THE INTERWOVEN TRADITIONS OF *BEOWULF*: INTERWEAVING THE PAGAN PAST, CHRISTIAN PRESENT, AND LOCAL AESTHETIC IN *BEOWULF*

by

JENNY MONTA MEDLIN

(Under the Direction of Thomas Cerbu)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the differing traditions that influenced the version of the only extant copy of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* and how their interweaving is at its most coherent in the character of Grendel. In order to do so the history of biblical exegesis, the scribal milieu of Anglo-Saxon England, the other manuscripts in the Nowell Codex, the inherited pagan heroic tradition, and the culture of the Anglo-Saxon community will be taken into consideration. An examination of the interweaving of the traditions in the monster Grendel will be undertaken in order to show the effectiveness of the interweaving and how this affects the way the poem should be read as a whole.

INDEX WORDS: Beowulf, Interweaving, Tradition, Pagan, Christian, Grendel, Scribe, Anglo-Saxon, Exegesis, Nowell Codex

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DEDICATION

To my husband, who has endured the crucible of higher education alongside me. This thesis is as much a product of your unwavering faith in me as it is my research. And, as this is probably the only page you will read, know that the interweaving of our lives is just as beautiful as the interweaving of the poet.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to *A Beowulf Handbook*, John D. Niles groups the *Beowulf*

criticism of the past fifty years into three groups – aesthetic criticism, patristic criticism, and

oral-formulaic criticism.[1] The first type, aesthetic, is centered on the text. It focuses on "evidence

of complexity, tension, and hard-won structural unity in the poem" (Niles 6). The second type,

patristic, looks to center the text in the writings of the Church Fathers. This requires one to look

at the text allegorically in relation to ecclesiastical sources (6). The third type, oral-formulaic, is

similar to the patristic in that it looks to the literary history of a text, but instead of a written

history it focuses on the oral origins of a text. The phrases, themes, and plots are explored with

an eye to the oral delivery of the work (7). He then applies the three types of criticism to ways in

which scholars read the poem – formalists, Christologers, and neotraditionalists. The formalist

aligns with the aesthetic approach; they "tend to read the poem's effects as essentially artistic…

the poem's structural or stylistic features [are] admirable achievements that are worth knowing

for their own sake" (7). The Christologers, as the name suggests, align with the patristic

approach. They read with an eye toward "the literature of the Latin Middle Ages and have seen

typology and allegory as keys to its meaning" (7). The final group, the neotraditionalists, aligns

with both the patristic and the oral-formulaic approaches. This group looks to the Latin learning

and the Germanic history of the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition. Niles compares the

neotraditionalists to "a geologist examin[ing] metamorphic rock: as containing elements of

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[1] This is, of course, a broad grouping. Linguistics has also been a productive field of study in regards to *Beowulf.*

diverse origin that were fused into a complex amalgam through unknown heat and pressures acting upon an individual poet (7-8).

While lengthy, this examination of the common approaches of the past fifty years as laid out by John Niles has been necessary. I propose that, rather than three distinct paths, the three approaches are three strands; they are to be woven together, not separated as they have been, in order to fully appreciate the wonder and complexity that is *Beowulf*. In his essay, "The Interlace Structure of Beowulf", John Leyerle points out one common problem some scholars have with the poem, principally that "*Beowulf* is a poem of rapid shifts in subject and time. Events are fragmented into parts and are taken with little regard to chronological order. The details are rich, but the pattern does not present a linear structure" (146). His argument is that the events of the poem – the monster fights, the digressions, and the domestic scenes – are reminiscent of the interlace design that is found in many works of art from the Anglo-Saxon period. Leyerle points out that "Stylistic interlace is a characteristic of Aldhelm and especially of Alcuin. They weave direct statement and classical tags together to produce verbal braids in which allusive literary references from the past cross and recross with the present subject" (148-49). While his main focus is the structure of *Beowulf*, Leyerle's conclusion applies to the influences on the poet as well. Interweaving, or "interlacing", to use Leyerle's term, was common in Anglo-Saxon art and literature; this essay focuses on the interweaving of traditions that come to fruition in the poem, not the narrative structure of the poem itself.

All three strands, the patristic, oral-formulaic, and aesthetic, will be taken into account in this paper. To be studied first is the patristic history of Latinate learning in the Middle Ages. Next, the focus will be the poem as it exists today – the manuscript, the time and culture context, and issues regarding authorship in the Middle Ages. Due to this last concern, especially, the main

argument for this section is that the extant *Beowulf* poem should be regarded as an adaptation. The last part will focus on the poem itself, specifically the character of Grendel. Nowhere else in the poem is the marriage of pagan, Christian, and local aesthetic so evident as in this "lone walker". Grendel is a monster sprung from the Germanic tradition, which has a Christian genealogy, while also being described in terms that are unique to Anglo-Saxon ideas of evil within a community.

The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* is the story of a Scandinavian hero from the pagan past. Modern scholarship has made much of trying to reconcile the pagan content of the poem with the contemporary Christianity of the poet. Scholarship has, at times, favored a strongly pagan reading with no regard for Christianity, a strongly Christian reading that is anti-pagan, and a mixture of the two. There is no denying the fact that there are distinctly Christian elements of the poem as well as distinctly pagan elements. The characters are unavoidably pagan:

> *Þæt wæs wræc micel   wine Scyldinga,*
> *modes brecða.   Monig oft gesæt,*
> *rice to rune;   ræd eahtedon,*
> *hwæt swiðferhðum   selest wære*
> *wið færgryum   to gefremmanne.*
> *Hwilum hie geheton   æt hærgtrafum*
> *wigweorþunga,   wordum bædon*
> *þæt him gastbona   geoce gefremede*
> *wið þeodþreaum.   Swylc wæs þeaw hyra,*
> *hæþenra hyht;* (170-179a)[2]

> That was deep misery to the lord of the Danes,
> a breaking of spirit. Many a strong man sat
> in secret counsel, considered advice,
> what would be best for the brave at heart
> to save themselves from the sudden attacks.
> At times they offered honor to idols
> at pagan temples, prayed aloud
> that the soul-slayer might offer assistance

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[2] The text is taken from *Klaeber's Beowulf*, minus the diacritic marks.

> in the country's distress. Such was their custom,
> the hope of heathens.[3] (58)

Without knowing who the poet[4] was or where *Beowulf* was composed it is almost impossible to say with certainty how the community in which it was written felt about its pagan past. It is possible, however, to draw inferences based on what is known of monastic education to see the philosophies and texts he would have been exposed to, sources such as Origen, Augustine, Bede, and Rabanus Maurus. These writers provide both philosophical and theological readings that allow for interpreting pagan material in light of Christian doctrine; that is to say, it is possible for pagan elements to contain truth about the world and God. Starting with the Patristic Fathers, the belief that Creation (or the cosmos) was "written" by God and reveals truth in line with the Scriptures was alive and well into the late medieval period. This, coupled with Origen's spiritual reading of the beautiful captive, allows for a useful treatment of pagan material. The functionality of a text was as important as its content; the beauty of multiple levels of interpretation is the fact that one can make even the most obscure or mundane texts useful. The question of how to interpret the truths found in Creation is rooted in biblical exegesis. Exegesis at the time of the composition of *Beowulf* was highly developed. It consisted of three, or four, levels; depending on which exegete you followed, though, by the late Middle Ages the four levels had become standard. These four levels were the literal or historical, allegorical, tropological, and anagogic.[5] These layers allow for a more nuanced text with multiple interpretations. Due to these factors, the *Beowulf* poet would have been able to tell a pagan story

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[3] The Modern English text is taken from Roy Liuzza's translation.

[4] As Whitelock said, "By the 'poet' I designate the Christian author who was responsible for giving the poem the general shape and tone in which it has survived, and by the 'audience' the people whom he had in mind" (3).

[5] At times the anagogic is subsumed into the allegorical. So, while at times there are three levels instead of four, the fourth is still present, just not as its own level.

from a Christian perspective, still retaining the pagan elements and not inserting his own doctrine into the narrative. This is not to say that *Beowulf* is simply an allegory and nothing more, but rather as Alvin Lee says,

> There is general agreement that structurally the poem is not formal allegory, in the way that the *Psychomachia* [is]… At the same time, because of the poem's seriousness of tone and the frequent (apparently didactic) expressions of ethical and religious concepts, because also of the way it conveys a sense of large reserves of understanding and wisdom, it continues to invite thoughtful consideration of those tendencies in it that plausibly can be called allegorical. (238)

Allegorical interpretation is a way to reconcile a pagan past with a Christian present without throwing the baby out with the bath water, so to speak.

