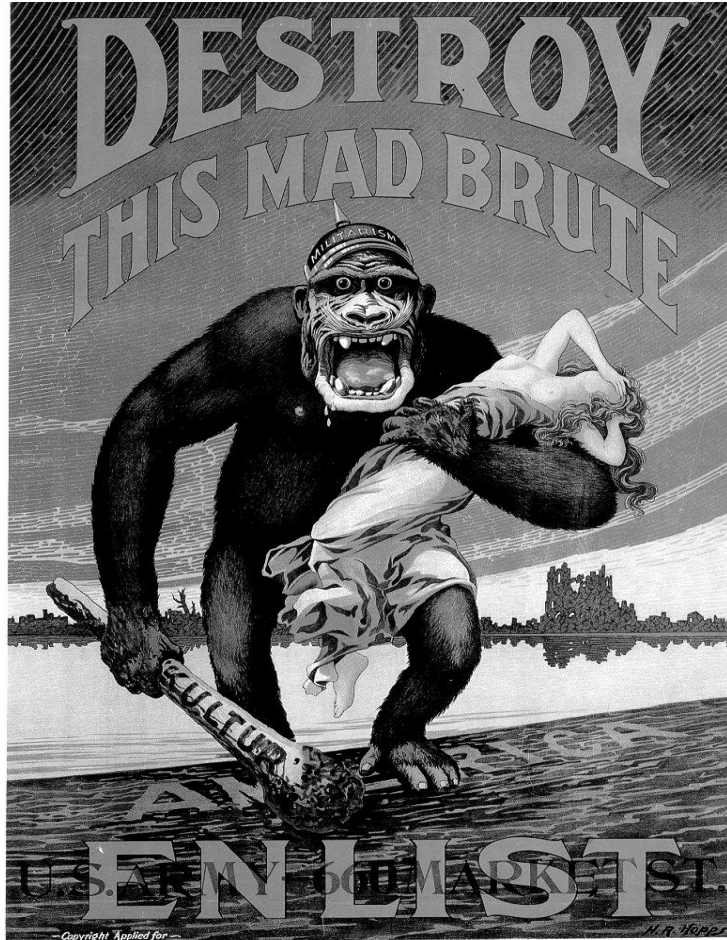


Figure 2.3: US Army recruitment poster for World War I depicting the ape-like Hun personifying Germany. The *pickelhaube* bears the inscription “Militarism” and the club, “Kultur” (c. 1917). (Public Domain)

Because it functions within and against the community, deviant behavior likewise rests largely on socially constructed bases specific to particular times and places. It must, therefore, be defined in relation to behavioral standards evinced in those contexts. In *Beowulf*, this is achieved easily enough, for the poet wishes us to recognize Beowulf (and, to a lesser extent, Hrothgar) as a normative model for correct behavior. He presents almost every action of his protagonist with a nod of approval, sometimes breaking into the narrative to do so.³⁹ Although certainly not normal—the poem’s audience would not

walk away thinking that all warriors should fight bare-handed and unarmored—
Beowulf’s behavior is normative as an ideal to which warriors might once have striven.⁴⁰
But *Beowulf*’s critics no longer live in a world structured by kin ties, feuds, and honor:
we critics no longer give our daughters to our enemies or rivals to try to prevent some
bloody conflict and certainly do not use our hands to crush men to death on military
forays. The standard of acceptable behavior these days, to indulge in some typically
Anglo-Saxon understatement, is quite different.

Because the fictional contexts in which Grendel and other monsters appear are
often temporally, geographically, and/or culturally removed from our own, we should be
sensitive to the particular circumstances in which they exist and act. One way to do so is
the sort of New Historicism practiced by Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose.⁴¹
Their interest in contradictory systems of power and resistance to political orthodoxy,
however, is out of step with the aims of this project, which is concerned with more
discrete, formal analyses instead of reading culture and the poet’s place in it through
Beowulf. I am not concerned with how a specific cultural or political element is
expressed in a particular text or anecdote, but with the particular cultural and
epistemological viewpoint as it is created within *Beowulf*, irrespective of how it may
reinforce or resist the contexts in which it was written and read.

A better approach, therefore, is offered by Mittman and Carroll, who have argued
persuasively that an important characteristic of monstrosity is affect. Mittman
contends that the impact of the monster is what really defines it, because monstrosity
induces a sort of epistemological vertigo, “highlights its fragmentary and inadequate
nature, and thereby asks us...to acknowledge the failures of our systems of

categorization” (7-8). In the broad strokes, Mittman has hit the proverbial nail on the head. In the details, however, his characterization of affect as a monstrous trait distinct from morphology and behavior is problematic. Instead, the monster’s impossible physical appearance and unthinkable acts cause such a radical and vertiginous disorientation (or awakening).

Carroll generally agrees with Mittman, but because the latter’s are introductory remarks and the former’s comprise part of his methodology for a study of “art-horror,” they are more detailed. Carroll proposes that we should glean from the text itself what is and is not physically abnormal, what is and is not deviant behavior. With very little adaptation (monsters are, for him, an important part of art-horror), his approach provides a way of identifying monsters that is both elegant in its simplicity, and sensitive to the various manifestations of the monstrous and the equally various contexts in which they appear. The core of Carroll’s methodology is that the characters in a work are the acid test for monstrosity. Their reactions to the potential monster are the best indicators of whether or not its morphology aberrant and its behavior deviant:

The characters in works of horror exemplify for us the way in which to react to the monsters in the fiction. In film and onstage, the characters *shrink* from the monsters, contracting themselves in order to avoid the grip of the creature but also to avert an accidental brush against this unclean being....The emotional reactions of characters, then, provide a set of instructions or, rather, examples about the way in which the audience is to respond to the monsters in the fiction—that is, about the way we are meant to react to its monstrous properties. (17)

Thus, everything we might need to identify abnormality and deviance is available in the text. Do the characters recoil from the creature? Do they, like the Danes, flee in terror? Do they, like Beowulf and the Danish Bowman, set out to kill it? These are the responses we would expect to see when a character is confronted by monsters. For morphologically

aberrant characters such as Beowulf, this is obviously not the response we see; the coast-guard, Wulfgar, Unferth, and Wealhtheow are all, for their own reasons, slightly off-put by his physical stature and prowess, but they certainly do not shrink from him or avoid physical contact. For behaviorally deviant characters, the negative response exists within the framework of *Beowulf's* social system. Modþryð is, in a way, rehabilitated; Heremod is banished to exile; and Unferth actually remains a member of the Danish warrior society even though he has killed his kin and is braver in words than in deeds (ll. 587-89, 1465-68). None of these characters, however, evoke the visceral *atelic egesa* [horrible fear] in the other human characters the way Grendel does.

Carroll's affective approach helps explain particularly thorny examples such as the difference (seemingly negligible) between Rabelais's Pantagruel and the infamous giant of Mont St Michel. Bakhtin does not read Pantagruel as a malevolent and terrifying figure—though the giant drowns armies in floods of urine and swallows men whole. This is, arguably, more deviant behavior than that exhibited by Malory's version of the Giant of Mont St Michel, who eats knights and rapes women. Pantagruel's behavior, if we were to accept a definition of the monster that was blind to affect, would obviously count as deviant behavior. Because it is coupled with the morphological abnormality of Pantagruel's gigantism, we would be forced to conclude that he is a monster. If, however, we are mindful of the reactions of the characters surrounding Pantagruel, we get a very different reading that agrees with Bakhtin's. Even a passing familiarity with the text shows that Rabelais is clearly in on the joke: Pantagruel is not set against some normative protagonist, and the human characters do not take up arms against him or run for their lives. The same cannot be said for the Giant of Mont St Michel, as Arthur's

battle with him is really a test by which he shows the rightness of his rule and completes his development into an international power. Because Rabelais's giant participates in the carnivalesque, which satirizes and perverts official culture, his actions are actually in keeping with the normative standards of that parodizing and mocking social context.

The term *monster* is what structuralists would call an “empty form,” which can only be defined in associative terms. Whether we call it *Kύκλωπας*, *risastór*, *loup-garou*, הגולם, *Dämon*, *Дрекавау*, *la chupacabra*, *Babau*, *afanc*, *oni*, *monstrum*, or *monster* makes no real difference. What matters are the connections to the dual criteria of morphological abnormality and behavioral deviance—revealed in how the creature is treated in the text. So even though the *Beowulf*-poet never uses the Latin *monstrum* to refer to Grendel, the reactions of the Danes and Geats, and the attitude toward him by the poet make it clear that he is a monster. The use of such criteria also complements my Benjaminian understanding of Grendel as a constellation of signifying traits. Because the core definition of a monster is wholly reliant on traits as they are depicted in relation to protagonists and positive characters, the definition itself suggests that monsters are constellations of traits that take on meaning based on the contexts in which they operate.

Notes

¹ Ray Bradbury. “The Man Upstairs.” *The October Country*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. 257-72 (267).

² I wish to thank those present at “Eyes of the Beholders: A Roundtable Discussion on the Monstrous” during the 2012 International Congress on Medieval Studies for their suggestions and sharp criticisms. Asa Simon Mittman, in particular, aided me by reading an early version of this chapter, commenting on it extensively, and engaging in a spirited correspondence about defining monsters. He has helped me to evolve and urged me to reconsider what was an overly rigid approach.

³ Although it is slightly unwieldy, I use the term *monstrousness* instead of *monstrosity* for good reason. Interspecific conflation alone produces a creature that can be called a *monstrosity*, for which the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a distinct definition. A *monstrosity* is more closely associated with “an animal or plant. . .that is abnormally developed or grossly malformed” and was not conflated with *monster* until the seventeenth century (“Monstrosity”). Therefore, to minimize confusion and provide more precision to

my definition, I use *monstrosity* only when quoting an author who does so. See “Monstrosity.” *OED Online*. Oxford UP. November 2010. Web. 30 January 2011 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/121758>>.

⁴ Other elements, like geographic location, gender, and affect have been proposed and may well apply in other circumstances. It seems to me, however, that these are traits common to, but not necessarily constitutive of, monsters. Living far away—in “the East” or a mere—is often a trait of monsters, but this seems more like a narrative device that provided distance and safety for the “real” world of the reader, and assured that the monsters described could not easily be disproven (Mittman and Kim 335). Gender, while it does play a significant role in making monstrous Grendel’s mother, Sirens of classical myth, and the like, can be included in the category of morphology. This seems especially true since the female was (and sometimes still is) considered at best a incomplete physical imitation of the male, thus leading the way for patriarchic organizations like the medieval Church to consider the female body grotesque and even deformed. Affect, as I will argue, is not so much a trait of monsters as it is the mechanism by which we may judge their abnormality and deviance. Though I am doubtful that other traits are as constitutive as morphology and behavior, a full-scale examination of the monstrous and a definition of it that applies to most every time and place is outside the scope of this work and would constitute a significant research project in its own right.

⁵ This approach is not wholly a creation of modern scholarship or a novel artifact of postmodern theory. In her survey of major medieval texts on monsters, Lisa Verner found that the earliest studies do not define the term in any coherent way. Augustine defines the human rather than the monster, Isidore of Seville discusses the etymology of the term *monstrum*, the *Liber Monstrorum* attempts to distinguish between monster and beast but does not do so in practice, and the *Aberdeen Bestiary* fails to include any sort of explanation as to how monsters do or do not fit into its carefully-constructed animal taxonomy (2-5). It is not until Mandeville’s *Travels* in the fourteenth century that Verner sees a working definition of a monster as “a þing difformed azen kynde” (qtd. in Verner 5). See *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

⁶ Such a state of affairs might put us in mind of United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who famously wrote regarding pornography: “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it.” The frustration in his words is almost palpable, and he seems utterly defeated by what is indeed a Sisyphean task. But as I observed before, those brave souls who study monsters differ from Justice Stewart. They tend not to articulate frustration at the lack of an overarching definition for their subjects, but celebrate it. See *Jacobellus v. Ohio*. No. 378 US 184. Supreme Ct. of the US. 22 June 1964.

⁷ Perhaps it is not unintended. In many ways, the current state of monster studies is analogous to painful and tumultuous stages in feminism and LGBT communities. What is typically—and sometimes problematically—called Third-Wave Feminism was born out of a definitional crisis much like the one I have been outlining in monster studies. Rejecting what they saw as an essentialist position in Second-Wave Feminism that unconsciously defined “female” as “white, upper- or middle-class female,” Third-Wave feminists embraced difference and sought to open the definition to women of color, social classes, and cultural contexts that they saw as un- or underrepresented in previous waves. Second-Wave feminists have often criticized the approach for being about nothing by being about everything. Likewise, some within the LGBT community seek to make a distinction between homosexuality and bisexuality on the one hand, and transgenderism and intersexuality on the other. The root of the identity crisis is, again, definitional. Some, particularly those ascribing to lesbian and gay separatism, distinguish between sexuality and gender construction. The social and political issues affecting transgender and intersex people, it is argued, are linked to a particular social view of gender instead of social views on sexuality and sexual identity; thus, they should not be included in discussions about gay marriage. In both the case of Third-Wave Feminism and the LGBT community, the definition is at issue, and at least one side argues for a consciously open and inclusive definition that will not *define*, for defining the movements allows them to

be either absorbed into the existing heteronormative and patriarchic social structure or circumscribed and marginalized. See Joan W. Scott's "Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism." *Feminist Studies* 14.1 (1988): 32-50; Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner's *The F-Word: Feminism in Jeopardy*. Emeryville, CA: Seal P, 2004; Jonathan Alexander's and Karen Yescavage's *Bisexuality and Transgenderism: InterSEXions of The Others*. Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park P, 2003; and Mark Blasius's *Sexual Identities, Queer Politics: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Politics*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.

⁸ Thing theorists like Bill Brown, however, might bristle at the use of *thing* to describe Grendel, for they have marked out their own territory. See "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 1-22.

⁹ Mittman also has an abiding interest in the geography of monsters, especially as it is represented in medieval *mappaemundi*. This element is discussed briefly at the end of the article and more fully developed in *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England*. New York: Routledge, 2006. As noted earlier (n. 4), the geographical location of the monster may very well be an element of monstrousness, though not an especially fruitful one for the present study.

¹⁰ In a not insignificant way, however, the process of defining—especially inductive categorization in which we are here involved—is a process of taking the common and making it constitutive.

¹¹ Though it is mostly tongue-in-cheek, I am obviously adapting the nomenclature from the structural Marxist, Louis Althusser. See "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review P, 1971. 121-76.

¹² Hayden White's "Forms of Wildness: The Archaeology of an Idea" and Yamamoto's chapters on the Wildman have both been applied to monsters and are significant works of scholarship. But because each is specifically about wild men, I have chosen not to include them in this review. I have also omitted David Williams's fine *Deformed Discourse*. He examines monsters in relation to Pseudo-Dionysus' Neoplatonism and determines that their very paradoxical nature allows them to be the driving force behind the *via negativa*, a manner of understanding what something is by understanding what it is not. The paradox of the monster—especially in a semiotic sense—ruptures the stable signifying relationships of language and allows the discourse itself to be transgressed and truth to be approached. Precisely because his object of study is the concept of the monster and not specific monsters, however, Williams's treatment is so broad as to include gemstones, letters, and numbers, negating much of its importance to this study. See White's *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985.

¹³ Portions of the book (especially Bakhtin's discussion of the "Indian Wonders" on 345-47) seem to draw from Wittkower's essay, though there is no explicit reference to it.

¹⁴ As anyone who has gone over test results with a doctor knows, normal ranges are a basis for almost all medical diagnoses. The United States Center for Disease Control and the United Nation's World Health Organization both have set normal ranges for everything from bone density to blood coagulation timelines—and these, in turn, have had profound effects on diagnosis and treatment of diseases and disorders. See also my later discussion of morphology (45-49). Cf. Donna Haraway's "The Promises of Monsters." *Cultural Studies*. Eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler. New York: Routledge, 1992. 295-337.

¹⁵ See Canguilhem 31-32. Foucault, however, does not acknowledge him specifically.

¹⁶ Foucault also treats two other figures, the individual to be corrected and the masturbating child, though they are not of interest to the present discussion.

¹⁷ Examples of each of the combined categories would be the centaur (human/animal), the hermaphrodite (male/female), the zombie (living/dead), and conjoined twins (self/other). Not all of these are monsters, but they are examples of the morphological abnormality that is required of a monster.

¹⁸ Some Plinian races, like the lion-headed Donestre who consume travelers and then weep over their decapitated heads, actually do fit the definition, but these are not mentioned in Friedman's initial discussion.

¹⁹ He does not use the term "marvelous creatures," instead distinguishing the categories as "monsters" and "horrifying monsters." As his definition—especially his differentiation between *Star Wars*' Chewbacca and *The Howling*'s werewolves—makes clear, however, the difference between monster/marvelous creature and horrifying monster/monster is one of semantics (27). For clarity's sake, I will maintain the monster/marvelous creature nomenclature when discussing his work.

²⁰ For a fuller discussion of this aspect of Carroll's work, see below, 59-60.

²¹ See pages 43-45 for fusion, 46-48 for fission, 49-50 for magnification, and 50 for massing.

²² Halberstam pays tribute to Butler's text with the cleverest of clever chapter titles, "Bodies that Splatter: Queers and Chain Saws."

²³ With his essay, we have something that might be called an *event* in the history of the concept of the monster, to borrow from Jacques Derrida's famous opening to "Structure, Sign, Play." Like Derrida's description of that fateful 1966 conference on structuralism, Cohen's work is both a "*rupture* and a *redoubling*" in monster theory (278). First, as a manifesto, the essay is a rupture of the narrative arc of monster theory. For the first time, we have a broad-scale theory about monsters and their use as cultural artifacts. Cohen does not argue that such-and-such a monster means this, and such-and-such a monster means that. He does not, as does Foucault, argue that the monster is a cog in a much larger theory. He argues only that monsters *mean*. Thus, the piece is a radical break from the monster theory up to that time. But it is also a redoubling of the work that had been done before. Almost all of his theses are reiterations of previous ideas (Thesis I is discussed by Wittkower, Foucault, and Friedman; Thesis II by Wittkower and Friedman; Thesis VI by Bakhtin; etc.). In that sense, Cohen's ideas are derivative, redoubling previous forays. In the other sense, they form a rupture because he has used these previous ideas to discover and communicate something completely new in monster theory—an articulation of heretofore unspoken, disparate ideas into a cohesive *theory*. See "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 1978. 278-94.

²⁴ This definition creates some interesting limit cases: Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the Greco-Roman Chiron, Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera*, Melion, Victor Hugo's *Quasimodo*, and Frankenstein's creature fall very close to the dividing line between normal and abnormal, or normative and deviant. While is not my goal to explore these limit cases here, such an examination would be profitable because it would provide further analysis of not only this organizational schema but also the texts in which these limit cases appear.

²⁵ There are, of course, exceptions. Julie Orlemanski, for example, writes about the common theme of the leprous kiss in medieval saints' lives; she argues that the diseased flesh, rather than engendering disgust, is depicted as eliciting a sort of attraction for the pious. Hers is a narrow set of circumstances, and it seems to me that the leprous kiss still trades on a recognition and overturning of a perceived physical abnormality—else the piety of the desiring saint is not extraordinary. See "How to Kiss a Leper." *Postmedieval* 3.2 (2012): 142-57.

²⁶ The vitriol aimed at Darwinian evolution in US classrooms is largely driven by Christian ideas of the separation between human and animal. In philosophy, one need only look at the controversy Peter Singer's

notion of *speciesism* (discrimination based on membership in a particular species) engendered when he published *Animal Liberation* to see the anxiety a blurring of the line between human and animal produces. In the sciences, this division is a basic assumption: animal testing is still legal without the testee's consent, whereas human testing without consent is unethical according to the Declaration of Helsinki in 1964.

²⁷ See the entry for the same in *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Eds. Henry George Lydell and Robert Scott. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.

²⁸ Additionally, Beowulf is said to have *þritiges / manna mægen-cræft on his mundgripe* [the strength of thirty men in his hand-grip] and to have crushed Dægfrn to death with those same hands (ll. 379-80, ll. 2501-08). Both of these speak to a level of strength that is magnitudes greater than that possessed by any other human being in the poem, and therefore suggests some level of morphological abnormality. Unless otherwise noted, all references to *Beowulf* are taken from Klaeber's fourth edition and all translations of the text are my own.

²⁹ Robinson most certainly does not accept either that Beowulf swam or that he possesses a physical nature beyond that of his contemporaries, and it is to his essay that Greenfield responds. As the back-and-forth between the two shows, the interpretation of Beowulf's swimming feats is far from *stare decesis*. Whether Beowulf actually swam or rowed is the subject here, though the interpretation of him swimming is the dominant reading. For views on Beowulf's rowing, see Robinson's "Elements of the Marvellous in the Characterization of Beowulf: A Reconsideration of the Textual Evidence"; Karl P. Wentersdorf's "Beowulf's Adventure with Breca." *Studies in Philology* 72.2 (1975): 140-66; and James W. Earl's "Beowulf's Rowing Match." *Neophilologus* 63 (1979): 285-90. For views on Beowulf's swimming, see Greenfield's "A Touch of the Monstrous in the Hero, or Beowulf Re-Marvellized"; Frederick Biggs' "Beowulf's Fight with the Nine Nicors." *Review of English Studies* 53.211 (2002): 311-28; and R.D. Fulk's "Afloat in Semantic Space: Old English *sund* and the Nature of Beowulf's Exploit with Breca." *JEGP* 104.4 (2005): 456-72.

³⁰ His power is not drawn, as is Gawain's or Percival's, from some external source but is a direct result of his own strength, which is to say, his body. For Gawain's ability to gain strength as the sun waxes, see Sir Thomas Malory's *Works*. Ed. Eugène Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978, especially p. 96. For Percival's invincibility because of a ring, see Mary Flowers Braswell's edition of *Sir Percival of Galles*. TEAMS. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995, especially ll. 1860-72.

³¹ Modern scholars typically laugh up their sleeves at the beliefs of medieval peoples when it comes to monsters, but two recent polls show that sense of enlightenment to be misplaced. An Angus Reid Public Opinion poll taken in March of 2012 reveals that 29% of Americans report that they believe in Bigfoot and 24% of Scots believe in the Loch Ness Monster. An Ipsos/Rueters poll taken in April of 2010 shows that 20% of the global population believes extraterrestrials have visited Earth and lived among the human population. No more credible evidence now exists for the existence of Bigfoot, Nessie, or aliens than it did for giants during the Anglo-Saxon period in England—yet these beliefs persist. See: Angus Reid Public Opinion. "Americans More Likely to Believe in Bigfoot than Canadians." *AngusReidPublicOpinion*. 4 March 2012. 4 April 2012 <<http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/44419/americans-more-likely-to-believe-in-bigfoot-than-canadians>>, and Ipsos. "One in Five (20%) Global Citizens Believe That Alien Beings Have Come Down to Earth and Walk Amongst Us in our Communities Disguised as Humans." *Ipsos, North America*. 8 April 2010. 4 April 2012 <<http://www.ipsos-na.com/news-polls/pressrelease.aspx?id=4742>>.

³² In the story of Modþryð and Offa, there also seems to be a subtext in which the poem itself works as a tool of social control and normativity. Modþryð's deviant behavior seems to be controlled and ended by Offa in an obvious male fantasy. The tale of an uncontrolled female and the male who "tames" her reinscribes the standard sexual politics of the time by depicting the relationship as right and proper.

³³ Though her body count may be lower, Modþryð is much like Grendel in the sense that her motives are inscrutable. The poet, it seems, cannot fathom what would drive either to take the actions they do, so in Modþryð's case he gives no reason at all and in Grendel's gives the long-used motivator of hatred.

³⁴ Those who make this argument—or one close to it—still tend to reify the distinction between Beowulf and Grendel simply with their word choices. S.L. Dragland understands Grendel as Beowulf's alter ego and contends that the poet associates the two with one another both mentally and physically, but he still refers to Grendel as a monster (distinguishing him from Iago, for example) and to Beowulf as heroic and human (612, 610). Katharine O'Brian O'Keefe argues that in the battle with Grendel, Beowulf slowly becomes indistinct from his foe, yet she retains the word *monster* to refer to Grendel and *hero* to refer to Beowulf ("Beowulf..." 490, 489). For Dragland, see n. 24 in Chapter I.

³⁵ See, for example, Richard G. Klein's "Archaeology and the Evolution of Human Behavior." *Evolutionary Anthropology* 9 (2000): 17-36 (especially 24), and Chris Stringer's "The Morphological and Behavioural Origins of Modern Humans." *The Speciation of Modern Homo Sapiens*. Ed. Tim J. Crow. Proceedings of the British Academy. Ser. 106. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. 23-30 (especially 24). Paleoanthropologists, of course, do not make normative/antisocial judgments when they discuss behavior, but hunting strategies, symbolic actions such as painting, and burial rites are behavioral indicators used to differentiate between the two species.

³⁶ Michael Dylan Foster makes a similar objection with regards to Japanese monsters. See his "Early Modern Past to Postmodern Future: Changing Discourses of Japanese Monsters." *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*. Eds. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. 133-50 (especially 135).

³⁷ How the Germans came to be associated with Huns is rooted in a speech given by Kaiser Wilhelm II in which he describes the merciless approach German soldiers were to take in response to the Boxer Rebellion. How this translated to depictions of ape-like features is not fully clear to me, but provides an interesting example of morphology shifting in order to match the perceived deviant behavior of the Central Powers.

³⁸ See Fossey's *Gorillas in the Mist*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1983, and Crichton's *Congo*. New York: Knopf, 1980.

³⁹ See, for example, ll. 669-70, 1534-36, 2541.

⁴⁰ As Edward B. Irving, Jr. states, "There should be no doubt whatever—it is amazing that anyone has to state this point explicitly—that, for the poem's audience, Beowulf is always a superb role-model" (355). See "Heroic Role-Models: Beowulf and Others." *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period: Studies in Honor of Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.* Eds. Helen Damico and John Leyerle. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993. 347-72.

⁴¹ See Greenblatt's "Toward a Poetics of Culture." *The New Historicism*. Ed. H. Aram Veseer. New York: Routledge, 1989. 1-14, and Louis Montrose's "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture." in the same collection.

CHAPTER III

THE BODY GIANT

Why is it almost impossible to gaze directly at the Grand Canyon under these circumstances and see it for what it is—as one picks up a strange object from one’s backyard and gazes directly at it? It is almost impossible because the Grand Canyon, the thing as it is, has been appropriated by the symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer’s mind. Seeing the canyon under approved circumstances is seeing the symbolic complex head on. The thing is no longer the thing as it confronted the Spaniard; it is rather that which has already been formulated—by picture postcard, geography book, tourist folders, and the words *Grand Canyon*.... The highest point, the term of the sightseer’s satisfaction, is not the sovereign discovery of the thing before him; it is rather the measuring up of the thing to the criterion of the preformed symbolic complex.

Walker Percy, “The Loss of the Creature”¹

Introduction

Walker Percy’s “The Loss of the Creature,” part paean to “sovereign knowing” and part dirge for its loss to the “symbolic complex,” makes a good start for this chapter because, as Percy himself might say it, we cannot *see* Grendel. There are, in fact, two distinct but related ways in which we have lost this particular creature. First, his physical shape is lost to us because the *Beowulf*-poet employs a particular kind of description in which the totality of a character’s physical aspect is deemed unimportant. It is—for our poet and for many within Old English heroic literature—more important that specific parts of a character’s anatomy be described, not to provide the audience with a sharp mental image, but to explore the semiotic possibilities of a hand, a head, or the eyes.

As a natural consequence of the first circumstance, modern critics, translators, and readers have filled the vacuum with their own interpretations. This is the second way in which we lose sight of Grendel. What he is in the text has been plastered over by interpretations, artistic renderings, and the private mental images of critics and translators. These have calcified around the few bodily descriptions *Beowulf* does give to

create a few dominant readings of Grendel's morphology; while they cannot be refuted with the evidence available to us, neither can they be supported by it. Nevertheless, they continue to persist, subtly shaping not only our understanding of Grendel, but also the sorts of questions we ask and the interpretations we offer. That is, by the time most readers have come to the text in the original and are prepared to make study of it, our impression of Grendel has already been shaped—by critics, filmmakers, illustrators, and translators. This accretion is what Percy calls the symbolic complex, and it is what he blames for the loss of the creature—be it the Grand Canyon, a Shakespearean sonnet, an ordinary dogfish, or Grendel.

While Grendel may not exist in the same way that any of Percy's three examples do, there are, nevertheless, certain verifiable facts to which any interpretation must defer. That is, Grendel's physical appearance does (even if only to a small extent) exist within the poem, and in order to understand its elements as points in the semiotic constellation that is his monstrosity, we have to understand what those elements are. To do so, I will first outline the few textual descriptions of Grendel's physical appearance the poem provides. Next, I discuss why we have so little real textual evidence as to his appearance and examine the symbolic complex as it exists in a few of the most influential examples. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to an examination of one of Grendel's most documented morphological abnormalities, his gigantism. Although it does distance him from the human beings of the poem in morphological terms (thus partially fulfilling the definition set forth in Chapter II), the physical reality of Grendel's gigantism is not the poet's real interest. Because he is wildly inconsistent about the monster's size from one point in the narrative to the next, I argue that gigantism functions as an allusive

opportunity for the poet to introduce and combine in one character the negative associations of giants in both Latin Christian and Germanic traditions.

The Description

When thinking about Grendel's morphology, the best place to begin is by taking stock of what we do know. The poet tells us that Grendel is humanoid: he goes about *on weres wæstmum* [in the form of a man] (ll. 1352). From this we can surmise that Grendel has a head, shoulders, arms, a torso, and two legs on which he walks. And this allows us a limited mental image. We can be sure, for example, that he is no Blemmye because he has a head (or did, before Beowulf cut it off). He also has hair by which the head is carried into Heorot (ll. 1647-48). These are not insignificant elements of his morphology, though I have found few who have argued that the presence of hair, a head, or even a humanoid shape suggests some sort of monstrous nature in Grendel. Certainly, none are morphological abnormalities.

Three verifiable physical traits, however, have often been cited as evidence of physical abnormality. First, Grendel has hands: before his fatal meeting with Beowulf, he had two arms, two hands, and an unspecified number of fingers. We know this because he leaves one arm behind to be hung in Heorot—a plot development that provides one of the few opportunities for any sort of detail about Grendel's morphology (ll. 984-87). Furthermore, the text tells us he has at least two eyes, which shine with an ugly light (ll. 726-27). We can also be certain that he is large: physically, Grendel is *mara þonne ænig man oðer* [larger than any other man], and the poet supplements that morphological detail with connections to giants via epithets like *þyrs* and *eoten* (l. 1353).

All further conclusions about Grendel's facial structure or the details of his body are based on inference or conjecture. We may, for example, safely assume that since he is able to bite Hondscio in l. 742, Grendel also has teeth, but such an attribute must be inferred from the action and is nowhere described. Some would construe *on weres wæstmum* more liberally and so provide Grendel with a nose, mouth, ears, etc. Such a reading is on shaky ground, however, because it is not at all clear that the poet meant the phrase to apply to the monster's face and head. Many creatures contemporaneous with Grendel possess what we might consider significant morphological abnormalities, but are considered by their Anglo-Saxon authors to be human beings or of humanoid form. The cynocephalic St Christopher rides a horse, can (eventually) speak, is brought to salvation, and becomes a saint; he could, therefore, well be described as "in the form of a man," but because he has a dog's head, his nose, ears, and skin must be significantly different from those of the Lycian king who has him killed.² This is also the case with some beings described in the version of the *Wonders of the East* that accompanies

Beowulf in MS Vitellius A.xv:

Ciconia in Gallia hatte þæt land þær beoð men acende on drys heowes, þara heafdu beoð gemonu swa leona heafu, 7 hi beoð .XX. fota lange 7 hy habbað micelne muð swæfon gyf hwylcne monnan on þæm landum ongitað oððe geseop oððe him hwilc man folgiende bið, þonne feor þæt hi fleoð, 7 blode hy swætað. Þas beoð men gewende.

[That land is named Ciconia in Gallia where men are born in three hues; their heads have manes like lions' heads. And they are twenty feet tall. And they have a great mouth like a fan. If they hear of or see any man in those lands, or [if] any man is following them, then they flee far from there. And they sweat blood. They are changed/interpreted to be men.] (Orchard 192)³

Twenty-foot, blood-sweating, tri-colored creatures with long manes and enormous mouths are, by the unknown Anglo-Saxon author, included in the category of human. To

be sure, they are humanoid, but they have some morphological abnormalities that might give pause to modern readers before we label them *homo sapiens sapiens*. While Anglo-Saxons maintained a division between the normal and the abnormal, that distinction appears to have been married with a much larger and less distinct category of “human being” than that we currently use. Thus, it seems unwise to assume that Grendel, because he is *on weres wæstmum*, possesses human facial features—or even that he possesses a nose or ears at all.

The “Problem” of Description

The “problem” of Grendel’s description is actually twofold. First, there is the issue that so little description of his body actually appears in the poem. The few physical traits we can confirm are significantly outweighed by unanswerable questions about his morphology. Does Grendel have a nose? If so, is it human or something more like a snout? If it does resemble that of a human being, is it flattened or is it Aquiline? Does he have ears? If so, are they rounded and on the side of his head like those of primates or pointed and on top of his head like those of other mammals? What color is his skin? Is it covered in hair, scales, an exoskeleton? What does his mouth look like? Is it, like the creatures in the *Wonders of the East*, *micelne muð swæfon* since he can bolt an entire warrior? What sort of teeth does a man-eating monster have? Without these kinds of details, we cannot know whether Grendel looks more like Walter Skeat’s brown bear, Tolkien’s menacing ogres, or an enormous undead *draugr*.

The second problematic aspect is the anxiety such sparse detail seems to elicit among critics. Despite such a lack of specifics, some critics have tried to show what we do have is somehow satisfactory. Ruth Mellinkoff admits that the details are “sparing,”

but she also argues that particulars like Grendel's head being dragged by the hair and the presence of claws are "vividly revealing details," though she does not say just what they reveal (151). Michael Lapidge, too, thinks that experience with the poem gives the reader "a moderately clear notion of...what (roughly) he looked like" (374). Lapidge is interested, first and foremost, in the way the suppression of Grendel's body and other details enhances fear, so he presumably means that the monster's morphology is clear enough to differentiate him from human beings and to strike terror into the heart of the reader. This may mean that Grendel's physical appearance is clear enough for Lapidge's purposes, but it does not, as he states, "allow us to see what sort of creature the *Beowulf*-poet had in mind" (375). Given that swords and buildings are more thoroughly described than our monster, it seems incredible to contend that we know much at all about Grendel's appearance.

To my mind, both Mellinkoff and Lapidge try to paper over the huge blank spots on the canvas that is Grendel's body. If they do play the roles of apologist, their impulse is understandable—but an excuse for the poem need not be offered. *Beowulf* is not a bestiary or scientific tract, it adopts the epic poetic technique of cataloging only rarely, and it never approaches the level of ekphrasis found in Homer or Virgil. We would, therefore, be wrong to expect an anatomical description of the poem's monsters. Likewise, the poet was no realist, so we should not rebuke him for failing to outdo George Eliot or James Fennimore Cooper in descriptive detail. By that same token, however, we must admit that the poet's choices and techniques have made a clear image of Grendel unavailable to us. Rather than attempting to convince ourselves that what we have been given is enough to produce anything approaching the sort of character profile

we can create for Chaucer's Knight or Wife of Bath, we should explore why the poet chose not to provide those details.

The poet's strategic silence is not limited to Grendel, his mother, and the dragon. In point of fact, he appears to have almost no interest in the body—monstrous or human. As little as we know about Grendel's morphology, we know even less, for example, about Beowulf's appearance. The lines separating Beowulf's introduction and his naming give at least ten separate references to armor—four of which are descriptions more detailed than we ever get for the Geat or his men.⁴ As the Geats move up the path to Heorot, it is not the bodies that seem to be moving but the armor, since the poet focuses almost exclusively on the glint and clank of the war gear. There is no attempt to describe Beowulf beyond his warlike or noble qualities: it is as if by calling him “noble,” the poet believes that he is indeed giving all the physical description an audience might need.

Given the lack of description for all of *Beowulf's* characters, it might seem ridiculous for a scholar the caliber of Seth Lerer to argue that the poem is inherently concerned with the body (723). Nevertheless, he is correct that bodies are important in it. Lerer may be exaggerating for effect when he claims the poem's “landscape is littered with ripped trunks, severed heads, and fragmentary limbs,” but it does seem that bodies are treated by the poet in a selectively fragmented form, which belies their real semiotic import (723). James L. Rosier, for example, observes that terms referring to hands (often novel compounds) occur sixty-six times throughout the poem and concludes that the poet stressed this particular body part via repetition and variation (10, 12). John M. Hill gives the matter some sustained thought in “The Sacrificial Synecdoche of Hands, Heads, and

Arms in Anglo-Saxon Heroic Poetry” where he argues for an understanding of the fragmented heroic body. There is, he writes, “a coherent set of concerns and signs...centered in the potent parts of the warrior body” in which the hand, especially, serves as an image of the hero’s power (“The Sacrificial...” 117-18). The heroic feat, whether it is Beowulf’s fight with Grendel or Byrhtnoth’s defense of his homeland, comes to be located in the hero’s hand (in Beowulf’s case) or sword arm (in Byrhtnoth’s).

Hill thinks that so little description is given for these symbolically important body parts precisely because they are symbolic. Beowulf’s hand itself is not depicted, for “to attempt to do so would be to describe merely flesh or else a token, a sign only of the hero’s might....The hero’s hand or handgrip is a synecdoche for his embodied strength, heart, and courage in this world” (“The Sacrificial...” 126-27). For Anglo-Saxon poets, the body is always bound up in a metaphorical matrix, and this produces a conceit in which its figurative dimension takes precedence over its literal one. Hill’s argument helps explain why, contrary to the expectations of modern audiences, the *Beowulf*-poet gives so little thought to crafting a coherent and complete physical description for one of his main antagonists. To expect an Anglo-Saxon poet to describe the hero’s hand or, in Grendel’s case, the vast majority of his physical traits is to expect a description of the vehicle when the real concern is with the tenor of this metaphorical language. Grendel’s physical description (or, more properly, the lack of it) is only a problem if we try to make the poet and his work into something they are not.

In his preference for the semantic dimension of specific body parts and his complete disregard for the rest of the body, the *Beowulf*-poet evinces a particular literary conceit. Though Grendel is no hero, Hill’s examination of the hero nevertheless obtains,

for the handling of the monster's morphology can be thought of as a negative blazon.⁵ Grendel, strange as it may seem, has much in common with the beloved Laura of Petrarch's *Rime Sparse (Il Canzoniere)*. Though he is monstrous and she is beautiful, their features remain vague and undefined even as both receive significant attention from their respective poets.

Petrarch, it must be admitted, was more concerned with the looks of his subject than was the *Beowulf*-poet. In crafting the sort of blazon that set the standard for sonneteers like Sydney and Shakespeare, however, he also inaugurated a form that largely avoided revealing what that beloved looked like:

given an entire volume devoted to a single lady, the absence of a coherent, comprehensive portrait is significant. Laura is always presented as a part or parts of a woman. . . . Her textures are those of metals and stones; her image is that of a collection of exquisitely beautiful disassociated objects. Singled out among them are hair, hand, foot and eyes: golden hair trapped and bound the speaker; an ivory hand took his heart away; a marble foot imprinted the grass and flowers; starry eyes directed him in his wandering. (Vickers 266)

The above analysis, *mutatis mutandi*, could just as easily be about the poet's handling of Grendel: he is always presented as part or parts of a creature—of which size, hands, and eyes are singled out because they are symbolically significant. This is why I have called his description a negative blazon: it quite effectively imparts a sense of morphological abnormality and monstrousness while communicating precious little about the specifics of that morphology. Because the poet is already within a tradition of fragmentary description in which only those body parts having signficatory function are mentioned, his only task is to dwell on morphological traits that depict Grendel's separation from humanity or his monstrousness. To attempt some sort of anatomically complete rendering of the monster, then, is as wrong-headed as trying to paint a portrait of Laura

based on Petrarch's description. The poet gives us what is needed within the poetic context in which he works, not what we might want for a critical study: to expect more (or worse, to condemn the poet for not providing it) is to misread his work.