The importance of the past to the Anglo-Saxon poet is also a contributing factor in the poem's preservation. As will be shown, Bede cultivated an appreciation for the past that spread throughout Anglo-Saxon England. The elegiac tone is pervasive throughout the Anglo-Saxon poetic record, contributing to some of the most beautiful of the Old English poems. The elegies explore a longing for the past that is exacerbated by a troubled present and often end with the realization that hope is to be found in the next life, not this one. Beowulf and the Geats do not have this hope, as they are pagan, allowing one to fully experience the futility of longing for the past. Indeed, one must have knowledge of the past in order to fully understand the poem. One cannot simply be aware of the Christian tradition; it takes an awareness of the pagan heroic tradition as well as the local aesthetic, the local community of Anglo-Saxon England, in order to fully understand what the poet is doing. The *Beowulf* poet did not neglect his gifts and neither should the reader. The poet would have been aware of the responsibility of the measure talent God had gifted him with. As Katharina Wilson points out "the *Glossa Ordinaria,* in glossing the parable of the talents, equates the bad servant and his single coin with an *intellectus* deprived of

eloquence. Eloquence, on the other hand, is associated with the second servant's duplication of

the two talents interpreted as the preaching of the word by using figura and exempla" (113).

There was a duty, an obligation to use the abilities one had been blessed with. The pairing of

intellect and eloquence is the better combination, rather than one without the other, and there is

no doubt that the poet exemplifies both. J.R.R. Tolkien points out that it is this pairing, of

intellect and eloquence, that sets *Beowulf* apart from other Anglo-Saxon works:

> … *Beowulf* is more beautiful, that each line there is more significant (even when, as sometimes happens, it is the same line) than in the other long Old English poems. Where then resides the special virtue of *Beowulf*, if the common element… is deducted? It resides, one might guess, in the theme, and the spirit this has infused into the whole. For, in fact, if there were a real discrepancy between theme and style, that style would not be felt as beautiful but as incongruous or false. And that incongruity is present in some measure in all the long Old English poems, save one – *Beowulf.* The paradoxical contrast that has been drawn between matter and manner in *Beowulf* has thus an inherent *literary* improbability. (14)

 Just as the scribe was called to write to the best of his ability, the audience was to read closely in

order to fully understand, appreciate, and be edified by what was being communicated. By

interweaving all three traditions the poet is creating, in Grendel, a three-dimensional, dynamic

monster that embodies the fears of all three traditions – the monstrous race of Cain, the fierce

eoten and *þyrs* of the Scandinavian tradition, and the human outlaw who is bent on unmitigated

violence of the local Anglo-Saxon culture. The scribe does not privilege one tradition over the

other, and neither should the reader. It is the interweaving of all three that creates the poem, as it

exists today, and nowhere in the poem is that as evident as in the character of Grendel.

Chapter 2

THE PATRISTIC AND LATINATE INFLUENCES

The Greek and Latin Origins

In order to see how the *Beowulf* poet was influenced by the tradition of exegesis in his

adaptation of *Beowulf*, one must follow the development of the four levels of interpretation

through the centuries. In order to start at the beginning, one needs look to Philo of Alexandria

and the technique of allegory he adopted for the Hebrew Scriptures. Philo Judaeus was a Jewish

man living in Alexandria during the first century of the Common Era. Philo was a devout Jew

who wrote numerous commentaries on the Torah, providing exposition, exegetical commentary,

and application of the Torah to contemporary issues (Yarchin 18). Living in Alexandria also

provided Philo familiarity with the Greco-Roman world, specifically the Greek philosophers.

According to William Yarchin,

> Philo's allegorical method and interpretations helped 'scripturize' Hellenistic
> philosophical concepts that would eventually become key to Christian theology…
> Although not deserving the label 'father of Christian theology', Philo showed a way of
> rendering biblical narratives into theological principles that many Christian theologians
> would find fruitful in the intellectual milieu of late antiquity. (19)

He is one of the first to use 'allegory' as a verb and he, along with Heraclitus, is the first to use it

to mean "figurative interpretation of an authoritative text" (Hanson 38-39). It should be noted,

however, that Philo is not the first to apply Greek ideas and religious traditions to Jewish

writings. Aristobulus, especially, believed that Greek philosophy contained elements of true

philosophy and was, in places, derived from the teachings of Moses (Borgen 114). It is Philo,

however, who is important because his techniques were most influential for the later Church

Fathers.

Philo equates the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek as a major revelatory

event orchestrated by God. The purpose was to make the laws of the Jews, which were also

God's cosmic and universal laws, known to the rest of the world. This belief was rooted in his

unshakeable faith in the authority of the Torah. God was speaking through Moses to give the law

that would enable mankind to live in harmony with both God and Creation.[6] So, "the particular

ordinances of the Jewish Law coincide with the universal cosmic principles. Thus to Philo

universal and general principles do not undercut or cancel the specific ordinances or events of

the Mosaic law" (Borgen 120). This makes it possible for Philo to interpret a text on more than

one level. Since the Torah is divinely inspired, it must accord with the laws of the cosmos as

well. When it is hard to understand a certain text in light of history or human wisdom, the

exegete then looks to the next level – the allegorical.[7] Philo recognizes that some aspects of

Scripture are difficult to reconcile and concludes that they must be interpreted allegorically in the

way the natural philosophers would (Hanson 40).

For Philo it is natural that philosophy and theology would go hand in hand. The cosmos

is just as much a revelation of God as the Scriptures; what one derives from the cosmos is more

fully explained in Scripture and what one sees in Scripture is also compatible with the cosmos.

Thus, the philosophy of the Greeks had a place in theology; it just needed the Scriptures to help

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[6] "in relating the history of early times, and going for its beginning right to the creation of the universe, he [Moses] wished to show to most essential things: first that the Father and Maker of the cosmos was in the truest sense also Lawgiver, secondly that he who would observe the laws will accept gladly the duty of following nature and live in accordance with the ordering of the universe, so that his deeds are attuned to harmony with his words and his words with his deeds (qtd. in Borgen 120).

[7] But it is right to think that this class of things resembles the body, and the other class the soul; therefore, just as we take care of the body because it is the abode of the soul, so also must we take care of the laws that are enacted in plain terms; for while they are regarded, those other things also will be more clearly understood, of which these laws are symbols, and in the same way one will escape blame and accusation from men in general (Yarchin 28).

fully explain it. Much of Philo's writing reflects his Platonic leanings. One example of this is Philo's idea of perfection. Thomas Billings sums up the similarities between Plato's and Philo's arguments this way: "The chief points emphasized are the unchangeability of God in contrast to the changing things of sense; the perfect goodness of God, a goodness which means fatherly care for men and for all creation; His perfect knowledge and power" (20). Another way Philo incorporates Plato is in his view of the world. For Plato, the world is a place of constant flux and decline. It is a place of confusion, which is in direct contrast to the ideal of perfection. Philo, too, sees this world as a place of uncertainty, where evil is present because of this instability (23). In making room for Platonic thought in his theology, Philo is creating a foundation upon which later exegetes would build.

It is Philo's merging of philosophy and theology that later exegetes would pick up on and pass down to the Anglo-Saxon intellectual tradition, including, possibly, the *Beowulf* poet. The explanation of the cosmos through philosophy coupled with the truth of divine revelation in the Scriptures, provided a way of seeing truth in pagan stories. Origen, the next great exegete, refines Philo's technique. Origen (185-254 C.E), too, was born in Alexandria, but to Christian parents. He was a prolific writer, authoring commentaries, homilies, and other exegetical works. He was caught up in the persecution of Christians by Emperor Decius in his later years and, though he did not die a martyr's death, he died of the wounds received during this imprisonment about three years later. He contributed much to the academic study of the Bible, being an astute textual critic as well as a philologist and historian. Similar to Philo, Origen's foundation for his theology was rooted in the divine inspiration of Scripture. The biblical Canon had not been standardized yet, but it was Origen who provided the underlying arguments for such organization. For Origen, the various books of the Bible consisted of a single whole whose

purpose was to help the soul grow into perfection. He is the first to attempt to lay the foundation for a completely Christian culture as a viable alternative to the pagan philosophies prevalent in the third century (Yarchin 41-42).

The importance of Origen for this essay is twofold: his development of allegory as an interpretative method of the biblical material and his exegesis of the "beautiful captive woman" in Deuteronomy. Though Origen does not have the most stellar of reputations, due to his method of dealing with sexual temptation – self-castration – his writings were still influential into the Middle Ages, thanks mostly to Jerome.[8] Frances Young provides a nice summation of Origen's hermeneutics – rooted in allegory – which helps to show the focus of his exegesis. They are as follows:

1. Origen attributed "literal" interpretation to the Jews, and expected Christians to go beyond the mere letter to the spiritual meaning.

2. He believed that there were three levels of meaning in Scripture analogous to the body, soul and spirit; he developed this analogy from Philo's dichotomous analogy of body and soul… [T]hese three senses were literal, moral, and spiritual. Simple believers might remain at the level of the letter, but the elite should progress to the higher levels.

3. Origen found "stumbling-blocks," problems, impossibilities (*aporiai*) at the literal level in Scripture – indeed not every passage has a literal sense. These problems were intended by the Holy Spirit in order to alert the reader to the need to look for the spiritual meaning…

5. Origen accepted without question the unity of the Bible and found it in the Holy Spirit's *skopos* (aim) to impart the truth but to conceal it in a narrative dealing with the

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[8] See Lubac I: p. 198-211.

visible creation so that proper examination of these records would point to spiritual truths

(335).

These hidden and hard to decipher truths are the ones that bring the soul closer to perfection. The

order and emphasis of the levels of interpretation will be discussed in more detail in a later

section of the essay. Origen is the first to introduce a threefold way of interpreting Scripture. He

adds to Philo's two levels- the literal and spiritual- a third, which is the moral. As man has a

body, soul, and spirit, so, too, does Scripture. He associates the corporeal sense with history, the

psychical sense with morality, and the spiritual sense with allegory (Lubac I: 143).

Origen's metaphor of the beautiful captive woman is also important for this essay. It is

this metaphor that provides the surest foundation for the validity of pagan material such as

Beowulf. The reference comes from Deuteronomy 21:10-14[9] in which the laws about marrying a

captive are laid out. In his exposition, Origen equates the beautiful captive with pagan

philosophy or literature. He argues that, just as the captive can be purified, so also can pagan

works.

> … I too have often gone forth to war against my enemies, and I have found among my spoils a beautiful woman. For even among our enemies we find things that are good and proper. If, therefore, we read wise and knowledgeable words in one of them, we must purify them, we must remove and cut away everything in this knowledge that is deadly and vain. This is just like the hair and nails of this woman who was taken when the enemy was plundered. Thus we shall make her our wife, when she no longer has anything that has the appearance of infidelity, anything that smacks of death on her head or on her hands, so that she no longer bears anything impure or deathful either in her sentiments or in her actions. For the women of our enemies have no purity about them, seeing that there is no wisdom in them that is not mingled with some impurity… As for ourselves, we who are engaged in spiritual war and who, to destroy the power of the enemy, use not carnal

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[9] **10** "When you go out to war against your enemies, and the Lord your God gives them into your hand and you take them captive, **11** and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and you desire to take her to be your wife, **12** and you bring her home to your house, she shall shave her head and pare her nails. **13** And she shall take off the clothes in which she was captured and shall remain in your house and lament her father and her mother a full month. After that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife. **14** But if you no longer delight in her, you shall let her go where she wants. But you shall not sell her for money, nor shall you treat her as a slave, since you have humiliated her. (Deut. 21:10-14 ESV)

arms, but the power of God, if we find a beautiful woman in the camp of our adversary, that is to say, some rational discipline, in that case we shall purify her, as has just been recounted (qtd. in Lubac I: 213).

It is in Origen that we have the most influential argument for value in non-Christian literature. He also provides another example of appropriating pagan wisdom: God commanding the Israelites to take the riches of the Egyptians as they were leaving Egypt. Origen uses it in reference to the Platonists, who had some truth in their philosophy. The philosophy had to be whetted away until only truth remained. Augustine would pick up on this imagery, and Isidore of Seville connects the captive woman with Augustine's rendering of the spoils of Egypt in his *Questions*:

> Firstly, all the uncleanness of *superstition* should be removed and cut off from her, and so she should be adopted for the study of truth. Inasmuch as the disciplines of the pagans are unclean, because there is no wisdom in those who do not have faith. Wisdom is of such a nature that there is no uncleanness or *superstition* mixed in with it (Lubac I: 216).

As shown, there is truth in pagan literature; it simply has to be handled carefully so that one is not enticed by the outward packaging. The danger lies in accepting the whole of it. Rabanus Maurus goes as far as to say, "The figure of the captive woman must be understood as meaning that… *This is what we are accustomed to do*, when we read the pagan poets, when books of secular wisdom are in our hands" (qtd. in Lubac I: 216). The implication is that it was an ongoing practice to read pagan literature, which was acceptable as long as one took care not to forget the harm it could cause.[10]

    The next influential exegete is also, perhaps, the most influential thinker of the Latin Patristic period, St. Augustine. One cannot discuss Christianity in the Middle Ages without St.

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[10] Henri de Lubac cautions readers to be mindful of the fact that "[E]ven good authors in our own day all too easily misconstrue what was merely a warning as a lack of sympathy toward profane culture, indeed as contempt for all culture. The warning was constantly being reiterated inasmuch as it was always proving to be necessary as a counterpoint to the paganism in which the poets and 'philosophers of this age' had been nourished" (I: 40).

Augustine. He was born in Roman Africa to a Christian mother and pagan father who converted

to Christianity on his deathbed. He was educated in Carthage, where he studied rhetoric. He left

the church in his teens to follow the Manichaean religion, which was the recipient of many

scathing sermons after his conversion. He eventually became a rhetoric professor in Milan. It is

there that he came in contact with St. Ambrose, who was himself a master rhetorician. It was

through St. Ambrose that Augustine became a Christian. Augustine eventually returned to Africa

and was appointed bishop of Hippo, an office he led until the end of his days. It was his

familiarity with Latin learning and literature, as well as his formidable command of language

that lay the foundation for his interpretation of Scripture. The other key influence was that of

Ambrose, through whom the teachings of Philo and Origen reached Augustine (Norris 382).

Augustine's main issue with the Bible was its inelegance. This is understandable for one

who made his living by language. Augustine considered himself a student of wisdom, as

described in Cicero's *Hortensius*. The stories of the Old Testament in particular were crude and

full of unpleasant things that made it difficult to understand how the Bible was a book by which

to live. It was not until Ambrose introduced him to allegorical interpretation that Scripture began

to be beautiful.[11] It is this mystery of hidden wisdom that allowed Augustine to see the beauty in

Scripture; he was looking for the spirit behind the letter (Norris 395). This search for the

meaning behind the sign led not only to allegorical interpretations of Scripture but also to the

possibility that there was more than one meaning, or interpretation, for a given text. He states

this in the *Confessions*[12] as well as *De doctrina christiana*.

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[11] "As for the 'inconsistency' in the Scriptures that had so often been a stumbling block to me, I had now heard a credible explanation of many of these points, and ascribed this 'inconsistency' to the deepness of the mysteries concerned. Indeed, the authority of Scripture seemed all the more worthy of veneration and inviolable trust, since it was available for all to read, yet preserved the dignity of its secret in the depths of its meaning" (Augustine 116).

[12] "What hindrance is it to me, my God, light that lightens my eyes in secret, what hindrance is it to me as I make my ardent confession, that these words may be understood in such diverse senses, seeing as they are none the less

St. Augustine did not set out a formal classification system for biblical exegesis the way it is developed later. He does mention four levels in one letter but does not ever mention them again and he does not interpret any Scripture using the four levels he states. This one instance, however, was enough for later scholars to use as a proof text for their own lists. Truly the influence of Augustine cannot be overstated. Due to the curious ability medieval scholars had to not take into account the full body of work, Augustine's four levels helped shape medieval thought though he himself never fully developed them.

Augustine adds another dimension to the foundation that the *Beowulf* poet was building upon: Philo's technique of allegory and of melding philosophy and theology, Origen's beautiful captive and three levels of allegory, and now Augustine's notion of all truth being God's truth. In his work *De doctrinia christiana* Augustine states

> But we should not think that we ought not to learn literature because Mercury is said to be its inventor, nor that because the pagans dedicated temples to Justice and Virtue and adored in stones what should be performed in the heart, we should therefore avoid justice and virtue. Rather, every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord's. (qtd. inWestra 19)

He also goes on to say that rhetoric, his term for prose, is neither good nor bad but merely a vehicle. Simply because pagans used it in error does not mean a Christian cannot use it in service of the truth (Westra 19). The concept of all truth being God's truth is paramount to the reading and understanding of *Beowulf*. The poet uses this foundational truth to fashion *Beowulf* in such a way that the truths that align with Scripture are more easily seen while still retaining the beauty of the pagan and local traditions.