The Symbolic Complex

Like nature, it seems, we abhor a vacuum. In this case, the vast empty spaces in Grendel's physical appearance have been gradually filled in, his body given shape not by the poet but by later readers. Translators, because most everyone now experiences the poem first in translation, have arguably the largest role in creating this symbolic complex. As far back as 1967, Signe Carlson bemoaned the additions to Grendel's physical make-up that have been foisted upon us by translators:

Folm means "hand" or "palm of the hand." In line 745 *folma*, referring to Grendel's victim, is rendered "hands" by the translators, but in line 748 *folme*, referring to Grendel himself, is translated "hands" by only ten, "fist" by one, "claws" by six, and "talons" and "fang" by others. *Hond* ("hand"), sometimes translated "claw" in line 834, and *eardode* ("inhabited"), sometimes translated "haunted" in line 166, are additional examples of words whose interpretations may be considered literary accretions. The "drooling spit" and "red ferocious eyes and ravening jaws" of Grendel...heighten the horror of these creatures, but have no textual basis whatsoever. (361-62)

Seamus Heaney, whose version is now ubiquitous as the Norton Critical Edition and the replacement for E. Talbot Donaldson's prose translation in the Norton Anthology, does much to add to the symbolic complex. Obviously preferring the Christian elements of the poem, he passes on few opportunities to characterize Grendel as a demon—often injecting the term when the text makes no such connection (ll. 86, 103, 730, and 1358). One of the most pervasive morphological elements in translations—and one that might do more to create this symbolic complex—is Grendel's claws. Although there is only the shakiest of textual evidence for any term more precise than *hand* in ll. 984-87, most

translators seize on this rare opportunity to create some morphological distance between Grendel and the human characters in the poem. Thus, J.R. Clark Hall mentions “nails,” “claw,” and “monstrous spikes” in ll. 984-87. Francis B. Gummere’s influential rendering similarly includes “nails,” “hand-spear,” and “claw,” whereas Donaldson’s gives “nail-places,” “hand-spurs,” and “monstrous spikes.” Howell D. Chickering, Jr. remarks on Grendel’s “socketed nail,” “hand-spike,” and “giant war-claw” in his normally stolid facing-page edition; R.M. Liuzza gives “nail,” “heathen talons,” and “terrible spikes.” And Heaney’s rather loose rendering carpet bombs the passage with “nail,” “claw-scale,” “spur,” “spike,” and “welt.”⁶

More recently, visual images have begun to make a greater impact on our understanding of Grendel, whether we like it or not. Leonard Baskin’s etchings of Grendel are influential—appearing in Burton Raffel’s well-received translation and even as the cover image on Robert E. Bjork’s and John D. Niles’s *A Beowulf Handbook*. Baskin depicts Grendel as a stout creature sporting a number of globular growths. The arms (especially the upper right shoulder), torso, and thighs look as if they are covered with a crab-like exoskeleton. This, along with the reptilian four-digit claws and tail poking out from behind the left thigh, suggests the growths might be stylized depictions of scales.⁷ Baskin also shrouds the face in darkness, leaving only negative space for his eyes and obscuring any details of ears, nose, or mouth. Charles Keeping’s ink wash illustration, which appears in Kevin Crossley-Holland’s translation, gives a very different picture. Keeping renders Grendel a lank, shambling monster perched atop a marshy knoll with long hair and white eyes. The mouth seems shrunken and concave, as if Grendel’s teeth had rotted out of his gums. The nose is largely absent, with what remains

resembling the nasal cavity of a human skull and suggesting the undead nature of a revenant or *draugr*.

In his 2007 film adaptation, Robert Zemeckis creates a thoroughly modern, computer-generated Grendel. His monster is grotesquely misshapen: bulbous ears are set far back from the face, and the lower jaw is so malformed that the mouth opens on the right side of the face instead of at the center. The skin on his right bicep has pulled away, exposing the musculature beneath in a way that evokes not demons or *draugar*, but the decomposing undead in modern films like George Romero's *Living Dead* series.

Illustrations and film adaptations, while certainly not adding to the scholarly conversation about Grendel, nevertheless impact us and contribute to the symbolic complex about which I have been writing because they are so vivid. They produce images that come to us prepackaged, and whereas some of us are irritated or disappointed when we see them (because they do not meet our own mental images), there are others for whom Keeping's wraithlike depiction or Zemeckis's zombified Grendel will be the image that appears when they read *Beowulf*.

Mental images are not reserved for undergraduate readers or laypeople. Sometimes they are identifiable in the work of well known critics; these latent mental images, granted, do not contribute to the symbolic complex for most, but certainly affect the way other scholars think about Grendel.⁸ E.D. Laborde, for example, argues that Grendel's resistance to weapons is not due to enchantment but to some sort of armored skin. Taking l. 990, in which the Danes agree that his *beadufolme* is impervious to any sword, and extending it to the whole body, Laborde imagines a thick hide that he believes is in keeping with Grendel's "connexion to a bear" in analogous tales (203).⁹

More recently, John D. Niles seems to assume a hirsute Grendel, a reading unsupported by the text. Comparing our monster to two images from the eleventh-century MS Cotton Tiberius B.v, he observes similarities between the pair of anthropophagic giants and Grendel. Niles carefully avoids any claim as to a direct connection, but he nonetheless opines that one of the images is “perhaps the best indication we have as to how Grendel was imagined by an audience of Anglo-Saxons” (15). We cannot, of course, know just how closely Niles thought the two images reflected Grendel’s morphology, but he seems to accept that he had a hair-covered body and human facial features. I have already expressed my misgivings about imagining Grendel’s face to look much like a human one, so I will here only comment that nowhere does the poem indicate hair on his body except on his head. In light of these two unsupported traits, we are probably right to agree with Lapidge when he rejects Niles’s connection on the grounds that the poem suppresses most of Grendel’s morphological details (393).

It is puzzling, then, that Lapidge would essentially fall into that same blind alley when he asserts that analogues to Scandinavian *draugar* such as Ögmundr and Glámr mean “the *Beowulf*-poet must in the first instance have conceived Grendel in terms of an Old Norse *draugr*, an ‘undead man’ or ‘ghost’ or ‘zombi,’ a dead man who had not been properly buried and therefore became an animated corpse able to haunt the living” (375). True, he stresses the unknowable elements of Grendel’s anatomy as they function to inspire horror, but Lapidge nevertheless tags the *draugr*, a reanimated corpse that often is blue and stinks of its own decaying flesh, as the original template for Grendel—in

essence filling in much of the physical detail that the *Beowulf*-poet strategically omits (377).¹⁰

Assumptions like those made by Laborde, Niles, and Lapidge are not particular to them, but are instead reflective of criticism in general. Those underlying mental images may influence our own in subtle ways: they may shape the sort of questions we ask about Grendel, close off avenues of inquiry, and open up others that are not necessarily productive for the academic conversation focused on him. They allow room for a scholar to declare that Grendel and his mother are “clearly more human than beast” or that he “*looks like* the cannibals of the *mirabilia* tradition” (Mellinkoff 151, Blurton 38). What critics, translators, filmmakers, and illustrators create is a symbolic complex. This also means readers (including those critics, translators, filmmakers, and illustrators) do not see Grendel as he is when they read *Ða se ellengæst earfoðlice / þrage gepolde, se þe in þystrum bad*, but, as Percy puts it, “that which has already been formulated” (l. 86-87, Percy 47). In one way, this is unavoidable, for Grendel is not something observable like the Grand Canyon; he was created in a poetic work which makes much use of symbolic language, so it seems fitting that we should approach him through a symbolic complex. This is true, but we usually see the critic’s or the translator’s symbolic complex, not the one crafted by the *Beowulf*-poet. It is the first-order symbolic complex of Grendel’s morphology—that which is produced by description, allusion, and selection—with which this study is interested.

As is fitting with the conceit of a negative blazon and the importance placed on the semiotic function of physical traits, that symbolic context is a tissue of figurative references. Already subtle, its identification and analysis are made more difficult by our

temporal and cultural separation, and by the more recent symbolic complexes that have been thrown up in front of it. Nevertheless, it is at least partly recoverable. What follows, in both this chapter and that which follows, is a narrow examination of specific morphological traits possessed by Grendel, a formal study of each trait and its monstrous properties.

Giants: Size Does (Not) Matter

Giants have been a part of mythical and literary history almost as far back as our records go, their appearances exhibiting an array of types. Beloved, damned, terrifying, comic, libidinous, proudly celibate, they may be green or blue, Saracens or cynocephali.¹¹ With such an exciting and diverse field, giants have rightly garnered their fair share of critical attention. Describing them as members of a race “of much greater stature than the mass of mankind” who are “dedicatedly, unremittingly evil,” Walter Stephens argues that, until the later Middle Ages, giants inhabited a relatively stable position that was antisocial, criminal, and chaotic (96, 3). David Williams, on the other hand, interprets these creatures, “extreme of size,” as figures that midwife the birth of a negative theology and epistemology via their dissimilitude and resistance to signification (*Deformed Discourse* 113, 33). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen characterizes the giant physically as “a body enlarged to the point at which the familiar human figure becomes estranged” (“Giants”). Because they are so large, he argues elsewhere, we must abandon our human frame of reference for “an inhuman, transcendent point of view” in order to fully comprehend them (*Of Giants* xiii). But giants are linked to the human, and Cohen reads them as hybrids: unsettlingly human but somehow inhuman, always the Other yet always implicated in the founding of the human definition.

All three readings of giants honor their variation and complexity, but they expend much greater energy discussing what giants mean (ungodly evil, enablers of negative theology, examples of Lacanian *extimaté*) instead of what they are. The reason, I think, is that literary and mythological records show a distinct lack of interest in the body of the giant, especially when it comes to size: “we have to settle,” Mellinkoff notes, “for something larger than ‘normal’ at one end of the range and as large and varied as fancy desires at the other end” (149, n. 3). Goliath, for example, was *altitudinis sex cubitorum et palmo* [six cubits and a span] (1 Sam. 17.4).¹² Translated into imperial units, this is about nine and a half feet, which hardly forces us to follow Cohen in abandoning the human scale to think about the Philistine. On the other hand, Ymir in the Icelandic question-answer poem, *Vafþrúðnismál*, does demand such a shift in thinking:

Out of Ymir’s flesh was fashioned the earth,
And the mountains were made of his bones;
The sky from the frost-cold giant’s skull,
And the ocean out of his blood. (Bellows §21)

Literally embodying the earth and the heavens, Ymir must be considered in geological or cosmological terms. Highlighted by the difference between a nine-and-a-half-foot-tall Goliath and an Icelandic giant whose bones are the stuff of mountains is the incredible range of size available within the category “giant.”

Both Lotte Motz and Riti Kroesen take this point to its logical conclusion, arguing that Germanic giants are not necessarily defined by their size.¹³ In her “Giants in Folklore and Mythology,” Motz culls scores of examples from the *eddas* that show other attributes such as “wisdom, age, animal shape, strangeness of features, and relation to cold and ice” are sometimes deemed more important—so important that the character’s

size is often entirely omitted (73). Kroesen concurs with Motz's general argument, writing that giants "are not always of tall stature" (58).

What these varying characteristics give us is a sense that Germanic writers had little concern with any consistent depiction of giants' size. At times, they are much larger than the Æsir: for example, in Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*, Thor passes a comfortable evening in the glove of the giant Skrímir, having taken it for a hall.¹⁴ His later efforts to bash in the giant's head in with the magical hammer, Mjöltnir, only serve to awaken Skrímir, who mistakes the powerful strokes for acorns or twigs falling on him from an oak tree.¹⁵ At other times, however, Scandinavian giants seem to be close in size to both human beings and the Æsir: unlike his futile efforts in the *Gylfaginning*, Thor wields his hammer with great success in the *Þrymskviða*, killing Þrymr and the rest of the giants in attendance.¹⁶ A correlation in size is also suggested by the sexual themes running through these tales, which are discussed at length by Kroesen (64-66). In the *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, for instance, the Norwegian prince Helgi kills a giant and is subsequently threatened by his daughter, the giantess Hrímgærðr, unless the young warrior becomes her mate.¹⁷ (He refuses and delays her long enough for the sun to turn her to stone.) In the *Þrymskviða*, Thor is disguised as Freyja and promised to Þrymr, the king of the giants, for the return of Mjöltnir; the giant is so taken with the idea of sleeping with Freyja that he attempts to kiss her and has the hammer laid in Thor's lap to fulfill the marriage vow. Sexual congress demands some sort of equality in size, so Þrymr and Hrímgærðr cannot be giants on the same physical order as chthonic and cosmological Ymir.

In the Latin Christian tradition, Williams reminds us that “the nature of giants in the [Christian] tradition depended less on their physical size than on the immensity of their evil, and they are represented as ordinary creatures, though bigger than usual” (*Cain and Beowulf* 44). One textual example supporting his point is found in the illuminated Old English Hexateuch (Genesis) of MS Cotton Claudius B.iv. On f. 12v appears a double-paneled image: the left frame shows a group of people talking, with the figures on the left appearing about half as tall again as those on the right, while the other frame shows men and women, all of the same height, embracing.¹⁸ Beneath this illustration is a translation of Genesis 6.4: *Entas wæron eac swylce ofer eorðan on ðam dagum æfter ðan ðe godes bearn tymdon wið manna dohtra 7 hi cendon ða synd mihtige fram worulde* [giants were also on the earth in those days [and] after when [the sons] of God begat and produced offspring with the daughters of man: they are the mighty [ones] of old]. What the left frame shows, then, is the biblical Nephilim who lived before the Flood, but it shows them far less than the towering giants that appear in Numbers 13.33.¹⁹

Stephens identifies the same downplaying of size in later Continental thought, specifically Dante’s *Inferno*. As Virgil leads Dante through the circles of Hell, the latter asks to see Briareus, one of the Hecatonchires who took part in the Titanomachy.

Virgil’s answer leads Stephens to the following conclusion:

When Dante expresses a desire to see Briareus, Virgilio’s response again coincides with traditional lore by implicitly asserting the Giant’s harmonious physical proportion. Dante’s reference to Briareus as *smisurato* and his implied desire to see the Giant’s fabled hundred hands provoke Virgilio’s declaration that even Briareus, though huge and fierce, is a normally proportioned “hominid” like Ephialtes. . . . Since Ephialtes is two-armed (31.87), Virgilio effectively denies that any Giants, even Briareus, were ever physiologically deformed. Their inhumanity or monstrosity was to some extent a matter of size, but only insofar as size affected their temperament. Much later, when Dante gets his wish to see

Briareus, he sees that Briareus's "monstrosity," like that of Nimrod, is portrayed anthropometrically: his inhumanity was a matter of psychological and intellectual, rather than physical proportion, a pride which made him both evil and stupid. (69-70)

Like Williams, Stephens sees a softening of physiognomic interpretations of giants in the European Middle Ages. This is especially interesting since at this time Jews and Muslims—two groups who were considered enemies of the Church but with whom European Christians had interaction—were depicted in increasingly negative physiognomic terms.²⁰ If known peoples were shown as bestial, deformed, or uncommonly dark-skinned, should we not expect biblical giants—who were sufficiently evil to provoke God's wrath—to be depicted with physical markers? Instead, Dante seems more interested in showing them to be stupid, prideful creatures. Taken with the Anglo-Saxon visual examples and the Scandinavian evidence, this demands that we at least consider the assertions that 1) enormous size was not a prerequisite for gigantism and 2) the naming of a creature as a giant was often more efficient a marker than actually depicting it with a huge stature.

Grendel's Gigantism: A Thought Experiment

The loose connection between the status as giant and actual gigantism is a crucial element with regard to Grendel's morphology. His size does not remain constant throughout the narrative: at moments he is only slightly larger than Beowulf and at others single body parts are larger than a grown man. Unlike Cai's ability to change his size in *Culhwch and Olwen*, Grendel's inconsistent height does not seem to be a conscious addition to his character.²¹ Rather, the monster's stature is *ad hoc*, shrinking and expanding in accordance to particular narrative demands. The poet does not appear to have a clear idea of how big Grendel actually is and does not seem to care. This suggests

that he does not deem this morphological aspect to be particularly important. As with the heroes discussed by Hill, the importance of Grendel's gigantism lies in the negative connotations traditionally associated with giants. The poet is more concerned with calling his monster a giant and connecting him to a cluster of negative traditions than with a consistent portrayal of his size.

Epithets and clues pointing to Grendel's gigantism are not lacking, but it is significant that the first time we get an actual morphological description of his gigantism is over 1300 lines into the poem and long after he has ceased to play an active part in it. Following Beowulf's victory over Grendel and his mother's later revenge attack, Hrothgar finally reveals something about the monster's size: *oðer earmsceapen / on weres wæstmum wræclastas træd, / næfne he wæs mara þonne ænig man oðer* [the other, created to suffer, trod the paths of exile in human form, except he was larger than any other man] (ll. 1349-53). This is the first—and only—direct description of Grendel's size, and it is the evidence to which *Beowulf* scholars invariably point when they discuss his gigantism. Hrothgar tells us that Grendel is large, even bigger than Beowulf, but his statement is impressively vague.²² Grendel may be larger than any other man, but a monster nine feet tall or ninety feet tall fulfills this description.

Clues as to Grendel's size are present in the narrative, and they do provide more detailed information, but they also present a confusing and inconsistent picture of the monster. This is best illustrated by a sort of thought experiment in which we attempt a realistic reconstruction of Grendel's gigantism as it appears at different points in the poem. In his first narrated appearance, Grendel is big enough and strong enough to destroy parts of Heorot with ease:

duru sona onarn
fyrbendum fæst, syþðan he hire folmum (æt)hran;
onbræd þa bealohydig, ða (he ge)bolgen wæs,
recedes muþan.

[the door, strong with forged iron, immediately burst open as soon as he touched it with his hands; intending destruction, he, who was enraged, pulled it wide open, the mouth of the hall.] (ll. 721-24)

The generally accepted (but not undisputed) interpretation of this passage is expressed by Stanley B. Greenfield, who argues that “the first half of the sentence depicts the door as made fast with fire-forged bands, an image of strength and hardness defying entrance; by the time Grendel is finished, it is reduced, as it were, to a soft mouth, an easily-forced point of entry” (“The Canons...” 152). That is, *fyrbendum* refers to iron bars whose purpose was to keep the outer doors of the hall closed; Grendel was strong enough to burst them open despite the reinforcing iron bands holding them shut.²³ In this passage, then, Grendel is powerful and enormous—so much so that he can burst open the barred doors with merely a touch (*(æt)hran*).

The next part of the passage, however, marks the first spot of trouble for our hypothetical realist interpretation. It indicates that Grendel is not some towering, geologic giant in the mold of Ymir, for he can fit comfortably inside Heorot. Line 725 functions as a limiter for the monster’s size: *on fagne flor feond treddode* [the enemy trod onto the gleaming floor] demands that Grendel be small enough not only to enter the hall, but also to maneuver once inside. Grand though it may be, Hrothgar’s hall was designed with humans in mind, and the walking and thrashing about that Grendel does in his last hours require no little room to move. They also demand that we think of him—at least at this point in the narrative—as a giant on the order of Goliath.

If we take the long halls at Cheddar and Yeavinger as models for the interior dimensions of Heorot, we can get a sense of the upper limits of Grendel's size here. The main hall at Cheddar is thought to have been approximately seventy-five feet by fifteen feet; the long-house at Yeavinger complex was of similar length (about eighty-two feet) but was considerably wider at thirty-nine feet (Rahtz 99, Hope-Taylor 129-30).²⁴ No height estimates are to be found for the Yeavinger hall, but it must have been a towering construction since the post-holes dug for load-bearing beams run seven feet into the earth (Hope-Taylor 58). For the Cheddar site, we do have height estimates: the long long-house is thought to have had walls approximately thirteen feet tall (Rahtz 106). The building was a two-story affair, which would have also put the first-floor ceiling height at thirteen feet (since the joists supporting the second floor would have run along the top ends of the wall beams).

Although Rosemary Cramp has elsewhere argued that Heorot was multi-storied, we can afford to be overly generous and assume that Heorot had an area in keeping with the largest known Anglo-Saxon structures, but consisted of only a single story.²⁵ Imagining Heorot without a second floor would leave the gable open and give additional height to the interior (perhaps fifteen more feet), giving us an interior height of about twenty-eight feet and an interior area about the size of a regulation tennis court.²⁶ Such is the space in which we would have to picture Grendel moving about and fighting; it also gives us a maximum height estimate of twenty-eight feet.

In the next few lines, the poet disregards his setting, and Grendel's size drastically changes. After he bursts into Heorot and steps into the room, he grows again and is able to completely consume Hondscio in moments, a telling clue as to his size at this point (ll.

739-45). To eat 190 pounds (or more) in moments—over twice the average daily intake of a 700-pound brown bear—Grendel would have to be enormous. Furthermore, the act of eating Hondscio that quickly dictates a certain size: anatomically, Grendel would have to be enormous just to get 190 pounds of *anything* into his mouth and down his throat in such a short time span.

When Grendel meets Beowulf, however, he seems to shrink back to a smaller size. As they wrestle, Beowulf is able to gain the advantage with a sort of hammerlock and finally rip the monster's arm off. Such a fight, if Grendel remained the size he was when he smashed open Heorot's doors and devoured Hondscio, would be impossible. The physics of the battle are off because not only would he far outweigh Beowulf, but he also would not lose his arm since there is no way any human being would have enough mass to keep his feet—no matter how strong he might have been.²⁷ Grendel could simply have fled with Beowulf in tow, but the loss of his arm strongly suggests that he has returned to a smaller size.

Once Grendel returns to his underground lair, he again seems to return to his initial large size. After Beowulf decapitates his corpse and returns to the surface with the monster's head, the Geats struggle to carry Beowulf's prize: *feower scoldon / on þæm wælstenge weorcum geferian / to þæm goldsele Grendles heafod* [four were needed to carry—with difficulty—Grendel's head on a pole to the gold-hall] (ll. 1637-39). These mighty warriors, hand-picked by Beowulf, are not physically weak. Yet four of them struggle to transport a single head, even with the use of a pole on which to hang it. Obviously, Grendel's head is many, many times larger than that of an average human being, so he has returned to his giant size.²⁸

What is, I think, highlighted by this (at times absurd) thought experiment is that the depiction of Grendel is completely unrealistic because changes back and forth from an incredibly large creature to one that is closer to a human frame of reference. The shifting stature within the text is good evidence that the poet had in mind a loose relationship between Grendel's physical morphology and his status as a giant.

Grendel and the Traditions of Giants

As Hill concludes in his analysis of the heroic body, the overall emphasis in bodily representation is toward signification. This at least partly explains the *Beowulf*-poet's disinterest in a coherent depiction of Grendel's size. It also explains why he makes allusive connections between his monster and the medieval traditions of giants: by introducing the negative connotations of both Germanic and Latin Christian traditions, *Beowulf* illustrates the Anglo-Saxon tendency to emphasize the tenor of the metaphor far more than the vehicle. For the poet, the meaning of Grendel's gigantism is a much more effective symbol of monstrosity than his actual morphology.

If the poet did not give Grendel much in the way of description, the same cannot be said of epithets. There are at least seven references—either direct or allusive—that link Grendel to a tradition of giants. Most obviously, he is called a giant three times: in ll. 112 and 761 he is called an *eoten*, and in l. 426 he is called a *þyrs*. Line 668, in which Beowulf keeps *eotenweard* [giant-watch], links Grendel to the *eotenas* in a less direct manner. The excursus on Cain and the fate of his lineage in ll. 104-13 contains the final three references. As a kinsman of Cain, Grendel is genealogically related to *gigantas*. For a monster with no father, we know more about his (decidedly ignominious) ancestry than we do about Scyld's.

These seven references, however, have not always given a clear picture. “Anyone with as many names as Grendel,” Raymond Tripp has observed, “must surely have had identity problems” (43). Indeed, the epithets that link Grendel and giants have been difficult for some critics because they connect him to two traditions that at the time remained largely distinct. For giants in the Latin Christian tradition, the terms *gigantas* and *gigas* were reserved, though Germanic terms might be used as well.²⁹ The Latin words, on the other hand, were never used to refer to the giants of the Norse tradition; they are referred to exclusively by terms with Germanic origins—usually *eoten*, *ent*, *eten*, and *þyrs*. Obviously, the traditions are disparate, and understanding their relative importance for Grendel has sometimes been difficult, largely because the critics have seen them as competing traditions instead of complementary ones. Those who have studied the Latin Christian tradition (such as Mellinkoff, Margaret Goldsmith, and Stephen Bandy) and its impact on Grendel have at times had trouble reconciling some of the Germanic elements of his gigantism with their Robertsonian bent. Likewise, the scholars studying the monster’s Germanic aspects (such as Nora Chadwick and Kroesen) have mostly ignored the Christian tradition.³⁰

What is seemingly lost in this debate is what J.R.R. Tolkien recognized in the poem over three quarters of a century ago: it is a Prattian “contact zone” between Germanic paganism and Latin Christianity.³¹ The comingling of both traditions, he argues, is not “confusion, a half-hearted or a muddled business, but a fusion that has occurred at *a given point* of contact between old and new, a product of thought and deep emotion” (262). That is, because the Anglo-Saxon world—and especially *Beowulf*—was

such an amalgam of Christian and Germanic traditions, it should be no surprise that Grendel's gigantism reflects both influences.

The Latin Christian tradition of giants has garnered more critical attention, but it is actually less obvious than the Germanic, so we will begin with it. The first indication that Grendel is connected to biblical giants comes in ll. 104-14, in which he seems to be included in their lineage:

*fifecynes eard
wonsæli wer weardode hwile,
siþðan him scyppen forscriften hæfde
in Caines cynne —þone cwealm gewræc
ece drihten, þæs þe he Abel slog;
ne gefeah he þære fæhðe, ac he hine feor forwræc,
metod for þy mane mancynne fram.
þanon untydras ealle onwocon,
eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas,
swylce gi(ga)ntas, þa wið Gode wunnon
lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald.*

[in the abode of monsters the unfortunate man lived some while, after the Creator had condemned him, among the kin of Cain: that murder the eternal Lord avenged because he slew Abel. He gained no joy by that hostile act, but God banished him far away from mankind for that sin. From him all monsters arose, giants and elves and creatures of the deep, also the giants who strove against God for a long time; He gave retribution for that.]

There is much happening in this characteristically dense passage, and the allusions are sometimes subtle. First, Grendel is introduced as a foe of the Danes who has lived for some unspecified amount of time among monsters after God had judged him. A careful reading shows that the text does not say that Grendel *is* the kin of Cain—only that he lives among the various monsters that have sprung from Cain's line. The link between the two is only later made clear in ll. 1257-67:

*Grendles modor,
ides aglæcwif yrmpe gemunde,
se þe wætereges an wunian scolde,*

*cealde streamas, siþðan Cain wearð
to ecgbanan angan breþer,
fæderenmæge; he þa fag gewat,
morþre gemearcod mandream fleon,
westen warode. Panon woc fela
geosceaftgasta; wæs þæra Grendel sum,
heorowearh hetelic,*

[Grendel's mother, fierce lady-assailant, had misery in mind, she who had to inhabit the terrible water, cold streams, after Cain became the sword-slayer for his only brother, kinsman; he who, outlawed [and] marked by murder, went to flee human joy, lived in the wastes. From him were born many demons sent by fate; Grendel was one of them, hateful outcast.]

In these lines, Grendel is directly connected to Cain: living out his days in the uninhabited wastelands, the first fratricide produces many “demons.” As a part of this unhappy family, Grendel is then directly linked to Cain and, therefore, the monsters in the earlier passage.

The remainder of ll. 104-14 is actually not about Grendel at all, but Cain and his monstrous progeny, which are subdivided into specific categories. The term *fifelcynnes*, referring to the tribe with whom Grendel lives, is often taken to mean simply “monsters,” and Bosworth and Toller list it as such. However, this compound is found exclusively in *Beowulf*, and *fifel* is not well attested in the Old English corpus: it appears just five times, almost always as part of a compound.³² Carlson and Thalia Phillis Feldman argue that the medieval Icelandic cognate, *fífl* (“fool, clown, boor” according to Richard Cleasby), is the most important etymological influence on *fifelcynnes*. We should, according to both, conclude that Grendel is associated with a race of fools and brutes and, therefore, read him as uncultured and unlettered (Carlson 360, Feldman 74). The etymology here seems sound, but the attestations of the word in Old English do not necessarily support such a reading. Its appearance in the second fragment of *Waldhere* is ambivalent at best; *ðurh fifela gew[e]ald forð onette* [through the land of monsters/brutes/fools went forth] could

mean any number of things, though in some ways it echoes the *eotenas* among whom Heremod dies (l. 10). Where the term appears in *Elene*, the *Meters of Boethius*, and *Widsith*, however, it refers to water (*fifelwæge*, *fifelstream*, and *fifeldor*), so foolish would not apply.³³

On the other hand, *fifel* is thought by some to be yet another connection to giants. Francis A. Wood lists the Old Norse *fifl* and the rare compound *fimbol-fambi* (“mighty fool”) as cognate (235). For these he posits the base **pemp-* and its synonyms **pompn-* / **pomb-* which are connected to the Danish *fomp*, meaning “thickset person” as evidence. Wood’s etymology is strained, but connotatively his connection makes sense since large size and stupidity are two of the common characteristics of Scandinavian *jötmar*. Some element of gigantism in *fifelcynnes* also seems to fit with the context of the *Beowulf* passage since two different terms for giants are used in the following lines. However, we would be wise not to push our meager evidence too far, for the attestations of *fifel* in Old English are neither numerous nor clear enough to make a decision between “giant” or “brute”—and in any case, Grendel’s identity as a giant does not stand or fall with this single word.

Ylfe refers to elves, and the term appears in a number of forms in the corpus—usually in leechbooks and charms. Ten appearances exist in the compound *ælfþone* (elf’s nightshade); four in *ælfside* (elf’s influence/nightmare); and two each in *ælfsoða* (a disease brought on by elves and their control of the individual), *ælfadl* (disease caused by the influence of elves), *æflscot/ ylfescot* (elf-shot), and *ylfing* (mad, frantic, possibly affected by elves).³⁴ These texts also contain references in general to elves (*ælf*, *ælfcynn*, and *ylf*).³⁵

The strange compound *ælfsciene* [elfin beauty] occurs twice in the Old English *Genesis* where it refers to Sara; here it denotes beauty, perhaps a charming or disarming kind of beauty.³⁶ Though most of the previous instances of the term *ælf/ylfe* are negative or neutral, this instance of a positive connotation lends further credence to Alaric Hall's theories about the development of the concept throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. He argues that early in the Anglo-Saxon period, elves were thought to be human in appearance and that, although they were thought to be outside the normal, natural world, they did not exist in opposition to human beings the way giants and other monsters did (174). For Hall, then, *Beowulf* is an innovative text since it is the earliest textual evidence we have of a connection between elves and monsters like giants and demons (54). Nevertheless, he does conclude that *Beowulf* depicts the *ylfe* in a negative light, and while they may or may not have retained their near-human form in the poet's and audience's minds, they are certainly nothing like those seen in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy or commercials for crackers.

Orcneas occurs only once in the Old English corpus and is taken by Bosworth and Toller to denote a sea monster. They speculate that it might be a cognate of the Old Norse *örkn* ("seal," according to Cleasby), which is likely why they connect it to water. This is a possibility: the Icelandic connection to seals is reminiscent of the *nicors* fought by Beowulf during his swimming match and the sea-monsters in Grendel's mere, and such a connotation would jibe with the aquatic connotations of *fifelcynnes* and the cold streams references in l. 1263. Others such as Dobbie, Richard Jente, Willy Krogmann, and Johannes Hoops go to great lengths to link the term to Orcus, the Latin equivalent of Hades's dark and wrathful side.³⁷ There is some reason for this since the term *orcþyrs* is

glossed as *heldeofol Orcus* in MS Cotton Cleopatra A.iii (Wright 459). That being said, there is little firm evidence for either of these explanations. *Pace* Tom Burns Haber, there is no direct classical influence or reference in the poem—a point against Orcus being etymologically linked with *orcneas*.³⁸ Likewise, there has been no etymological work done on the connection between ON *örkn* and OE *orcneas*; until there is, to suggest it would be mere speculation. Thus, I have chosen the rather milquetoast translation of “creatures of the deep” which fulfills the connotative demands of both possible explanations.

Terms such as *fifelcynnes*, *ylfe*, and *orcneas* certainly set the context for the two words that first denote Grendel’s gigantism: *eotenas* and *gigantas*. Translators have often combined the two or elided one of them because they make for awkward modern English translations, but they are not synonyms. In Anglo-Saxon thought, they have very different connotations because they come into the language from different traditions. As Oliver F. Emerson first pointed out in 1906, the poet distinguishes between Germanic monsters (*eotenas*, *ylfe*, and possibly *orcneas*) on the one hand and biblical giants on the other (879). Bandy further argues that the poet distinguishes between the traditions in order “to stay within scriptural limits by restricting *gigant* to the race which perished in the Deluge” (240). He goes on to say that the poet interwove the two via the giant sword Beowulf uses to kill Grendel’s mother—an *ealdsweord eotenisc* that tells of the biblical Flood (l. 1558).³⁹ With respect to Grendel’s dual-citizenship, as it were, Bandy’s reading ultimately fails to combine the two traditions: because they are joined via a sword owned by the Grendelkin and not in the person of Grendel himself, their de facto separation remains.⁴⁰

A better, though still problematic, argument is made by Cohen, who agrees with Bandy and Emerson that the Germanic and Christian traditions are purposefully separated. He thinks, however, that the poet distinguishes the traditions in order to again join them in the person of Grendel—an “easy mingling,” which “characterizes the Anglo-Saxon giant” (“Old English...” 4). Cohen is here preoccupied with separating these traditions, with carving out pieces of Grendel as either Christian or Germanic. Such an approach forces him into an unsatisfying conclusion:

this combination of disparate giant lore leaves a fog of ambiguity (overdetermination) lingering around Grendel and his mother, for they are tied to so many different traditions at once that it becomes impossible to say exactly what has influenced their creation most. (“Old English...” 24)

The problem here is not with Cohen’s analysis, but with his ultimate goal. If we seek to divine which tradition had the greater influence on Grendel’s character, then the allusions and epithets do turn into a confusing morass. If, however, we examine the symbolic dimensions of Grendel’s gigantism (with which the poet is more interested), then the allusions and epithets make much more sense. In ll. 112-13, the poet separates the Germanic *eotenas* from the Latin Christian *gigantas*, but in the same move combines them into the overarching category of *fifelcynnes* and, ultimately, Grendel.⁴¹

The Latin Christian Tradition

Although Cohen contends that the “medieval Latin and the Norse traditions of giants are not radically dissimilar” and that “both are capable of embodying the same negative attributes,” a close look at these two traditions shows this to be inaccurate (“Old English...” 8). *Gigantas* or one of its forms (*gigas*, *gigans*) occurs sixty-one times in the Old English corpus where it overwhelmingly refers to biblical giants, though there are uses of it to refer to classical figures like Mercury.⁴² The scriptural basis for the Old

English *gigantas* seems to be Genesis 6.4, which was of interest not only to those Jewish exegetical writers examined by Mellinkoff, but also Church Fathers like Augustine.⁴³ In the biblical text, we are told: *gigantes autem erant super terram in diebus illis postquam enim ingressi sunt filii Dei ad filias hominum illaque genuerunt isti sunt potentes a saeculo viri famosi* [giants were upon the earth in those days, for afterwards the sons of God went among the daughters of men and they gave birth; those were the mighty ones of old, famous men]. These *gigantes* are the Nephilim, the inhabitants of Canaan against whom Moses sent Joshua as a spy and *quibus comparati quasi locustae videbamur* [to whom we seemed as locusts in comparison] (Num. 13.33).

Many interpretations of Genesis 6.4 lay the blame for giants on miscegenation: the mating of the *filii Dei* and the *filiae hominum*. Drawing from thinkers like Hugh of Saint-Cher, Cassiodorus, and Augustine, Stephens explains how the connection was made by late classical and medieval commentators:

“it was thus possible to read Gen. 6.1-7 as a sequence of related events: the ‘sons of God’ fornicated with the ‘daughters of men’; the Giants came into being; God was offended both by the fornication and by the evil the Giants had committed, and thus decided to destroy the world.” (76)

They are born of sinful sexual congress between distinct groups, but they also go on to commit their own sins against God and his wishes. As Niilo Peltola reminds us, however, there is nothing in the biblical text explicitly depicting the Nephilim—or the offspring of the *filii Dei* and the *filiae hominum*—as evil (286, 288). Instead, subtle details invited the exegetes to read giants not only as a product of miscegenation, but also as evil in deed. First and foremost, their nature is implied by their name: “the word *nēpīlīm* is a passive adjectival construction from the dynamic root *npl*, ‘to fall.’ It means literally, ‘ones who are fallen’” (Hendel 21). Obviously, all of humanity is fallen in

Christian theology, but because the Nephilim (via their direct descendants the Nephilim, sons of Anak in Num. 13.33) are in direct conflict with the Israelites, we should think of them as rather worse off than Noah, the members of the Twelve Tribes or *Beowulf*'s Anglo-Saxon audience.

One reason the Nephilim were considered morally inferior, at least in the Christian traditions, is that “they were alienated from God” (Clemoes 29). If we have read our Augustine, we know what the *Beowulf*-poet likely knew: the only way to be alienated from God is through sin—and one of the root causes of their sinfulness was their pride. Herbert Marks provides a useful explanation of the logic behind connecting biblical giants to pride:

However we understand the mythical Nephilim or “fallen ones” in Gen 6:1-4, the concluding phrase “men of renown” (אֲנָשֵׁי הַשֵּׁם, 6:4, literally, “the men of name”) places the whole idea of *nomen-omen* under critical scrutiny. Perhaps the unspecified “evil” that causes YHWH to condemn his creation (6:5) may be referred back to this epithet no less than to the effects of cosmic miscegenation. “To make oneself a name” will recur as the topos of illicit presumption for the would-be “mighty men” who build the tower of Babel. (29)

To be a mighty man, or even to strive to be one, may not seem like a sin of pride (especially if we remember *Beowulf*'s biography). However, the ancient Hebrew context in which this interpretation of the Nephilim took shape was quite different. The Jews of the Exodus were not mighty, and that was the point. God provided for them as long as they turned to Him and recognized their own weakness relative to those already dwelling in Canaan. Like classical hubris, pride is blamed for much of the strife in biblical accounts. It causes Cain to question God's judgment, causes Satan to attempt to put his throne above God's, causes Nimrod to build his tower toward Heaven, and causes the Nephilim to resist God's will and God's people.

R.E. Kaske observes that Judeo-Christian traditions—which survived in non-canonical works—were more specific as to the sins the giants were supposed to have committed. Enoch I’s explanation that “when men could no longer sustain them, the giants turned against them and devoured mankind. And they began to sin against birds, and beasts, and reptiles, and fish, and to devour one another’s flesh, and drink the blood” gives a clear sense of the sinfulness of the giants, but it goes on to tell us that “the spirits of the giants afflict, oppress, destroy, attack, do battle, and work destruction on the earth, and cause trouble” (qtd. in Kaske 424, 425). Although he wisely avoids making any claims for direct influence of Enoch I on *Beowulf*, Kaske does think the similarities suggest that it helped create “the cosmos assumed by the poet” (431). In looking for the sinfulness of biblical giants as part of Grendel’s persona, we are on firmer ground than Kaske, for its understanding pervaded later works such as the pseudepigraphal Book of Jubilees, the apocryphal Greek *Acts of Andrew and Matthew*, the homilies of Pseudo-Clement, and the *Chronicle* of Georgius Syncellus and St Theophanes (Kaske 424, n. 12). That is, theological understandings of the giants of Genesis 6.4 was so widespread when *Beowulf* was composed that it might have been more surprising for its influence not to be found in the poem and representation of Grendel.

Bastard sons, warmongers, anthropophagi, prideful mighty men, fallen ones: the sins of these biblical giants were so terrible in the eyes of Jewish and Christian theologians that they were one of the reasons God despaired of his Creation and sought to wipe it out. Simply put, biblical giants are morally depraved. Originally depicted as such because they opposed the Israelite settlement of Canaan, “in Christian historiography and theology, the Giants of the Pentateuch lost their importance as opponents of a particular

religion and culture, and took on a transcendent role as the archetypal enemies of both human culture and divine authority” (Stephens 73, 75). Such a tradition of sinfulness exerts a strong influence on *Beowulf*, making a prêt-à-porter lineage by which the poet could imply the sinfulness and monstrosity of Grendel merely by connecting him to it through Cain’s family tree.