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true for it? What hindrance is it if I take them to mean something other than Moses took them to mean? All of us who read him are striving to hunt down and comprehend his meaning, and, believing him to speak truly, we dare not suppose him to have said anything that we know or think is false. As long, therefore, as each of us endeavors to get from the Holy Spirit the same meaning as the writer's, what harm does it do if someone takes something that you, light of all truth-speaking minds, show him is true – even if this was not the meaning of the writer whom he is reading, seeing as Moses too meant something true, even thought it was not the same thing?" (Augustine 303-4)

The centuries following St. Augustine are important in that ideas from Origen, Ambrose, and Augustine were transmitted through exegetes such as Jerome and Gregory the Great. The recognition of truth in pagan works, the importance of nature, and the levels of biblical interpretation are further developed from these earlier works. The fluidity in the number of levels of interpretation is still seen in Isidore of Seville, Bede, and beyond, with both men using three and four levels, respectively, sometimes in the same work,

> Already Saint Isidore of Seville, in his zeal to collect all the givens of tradition, mentioned the four senses (or "modes") and the three senses consecutively in the same work, Guibert de Nogent tells us that at Bec Saint Anslem trained his pupils to take notice of "a triple or a quadruple sense" in Scripture… This does not introduce an essential modification to the structure of the formula." (Lubac I: 90-91)

Gregory generally recognized three spiritual senses (allegory, anagogy, and tropology). He insisted that the historical sense was foundational and essential and that to ignore it was to risk serious misinterpretation. (Mayeski 96). This appreciation for history is traced from Augustine through these authors:

> Saint Gregory takes up the metaphor on his own account; at the threshold of the *Moralia*, he writes: "We are laying down the primary foundation of the history"; and later on he observes that "the edifice of doctrine" will be so much the stronger as its foundation is the more carefully laid; still, he seems to prefer the analogous metaphor of a root: "We must first handle the root of history, so as later to be able to satisfy the mind with the fruit of the allegories." Saint Isidore says in his turn: "while the foundation of the history is going on first" and Bede: "once the root of the history has been handed over (Lubac II: 48)

The truths and doctrines that are passed down must be grounded in history. History must be preserved so that what comes later may be interpreted correctly. The importance of history is important for the preservation of *Beowulf.* That the Anglo-Saxons had a deep respect for history and those who came before, created a space for works that did not deal with the immediate

context in which they were written. In connecting history with exegesis the importance of the

past was preserved for future generations and brought to bear on specific local concerns.

Another work that was influential in Anglo-Saxon England was Prudentius's

Psychomachia. According to John Hermann,

> In what ways did the *Psychomachia* influence Anglo-Saxon culture? We can begin to answer this question with manuscript evidence, which indicates that the *Psychomachia* was one of the most popular works in early medieval England… The number of *Psychomachia* manuscripts written in England at this time, and of glossed manuscripts serving a wider reading public offers testimony to the place of honor accorded to the poem. (17)

This was an allegory in which personified vices and virtues went to war against one another.

Personification, in the words of Jon Whitman, "is virtually the inverse of allegorical

interpretation. Interpretative allegory moves from Athena to Wisdom, compositional allegory

starts with Wisdom and constructs a fiction around it" (3-4). *Beowulf* is not an allegory the way

the *Pyschomachia* is; however, any battle between forces of good and evil is in some sense

allegorical. The battle between good and evil as fleshed out in Prudentius's poem would

reverberate down the centuries, influencing literature, architecture, and painting. To the

martially-minded Anglo-Saxons, these battle themes would resonate also on a personal level.

The comitatus, the war band, was integral to Anglo-Saxon society; the language of war

permeated the vocabulary. Battle, and war, was themes and images the Anglo-Saxon audience

was familiar with and understood well.

Bede

In order to see how the *Beowulf* poet would have understood exegesis, one might look to

Bede. Any monk writing during or after the time of Bede would have been aware of his

incredible oeuvre. The sheer number of manuscripts of his commentaries, treatises, and histories is staggering. The demand for copies of his works lasted well into the twelfth century. While there is nothing specifically Bedan in the *Beowulf* poem, the writings of Bede would have been a part of the scribe's education.[13] It is important to highlight the works of Bede so that one can have a fuller of understanding of what exegetical works the scribe would have studied or come in contact with.

Bede was born *c.* 673 on the land that would become the dual monasteries of Wearmouth-Jarrow. The following year, 674, King Ecgfrith gave land to Benedict Biscop to build the monastery of Wearmouth near the River Wear. Bede was given to this house as a young boy of seven, becoming an oblate under Biscop in 680. Jarrow was built a year later, seven miles away near the River Tyne. Biscop moved from Wearmouth to Jarrow to help with the establishment of the monastery. It was here that Bede spent the majority of his life, only leaving a few times to visit places such as York and Lindisfarne. His works were in high demand through out the continent, especially in Frankia and Germany. Interestingly, it is from Frankia and Germany that Bede's works were reintroduced back to England after the Danish conquest (Westgard 206-210). Many manuscripts were lost during this period, those of Bede among them. There was a resurgence of interest in his works during the twelfth century and we see the high regard with which Bede was held even as late as Dante, who includes him among the wreath of the wise that encircles Beatrice (Canto X).

Bede's works covered a multitude of subjects, from history to exegesis to rhetoric. Benedict Biscop, founder of the twin monasteries, was an avid collector of manuscripts and relics. The libraries of these two monasteries were highly developed compared to most of

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[13] There are interesting parallels between Cædmon's hymn as presented by Bede and the Creation song in *Beowulf*.

England and, to an extent, the continent. He also borrowed manuscripts from other monasteries

and churches. The overwhelming majority of texts were the writings of the Latin Fathers –

Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Cassiodorus, Isidore, and Gregory. The Greek Fathers – Eusebius,

Basil, Origen, and John Chrysostom – were also available in Latin translation. These included

commentaries, onomastic dictionaries, theological treatises, sermons, letters, rules for monastic

communities, texts on church history, saints' lives, hymns, poems, and versifications of Scripture

(Love 43). It is clear that Bede was also acquainted with pagan Latin literature. Interestingly,

most of his use of pagan material is found in his treatises on education, *The Art of Poetry, The

Art of Rhetoric,* and *On Orthography*. The Roman style of education was adopted in the study of

Latin in to help that the student would be able to read the Scriptures.[14] It is from Latin grammars

that Bede formulated the texts mentioned above. Such grammars would include poetry from

Horace and Virgil as examples, which Bede rectified in his own texts by using Scripture and

Christian poets as his exemplars. It is clear that, aside from Roman grammars, Bede also had

access to Virgil's *Aeneid*, *Georgics*, and *Bucolics*. He had Pliny the Younger's *Natural History*,

though he probably did not have all thirty-seven volumes (Love 46).

Bede is important to the understanding of the *Beowulf* poet for several reasons. First, he

was the most widely-read Anglo-Saxon author of the Middle Ages. It is through Bede that many

of the ideas of Augustine, Gregory, and Jerome were passed into the Anglo-Saxon literary

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[14] "The secular Roman education system, which itself seems to have survived on into the early sixth century in a few places, had various stages, taking the pupil from the basics of Latin grammar to rote learning of the specimens of literature, and thence, presumably for the cleverest, to study of poetic composition, oratory, dialectic and philosophy… the Christian Church took on the bare outlines of this system for schools based at churches and in monasteries: essential grammar, memorization of key texts, progressing to the study of Scripture, the task for which everything else – including the basics of rhetoric and poetry, as well as some limited science - was preparatory" (Love 45-46).

record.[15] Bede was conscientious about citing when he borrowed from other authors, so these

men were credited with their ideas, for the most part. The second reason Bede was so important

for the poet of *Beowulf* was because of the types of works he wrote. He did not simply write

biblical commentaries; as mentioned earlier he also wrote an impressive history of England

entitled *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and several important works on

education – *On the Nature of Things, On Time*, and *The Art of Poetry and Rhetoric*. Bede was

aware of the importance of Creation in understanding how God willed the world to work and,

> "[F]or understanding God's plan, nature also offered valuable insights; for as Irish
> missionary Saint Columbanus had proclaimed, nature is a second scripture in which God
> is perceived. So Bede's list includes works devoted to the operations of the natural world,
> of time and space. (Brown 4)

Bede acknowledged the unity of Nature and Scripture and brought this to bear in his works.[16]

Bede's chronicle of the history of the Church in England sparked an interest in establishing a

history of Anglo-Saxon England. Part of this history would include stories from the pagan past.

In demonstrating an appreciation for and awareness of the unifying power of history, Bede

cultivates a respect for the past and an acceptance of where the diverse groups had come from,

from pagan disparity to unity under the Roman Church. In this way he shaped the English

church's view of history and its pagan past. *Beowulf* is an expression of this pagan past with an

eye to the current Christian understanding of the world.[17] The main characters are undeniably

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[15] "This does not mean that its members [the Anglo-Saxon readership/audience] would all have been well-read in
the works of the church Fathers but that they would have been influenced by the perspectives and concerns of
patristic writings, and would have been predisposed towards particular kinds of interpretation" (Magnennis 8).

[16] "Lo, the mouth of Britain, which once only knew how to gnash its barbarous teeth, has long since learned to sing
the praises of God with the alleluia of the Hebrews. See how the proud Ocean has become a servant, lying low now
before the feet of the saints, and those barbarous motions, which earthly princes could not subdue with the sword,
are now, through the fear of God, repressed with a simple word from the lips of priests" (Bede, *The Ecclesiastical
History of the English Peoples* 131).

[17] This can be seen in the genealogies of kings, where the current king's line included Germanic, British, Norse, and
Christian predecessors – "The listing pattern, by making the Germanic, British, and exotic elements part of one

heroic and honorable; it would not be looked down upon to emulate their secular merits while supplementing the lack of Christian virtue and understanding. This appreciation for the past would, in fact, be necessary for the survival of a poem such as *Beowulf.* All of the great epics were written with an eye to the past and the present, which is evident in *Beowulf* as well. Henri de Lubac states,

> History was therefore a moral science, which was studied with a view to improving morals. At least that was its essential goal… Indeed, whether it were a question of good acts or bad, the history that reports them always draws a salutary lesson from them, teaching people to imitate the good acts and to avoid the rest" (II: 70).

Beowulf contains many lessons that would apply to an Anglo-Saxon audience and would resonate with them even more than Greco-Roman history.

Bede's texts for teaching were also widespread and important for understanding the milieu in which *Beowulf* was written. Interestingly, for all his aversion to secular literature, Bede recognized the beauty of ancient Latin writers. While he changed the examples in his *The Art of Poetry and Rhetoric* from examples of classical Latin literature such as the *Aeneid* to biblical examples, he retained the mechanics and rules of classical rhetoric. Medieval exegetes, such as Bede, believed,

> that sacred Scripture is a sophisticated literary text, requiring complex readings… the methods of literary criticism inherited from secular classical authors were both necessary and appropriate to the interpretation of Scripture… They were aware of the ancient controversy over the benefits and dangers of using "pagan" models and methods in the interpretation of the sacred texts, but they did not abandon the tools of classical literary criticism. (Mayeski 89)

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harmonious form, denies any difference between elements entering the catalogue earlier or later. The obliteration of diverse origins is not a deception or an error but a functional element in traditional semiotics. In a traditional culture, the people's heritage consists in what the words say. The Anglo-Saxon texts simply do not maintain the pure Germanic heritage some modern scholars have sought… This kind of past does not record events but incorporates all that is important into the present experience, Christian interlocking with Anglo-Saxon, Norse with Christian" (Pasternack 75-76).

Since classical literary criticism was considered the preeminent form of criticism, it was natural that the scholars of the Middle Ages would apply its concepts to the Bible, the preeminent text, as well as to other texts. After all, the apostle Paul admonishes Christians to "work as for the Lord and not for men" (ESV Eph. 6:7, Col. 3:23). In order to read, and write, a text as well as one could, the rhetoric of the Latin period must be followed. It is in *On Rhetoric* that Bede gives us his definition of allegory – "Allegory is a trope in which a meaning other than the literal is indicated… this trope has many varieties, of which seven are prominent: irony, antiphrasis, enigma, euphemism, paroemia, sarcasm, and asteismos" (116).

The commentaries of Bede were also important to the learning of the monastic community in Anglo-Saxon England. He adheres to the multi-level exegesis first proposed by Origen, though it is not fully developed the way exegesis becomes by the time of Aquinas. At times he interprets a passage using three levels – historical, allegorical, and tropological – and other times he uses four levels, which included the anagogical (Lubac I: 90, 92-93). The fluidity of levels leaves room for monks to formulate their exegesis according to their own readings. They were not concerned with nailing down whether there were three or four levels; the historical, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical levels were used in whatever way best served the texts that was being interpreted. Bede himself illustrates the multiple uses of the levels; in his introduction to the book of Tobit he mentions three levels:

> The book of the holy father Tobit is clearly of saving benefit to its readers even in its superficial meaning inasmuch as it abounds in both the noblest examples and the noblest counsels for moral conduct, and anyone who knows how to interpret it historically (and allegorically as well) can see that its inner meaning excels the mere letter as much as the fruit excels the leaves. For if it is understood in the spiritual sense it is found to contain within it the greatest mysteries of Christ and the Church… (Bede, *On Tobit* 39)

Then, in his commentary on Samuel, he uses four levels,

[The disciples of the Lord] gave a double interpretation of the Scriptures, so that after the first one, namely, a reading of the history, which before his incarnation was fulfilled by the law, he might himself disclose both the allegorical and anagogical sense. By the action of a new dispensation that had been inaugurated, this allegorical and anagogical sense was congruent with the truth of present grace or the blessedness of future life… Often we examine the literal surface by busily considering what it contains that tis allegorically congruent with the mysteries of Christ, with the state of the Catholic Church, and with the censure of a person's morals… (qtd. in Lubac I: 93).

The *Beowulf* poet would presumably have been aware of Bede's method of exegesis and acceptance and advocacy for allegory as an acceptable means of interpreting difficult biblical texts; however, one text did not have to have all four levels. George Hardin Brown provides a wonderful example of how Bede was able not only to interpret the events of a text using exegesis, but also the minute details that made up the narrative . This comes from Bede's commentary on the Song of Songs, a notoriously difficult text. The verse is "Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate, behind your veil" (*ESV,* Song of Songs 4:3). The commentary is as follows:

By cheeks, as we remarked above, is designated shame, because to be sure a sudden redness is accustomed to suffuse them in blushing. Moreover, the pomegranate is, like the scarlet dye, suitably applicable to the mystery of the Lord's passion because of its rosy hue. For it was fitting that the mode of our redemption be intimated by the frequent use of figures in sacred song and other writings of the prophets. Because the church does not blush at the cross of Christ but even rejoices in insults and sufferings on behalf of Christ and is accustomed to bear the standard of the cross itself (*vexillum crucis*), it is suitably said to have cheeks like the pomegranate. And it is not without meaning that the pomegranate is here described not as a whole but a piece, because in the broken open pomegranate a part is red (*ruboris*) and a part that is hidden inside is shiny white (*candoris*). Therefore the spouse has the redness of the pomegranate in her cheeks when she confesses the mystery (*sacramentum*) of the Lord's cross in words. She also shows the whiteness (*alborem*) of the same broken pomegranate when, struck by affliction, she also exhibits the chastity of a pure heart in deeds, since the very cross of her redeemer opens what is contained within, salvific grace. Likewise she shows pomegranate colour in her cheeks when her first and more eminent members, that is, the martyrs, pour forth their blood for Christ, and adds white colour when the same ones shine forth during their passion or, after their completed suffering, with their miracles. Nor should we pass over that the pomegranate encloses a mass of grains within an outside rind; hence it is called a pomegranate in the singular (*malum granatum*), in that the grains are unable to be seen when the fruit is whole, but when broken they increase innumerably. For thus the holy

church in so far as it is broken by adversity so much the more brilliantly lays open so many grains of virtues it contains within the covering of one faith. And rightly is added, 'besides that which is hidden within,' because all are able to hear the profession in the church of the vivifying cross, all can see the afflictions of that church, and the infidels are able along with the faithful to admire the brilliance of its gifts (*carismatum*) by which it cures the sick, raises up the dead, cleanses the lepers, ejects demons, and so forth. She alone knows, however, with how great a love of invisible life she is held, with how great a vision of her founder, with how great a love she is inflamed by the progress of her members. (Brown 139-40)

While this quote is long, it is important that one see just how much thought and effort goes into biblical exegesis. Bede is showing the various interpretations of the pomegranate; it represents Christ's blood, the Church, her most exalted members, her virtues, and gifts. The inclusion of allegory and its many tropes in Bede's teaching texts would have been instrumental in the learning of the poet. The detail with which a text must be read to accomplish this level of exegesis is daunting, but it illustrates how the Anglo-Saxon monastic community was expected to think about the world and its texts.[18]

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[18] Contemporary with and slightly later than Bede we have Aldhelm, Alcuin, and Hrabanus Maurus. These three men were also influential in monastic circles (and beyond); the *Beowulf* poet would have been exposed to their writings in his education. According to Margaret Goldsmith, Aldhelm clearly advocated the fourfold method of interpreting the Scriptures; the 9th century was a period when allegorical exegesis gained the ascendancy (33).

Chapter 3

THE MANUSCRIPT AND CULTURE OF THE SCRIBE

The Nowell Codex

The importance of the *Beowulf* manuscript cannot be overstated. Since there is only one extant copy, scholarship is rooted in and limited by it in a way few ancient texts are. There is no known reference to the *Beowulf* cycle anywhere else; there is no known evidence upon which one may build a theory of audience reception, other than the fact that someone took the time to write it down. It is a curious conundrum that has bested generations of scholars. The purpose of this essay is not to find the origin of *Beowulf*, but to explore the extant copy of *Beowulf* and to examine the cultural context in which it was recorded. As will be shown, ideas of authorship differed in Anglo-Saxon England, which affects how one should view the poem.