The Germanic Tradition

As we saw above, l. 112 links Grendel to the *eotenas* by lumping both together into the lineage of Cain. But the link to Germanic giants—through the terms *eoten* and *þyrs*—is much more direct than to their Christian cousins since the epithets are applied directly to Grendel himself. With the term *eoten*, things are relatively clear, the connection between Grendel and Norse giants requiring little explanation. Unlike its etymological cousins *ent* and *eten*, which are commonly used to denote giants in Old English, *eoten* occurs primarily in *Beowulf*. As Chadwick points out, it is a cognate of the Old Norse *jötunn*, the word of choice to denote that class of creatures to which giants such as Ymir, Skrímir, and Þrymr belonged (173). The linguistic connection suggests that connotations associated with the *jötnar* continue into the Old English use of *eoten*. As I will discuss later, the chaotic, chthonic, and isolationist *jötnar* echo through the actions and living conditions of *Beowulf*’s most famous *eoten*.

Þyrs turns out to have a much more complicated link to the Germanic tradition of giants. In its most general sense, it is defined as a giant, but as a cognate of the Old Norse *þurs*, its linguistic history is enmeshed in Scandinavian mythology. Within this context it, according to Cleasby’s *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, denoted “a giant, with a notion of surliness and stupidity.” Motz agrees, pointing to examples in which the

giant Þrymr is outsmarted by Thor and Kaldrani by Ketill, to argue that *þurs* is mostly accorded to a “savage, simple-minded, bumbling ogre who invariably fell before the wit and cunning of a human hero” (“The Families...” 230-32, *passim*). This strong presence in Germanic language and mythology leads Paul Beekman Taylor to declare that “Beowulf’s identification of Grendel as a *þyrs* places the monster into the context of a considerable lore about early Germanic mythological beliefs” (2).

However, the carryover of this particular connotation from Old Norse *þurs* to Old English *þyrs* is not as clear-cut as Taylor would have us believe, for it is doubtful that foolishness was ever a part of the word’s meaning in Old English. Of the twelve instances of *þyrs* in the corpus, none make any clear reference to the referent’s stupidity. In its appearances in the glosses, the term is usually associated with giants in general or classical characters such as Orcus or the Cyclopes; Aldhelm connects it to magicians and snake-charmers. Its other scattered appearances—in a riddle, an entry in *Maxims II*, and in *Beowulf*—require no element of stupidity in the referents.⁴⁴ Perhaps Polyphemus’s foolishness as he declares “No-One” has blinded him can be read into the gloss reference for Cyclopes. We might also argue that Grendel displays some feeble-mindedness when he gleefully and foolishly approaches Heorot, when he blunders into Beowulf’s well planned trap, and when he sacrifices his arm just to get out of the hall. But nowhere does Old English literature display the blatant stupidity of a giant being fooled by the clever hero.⁴⁵ This seems strong evidence against any real persistence of the sort of connotation for *þurs* that Motz finds in Icelandic literature and that Cleasby asserts in his definition.

The Old English *þyrs* does, however, seem to retain a certain sense of the outlaw who lives outside the civilized space. Obviously, Grendel’s abode is a lawless place

where fire burns on water and the hall is below the surface rather than towering above it, but it is also a place largely unknown to the Danes even though it is within their borders: *Nis þæt feor heonon / milgemeances þæt se mere standeð* [It is not far hence, in miles, that the mere stands] (ll. 1361-62). This resonates with the *þyrs* in *Maxims II*, which informs the reader that *þyrs sceal on fenne gewunian / ana innan lande* [the giant shall dwell in the fen, alone in the land] (ll. 42-43). It may also call to mind one of the salient characteristics of Cyclopes; Odysseus, it will be remembered, describes them as “giants, louts, without a law to bless them,” expressing dismay at their primitiveness:

Kyklopêds have no muster and no meeting,
no consultation or old tribal ways,
but each dwells in his own mountain cave
dealing out rough justice to wife and child,
indifferent to what the others do. (Homer 9.113, 120-24)

This isolation, the lack of a *polis*, is a defining characteristic for ancient Greeks, and the motif runs through monstrous figures throughout the Middle Ages—from Malory’s Giant of Mont St Michel to the wild man.

In Icelandic literature, the *jötnar* are a chaotic force just outside the realm of everyday human life. Their homeland, *Jötunheimr*, is a place that functions much the same way the island of the Cyclopes does in the *Odyssey*. There is, in some traditions, a king (Þrymr), but the land is largely non-hierarchical and relies on local power spheres in which each giant deals out his own brand of “rough justice.” Their chaotic, primitive world, however, will not always remain within the bounds of *Jötunheimr*; on rare occasions it spills over into the human world, and it is the giants who will be largely responsible for Ragnarök and the destruction of both the *Æsir* and humanity. It appears,

therefore, that at least one aspect of the *þurs* continues in the Anglo-Saxon use of the term *þyrs*.

To varying degrees, then, both *eoten* and *þyrs* point to a Germanic tradition of giants and evoke a set of characteristics particular to that class of monster. As with the Latin Christian tradition, it is generally not a positive one. The *jötnar*, as observed above, act as the primary antagonists during Ragnarök in both the poetic and prose eddas. In this great battle, the *jötnar* will fight against and kill many of the *Æsir*, the *eldjötnar* will destroy much of the earth with fire, and the calamity will end with an all-encompassing flood from which a better earth will emerge. The *Völuspá* prophesizes that the human population, which is largely irrelevant in both the doings of the *Æsir* and the *jötnar*, will suffer greatly during this time:

Brothers shall fight and fell each other,
And sister's sons shall kinship stain;
Hard is it on earth, with mighty whoredom;
Axe-time, sword-time, shields are sundered,
Wind-time, wolf-time, ere the world falls;
Nor ever shall men each other spare. (Bellows §45)

According to the *Vafþrúðnismál*, humanity will be largely wiped out, and only two human beings, Líf and Lífþrasir, will survive to repopulate the earth (Bellows §45). From a cosmological standpoint, Scandinavian giants are the chaotic counterbalance to the order of the world: out of Ymir's chthonic body was made the earth, and by their hands the earth as it was known would be brought to an end. From a human standpoint, these same giants indifferently cause an inconceivable amount of destruction and human suffering.

The main difference between Germanic and Christian giants is not their morphology or opposition to human civilization, but their *esse*. Christian giants such as

the Genesis *gigantas* are evil simply because they sin and resist the will of God. In Germanic mythology, the dichotomy was not between good and evil, but chaos and order because Germanic religion was decidedly polytheistic. Additionally, the Æsir were not necessarily good. Their spheres of influence cover elements of human life as noble as poetry (Bragi) or fertility (Freyja) and as dark as malicious tricksterism (Loki) or unheroic death (Hel). They are, at times, as dangerous and petty as the gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon: the Æsir all but wiped out the Vanir in a great war, Odin steals from both giants and dwarves, and they trick and intrigue against one another almost ceaselessly. Norse gods were a sort of cosmological ego, the bringers of order to an unordered world. The ordered Æsir are in most ways set against the chaotic, cosmological id that are the *jötnar*—from whom the ordered world was made, who live outside that ordered world in *Jötunheimr*, and who will instigate its ending.

Chaos, not evil, is the forte of Germanic giants. Kroesen summarizes their role as “beings of *chaos*” who were “a perpetual threat to the cosmos, and therefore they were the implacable enemies of gods and men, who had to fight them until the end of creation, when everything and everybody had to perish” (59). With the Latin Christian giants, chaos may be a factor—as with the Nephilim’s largely uncivilized habitation of Canaan—but Nimrod’s highly organized project to build the Tower of Babel (which was divinely punished with the chaos of many languages) shows that this is not a necessary trait. Without the same moral compass by which to judge the *jötnar* as either good or evil, “the question of their *goodness*,” Kroesen writes, “simply does not arise” (59).

As beings of chaos, Norse giants are not therefore what we would call forces of evil and display traits that we would not expect to see from biblical giants. Although at

most times antagonistic, their relationship with the Æsir is not always such. In Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmal*, for instance, the giant Járnsaxa is said to have born Thor a son, and as discussed above, the *Prymskviða* depicts the giant Þrymr as lusting for Freyja and entering into a bargain with the Æsir to facilitate marriage.⁴⁶ The *jötnar* can also be great sources of wisdom for the gods; the sage Odin travels to match wits with and obtain wisdom from the giant Vafþrúðnir. Though they are dangerous to both gods and men, the giants of the Germanic tradition are what a modern reader might characterize as amoral. Their danger is like that of Mount Everest or a hurricane—not for any evil intent, but as a part of their nature.

It is unlikely that when the *Beowulf*-poet uses the term *þyrs* or *eoten* he is distinguishing between the nuances of Norse giants, but using the term generally to evoke the common knowledge of the Germanic tradition. Grendel nevertheless displays traits that correspond to almost every single category we have identified among these giants. In "The Families of Giants," Motz outlines four general types in Icelandic literature and folklore: the *jötnar*, the troll, the *þursar*, and the *risi*. The *jötnar* as we have seen, are enormous, chthonic creatures associated with cosmology; trolls are generally smaller and more closely linked to magic and metalworking; *þursar* are unintelligent and hostile; and the *risi* tend to be noble in both deed and appearance.

Grendel's character traits relating to the *jötnar* are clear enough. His abode is closely associated with the earth: it is surrounded by fens and marshes, the path to it is rocky, and the land surrounding the mere is craggy and grows nothing but stunted, twisted trees. In this context sits Grendel's natural, unworked "hall," which seems to amount to little more than an underground cavern—more earthy and primitive than most

of the dwellings of even the *jötnar*. Despite Taylor's best efforts to convince us otherwise, Grendel displays no notable aptitude for that trollish trade of metalworking (3-4). Our monster does, however, evince some connection to enchantment with the spell he has cast to render himself impervious to normal swords (ll. 798-05). The hostility of *þursar* is on full and obvious display in Grendel's unprovoked attacks on Heorot. Their stupidity, as discussed above, is only hinted at in Grendel's character—if it is even there at all. It is only the courtly appearances and deeds of the *rishi* in which Grendel does not seem to take part. So the Norse conception of giants provides a tradition for some of the worst character traits of Grendel. By means of the terms *eoten* and *þyrs*, he is associated with giants that could be savage, chthonic magic-users and who, above all, are agents of chaos. This linkage takes place before the narrative even reveals most of Grendel's character traits that place him in this class of monster, so it could well function to manage expectations. That is, knowing that he is an *eoten* and *þyrs* may well signal the audience to be sensitive to any of his actions that might fall into these categories.

Calling Grendel *eoten* and *þyrs*, and associating him with *gigantas* creates what Bandy (in an admittedly different context) calls an “iconography of gigantism” (235). The terms and associations denote a being of larger-than-normal size. But the symbolic dimensions of these traditions do the real work, connoting evil and chaos, magic use and miscegenation. Grendel's physical trait of gigantism is used by the *Beowulf*-poet less as an end unto itself and more as a means to an end. In this way, it functions as one of Charles Morris's sign vehicles: though a part of the monster's morphology, that trait exists to be read and in doing so brings with it a host of connotations from earlier traditions. As Stephens puts it, “whenever one encounters a Giant in literature of any

kind from this period, his physical appearance and exploits necessarily depend—
genealogically and etymologically—upon the portrayal of his literary ancestors” (64).

Grendel, though he is an *eoten* and a *þyrs* instead of a *gigant*, is linked to both the biblical and Germanic traditions, inviting us to think of him as a character that exhibits the moral sinfulness of one and the civilization-threatening chaos of the other. Associating Grendel with both Norse and Christian traditions by using epithets that evoke each allows the poet to saddle his antagonists with the worst traits of both. But from a semiotic viewpoint, it makes his huge body into a fleshly sign that alludes to the past crimes of both traditions.

Notes

¹ Walker Percy. “The Loss of the Creature” (47).

² The fragmented version of St Christopher’s *Life* that appears along with *Beowulf* in MS Vitellius A.xv does not depict him with a dog’s head and seems to be a forerunner of the version included in the later *Golden Legend*. Christopher’s dog head was not unknown to Anglo-Saxons, however; two separate MSS, Cotton Julius A.x and Corpus Christi MS 196, contain the martyrdom of St Christopher and depict him as a cynocephalic creature.

³ Translation mine. The meaning of *gewende* is unclear; it could either mean that those in the West understood them to be men or that they are in some way changed or translated men. Context does not provide any clue one way or the other, so I have included both possibilities in my translation. Aid in deciphering the MS Vitellius A.xv version of this text was due in no small part to the kindness of Asa Simon Mittman and Susan Kim, who shared with me early versions of their forthcoming edition (*Inconceivable Beasts: The “Wonders of the East” in the Beowulf Manuscript*. Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, forthcoming).

⁴ Lines 212-15, 226-27, 231-32, 237-38, 247-51, 287, 303-06, 321-28, 330, 333-35.

⁵ Hill does extend his theory—albeit tangentially—to Grendel’s hands (“The Sacrificial...” 126).

⁶ See Clark Hall’s *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*. London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1901; Gummere’s *The Earliest English Epic: Beowulf, Finnsburg, Waldere, Deor, Widsith, and the German Hildebrand*. New York: Macmillan, 1914; Donaldson’s *Beowulf*. Ed. Joseph F. Tuso. New York: Norton, 1975; Chickering’s *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*; Liuzza’s *Beowulf*. Ontario: Broadview, 2000; and Heaney’s *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*.

⁷ Marijane Osborn describes the growths in this image as “phallus-like protuberances” (356). This is a strong reading because they do indeed look much like what I take to be Grendel’s genitals. The head and lower abdomen contain symmetrical, elongated patches of white space on either side of a center line of darkness, suggesting labial and vaginal imagery. While the tenor of his depiction may make use of sexual imagery, this element of his etching does not seem to contribute to the symbolic complex that has formed around Grendel’s morphology, so I do not touch on it in my discussion. See Osborn’s “Translations,

Versions, Illustrations.” *A Beowulf Handbook*. Eds. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles. Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1998. 341-72.

⁸ Illustrators and filmmakers arguably have more cause to create a false image of Grendel’s body: they have to show *something* and cannot very well depict Beowulf fighting a blank human outline with a hand and eyes. Critics have no such demand on their work. It is amusing, therefore, that the creators of *Star Trek: Voyager* come closest to a textually defensible depiction by showing Grendel as a giant humanoid figure made completely of blinding light. See “Heroes and Demons.” *Star Trek: Voyager*. By Rick Berman, et al. Dir. Les Landau. 24 April 1995.

⁹ Laborde’s reading is problematic on a number of levels, but most significantly the “toughness of skin” he sees in ll. 984-90 is not the strongest interpretation. The steel-like nails are the focus in the preceding line, and it is just as likely—if not more so—that these nails are what could resist any sword-stroke (203).

¹⁰ Glámr, for example, is said to have a bluish tint to his skin (likely a nod to his status as an animated corpse), and the *draugr* Þráinn is accompanied by a horrible stench in the *Hrómundar saga Grípsssonar*. See *Grettir’s Saga*. Trans. Denton Fox and Hermann Plásson. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1974, and W. Bryant Bachman and Guðmundur Erlingsson, trans. *Six Icelandic Sagas*. Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1993.

¹¹ The giant Huwawa (Humbaba in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*) exists in Sumerian stories dated to the third millennium BC, almost 1000 years before the giants of Genesis take their final scriptural shape. Polyphemus is the offspring and ward of Poseidon, whereas the Nephilim of Genesis contend against God. The Titan Saturn in Francisco Goya’s *Saturn Devouring his Son* is truly terrifying, but the giant Ascapart in *Bevis of Hampton* is laughable when an attempt is made to baptize him. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s, Giant of Mont St Michel rapes even the old nurse, but Harpin of the Mountain in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* and Chretien de Troyes’s *Yvain* refuses to defile himself by bedding the beautiful maiden, instead giving her to his servants. The Jolly Green Giant is, obviously, green; cloud giants in contemporary role-playing games like *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* are blue-skinned; the nameless giant of Mont St Michel comes from Moorish Spain; and St Christopher is sometimes depicted with a dog’s head.

¹² All biblical references taken from the Vulgate (*Biblia Sacra*, 1994 edition). All translations mine.

¹³ Linguistically, this is sometimes difficult for English-speaking readers to understand. Our term for the giant functions as both a noun referring to a type of creature and as an adjective referring to a characteristic of that creature. It is not easy, therefore, to think of a non-giant-giant in the same way as did Germanic peoples—whose terminology referred to a class of creatures and seems to have been separated, at least linguistically, from that class’ characteristics.

¹⁴ See Sturluson’s *The Prose Edda*. Trans. Jesse L. Bayock. New York: Penguin, 2005.

¹⁵ A further point provided by Motz indicates that the size of giants (and perhaps dwarves, though she does not make this point) only began to come to the fore with the introduction of Christianity. The instances she identifies that specifically depict the giants as “beings of abnormal size are all taken from Snorri’s treatise,” which was written well after Iceland converted to Christianity, though it incorporated elements from the earlier *Poetic Edda* (“Giants in...” 74).

¹⁶ See “Thrymskvitha” in Henry Adams Bellows’s *The Poetic Edda*.

¹⁷ See “Helgakvitha Hjórvarthssonar,” Bellows, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Williams points to the image on f. 13r as evidence for his view, and Asa Simon Mittman also identifies the image as one depicting giants. However, there is nothing that provides scale, and the figures look

exactly like those of Noah and other human beings in the text. Thus, it does not seem to me to provide evidence one way or the other. See Mittman's *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England*. New York: Routledge, 2006 (65).

¹⁹ For a fuller discussion of the Nephilim, see below pp. 97-98.

²⁰ See Strickland's *Demons, Saracens, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (especially 8 ff.).

²¹ See: Patrick K. Ford's *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2008. 119-58.

²² We do not know how the poet is using the term *man*. If it is as elastic as *rinc* (which is also used to refer to Grendel), then we might take him to be larger than any other humanoid ever encountered. If we take it to refer strictly to human beings, then he is still larger than Beowulf—a superman who can carry 30 pieces of war gear while swimming or can kill Dægfrn with the strength of his grip—but perhaps still within a human frame of reference.

²³ Some interpretations have assumed that *fyrbendum* is analogous to *irenbendum* in l. 774, referring to iron bracings that provide stability at Heorot's wall and ceiling joints. If this were the case, the iron in l. 722 would be largely ornamental. Bosworth and Toller provide some evidence equating *bend* with the Latin *diadema*, thus referring to an ornament. However, the more common definition of the term—equated with *vinculum* and *ligamen*, and meaning to “tie or bind”—seems to better agree with the thrust of the passage, which is Grendel's rage and strength. If the iron were not functional, it would be of no consequence that Grendel burst the doors open with a touch since they would not be barred: any human being could have done the same thing.

²⁴ The dimensions given here are for building A4, the largest of the six halls built on the site.

²⁵ See Cramp's “The Hall in *Beowulf* and Archaeology.” *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period*. Eds. Helen Damico and John Leyerle. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993. 331-46 (especially 340).

²⁶ We do not know the pitch of the roofs in Heorot or Cheddar and Yeavinger. If we assume that the walls at Cheddar were thirteen feet tall because that was as long as it builders could reliably produce timbers, then it stands to reason that the roof beams were about the same length. This, in the absence of any more concrete evidence about the angle of the roof, allows us to calculate the height of the gable. If the gabled roof beams are about thirteen feet long and the interior of the hall is approximately fifteen feet wide (Rahtz 99), we can calculate the height of the gabled area to be just over fifteen feet ($13^2 \cdot 7.5^2 = 15^2$).

²⁷ Cf. Grettir's battle with Glámr, in which the Icelandic hero is physically outmatched and thrown about the room; only through a combination of desperation, cunning, and strength does he trap the *draugr* beneath him and cut off his head. Beowulf, by contrast, is never out of control and his only failure is his inability to keep Grendel's entire body inside Heorot. See R.W. Chambers's *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1921 (especially 172-73).

²⁸ Though I am unaware that anyone has made the argument, the weight of Grendel's head seems to suggest a further connection to Scandinavian giants and *draugar*. The former are often depicted as, literally, hard-headed: Thor smashes the unbreakable chalice against the giant Hymir's head, and Hrungir's head is said to be made of stone. The latter can vastly increase their size at will and, it seems, become especially heavy when they die: Glámr sought to crush Grettir to death with his bodyweight, and the *draugr* Thorolf Halt-Foot becomes so heavy that he cannot be moved after the oxen go mad and bolt. For Hymir and Hrungir, see “Hymiskvitha” and “Harbarthsljóth” in Henry Adams Bellows's *The Poetic Edda*. For Glámr, see

Chambers *op. cit.* For Thorolf Halt-Foot, see *Eyrbyggja Saga*. Trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards. New York: Penguin, 1989 (especially Ch. 34).

²⁹ For this argument, see Bandy (240), Mellinkoff (184), and Cohen's "Old English Literature and the Work of Giants" (3).

³⁰ Happily, there are scholars who have acknowledged both sides of the issue. Beside Cohen, about whom more will be said, R.E. Kaske has written about both the *eotenas* and the biblical giants in Enoch. Paul Beekman Taylor, though he advocates for Germanic elements, does so with the understanding that the Latin Christian tradition was an important part of Grendel's make-up. See Kaske's "The *Eotenas* in *Beowulf*." *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*. Ed. Robert P. Creed. Providence, RI: Brown UP, 1967. 285-310, and "Beowulf and the Book of Enoch." For Taylor's approach, see "Grendel's Monstrous Arts".

³¹ Although it is beyond the scope of this work, an interesting approach to understanding both Grendel and his mother is via Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "contact zone," a "social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other," but where the utopian dream of a completely heterogeneous community is held in abeyance (34). See "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* (1991): 33-40.

³² Thalia Phillis Feldman (74) incorrectly states that Signe Carlson claims *fifel* is a hapax legomenon; Carlson merely makes the (correct) claim that *fifelcyn* is nowhere else attested in the Old English corpus (350). The compound *sceanfifel* (dung beetle) occurs twice, but it is a corruption of *scearnwifel* and has no bearing on the current study. See *Latin-Old English Glossaries in Plantin-Moretus MS. 32 and British Museum MS. Additional 32246*. Ed. Lowell Knidschi. Diss. Stanford U, 1955; *The Corpus, Épinal, Erfurt and Leyden Glossaries*. Ed. W.M. Lindsay. New York: Oxford UP, 1921; and Johannes Hoops's and John Van Zandt Cortelyou's *Die altenglischen Namen der Insekten Spinnen- und Krustentiere*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1906 (especially 20).

³³ See *Elene. The Vercelli Book*. Ed. George Philip Krapp. ASPR 2. New York: Columbia UP, 1932 (l. 237); *Meters of Boethius. The Paris Psalter and the Meters of Boethius*. Ed. George Philip Krapp. ASPR 5. New York: Columbia UP, 1932 (26.21); *Widsith. The Exeter Book*. Eds. George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie. ASPR 3. New York: Columbia UP, 1936 (l. 47). *Fifeldor* appears in *Widsith* in reference to the river Eider, so how we are supposed to understand it is not clear: "big door," "foolish door," and "beetle door" (if the word were a corruption of *wifeldor*) do not seem to make much sense. "Big door" makes the best sense, if only because the other two options are worse.

³⁴ For *ælþþone*, see Godfrid Storms's "Prose Charms and Charm Headings." *Anglo-Saxon Magic*. The Hague: Nijof, 1948. 28.1, 17.2, 17.25, 17.30, and 17.33); Oswald Cockayne's *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England*. Vol. 2. London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1865. Leechbook I (32.4), II (53.1), and III (26.1, 47.1, 68.1). For *ælfside*, see Cockayne's *Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England*. Vol. 2. Leechbook I (Chapter Heading 64, 64.1) and III (41.1); John H.G. Grattan's and Charles J. Singer's *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1952. Lacnunga (29.1). For *ælfsoġoða*, see Storms's "Prose Charms and Charm Headings" (17.50) and Cockayne's *Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England*. Vol. 2. Leechbook III (Chapter Heading 62). For *ælfadl*, see Storms's "Prose Charms and Charm Headings" (17.1) and Cockayne's *Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England*. Vol. 2. Leechbook III (Chapter Heading 62). For *æflscot/yflfescot*, see "Metrical Charms: For a Sudden Stitch." *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* (ll. 20, 25). For *yfling*, see Aldhelm's *De laude virginitatis*. *Old English Glosses*. Ed. Arthur S. Napier. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1900. (1.4937, 2.406).

³⁵ See Storms's "Prose Charms and Charm Headings" (20.1, 20.8), and Cockayne's *Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England*. Vol. 2. Leechbook II (65.5) and III (Chapter Heading 61).

³⁶ See *Genesis. The Junius Manuscript*. Ed. George Philip Krapp. ASPR 1. New York: Columbia UP, 1931 (ll. 1822, 2727).

³⁷ See Dobbie's *Beowulf and Judith* (122); Jente's *Die mythologischen Ausdrücke im altenglischen Wortschatz*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1921 (137); Krogmann's "Ae *orcneas*." *Anglia* 56 (1932): 40-42 and "orc und *orcneas*." *Anglia* 57 (1933): 396; and Hoops's *Beowulfstudien*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1932 (70 ff.).

³⁸ See Haber's *A Comparative Study of Beowulf and the Aeneid*. New York: Phaeton P, 1968.

³⁹ Paul Beekman Taylor has more recently disputed the accepted reading of the flood as referring to the one from biblical narrative; instead, he argues, it refers to the *Prose Edda*'s account of Ymir's death and the flood of blood that resulted from it. See *Sharing Stories: Medieval Norse-English Literary Relationships*. New York: AMS P, 2000 (esp. 123-37).

⁴⁰ Bandy's work has been continued, with limited success, by Dennis Cronan in "The Origin of Ancient Strife in *Beowulf*." *North-western European Language Evolution* 31-32 (1998): 57-68.

⁴¹ Obviously, these antediluvian giants no longer exist in the heroic past of the poem. This explains why Grendel is never explicitly named a *gigant*. Using Midrashic texts, however, Mellinkoff and Orchard make an interesting argument for Cain's (*comes* was originally written in l. 107) gigantic offspring to live on after the Flood through Noah's son, Ham. See "Cain's Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*: Part II, Post-Diluvian Survival" *Anglo-Saxon England* 9 (1981): 183-97 (esp. 185-87) and Orchard's *Pride and Prodigies* (68-69). Phillip Pulsiano has argued that the confusion between the two was an intentional poetic decision by the poet. See "'Cames Cynn': Confusion or Craft?" *Proceedings of the Patristic Medieval and Renaissance Conference* 7 (1985): 33-8.

⁴² See, for example, "Adrian and Ritheus." *The "Prose Solomon and Saturn" and "Adrian and Ritheus."* Eds. James E. Cross and Thomas D. Hill. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1982 (16.2). Results come from a search of the Dictionary of Old English online. University of Toronto. 24 November 2009. 12 July 2012 <<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/libproxy.uoregon.edu/doecorpus/index.html>>.

⁴³ See *De civitate Dei* 15.23.

⁴⁴ See W.G. Stryker's *The Latin-Old English Glossary in MS. Cotton Cleopatra A.III*. Diss. Stanford U, 1951. (1388, 1507, 4502); Aldhelm's *De laude virginitatis*. *Old English Glosses*. Ed. Arthur S. Napier. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1900. (1.1637, 1.3271, 2.183); Aldhelm's *De laude virginitatis*. *The Old English Glosses of MS. Brussels, Royal Library 1650*. Ed. Louis Goossens. Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1974 (ll. 1637, 3166); "Riddle 40." *The Exeter Book*. Eds. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie. ASPR 3. New York: Columbia UP, 1936. (l. 62); and *Maxims II* (l. 42).

⁴⁵ Magicians would seem to possess a good deal of arcane (or demonic, depending on the reader) knowledge. Though perhaps one could argue that Anglo-Saxons would have considered magicians and snake-charmers foolish because they would not recognize the rightness of Christianity, this seems thin evidence.

⁴⁶ See Sturluson, *op.cit.*

CHAPTER IV

ALL EYES AND CLAWS

Examine these limbs, red, black, or white—they are so cunning in tendon and nerve;
They shall be stript, that you may see them.

Walt Whitman, “I Sing the Body Electric”¹

Introduction

In this chapter, my purpose is much the same as in Chapter III—to try to remove some of the accrued conjectural and imaginative layers that have formed an imposing symbolic complex around the limbs and body of Grendel. Our interest here will be in his shining eyes and his so-called claws. In the case of his eyes, the trait takes on the same sort of symbolic function that John M. Hill describes.² Its meaning and allusive properties are most important. In part this is because it is not, in and of itself, a morphological abnormality. Given contemporary theories of vision, it is entirely possible the poet believed that vision was only possible because light or soul-fire shines forth from the eyes. If this is so, the abnormality of Grendel’s eyes lies not in their morphology, but in the connotations attached to and the semiotic potential of their light. The poet is careful to tell us that the light is ugly (*unfæger*) and to associate it with fire, both of which inject a wholly negative connotation into what is likely a natural physical trait to him.

Grendel’s claws, on the other hand, appear to be an exception to the symbolic rule since they are important to the poem’s plot and seem to play a largely functional role in his attacks. They may suggest a demonic or reptilian aspect, but their main purpose seems to be to explain Grendel’s method of attack and to emphasize his difference from the human beings in the poem. Though critics and translators regularly refer to Grendel’s

hands as “claws” or “talons,” there is virtually nothing in the text as we now have it that supports such a reading. A philological analysis of ll. 984-87 shows that we cannot be sure that Grendel has claws. The word-forms and grammar of the passage are so vexed that using it as evidence for morphological difference is untenable. Barring some new manuscript discovery, I encourage *Beowulf*-scholars to abandon his claws as evidence for monstrosity—or anything else.

Grendel’s Shining Eyes

Reference to Grendel’s eyes is minimal, taking up only one and a half lines in its single occurrence. The description comes at the end of his famous approach to Heorot: after he bursts open the doors and steps into the hall, we are told *him of eagum stod / ligge gelicost leoht unfæger* [from his eyes shone an ugly light, most like a flame] (726-27). Though short, the passage is laden with meaning. The main sentence, *eagum stod...leoht*, tells us that light shines from Grendel’s eyes; the simile, *ligge gelicost*, tells us that the light was like fire; and the adjective, *unfæger*, shows the light to be unpleasant. Alain Renoir, who calls this one of the “most effective” images in all of English literature, observes that much of its power stems from the darkness surrounding Grendel’s eyes: “the pitch-blackness is momentarily so dense that only the burning eyes are visible to tell us where destruction stands” (164-65). While this gloom may introduce an additional element of terror into the scene, it also serves to disembody Grendel’s eyes.

The eyes are further distinguished by being the first meaningful physical description of Grendel. Before ll. 726-27, we have learned precious little about his physical make-up. As we saw in the previous chapter, the poet links him to giants early on, and just before the eyes are mentioned, he tells us that Grendel has a hand (*folmum* in

l. 722). These references are evocative, suggesting a humanoid body-type and the general shape of two appendages—but they fall well short of direct physical description. Even in the lines describing Grendel’s approach to Heorot, the poet avoids divulging any relevant details of the monster’s appearance.³ As Katherine O’Brian O’Keefe has demonstrated, the imagery shifts from the ethereal to the material, progressively revealing Grendel as a physical being with each repetition of *com* (487-88). In the first *com*-section, epithets like *s(c)ynscaþa* (l. 707) and *wraþum* (l. 708) evoke negative images, but keep his physicality wrapped in mist and shadow. The second *com*-section employs two verbs (*gongan* in l. 711 and *wod* in l. 714) to imply a physical body, but avoids any adjectives or nouns that might provide more concrete information. In the final *com*-section, Grendel is called a *rinc*, a noun usually reserved for human beings; its use confirms his humanoid body-type, but adds nothing substantially new. Thus, the poet so artfully employs the negative blazon that he manages to reveal Grendel in stages while jealously guarding any additional clues as to his appearance.

O’Keefe and Renoir both highlight the craft of this passage, the poet’s ability to describe Grendel without really describing him at all. Up to the point at which Grendel steps into Heorot, most of the meaningful morphological traits are suppressed. From this blankness, however, shine his eyes. Because there is virtually nothing else, they are a new and unexpected detail for a character that has received little in the way of it. Careful selection and suppression reduce everything else to a shadowy backdrop, effectively transforming his glowing eyes into a synecdoche for Grendel—at least until a fuller description emerges over the next few hundred lines.

This disembodied embodiment, as it were, is reminiscent of the way the poet treats Grendel's gigantism. Still rejecting any totalizing description, the poet parcels out his monster's body—in this case drawing attention to the eyes while suppressing all else for the moment. In ll. 726-27, we again see the presentation of a fragmented body and its semiotic potential take priority, this time over any specific morphology of the eyes. The poet is interested in what the light might mean, rather than in the light itself as a morphological trait. One reason for this may be due to the poet's understanding of optics and eyesight: to one who believes that sight flows out from the eye, the light that shines forth from Grendel's might not seem all that abnormal. What is out of the main, however, is the kind of light his eyes emit. The poet is sure to call it an *unfæger* light and compare it to fire, which does not enjoy a positive connotation in the poem. These descriptors inject both a semiotic dimension and a subtle commentary on Grendel's moral position into this odd—but not inherently abnormal—morphological trait.

Shining Eyes: The Traditions

Morphological variety in the medieval tradition of marvels and monsters—mostly inherited from the classical past—is vast and includes a fair number of examples whose eyes are abnormal. Sometimes the basic humanoid structure is retained and the number of eyes multiplied (such as Argus with his 100 eyes) or reduced (such as the Cyclops Polyphemus). Sometimes these creatures are a bit more fanciful: Pliny tells of the catoblepas and of Scythian women, both of whom have eyes that can kill.⁴ Eyes that burn, spark, or shine with a visible light are, however, not so well attested in the Anglo-Saxon monstrous or marvelous tradition.⁵ Grendel is not alone in possessing shining eyes, but he does not have as much company as he did in the previous chapter.

Some critics, such as Renoir and Margaret Goldsmith, attempt to link Grendel's shining eyes to Glámr in the Icelandic *Grettis saga*. Although R.W. Chambers had earlier studied the similarities between the Glámr episode and the fight with Grendel, he made no mention of Glámr's eyes being like Grendel's.⁶ Renoir nevertheless attempts to shoe-horn Glámr's frightening gaze into the same category as Grendel's shining eyes (166). The problem is that Grendel's eyes do not share any salient characteristics with Glámr's: the *draugr*'s eyes roll in the moonlight, strike terror into the heart of the otherwise-brave Grettir, and are a part of the curse laid on the hero. On the other hand, Grendel's eyes emit a fiery light, Beowulf's calm and resolve seem unaffected by them, and there is no curse that dogs him into outlawry.

Goldsmith, likewise, is on thin ice when she associates the horrifying reflection of the moon in Glámr's eyes with the light from Grendel's. This connection is suggestive, but ultimately problematic for a number of reasons. She misreads the episode in the *Grettis saga*: instead of reflecting the moonlight, Glámr's eyes roll when the clouds part.⁷ Perhaps thinking that the whites of his eyes reflected the moonlight, she suggests that the light coming from Grendel's is a reflection from firelight inside Heorot (100). The text neither supports nor prohibits such a reading, but it clearly emphasizes darkness at this point in the narrative.⁸ Although the hall is described as clearly visible (*gearwost wisse*) and gleaming (*fahne*), the poet also clearly describes the light standing out from Grendel's eyes (ll. 715, 716). Because the phrasing of ll. 726-27 bears a striking resemblance to other instances of eyes that shine without any external light source, Goldsmith's reading has less to recommend it than the dominant interpretation. This also puts to rest any substantial connection between Grendel's eyes and those of Glámr.

David Williams fares only slightly better when looking to the Latin Christian tradition for analogues. In *Cain and Beowulf*, he links shining eyes to the mark of Cain. Though Genesis 4.13-15 does not specify the nature of this mark and does not mention eyes at all, Williams points to a comment by Jacques-Paul Migne on Peter Cantor's *Verbum Abbreviatum* to bolster his claim: *Dicunt quidam Deum tale dedisse cornu in nare Cain, et oculos ita scintillantes, ut visu, terribilior appareret quam unicornis* [It is said that God gave Cain a horn on the nose and eyes so glimmering that [his] appearance seemed more frightful than a unicorn] (*Patrologia Latina* 205.387).⁹ Cain, as numerous critics have shown, was a malleable figure in the Middle Ages: he sometimes appears as an animal, sometimes as a horned humanoid, and sometimes as a civilized (but thoroughly secular) builder of cities.¹⁰ However, this reference is the only one of which I am aware that attributes glowing eyes to him. This singularity should give us pause, and we might also be skeptical of Migne's commentary. Its applicability to an Anglo-Saxon text is suspect because although he comments on a twelfth-century text, Migne points to no earlier source for the tradition. Thus, what remains is a nineteenth-century example of Cain with shining eyes that has no demonstrated connection to either Peter Cantor specifically or Anglo-Saxon literature in general.

Although none of the above evidence sufficiently links Grendel's eyes to either Cain's or Glámr's, there are examples from both Christian and secular traditions that pertain to literature of the Anglo-Saxon period. The first- or second-century BC deuterocanonical text, *The Book of Wisdom*, lists a number of creatures that could destroy the Israelites:

multitudinem ursorum aut audaces leones, aut novi generis ira plenas et ignotas bestias, aut vaporem igneum spirantes, aut odorem fumi proferentes, aut horrendas ab oculis scintillas emittentes
[a multitude of bears, or bold lions, or new species and unknown beasts, full of anger, or those breathing fiery vapor, or those sending forth a stink of smoke, or those emitting terrible sparks from the eyes]. (qtd. in Anlezark 263)¹¹

Daniel Anlezark makes an interesting case that the *novi generis* and *ignotas bestias* echo the unknown parentage of Grendel and the *untýdras* with which he was associated; if this connection holds true, it also suggests that the *Beowulf*-poet could have been indirectly influenced by this ancient Middle Eastern text (268).¹² Significantly closer in its composition, the Middle High German *Genesis* declares of Cain's progeny, *die ogen schinen in alle stunde* [their eyes were gleaming all the time] (qtd. and trans. in Emerson 884).¹³ Because *Beowulf* also considers Grendel to be related to Cain, this example correlates with Grendel's shining eyes. Lastly, in the Old English life of St. Margaret, the Devil (in the form of a dragon) is described thusly: *of his toþan leome ofstod, ...and of his eagen swilces fires lyg* [from his teeth and eyes a light stood like fire] (qtd. in Robinson, *Beowulf and...* 32).¹⁴ Of the three examples that come from religious texts, this seems the strongest. The construction of the phrase is similar to *him of eagum stod / ligge gelicost leoht unfæger* in *Beowulf*: in each, the main verb used to describe the light is a form of *standan*, and although the two use different words, both compare the light that shines forth to fire.

A tradition of shining eyes is also present in secular Anglo-Saxon texts. The version of the *Wonders of the East* in MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv contains two references to them in snakes and human beings.¹⁵ First it tells of two-headed snakes whose eyes *scinað nihtes swa leohte swa blæcern* [shine, by night, as brightly as a lantern] (§5) and

later describes nameless men whose eyes *scinap swa leohte swa man micel blacern onæle þeostre niht* [shine as brightly as if someone had lit a great lantern in the dark night] (§22) (Orchard 186, 198).¹⁶ The *Liber Monstrorum*, which exhibits knowledge of source material also present in the *Wonders of the East* and *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*, contains six references to shining eyes possessed by either human beings or snakes (Orchard 87).¹⁷ There are people with *dentibus et oculis nitentem* [shining teeth and eyes] and those whose *oculi sicut lucerna lucent* [eyes shine just like lanterns] (I.30, I.36).¹⁸ The text also mentions snakes whose *quatorque per umbras nocturnas oculis in modum lucernae lucent* [four eyes shine through the night-shadows like lanterns], that *agros scintillantibus peragravit oculis* [wandered the fields with sparking eyes], and that went about *oculis... scintillantibus* [with eyes sparking]; even the serpents that attacked Laocoön and his sons at Troy had shining eyes: *oculi eorum igni horrebant* [their eyes danced with fire] (III.2, III.5, III.7, III.10).

The eleven previous examples are relatively straightforward. Creatures that possess shining eyes are either monsters or marvels—the distinction between them, as I argued in Chapter II, hinging on the presence or absence of threatening behavior. This distinction causes some difficulty in judging whether the tradition of shining eyes would always have been considered a negative one (as were the traditions of gigantism) or whether it was a relatively neutral morphological trait that was considered marvelous. The story of St Christopher's death, as told in the *Old English Martyrology*, is a microcosm of this complexity. It tells us that his *eagan scinon swa leohte swa morgensteorra* [eyes shone as brightly as the Morning Star], but the depiction of the saint is full of conflicting imagery (Herzfeld 66).¹⁹ Christopher's origin from the unknown

nations of the East suggests he may not be fully human, and his dog-headed body seems to confirm it. By the time we are told of his shining eyes, however, he has undergone a conversion and *wæs gode geleafull on his heortan* [was faithful to God in his heart] (Herzfeld 66). Because Christopher is eligible for salvation, mainstream Christian theology held that he was a human being.²⁰

The reference to *morgensteorra* is also contradictory; the Morning Star has two separate connotations in the Christian Bible. First, it is equated with the proper noun “Lucifer,” which was connected to Satan by early Christian theologians such as Augustine, Origen, and Tertullian (Tate 467). In Revelation 22.16, however, the Morning Star is used as a title of Christ: *stella splendida et matutina* [the bright and morning star]. The two different connotations for *morgensteorra* make interpreting the reference in the Christopher story a tricky proposition. When the simile is applied to him, he exhibits normative behavior. He is preparing to defy a king, to be tortured, and to die, so it seems that we should understand the Morning Star as a connection to Christ, whom Christopher carried across the river and for whom he is about to give his life. But what of his morphology and his past? Christopher remains cynocephalic even after his conversion—a state of affairs that does not always happen in conversion stories—and as *Reprobus*, he rode with and fought for Satan.²¹ This background also suggests that we might think of *morgensteorra* as a veiled reference to Satan. The indeterminacy of this example shows that the physical characteristic of shining eyes was a complex and not necessarily negative one, though it has thus far always pointed to morphological abnormality.

In these twelve references we have a number of different portrayals of shining eyes. Christopher's evoke both negative and positive connotations and complicate any definitive judgment as to their moral implications. There are also the creatures who populate the secular *Wonders of the East* and *Liber Monstrorum*: snakes' shining eyes, we can be fairly sure, symbolize their danger to humanity, but those of the exotic men make no comment on their moral standing since they are still thought of as human beings and are not necessarily threatening. Last, we have the beasts who threaten the Israelites in *The Book of Wisdom*, the offspring of Cain in the German *Genesis*, and Satan in the life of St Margaret, whose shining eyes are clearly a physical representation of their evil nature.

The previous examples—despite the confusion they engender—show that shining eyes can have either a negative or neutral connotation. Far from the automatic indicator of monstrosity that Renour, Goldsmith, and Williams take it for, a light emitting from the eyes was not necessarily a damning morphological trait. The following three examples show that this trait can both be positive in meaning and lack any suggestion of morphological abnormality. In the Old English *Juliana*, both the title character and her father are associated with a light in the eyes. As he tries to force his daughter to marry her pagan suitor, Africanus says to her: *ðu eart dohtor min seo dyreste / ond seo sweteste in sefan minum, / ange for eorþan, minra eagna leoht, / Iuliana* [Juliana, you are my daughter, alone on earth, the dearest and sweetest of my seven, the light of my eyes] (ll. 93-96). Though he obviously speaks metaphorically, the connection between light and eyes is, nevertheless, an important part of his figurative language and the scene in general. His goal is to convince his *dyreste* and *sweteste* daughter to marry Eleusias and

to avoid the punishment awaiting her if she refuses. That he would implicate both of them in a tradition with a negative, or even neutral, connotation seems unlikely. The tenor of the line (Juliana is closest to her father's heart and the best of seven sisters) seems to require a positive connotation for the light since Africanus's persuasive approach rests on pathetic appeals. If there were no extant positive tradition, trying to flatter Juliana by calling her the light of his eyes would be no different than Shakespeare comparing his Dark Lady's hair to wet pitch: the metaphor would be technically sound but contrary to the speaker's purpose.

Two more positive references to light in the eyes occur in *Beowulf* and the life of St. Andrew, Blickling Homily 19. In the former, Hrothgar admonishes Beowulf to trust in wisdom rather than strength, since his body will eventually grow weak and die:

*eft sona bið
 hæc þec adl oððe ecg eafopes getwæfeð,
 oððe fyres feng, oððe flodes wylm,
 oððe gripe meces, oððe gares fliht,
 oððe atol ylðo; oððe eageana bearhtum
 forsitedeð ond forsworcedeð*

[immediately afterwards it will be that disease or the sword deprive you of strength, or else the grip of fire, the surge of floods, the attack of a sword, the flight of a spear, terrible old age—or the brightness of your eyes fails and dims.] (ll. 1762-67)

Here, the Danish king provides a lengthy and very specific list of things that could kill Beowulf, making the final *oððe* clause all the more distinctive. It is so vague that it seems to be a catch-all phrase, a way of reinforcing that Beowulf will most certainly die—even if it is not by disease, sword, fire, flood, spear, or old age. What makes this clause important is the way it uses the light in Beowulf's eyes as a metaphor for life itself. Death will bring a loss or dimming of light, so it exists only as long as Beowulf lives, perhaps a physical indication of his strength and vitality. In Blickling Homily 19,

the situation and the use of light in the eyes is slightly different. The apostle Matthew—captured, blinded, and imprisoned by the cannibalistic Myrmedonians—begs God *þæt þu me forgife minra eagenas leoht, þæt ic geseo þa me onginnað don on þisse ceastre ða werrestan tintrega* [that you give me the light of my eyes so that I may see those who, in this city, prepare the worst torture for me] (Morris, R. 229).²² Here, the light is not affection or life, but his ability to see.

The references in Blickling Homily 19 and *Beowulf* seem to be just as metaphorical in nature as that in *Juliana*. The light of Africanus's eyes metaphorically describes his love for his daughter; the light in *Beowulf*'s seems to symbolize his very life; and the light in Matthew's seems to be a metaphor for the saint's eyesight. While we cannot definitively declare that these final two instances are meant to be literal, there is some reason to believe that they reflect what was then state of the art knowledge of physiology and vision. *Beowulf* may draw indirectly on Stoic ideas about the soul and its *pneuma*, or fire, which shines forth from the eyes; Blickling Homily 19, especially, seems to base its representation of eyesight on inherited Platonic and Galenic theories of vision.

Medieval Theories of Vision

In the ancient Greco-Roman world, there was a healthy interest in the mechanics of vision. What follows is a brief sketch of optical theory from Greece of the Classical period to twelfth-century England.²³ Most of the theories, varied though they are, can be broken down into the categories of extramission and intromission. Suzanne Conklin Akbari describes the difference between the two: "The extramitted visual beam, 'sent outward' from the viewer, reaches out (as it were) and apprehends the object of vision.... Intromission takes place when the visible form is literally 'sent into' the one

who sees” (24). Of intromission, little need be said since its effect on the medieval West was minimal until well into the thirteenth century. Aristotle was the theory’s most famous proponent, focusing on the transparent medium, the “diaphanous,” as the main engine of vision.²⁴ According to him rather than seeing through the diaphanous, the eyes participate in it because sensory organs, light, and the transparent medium are all part of each other. Vision, according to Aristotle, takes place not via rays emitted from the eyes, but because the external object acts on the medium and, as a consequence, the eyes.

Of those who held a theory of vision based on extramission, Plato was the most influential—not only during the height of Greece and Rome, but also in the Middle Ages.²⁵ In the *Timaeus*, he argues that a continuous stream of fire is emitted from the eyes:

And of the organs [the gods] constructed first light-bearing eyes....They contrived that all such fire as had the property of not burning but of giving a mild light should form a body akin to the light of every day. For they caused the pure fire within us, which is akin to that of day, to flow through the eyes in a smooth and dense stream....So whenever the stream of vision is surrounded by mid-day light, it flows out like unto like, and coalescing therewith it forms one kindred substance along the path of the eyes’ vision, wheresoever the fire which streams from within collides with an obstructing object without. (100-03)

For Plato, the fire coalesces with an external light to interact with objects and then return the image to the viewer. The Stoics—with whom, for the purposes of optics, Galen is included—also believed in extramission, crafting their theory around the concept of *pneuma*, “an all-pervasive active agent composed of a mixture of air and fire. An optical *pneuma*, it was supposed, flows from the seat of consciousness (the *hegemonikon*) to the eye and excites the air adjacent to the eye” (Lindberg 9). Galen, whose explanations of sight were combined with Plato’s in the medieval period, maintains key elements of the

Stoic theory. His model of vision consists of a luminous, incorporeal emission from the eye, a *spiritus animalis*, that was “continuous in itself, invisible, and imperceptible, weightless and colorless” (Siegel 263). In addition, he introduces an anatomical explanation, arguing that the optical *pneuma* originates in the brain and travels to and out of the eye by means of hollow optic nerves:

there is a movement of luminous pneuma in the case of those [optical] nerves, which have perforations clearly visible both at their upper beginning and at their attachment to the eyes....That a pneuma is carried through these passages to the eyes you learn from the structure and also from the fact that when one of the eyes is closed the pupil of the other is enlarged, and when it is reopened the pupil of the other quickly returns to its natural size....And since both passages converge at a single point—for this too is clearly seen by dissection—, it is reasonable that the place where they meet receives the pneuma from both passages; and when one eye is closed, it sends all the pneuma to the other. (*On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* 7.4)

These two theories of extramission were largely transmitted to the Western Middle Ages via the work of Augustine and Chalcidius.²⁶ Because he was so widely read, Augustine plays a central role in the transmission of Greco-Roman visual theory to the medieval period and provides a snapshot of early Christian thinking on vision as influenced by Neoplatonism. In *De Genesi ad litteram*, for example, Augustine writes: *jactus enim radiorum ex oculis nostris cujusdam lucis quidem est jactus* [indeed, the emission of rays from our eyes is the emission of a certain light]; this light *contrahi potest...et emitti* [can be contracted and sent out] (1.16; *PL* 34.258). Furthermore, for Augustine this light is a material, fiery thing:

et ignis non solum fervidam qualitatem, cuius sedes in jecore est, verum etiam luculentam, quam velut eliquari ac subvolare ostendunt in excelsum cerebri locum, tanquam in caelum corporis nostri; unde et radii emicant oculorum [[these medical writers] have shown that [the body has] not only a warming quality of fire, which is settled in the liver but also a bright quality, which is made to flow out and rise to the high place of the brain,

which is the heaven of our bodies; whence come the rays that shine from the eyes] (*De Genesi ad litteram* 7.13.20; *PL* 34.362).

Augustine's notions of vision may have been influenced by Chalcidius's *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*. A Christian philosopher roughly contemporary with Augustine, he provides what was to become the main source for Plato in the Western Middle Ages. Moreover, through his extensive commentaries Chalcidius upholds the Platonic model of extramission, blending it with Galen's Stoic model. He argues that the light and/or color from external objects, light from an external source, and "the light of the innate heat passing through the eyes" all combine to allow us to see (qtd. in Lindberg 89). He also deepens the theory with reference to Galen's anatomical studies in order to explain how the light is conducted from the brain through the eyes. More so than Augustine, Chalcidius is responsible for what David C. Lindberg calls the "'Galenized' Platonism" of medieval theories of vision (88-89).

Two scholars of the twelfth-century renaissance, William of Conches and Adelard of Bath, both exhibit such a Galenized Platonic understanding of the eye and vision. In the *Dragmaticon*, William largely follows Chalcidius:

the visual power...is generated in the brain and sent to the eye by way of a hollow conduit, the optic nerve. Upon passing through the pupil, the visual power merges with the external light and extends, in the shape of a cone, until it reaches a visible object which acts as an obstacle, impressing its form upon the visual beam. (Akbari 35)

Because it incorporates all three elements (interior light, exterior light, and an exterior viewed object) William's is clearly reminiscent of the Platonic model, while the anatomical explanation of the interior light passing through the hollow optic nerve is drawn from Galen. Adelard, a contemporary of William, shows these same influences in *Questiones naturales*, but his knowledge of Augustine subtly distinguishes it. By

proposing that a “‘visual spirit’ or ‘fiery virtue’ then passes with marvelous swiftness to the visible body,” Adelard clearly has in mind a corporeal light (Augustine’s *radii emicant oculorum*) which travels through the air rather than coalescing with or exciting the external light as Plato and Galen would have it (Lindberg 93, Akbari 26-27). Though not necessarily in conflict with Platonic and Galenic theories, Adelard’s shows a clear preference for the material fire in Augustine’s explanation.

Both Adelard and William are too late to be considered contemporary with *Beowulf*, and the Old English corpus contains nothing that discusses optics with any detail. However, the evidence for some version of extramission as the standard theory in Anglo-Saxon England is compelling. It enjoys sustained popularity—both with important authors like Augustine and Chalcidius before the Anglo-Saxon period, and with William and Adelard after it. Additionally, the lack of translations from Greek and Arabic make advocates for intromission scarce in the West during this time. These two circumstances combine to virtually assure that if the Anglo-Saxons thought about vision, they thought about it as a light that shone forth from the eyes.²⁷ If this is the case, then the reference in Blickling Homily 19 is not metaphorical, but Matthew’s straightforward request for his sight to be returned. Likewise, the light in *Beowulf*’s eyes is possibly much more literal than we have ever recognized. If the light were a quintessence of the human soul, it really would be extinguished at the time of death—whether it is the “pure fire” of Plato, the *pneuma* of the Stoics, or Augustine’s refined corporeal energy. *Beowulf*’s soul, the ultimate origin of the light, would no longer be present to produce it: the soul-fire, without the soul, ceases to exist.

The scientific theories of vision, Matthew's request, Hrothgar's words, and Africanus' metaphor, when taken together, strongly suggest that the single, crucial element of ll. 726-27 is *not* that Grendel's eyes shine. The poet may well trade on the negative traditions of shining eyes to introduce a semiotic aspect to this physical trait just as he did with gigantism. Unlike Grendel's enormous size, however, there is some reason to think that the light from his eyes was not considered abnormal in and of itself. Churls in later romances are regularly described as physically ugly, and the old woman in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is physically repulsive, but in neither case does the physical depiction amount to morphological abnormality: they are still recognized as human beings.²⁸ The same argument might be made for the light from Grendel's eyes. On a semiotic level, they may connote negative aspects by evoking a past tradition, but on a literal level, they do not necessarily denote morphological abnormality or move him out of the realm of the human.²⁹ The light itself does not demand that we consider the eyes abnormal: its modifiers and descriptors are where we will find the poet injecting powerful negative imagery and references to physical abnormality.

Grendel's Eyes: *ligge gelicost*

The phrase *ligge gelicost* is a strong indicator of the poet's semantic interest in Grendel's eyes and the light which beams forth from them. Its association with fire invites the audience to understand this light as a negative trait, a statement which may seem contradictory. If the dominant theory of vision was based on the extramission of Plato and Galen so that the Anglo-Saxons believed eyes emitted a sort of soul-fire, and if this scientific understanding might well normalize Grendel's shining eyes, then how can they still be a negative trait? If every seeing thing's eyes both emit a soul-fire and fire

itself carries a negative connotation, how do we avoid condemning all characters equally? The answer is twofold. As previously discussed, there is the distinction between morphology and its figurative use, so whereas the morphology might be odd but not abnormal, the meaning attached to it might be quite negative. Secondly, *Beowulf* evinces a thoroughly unfavorable portrayal of fire, and comparing the light to it yokes a negative connotation to the former. Obviously, fire does not have this sort of reputation in Anglo-Saxon England generally.³⁰ It is a peculiarity of the poem, a tendency that goes against the grain of other literature of the period. The unfavorable depiction of fire, then, does not operate within the general thematic system of the Old English corpus, but within the specific thematic system of the poem itself: fire is a dangerous, threatening consumer of men and is most often associated with death in *Beowulf*'s internal logic.

It must be clearly stated from the beginning that the depiction of fire in the poem is overwhelmingly—but not completely—negative. For instance, there is the *aledleoman* [fire-gleam] that Wiglaf bears before him as he leads Geats into the dragon's cave (ll. 3125). This light is revealing, productive in a way that runs counter to the other instances of destructive fire in *Beowulf*. Furthermore, the monster has been defeated, so the light is perhaps a symbol that darkness and threat have been cleared away, and the cave cleansed of the dragon's influence. Wiglaf's introduction of such a light into its cave might well put us in mind of the light that suffused Grendel's cave after his mother was killed. It, too, is associated with flame when it is compared to the sun, the *rodores candel* [candle of the sky], and there is another passing reference to the sun as a *woruldcandel* [world-candle] (ll. 1572, 1965). I question the applicability of these final two instances to fire, since the connection is indirect. A candle bears a flame just as surely as does Wiglaf's

æledleoman, but it is a second-order relationship; the focus in ll. 1572 and 1965 seems to be more on the production of light rather than the presence or absence of any flame. In the end, however, that objection is largely academic, for even if we grant all three of these instances, they make for a slight counterweight to the thirty-four negative associations.³¹

Of these negative depictions, twenty refer to the dragon. They depict fire as a danger to the Geats or as a symbolic trait of the dragon—itself an obvious danger to the Geats. It is sometimes depicted realistically, such as when the dragon attacks the settlement (*se gæst ongan gledum spiwan* [the visitor began to spew flame] (l. 2312)), and when it battles Beowulf and Wiglaf (*lig yðum for / born bord wið rond* [flame rolled forth, burned the shield up to the rim] (ll. 2672-73)). Other times, fire describes the dragon and reaffirms its difference from Beowulf and the other Geats: multiple compounds of *-draca* incorporate terms for fire (for example, *fyrdraca* in l. 2689), and ll. 2273-74 tell us *nacod niðdraca, nihtes fleogeð / fyre befangen* [the smooth strife-dragon flies by night, wreathed in flame]. Finally, like an analogue to the light and life in Beowulf's eyes, fire represents the dragon's vitality. We know the serpent is dying when the fire wanes: Wiglaf strikes the dragon *þæt ðæt fyr ongon / sweðrian syððan* [so that afterwards, the fire began to subside] (ll. 2701-02), and he tells the cowardly retainers *þonne ic sweorde drep / ferhðgeniðlan, fyr unswiðor / weoll of gewitte* [when I struck the nemesis with my sword, the fire welled out of his head less strongly] (ll. 2880-82).

Five different times, fire is associated with death as a part of the poem's funeral rites. Two instances appear in the Finnsburh episode, describing the flames to which both Half-Danes and Frisians are consigned:

wælfyra mæst
hlynode for hlawe. Hafelan multon,
bengeato burston ðonne blod ætspranc
laðbite lices; lig ealle forswalg,
gæsta gifrost
 [the great funeral fire roared before the burial mound. Heads melted,
 gashed wounds—the body’s war-bites—burst as blood spurted forth; the
 fire swallowed all, greediest of spirits.] (ll. 1119-23)

The negative imagery is difficult to miss, for the fire is an active agent and creates a gruesome scene while consuming the bodies of the warriors. Their skin shrivels until it seemingly melts away from the bone. As the skin contracts, wounds appear to gape even farther open. The heat swells any air and fluid still trapped inside the bodies until they appear to spit blood, bile, and urine. The word choice here is evocative, especially *forswalg*, which calls to mind Grendel’s depredations in Heorot when he *synsnædum swealh* [swallowed the sin-morsels] (l. 743). Both the fire and Grendel swallow up thanes greedily (*gifrost* in l. 1123 and *unwearnum* in l. 741), and both take away the bodies of kinsmen, young able-bodied men.

Beowulf’s funeral contains three other references to fire, and in them, it retains the role of an active consumer of the body. The Geatish messenger tells Beowulf’s people, *þa sceall brond fretan, / æled þeccean* [then will the fire consume, the flame enfold] (ll. 3014-15). Wiglaf follows with his own commentary: *Nu sceal gled fretan, / —weaxan wonna leg—wigena strengel* [Now will the flame consume the warrior-lord, the fire grow dark] (ll. 3114-15). And, lastly, the poet himself gives a description of the funeral fire in which he lingers over the details:

Ongunnon þa on beorge bælfyra mæst
wigend weccan; wud(u)rec astah,
sweart ofer swiððole, swogende leg
wope bewunden —windblond gelæg—,

*oð þæt he ða banhus gebrocen hæfd(e),
hat on hreðre.*

[Then on the cliff, the warriors began to kindle the great fire; wood-smoke rose, black over the flames; the fire roared, bound round with weeping—swirling winds subsided—until it had broken the bone-house, hot in his heart.] (ll. 3143-48)

Here fire is associated with the destruction of the body. In the words of the messenger and Wiglaf, the motif of flame-as-consumer is obvious and hearkens back to the Finnsburh and Grendel episodes earlier in the poem. The poet's description, like his description of the Finnish pyre, emphasizes the rupturing of the body.

But in a more general sense, these five references are negative because they appear in a context of bloodshed, strife, sorrow, and fear. The pyre in the Finnsburg episode is the result of a treacherous attack and subsequent battle. Sorrow then follows as Hildeburh loses the remainder of her family in Hengest's (possibly treacherous) act of vengeance. Beowulf's funeral fire is a consequence of his battle with the dragon, but there is also sorrow for the loss caused by the raid. After the fire consumes their king's body, the Geats themselves are consumed by both sorrow and fear—sorrow at the loss of their great ruler and fear of the attacks that will soon follow.³²

Even when it does not flow from a dragon or engulf a funeral pyre, fire is still associated with destruction and strife. Two references, for example, occur in relation to the burning of Heorot. The first allusion to this event comes just after we are told of the construction of the great hall: *heaðowylma bad / laðan liges* [it awaited the battle-surge, the hateful fire] (ll. 82-83). Some 700 lines later, as Grendel and Beowulf do battle, the poet again alludes to Heorot's future destruction. After describing the crashing of mead benches and thundering of the hall, the poet notes its impressive craftsmanship, but foreshadows its vulnerability. It could not be destroyed *nymþe liges fæþm / swulge on*

swapule [unless the embrace of fire swallowed it in flame] (ll. 781-82). The flames that will consume this monument to Hrothgar's success are, like those in the Finnsburh episode, borne of treachery—for Ingeld will eventually break kin ties and attack his own father-in-law. This action, we are to understand, will not only destroy an important status symbol for Denmark, but it will also renew the hostilities between the Danes and the Heathobards.

The final reference that will here be examined is to the *fyr on flode* that can be seen at night, dancing on the surface of Grendel's mere (l. 1366). Although Richard Morris long ago observed the similarity between the depiction of Hell in the *Visio S. Pauli* and Grendel's mere, the flames on the water find no parallel there and may be original to *Beowulf* (vii).³³ Whatever their provenance, their symbolism is clear enough. Grendel's mere is something we might expect from an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, a frightening place where natural laws are turned on their heads: monsters sport in the water, stunted trees grow from rocky crags, and fire coexists with its elemental opposite. The *fyr on flode*, however, has long been the most effective synecdoche for the mere since it evokes not only the unnatural comingling of fire and water, but perhaps also suggests a supernatural connection to will-o-the-wisps, eerie ghost lights that are most common to marshy regions and which lead travelers off known paths and into the bogs where they are lost.³⁴ Whatever its origins and whatever it is meant to symbolize, this fire is surely a *niðwundor*, an evil wonder (l. 1365).

In *Beowulf*, fire symbolizes or is associated with adverse events and characters—either bringing about death or brought about as a result of it, lingering in the background as a consequence of betrayal or as a symbol of it, evoking sorrow and fear virtually

wherever it appears. Thus, the simile that describes the light from Grendel's eyes as *ligge gelicost* is much more than a figurative description. It alludes to imagery that evokes the same death, strife, sorrow, and fear that Grendel's behavior causes. Although this characterization of fire is out of step with the rest of Old English literature, we would do well to remember Noël Carroll and his thesis that the criteria by which we should judge what is monstrous or terrifying is found in the text—in the depiction by the author and by the reaction of other characters to the monster or the fearsome (31). We must take what evidence the poem gives us, and in the case of Grendel's eyes, the poem tells us that the allusion to fire is a much greater negative element than is the presence of light: a light in the eyes may be either positive nor negative, but a light *ligge gelicost* alerts us to trouble from the one who bears the trait.

Grendel's Eyes: *unfæger*

One further detail, the adjective *unfæger*, provides the final element of the poet's semiotic interest in Grendel's eyes. Whereas *ligge gelicost* is evocative, *unfæger* is declarative. The latter has none of the nuance of *Beowulf's* fire imagery, and its more direct condemnation does not seem to require much in the way of literary sleuthing: that light which shines from Grendel's eyes is ugly. However, there is an interesting aspect to the figurative potential of this modifier that its declarative nature belies. The various theories of extramission—more so in the Stoic, Galenic, and Augustinian explanations, but also in the Platonic version—posited that the light which streamed forth from the eyes was either a divine gift or linked to the soul. Plato's "pure fire," as he says in the *Timaeus*, is not only a gift from the gods, but is also very much like the light of the sun (100-03). For Galen and the Stoics, the *pneuma* or *spiritus animalis* came directly from

the brain, the citadel of rational thought and consciousness (Lindberg 9, Siegel 263). For Augustine, the light also comes from the brain, which he calls *caelum corporis nostri* [the heaven of our bodies]; moreover, this light, though it is not the soul itself, is akin to it (*De Genesi ad litteram* 7.13.20, 12.16.32; *PL* 34.362, 34.466).

If the light that shines from the eyes and allows one to see is so intimately connected with the highest faculties of a human being—the soul, the *hegemonikon*, the very gift of the gods—what might this say about Grendel’s *unfæger* light? It seems a perfect opportunity for a poet who has already shown an interest in the semiotic potentialities of morphology to comment on Grendel’s very nature. With any of the three major strains of extramission, Grendel’s *unfæger* light is a damning trait. From a purely Platonic viewpoint, the pure and delicate fire so much like sunlight has been perverted and turned into something grotesque. In a Stoic/Galenic interpretation, Grendel’s spirit produces this foul *pneuma*. There is, therefore, something “wrong” with his body or his *hegemonikon*, the seat of his consciousness. Since Grendel possesses a rational mind and is placed in the family tree of Cain, it could be that the poet conceived of Grendel as congenitally deformed in both mind and body. But it could also be his soul, since the *pneuma* comes from the seat of consciousness—the very thing that makes human beings rational and is, therefore, so closely associated with the soul itself. An Augustinian perspective would be much the same as a Stoic/Galenic one, though the connection is a bit more straightforward. For Augustine, the light rays are very similar in substance to the soul itself (*De Genesi ad litteram* 12.16.32; *PL* 34.466). It stands to reason, then, that an ugly light emanating from Grendel’s eyes means that the soul with which it is so closely related is as *unfæger* as—or worse than—the light itself.

With *unfæger* and *ligge gelicost*, the poet has fully distinguished his monster from the human beings against whom he contends. There is no mistaking Grendel's shining eyes for a normal extramitted soul-fire or for Matthew's *leoht*. Grendel's is an ugly, unpleasant light that leaves little doubt as to the monstrosity of his body. This light is not necessarily abnormal in and of itself—since it functions as a positive image in contemporary literature and since the Anglo-Saxon understanding of optics likely posited a light that shone from the eyes. As with Grendel's gigantism, the poet has seized an opportunity to isolate a single part of the body and explore its semiotic potential. By likening the light to fire, he connects it with an image of death, sorrow, and destruction. By calling it ugly, he comments not just on Grendel's body, but also on his mind or soul.

The Philologists' Claws

Unlike that which focused on Grendel's eyes and gigantism, my analysis of Grendel's supposed claws is not concerned with semiotic potential or traditions in which they may participate. Neither of these topics can be discussed here, simply because we cannot advance past the first-order problem of textual criticism.

As we saw at the beginning of Chapter III, the assumption that Grendel has claws is pervasive in translations and editions of the poem.³⁵ The almost unbroken agreement by translators belies the difficulty of ll. 984-87 and the problems encountered by textual critics of *Beowulf*. The point is an important one because the accepted interpretation that Grendel had claws is wholly rooted in this less-than-clear passage:

*foran æghwylc wæs,
steda nægla gehwylc style gelicost,
hæpenes handsporu, hilderinces,
egl', unheoru*

[before each [were] the hand-leavings of the heathen warrior, the fingertips each like steel—horrible, dreadful]. (ll. 984-87)

With the obvious exception of ll. 2207-31 (which are difficult due to unusual damage to folio 179r, a later retouching, and an even later disastrous attempt to recover the text with a chemical agent), these are perhaps the poem's most difficult lines to puzzle out.

Although their general sense is easy enough to understand, any detailed analysis and interpretation is frustrated by the diction and syntax. Three points (shown above in bold) are especially difficult and especially pertinent to Grendel's morphology. What follows is an examination of these three vexed elements of this most vexing passage; the Gordian knot that is produced by competing interpretations of ll. 984-87 forces us to conclude that whatever Grendel's hands may look like, they cannot be used as evidence for his morphological abnormality.³⁶

Let us begin with *egl'* and work our way back through the passage. The MS reads *egl*, and early editors—most notably C.L. Wrenn—took it as a less-common form of *egle*, translating it as “spike” (136). In the fourth edition of Klaeber's *Beowulf*, R.D. Fulk et al. contest both the translation and the editorial decision, observing that *egl* has only “substantiated meanings [of] ‘awn’ (‘ail,’ that is, ‘beard of barley’), ‘thistle,’ ‘chaff,’ ‘mote’” (Klaeber 175). None of these meanings is congruent with the rest of the passage, for plants like barley and thistle are contrary to the hardness demanded by *style gelicost* in l. 985.

C.J.E. Ball provides an equally fanciful solution when he advocates amending *egl* to *egla*, the nominative singular masculine form of Wrenn's *egl*, in order to render *hilderinces / egl[a] unheoru* [terrible sword of the warrior] (45). He explains that the original would have been *egla heoru*, but at some later point, the phrase was mistakenly taken as *eglū heoru*, then incorrectly divided into *egl ũheoru*, and finally reconstructed to

give the MS reading of *egl unheoru* (46). Ball recognizes the disjunction between his rendering and the rest of the passage, arguing that “terrible sword” is a metaphorical reference to Grendel’s steel-like claws (46). This proposal is ultimately unconvincing. Ball’s reading, though grammatically and syntactically sound, demands we accept that the poet used a relatively tenuous metaphor that was then lost to us through not one but three copying errors. Such a problematic explanation becomes even more so when we pause to consider Ball’s assumption that Grendel had sword-like claws to use as weapons, for the words and phrases on which he bases the premise are not as firm as he wished to believe.

Fulk et al. opt for *eglʹ* as an elided form of *eglu* [horrible]. Wrenn considered this alternative in his edition and even judged it “paleographically plausible,” but in the end he dismissed it because the term “gives odd syntax and weak meaning” (136). Not all agree with his reasoning; Bruce Mitchell observes that it is not uncommon to have “two adjectives in asyndetic parataxis in the same half-line” and points to another instance in which Wrenn retains this exact relationship in his edition (315).³⁷ Furthermore, Fulk et al. give twelve analogous examples in the poem to rebut this objection (Klaeber 175). Given Mitchell’s pointed remark regarding Wrenn’s inconsistency and the ample evidence for asyndetic parataxis in *Beowulf*, it seems most logical to take the MS form of *egl* as an elided form of *eglu*, working in parallel with *unheoru*.

Handsporu is perhaps the most confusing and frustrating of the three terms. The initial part of the compound, *hand*, is simple enough, but *sporu* is another matter entirely, as it appears nowhere in the Old English corpus. Many editors, including Klaeber and Fulk et al., take it to be a form of *spora*, thus rendering “hand-spur.” As Ball points out,

however, *spora* is a weak masculine noun, so we would not expect to see a *-u* ending (45). In response to this objection, Klaeber originally suggested (and Fulk et al. maintain) that *spora* “has passed over to the feminine class” (Klaeber 175). In Old English, there are instances in which the grammatical context demands a feminine form of *spora*. For it to appear as *sporu*, however, the word would have to shift not only from masculine to feminine, but also from weak to strong—quite a linguistic leap.

B.R. Hutcheson’s solution is to call it a scribal error, suggesting an emendation to *handspora* (305, n. 24). The answer is an elegant one and has some textual criticism to recommend it. Peter Clemoes, for example, observes that the miniscule *a* was often open at the top causing it to look quite like a *u*; distinguishing between the two required “sustained concentration”—a difficulty likely compounded if the scribe were not intimately familiar with the language (32-33). Grammatically, however, Hutcheson’s theory is less elegant. If *handspora* were the correct reading, then it would be a weak masculine noun, but its modifier, *unheoru*, would no longer agree since the *-u* ending demands that it be either a feminine singular or neuter plural strong adjective.

Like Hutcheson, Ball attributes *handsporu* either to scribal error or an alternate spelling and replaces *-sporu* with *-speoru* to create the compound “hand-spears” (45). His solution avoids the grammatical dead-end that vitiates Hutcheson’s proposal because the adjectives *egl’* and *unheoru* would still agree with the neuter plural noun (even if we reject Ball’s revision of *egla*). Furthermore, because it relies on either a dropped letter or an alternative spelling, it avoids the linguistic acrobatics Klaeber and Fulk et al. are forced to create.

Ball's argument, though it makes good grammatical sense, has two important problems. First, it posits a dubious alternate spelling; although he points out that it is not uncommon for an *e* from an *-eo-* form to be dropped in *Beowulf*, he replaces a problematic word with one that is hardly better (45).³⁸ A simple search of the Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus reveals that *speoru*, as a form of *spere*, appears only once—in a glossary that lists it for the Latin *contos* (Hessels 34).³⁹ J.H. Hessels, the editor of the edition, acknowledges that the Latin terms are “in very corrupt condition,” containing “numerous deviations in spelling” (xv). He further notes that the Old English is in a similar state, and *speoru* is among the forms that he identifies as anomalous (xli). One appearance in a poorly-written glossary is hardly compelling evidence for replacing the unattested *-sporu* with the equally dubious *-speoru*.

The second issue with Ball's proposed reading is that it sacrifices meaning. *Handspeora* makes perfect sense if we also accept his radical revision of *egl' unheoru*, for spears and swords are emphasized in descriptions of other characters (as when the Geats land in Denmark and make their way to Heorot). However, as shown above, Ball's reading is inferior to other, more credible explanations. Thus, the only remaining element of the passage that might support an interpretation of Grendel's “hand-spears” is the steel-like *steda nægla*, which as we will see, is not clear and provides an unsteady foundation on which to construct such a reading. Even if we put aside these strictly philological objections, *handspeora* makes poor sense in the passage. There is, for example, no evidence that Grendel actually uses his hands as weapons: he grabs with them and his fingers burst open, but never does he attempt to claw, rip, or stab with

them.⁴⁰ *Handspeoru*, therefore, is neither required by nor especially germane to the narrative.

In an essay he published three years before editing the most recent edition of Klaeber's *Beowulf*, Fulk gives an explanation that is plausible in both its grammar and meaning. He takes *sporu* as the neuter plural of *spor* [leavings, vestiges] (148). As with the other explanations, his is not without its difficulties. Ball was aware of this possibility in 1965, dismissing it as "singularly inappropriate in the context" (45). Although he does not explain why this solution is so wrong-headed, much of the resistance is likely based on a tautology: the thinking seems to be that because Grendel has claws, the best solutions to these textual difficulties are those that in some way relate to claws—which provides the evidence needed to argue that he has claws. As we have seen so far, however, the evidence for claws is less than compelling, and Ball's objection loses its force in direct relation to the power of that evidence.

In defense of his reading, Fulk points out that *spor* is used metaphorically in other Old English poetic works. For example, the kenning *wæpnes spor*, literally "leavings of weapons," is used to refer to wounds in both *Juliana* and *Andreas* (148). If we consider a metaphorical interpretation of the term as it is used in *Beowulf*, we may have yet another instance of the grimly ironic meiosis so characteristic of Old English verse. The arm that hangs before Unferth and the rest of the Danes is, indeed, what Grendel left behind. Furthermore, this reading of *spor* echoes a passage describing Grendel's arm some 100 lines earlier. As a leaving or vestige, it can be associated with the *lapes lastas* [tracks of the hostile one] and the *feorhlastas* [life-tracks] that remain behind from the gaping

shoulder socket after Grendel flees Heorot (ll. 841, 846). Likewise, the arm itself is depicted as a symbolic vestige:

Pæt wæs tacen sweotol
syþðan hildedeor hond alegde,
earm ond eaxle —þær wæs eal geador
Grendles grape— under geapne hr(of)
[That was a clear sign, after the battle-brave one hung the hand, arm, and
shoulder—there was Grendel’s grasp all together—under the broad roof.]
(ll. 833-36)

The poet here represent Grendel’s arm as a *tacen*, a token, a sign—a part of his body left behind to be seen and interpreted by the Danes and Geats.

What we are left with is a number of imperfect solutions to the textual problem of *handsporu*. Ball’s is grammatically sound, but gives poor meaning. Klaeber and Fulk et al. give a grammatically plausible reading with good meaning, but they ask us to accept a linguistically dubious class shift. Hutcheson’s is paleographically elegant and also provides good meaning, but is flawed in its grammar. Fulk’s is the only one that is both textually sound and gives fair meaning, and it is the rendering I have adopted in my own translation. Whatever choice we make, however, prudence is the wise course. We simply cannot, as so many translators and editors have, rely on *handsporu* to shed much light on Grendel’s physical appearance.

The last of the difficult points is *steda nægla*. As Klaeber first noted, the problem with this phrase is that its plural form is nowhere else attested (qtd. in Dobbie 164). The phrase “places of the nails” has also long been considered clumsy and unclear. In response to both of these issues, earlier editors, such as Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie and Klaeber, amend the phrase to *stiðra nægla*, giving it the meaning of “hard nails.”⁴¹ Dobbie defends the change on the grounds that the MS reading “shows an unusual word

order and is otherwise stylistically suspect” (164). However, Wrenn and Fulk et al. find fault with *stiðra* on paleographical grounds because the emendation is too radical: there is no damage to this portion of f. 154v that would require such a drastic change (Wrenn 134, Klaeber 175).

Dobbie further defends the change on metrical grounds by arguing that “although it is rather long, it is identical in metrical structure with *oncyð eorla gewhæm*, l. 1420” (164). This is, perhaps, an unfortunate piece of evidence for Dobbie to use since it ultimately undermines his point. John C. Pope places *stiðra nægla* within Eduard Seivers’s verse pattern Type D4 (into which l. 1420 also fits), but seems troubled by its non-standard single alliteration:

This rhythm conflicts with the grammar, according to which *stiðra nægla* should stand together against *gewhylc*. Therefore the only acceptable emendations are *stiðnægla gewhylc* (Type E) and *stiðra nægla* (Type A), with the omission of the redundant *gewhylc*. But *stead nægla gewhylc*...makes better sense than any of the proposed emendations, and can be read according to type E no. 7. (313-14)

A.J. Bliss, too, struggles with the single alliteration and concurs with Pope, placing the half-line in Sievers’s Type E and concluding that “whatever difficulties the interpretation of the verse may offer, they must not be removed at the cost of producing an impossible metrical type” (74). Thus, the metrical and paleographical objections that have been raised are too convincing for us to accept the emendation of *steda nægla* to *stiðra nægla*; such a course seems to cause more problems than it resolves.

Alistair Campbell makes a more conservative emendation to *stedenægla*, also arriving at “firm nails” and, by extension, “talons” (57). Mitchell supports this reading, likely because its sense dovetails nicely with *style gelicost* at the end of l. 985 (315). Fulk et al., however, deem the emendation “speculative” as it is based on thin evidence—

though no thinner than that which supports their reading of *handsporu* (Klaeber 175). According to Mitchell, *stedewang* [open space, firm ground] is the basic analogue for creating the compound *stedenægla*, though the actual form of the latter is encountered nowhere else in the Old English corpus (Mitchell 315).