Beowulf is part of the Cotton MS Vitellius A. xv. This is a composite manuscript most probably assembled by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571-1631) from two different codices, the Southwick codex and the Nowell codex (Orchard, *Companion* 12). *Beowulf* is found in the second codex, the Nowell codex.[19] It is, however, unsurprisingly, most often referred to as the "Beowulf manuscript". On October 23, 1731 a fire swept through Ashburnham House where the

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[19] This comes from the name found on the title page – Laurence Nowell (1510/20-1571) – which identifies him as the owner.

Cotton collection was housed and the manuscript was damaged.[20] It was later given to the British Museum and now resides in the British Library.

The Nowell Codex also contains *The Passion of Saint Christopher, The Wonders of the East, The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle,* and *Judith*. Two scribes wrote all five texts; the first scribe, or scribe A as he is called, wrote *The Passion of Saint Christopher, The Wonders of the East, The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle,* and the majority of *Beowulf*. The second scribe – scribe B – finished *Beowulf* and wrote *Judith*.[21] The codex is a mix of prose and poetry, secular and Christian material. There appears to be, at first glance, no rhyme or reason as to why these texts were put together. It was Kenneth Sisam who first posited that these texts were grouped together on the basis of their containing monsters (Orchard, *Pride* 1).

The secular texts – *Wonders, Letter*, and *Beowulf* – all contain monsters who are hostile to humans. *The Wonders of the East* is exclusively about the exotic lands to the East of the known world and the manifold wonders, monsters, and beauty found in there. In the *Wonders* the land beyond the River Brixontes is described as having

> *Begeondan Brixonte þære ea, east þonon, beoð men acende lange [and] micle, þa habbað fet [and] sconcan .XII. fota lange, sidan mid breostum seofon fota lange. Hostes hy synd nemned. Cuðlice swa hwylcne man swa hy gelæccað, þonne fretað hi hyne. Ðonne seondon wildeor þa hatton Lertices. Hy habbað eoseles earan [and] sceapes wulle [and] fugeles fet. Þonne syndon oþere ealond suð from Brixonte on þon beoð [men] buton heafdum, þa habbað on hyra breostum heora Eagan [and] muð. Hy seondan eahta fota lange [and] eahta fota brade. Ðar beoð cende [dracan] þa beoð on lenge*

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[20] "The fire destroyed the threads and folds of the gatherings of both the Southwick and Nowell codices, so obscuring their original construction; the leaves are now mounted separately in nineteenth-century paper frames. Although the *Beowulf*-manuscript escaped the worst ravages of the fire… its margins were singed, and many individual letters were lost, later crumbled, or became obscured by the paper frames" (Orchard, *Companion* 19).

[21] "Scribe A, writing a minuscule characterized especially by extended descenders and ascenders, was responsible for lines 1-1939 (*scyran*) of *Beowulf*. Scribe B, writing a rather crude, late square minuscule script, completed the poetic half-line and the poem, lines 1939 (*moste*)- 3182. Both scribes were also responsible for writing other texts now contained within the 'Nowell Codex': scribe A wrote the prose texts; scribe B copied the surviving leaves of the poem *Judith*. No other specimen of either scribe's work has ever been discovered; nor have any closely related scribal performances been identified" (Dumville 50).

hundteontige fotmæla lange [and] fiftiges, hy beoð greate swa stænene swears micele.
For þara dracena micelnesse ne mæg nan man nayþelice on þæt land gefaran.

People born big and tall, who have feet and shanks twelve feet long, flanks with chests
seven feet long. They are of a black colour, and are called Hostes ['enemies']. As
certainly as they catch a person they devour him. Then there are on the Brixontes wild
animals which are called Lertices. They have donkey's ears and sheep's wool and bird's
feet. Then there is another island, south of the Brixontes, on which there are born men
without heads who have their eyes and mouth in their chest. They are eight feet tall and
eight feet wide. Dragons are born there, who are one hundred and fifty feet long, and are
as thick as great stone pillars. Because of the abundance of the dragons, no one can travel
easily in that land. (Orchard, *Companion* 24)

While the *Wonders* is more of a travelogue and not a monster hunt as *Beowulf* is, it is clear that
the wondrous and the monstrous often go hand-in-hand. The world described in the *Wonders* is
dangerous to men, and the appropriateness of men killing the monstrous is evident in both texts.
These descriptions of monstrous-looking men accord well with the poet's descriptions of
Grendel; they are clearly men but, at the same time, they are also more than men. Another
similarity in the two works is the curious analogue in the *Wonders* to the description of Grendel's
eyes in *Beowulf*. In *Beowulf* they are described as "shining with an unholy light" (*ligge gelicost
leoht unfæger,* 727). The *Wonders* contains two references to shining eyes – one island's
inhabitants have eyes that *scinaþ swa leohte swa man micle blacern onæle þeostre nihte*, "[men
whose] eyes shine as brightly as if one had lit a great lantern on a dark night" (Orchard, *Pride*
198-99), and a two-headed serpent whose eyes *scindað nihtes swa leohte swa blæcern*, "shine at
night as brightly as lanterns" (*Pride* 186-87). These night-glow eyes are marks of the monstrous,
marking their possessors as something other.

     The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle, based on a Latin text, also contains similarities to
Beowulf. It is a letter supposedly written by Alexander to his tutor Aristotle chronicling his
campaign in India. In it he gives accounts of his battles, both with humans and with monsters.

Like Beowulf, Alexander is a pagan hero. He was fairly well known in the medieval world, with

opinions of him falling into two camps, "as explorer and seeker of marvels on the one hand and

moral *exemplum* of pride on the other" (Orchard, *Pride* 119). Scribe A seems to be a proponent

of the first rendering. He even goes so far as to recount how, when one of Alexander's men

risked life and limb to bring him back a drink of water, he poured the water on the ground rather

than slake his thirst while his men and animals still went without (*Pride* 230). This is an almost

direct parallel to a story found in 2 Samuel regarding King David.[22] The letter ends with

Alexander displaying his pride and concern for his own glory, which would have been anathema

to a Christian audience. It is clear that the pagan heroes can be both admirable and unchristian.

The scribe is sympathetic to the pagan kings Beowulf and Hrothgar in a similar manner,

furthering the similarities between the two works.

Alexander's encounter with the hippopotami is also similar to the account found in

Beowulf of the sea monsters in Grendel's mere:

> *Þa het ic .CC. minra þegna of greca herige leohtum wæpnum hie gegyrwan, [and] hie on sunde to þære byrig foron [and] swumman ofer æfter þære ea to þæm eglande. Þa hie ða hæfdon feorðan dæl þære ea geswummen, ða becwom sum ongrislic wise on hie. Þæt wæs þonne nicra mengeo on onsione maran [and] un [122v]hyrlican þonne ða elpendas in ðone grund þære ea [and] betweoh ða yða þæs wæteres þa men besencte [and] mid heora muðe hie sliton [and] blodgodon [and] hie ealle swa fornamon, þæt ure nænig wiste hwær hiora æni cwom. Ða wæs ic swiðe yrre þæm minum ladþeowum, þa us on swylce frecennissa gelæddon. Het hiera ða bescufan in þa ea .L. [and] .C. [and] sona þæs ðe hie inne wæron, swa wæron þa nicoras gearwe tobrudon hie swa hie þa oðre ær dydon, [and] swa þicce hie in þære ea aweollon swa æmettan ða nicras, [and] swilc unrim heora wæs.*

> Then I ordered two hundred of my thegns from the Greek army to arm themselves with
> light weapons and go over to the village by swimming, and they swum over across the

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[22] "And David said longingly, "Oh, that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!" Then the three mighty men broke through the camp of the Philistines and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate and carried and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it. He poured it out to the Lord and said, "Far be it from me, O LORD, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives? Therefore he would not drink it." (*ESV*, 2 Sam. 23:15-17).

river to that island. And when they had swum about a quarter of the river, something terrible happened to them. There appeared a multitude of water-monsters [hippopotami], larger and more terrible in appearance than elephants, who dragged the men through the watery waves down to the river bottom, and tore them to bloody pieces with their mouths, and snatched them all away so that none of us knew where any of them had gone. Then I was very angry with my guides, who had led us into such danger. I ordered that one hundred and fifty of them be shoved into the river, and as soon as they were in the water-monsters were ready, and dragged them away just as they had done with the others, and the water-monsters seethed up in the river as thick as ants, they were so innumerable. (*Pride* 234-235)