Fulk et al. follow the MS, but admit that “we must assume an unfamiliar idiom” (175). The difficulty is lessened somewhat by D.E. Martin Clarke’s observation of a similar construction in the *Kalevala*, a compilation of Finnish folk songs and stories that predate their nineteenth-century publication. The analogue leads Clarke to speculate that *steda nægla* could be “a defining epithet, a kenning for finger-tips,” a reading supported by Pope (Clarke 320, Pope 314). The original text, bolstered by Clarke’s analogue, gives a reading that equates Grendel’s fingertips with steel. Because it conveys the general sense (though less adroitly than we might wish) of the fingertips as being hard, it achieves the same sense as Campbell’s and Mitchell’s suggested emendation to *stedenægla*. Because it does so without any editorial interference, the solution offered by Fulk et al. and Clarke seems preferable to any textual changes yet proposed.

If we take *steda nægla* as “fingertips,” we have a slightly awkward, but passably clear reference—if not to claws in particular, then at least to something approximating them. Claw-like, of course, is not the same as a clear reference to claws, and Grendel’s morphology remains murky. It could be that the tips of his fingers are grown to a hard point like talons; it could be that there are claws growing out of his hands like those of a bear or lion; it could be that these are human-like fingernails growing out of a familiar nail bed, but incredibly hard. It might even be that the steel-like nails are not meant to be morphologically abnormal at all, but to work in apposition to ll. 987b-90: *æghwylc*

*gecwæð / þæt him heardra nan hrinan wolde / iren ærgod þæt ðæs ahlæcan / blodge
beadufolme onberan wolde* [each of the stout men said that no tried and true iron blade
might touch him, none injure the bloody battle-hand of the fierce assailant]. Grendel’s
steel-like fingertips could very well symbolize his impenetrability; just as hardened steel
is much stronger than iron (no matter how proven in battle), so too is Grendel much
stronger than any weapon the Danes or Geats have forged or won.

What we are left with, then, is a collection of possible solutions—some better,
some worse, none definitive—to the textual problem that is ll. 984-87. To pin our hope
of understanding Grendel’s morphology to this passage would be unwise, since the
decades of criticism thus far have left us with more “ifs” than Shakespeare’s Rosalind.
Because a decision *must* be made for the purposes of translation, I have made what I
deem to be the most prudent choices. The problem, as I mentioned at the beginning of
this section, is that editorial choices and decisions by translators—even if accompanied
by such extensive discussion of the difficulties in the original as Klaeber, Dobbie, and
Fulk et al. provide—have a tendency to ossify the passage. All too quickly, what was
uncertain becomes fact: repetition begets authority, authority begets acceptance. What is
invigorating to a philologist and what is acceptable to a layperson do not translate into
textual evidence; this vexed passage is poor support for the sort of analysis I wish to
undertake here. It is at best a precarious basis for analyzing Grendel’s physical
appearance and at worst a red herring, offering false promise for those wishing to find
concrete evidence of his morphological abnormality.

Notes

¹ Walt Whitman. “I Sing the Body Electric.” *Leaves of Grass*. Ed. Michael Moon. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 2002, ll. 102-11.

² See the discussion of Hill's identification and examination of this interest in Chapter III (73-4).

³ According to Renoir, this is purposeful, and he concludes that the poet carefully selected (and suppressed other) imagery to control the audience's visualization (158). Stanley B. Greenfield disagrees, arguing that the reference to Grendel's eyes—especially the simile *ligge gelicost*—prepares the reader for the physical description that is to come later. See Greenfield's "Grendel's Approach to Heorot: Syntax and Poetry." *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*. Ed. Robert P. Creed. Providence: Brown UP, 1967. 275-84.

⁴ See Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* 8.21 for the catoblepas and 7.2 for the Scythian women. *Natural History*. Ed. H. Rackham. Vols. 2-3. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1961 and 1940.

⁵ There are instances, like the monster Typhoeus in Hesiod's *Theogony*, who have fiery eyes, but we do not know how available these particular monsters would have been to Anglo-Saxon scholars and poets. See *Hesiod*. Ed. and Trans. Glenn W. Most. Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006.

⁶ See *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1921 (especially 48).

⁷ Goldsmith presents the original Icelandic from Chambers without translation. This is odd because the translation provided in his book contradicts her reading: "There was bright moonshine and broken clouds without. At times they drifted in front of the moon and at times away. Now at the moment when Glam fell, the clouds cleared from before the moon, and Glam rolled up his eyes; and Grettir himself has said that that was the one sight he had seen which struck fear into him. Then such a sinking came over Grettir, from his weariness and from that sight of Glam rolling his eyes, that he had no strength to draw his knife and lay almost between life and death" (*op. cit.* 173).

⁸ See Grendel's approach, especially ll. 702-09.

⁹ Translation mine.

¹⁰ Oliver F. Emerson relates the popular medieval tradition in which Cain was so bestial that his own kin mistook him for game and accidentally killed him (867). John Block Friedman observes that horns (or lumps in the case of the Irish *Lebor Gabála*) were a common iconographical symbol for Cain's lost humanity (96-97). In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine interprets Cain as a builder of cities—the cities of man set against the City of God (15.5).

¹¹ Translation mine.

¹² Although *The Book of Wisdom* was composed in Greek and was never a part of the Christian canon, Anlezark finds references to it in the writings of Aldhelm, Bede, St. Boniface, Ælfric, and Byrhtferth, showing that the text was known during the Anglo-Saxon period (268). To be sure, that influence would be no stranger than finding Attila the Hun in the *Völsunga saga*.

¹³ This is, perhaps, a hint at the unsourced tradition Migne referenced in his commentary.

¹⁴ Translation mine. One might also note the similarity between this description of Satan and the following description of marvelous races in the *Liber Monstrorum*.

¹⁵ John Block Friedman makes passing mention of a race of men in what he calls the "Alexander" literary tradition whose eyes shine, though the source of his reference is not clear since it comes in a lengthy list of so-called monstrous races culled from Ktesias, Megasthenes, Pliny, and the Alexander cycles (18-19). Whatever the source, it probably is the root of the examples seen in the *Wonders of the East* since most of the monsters and marvels that populate it ultimately come from Greco-Roman sources.

¹⁶ Translation mine.

¹⁷ In *Deformed Discourse*, Williams mentions a race of men in the *Liber Monstrorum* whose eyes glow, though he cites as his reference an unpublished dissertation referred to as *Book of the Monsters* (149). This is odd, since Orchard's *Pride and Prodigies* had been published three years earlier. Whatever Williams's reason for preferring an unpublished dissertation over Orchard's transcription, it points up some of the difficulty in referring to the *Liber Monstrorum*. Following Orchard, I refer to it in the singular out of convention more than accuracy because it exists in at least five MSS, each one different in its particulars.

¹⁸ Translations mine. All references to the *Liber Monstrorum* are taken from Orchard's *Pride and Prodigies* (275, passim).

¹⁹ The edition by Herzfeld draws from four separate MSS; only two (Cotton Julius A.x and Corpus Christi MS 196) contain the martyrdom of St Christopher.

²⁰ See Augustine's *De civitate Dei* 16.8, in which he wrestles with the question of whether morphologically abnormal creatures who are nevertheless *animal rationale mortale* may be saved and may, therefore, be a part of humanity.

²¹ For instance, the *King of Tars* revolves around a deformed and ugly infant, born of a Saracen father and Christian mother, who is miraculously transformed to a beautiful Western European child after his baptism. See *King of Tars: Edited from the Auchinleck Manuscript, Advocates 19.2.1*. Ed. Judith Perryman. Middle English Texts 12. Heidelberg: Winter, 1980.

²² Translation mine.

²³ Because my interest in optical theory is quite narrow and the chronological range of theories so vast, this overview is necessarily simplified and incomplete. For a more thorough discussion, see Lindberg's near-encyclopediaic *The Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (especially 1-17 and 87-103) and Akbari's *Seeing Through the Veil* (especially 21-44). I acknowledge these works at the outset because the summary that follows is largely drawn from both.

²⁴ See *De anima*. Aristotle: *On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Breath*. Ed. and Trans. W.S. Hett. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975 (2.7.418-19). Aristotle was not the first to propose the theory: Pre-Socratic Atomists such as Leucippus, Democritus, and Epicurus held that atoms (*eidola*) continually streamed from physical objects. Sight, then, was a matter of these particles striking the eye and transmitting that image to or imprinting it on the mind.

²⁵ Again, he was not alone in his theory. Natural philosophers Euclid, Hero, and Ptolemy, who were concerned with the geometric properties of optics, also adopted the extramission theory. They believed a cone of visual rays issued forth to spread out, strike physical objects, and return the visual pattern to the observer's eye.

²⁶ Although I do not have the room to make a full discussion of their ideas, Boethius and Macrobius also held a theory of extramission. See Boethius's *Consolatio philosophiae* (5.4) and Macrobius's *Saturnalia* (7.14).

²⁷ The three works that laid out Aristotle's intromission theory (*De Anima*, *De Animalibus*, and *De Sensu*) were not translated from Greek or Arabic until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. All, therefore, that was known about his ideas came to the Anglo-Saxons via later Roman and Late Classical writers. (Cf. Mary Catherine Bodden's "Evidence for Knowledge of Greek in Anglo-Saxon England." *Anglo-Saxon England* 17 (1988): 217-46.) Some later writers like Chalcidius actively disputed the intromission visual theory, so even when it was transmitted to the Middle Ages, it did not arrive in anything like a fair presentation.

²⁸ The rude churl who insults Colegreant in Chretien de Troyes's *Yvain* "was exceedingly ugly and repulsive...his head was larger than that of a packhorse or any other beast. His hair was in tufts, and his bare forehead was nearly two spans wide. He had big hairy ears like those of an elephant, heavy eyebrows and a flat face, the eyes of an owl and the nose of a cat, a mouth stretching wide like a wolf's, the sharp and yellowed teeth of a wild boar, and a red beard and twisted whiskers. His chin merged with his chest, and he had a large back-bone, twisted and hunched" (260). Chaucer's tale depicts the old crone's physical decrepitude in the most grotesque manner possible in order to make the knight's decision that much more difficult; because he does marry her, however, she is included in the realm of the human. (See *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*. Trans. David Staines. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990, and "The Wife of Bath's Tale." *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, ll. 1100-01.) Cf. Debra Higgs Strickland (8-9) and John Block Friedman (63).

²⁹ This is not to say that the *Beowulf*-poet knew the *Timaeus* or was familiar with Stoic concepts like *pneuma*. Such a connection is hardly necessary. Just as the average American knows that germs and viruses cause sickness but not necessarily how, so too the poet may have known that the eye emitted a fiery light in order to produce vision—even without a clear understanding of its theoretical and technical details.

³⁰ Bede's famous allegory of the sparrow, with its cheery description of the hall in which *accenso quidem foco in medio* [the fire burns in the middle] and warms the place on a winter's night, is proof enough that *Beowulf*'s depiction of fire was not a widespread motif (2.13). See Bertram Colgrave's and R.A.B. Mynors's *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969.

³¹ Obviously, not all thirty-four can be covered in detail. Of the negative references to fire, those I do not examine here are: ll. 1516-17, 1764, 2302-06, 2307-09, 2321-23, 2333-35, 2339-41, 2522-23, 2546-49, 2569-70, 2580-82, 2594-95, 2648-52, 2675-77, 2777-82, and 2817-19.

³² Obviously, my reading of the end of the poem is much closer to the melancholic ending that John Halverson sees in the poem (604) instead of the stoically heroic and ever-hopeful ending Edward B. Irving, Jr. sees (245-46).

³³ Cf. C.D. Wright, who argues that both the *Visio S. Pauli* and *Beowulf* likely shared an original source—perhaps a redacted version of the *Visio S. Pauli*. See Wright's *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993 (especially 116-36).

³⁴ Interestingly, England and the Scandinavian countries have produced a goodly number of these apparitions. In Welsh mythology, the lights are a ghostly fire held in the hand of a *púca* or fairy/goblin; in Britain, they were thought to be pixie lights that mischievously misled travelers; in Scandinavia, they were associated with buried treasure, and belief in at least one instance, the Paasselkä devils, persists to this day.

³⁵ See above 76-77.

³⁶ In the most basic sense, we know that Grendel has hands and fingers. This is not at issue, and the references supporting this are some of the clearest (*folm*: ll. 722b, 748a, 970b; *hand / hond*: ll. 746a, 834b, 927b, 983b; *finger*: ll. 760b, 764b, 984b, 1505b). There is nothing particularly interesting about these terms, and they neither denote nor connote anything out of the ordinary. *Folm* is used to describe the hands of Hondscio (l. 745); *Beowulf* refers to his own *hand* in order to claim agency for the killing of the *nicors* in the swimming match with Breca (l. 558); and although *finger* is never used in reference to a human being in *Beowulf*, it is in other Old English works. (For example, in l. 155 Ælfric's "Exaltation of the Cross" instructs the reader to make the sign of the cross with the fingers (*mid þrym fingrum man sceall senian and bletsian*). See *Ælfric's Lives of the Saints*. Ed. Walter W. Skeat. Vol. 2. London: EETS, 1900 (154).) Indeed, there is nothing in the ten above references to suggest claws or morphological abnormality. Another reference to Grendel's hands comes in ll. 833-36, but ultimately tells us nothing more than we knew before. Grendel has a hand, an arm, and a shoulder—which the poet renames in the clause *eal*

geador / Grendles grape. This is his means of grasping men and grappling with Beowulf. The phrase *Grendles grape* is evocative of his *modus operandi* and connotative in that it shows him to be a greedy creature, but it does nothing to clear up for us the matter of whether he had claws since one may grasp as well with a hand as a claw. There are, in other places, references to Grendel's arm and shoulder—but these need not concern us in a discussion of claws.

³⁷ The two adjectives are *frome* and *fyrð-hwate* in l. 1641a.

³⁸ Ball's rendering is wedded to the *-speoru* form, whether or not one thinks the scribe erred in his copying. If *-sporu* were a variant spelling, it would, of course, represent *-speoru*. If, in the alternative, it were the result of scribal error, *-speoru* would still be that which the poet meant to be written.

³⁹ See the Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus. University of Toronto. 24 November 2009. 14 June 2012 <<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/libproxy.uoregon.edu/doecorpus/index.html>>.

⁴⁰ As we will see in Chapters V and VI, Grendel *slat* Hondscio in his final attack on Heorot, and it is tempting to understand it as referring to Grendel's claws—especially since it comes on the heels of *gefeng* in the previous line. However, the text does not indicate that his hands or claws had anything to do with this action. Indeed, Bosworth and Toller show an Anglo-Saxon usage that is often associated with biting or consuming, and, because every other action that follows *slat* has to do with Grendel's mouth, it is more likely that he rips open the Geat with his teeth.

⁴¹ This rendering appears through the third edition of Klaeber's book and is revised to the more familiar *steda nægla* by Fulk et al. in the fourth edition. See Klaeber's *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 3rd ed. Boston: D.C. Heath, 1950.

CHAPTER V

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT: FOOD TABOO AND SYMBOLISM

“I can see you one of these old-fashioned yam eaters.”

“They’re my birthmark,” I said. “I yam what I yam!”

“Then you must be from South Car’lina,” he said with a grin.

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*¹

Introduction

The next two chapters both explore Grendel’s relationship to food with an eye toward how his foodways construct his monstrousness. One aspect of this is his deviant behavior with respect to food and food traditions. In other words, what he eats and how he eats it are distinguishing characteristics that the poet uses not only to set Grendel apart from the human beings of the poem, but also to locate him outside the behavioral norm in both spectacular and subtle ways. The current chapter will content itself with an examination of the taboo of anthropophagy as it is expressed in *Beowulf* and the symbolism involved both in that taboo and also eating and drinking in general. In the following chapter, I address the alimentary transgressions of Grendel as they relate to the areas of cuisine and etiquette.

Like geographical location, kin relations, settlement patterns, and languages, alimentary customs can be used to understand, unify, and subordinate communities. The foodways displayed by Grendel do not simply distinguish him from the Danes and Geats, and they are not differences that are only later re-evaluated as deviant.² Instead, the poet seems to have created this particular cluster of alimentary violations specifically to illustrate his monstrousness. The poet and characters (and most readers) reject Grendel’s foodways along a number of different fronts, his deviant behavior extending beyond the anthropophagy that has been such a familiar reference in *Beowulf* criticism. In every

major alimentary area, as distinguished by social scientists interested in food studies, he performs actions that violate the behavioral standards depicted by the poem's human characters.

I stress that the standard against which Grendel's behavior is considered deviant is demonstrated by the poem's characters and by the poet because, as Alfred Korzybski first said, "the map is not the territory."³ Such is the case with the social world depicted in *Beowulf* and the historical reality of Anglo-Saxon England. A number of scholars have identified a disconnect between what must have been the historical Anglo-Saxon daily life that Christopher Dyer found so interesting and the day-to-day existence depicted in Old English poems like *Beowulf*. James W. Earl, in his study of the hall and its sacral function as a creator and definer of community, argues that the warriors in the poem "drink and talk there, but they do not live there; they do not eat there (a feast is a *gebeorscip*, a beer-drinking, or a *symbel*, a ceremonial feast, and there is no mention of food), and for the most part they do not sleep there" (116). That is, feasting in the poem is the result of a heavily stylized representation of the Germanic warrior society because the poem's emphasis seems to be on the sociological function of the hall and the fellowship in it, rather than any depiction of a historical reality. Hugh Magennis concurs with Earl, recognizing the same discrepancy and offering different—though largely complementary—reasons for it. In *Anglo-Saxon Appetites*, he contends that food is regularly excised from even the feast scenes of Old English poetry because the literary tradition follows the conventions of an already influential Germanic one that was largely unconcerned with food (41).

Obviously, Anglo-Saxons ate. Poems like *Beowulf*, therefore, depict Anglo-Saxon England not as it was, but as the poet imagined it had been.⁴ On this point Earl cautions the reader from the start by characterizing his work as “an ethnography of the world of the poem rather than of any historical reality the poem supposedly represents” (100). John M. Hill adopts much the same stance in his study: “the poem’s world [is] a complex idealization for the poet...In effect the poet recreates an epic memory of the past, coming to see the past in terms of his values and those of his present” (*The Cultural...* 7). We cannot now fully understand its historical context. Even if we employ psychoanalytic/structuralist anthropology, as does Earl, or comparative ethnology, as does Hill, we at best deepen our understanding of the poem’s customs. While we may use what knowledge we have gained from written records and archeological work to inform an examination of *Beowulf*’s social systems, we cannot safely use it to better understand Anglo-Saxon historical social systems any more than we could use “The Knight’s Tale” to help us understand classical Athens. Our poem is, moreover, the very picture of overdetermination: set in Scandinavia and produced in a Christianized Anglo-Saxon context, it is a reimagining of a lost heroic past where Germanic traditions held sway. Thus, its overdetermined cultural history and its stylized depiction of a warrior society make it a poor candidate for Archibald Strong’s dream of it as “the picture of a whole civilization, of the Germania which Tacitus describes...an important historical document” (qtd. in Tolkien 247). Using it to somehow recover the historical reality of Anglo-Saxon England is futile.

To avoid such a dead-end, I will follow Earl and Hill by focusing on the world as the poet creates it. With very few exceptions, my examination of Grendel’s monstrous

foodways will be limited to alimentary concerns as expressed in *Beowulf*: the differences evinced by Grendel with respect to culturally sanctioned acts and traditions shown by the characters of the poem. Such an approach continues the distinction first made in Chapter II between a reading that assumes universal codes by which to judge deviancy and one that understands behavioral transgression to be textually situated, thus remaining sensitive to the reactions and judgments made by the poet and his characters.

Food Studies and the Four Food (Studies) Groups

Fast food, slow food. Organic, conventional, genetically-modified. Omnivores, Herbivores, Locavores. Health, obesity, anorexia, starvation. The concept and social reality of food cut across a number of categories—from medicine to the environment, from economics to identity politics. Academic study of food began in the early- and mid-twentieth century with anthropologists like Audrey Richards, Bronisław Malinowski, Margaret Mead, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Mary Douglas; their work opened up food studies to examinations of what people will and will not eat, where they eat, with whom they eat, when they eat, and how they eat. By the early twenty-first century, the study of foodways exploded, reaching farther than its founders could have dreamed. In 2008, for example, the editors of *Food and Culture: A Reader* are forced to abandon any hope of comprehensive coverage—even with selections touching on issues as disparate as sugar's function in Caribbean colonialism, the on-going debate between proponents of breastfeeding and of baby formula, and dumpster-diving as an anti-capitalist demonstration of punk cuisine.⁵

Different though they may be, most studies on food and foodways still rely on a single assumption based on the work of the field's pioneers: that food and its

consumption are culturally constructed, or at the very least culturally influenced. Roland Barthes is representative of the position when he, during his high structuralist phase, asserts that “an entire ‘world’ (social environment) is present in and signified by food” (Barthes 23). That is, one can identify a certain “spirit” of food within a culture by looking at its traditions and the attitudes about it. Though her methodology and even her general purpose are different than Barthes’s, Carole Counihan shows this same understanding of food’s cultural function and value when she argues that both the power and gender attitudes of a specific society can be understood through examinations of their alimentary practices (6). In other words, who we are and how we understand the world is in part shaped by what we eat and how we eat it.

But these cultural concerns in food studies have presented some of the very same problems encountered by other burgeoning academic areas: organization. Because it can cover examinations of the actual foodstuffs consumed, when people eat, with whom they eat, where they eat, how the food is grown, how it is obtained by consumers, how it is prepared, how it is eaten, what is its relative worth, or what specific foods symbolize, food studies could easily descend into a comprehensive but incomprehensible Library of Babel. To combat this, those working in food studies (anthropologists especially) have tried to articulate some sort of organizing principle for the field. Counihan, in particular, has introduced a useful set of four loose conglomerations for the different aspects of foodways:

Cuisine, the food elements used and rules for their combination and preparation; *etiquette and food rules*, the customs governing what, with whom, when and where one eats; *taboo*, the prohibitions and restrictions on the consumption of certain foods by certain people under certain conditions; and *symbolism*, the specific meanings attributed to foods in specific contexts. (19-20)

Cuisine, etiquette and food rules, taboo, and symbolism are by no means discrete categories, for almost all overlap in some way. But as organizing principles or clusters of concerns, they help us orient ourselves in relation to the work that has been done. Furthermore, these four categories help frame and focus an examination of alimentary behavior in *Beowulf*.

The human communities depicted in the poem display food customs that participate in all four of Counihan's categories—and Grendel behaves in a way that violates them at every turn. Yet his alimentary transgressions (with the obvious exception of the taboo of anthropophagy) have not been studied with any detail, though they can be glimpsed in the work of James L. Rosier and Hugh Magennis. Rosier writes that the imagery of Grendel's feast is all the more terrifying because it perverts something so central to what is depicted in the poem as normal life. For example, he notes in reference to ll. 118-25 and 480-87 that "the feast of Hrothgar's hall-thanes and the 'hall-thane's' feast of the men are juxtaposed" (9). In *Anglo-Saxon Appetites*, Magennis also argues that Grendel's "antipathy to human civilization is epitomized in his action of killing and then eating—feasting upon—human feasters in the very place of the feast" (79). Because they identify his feast as a perversion of human feasts based (like the Black Mass) on the retention but inversion of elements and roles, both implicate food symbolism, cuisine, and etiquette in their discussion of the anthropophagic taboo. These have been largely occluded by our preoccupation with the taboo, so if we can look past it, we find a particularly rich set of transgressions that contribute to the monstrous constellation that is Grendel and that are, perhaps, equally objectionable.

As these four clusters relate to a study of Grendel, taboo is the most obviously applicable. The earliest—and strictest—anthropological use of the term originated with James George Frazer, for whom it was directly associated with harmful magic resident in a certain item or person.⁶ This usage was relaxed and largely replaced by Emile Durkheim and Mary Douglas, the latter of whom argues that taboos work not only as a form of social control for behaviors, but also as expressions of “a general view of the social order” so that specific taboos may be emblematic of a larger cultural worldview (3). In most recent anthropological studies, taboo is synonymous with aversion; thus, a food taboo identifies what is unacceptable to consume in a certain culture. The concept itself, however, is an abstraction, what Lévi-Strauss might have called an “empty form,” so its appearance is determined by the culture and the historical moment we examine (587). Orthodox Judaism, for example, forbids the consumption of shellfish because they have neither fins nor scales, traits demanded in Leviticus 11.9-12.⁷ Reform Judaism, however, allows for their consumption since it has adopted a looser interpretation of the Torah and its taboos.

Taboo, as the example of Orthodox and Reform Judaism might suggest, is closely tied to symbolism. On a macro level, specific foodstuffs carry with them culturally specific connotations. In the Christian tradition, for example, wine has a specific symbolic value when considered in the context of the Eucharist. But in some Protestant denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention, wine becomes a complex nexus of symbolism. In these communities, it is holy by virtue of its connection to Christ’s blood, but has a thoroughly negative connotation because it is associated with the vice of drunkenness.⁸ These two alimentary categories are the focus in the remainder of this

chapter, and we begin with the most-discussed aspect of food in *Beowulf*, the taboo of anthropophagy.

Anthropophagy and Cannibalism

I said earlier that Grendel's anthropophagy has kept his other alimentary transgressions in the shadows. In order to look past the taboo of anthropophagy, paradoxically, we must first confront it. If we can understand what it is and what it is not, if we can delineate its edges, then we may understand the power that it seems to exert over the first two-thirds of the narrative—and find some way a peering behind it. That it dominates the thinking on foodways depicted in the poem is unsurprising: cannibalism is “the ultimate antisocial act” or “the ultimate charge,” depending on the evidence behind its allegation (Salmon 134, Kilgour vii). It garners such attention in *Beowulf* not only because it is so obvious, but also because it is so horrible, even to modern-day readers.

But what is the current understanding of Grendel's anthropophagy in *Beowulf* scholarship? One finds the term *cannibal* applied to him regularly, but usually in passing; it has become a shorthand descriptor, but the actual trait of his anthropophagy has not received much sustained attention.⁹ R.E. Kaske remarks on Grendel's man-eating, connecting it to the anthropophagic giants of the Hebrew *Book of Enoch*. Katherine O'Brian O'Keefe and Susan M. Kim both include anthropophagy as one of the actions that make Grendel inhuman or monstrous (O'Keefe 491-92, Kim 8). The most thorough-going examination of anthropophagy, however, is undertaken by Heather Blurton, whose *Cannibalism in High Medieval English Literature* identifies in the motif of cannibalism throughout MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv an anxiety about identity and

invasion. Her impulse and concern with the poem's anthropophagy is laudable and opens up this aspect of the poem for further examination, but because she emphasizes cannibalism as a mode of incorporating the Danish body politic, she is forced into a high level of abstraction. Any analysis of the anthropophagy and its effects on the characters or social structures in the poem is blunted. The proposition that Grendel's consumption of Danish warriors is an obstacle for political expansion rests on Blurton's unaddressed assumption that anthropophagy is inherently more terrifying than the death of warriors in battle. It is that assumption, however, that lies at the core of understanding both the taboo of anthropophagy and how Grendel is constructed as a monster via his participation in this taboo.

In the previous pages, my distinction between the terms *cannibal* and *anthropophagy* may have seemed arbitrary, but there is method in it. Although most critics have used the term *cannibalism* in all references to Grendel's consumption of human flesh, I will use *anthropophagy*. My reason is simple: anthropophagy is the eating of human flesh, whereas cannibalism is the "ingestion *by humans* of any part of a human body" (Salmon 132, emphasis mine).¹⁰ As Kristin Guest has observed, "the idea of cannibalism prompts a visceral reaction among people precisely *because* it activates our horror of consuming others like ourselves" (3). It seems unwise to argue in one breath that Grendel is a monster distinct from human beings only to reinsert him into the species *homo* by calling him a cannibal.¹¹

At the same time, I here base my theoretical approach on anthropological and sociological understandings of cannibalism. I look to cannibalism for my theoretical approach and adhere to anthropophagy as the correct description of Grendel's actions

because I am concerned with the human responses to being eaten. As I argued in Chapter II, a monster is constructed by the reactions of the characters and its depiction by the narrator and/or author. These reactions, what Noël Carroll calls a combination of “fear” and “disgust,” are prerequisites for any creature that can rightly be called a monster (28). Since we are concerned with human interpretations of Grendel’s behavior—and since there is no anthropological or sociological work done on human responses to being hunted by ogres or tigers—it seems appropriate to turn to studies of cannibalism. Much work has been done that relies, implicitly or explicitly, on the central fear of being eaten by *someone like us* that Guest so eloquently articulates. This will be of limited use to the present discussion, and I instead look to symbolic anthropology, a school of thought on cannibalism that is concerned not with what drives the behavior in the cannibal, but what cannibalism means to those who are (or feel that they are) under threat of such a practice.

Symbolic anthropology has gained traction in the last thirty years in no small part due to William Arens’s *The Man-Eating Myth*. In it, he interrogates the widespread assumption that cannibalism existed as cultural practice since, he argues, no historical instance of cannibalism meets basic anthropological standards of evidence.¹² He does, however, agree that institutionalized cannibalism is an important subject for anthropological research because of its endurance as a “myth,” a means of reproducing specific “cultural messages” (182). Much like Douglas, Arens sees the charge and concept of cannibalism as carrying a “symbolic load” (Douglas 3). His book was highly polarizing, but it inaugurated a renewed interest in the meaning of an action like cannibalism rather than whether or not it actually occurs (Salmon 136).¹³ “The idea of ‘others’ as cannibals, rather than the act,” Arens writes, “is the universal phenomenon.

The significant question is not why people eat human flesh, but why one group invariably assumes that others do” (139). Thus, we should be interested in what Grendel’s anthropophagy means to those who allege it and to those who might be eaten. This symbolic anthropological approach to cannibalism is in keeping with the definition of the monster I put forth in Chapter II, for if Grendel’s monstrosity is based on his depiction by the poet and by the responses of the poem’s human characters, their perceptions are what count and what Grendel’s anthropophagy means to him is of little importance (even if it were knowable).

Geoffrey Sanborn shows how literary critics might make use of such an approach when he examines the depiction of cannibalism in the eighteenth-century *Journal of the Resolution’s Voyage*. Identifying cannibalism as a mechanism by which cultures or authors (it is not clear that he differentiates between the two) might construct a definition of humanity, he rejects the traditional models used by critics to read literary depictions of cannibalism. Sanborn rejects these previous approaches because they either situate the practice within an exculpatory cultural matrix (excusing cannibalism based on cultural relativism) or view it as a symptom of the inherent savagery in all human beings (something dangerously close to the old “noble savage” type). He contends that it is better to study specific examples of literary cannibalism as moments of cultural construction:

we slow down the interpretative passage into the abstract realms of “culture” and “savagery,” and thereby reconfigure the scene of the encounter [between the cannibal and the Westerner] as the place where such terms are strategically enacted, rather than the place where their truth is made evident. (196)

By deconstructing individual depictions of cannibalism, we gain access to the points at which a cannibal's culture or human savagery is constructed in the Western mind—even as it is put on the page.

Sanborn's approach is complementary to the spirit of this entire study and particularly appropriate for the study of Grendel's anthropophagy as an alimentary taboo. As Ward Parks reminds us, sympathy for the monster "is not the standpoint of the *Beowulf*-poet" (5-6). Therefore, rather than attempt a reclamation of Grendel as a misunderstood outcast or show that he represents the evil in the heart of humanity, the goal is to understand how his transgressive traits are constructed in the text and why we understand him as monstrous.¹⁴ If we focus on the particular anthropophagic acts by Grendel as strategic enactments created by the poet and placed in opposition to the Danes and Geats, we find they are performances that construct the boundaries of acceptable behavior along the lines of specific anxieties.

My concern with the cultural meaning of anthropophagy and its meaning for targets (real and potential) dictates the sort of cannibalism with which I am concerned. So although anthropologists have identified a number of different kinds of cannibalism, from survival to mortuary cannibalism, I want to turn now to a specific type of exocannibalism called warfare cannibalism.¹⁵ It best applies to this examination of Grendel—and best explains the anxiety surrounding the taboo on the part of the Danes and Geats—since it carries with it symbolic elements that do not necessarily appear in other types. Peggy Sanday summarizes the two symbolic beliefs central to warfare cannibalism:

When projected onto enemies, cannibalism and torture become the means by which powerful threats to social life are dissipated. To revenge the loss

of one's own, the victim taken in warfare is tortured and reduced to food in the ultimate act of domination. At the same time, by consuming enemy flesh one assimilates the animus of another group's hostile power into one's own. (6)

In the practices of the Papua New Guinean Orokaiva tribe, whose members consumed enemy warriors to “compensate for the spirit of an Orokaiva man killed,” Sanday identifies a regenerative component of warfare cannibalism (6).¹⁶ Fitz John Porter Poole, who did fieldwork among the Bimin-Kuskusmin (also of New Guinea), reports that initiated males would consume enemy warriors to humiliate them and the tribe to which they belonged. Based on their stringent gendering of body parts (without regard for the gender of the individual), these tribesmen sought to humiliate fallen enemies by consuming only those parts of the body characterized as female. The symbolism of this discernment, according to Poole, is that eating the female parts stressed “the weak, female nature of the fallen warriors in an expression of deliberate contempt” and thereby humiliated them by emphasizing their femininity (15).

Humiliation was also the goal of the various types of mutilation practiced during Bimin-Kuskusmin warfare: in some cases, the warrior's corpse was cut apart and the head interred by itself, which was thought to prevent his spirit's passage to the ancestors (15). This final humiliation, one might imagine, would be especially demoralizing to enemies. If they believed that the soul of a community member would join the tribal ancestors after death and therefore maintain a level of spiritual power (the point of mortuary cannibalism), then the loss of that soul to the Bimin-Kuskusmin would not only permanently rob the enemy tribesmen of power, but also “trap” the soul in a foreign community. Forever would a fallen warrior live among hostile spirits, and forever would he lend his power to a foreign group. Thus, warfare cannibalism is meant to inspire a real

sense of fear, which can have a demoralizing effect on a group that feels it is—or could be—a target of the practice.

Humiliation and Grendel's Anthropophagy

The *Beowulf*-poet displays an obvious concern about Grendel's anthropophagy, and he means to communicate that concern to his audience. Clear references to the monster's consumption of human flesh appear at least five separate times in the first two-thirds of the poem.¹⁷ The restriction of Grendel's anthropophagy and the exclusive focus on a martial community in the poem suggest warfare cannibalism as a rich vein for exploring the ways in which his behavioral deviance help construct a monstrous identity. That is, Grendel's anthropophagy is monstrous because anxiety is expressed about the transfer of power out of the Danish comitatus and about the humiliation of both the consumed and his community.

The humiliation of an enemy and the social group to which he belongs is an inherently political act, and previous critics have identified political elements in Grendel's attacks. Edward B. Irving, Jr. observes as much when he writes, "the destruction of society and of the individual, tearing open the hall and tearing apart the man, become parallel destructive acts" (*A Reading*...105). As we have already seen, Blurton posits that Grendel's anthropophagy is inherently political because it weakens and fragments Hrothgar's comitatus and, therefore, his community. For her, the consumption of human bodies is really a synecdoche for the consumption and destruction of the Danish body politic (55). Magennis goes further, arguing that the real problem posed by the attacks is the dysfunction of the warrior society. He identifies this dysfunction as both the object and product of the night raids: "It is significant too that it

is warriors that he eats, not other people... The threat is aimed directly at warrior society and its structures” (*Anglo-Saxon...* 82). This political symbolism helps to explain the raids, for by treating warriors as *food* instead of adversaries, Grendel not only transgresses the interdiction against eating human flesh, but also humiliates both the individual and the warrior band.

The Danes, it seems, are quite worried about the consequences for those who are or could be eaten by Grendel. As with the enemies of the Bimin-Kuskusmin tribe, part of that terror seems to stem from the humiliation of the body and social group via post mortem desecration. The first time *Beowulf* directly mentions anthropophagy, for example, it also suggests concern for the hero’s body and what will happen to it after death. Beowulf himself describes what sort of feast Grendel will have if he is defeated:

*Wen’ ic þæt he wille, gis he wealdan mot,
in þæm guðsele Geatena leode
etan unforhte, swa he oft dyde
mægenhreð manna. Na þu minne þearft
hafalan hydan, ac he me habban wile
d[r]eore fahne, gif mec deað nimeð:
byreð blodig wæl, brygean þenceð,
eteð angenga unmunlice,
mearcað morhopu— no ðu ymb mines ne þearft
lices forme leng sorgian.*

[I expect that he will, if he may gain victory, eat the people of the Geats in the hall without fear, as he often did, the great glory of men. You [will] have no need to cover my head, but he [will] desire to have me, stained with blood, if death takes me: the solitary wanderer [will] bear [my] bloody corpse, think to taste [it], ruthlessly eat [it], mark [his] moor-retreat—you [will] no longer need to worry about the sustenance of my body.] (ll. 442-51)

If we look past his brave words (or, perhaps, bravado), we get a sense of what the targets of warfare cannibals must fear. Beowulf does not expect to be buried if the fight goes against him; instead, he believes that Grendel will take his body and consume it in his

mere-cave. Couched in this monologue is the implication that Beowulf expects his adversary to mutilate his corpse. He thinks Grendel will *mearcað morhopu*, that he will “mark” or “stain” his remote dwelling place. Though no explicit details about how this might happen are given, the statement follows a series of actions that Grendel might perform: the body would be borne off, tasted, and eaten.

The context for this marking or staining is, grammatically and narratively, Beowulf’s body. Thus, the likely interpretation of *mearcað morhopu* is that it will be involved. If we translate *mearcað* as “stain,” we might understand Beowulf to mean that his blood will be splashed about the hall, painting it in the same grotesque manner in which Grendel decorates Heorot after his attacks (ll. 480-87). There is also the possibility that *mearcað* means “mark,” in the sense that a place is made significant or consecrated; if we accept this reading, then Beowulf’s body (or part of it) would be the mark and could function as a kind of totemic sign—like Grendel’s arm or Æschere’s head.¹⁸ In either case, he believes his body will not remain intact and will be used to signify something very different than the “huge potency of awesome bodily strength and righteous dedication” that characterizes the bodies of most Anglo-Saxon heroes (Hill, “The Sacrificial...” 137).

Later in the same speech, Beowulf again implies the importance of a slain warrior’s body in a seemingly simple request. After telling Hrothgar that he will not don his armor because Grendel wears none, he asks that the Danish king:

*Onsend Higelace, gif mec hild nime,
beaduscruda betst, þæt mine breost wereð,
hrægla selest; þæt is Hrædlan laf,
Welandes geweorc.*

[Send to Hygelac, if battle takes me, the best of armor, which defends my breast, best of garments; it is the heirloom of Hrethel, the work of Weland.] (ll. 452-55)

Beowulf, a warrior mighty enough to wear armor smithed by the legendary Weland, might rightly expect the honor of wearing it to the grave. There is, however, no mention of a funeral, no suggestion as to what should be done with his body. In contrast to the fairly detailed instructions given by Scyld (ll. 29-30) and an older Beowulf (ll. 2802-08) for their funerals, the young Beowulf expects no ceremony, no reverence, no mourning. His attitude seems to be based not so much on modesty or nonchalance, but on the understanding that because his body will be absent, no funeral or honorific rites could be undertaken.

In the death of Æschere, there is also concern about the body and anxiety about what its loss and mutilation means for his spirit and for Danish society. When Hrothgar calls for Beowulf on the morning after the raid by Grendel's mother, he is distraught at the loss of his trusted companion. *Ne frin þu æfter sælum* [Ask not about happiness], cries the old king before he informs Beowulf of Æschere's abduction and how great the man was (l. 1322). We might attribute Hrothgar's outburst to his propensity for emotional displays, his loss of a close friend, or even his worry that Beowulf has sparked a feud that will leave Denmark even worse off than before. Without denying these causes, I would add to them his anguish over the desecration of this thane's body. Of course, Hrothgar does not yet know that Æschere has been mutilated: that is only learned at the mere when the company finds the head sitting on a cliff. He does, however, guess correctly when he says *ic ne wat hwæder / atol æse wlanc efsiðas teah, / fylle gefrecnod* [I know not where the terrible one, proud in carrion, went on her journey, made glad by

her feast] (ll. 1331-33). In using the words *æse* and *fylle*, Hrothgar associates Æschere's corpse and Grendel's mother's feasting with each other; he clearly believes that what happened to the thanes Grendel killed will also happen to his dear friend's body.¹⁹ The anxiety shown in *Beowulf*, while not approaching the level of detail found in Origen, Jerome, Tertullian, or Augustine, appears in the same form; like them, the poet signals anxiety about the loss of self after death and does so through "metaphors...of digestion and nutrition" (Bynum, *The Resurrection...* 111).

Later in the poem, the poet reinforces the loss of Æschere's body as the main cause for Hrothgar's distress. When Beowulf reports the events in Denmark, he makes a point of mentioning the man's death:

*Noðer hy hine ne moston, syððan mergen cwom,
 deaðwrigne Denia leode
 bronde forbærnan, ne on bel hlanan
 leofne mannan; hio þæt lic ætbær
 feondes fæð(mum un)der firgenstream.
 Þæt wæs Hroðgar(e) hreowa tornost
 þara þe leodfruman lange begeate.*

[Neither were they able, the Danish people, able to burn the dead man after morning came, nor lay the beloved man on the pyre; she bore the body off under the mountain stream in a fiend's embrace. For Hrothgar, that was the cruelest of sorrows that befell the people's leader for a long time.] (ll. 2124-30)

Beowulf here identifies the cause and root of Hrothgar's emotional outburst as the loss of Æschere's body and the inability of the Danish king to honor him in death. Compared to the detail given about the actual events of Æschere's death (Hygelac learns only that he was killed by Grendel's mother; Beowulf does not elaborate and does not mention the decapitated head), the passage about Hrothgar's sorrow is extensive. We learn that the Danes as a people would have been involved in Æschere's funeral—just as the Geats, noble and common, are involved in Beowulf's. We learn that this, above all other

injuries suffered in the long years of Grendel's attacks, pains Hrothgar the most. And we learn that the cause of that pain is not necessarily Æschere's death (kings lose thanes as a matter of course in a warrior society), but the lack of a body, the lost chance to honor a noble warrior after he has been killed.

The importance of honoring a slain warrior is illustrated in the three funerals that punctuate the poem.²⁰ In Scyld's burial (ll. 26-52), the king's body is lovingly placed in his ship and surrounded by treasures, weapons, and armor that are meant to accompany him to sea. The burial of the unnamed son of Hildeburh and Finn, a multitude of dead Frisians and Half-Danes, and Hnæf shows the same concern for the body (ll. 1107-25). Despite the passage's gruesome imagery of the corpses bursting open and being consumed by flames, there is a certain reverence for the fallen since their richly appointed armor (*swatfah syrce, swyn eal gylden, / eofer irenheard*) accompanies them into the fire (ll. 1111-12). Lastly is Beowulf's funeral, at which the body is not only cremated with helmets, shields, and armor (ll. 3137-40) as in the two previous burials, but is later buried with the entire hoard that he died to gain (ll. 3163-68).²¹ The common thread among these funerals is clear: the bodies of Scyld, Hnæf, Hildeburh's and Finn's son, and Beowulf are all accompanied by treasure—some of it spectacular. Whether the disposal of the corpse is by sea, by fire, or by burial, expensive and important material goods like armor, weaponry, and gold are in each case depicted being on or near the body.

According to Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *Beowulf's* burials serve four distinct functions: they are a means of removing the now-decomposing body from the community, a religious rite concerned with the afterlife, an emotional outlet in the form

of mourning, and a memorialization and show of respect for the dead (3-4). These four functions are all intimately linked to the presence of the body. In all three burials, the body is *present at the funeral rites*—though it may be hacked, bloodied, and broken. This commonality strongly suggests that the absence of Æschere’s body is the main reason we do not see a fourth funeral scene after Beowulf defeats Grendel’s mother and sets the Danish community right again. A memorial for a cherished friend and warrior would have been a powerful image for the reassertion of social mores and a return to normalcy after the travails and backsliding experienced in Denmark. The (implied) consumption of Æschere seems to preclude any possibility of honoring this most honorable of men, and we are left to wonder what the Danes thought happened to Æschere’s spirit or identity, since his body was lost for all time. Whatever consequence they feared, Grendel’s anthropophagy certainly humiliates the warriors who have been consumed, since their bodies cannot be properly honored with grave goods and disposed of by the community with the proper religious rites and emotional release.

Consuming the Comitatus

The other element of warfare cannibalism is the literal incorporation of the enemy’s strength and spirit. Norma Kroll posits a reading of *Beowulf* in which there is a clear transfer of power during Grendel’s anthropophagic acts: “Beowulf will be eaten if defeated, with his nature physically absorbed into the monster’s and his heroic attempt to establish civilized brotherhood swallowed up by the monster’s anticivility” (124). It makes sense that eating Danes would strengthen Grendel—since the warriors are food items. Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Metamorphosis and Identity* traces the conflicting views of Peter Lombard, Bernard of Clairveaux, and Marius in the late eleventh and early

twelfth centuries, observing a particular anxiety regarding how much of one's food becomes part of the body (144-46).²² That this issue was being discussed perhaps not very long after *Beowulf* was written down shows that there were non-trivial anxieties about the mutability or immutability of the human body: if we might absorb the energy and essence from mutton, then perhaps Grendel could absorb the energy and essence from Hondscoi or Æschere.

Beowulf, unfortunately, does not provide definitive evidence that Grendel grows stronger by eating warriors, but there is evidence that the Danes grow weaker as a result of the attacks. As Sanday reminds us, “the rituals [of warfare cannibalism] are motivated by concerns about the replacement of personnel or about transmitting psychobiological substances from the dead to the living” (xii). That is, this type of cannibalism exists to strengthen one community, but necessarily does so at the expense of an opposing community. As far as strength and spirits go, warfare cannibalism is a zero-sum game. The group that practices (or is alleged to practice) warfare cannibalism will grow stronger as the enemy group grows weaker, since its numbers and spiritual strength are sapped to fortify the opposing force.

Such a situation clearly exists in Denmark after twelve years of Grendel's raids. Word of Hrothgar's troubles has spread outside the borders—at least to the friendly ears in Geatland and, if the jumpy Danish coast-guard is any indication, to less friendly ears as well. As Hrothgar welcomes Beowulf into his hall, he admits only that Grendel's attacks are humiliating (*hynðo*) and that he has lost warriors: *ahte ic holdra þy læs, / deorre duguðe, þe þa deað fornam* [I had the fewer loyal ones, dear veterans, since death carried them away] (ll. 475, 487-88). The audience, however, already knows what sort of losses

he suffered, since we are privy to Grendel's first sortie in which he kills thirty men (ll. 122-23). With this knowledge, we are unsurprised when the possibility of killing even sixteen warriors is enough to make Grendel's heart exult (*ahlog*) during his final visit to Heorot (ll. 730-33). That these attacks continue for years suggests a significant weakening of Denmark's military strength and status in relation to the surrounding kingdoms.

The consumption of Danish warriors and the draining of strength from their community together form a nexus at which the taboo and symbolic areas of food studies converge. Obviously, the anthropophagic taboo is at work, but the symbolic import of who is consumed and what they mean to the Danish social group plays no less a part in the poet's construction of Grendel's monstrosity. The effects of monsters eating Hrothgar's retainers prove to be far-reaching: it seems that, rather than some ancestral or tribal spirit that guards and protects the community, the spirit leached from Denmark is the sort of *élan* that animates warriors in works like *The Battle of Maldon*.

In his welcome to Beowulf, Hrothgar hints that Grendel's raids have weakened Denmark well beyond their toll on his personnel: he admits that he is losing warriors not only to Grendel's anthropophagy, but also as a result of it. His words in ll. 476-78, *is min feltwerod, / wigheap gewanod; hie wyrd frosweop / on Grendles gryre* [my hall-troop, my band of warriors is lessened; fate swept them off in Grendel's horror], do not necessarily allude only to warriors dying: some of them are deserting their lord in his most desperate hour. About three hundred lines before Hrothgar's welcome, we see a startlingly quick deflation of the Danish fighting force. After Grendel's second attack, the poet states:

*Pa wæs eaðfynde þe him elles hwær
gerumlicor ræste [sohte],*

*bed æfter burum, ða him gebeacnod wæs,
gesægd soðlice sweotolan tacne
healðegnes hete*

[Then it was easy to find those who sought rest in another room, a bed in an out-lying chamber, when the hall-thane's hate was shown to them, seen truly, by the most certain signs.] (ll. 138-42)

This passage is, for the anthropologist and the historian, a bit odd. As Earl has observed, archeological evidence shows that Anglo-Saxon halls conform to “a typical structure of tribal villages around the world...consisting of numerous huts surrounding a men's ceremonial house” and were not generally used as sleeping quarters (117). But we are not here concerned with using *Beowulf* to illuminate Anglo-Saxon social realities. Instead, the focus is that “idealized, archaic, anachronistic, and only partial” vision of a Germanic warrior society created in the poem (Earl 116).

The *Pa...ða* construction in ll. 138-42 suggests that it was not normal for Danish thanes to sleep away from Heorot before Grendel began his raids. Only *after* Grendel's hate is shown through his anthropophagic attacks is it easy to find Danes sleeping elsewhere. Thus, the retainers who *dreamum lifdon, / eadiglice* [happily lived in joy] after the construction of the hall and enjoyed its warmth, protection, and camaraderie have abandoned it (ll. 99-100). Harry Berger, Jr. and H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. observe that Heorot is “the climax of Hrothgar's career...the site and source of continuing group life; a widely visible centre of protection, solidarity, reciprocity, and celebration; a seemingly permanent symbol of achieved Scylding glory” (37). But according to the stories sailors tell and what Beowulf has heard, *þæs sele stande, / reced selesta rinca gehwylcum / idel ond unnyt, siððan æfenleoht* [this hall, best building, stands empty and useless to every warrior after evening-light] (ll. 411-13). The loss is significant for

Denmark since Hrothgar's warriors, as recipients, are not only the ones who allow him to be a "ring-giver" but, as fighters, also provide the source of his ability to give rings.

It has now become a commonplace among Anglo-Saxonists that the *comitatus* is the heart of the human communities depicted in poems like *Beowulf*. The lord-thane bond animates the warrior society, allowing thanes to profit from the largesse of their lord, to enjoy the brotherhood and protection of a fighting force, and to have an opportunity to increase their glory. In return, they are expected to put their lives on the line for their lord in battles and raids. Hill succinctly explains this complex social contract:

This promise of reward is...the central, honorific contract of the *comitatus*—rewards for services rendered or rewards (rings, weapons, mailshirts) for services that might fall due in the future when war comes...Certainly one gives so that one will receive, be it the support of armed men in times of war or the esteem of allies. Moreover, through military prowess in the service of law and settlement one earns glory and prosperity for one's people; through liberality in the hall one earns praise and fame. (*The Cultural...* 86)

Yet the cracks begin to show in Denmark's "central, honorific contract of the *comitatus*" after just two days. As the attacks drive men from Heorot, that ultimate symbol of Hrothgar's power over the surrounding tribes and his own men, the lord-thane bond weakens: the promise of rings and honor is no longer reward enough for the Danish warriors to risk their lives for their lord.

This is a powerful image of the terror evoked by Grendel's anthropophagy. Warriors in Germanic heroic poetry thirst after honor and material goods that represent that hard-earned honor. They charge right into a shield wall or follow their lord on ill-advised raids (like Hygelac's). They live each day within the fatalistic Germanic warrior society, knowing (perhaps even hoping) that they will likely meet their ends on the field

of battle.²³ But what, it seems, the Danish warriors *will not* do is inhabit Heorot when Grendel is likely to attack. Howell D. Chickering, Jr., in defending the actions of the Danes, supports this reading; he writes, “the poet’s strategy...creates the sense that this is such a great persecution that everyone must flee” (286). It is not that his thanes abandon Hrothgar completely, for the coast-guard and Wulfgar show that there are still men left who are willing to perform their duties. But his Germanic version of the city on the hill, empty and useless, stands in mute testimony to a new sort of fear that has changed the nature of Hrothgar’s comitatus as the promise of a battlefield death could not. It is difficult to imagine the remnants of Hrothgar’s troop fighting for days to the point of exhaustion and waiting an entire winter to take vengeance for the death of their lord, as do the Half-Danes in the Finnsburh tale. The members of the Danish comitatus are scared, and with each sunset they abandon their lord’s hall, ceding its ownership to a monstrous descendant of Cain. This is, to my mind, as good an indication as any of just how much anxiety anthropophagy provokes in the poem.

Grendel’s attacks and the possibility of being consumed by the monster put so much pressure on the warrior society that it folds, and, as John Halverson suggests, the “priority of the individual over the group” gradually supplants the brotherhood of the comitatus and the duty of the lord-thane bond (608).²⁴ This is also the overarching argument presented by Blurton, who see a

conceptual link between the cannibalizing of the human body and the cannibalizing of the social body...a monstrous mis-incorporation of the polity. It is not just individual warriors that Grendel eats, it is the Danish political hegemony that he dismembers. (55-56)

This portion of her argument is sound. The loss of manpower as a result of Grendel's attacks impacts the warrior society, but the loss of manpower to an overwhelming fear of consumption begins to stress it beyond the breaking point, and fissures begin to form.

Food and Eating

The effects of Grendel's anthropophagy on Denmark stem from his exclusive focus on warriors as objects of his attacks. While this particular type of food symbolism works to weaken Hrothgar's kingdom, we should also consider it with respect to what food and eating in general symbolize in the poem. As Magennis has persuasively argued in *Anglo-Saxon Appetites*, food does not appear in *Beowulf* in a socially acceptable form or in a socially acceptable context.²⁵ In Old English poems such as *Judith*, *Genesis*, and *Daniel*, it is mentioned obliquely, and even when source texts such as the Books of *Judith*, *Genesis*, or *Psalms* dictate the presence of food, Old English poetic versions excise or minimize it as much as possible (*Anglo-Saxon... 34*).²⁶ What is more, Magennis argues that eating "is typically associated not with the communal joys of human feasting but with animals and sub-human or quasi-human monsters" and is never counter-balanced by any positive depictions of food being consumed (*Anglo-Saxon... 51, 64*). That is, the actual act of consuming food is almost always associated with animals (the beasts of battle), cannibals (the Myrmedonians of *Andreas*), or monsters (the Grendelkin).

The absence of food and eating is, according to Magennis, rooted in two distinct, yet complementary, sources of anxiety. First, eating is an inherently individual activity—even if it is done in a communal setting. "The sharing aspect of the meal," he writes, "is communal, the eating aspect is individual" (*Anglo-Saxon... 61-62*). Second, eating

suggests a level of animalism that Christian societies like the one that produced *Beowulf* found to be a vexed issue. For Magennis, Old English literature “is affected by an unease about the seamliness of eating and about what eating is, which derives ultimately from the recognition that eating is essentially a bodily function, a function that does not distinguish human beings from animals,” which is why “the gruesome images in Old English poetry of animals and monsters eating would seem to accord with these anxieties” (*Anglo-Saxon...* 59, 61).

These two issues obviously affect the quantity of references to food and eating in *Beowulf*, as Magennis argues, but they also affect the nature of those that do appear. That is, how food and its consumption are treated in the poem become symbolic in and of themselves. When we look closely at these references, we see a pattern of distancing and circumlocution that only obliquely suggests heroic humans ate without directly involving them in the act itself. A human being in the poem may *ful geþeah* [receive the cup] or *symbelwynne dreoh* [delight in the feast-joy], but the poet never depicts any in the process of eating, chewing, or swallowing (ll. 628, 1782). Aside from the verbs that denote drinking (which will be discussed later), there is actually little in the language to point to the mouth of a feaster. By far the most common verbs in feast scenes are those clustered around service and sharing: *scencan* [pour], *sellan* [give], and *beran* [carry] occur six times in reference to human feasters in *Beowulf*.²⁷ The second most common verb type, unsurprisingly, denotes receiving, and it is represented by a single verb, *(ge)þicgan*, which takes as its subject twice Hrothgar, twice Beowulf, and once the combined troops of Danes and Geats.²⁸ Of interest here are the connotations of *þicgan*, which, according to Bosworth and Toller’s *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, can mean “to

receive,” but can also mean “to eat, drink, or consume.” The nuances of meaning covered by the term make it a perfect vehicle for circumlocution. In much the same way Milton uses the phrase “such joy thou took’st / With me in secret” when Sin describes her incestuous rape by Satan, the *Beowulf*-poet opts for verbs that describe service and sharing elements of the feast. When he must describe the act of consumption, he prefers *þicgan*, keeping the human characters comfortably removed from anything so unseemly as biting or swallowing.²⁹

This, of course, is not the case with Grendel, for the poet provides a vivid depiction of him in the act of eating. In the final attack on Heorot, Grendel seizes Hondscio:

*Ne þæt se aglæca yldan þohte,
ac he gefeng hraðe forman siðe
slæpende rinc, slat unwearnum,
bat banlocan, blod edrum dranc,
synsnædum swealh; sona hæfde
unlyfigendes eal gefeormod,
fet ond folma.*

[Nor did the formidable assailant think to delay, but he seized a sleeping warrior at the first opportunity, rent without restraint, bit the muscle, drank blood from the veins, swallowed the sinful morsels; quickly, he had consumed all of the lifeless [man], feet and hands.] (ll. 739-45)

If we compare the detail and immediacy of the verbs in this passage to those in passages describing Danish and Geatish feasting, we find a marked difference. In this feast, the poet depicts Grendel rending (*slat*), biting (*bat*), drinking (*dranc*), swallowing (*swealh*), and consuming (*gefeormod*). The verbs here are all direct and specific, and most pair with their own direct objects, clearly pointing to that upon which Grendel acts upon. Instead of vague and allusive reference to foodstuffs, the poet has Grendel bite muscle, drink blood, swallow morsels, and consume the man. By virtue of his word choice, he

has made Grendel a very active participant in his meal, a far cry from the giving and receiving we see in human feasts.

What we should take away from this difference is that food and eating act as a kind of micro-topos in *Beowulf*, a signal that whatever we see in the act of eating should be considered distinct from humanity. The presence of such a *topion* is further supported by the implications of individuality and animality, which run counter to the idealized communal atmosphere of human feasts. The circumlocution used to allude to human beings eating, the direct and visceral depiction of Grendel consuming Hondscio, and the general social anxiety over the very act of eating show that food symbolism—in this case how food is presented and its relationship to those eating—was an aspect of Grendel’s foodways the poet used to further mark his behavior as monstrous.

Drink and Drinking

Unlike food and eating, drinks and drinking play a prominent role in *Beowulf*’s warrior society. Though actual depictions of it are still relatively rare in the Old English corpus, the activity of drinking is so important that it serves as a stock metaphor, for both good and ill.³⁰ The imagery of drinking, for example, is used to show misfortune—as with the *meoduscerven* [bitter beer-drinking] in *Andreas* and the adoption of the *poculum mortis* [cup of death] motif from the Latin tradition.³¹ Most references to drink in Old English, however, are positive. Magennis’s uncontroversial argument is that “drinking in *Beowulf* and poems in the same broad Germanic heroic tradition is essentially symbolic in significance. It is expressive of reciprocity and trust within the warrior society” (*Anglo-Saxon...* 21). Paul C. Bauschatz goes a step further: he sees drinking as perhaps the most important aspect of the Germanic feast (*symbel*) and, therefore, a crucial part of

“the ways in which the larger conception of the cosmos makes its presence felt in more ordinary social activity” (289).

In Old English heroic poetry, and *Beowulf* especially, the drinking that takes place at these feasts almost always follows a certain pattern. Obviously, it is communal; with one significant exception (discussed below), drinking is always depicted as a group activity that takes place in a hall, as both Bauschatz and Magennis have pointed out (Bauschatz 289-90, Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon...* 11). But what is of more interest is the intimate relationship between drinking and speech acts during feasts. Rituals of flyting, gift-giving, oaths, and even the establishment of long-term political alliances take place at this time, and they often happen either over the cup itself or after one person drinks mead proffered by another.³²

In oaths and alliances, the symbolic function of drinking is pretty clearly illustrated. Stefán Einarsson sees it as part of a larger pattern in which “it is even likely that the drink was considered to add weight and authority to the spoken word” since Germanic literature shows that transactions as important as betrothals and as mundane mercantile transactions “had to be fortified with a cup of ale or wine” (978). Michael J. Enright significantly extends Einarsson’s argument, proposing that “liquor was used because liquor was the medium through which one achieved ecstasy [sic] and thus communion with the supernatural”; it is therefore logical that oaths would be made over this sacred stand-in for blood (17).

Hill strikes a nice middle ground between these two positions. He identifies a cause-and-effect relationship between drinking and making an oath—specifically in an exchange between *Beowulf* and Hrothgar just after the flyting match with Unferth (ll.

612-41).³³ Showing the influence of Marcel Mauss, he contends that when Beowulf receives the cup from Wealhtheow, he receives with it the obligation for “an oath or solemn vow in response” (*The Cultural... 79*). Hill’s analysis of this scene is magisterial, and I need not retread ground that has been so well covered.³⁴ I would, however, look to another instance involving Wealhtheow that illustrates how, exactly, this obligatory connection between drinking and oaths plays out.

During the second feast (ll. 991-1233), Wealhtheow admonishes Beowulf, *þissum cnyhtum wes / lara liðe* [be good counsel to these boys] and *beo þu suna minum / dædum gedefe* [be to my sons gentle in deeds] (ll. 1219-20 and 1226-27). But what initially appears to be maternal concern quickly takes a darker tone. In what sounds like a veiled threat to dissuade Beowulf from reneging on his oath and taking the Danish throne, she observes aloud how united and loyal the Danish men are:

*Her is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe
 modes milde, mandrihtne hol[d];
 þegnas syndon geþwære, þeod eal gearo;
 druncne dryhtguman doð swa ic bidde*
 [Here, each retainer is true, gentle in disposition, cleaves to [his] liege-lord; the thanes are united, the people completely prepared; having drunk, the warriors [will] do as I bid.] (ll. 1228-31)³⁵

The implication, of course, is that if Beowulf does not adhere to his oaths of friendship to her family, the Danish *comitatus* will fulfill theirs and take action against him.

What is interesting about the statement is that the key symbolic act, the reason Wealhtheow is so sure of the Danes’ loyalty is that they have drunk their lord’s mead. The first three lines are concerned with how true and loyal the retainers are to Hrothgar and, by extension, Wealhtheow, her words describing them in these terms (*getrywe, modes milde, geþwære, and ealgearo*). Line 1231 illustrates the consequence of that

loyalty: these warriors will do whatever she orders. The cause and effect are linked by the past participle *druncne*, which serves as the catalyst for their obedience. We might also notice that the act of promising is absent in Wealhtheow's syllogism; it is instead replaced by *druncne*, which in this case works as a metonym for oath-taking. That is, because her thanes are loyal and because they have drunk Hrothgar's mead in Heorot, they are duty-bound to follow her orders.³⁶ Though it is not necessarily her purpose to do so (since the audience would likely be well aware of this connection), Wealhtheow makes clear the linkage between drinking a lord's mead and promising one's services to that lord.

Earlier in this same feast, the poet shows us that not only is the act of drinking an important symbolic element, but that the vessel in which the drink is held also has a symbolic role. After serving wine to Hrothgar, Wealhtheow remarks on the king's overtures toward adopting Beowulf and reminds him that the rule of Denmark should be kept within his family line. Immediately after she finishes speaking, we learn that Beowulf sits between Hrethric and Hrothmund and that *him wæs ful boren, ond freondlāpu wordum bewægned* [to him was brought a cup, and a friendly invitation was offered with words] (ll. 1192-93). The poem is not clear as to who offers the friendship. However, because Wealhtheow's speech directly precedes the offering of the cup, because the poem mentions her two sons flanking Beowulf as he receives the cup, and because Wealhtheow requests that Beowulf have a care for her sons, the implication is that he makes the pact with Hrothgar's household to support its rule of Denmark.

The conjunction *ond* denotes a connection between the two acts: the cup is brought to Beowulf and friendship is offered. This connection is not as clear as the one

discussed by Hill and that in ll. 1228-31 because *ond* does not introduce a cause-and-effect relationship. This passage, however, is of interest because of the importance of the *ful*. In this instance, the cup stands in metonymically for mead or wine. The poet includes no actual reference to the drink, though statements such as *druncon win weras* [the men drank wine] (ll. 1232) and Hrothgar's words about his own men (ll. 480-81, discussed below) are proof enough that he does not shy away from associating drinker and drink. Thus, the absence of any reference to mead does not seem to be a symptom of anxiety, as is the case with references to food in the poem. Instead, the presence of the vessel alone in the description of Beowulf's drinking calls attention to it and illustrates the cup's importance in relation to oath-taking.

In an earlier article that seems to have inspired his later interest in food and drink in Old English literature, Magennis argues for the importance of the cup in heroic poetry:

the center of interest in Old English images of drinking cups lies in what the cup signifies or represents. In *Beowulf*, for example, references to the 'hroden ealowæge' (495) and to 'win of wunderfatum' (1162) are an essential part of the poet's evocation of the good life in the hall enjoyed by Danes and Geats. The cups are bright, adorned, gold-plated—vivid symbols of a glorious way of life. ("The Cup as Symbol..." 517)

The symbolic value of the cup, though Magennis applies it rather generally to the entire warrior society, is really rooted in loyalty and oaths. For example, when Hrothgar first tells Beowulf of the fallout from Grendel's raids, he mentions that he lost many men when they tried to battle the monster. They did so, he says, because they *gebeotedon beore druncne / ofer ealwæge* [having drunk beer, swore over the ale-cup] (ll. 480-81). This example illustrates both elements of social drinking examined here. As in ll. 1228-31, the past participle *druncne* is the catalyst for making a pledge: after the men have partaken of their lord's mead, they owe some sort of oath in return. As in ll. 1192-93, the

promises are made over a cup of some sort—*ful* in l. 1192, *ealwæge* here.³⁷ Thus, both the act of drinking and the vessel in which the drink is held are distinct but complementary elements of oath-taking and alliance-making during a feast.

In the above examples, these two elements of drinking help to knit people together—whether it is within the comitatus by reasserting the lord-thane bond or on a larger scale by creating alliances between members of separate nations. It is what Hill calls a “drink-solemn,” in which drinking obligates one to make an oath, often over the *ful* from which the mead was drunk (*The Anglo-Saxon...* 83). With such ritual attachments, the drink-solemn easily takes on a culturally important, quasi-religious meaning like that posited by Enright. A *beorscipe*, therefore, is much more than beer and glittering vessels, but at the same time it cannot be a true *scipe* without those elements. The promises made over cups and the drinks consumed work along with other elements of a feast (like the service, the benches, the happy din, and the giving of gifts) to constitute a social structure in which drinking is a crucial part of symbolizing and performing the comitatus.

When we read ll. 739-45, in which the poet describes how Grendel consumes Hondscio, the shock at his anthropophagy likely blinds us to the subtle ways in which the poet includes transgressions of social drinking. In fact, we may not initially notice that Grendel drinks at all. But in telling us that Grendel *blod edrum dranc* [drank blood from the veins], the poet marks social drinking as yet another cultural standard that Grendel transgresses (l. 742). Because he is depicted as a lone *mearcstapa*, it should be no surprise that Grendel’s drinking is the one exception (as identified by Bauschatz and Magennis) to the pattern of social drinking that is almost universal to Old English heroic

poetry. In this case, Grendel's antisocial behavior is rooted in his solitary nature, which is expressed through his solitary drinking and unwillingness to enter into any sort of relationship with the Danes that abides by their cultural standards.

That Grendel is very much alone when he attacks Heorot and when he drinks Hondscio's blood should go without saying, but how his solitude contributes to his monstrosity is not so obvious. Whether the poet had in mind to show Grendel's (perhaps animalistic) ignorance of customs in *Beowulf's* warrior society or whether he intended to show the monster's contempt for them by creating a perverse parody of social drinking customs is difficult to say.³⁸ Whatever our thoughts about his intent, the transgression itself, that Grendel is alone when he drinks Hondscio's blood, is so specific that it is the only known depiction in Old English heroic poetry of a character drinking in the hall alone (Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon...* 26).³⁹ With this, the poet very clearly sets Grendel in opposition to the normative drinking customs shown throughout the poem.

More important than his solitary drinking, however, is Grendel's transgression of the ritual and symbolic elements of drinking that connect human beings to one another in *Beowulf*. The poem shows no hint that Grendel attaches any special importance to his own drinking in Heorot; it is purely practical, and he seems to do it only to slake his thirst. But because the drinking at human feasts is so important to the creation and maintenance of promises and allegiances, Grendel's drinking illustrates his opposition to this as well. Indeed, we learn earlier that Grendel simply does not make promises:

sibbe ne wolde
wið manna hwone mægenes Deniga,
feorhbealo feorran, fea þingian,
ne þær nænig witena wenan þorfte
beorhtre bote to banan folmum

[he wished no peace with any man of the Danish host, to end his deadly aggression, to settle with payment, nor did any of the counselors have need to expect splendid compensation from the killer's hand.] (ll. 154-58)

The implications of this passage in relation to the Danes' situation, are clear: there will be no end to the bloodshed unless they can defeat Grendel. He will not make treaties—or even recognize the existence of social structures (like the *wergild*) that rely on them. In their most recent edition of Klaeber's *Beowulf*, R.D. Fulk et al. note that this reference “is probably intended as no more than a grimly ironic notice of his monstrous nature,” and while this is no doubt true, it also resonates with Grendel's drinking (Klaeber 125). The Danes and Beowulf enact the drink-solemn in Heorot, swearing oaths and creating ties between nations; Grendel, he who creates no pacts and makes no oaths, drinks alone in the hall.

One more example may serve to illustrate how expansive and subtle the transgressions are. In ll. 480-81, I examined one of the ways an oath is expressed in *Beowulf*'s feasts, specifically that it is made *ofer ealwæge*. Because the cup is such an important and symbolic part of the oath-taking ritual, Grendel's act of drinking takes on yet another transgressive dimension. He does not simply consume Hondscio and drink his blood; Grendel drinks the blood *edrum*—essentially using the Geatish warrior as a cup. The transgression here is subtle but devastating. One of the men who feast in the hall, who make important oaths over a cup of mead, who use it as a symbol of their community *has become* Grendel's cup in a gruesome inversion of the hall feast. This, though it lacks the modern-day political aspect that amplifies our horror at medieval tales of blood libel, matches anything Thomas of Cantimpré ever concocted.⁴⁰

When he wrote *blod edrum dranc*, the *Beowulf*-poet created a point-for-point travesty of the human feasts—whether it be Grendel using a thane as a *ful*, rejecting the drink-solemn by refusing oaths, drinking alone, or drinking blood. It might seem less than important that Grendel violates human customs in these ways, but although his alimentary behavior trades on the horror of anthropophagy, there are also subtle but important lines of transgression based in food symbolism. These seemingly trivial symbolic transgressions work in concert with the taboo of anthropophagy and the violations of cuisine and etiquette rules discussed in the following chapter to reveal the depth of his deviant behavior.

Notes

¹ Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage, 1995 (266).

² One of the more famous instances of this is Chinua Achebe's postcolonial reading of *Heart of Darkness* that understands the novel's characters (and Joseph Conrad himself) as racist colonialists. The racial slurs spoken by the characters in *Heart of Darkness* can and should inform our reading, but that was not the initial purpose and is not supported by the text on its own. See: "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'" in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 1965-1987*. London: Heinemann, 1988.

³ See Korzybski's "A Non-Aristotelian System and its Necessity for Rigour in Mathematics and Physics." American Mathematical Society. New Orleans, LA. 28 Dec. 1931. (Reprinted in *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. New York: Institute of General Semantics, 1994 (58)).

⁴ Perhaps, as Axel Olrik might argue, the Germanic society depicted in *Beowulf* is not necessarily as the poet idealizes the past, but as the narrative of the story demands. His epic rule for narrative "The Logic of the Narrative," states that "the narrative is unwilling to adopt motifs other than those that will have influence on the plot; and their influence on the plot is in proportion to their varying degree of importance with regard to the goal toward which the plot moves" (46). See *Principles for Oral Narrative Research*. Trans. Kirsten Wolf and Jody Jensen. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1992.

⁵ See Sidney W. Mintz's "Time, Sugar, and Sweetness" (91-103); Fabio Parasecoli's "Feeding Hard Bodies: Food and Masculinities in Men's Fitness Magazines" (187-201); Dylan Clark's "The Raw and the Rotten: Punk Cuisine" (411-22); and Penny Van Esterik's "The Politics of Breastfeeding: An Advocacy Update" (467-81). See Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik's *Food and Culture: A Reader*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2008.

⁶ See Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. New York: Macmillan, 1922. Sigmund Freud seems to retain this narrow definition in his *Totem and Taboo*.

⁷ *Haec sunt quae gignuntur in aquis et vesci licitum est omne quod habet pinnulas et squamas tam in mari quam in fluminibus et stagnis comedetis quicquid autem pinnulas et squamas non habet eorum quae in*

aquis moventur et vivunt abominabile vobis et execrandum erit carnes eorum non comedetis et morticina vitabitis cuncta quae non habent pinnulas et squamas in aquis polluta erunt. [These you may eat, of all that are in the waters. Everything in the waters that has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the rivers, you may eat. But anything in the seas or the rivers that has not fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and of the living creatures that are in the waters, is an abomination to you. They shall remain an abomination to you; of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall have in abomination. Everything in the waters that has not fins and scales is an abomination to you.]

⁸ See, for example, the most recent Southern Baptist Convention resolution on alcohol, which, in part, states: “RESOLVED, That the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Greensboro, North Carolina, June 13-14, 2006, express our total opposition to the manufacturing, advertising, distributing, and consuming of alcoholic beverages.” “On Alcohol Use in America.” *SBCNet*. June 2006. 20 Nov. 2011 <<http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1156>>.

⁹ To name only a few, see Alfred Bammesberger’s “In What Sense was Grendel an *Angeng(e)a*?” *Notes and Queries* 46.2 (1999): 173-76.; Andy Orchard’s “Psychology and Physicality: The Monsters of *Beowulf*.” *Beowulf, Updated Edition*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 2007. 91-119; David Williams’ *Cain and Beowulf*; Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr.’s “Grendel’s Arm and the Law.” *Studies in Language and Literature: ‘Doubt Wisely,’ Papers in Honor of E.G. Stanley*. Eds. M.J. Toswell and E.M. Tyler. New York: Routledge, 1996. 121-32; Signe M. Carlson’s “Monsters of *Beowulf*: Creations of Literary Scholars.”; Susan M. Kim’s “As I Once Did with Grendel”; David Lyle Jeffrey’s “Medieval Monsters.” *Manlike Monsters on Trial: Early Records and Modern Evidence*. Eds. Marjorie M. Halpin and Michael M. Ames. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1980. 47-64; John M. Hill’s *The Cultural World of Beowulf*; and John Halverson’s “The World of *Beowulf*.”

¹⁰ Eileen Joy, in a comment on an online review of Blurton’s book, observed this disjunction: “my issue in this case is...with how the term ‘cannibal’ is applied in such a broad manner...that I fear it loses its potentially sharp edge as an analytic scalpel.” After rejecting Blurton’s move to lump all references to *eotenas* as cannibals, Joy continues: “Nor do I believe that, when push comes to shove, that [sic] either the texts or images of all three versions of the Anglo-Latin ‘Wonders of the East’ present what might be called unadulterated ‘cannibals’ (humans who eat humans), so much as they present certain hybrid ‘species’ (that might be part-human) who consume humans but are more anthropophagous than cannibalistic”. See Susan Kim’s “Susan Kim: Receiving Cannibalism/Cannibalizing Reception.” *In the Middle*. 14 August 2007. 29 January 2012 <<http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2007/08/susan-kim-receiving-cannibalism.html>>.

Yet another reason to avoid *cannibalism* stems from its unfortunate lexical history. Because *cannibal* is rooted in European colonialism and slavery as practiced in Africa and the Americas, there has been a move to distinguish between the connotations of the word and the act itself. See William Arens’s *The Man-Eating Myth* and Peter Hulme’s *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797*. New York: Methuen, 1986.

¹¹ This is the reason that Merrall Llewelyn Price, for example, does not discuss monsters like Polyphemus, giants, or Grendel in her work on cannibalism in the Middle Ages. She contends that, unlike the man-eaters in *Andreas* on which she does touch, monsters are separate species and, therefore, do not fall into the category of cannibals. See *Consuming Passions: The Uses of Cannibalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. New York: Routledge, 2003 (especially 3, n. 7). This also leads Magennis to characterize Grendel’s anthropophagy as “quasi-cannibalism” (*Anglo-Saxon Appetites...* 81).

¹² Since the publication of his book in 1979, there have been a number of anthropologists (such as Poole) who have indeed witnessed acts of institutionalized cannibalism. Arens’s conclusion is, therefore, most certainly wrong, but his core argument—that the standards of evidence for anthropologists studying cannibalism had not been met as of the writing of his book—remains valid and has had an enormous impact on the field.

¹³ Just as the Harvard researcher Susan Clancy did not need to believe in alien abductions to legitimately study the cause and impact of the phenomenon, so too may symbolic anthropologists study the cultural phenomenon of cannibalism even if they believe it to be a fiction. See Clancy's *Abducted: How People Came to Believe they Were Kidnapped by Aliens*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005.

¹⁴ For reimaginings of Grendel as a tortured outsider, see John Gardner's *Grendel*. New York: Vintage, 1989, and Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf*. For an argument of monsters as "us," see Patricia MacCormack's "Posthuman Teratology." *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*. Eds. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. 293-309, and Kevin Keirnan's "Grendel's Heroic Mother." *In Geardagum* 6 (1984): 13-33. Like Sanborn, I applaud the spirit of these projects, but I also question their usefulness since they seem to elide the constructedness of a monster in their attempts to resist the epistemological domination so prevalent in racist, colonialist, and sexist attitudes.

¹⁵ In an overview of the separate organizational schemas, anthropologist Merilee H. Salmon identifies at least four different types—for example, dividing cannibal practices by their purposes (like gastronomic, medicinal, mortuary, and sacrificial). The most common in anthropological works and the most useful to the current study, however, is the endocannibalism/exocannibalism organization.

¹⁶ This, it has often been stated, is also the driving force behind the anthropophagic, brain-eating zombies in contemporary horror films. One zombie, in the 1985 *Return of the Living Dead*, explains that the zombies want to consume human brains because it temporarily relieves the agony of being dead. Vampires as early as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* drank human blood to regain strength. However, contemporary vampires like Blade (from the *Blade* franchise) and Edward Cullen (from the *Twilight* franchise) express the desire for human blood as a sort of primal urge, showing physical signs of weakness and distress if they go too long without feeding.

¹⁷ Lines 120-25, 445-51, 730-45, 1580-84, and 2078-80.

¹⁸ John Edward Damon also touches briefly on this notion; see his "Desecto capite perfido: Bodily Fragmentation and Reciprocal Violence in Anglo-Saxon England." *Exemplaria* 13.2 (2001): 399-432 (especially 402).

¹⁹ L. Whitbread has surmised that this passage evinces an even more explicit concern with mutilation and dismemberment. He suggests that Hrothgar's reference to Æschere's hand in l. 1343, is literal, that the king is actually holding the hand in front of him: "he might be imagined as pointing to the hand in emphasis and proof of his sombre pronouncements; or we might think of the hand as left outside Heorot in the very place where Grendel's claw had lain" (340-41). Such an interpretation would certainly support my reading, but it stretches credulity since Hrothgar makes reference to time ("now his hand lies") rather than location ("here the hand lies"). See Whitbread's "The Hand of Æschere: A Note on *Beowulf* 1343." *Review of English Studies* 25.100 (1949): 339-42.

²⁰ Owen-Crocker argues that there are four funerals in the poem, counting the barrow described in the Last Survivor's lay. This conflicts with the generally accepted *ubi sunt* interpretation of the passage and is not widely held since the text makes no mention of actual dead bodies, focusing instead on the treasure.

²¹ There is some confusion as to whether or not the dragon's hoard was burnt along with Beowulf's body. The messenger who brings news of Beowulf's death plainly states that the treasure will be added to the pyre (ll. 3010-15), but it is only mentioned being placed into the barrow after the cremation.

²² Peter and Bernard both held that inherent change was impossible and food never really turned to flesh and blood in the digestive tract, arguing that this was the reason humans do not turn into apples or milk

even if we consume great quantities of it. Marius, on the other hand, held that change was possible and that what we eat does become a part of our bodies.

²³ To deny the Danes this level of bravery is to single them out among all the tribes in Scandinavia as inherently weak-willed. This seems unlikely since they had sufficient military will and power to subjugate the surrounding communities and build Heorot on the backs of those who paid tribute to Hrothgar. It, therefore, seems unwise to attribute a higher level of *esprit de corps* to the Geats, Swedes, Frisians, etc. who never built anything approaching Heorot.