Not only is this section similar to the section that mentions *nicras* in *Beowulf*, but the poet has

also expanded the attack from the Latin original quite a bit:

Hippopotami, that had been immersed in the deep currents of the waters, appeared, snatched the men in their mouths and took them off in a cruel punishment while we wept. (qtd. in Orchard, *Companion* 32)

The description of Grendel's mere is similar to this account. There are water-monsters swimming

around, churning up the water, waiting to drag anyone down who dares to enter their abode,

Sona þæt onfunde   se ðe floda begong
heorogifre beheold   hund missera,
grim ond grædig,   þæt þær gumena sum
ælwihta eard   ufan cunnode.
Grap þa togeanes,   guðrinc gefeng
atolan clommum;   no þy ær in gescod
halan lice;   hring utan ymbbearh,
þæt heo þone fyrdhom   ðurhfon ne mihte,
locene leoðosyrcan   laþan fingrum.
Bær þa seo brimwyl[f],   þa heo to botme com,
hringa þengel   to hofe sinum,
swa he ne mihte   - no he þæs modig wæs –
wæpna gewealdan,   ac hine wundra þæs fela
swe[n]cte on sunde,   sædeor monig
hildetuxum   heresyrcan bræc,
ehton aglæcan. (1497-1512a)

Right away she who held that expense of water,
bloodthirsty and fierce, for a hundred-half years,

> grim and greedy, perceived that some man
> was exploring from above the alien land.
> She snatched at him, seized the warrior
> injured his sound body – the ring-mail encircled him,
> so that she could not pierce that war-dress,
> the locked coat of mail, with her hostile claws.
> Then the she-wolf of the sea swam to the bottom,
> and bore the prince of rings into her abode,
> so that he might not – no matter how strong –
> wield his weapons, but so many wonders
> set upon him in the water, many a sea-beast
> with the battle-tusks tearing at his war-shirt,
> monsters pursuing him. (99)

Clearly, the poet had no qualms about embellishing the narrative when he wanted. This will be covered in more depth later, but suffice it to say that this is a clear example of scribe A adding to the text and making it his own, though he would not have thought of it as such. The text as it survives is delineated by its authors and their culture. One example is the use of the word '*nicor',* which is fairly unique. According to Andy Orchard,

> The word *nicor* and its variant forms occurs only twelve times in extant Old English, and apart from its four occurrences in the *Letter*, is found five times in *Beowulf* and three times in the Blickling Homily XVI, once more precisely in the passage which offers a parallel for the description of the monster-mere in *Beowulf.* In none of these other cases is the word used to render a Latin term for 'hippopotamus', though the beast was known to at least some Anglo-Saxons. (*Companion* 33)

The similarities between the *Letter* and *Beowulf* are fairly easy to see, easier to see than these between the *Wonders* and *Beowulf.* It is clear, however, that all are connected by their monsters, wonders, and the creative narrative of scribe A.

The monsters in the two Christian works, interestingly, are pagan leaders, who stand in direct moral opposition to the protagonists of the *Letter* and *Beowulf.* The two works begin and end the manuscript – *The Passion of Saint Christopher* at the beginning and *Judith* at the end. The *Passion* was written by scribe A and *Judith* by scribe B. Both works are incomplete, though

Judith is missing more, both were based on Latin texts, and the *Passion* is recorded in two other manuscripts (Orchard *Pride12*). There has been some debate over the ordering of the works in the manuscript due to spelling variations, but this has no bearing on the present topic.[23]

The first work, *The Passion of Saint Christopher*, is about the martyrdom of Saint Christopher, who belongs to the race of *cynocephali*.[24] The *Passion* found in the Nowell Codex is, as mentioned before, incomplete. In this case, it is the beginning that is missing. For this reason there is not the complete description of Saint Christopher that is found in other texts, but instead only the descriptions of the saint as "twelve fathoms tall" (*twelf fæðma lang)* and "the worst of wild beasts" (*wyrresta wildeor*). It is clear from the other extant manuscripts of this story that Saint Christopher is recognized as a being that has the head of a dog. Another Old English version, found in the *Old English Martyrology*, describes Saint Christopher this way:

> *Se com on Decius dagum þæs caseres on þa ceastre þe Samo is nemned of þære þeode þær men habbað hunda heafod ond of þære eorðan on þære æton men hi selfe. He hæfde hundes heafod, ond his loccas wæron ofer gemet side, ond his eagon scinon swa leohte swa morgen steorra, ond his teð wæron swa scearpe swa eofores tuxas. He was gode geleaffull on his heortan, ac he ne mihte sprecan swa mon.*

> [Christopher] came in the days of the Emperor Decius into the city which is called Samos, from the race where people have dogs' heads and from the land where folk eat each other. He had the head of a dog, and his locks were exceedingly long, and his eyes shone as brightly as the morning-star, and his teeth were as sharp as a boar's tusks. He

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[23] For further reading on this topic see Peter Lucas's "The Place of Judith in the Beowulf-Manuscript", *Review of English Studies* 41 (1990), 463-78.

[24] Andy Orchard summarizes the Christopher story from the Latin texts – "In the days of King Dagnus (or Decius) of Samos, one of the *cynocephali*, a giant race of dog-headed cannibals, believes in God, and receives baptism, a human voice, and the name Christopher. He undertakes to visit Samos to convert the heathens, but is spotted en route by a woman who, naturally alarmed, runs screaming to the palace. Christopher is apprehended by the soliders of King Dagnus, who imprisons Christopher, and attempts to make him apostasise through torture. Dagnus becomes increasingly angry in the face of an implacable Christopher, and successively places a fiery helmet on his head, binds him to a red-hot iron chair, ties him to a tree, and has archers shoot at him, all to no avail. In the last case the arrows hang impotently in the air, but when Dagnus curses Christopher, they fly back and blind the king. Christopher predicts his own peaceful demise the next day, and advises the king to use blood and soil from his grave as a poultice. Christopher dies, and a voice from heaven proclaims his piety. Dagnus does as he has been advised, is cured of his blindness, and promptly converts to Christianity, along with his people. Some closing remarks stress Christopher's curative and incercessionary powers" (*Pride* 14-15).

believed in God in his heart, but he could not speak like a man. (qtd. in Orchard, *Pride* 14)

This description is strikingly similar to that of Grendel, "who is clearly of human shape and man-eating stock, with bright eyes and sharp teeth, whose severed head Beowulf grasps by the (presumably long) hair" (*Pride* 14). One can only imagine how scribe A would have described Christopher. Perhaps he even had this in mind in his description of Grendel.[25] The text in the Nowell Codex begins in the middle of Christopher's tortures and ends with his death and posthumous miracles. The juxtaposition between the human and the monstrous is unique to the secular works; in the *Passion* it is the human king who is the monster and the saint who simply has a monstrous visage. One must be evil in intention and deed in order to be considered truly monstrous. It is not enough to resemble a monster, one must act like a monster as well. A spiritual implication of this is that no man is beyond redemption, no matter the physical appearance. Any other perspective would limit to God's power, an idea medieval doctrine and theology would not support.

Judith, on the other hand, is more what one expects when reading about heroes of the faith. It is a versification of the Judith narrative as found in the Latin Vulgate. It, too, is incomplete. It starts mid-sentence but it is hard to know exactly how much is missing.[26] The story is of how Judith saves her city, Bethulia, from the Assyrians. Her beauty gains her entrance to the Assyrian general Holofernes's tent and his bed, where she beheads him when he is drunk, thus saving her virtue and her city. The monstrous in this narrative comes in the form of the pagan general Holofernes and his drunken disorder. While there is nothing outwardly

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[25] I recognize that this is complete conjecture but I do not think it is impossible.

[26] Some argue that multiple fitts are lost; others argue that not much has been lost at all. See Timmer's introduction to *Judith* (Exeter, 1978) for the first and Rosemary Woolf's 'The Lost Opening to the *Judith*', *Modern Language Review* (1955), 168-72 for the second.

unappealing about him, it is his pride that makes him repulsive. Indeed, the "theme of *Judith*

appears to have focused on the victory of the oppressed over the oppressors, and the fatal

humiliation of overweening pagan pride" (Orchard, *Pride* 5).

The differences between the Vulgate Judith and the Anglo-Saxon *Judith* are very telling.