²⁴ This is, according to anthropologist David Parkin, the difference between “respectful” fear and “raw” fear: “respectful fear assumes a predictable response to behavior. It approaches knowable fear. Raw fear assumes an unpredictable aspect sustained by the victim. It is, literally, fear of the unknown. The first is emotionally integrated. If you cross your divine or secular lord, then you may fear his wrath but at least have only yourself to blame and could have prevented it. Falsehood and guilt prompt the fear while truth and innocence suppress it. In this way these emotions or ‘inner states’ occur in some kind of balance. However, raw fear is, so to speak, dislocated from any underlying emotional consistency. You may suffer it even though you did no wrong. The innocent as well as the guilty are its victims. Thus, respectful fear is based on some system of reasoned consequences, while raw fear is not.” See Parkin’s “Toward and Apprehension of Fear.” *Sociophobics: The Anthropology of Fear*. Ed. David L. Scruton. Boulder, CO: Westview P, 1986. 158-72 (especially 159-160).

²⁵ Magennis distinguishes food from drink in his work, the latter of which, as we will see, does appear quite often.

²⁶ Oddly enough, Magennis almost undercuts the efficacy of his argument by repeatedly claiming that “food appears to have been seen in the Germanic culture reflected in Old English as a staple of life rather than as belonging to a symbolic value-system” (*Anglo-Saxon...* 40). Such a stance seem incongruent with his overarching point that there is a definite anxiety about food in the Old English corpus, which likely reflected an anxiety about food both in the Germanic literary tradition inherited by the Anglo-Saxons and in that cultural context in which *Beowulf* took shape. It is not, I would argue, that food was omitted from the symbolic value-system, but that food was not positively implicated in that system. That is, the absence of references to socially acceptable foodstuffs or eating in Old English literature is not a result of disinterest, but is instead a result of the negative symbolic force that food exerts in this particular system. Seen in this way, the silence about food and eating is indicative of the very anxiety Magennis identifies, and it signifies an even greater impact on Old English literature than he first suggests.

²⁷ *Scencte* in l. 496, *sealdon* and *sealde* in ll. 1161 and 2024, and *boren* and *bær* in ll. 1192, 1982, and 2021.

²⁸ *Geþeah* in ll. 618 and 628, *þicgan* in l. 1010, *geþægon* in l. 1014, and *geþah* in l. 1024.

²⁹ 2.765-66.

³⁰ Magennis argues that “even with drinking, it is notable that the focus in Old English poetry is on the *activity* but not the *act* of drinking” (*Anglo-Saxon...* 64). The term “focus” is important because the verb *drincan* appears throughout *Beowulf* and other Old English literature and takes human subjects. Interestingly, Magennis argues that most of these appearances do not have direct objects (*Anglo-Saxon...* 26). R.D. Fulk et al. further observe that “although Beowulf himself is represented as accepting the cup at the feasts, the term *drunken* is never used of him” (152-53). So while the language itself may inject some separation between the humans and the act of drinking, drinking has a much higher profile than food and is much more closely associated with hall-thanes.

³¹ For *poculum mortis*, see Carleton Brown's "Poculum Mortis in Old English." *Speculum* 15.4 (1940): 389-99 and Magennis's "The Cup as Symbol and Metaphor in Old English Literature." For *meoduscerwen*, see Albert Stanburrough Cook's "Bitter Beer-Drinking." *MLN* 40.5 (1925): 285-88 and Magennis, *op. cit.*

³² I use the term *mead* here in much the same way the *Beowulf*-poet does, not to refer to the specific alcoholic beverage made from honey but to all alcoholic beverages (beer, ale, mead, and wine) mentioned by the poem. For more on this lack of distinction between different kinds of drink, see Magennis's *Anglo-Saxon Appetites* (23).

³³ Fred C. Robinson had touched on the point some years earlier, though he did not develop the idea nearly as thoroughly as Hill. See Robinson's *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (especially 77-78).

³⁴ The main of Hill's analysis can be found on 76-83. In his *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*, he makes a similar argument regarding Wiglaf's understanding of his duty to Beowulf (82-84).

³⁵ Wealhtheow never reveals what, exactly, the warriors are ready to do, but since she is obviously against Beowulf ruling Denmark, one might speculate that they would be ready to defend it against any sort of power-grab by Beowulf at her orders.

³⁶ Though Hrothgar's surviving Danes do not defend his hall against Grendel, there is an implicit honoring of the oath made over the king's mead. Perhaps taking the advice of the *Widsith* poet, the retainers do not make oaths they do not intend to fulfill: no Dane—not even Unferth—is shown making a promise to fight Grendel and then breaking it, unlike Beowulf's own men later in the poem. The ones who do swear to fight Grendel, however, die in the fulfillment of that oath because they *gebeotedon beore druncne / ofer ealwæge* [having drunk beer, swore over the ale-cup] (ll. 480-81). Again, observe the past participle, *druncne*, appear in connection to an oath.

³⁷ Obviously, these oaths are not always fulfilled. Some Danish warriors must be breaking their oaths or simply refusing to make any since Heorot is usually deserted at night. Likewise, Beowulf's own men, according to Wiglaf, break the promises they made over Beowulf's mead by deserting him as he battles the dragon (ll. 2631-37). Be that as it may, Wiglaf's vitriolic outburst and the resulting exile of the ten deserters show just how important the oath-breaking was and, consequently, how important these oaths were to the characters in the poem.

³⁸ It could well be that Grendel's solitary drinking is a byproduct of his exilic life, that his descent from Cain coincidentally sets him at odds with the communal nature of the Danish and Geatish hall feasts—a happy accident, depending on one's viewpoint. However, to my mind, it is more likely that this is a display of contempt, for there is little reason to include the half-line of 742b if not to set Grendel in opposition to the alimentary traditions of drinking that are depicted throughout the poem. Additionally, if Grendel is well enough aware of the importance of the cup for oathing and alliances (as I will later discuss), it seems unlikely that the poet would try to depict ignorance with regard to the social nature of drinking.

³⁹ According to Magennis, only once in Old English secular poetry is *drincan* used in a singular, "finite form," and that is in reference to Grendel.

⁴⁰ See Thomas of Cantimpré's *Bonum universale de apibus*. Douai: Baltazar Belleri, 1627.

CHAPTER VI

YOU ARE HOW YOU EAT: CUISINE AND ETIQUETTE

The hostess receives at the door; guests stand until dinner is announced; the host leads the way with the guest of honor. The hostess goes to table last. The host and hostess always sit at the big center table and the others at that table are invariably the oldest present.

Emily Post, *Etiquette*¹

Introduction

After having studied the more obvious elements of taboo and symbolism in the foodways of the human characters and Grendel, we now turn to the less obvious aspects of cuisine and etiquette, which have been generally neglected by critics. James L. Rosier's reading of Grendel's final meal is a typical example: "were the morsel not a thane," he writes, "the process of eating might be that of any Anglo-Saxon gourmet" (9). He supports this interpretation by observing that Grendel looks forward to his feast with joy, eats, drinks, and even sings. Numerous problems exist with Rosier's interpretation.² I put aside any objections to the "process of eating" in the poem and the rather unfortunate turn of phrase "Anglo-Saxon gourmet" because, as the previous chapter showed, no one else in *Beowulf* is actually shown eating. My point of contention is with the way Rosier parallels the forms and rituals of human feasts with Grendel's. To equate them is to claim that the only transgression in his foodways is the taboo of anthropophagy. This interpretation, as we have already seen in the previous discussion of symbolism, is incorrect and unnecessarily flattens a scene so laden with meaning.

I have here discussed Rosier's interpretation not to impugn him, but to illustrate just how thoroughly the obvious transgression of anthropophagy has impeded a clear-eyed examination of Grendel's deviant behavior. Our preoccupation with anthropophagy has proved to be such an inviting avenue by which to discuss Grendel as a monster that it

has come to *represent* his monstrosity to most critics.³ Such a view is self-limiting, for when we look at the cuisine and etiquette elements of his foodways, we see a deeper violation of alimentary traditions than critics have ever suspected. These two areas will be the focus of this chapter. As in Chapter V, I will first sketch out a general explanation of cuisine and etiquette as they are understood in food studies. Then, I will show that norms of food preparation, restraint, and the speed at which the feast progresses are carefully, if subtly, constructed in the poem—almost as if they exist purely to be violated by Grendel. And violate them he does; his hasty consumption of raw human flesh and the greedy nature he displays by taking as many thanes at one time as he possibly can all point to significant deviance in behavior.

Cuisine and Etiquette

By way of introduction to cuisine and etiquette, let us revisit Carole Counihan's description: "*Cuisine*, the food elements used and rules for their combination and preparation; *etiquette and food rules*, the customs governing what, with whom, when and where one eats" (19). The inclusion of cuisine might seem wrong-headed in this study, for the common definition denotes a group of foodstuffs associated with a specific culture or evokes Michelin Guides and Zagat Surveys. While not wholly incorrect, that oversimplifies what is a complex area of study. As we can see from Counihan's quick description, cuisine refers to specific rules governing not only the traditional or acceptable food elements included in a cuisine, but also their combination and preparation.⁴

In this examination, food elements and their combination are of little analytical value, since all we know is that Grendel eats human beings and drinks their blood directly

out of their bodies. Preparation, on the other hand, is a richer vein of inquiry and will be the focus in this chapter. There are a number of actions that might be included in this category: skinning, plucking, gutting, butchering, washing, plating, and serving can all account for preparation since they are important elements of a meal, but are not directly involved in its consumption. The most important aspect of preparation, however, is cooking. Some modes of cooking (such as deep frying or sautéing) are tied to class, some (such as poaching or smoking) are tied to the foodstuff being prepared, and some (such as using a thermal immersion circulator for sous-vide or microwaving a bag of popcorn) are tied to technology. Because its presence and the manner in which it is performed are considered distinguishing cultural markers, most of those working in food studies consider cooking methods deeply intertwined with specific cultures.⁵

The father of structuralist anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, argues that cooking and language are two hallmarks of cultures and are important for understanding them. Viewing the underlying principles of a given society in linguistic terms borrowed from Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss generally argues that social phenomena and individual action take place within “systems of relations which are the products of unconscious thought processes” (*Structural Anthropology* 58). Perhaps because his work is so indebted to Saussure and Jakobson, and their propensity for the dialectic (*langue* and *parole*, signifier and signified, syntagmatic and paradigmatic, definitions based on contrast, etc.), Lévi-Strauss is often characterized by his use of binaries. Whether it is his study of kin ties, myths, or foodways, he seems to return again and again to a progressive theory of cultural evolution based on the opposition between nature and culture. This is an obvious theme in *The Raw and the Cooked* (first published

in 1964 as *Le Cru et le Cuit*), in which he attempts to show that *armatures*, synchronic points of relation between mythemes, undergird any social system. An exemplum would be the double opposition between the mythological jaguar of the Ge peoples and the vulture of the Tupi-Guarani:

each species is defined in terms of the food it eats: the jaguar is a beast of prey who feeds on raw meat; the vulture is a carrion-eater, who consumes rotten meat. . . . It is thus confirmed that the Ge myths about the origin of fire, like the Tupi-Guarani function in terms of a double contrast: on the one hand, between what is raw and what is cooked, and on the other, between the fresh and the decayed. The raw/cooked axis is characteristic of culture; the fresh decayed one of nature, since cooking brings about the cultural transformation of the raw, just as putrefaction is its natural transformation. . . . But the dividing line between nature and culture is different, according to whether we are considering the Ge or the Tupi myths: in the former it separates the cooked from the raw; in the latter it separates the raw from the rotten. For the Ge, then, the raw + rotten relation is a natural category, whereas for the Tupi the raw + cooked relation is a cultural category. (*The Raw...* 142-43)

As we can see, the binary oppositions in this passage are numerous (raw/cooked, raw/rotten, culture/nature), and Levi-Strauss's real interest in this particular work lies in the large-scale relationships between mythemes (the arbitrary, Saussurean signs that are the jaguar and the vulture) and in revealing how those binaries alone comprise cultural systems.

In his 1966 article, "The Culinary Triangle," he turns his attention more directly to the intricacies of the binaries he set up in *The Raw and the Cooked*, more thoroughly articulating their details and implication. At first, he seems to break away from the binary system (though not the notion of opposed concepts) by proposing a triangulated system comprised of "raw," "cooked," and "rotted" (Figure 6.1). Intended to complement and further clarify this abstract triangle is a less successful concrete triangle consisting of cooking methods: roasting is associated with the raw, smoking linked to the

cooked, and boiling, identified with the rotted (“The Culinary...” 591-92). It is not long, however, before the binarism makes an appearance, and he uses the triangles to illustrate an oppositional relationship between culture (cooked) and nature (raw, rotted). As he does in *The Raw and the Cooked*, he argues the raw and the rotted are natural since they

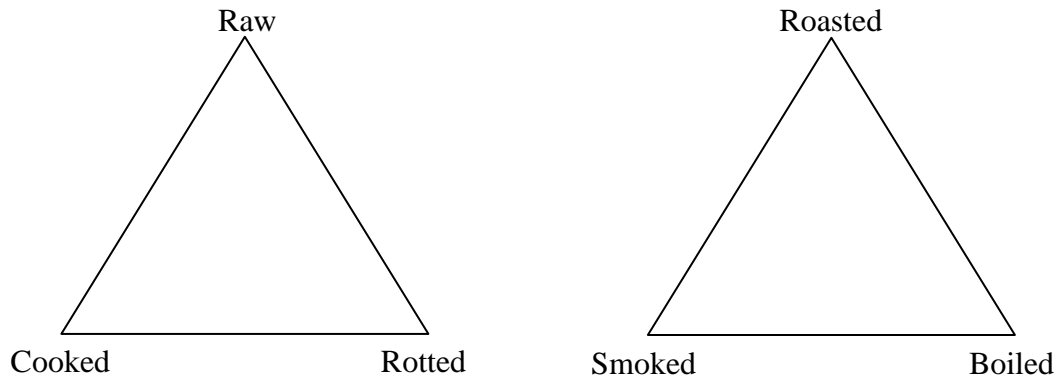


Figure 6.1: Two diagrams illustrating Lévi-Strauss’s culinary triangle. On the left, the abstract triangle and on the right the concrete one.

have not been changed by human beings, whereas the cooked is cultural because the cooking process is a transformation of raw items into food via human action and technology (“The Culinary...” 587).

Lévi-Strauss’s work—and structuralism in general—has received a good deal of criticism. The most obvious, of course, are those leveled by Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault; Derrida attacking the primacy of speech and arguing that writing is always already present in any culture, and Foucault arguing that the mythemes and structures are not hard-wired but are propagated by specific populations within a society to maintain power and control.⁶

More specifically, some have leveled charges against the culinary triangles themselves. Adrienne Lehrer, for instance, finds little evidence for the sort of

oppositional structure proposed in the concrete roasted-smoked-boiled triangle in her study of cooking terminology (167-68). On a different front, Paul Shankman takes Lévi-Strauss to task for, among other things, failing to properly define terms like “culture” and “nature”. While these two may seem well nigh impossible to define, from an anthropological standpoint, Shankman’s critique is valid, for, as he points out, with undefined terms, Lévi-Strauss can assert that the rotted is a result of natural transformation, but the boiled, which is mapped onto the rotted position, is “on the side of culture *as to the means*; or *as to results*...on the side of nature” (Shankman 56, Lévi-Strauss, “The Culinary...” 594). Both Shankman and Lehrer make clear cases that the concrete triangle—at which most specific criticism has been directed—is so full of exceptions and inconsistencies that we would do well to reject it outright.

I do not here seek to craft a wholesale defense of Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology, nor do I agree with all of his arguments.⁷ It may well be that the sort of unobservable grammar which allows for the construction of social patterns—and even the seemingly basic binary of nature and culture—are not the hard-wired psycho-sociological systems he believed them to be. They may be useful fictions that, having been repeated so long, look very much like fact. Nevertheless, the nature-culture binary was at work in the Anglo-Saxon mind, and it enjoys a significant presence in *Beowulf* (as seen in the distinction between the “natural” hall of Grendel and the “cultured” hall of Hrothgar, Grendel’s consumption and the “fasting” of human beings in the poem, the difference in accouterment between Grendel’s unarmed foray and the Germanic reverence for manufactured weapons, etc.).⁸ That is to say, whether Lévi-Strauss’s structural system is the Unified Theory he thought it was or applies only in specific cultures that have

developed in a certain way, his basic interpretation of food and its place within a society is an excellent way not necessarily to understand or reveal some truth about the society in the poem, but to frame and focus an examination of it.

Even more recent anthropologists working in the field of food studies accept the general distinction he makes between the natural raw and the cultural cooked, and it remains a central tenet of food studies. One of the more recent works in food studies, for example, spends pages rightly criticizing the roasted-smoked-boiled triangle only to ultimately affirm “that the opposition between nature and culture—between the raw and the cooked—often remains an important one in terms of the way in which food is both thought about and represented” (Ashley et al. 35-36).⁹ That is, preparation in the form of cooking is a very strong marker of the cultural, whether it is structured like a language or not.

The cultural implications of preparation, however, extend beyond the confines of cooking per se.¹⁰ In some contexts, the way the foodstuffs are handled—from farm to table—are associated with explicit cuisine rules. Kosher production of beef and poultry, for example, involves specific standards regarding the killing of animals (*shechita*) and their butchering. Even if a food item is produced according to these rules and comes to the consumer in its kosher state, it can still become non-kosher through incorrect preparation—if it is prepared with utensils that have been used on non-kosher foodstuffs, for instance.

Etiquette, like cuisine, takes on a meaning much broader in food studies than that attached to its common usage. As Counihan points out, etiquette governs how one eats, where one eats, with whom one eats, etc. Although it can certainly refer to rules

about placing the salad fork in the proper spot on the table, etiquette extends far beyond table manners. In fact, many of its aspects have nothing to do with the table at all. One of the most significant studies of etiquette was published by Mary Douglas and Michael Nicod. Studying the meal in mid-1970s England, they create a distinction between “structured” and “unstructured” food events: the former is considered a meal, the latter a snack. A meal, since it is “a social occasion, which is organised according to rules prescribing time, place, and sequence of actions” has a regularized set of food rules, whereas the unstructured snack has very few (744). Snacks can be eaten at any point in the day or night, do not usually require utensils or plates, and can be eaten virtually anywhere—at a table, on the couch in front of the television, or in the car. In fact, the only etiquette rules that do apply to snack foods are those prohibiting their appearance at a structured meal event.

The structured meal identified by Douglas and Nicod is defined by the presence of certain kinds of food and the absence of others, but out of that selectivity come other characteristics. “The meal,” they argue, “is strongly rule-bound as to permitted combinations and sequences” (744). Obviously, most meals in the West are eaten with utensils, on plates, and around a table. Moreover, meals tend to unfold along a specific set of rules. An evening meal in the blue-collar British households studied by Douglas and Nicod, for example, almost always began with a hot, savory course that contained a starch, a protein, a trimming (vegetable or savory pudding), and a dressing (746). The etiquette rules in this example stem from its nature as a structured food event, and these rules help shape the order of events, the kinds of food we expect to see, and the way in which they are consumed.

Cuisine: Grendel and Preparation

One might object to my identification of cooking as an important cultural element in *Beowulf*. After all, much of the argument in Chapter V rests on the observation that no human being ever eats in the poem, and Chapter IV made the case that fire, the most obvious element of cooking, retains a thoroughly negative image throughout. In Heorot, we see no boars roasting on a spit and no porridge merrily simmering over a crackling, welcoming fire. So how could cooking or preparation be an analytical tool by which to identify behavioral transgressions by Grendel? While it is true that no cooking is depicted in the poem, it is also true that cooking is *implied* a number of times—if only we broaden our definition past that imposed by Lévi-Strauss's concrete culinary triangle.

One flaw in Lévi-Strauss's second culinary triangle is that he considers no cooking techniques beyond boiling, roasting, and smoking. Perhaps this is a product of his strict structuralist approach or a symptom of cultural blindness. Whatever the cause, his second triangle not only excises cooking techniques that do not include a heat source (such as ceviche, salting, and pickling), but it also ignores one of the earliest forms of food preparation: fermentation. Such an omission seriously limits the utility of his second culinary triangle because fermentation has been an almost-universal cooking process since the Neolithic Era (beer has recently been dated to the seventh century BC in China).¹¹ With a more inclusive definition of cooking that considers fermentation, our understanding of food preparation in *Beowulf* changes significantly.

The poem contains numerous references to fermented drinks as they are served and enjoyed in the halls of Hrothgar and Hygelac. Hrothgar, we might recall, mentions that his long-dead thanes drink beer when they swear to fight Grendel (l. 480); mead is

served to Beowulf during the first feast at Heorot (l. 624); and wine is served during the second feast (l. 1162).¹² The poem, in fact, makes no mention of human beings drinking anything other than fermented alcoholic beverages. The obviousness of my observation might belie its subtleties when we think of preparation in *Beowulf*. Cups of mead do not spring from the ground, and there are no liquor stores from which Hrothgar might buy his kegs of ale. His drink must be prepared—fermented ahead of time and stored against need. The planning, the technology, the time for the process, and the resources required all point to a rather extensive element of preparation after all.

The process by which ale was made in the Anglo-Saxon period in which the poem was written down was not a simple one. The batches were likely small, perhaps approaching what a local microbrewery might produce today. Additionally, the process was fairly inefficient because medieval people lacked the sort of production line mentality that we today take for granted.¹³ In her *Second Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink*, Ann Hagen gives an outline of the brewing process that highlights the labor and procedures involved:

The grain is steeped in water for three nights, left to drain dry for a day, then piled into a heap for three days. During this time it will begin to sprout. After that, the grain is spread thinly over the malting floor, and turned twice or thrice a day...for a further two weeks....The malt is gently dried over a fire of straw in a kiln before being rubbed clean and winnowed. The dried grains are ground, and are then ready for brewing....The ground malt is placed in a mash tun, then water which has been boiled and cooled slightly, or three parts of boiling to one part of cold water are poured over the malt, and the mix is stirred. It is left to stand for three days or so before the wort...is drained from the spent grains....During mashing, diastase converts the starch in the malt to sugar, on which the yeast, which is now introduced, can feed....After some three days, the yeast stops working, and the beer can be cleared and put into barrels. (207-08)

The steps taken in this technological intervention to transform grain to beer are numerous and the labor significant. Turning, cleaning, winnowing, boiling, draining, and adding ingredients at specific times seem like work enough, but because of the relatively small size and long timeline of each batch, these steps were often performed for multiple batches, each at a different stage of the process. Such a situation demands a significant outlay of work-hours and resources, and Hagen's description points up the amount of time demanded to produce such alcoholic drinks. Brewing ale, as she describes it, would have taken approximately one month per batch (mead takes less time, wine considerably longer), so brewing must be planned, and it must take place far in advance of consumption.

The labor-intensive and lengthy preparation stage of the alcohol consumed at human feasts in *Beowulf* are important because they illustrate the significant role these drinks play in the community. One of the positives of brewing comes from the symbolism of a technological intervention of the process and its product: preparation seems to signify the transcendence of a merely hand-to-mouth, animalistic experience. The Danes and Geats do not consume grain in its raw state, but process it for a lengthy period of time until it takes on a very different form. This technological intervention into the natural state of wheat (honey in the case of mead, grapes in the case of wine) is what Lévi-Strauss means when sets up the link between cooking and culture—and its oppositional relative, the raw/natural—in his culinary triangle.

Cooking itself, as Lévi-Strauss reminds us, is an “empty form,” for it means nothing in and of itself (587). That is, there is no cosmological or cultural meaning inherent to fermentation, roasting, boiling, etc. The intervention into a food item's

natural state can take forms as different as the Danes and Geats brewing alcohol from grain and the Maya making tortillas from *masa*. The preparation may, as in the case of tortilla-making, symbolically tie the community to its origins; it may, as in the case of *Beowulf*'s brewing, serve a pseudo-sacred function that ties the members of the community to each other.¹⁴ Whatever symbolic function food preparation acquires in any community, the larger symbolism remains: it is a way for us as human beings to exert our will over natural objects and effect a change for which we alone are responsible. In this way, food preparation does exist in opposition to the "natural" and functions as a very basic method for us to distinguish ourselves from the animal or, in the case of *Beowulf*, the monstrous world.

Because the poet describes how Grendel eats the still-living Hondscio, it is perhaps understatement to say that preparation plays no part in his cuisine. The only action that could in any way be labeled as such is Grendel's scheme to stuff the Geats into his *glof*. Whereas this does demand a certain, if rudimentary, level of planning, there is still no reason to think that Grendel will do anything more than eat the warriors whole and raw once he returns home.

If we return to ll. 724-45 and Grendel's last feast in Heorot, the absence of any food preparation is clear. When Grendel enters Heorot, the warriors are sleeping all huddled together [*samod ætgædere*] in a *heap* (ll. 729-30).¹⁵ Most translators render *heap* as "troop," but the word also appears in Old English denoting a "heap" or large pile of items. Because *heap* here refers to a group of warriors, translators seem justified in rendering it "troop," but their "echo of the original," as Walter Benjamin calls translations, in a way impoverishes the Old English, "for it signifies a more exalted

language than [the translator's] own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien" ("The Task..." 258). It is difficult to keep such a concept in mind when we read Howell D. Chickering, Jr.'s fairly literal translation, but if we do not do so, we become complicit in robbing a term like *heap* of its original polysemy by effectively shearing off the figurative possibilities of its original form.¹⁶ That is, the translation of *heap* as "troop" no longer allows for a play of language. For an anthropophage like Grendel, we can imagine that the Geatish thanes sleeping on the floor of the hall would have looked less like a "troop"—which connotes a military strength Grendel is probably right not to expect—and more like a "pile" of food—which seems to be the passive role the Danes have accepted over the years. This supplementary meaning lurks in the background and suggests the *heap* is both a troop and a pile, a meal of warriors already laid out before Grendel—not on a table but on the floor.¹⁷

Grendel obviously plays no part in the preparation of his meal before he visits the hall, but the language of ll. 724-45 also shows that he takes no preparatory action even after he arrives in Heorot. The verbs used to describe his actions tell the entire story of this feast: he *treddode* [stepped] into the hall, *geseah* [saw] the Geatish troop, *þohte* [thought] not of delaying, then *gefeng* [seized], *slat* [rent], *bat* [bit], *dranc* [drank], *swealh* [swallowed], and *gefeormod* [consumed] Hondscio in quick succession. As I observed earlier, the final six verbs in this series tie Grendel closely to his food, and as I will discuss later, all but two are verbs of movement and action.¹⁸ But what this passage means in reference to food preparation is that the feast is ready-to-eat because no preparation is required or, apparently, desired. There is no pause between Grendel seeing the *heap*, grabbing Hondscio, and eating him. The hapless man is still alive when he is

seized, and with the blood still spurting from the veins, it is likely that he is still alive as Grendel consumes him. Food does not get rawer than that. This total absence of preparation leads critics such as Ward Parks and Hugh Magennis to think of the monster's attacks as animalistic—since he behaves very much like a “lion pouncing on a helpless deer” (Parks 2, Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon... 79*). Whether Grendel's food consumption is animalistic or not, his total lack of preparation is set in stark contrast to the cultural practices of the poem's human beings. Where the Danes and Geats perform a technological intervention into the natural state of food items and thereby reassert their cultural position and humanity, Grendel's consumption is literally hand-to-mouth.

Etiquette: Fast Food and Slow Food

The distinction of humanity from the natural, animalistic world—whether we think of it as a reality or a cultural fiction—plays an important role in the etiquette displayed by *Beowulf's* human characters. If we examine the four main human feasts in the poem, we see elements common to almost all of them. They tend to have a consistent concern with time in that they usually begin and end at specific points, and they proceed at a slow pace because they are organized in the poem by a sort of interruptive structure.

One of the major commonalities of *Beowulf's* four human feasts is that they all have distinct points at which they begin and (with the exception the fourth feast) end. Since they total about 600 lines, the full text of these scenes cannot be reproduced here, but it is useful to give the passages that depict the beginning and ending of each.

Feast One (ll. 489-651)

*'Site nu to symble, ond onsæl meoto,
sigehreð secgum, swa þin sefa hwette.'
Pa wæs Geatmæcgum geador ætsomme
on beorsele benc gerymed;
þær swiðferhþe sittan eodon,*

bryðum dealle....

Werod eall aras....

*Ða him Hroþgar gewat mid his hæleþa gedryht,
eodur Scyldinga ut of healle;
wolde wigfruma Wealhþeo secan,
cwen to gebeddan.*

[“Sit now to the feast, and give voice to your thoughts, glory of victory, to these men as your heart desires.” Then was the bench cleared for the Geats together in the beer-hall; there the stout-hearted men went to sit, proud in their strength....The whole troop arose....Then Hrothgar, protector of the Scyldings, went out of the hall with his band of warriors; the war-leader wished to go to Wealhtheow, the queen as bed-fellow.] (ll. 489-94, 651, 662-65)

Feast Two (ll. 991-1237)

Pa wæs sæl ond mæl

*þæt to healle gang Healfdenes sunu;
wolde sylf cyning symbol þicgan....*

swa hit agangen wearð

*eorla manegum, syþðan æfen cwom,
ond him Hroþgar gewat to hofe sinum,
rice to ræste.*

[Then was the proper and suitable time that the son of Healfdene went to the hall; the king himself would partake of the feast...as it came to pass for many of the warriors after evening came, and Hrothgar went to his chamber, the powerful one to bed.] (ll. 1008-10, 1234-37)

Feast Three (ll. 1782-92)

*‘Ga nu to setle, symbolwynne dreoh
wiggeweorþad; unc sceal worn fela
maþma gemænra siþðan morgen bið.’
Geat wæs glædmod, geong sona to,
setles neosan, swa se snottra heht....*

Duguð eal aras;

*wolde blondenfeax beddes neosan,
gamela Scylding.*

[“Go now to the seat, enjoy the happy feast; we two shall share a great many treasure between us after morning comes.” The Geat was glad-hearted, he immediately went to the seat to which the wise one had ordered him....The whole troop arose; the old, grey-haired Scylding wished to go to bed.]. (ll. 1782-86, 1790-92)

Feast Four (ll. 1975-2196)

*Hraðe wæs gerymed, saw se rica bebead,
feðgestum flet innanweard.*

[Swiftly was [the hall] cleared for the foot-guests within the hall, after the ruler commanded it.] (ll. 1975-76)

All four feasts illustrate an interest in when and how a feast should properly begin. A phrase in the second feast exemplifies the care taken with a feast's beginning, for that celebration starts *sæl ond mærl*, at the proper and suitable time. There is only one clue in the text about what, exactly, makes a time proper and suitable to begin a feast—and that is the presence of the ruler. It seems that he must be in attendance for any feast to begin in *Beowulf*.

If the second feast suggests a concern with the correct time for a feast to begin, the three other feasts reinforce and extend that concern to how a feast should properly begin. The connection between the king and the beginning of the feast is made more explicit in the first, third, and fourth feasts, each getting under way only after the Hrothgar or Hygelac commands it to begin.¹⁹ In the first and third, Hrothgar's order follows the same general pattern: he orders, *site nu to symble*, and, *ga nu to setle*. In each, the poet employs the imperative (*site* and *ga*) and supplements it with the adverb *nu*, again showing some interest in timeliness. Furthermore, in the third feast the verb *heht* appears, as if to make it clear that Hrothgar's words are not a mere invitation or suggestion. Beowulf may have the martial strength to save the weakened Hrothgar, but the only one with the power to command a banquet is the lord of the hall. In the fourth feast, we again see a command (*Hraðe wæs gerymed, swa se rica bebead*) begin the festivities. Although the poet switches gears slightly and uses indirect address, he retains the element of command by using the verb *bebead*, which resonates with Hrothgar's *heht* in the third feast; as soon as the order is given, servants begin to prepare the hall for Beowulf and his men.

The fourth feast scene also includes the interesting compound *feðgestum*, which suggests it is significant that Beowulf and his men are on their feet. Rendered in Modern English, “foot-guests” sounds awkward, and, if its attestations are any indication, *feðgest*’s place in Old English is little better. Its only other appearances in the corpus are in *Elene* (where it references those going into Jerusalem carrying the crosses) and *Exodus* (where it loses all association with feet since its referent is the Red Sea).²⁰ In *Beowulf*, the word alliterates with *flet*, a term that originally denoted a floor and only through a sort of metonymic drift came to refer to the interior of a hall or house.²¹ The alliterative pair *feðgestum flet* connotes a sense of standing, and this evocative connection is made more explicit by Hrothgar in the first and third feasts. In both, Beowulf remains standing until the Danish king bids him sit and enjoy the feast. The third feast, especially, illustrates this point by describing Beowulf’s compliant response—which is to immediately go to the seat Hrothgar indicates.

In this motif, Paul C. Bauschatz sees a sense of order implicit in the commandment to sit, “since to sit requires a place to sit, and a place suggests some apportioning of positions, and the apportioning requires order” (289). Michael J. Enright further observes that “when leaders sit down...retainers often remain standing and that is an appropriate sign of status” (10-11). Thus, there is a hierarchal structure at play even before the feast has properly begun. The social hierarchy plays out in the actions of each man at the feast, imparting, as Bauschatz concludes, a sense of formality and order to the proceedings that follow. Although he does not detail just what sort of order the formality of sitting might signify, it seems quite close to the sort of structured food event mentioned by Douglas and Nicod. A feast in *Beowulf* is certainly a “social occasion,” but

the fairly standard rules by which each of the four begins also fulfill the requirement that the structured food event be “organised according to rules prescribing time, place, and sequence of actions” (Douglas and Nicod 744).

The concern with etiquette—specifically the timing and sequence of actions—is further illustrated in the ending of the feast. With the exception of the fourth feast, which does not end so much as it trails off into the story of Beowulf’s rise to power, all human feasts in *Beowulf* end with the king taking his leave of the hall. In each, the festivities cease when Hrothgar leaves Heorot for bed. The phrases *cwen to gebeddan* in l. 665, *to ræste* in l. 1237, and *beddes* in l. 1791 all introduce Hrothgar’s need for sleep. After he leaves, the revelers quickly settle into their slumber rather than continue the feast (ll. 688-90, 1239-43, 1799-1802).

We should not interpret these endings as informal or coincidental. Hrothgar does not “kill the party” by leaving early. There is nothing early about it because the proper time for a feast to end is when the lord leaves the hall. The formality of Hrothgar’s departure is made clearer if we continue to examine the motif of standing and sitting. In the first and third feasts, Hrothgar’s departure is preceded by the warriors getting to their feet. The first ends when *werod eall aras*; this takes place before the Danish king transfers protection of Heorot to Beowulf and retires to the company of Wealhtheow, but it clearly initiates the process of ending the feast (l. 651). In the third, *duguð eal aras* before Hrothgar goes to bed, a phrase that echoes the ending of the first (l. 1790).²²

The custom of standing appears to be a formal recognition of the warrior society’s hierarchical structure. In many ways, it evokes modern tradition, which dictates that soldiers stand at attention and salute when a superior officer enters the room. Unlike

their modern counterparts, however, warriors in *Beowulf* do not receive an “as you were” from Hrothgar and do seem to be free to resume their activities after he leaves. The Danes and Geats are on their feet, physically and formally recognizing that their time on the mead-benches is, for the moment, over. The formalized endings to feasts have a number of effects. Obviously, they enact a lord’s authority over his hall and the men in it. More importantly, however, by placing the authority to begin the feast completely within the power of the king, these endings demand a sense of decorum and self-control from the feasters. They have no ability to influence when a feast ends. The men may want the celebration to continue after the king ends it. They may wish to leave before it ends—as Beowulf probably does during the third feast, since he *unigmetes wel...restan lyste* [very greatly desired to rest] (ll. 1792-93). What the thanes wish, however, is of no importance, and they adhere to the lord’s decision. It is this suppression of individual desires that so clearly distinguishes the human beings of the poem from the monsters—so much so, that restraint and self-control are hallmarks of the human feasts.

Restraint and self-control are not only evinced in the beginnings and endings of human feasts, but also in the way they progress. As much as anything, the four feast scenes are distinguished by their preoccupation with etiquette elements that have little, if anything, to do with food. In his “inventory” of features, for example, Magennis identifies ten motifs that recur in *Beowulf*’s feast scenes: “drinking, the hall setting, the dignity and nobility of the participants, the attendance of serving stewards, music, the giving of gifts, the presence of women, the physical splendour of the scene, rejoicing and speeches” (*Images of...* 62). Eight of the ten have nothing to do with consumption, and service is only tangentially related to it. Since a number of Magennis’s features (like

nobility) are descriptive elements of the narrative, they need not concern us here, but there are four that should draw our attention in an examination of etiquette: service, singing/music, gift-giving, and oratory.

The service of drink appears in three of the four feast scenes. In the first, a thane carries an *ealowæge* [ale-cup]; Wealhtheow serves the *ful* first to Hrothgar, then to (presumably Danish) retainers, and finally to Beowulf; and Freawaru, Hrothgar's daughter, serves the warriors, according to Beowulf's later account of the night (ll. 494-96, 612-29, 2020-24). The second feast also has cup-bearers in attendance and Wealhtheow again serving Hrothgar (ll. 1161-62, 1169-79). In the fourth feast, Hygd, wife to Hygelac, serves the Geatish war band (ll. 1980-83). Singing appears in the first two feasts: it is only generally mentioned in the first, but takes up over 100 lines in the second with the Finnsburh tale.²³ Gift-giving is mentioned three separate times in the second feast scene and takes up the final twenty-four lines of the fourth.²⁴ Lastly, the majority of feasts devote a tremendous amount of attention to speaking—from the flyting match in the first, to Wealhtheow's speeches in the second, to Beowulf's tale-telling and disquisition on the future of the Danish kingdom in the fourth.²⁵ Aside from service, none of these other elements of etiquette have any direct connection to food or drink. Whereas they do function as motifs common to the poem's banquets, singing, gift-giving, and oratory are not exclusive to them. Unlike drinking or eating, there is nothing in most of these rules of etiquette that innately connect them to the defining element of most feasts, which is, of course, consumption.

What I have tried to show in the previous paragraph is that human feasts actually contain very little in the way of food consumption or actions directly associated with it.

For example, although the first feast runs for 163 lines, 115 of them deal with songs or noble and well-crafted speeches. Likewise, the second feast scene is covered in 229 lines, 169 of which are devoted to elements having no direct connection to food. These quantitative measurements, while striking, are just statistics; they may highlight a disparity in emphasis, but cannot tell the whole story. Instead, the actual pattern in which etiquette elements appear makes more of an impact on the character of the feast in *Beowulf*. This pattern is the interruptive structure mentioned earlier. In the feasts that are most detailed—the first and the second—we can see a sequence in which those portions of the text devoted to the actual consumption of foodstuffs are not bunched together but appear in relatively short passages punctuated by gift exchange, songs, or speeches. To better illustrate this interruptive structure, a schematic outline of the second feast appears below (passages related to consumables are shown in boldface, and passages related to etiquette but not related to consumption are italicized):

- ll. 1008-19: Beginning of the Feast
- ll. 1020-1024a: Gift-giving (Beowulf)*
- ll. 1024b-1025a: Drinking (Beowulf receives the cup)**
- ll. 1025b-1057a: Gift-giving (Beowulf and the surviving Geats)*
- ll. 1057b-1062: Narratorial intrusion (gnomic)
- ll. 1063-1160a: Singing (Finnsburh)*
- ll. 1160b-68a: Feasting (happy din, service of wine)**
- ll. 1168b-1187: Speaking (Wealhtheow's first speech)*
- ll. 1188-93a: Drinking (Beowulf receives a cup, enters into friendship)**
- ll. 1193b-96: Gift-giving (Beowulf)*
- ll. 1197-1214a: Narratorial intrusion (fate of the necklace)
- ll. 1214b: Feasting (hall filled with sound)*
- ll. 1215-31: Speaking (Wealhtheow's second speech)*
- ll. 1232-33a: Feasting (described as the best of feasts)**
- ll. 1233b-37a: End of the Feast

The average line length for passages concerned with consumption is short—just under three lines. Although they are on average longer, lines concerned with etiquette elements

unrelated to food are still relatively brief. With the obvious exception of the Finnsburh lay, no single motif of the feast is particularly developed, and the different aspects (consumption, gift-giving, singing, speaking) are spread throughout the passage.

This distribution pattern is especially important when we think about feasting proper, since it is consistently interrupted—often in mid-line. In ll. 1025 and 1193, for instance, the first half-line relates to drink and drinking, whereas the second relates to gift-giving. The latter is especially illustrative of an interruptive structure. Initially, ll. 1192-93a make it seem as if the poet is finally building some momentum toward a Homeric depiction of the feast:

*Him was ful boren, ond freondlaðu
wordum bewægned, ond wunden gold
estum geeawed, earmreade twa,
hrægl ond hringas...*

[to him was brought a cup, and a friendly invitation was offered with words, and wound gold was bestowed with goodwill, two arm ornaments, a mail-coat, rings...] (ll. 1192-95)

The poet introduces speech and drink together, and the implication is that Beowulf drinks from the cup offered to him. But the poet skitters away from such a depiction and shifts his attention to gift-giving, avoiding any mention of feasting until the end of the passage almost forty lines later.

My point here is not to judge the *Beowulf*-poet because he failed to re-dress the feast at Nestor's palace in Germanic trappings. Instead, I wish to show that the interruptive structure shortens and separates moments of consumption by introducing other etiquette elements that do not relate to food or drink in a direct way. When the poet describes gift-giving, speeches, or songs *he is not describing eating and drinking*. Narrative, because reading or listening to its words is inherently diachronic, is a poor

means to reflect simultaneity.²⁶ Each time the poem breaks off its description of drinking, that action is effectively “paused” and is restarted only when it is revisited later in the passage.

Moreover, the action of the poem itself reflects these interruptions, for the poet may be telling us that drinking does not continue when gift-giving, speaking, or singing take place. After the Finnsburh lay, for example, the poem describes the banquet’s resumption: *Gamen eft astah, / beorhtode bencsweg; byrelas sealdon / win of wunderfatum* [the amusement arose again, the bench-noise rang out; the cup-bearers served wine from wondrous vessels] (ll. 1160-62). The sense here is one of reanimation. *Eft* suggests that the happy din of the feast quiets as the *scop* sings, returning to its previous volume only after he finishes. The explicit reference to the cup-bearers going about their duties further supports that sense of reanimation: it seems that they are busily refilling cups that ran dry during the performance, which means that they were likely not serving as the song was being sung. The ritual of speech and the meaningful drink that seals an oath seem even more important than the song of a *scop*, so if the hall falls silent and service pauses during a song, it would not be unwarranted for us to think the poet envisioned the hall falling still and silent as Hrothgar gives Beowulf his gifts or when Wealhtheow makes her speeches.

The consistent interruption of feasting in *Beowulf* functions as a sort of brake on momentum; in addition to shifting the emphasis away from consumption, it slows down and extends the feast. There is never a point in these scenes at which a drunken brawl erupts or, as in Scandinavian sagas, men throw the detritus of their meals at one another.²⁷ The gravitas is too great, and the human feasts never reach the sort of

animalistic crescendo that we see in Grendel's. It is as if the interruptive structure is a response to the anxiety about consumption posited by Magennis, as if exerting such an extraordinary social control over the feast is a sort of proxy by which control is exerted over the basic urge of hunger and thirst. By expressing this anxiety as a form (perhaps a fantasy) of control, the poet illustrates the distinction between humanity and animality—and human mastery over that animalism.

A commensurate level of control is obviously lacking in Grendel's feasts. The poet gives him a healthy dose of animosity for the poem's Germanic power structures, but when it comes to formality and the traditions of etiquette we have just examined, there is an even greater level of hatred and/or disregard. However, in one regard, Grendel's last feast in Heorot (ll. 739-45) does not violate the etiquette displayed in human feasts. Since he is the ruler (*swa rixode*) of Heorot during the night, his feast properly begins when he arrives—just as it does with Hrothgar and Hygelac (l. 144).

Nevertheless, there is something very different about the beginning of Grendel's feast compared to the other four.²⁸ Although Hrothgar and Hygelac have the ability and duty to begin the feast, they do so largely with formulaic language set within a context of formalized behavior. In all but the third feast, for example, there is a period before the banquet proper begins that is devoted to talking, preparation, and even sitting. If these events in the nascent stages of a feast exemplify, as Bauschatz and Enright argue, a sense of order and social hierarchy, then the beginning of Grendel's meal illustrates just the opposite. His approach to the hall, which Arthur G. Brodeur and Katherine O'Brian O'Keefe so aptly analyze, is deliberate and ominous: the pace of the action slows, allowing tension to build.²⁹ As soon as Grendel steps into the hall, however, the tempo

changes. As if referencing the measured human feast that precedes this attack, the poet tells us *ne þæt se aglæca yldan þohte*, [nor did the formidable assailant think to delay] (l. 739). There is nothing to suggest order, no formal speech or action that reveals the presence of a social hierarchy, only the chaos that results from Grendel's quick progression from decision-making to eating.

Grendel's is distinguished from the human feasts by its single-track focus on him and his food. Gone is the service that characterized the other banquets, since Grendel—by grabbing Hondscio up off the floor—serves himself. Also absent are gift-giving and speeches. Grendel gives no gift to any man, possibly because he is incapable, and, with the exception of his song of sorrow in l. 787, he never makes a sound.³⁰ Because all of the etiquette elements that interrupt the actual consumption during the human feasts are missing, Grendel's feast is structurally different from the other four.

In fact, we might think of Grendel's feast as an antithesis to the others. Instead of an interruptive structure that creates an atmosphere of self-control and decorum, both the diction and grammar impart a sense of abandon:

*Ne þæt se aglæca yldan þohte,
ac he gefeng hraðe forman siðe
slæpende rinc, slat unwearnum,
bat banlocan, blod edrum dranc,
synsnædum swealh; sona hæfde
unlyfigendes eal gefeormod,
fet ond folma.*

[Nor did the formidable assailant think to delay, but he seized a sleeping warrior at the first opportunity, rent without restraint, bit the muscle, drank blood from the veins, swallowed the sinful morsels; quickly, he had consumed all of the lifeless [man], feet and hands.] (ll. 739-45)

The first action verb of the passage, *gefeng*, is modified by the adverbials *hraðe* [quickly] and *forman siðe* [at the first opportunity]. From the beginning, these dual adverbials

show that Grendel snatches up Hondscio as quickly as he is able. At the end of the sequence, modifying *gefeormod* [consumed], is the adverb *sona* [at once]; here, the poet chooses to modify a verb of consumption, meaning that Grendel eats the thane as hastily as he seizes him. On a larger scale, these three adverbials provide a sort of envelope structure for Grendel's feast so that it begins with quick action and ends in the same manner.

The lines that lie within this envelope structure, as we saw in Chapter V, contain a series of verbs that depict the actual process of consumption. Lana Stone Dieterich has observed a sense of hurriedness in the construction of this passage and in the location of the verbs themselves. These lines, she argues,

offer us a rapid succession of active verbs, all of which have Grendel as their subject, two of which are slowed only slightly by their appearances following their objects: *dranc* and *swealh*. The pattern, in other words, follows the context in the text of Grendel's swift seizure of the warrior, his tearing and biting him, slowing only enough to drink his blood and swallow huge morsels of his body. The syntactic break in l. 743 is enough time for the monster to have finished his meal. (9)

Of the seven verbs that appear in these lines, six of them (*gefeng*, *slat*, *bat*, *dranc*, *swealh*, and *gefeormod*) are transitive action verbs. For comparison, Beowulf is the subject of one transitive action verb in the 246 lines that comprise the second human feast scene; Hrothgar is the subject of eight.³¹ The difference in density is shocking and can only partly be attributed to the larger cast of characters, since many of the verbs in this scene move to the passive voice (such as *wæs haten* in l. 991 and *Þær wæs sang ond sweg* in l. 1063) or lack a direct object (such as *gewat* in l. 1234 and *sæt* in l. 1190).

Moreover, the grammatical structure of ll. 739-45 is quite simple. The first four and a half lines are formed by two independent clauses, the second with a compound

predicate. The last two lines of the passage are a simple independent clause, ending with the modifier *fet ond folma*. Of particular interest is the compound predicate, since it is composed of five separate verb phrases, all clearly governed by the pronoun *he* in l. 740. This grammatical structure is not only fairly simple, but also allows the sort of accelerated pattern that Stone identifies. By employing the compound predicate here, the poet avoids a repeated subject or any other modifiers that might expand the passage and separate the verbs from one another. The result is a rapid-fire list of action verbs that breaks the lines into a series of staccato phrases—very different from the long, looping sentence forms in which the single verb is wound round by adjectival phrases. (One can imagine that this effect would be even more pronounced in an oral recitation of the poem.) This stylistic shift, combined with the sense of speed dictated by the adverbials *hraðe*, *forman siðe*, and *sona*, gives the entire passage describing Grendel’s last meal a frenetic pace—in stark opposition to the controlled, slow-developing human feasts in the poem.

Etiquette: Greed, Gluttony, and Restraint

The final aspect of etiquette, and the final aspect of Grendel’s foodways under examination, also revolves around restraint. The reading of Grendel’s attacks put forth by critics has often associated him with gluttony. There is some suggestion of this vice in the poem. For instance, when he writes, *sona hæfde / unlyfigendes eal gefeormod, / fet ond folma*, the poet stresses Grendel’s enormous appetite by telling us he ate *eal* of Hondscio (ll. 743-45). Since he is one of the Danish thanes hand-picked by Beowulf for this mission, Hondscio is not likely to be a ninety-eight-pound weakling, so Grendel has consumed a tremendous amount of food at once.³² The idea is re-emphasized with the

modifier *fet ond folma*, which adds a descriptive element and helps the audience to visualize the Geat disappearing down Grendel's bloody maw, since feet and hands are extremities. Beowulf's retelling of the battle, though it contains some new information, remains largely consistent with the original narrative: he tells Hygelac, *him Grendel wearð, / mærum maguþegne to muðbonan, / leofes mannes lic eall forswearlg* [Grendel, the mouth-killer, went to him, the great warrior, and swallowed up the whole body of this beloved man] (ll. 2078-80). The repeated use of the adjective *eal(l)* in both accounts of the consumption of Hondscio suggests an anxiety about the consumption of an entire person or creature, as we saw in the previous chapter.

These depictions of Grendel's feast make it easy to see why Seth Lerer characterizes him as "a creature of unbridled appetite," a monster whose "hunger motivates a cruelty that transgresses the most fundamental of social taboos—cannibalism—and makes him a being ruled not by the mind but by the mouth" (735). Likewise, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues an "uncontrolled, destructive appetite" is a crucial aspect of Grendel's position as the cultural Other, a symbol of unchecked compulsions against which the human communities of *Beowulf* define and refine themselves ("Old English..." 23). Instrumental to both readings is Grendel's appetite, which, of course, aligns with gluttony.

Gluttony was indeed at issue in Anglo-Saxon England, as Magennis has argued elsewhere; it was seen as a sort of primrose path that led to other sins (especially drunkenness).³³ We may very well get a glimpse of this concern in Beowulf's rejoinder to Unferth in ll. 530-31 when he pointedly mentions just how much his flyting partner has drunk. It may also be the case that we can take silence about the issue as a symptom of

concern, for nowhere else does the poem allude to human gluttony. Indeed, the human beings in *Beowulf*, especially in the feast scenes, are characterized by their self-restraint.

Taken as a whole, however, this is weak evidence. If we have learned anything from the previous examinations of taboo, symbolism, and cuisine, it is that the poet gives ample evidence of the human traditions which Grendel's actions violate. They may be subtle and require some analysis to uncover, but they are always there. In this case, the poem shows relatively little anxiety about gluttony—or even drunkenness. Instead, most of the concern about it seems to have been confined to the Church. Magennis's work on gluttony references almost exclusively Christian works, and this may be one reason that the vice does not play a very large role in *Beowulf*. It gives little attention to specifically Christian practices, and it is certainly not didactic like *The Season of Fasting* or Alcuin's *De Virtutibus et Vitiis Liber*, Magennis's two main sources. We may safely assume that because he is kin to Cain and is, therefore, placed within a well-known Christian context, some religious tingeing of Grendel's gluttony should be expected, but it does not appear to be a trait that carries the same level of anxiety in *Beowulf* as it does in overtly Christian works.

No doubt, then, there is some small element of gluttony in Grendel's character, but it is not the controlling trait that some critics take it to be. Although his appetite might be uncontrolled, Grendel's greater transgression seems to be greed. This vice more properly describes a creature that is so thoroughly symbolized by his *grape*, his grabbing arm (ll. 836). It better fits with the "the numerous references to the power of his grasp" that Cohen attributes to his gluttonous nature ("Old English..." 23). And it complements Lerer's reading, which identifies Grendel's mouth and hand as the bodily foci for the poet

(735). Conclusions about Grendel's terrible gluttony, which focus so much on his appetite, seem to be rooted in the mistaken assumption that he eats *all* of his meals in the hall. Lerer and Cohen leave this assumption unspoken, but Magennis articulates it: "there is no indication that Grendel's eating of Hrothgar's warriors is due to hunger or need for food. He does not bring back food for his mother and she does not take part in his man-eating attacks" (*Anglo-Saxon...* 79). A careful reading of the poem reveals a good deal of textual evidence to contradict this assumption and the interpretation which rests on it.

Grendel's first appearance in the narrative seems to support the view that he is indeed gluttonous:

*Whit unhælo,
grim ond grædig, gearo sona wæs,
reoc ond reþe, ond on ræste genam
þritig þegna; þannon eft gewat
huðe hremig to ham faran,
mid þære wælfylle wica neosan.*

[The creature of evil, savage and greedy, was immediately ready, fierce and cruel, and seized thirty thanes at [their] rest; he returned from that place, exulting in his spoil, to his home, to seek his abode there with his fill of slaughter.] (ll. 120-25)

The most obvious indicator of his appetite is that Grendel takes thirty men on the first night. But this passage does not actually describe the sort of appetite that critics have attributed to it: the text simply states that Grendel goes to the mere-cave *wælfylle*, with his fill of slaughter. It does not say that he ate all thirty warriors in Heorot. The compound *wælfylle* seems to be at the root of the confusion. Its definition, "an abundance of slaughter," opens up two possibilities for the meaning of this passage.³⁴ On the one hand, it can be taken to mean that Grendel returns home with his fill of slaughter, that he is satisfied because he just ate thirty men. It can also mean that he returned home

with his abundant slaughter. In this reading, the thirty men (or what remains of them) are the *wælfylle*, and Grendel takes them home with him to eat at his leisure. If we take the latter reading—and there are points in the narrative that make it preferable—then the poet does not depict Grendel as a glutton, but a greedy monster.

Beowulf's own words further support this interpretation. As discussed in Chapter V, he rather casually alludes to the possibility that there will be nothing left of him to bury should he lose his fight with Grendel, and in doing so explicitly states that the monster would *byreð blodig wæl* [bear [my] bloody corpse] off to his lair (l. 448).³⁵ That is, Beowulf does not think the monster will eat him right away, but will instead take him away to a safer place before feeding on him. Even after his battle with Grendel, Beowulf maintains this view. As he relates his adventures to Hygelac, he says that *he mec þær on innan unsynnigne, / dior dædfruma gedon wolde / manigra sumne* [He, the fierce worker of deeds, sought to put me, guiltless, in there [the *glof*—one of many] (ll. 2089-91). According to Beowulf, Grendel's appetite appears temporarily satisfied after he eats Hondscio, so the monster intends to stuff Beowulf and any other thane he can grab into his *glof*. Because of Beowulf's speculation, a common interpretation of the *glof* has been that it is used as a sort of game-bag; even E.D. Laborde, who connects it to gloves carried by Scandinavian trolls, admits that Grendel uses it this way (202). If this is the case, then it is likely that *wælfylle* in l. 125 refers directly to the thirty thanes (or at least most of them) as provisions taken back to the underwater hall.³⁶ Because there is no textual evidence for the assumption that Grendel eats all his meals in Heorot, there is very little reason to attribute to him an “unbridled appetite” (Lerer 735). Because he does grab

as much as he possibly can, however, the same textual evidence that contradicts Grendel's gluttony supports his greedy nature.

This greed is suggested by the adjectives used to describe Grendel in ll. 121-22. Of the four descriptors, three (*grim*, *reoc*, and *reþe*) retain essentially the same meaning of "savage" or "fierce". All are descriptors of Grendel based on the sort of behavior he shows in his nighttime raids: they stem from actions like slitting open a thane or painting the interior of Heorot with blood. The only one of the four adjectives that is substantially different is *grædig*. Aside from its obvious denotative difference, it also describes the motivation behind his behavior. It is greed that drives him into Heorot night after night, and it is greed that drives him to kill and take until the Danish comitatus is almost shattered beyond repair.

Even among the other anthrophages in Old English poetry, Grendel's *modus operandi* stands out. The Myrmedonians of *Andreas*, for example, have a system engineered to be sustainable over the long term, and, as Blurton observes, they dole out human flesh in equal portions without regard for age or experience (21). Grendel obviously has no truck with bureaucratic systems, and he does not come to Heorot to take one victim as his needs dictate. Instead, he gorges himself in the hall and, belly full, takes as much as he can carry in his *glof*. Grendel seems to want all he can get—behaving much more like "Buffalo Bill" Cody who is said to have killed 4,280 bison, than a voracious predator who stuffs his gullet with as much food as he can find whenever he can find it.

If we keep in mind Grendel's *grædig* nature and Beowulf's speculation about what would have happened to him had he lost the fight, Grendel's final feast (ll. 728-34)

shows a fit of avarice rather than gluttony. As he looks around Heorot and sees the sleeping men, Grendel's spirit soars in expectation of the slaughter he is about to unleash:

*Geseah he in recede rinca manige,
swefan sibbedriht samod ætgædere,
magorinca heap. Ða his mod ahlog;
mynte þæt he gedælde ær þon dæg cwome,
atol aglæca, anra gehwylces
lif wið lice, þa him alumpen wæs
wistfylle wen.*

[He saw many warriors in the hall, a band of kinsmen, a troop of young warriors asleep all together. Then his spirit laughed; the terrible enemy meant to sever the life from the body of each before day came, when the expectation of a full feast came upon him.] (ll. 728-34)

The passage has often been taken as evidence for gluttony because critics think it implies Grendel means to kill and eat every thane in the hall. This is contrary to Beowulf's own version of the events, and is not supported by textual evidence. The poem states only that Grendel *mynte þæt he gedælde... anra gehwylces / lif wið lice*; that is, he meant to *kill* each man. There is nothing here to hint at consumption. Because he eats Hondscio in the lines immediately following, critics have mistakenly concluded that he sought to do so to all the warriors. But it is much more likely the poet meant to coordinate this depiction of Grendel's meal with Beowulf's retelling in ll. 2089-91. In the reading I have proposed, the feast follows a slightly different sequence of events: Grendel enters Heorot, he looks at all the sleeping men, he exults in the bloody feast he is about have and in the abundance of food he means to take home, he quickly gobbles up Hondscio, and he grabs Beowulf, planning to kill him and put him in his *glof*—along with the rest of the Geats. Such a reading paints a monster that wishes to take an abundance of food (*wistfylle*) all at once, seeking to clean Heorot out as if it were a pantry. Grendel is, to rephrase Lerer's pithy characterization, a creature of *more* hand than mouth (735).

What, then, does Grendel's cupidity mean in the context of the poem? Certainly it supplements his anthropophagic transgressions: his spreeish raids devastate the fighting force of the Danish comitatus, bringing it to the brink of collapse. But beyond that, Grendel's greed stands opposite the very tenor of the poem's human feasts. Indeed, Hill explicitly contrasts Grendel's "monstrous impulses" and the "the communal joys of conscientious life" (*The Cultural...* 195, n. 19). The communal nature of human feasts is expressed throughout the poem, for example, through gift-giving. Hrothgar's characterization of Heremod—always used in *Beowulf* as a negative example—as a miser unwilling to share rings shows what sort of person refuses to take part in one of the more important communal aspects of human feasts (ll. 1719-20). Service of drinks, likewise, involves giving and receiving. Speeches and songs require an audience to share in the experience. (The first line of the poem even draws the audience together to share in the experience: *we* have heard of the Spear-Danes). Promises made over the *ful* bind people and communities together. Even the retainers in Heorot, we should remember, sleep *æt gædere*. There is a dominant sense of giving, receiving, and sharing in these feast scenes that extends even to the word choice. We might recall from Chapter V that the verbs used most often in *Beowulf*'s four human feasts all evoke these themes: *scencan* [pour], *sellan* [give], *beran* [carry], and *(ge)þicgan* [receive/eat/drink].³⁷

Some critics have argued that the Danes and Geats are quite greedy, for they desire material wealth or honor above all else. For instance, the final half-line of the poem, *lofgeornost* [most eager for fame], has not always sat well, and many have seen in the word a criticism by the Christian poet.³⁸ Whatever view we may have about the Danes' and Geats' materialism, that trait does not extend to banquets in which drinks and

cups are shared and the only ones deprived of the mead-bench are those who have been bested on the field of battle. The communal nature of *Beowulf*'s human feasts is certainly at issue—and is, therefore, ripe for exploitation. The poet, therefore, crafts Grendel's actions to transgress these human customs as they have been expressed throughout the poem.

Notes

¹ Emily Post's *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics, and at Home*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1923 (226).

² In addition to the objections voiced afterward, Rosier's statement also seems slightly tone-deaf in that it ignores the elements of travesty in Grendel's feast. The poet (in ll. 117-19 and 123-25 or ll. 611-46 and 734, for example) often associates the human feasting and Grendel's feasting with one another, thus heightening their contrasting qualities.

³ Heather Blurton's argument that Grendel is *first and foremost* an anthrophage serves as a compelling case in point. See: *Cannibalism in High Medieval Literature* (especially 35-58).

⁴ Combinatory practices are sometimes nudged into profile by particularly odd pairings, as illustrated by the fast-food restaurant White Castle's decision to begin selling wine along with their famous sliders. See: Barry Newman's "An Unconventional Pairing: Wine and 'Sliders' at the Castle." *The Wall Street Journal* 22 Feb. 2012: A1+.

⁵ In *Anglo-Saxon Appetites*, Magennis points out that Tacitus and Saxo Grammaticus—two authors whose lives bookend the Anglo-Saxon period—both remark on the plain fare enjoyed by Germanic peoples, with Saxo even complaining of sauces and roasted meat because he considered them unwelcome foreign influences on the diet (36-37).

⁶ Derrida's *Of Grammatology* is most often cited as the most critical work about Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, but his paper, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," was delivered at a Johns Hopkins University conference devoted to the structuralist work of Lévi-Strauss, and he consistently cites Lévi-Strauss's written work in which self-consciousness about structures is addressed. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is thoroughly structuralist, and his work after the summer of 1968, though it no longer accepts Lévi-Strauss's view that cultural systems are hard-wired and instead argues that they are used to propagate power for a select population, nevertheless makes use of structuralist principles. See Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 1978. 278-94, and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995.

⁷ Anthony Giddens's position that structuralism and post-structuralism (in which he includes Foucault, Derrida, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Lacan) are "dead traditions of thought" is a surprising overstatement (195). Foucault's ideas on biopower/biopolitics have taken on new meaning since 9/11 as has Derrida's ethical turn late in life; G.A. Cohen's use of Althusser's structural Marxism in his work in political science and Slavoj Žižek's wide-ranging application of Lacanian theories (from the films of Alfred Hitchcock to the Occupy Wall Street movement) show these theorists' ideas to be alive and well. See Giddens's "Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, and the Production of Culture." *Social Theory Today*. Eds. Anthony Giddens and Jonathan Turner. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1988. 195-223.

⁸ Stephen Wilson, for example, observes that Anglo-Saxons seemed to set the “wild” against areas of human settlement and use like the house, village, and field; Jennifer Neville finds this same binary in Old English poetry, in which the natural world opposes and reveals the frailty of human beings and human civilization. See *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe*. New York: Hambledon & London, 2000 (especially 10-24); *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (especially 19-52).

⁹ See also Thomas M. Wilson’s “Food, Drink and Identity in Europe: Consumption and the Construction of Local, National and Cosmopolitan Culture.” *Food, Drink and Identity in Europe*. Ed. Thomas M. Wilson. European Studies, 22. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006. 11-29; Bonnie Efros’ *Creating Community with Food and Drink in Merovingian Gaul*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002; and Jack Goody’s *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982.

¹⁰ This is, according to some, Lévi-Strauss’s meaning all along; the *cuit* in *Le Cru et le Cruît* is thought to extend beyond the act of cooking to denote “done” in whatever way a specific culture considers food preparation to be complete.

¹¹ The importance of fermentation and the alcoholic beverages it produces has been widely studied. Patrick E. McGovern argues that it was instrumental not only in the development of self-awareness in human beings, but also in the development of art and religion; Alexander H. Joffe places it among the foundations of the nation-state argues that it was a crucial Western Asia. See McGovern’s *Uncorking the Past: The Quest for Beer, Wine, and Other Alcoholic Beverages*. Los Angeles: U of California P, 2009 and Joffe’s “Alcohol and Social Complexity in Ancient Western Asia.” *Current Anthropology* 39.3 (1998): 297-322. Some anthropologists have argued that the use of grains for brewing beer actually preceded their use in bread-making. For the earliest dating of beer, see Patrick E. McGovern, et al. “Fermented Beverages of Pre- and Proto-Historic China.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 101.51: 17593-98. For a fine overview of the debate about beer preceding bread, see Robert J. Braidwood et al. “Symposium: Did Man Once Live by Beer Alone?” *American Anthropologist* ns. 55.4 (1953): 515-26.

¹² The three examples given are, of course, far from comprehensive. For all relevant references, see J.B. Bessinger, Jr. and Philip H. Smith’s *A Concordance to Beowulf*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1969.

¹³ For comparison, the world’s largest brewer, Anheuser-Busch, made five billion gallons of beer in 2006—an average of over 4.5 million pints an hour.

¹⁴ The progenitors of the third, successful, age of humanity in Maya mythology were made from white and yellow maize. See *Popol Vuh: Literal Poetic Version: Translation and Transcription*. Ed. and trans. Allen J. Christenson. Norman, OK: Oklahoma UP, 2004 (especially 3.1-3). For the strengthening of ties within *Beowulf*’s warrior society, see 183-84 of this work.

¹⁵ It is interesting, though quite outside the scope of this work, that the phrase used to describe the sleeping Danes, *sibbege driht samod atgædere*, is the exact phrase used to describe the Israelites in the Old English *Exodus* (l. 214).

¹⁶ The blame cannot be placed solely on translators—and perhaps they should bear less of the blame than the reader. The “task of the translator,” to again borrow from Benjamin, is not to produce a complete reproduction of the original in another language, for that is an impossibility. It is the task of the reader, in my view, to explore the contingencies and limitations of a translation, and when we do not, we contribute to the flattening of a poem like *Beowulf*.

¹⁷ There has been some discussion on the seemliness of eating food off of the floor expressed in Old English poetry. In the wisdom poem, *Solomon and Saturn II*, Solomon tells of a man who drops meat on

the floor, picks it up, blesses it (since there was a folk belief that food falling on the floor was associated with Satan), seasons it, and then eats it. Hagen reads this as a condemnation of the eater because the verb *fretan* is used to describe the action. Magennis, however, is more circumspect. He agrees that *fretan* is almost always associated with animals or monsters in Old English poetry, but interprets the connotation of the verb as one of eagerness for food (*Anglo-Saxon... 75-76*). In either case, eating off the floor is seen as distinctly problematic. See Ann Hagen's *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Processing and Consumption*. Pinner, UK: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1992 (especially 82).

¹⁸ For a discussion of the verbs tying Grendel to his food, see pages 178-79; for a discussion of these verbs giving a sense of hurriedness to Grendel's feast, see pages 217-18.

¹⁹ One might argue that the second feast, too, begins with a command: ll. 991-92 show that a command (*hetan*) was given that Heorot be outfitted for a feast. This is indeed an order for preparation, but I find it too removed from the feast itself to be of much evidentiary value.

²⁰ See *Elene. The Vercelli Book*. Ed. George Philip Krapp. ASPR. New York: Columbia UP, 1932 (l. 844); *Exodus. The Junius Manuscript*. Ed. George Philip Krapp. ASPR. New York: Columbia UP, 1931 (l. 469).

²¹ See *flet* in Bosworth and Toller.

²² It is interesting that the *eal(l) aras* construction appears just once more in the poem. After the unnamed messenger relays the news of Beowulf's death, *Werod eall aras* and journeyed to see his body (l. 3030). Whether or not it was intentional, the phrase resonates with the end of the first and third feast and figuratively marks the end of the joyous times of Beowulf's life and rule.

²³ See: ll. 496-97, 1063-1160.

²⁴ See ll. 1020-24, 1025-57, 1193-96, 2152-76.

²⁵ See ll. 499-606, 1168-87, 1215-31, 1999-2151.

²⁶ Peter Brooks, for example, makes such an argument: "For not only does the reading of narrative take time; the time it takes, to get from beginning to end... is very much part of our sense of the narrative, what it has accomplished, what it means. Lyric poetry, we feel, strives toward an ideal simultaneity of meaning, encouraging us to read backward as well as forward (through rhyme and repetition, for instance), to grasp the whole in one visual and auditory image; and expository argument, while it can have a narrative, generally seeks to suppress its force in favor of an atemporal structure of understanding; whereas narrative stories depend on meanings delayed, partially filled in, stretched out. Unlike philosophical syllogisms, narratives ('All-Kinds-of-Fur,' for example) are temporal syllogisms, concerning the connective processes of time." See *Reading for the Plot*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992 (20 ff.).

²⁷ For more on the raucous feast in the sagas, see: Ian MacDougall's "Serious Entertainment: An Examination of a Peculiar Type of Viking Atrocity." *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1993): 201-25 (especially 218-19).

²⁸ The ending of Grendel's last feast cannot be compared to the ending of the first, second, and third human feasts, since it is broken off by his battle with Beowulf and since the other descriptions of his attacks do not provide any more detailed information.

²⁹ Brodeur, the first to identify the three-fold repetition of *com* in Grendel's approach, describes the suspenseful scene as "nerve-shredding," and O'Keefe observes that with each repetition of *com*, the poet

slowly and carefully materializes the monster. See: Brodeur's *The Art of Beowulf*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1959 (90-91) and O'Keefe (487-88).

³⁰ If we understand *he* in l. 168 to refer to Grendel and *gifstol* to refer to Hrothgar's throne, the poet seems to be saying that Grendel cannot approach Hrothgar's gift-stool or throne, thus effectively barring him from the gift economy that typifies *Beowulf's* warrior culture. Earlier in the poem (ll. 154-56) we also learn that he would not comply with the feud-settlement traditions of the *wergild*.

³¹ The verb of which Beowulf is the subject is *geþah* [received/drank] in l. 1024. Hrothgar is subject to *wolde þicgan* [would partake of/eat] in l. 1010, *geþægon* [receive/drink] in l. 1014, *forgeaf* [gave] in l. 1020, *heht* [commanded] in ll. 1035 and 1053, *geteah* [gave] in l. 1044, *geald* [repaid] in l. 1047, and *gesealde* [gave] in l. 1052. Obviously, most of these verbs are substantively different in meaning than the ones of which Grendel is a subject; Hrothgar, for instance, is usually the subject of verbs that have to do with giving or sharing.

³² For a similar discussion of this aspect with regard to Grendel's size, see Chapter III 88-89.

³³ See *Anglo-Saxon Appetite* (91-103).

³⁴ See entry in Bosworth and Toller's *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

³⁵ See Chapter V 165-67.

³⁶ Cf. Blurton (157, n. 53).

³⁷ See Chapter V 177-78.

³⁸ For an extensive overview of the literature on this vexing term, see Fulk, et al. *Klaeber's Beowulf* (271).

CHAPTER VII

CONTINGENCY

Piece is in many parts.
Each in itself is a complete statement,
together am not certain how it will be....
textures coarse, rough, changing.
see through, non see through, consistent, inconsistent.
enclosed tightly by glass like encasement just hanging there.
then more, others, will they hang there in the same way?

Eva Hesse¹

Known Unknowns and Unknown Unknowns

In 2004, I wrote in my Master's thesis:

Grendel and his mother have human characteristics, they are part of a community with social codes, they have a human genealogy, and despite the history of translations depicting them as supernatural, evil, clawed, fanged, and scaly monsters, the case is strong that they are not monsters at all but monsterized members of an external culture. As such, they represent humans who were not part of the Anglo-Saxon culture; the Grendelkin are the Other, "they," and that becomes their damning trait.²

I was so sure that I was correct, so certain that Grendel and his mother really were monsterized representatives of an exterior culture. I was, instead, astoundingly wrong. A heady combination of youthful overenthusiasm and inexperience led me to believe I had found answers where there were only more questions—at best suggestions. Eight years more experienced and slightly wiser, I make no bold claims this time round. This is in part because my approach disallows it. The concept on which my present study is based, and around which it is organized, is the Benjaminian constellation—comprised of selection and relation. Most of the analysis has, necessarily, been about the selection of traits and what they do (and do not) mean, but it is important also to think about their relation to each other, for the monster is more than the sum of its parts. Grendel's numerous violations of the alimentary norms of the poem work together and build on one

another. An etiquette, cuisine, or symbolic violation might not be thought shocking or particularly deviant on its own—at least not enough on which to hang a label of “monster.” Taken together, however, and combined with the shocking and deviant taboo of anthropophagy, all four create a potent blend of transgressions tailor-made for the cultural environment depicted in *Beowulf*. They are travesties of important social customs, affronts to the social veneration and position of the Germanic warrior, and they perversely fragment the thane’s body in a way that humiliates and robs each victim of his humanity.

It is interesting, then, that Grendel’s body—at least as it is revealed to us in the poem—is also highly fragmented. The limited bits and pieces of his physique like his gigantism and his eyes play an important role, too. Not only must they be morphologically abnormal for him to fulfill the definition of the monster, but Grendel’s disembodied embodiment might also bear some connection to his behavioral deviancy. A monster, depicted in fragments, quite literally fragments others. It may be that Grendel enacts a reversal of social rituals important to the identity of these Danish and Geatish warriors. At the end of that reversal, when they are consumed, they are literally broken apart and left in some unnatural state—defleshed like a *draugr*, one-legged like a sciapod, headless like a blemmye. We might even speculate based on this that Grendel, like the prototypical demon, seeks to bring all others down to his level of misery, to make them *earmscapen* just as he is.

I say “speculate” because this anatomization of Grendel has been only partial. The study of each morphological and behavioral trait has been so thorough that the scope has been necessarily limited. As I admitted in Chapter I, some characteristics that

contribute to Grendel's monstrousness have been left out. His antithetical stance with regards to human weapons and armor, for example, seems meaningful. There are few things in *Beowulf* more important than these pieces of matériel, and against that cultural practice is set Grendel, who neither wears armor nor wields a weapon. This immediately marks him as transgressive of the behavioral norms in the poem, but he goes farther by affecting the actual behavioral practices of the Geats and Danes. Grendel has woven an enchantment that makes him impervious to all human weapons, so the Geats' swords do no good as they attempt to aid Beowulf in his battle. Through that enchantment, he renders cherished social customs ineffectual. This is perhaps a kind of behavioral transgression that would complement Grendel's alimentary violations and show that there is a clear assault on the core of the warrior society.

Likewise, Grendel's silence seems to be a fundamental but subtle monstrous trait. His lack of symbolic language is set against the culture depicted in *Beowulf*—where oaths regulate social interactions, scop songs are sung at feasts, flyting takes place before warriors join battle, and noble men recite their genealogies as a way of introducing themselves. The latter is a crucial element with regards to Grendel since he is named by the Geats and has no known father or lineage. If we take a postcolonial view of language and its suppression as a tool for domination, we might view his silence as a behavioral trait that not only mystifies him by obscuring his point of view, but also distances him by disallowing any participation in an aspect of the warrior culture by which men and their intentions are judged. Silencing Grendel may be a crucial step toward managing the audience's response to him. And it may well be that his lack of language informs all of his other monstrous traits since it prohibits any sympathy from the audience. This silence

directly relates to his relationship to weapons and armor, and his alimentary deviance. If we were to have dialog from Grendel, we might better understand why he does what he does.

All of these traits work in relation to one another to create the image of a monstrous Grendel, and once we understand the building blocks of that image, we can begin to understand his function in the poem and our interpretations of it. But until that work is completed, we are working with a partial picture. Who knows for sure what sort of change in interpretation will take place once we better understand Grendel's rejection of weapons and armor? Once we think about his silence, namelessness, and lack of lineage, we may find a very different understanding of his body or his foodways.

This particular circumstance puts me in mind of Edward B. Irving, Jr., who in *Rereading Beowulf* seems genuinely shocked twenty-one years later that his "unconscious biases" blinded him to the important ways in which gender impacts the characterization and treatment of Grendel's mother (70). Not only have I yet to present all the evidence at our disposal, but as a human being, I have prejudices of which I am completely unaware at present. All ignorance aside, I do know enough to know that I am no seer and do not wish to repeat past errors—to so doggedly stake a position that the inevitable changes in my thinking, different understandings of the evidence of which I am aware, and addition of any new evidence or perspectives that may be offered in the future would pull the entire study down like a house of cards.

Contingency

The epigraph for this chapter is taken from the catalogue statement of Eve Hesse's installation art piece called *Contingent*. It is a series of eight panels made of

cheesecloth hung between clear fiberglass; the cheesecloth, attached at the top and the bottom to the much heavier fiberglass, immediately began to stretch and decay when the project was finished in 1969. Today, *Contingent* looks quite different from the piece Hesse finished in her final days; some cheesecloth panels have fared better than others, and at least one panel has stretched so much that its fiberglass bottom drags the floor of the National Gallery of Australia where it is now housed. This is, it seems, exactly what she planned. She *wanted* it to change, to illustrate that the piece itself—never mind its appreciation or cultural context—changes. It may not now be what she planned for it, but that, it seems, was exactly her plan.

A few years ago, in an email exchange with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, I expressed my frustration with my own writing and a wish that the academic model were much closer to Hesse's artistic statement. "Why," I lamented, "should every single thing we write *not* end with the words: 'At least, I think so right now?'" I do not recall how he replied to that minor rant. But with that sentence, I stumbled upon something about my own writing that I have tried to hold in mind since then. We all know—those of us writing dissertations, those of us reading them, senior academics, junior faculty, beleaguered graduate students—that the work we do in a field or on a topic is often embarrassingly wrong. We mistranslate. We misunderstand. We make statements that, with later thought and experience, we would like to take back. We are unaware of an important work. We have coffee with a colleague at Kalamazoo or Leeds and in that conversation realize errors in our analysis or conclusions. We know that it happens. Rarely (but still all too often), the response is to double down and more adamantly defend

the original position. Most of the time, however, we welcome it because we are motivated by a spirit of inquiry: it is better to find the best answer than to be correct.

Why, then, the pretense? Time after time, scholars who have shown the productivity and longevity in literary studies have evolved far past their early work: Barthes repudiated his high structuralism by the mid-1970s; if Irving wrote *A Reading of Beowulf* in 1989, it would obviously be much different; Cohen's first work on monsters ("The Use of Monsters in the Middle Ages) in some ways oversimplifies the study of monsters that he now sees (in "Postscript: The Promise of Monsters") as a vertiginous collection of subject and approaches.³

I am not one for pretense; as the reader might well know by this point, I tend to prefer the blunt statement instead of the couched, safe, equivocation one often encounters in academic writing. So, to end this preliminary foray into Grendel's monstrous semiotic constellation, I make a blunt statement, paradoxically, in support of contingency.

Everything that has come before has been, to my mind, a *conditional statement*.

Thoroughly researched and ponderously executed, yes, but nevertheless conditional.

Grendel is a monster composed of morphological abnormality and behavioral deviancy.

He is made up of allusive physical traits and culturally specific behavioral transgressions.

At least I think so right now.

Notes

¹ See Michael Lloyd's and Michael Desmond's *European and American Paintings and Sculpture 1870-1970 in the Australian National Gallery*. Canberra, AU: Australian National Gallery, 1992

² See my *Icons of Terror, Icons of Tragedy: (Re)constructing the Grendelkin*. Thesis. Baylor U, 2004 (10).

³ See *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*. Eds. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. 449-64.

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