The Anglo-Saxon rendition is much more martial, describing the battle and the emotions

associated with the defeated pagans in greater detail, as well as describing Judith in more heroic

terms. The Vulgate focuses on her chastity and widowhood, while the Anglo-Saxon adaptation

focuses on her beauty, courage, and wisdom.[27] The decapitation of Holofernes in the Anglo-

Saxon poem is also markedly different from the Latin source. The Anglo-Saxon account is very

thorough in its description of the event,

> genam ða þone hæðenan mannan
> fæste be feaxe sinum,   teah hyne folmum wið hyre weard
> bysmerlice,   and þone bealofullan
> listrum alede,   laðne mannan,
> swa heo þæs unlædan   eaðost mihte
> wel gewealdan.   Sloh ða wundenlocc
> þone feondsceaðan   fagum mece,
> heteþoncolne,   þæt heo healfne forcearf
> þone sweoran him,   þæt he on swiman læg,
> druncen and dolhwund.   Næs ða dead þa gyt,
> ealles orsawle;   sloh ða eornoste
> ides ellenrof   oðre siðe
> þone hæðenen hund,   þæt him þæt heafod wand
> forð on ða flore. (98-111)[28]

> Then she took the heathen man firmly by his hair, and dragged him wretchedly towards
> her with her hands, and carefully arranged the wicked and hateful man so that she could
> most easily deal effectively with the wretch. Then that curly-haired girl struck the
> wicked-minded foe with a decorated sword so that she sliced through half his neck, so

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[27] Interestingly, Judith and Grendel's mother are both referred to as "*ides*", meaning 'woman or lady'. Judith is an *ides ellenrof* (lines 109 and 146) – a "courageous lady" and Grendel's mother is an *ides aglæcwif* (line 1259) – an "awe-inspiring lady". See Keith Taylor's "Beowulf 1259A: The Inherent Nobility ff Grendel's Mother," *English Language Notes* 31.3 (1994): 13. *Humanities International Complete* for further reading.

[28] The Old English *Judith* text is taken from *Beowulf and Judith*, edited by Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie.

that he lay in a daze, drunk and maimed. He was not dead yet, not quite lifeless. The brave woman then struck the heathen dog in earnest a second time, so that his head flew off onto the floor. (Orchard, *Pride* 10)

The Anglo-Saxon mentality is highlighted by this deviation from the original. The Anglo-Saxon society was built upon raids, hostile takeovers, feuds, and constant political upheaval. They were no strangers to violence, which was, in fact a double-edged sword. Violence was necessary to keep the peace and to keep family, home, tribe, and kingdom safe, but it was also something that could consume the Anglo-Saxon psyche if not properly monitored. Judith's decapitation of Holofernes provides a way to celebrate violence in a proper way. There is no doubt that Anglo-Saxons enjoyed grisly descriptions.

The poem has one more notable deviation from the Latin original, which is more reflective and introspective than the graphic love of violence, and it, too, showcases the Anglo-Saxons' love of the elegiac. The Anglo-Saxon contains a description of the battle between the Assyrians and the Jews that is not found in the original. Holofernes is not discovered until after the Assyrians have lost the battle, and the poet includes a protracted look at the nameless soldier who discovers him:

> *Þa wearð sið ond late   sum to ðam arod*
> *þara beadorinca,   þæt he in þæt burgeteld*
> *niðheard neðde,   swa hyne nyd fordraf.*
> *Funde ða on bedde   blacne licgan*
> *his goldfigan   gæstes gesne,*
> *lifes belidenne.   He þa lungre gefeoll*
> *freorig to foldan,   ongan his feax teran,*
> *hreoh on mode,   and his hrægl somod,*
> *and þæt word acwæð   to þam wiggendum*
> *þe ðær unrote   ute wæron:*
> *"Her ys geswutelod   ure sylfra forwyrd,*
> *toweard getacnod   þæt þære tide ys*
> *mid niðum neah geðrungen,   þe we sculon nyd losian*
> *somod æt sæcce forweorðan.   Her lið sweorde geheawen,*
> *beheafod healdend ure."* (275-90)

Then one of the soldiers belatedly and tardily became so bold that he bravely ventured into the pavilion, as forced by necessity; he found his lord lying pale on the bed, deprived of his spirit, bereft of life. Immediately he fell cold on the ground, began to tear his hair and clothes alike, troubled in heart, and he uttered these words to the warriors waiting wretchedly outside: 'Here is revealed our own doom, imminently signaled that the time has drawn near, along with its griefs, when we must perish and fall together in the fray. Here, hacked by the sword, our lord lies beheaded. (Orchard, *Pride* 11-12)

This scene is very similar to two passages in *Beowulf.* The first is when the messenger brings

news of Beowulf's death to his people –

> *Þæt ys sio fæhðo   ond se feondscipe,*
> *wælnið wera,   ðæs ðe ic [wen] hafo,*
> *þe us seceað to   Sweona leoda,*
> *syððan hie gefricgeað   frean userne*
> *ealdorleasne,   þone ðe ær geheold*
> *wið hettendum   hord ond rice*
> *æfter hæleða hryre,   hwate Scilfingas,*
> *folcred fremede,   oððe furðer gen*
> *eorlscipe efnde.* (2999-3007a)

> That is the feud and the fierce enmity,
> savage hatred among men, that I expect now,
> when the Swedish people seek us out
> after they have learned that our lord
> has perished, who had once protected
> his hoard and kingdom against all hostility,
> after the fall of heroes, valiant Scyldings,
> worked for the people's good, and what is more,
> performed noble deeds. (144-45)

The second is the nameless woman's lament at his funeral. The hero is dead and without the

strong leadership he provided his people are soon to follow. She echoes the messenger in

lamenting the fate of the Geats without Beowulf (3150-55a). The contrast between the two dead

men could not be greater; Holofernes is a drunken pagan who is intent on seducing a chaste

widow and waging war against the people of God, while Beowulf is a virtuous pagan who dies

trying to protect his people. The fact that both poems take the time to deal with the grief of their retainers is revealing of the Anglo-Saxon culture. These laments reveal the high importance placed on the king/leader of the comitatus. While differing in tone, both passages are indicative of a cultural consciousness. The loss of such a man inspires both grief and happiness – grief amongst his retainers and happiness amongst the enemy. The audience of *Judith* would recognize the importance of Holofernes's death on two levels – the historical and the spiritual. It is historical in that the martial victory belongs to the Jews, and it is spiritual in that the virtuous triumph over the unrighteous. The same could be said of Beowulf; there is joy in that he wins the battle against the dragon but sorrow also because he ultimately loses the war.

It is impossible to know why these five works were bound together in one codex. There is a similarity amongst them, as attempts have been made to show, that warrants recognition. All five works deal with the monstrous on some level, whether it is a foreign being or a human with a monstrous nature. Two of the texts, *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and *Beowulf*, contain favorable depictions of pagan kings, while two, *The Passion of Saint Christopher* and *Judith*, contain unfavorable ones. All feature the defeat of those who are considered unrighteous according to the Anglo-Saxon Christian paradigm. In both *Beowulf* and *Judith* an outsider is responsible for the defeat of the monstrous; Beowulf comes from across the sea to Heorot to defeat Grendel and his mother and Judith is an outsider by virtue of her sex. She is the one who goes to Holofernes to kill him, just as Beowulf goes to Heorot. In the *Passion* it is the outsider who has come to bring good news – the gospel – and the community who harms him. In *Beowulf* the monster comes bent on destruction and will not deal with the community as he should, thereby being the one who does harm. There are many threads that seem to weave the majority of the texts together (the *Wonders* being a bit of an anomaly). All five texts offer insights into

aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture and consciousness that coexist well together; that is, all five texts offer a coherent perception of the world, history, and heroes.

Authorship and Scribal Culture

The next major area to consider when trying to understand the adaptation of *Beowulf* found in the Nowell codex is the scribal culture of Anglo-Saxon England. Audience and authorship meant vastly different things to the people of the Middle Ages. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe states,

> Knowledge of the circumstances of transmission should make us wary about inferring authorial intention from a text affected to an unknown degree by participatory reading and copying. Indeed, the modern, critical reflex to recover an authorial text devalues the historical significance and meaning of the actual, realized texts which show us the poem working in the world. (193-94)

She highlights the importance of understanding the culture of a text as much as the author who creates it, especially a text that comes from a culture that has been predominantly oral. How important is the author to *Beowulf*? The argument presented here is that the author is, in fact, not very important to the reading and understanding of the poem. The *culture* of the author, however, is of utmost importance. The influence of a pagan past and a religious present, an oral past and a written present, all mesh together to give us the adaptation of *Beowulf* that is both useful and entertaining. It is only out of such a blending that the adaptation could have been created – with an awareness of patristic, oral-formulaic, and aesthetic concerns.

As mentioned previously, this essay is concerned with the dating of the *Beowulf* manuscript as found in the Nowell Codex, not the manuscript it was potentially copied from or the narrative itself. One piece of evidence that helps to date the text is the handwriting of the two scribes. Scribe A wrote in what is referred to as English Vernacular minuscule. This hand is not

known to have been definitively used before 1001. Scribe B wrote in English Square minuscule, of which we have no reliable examples to be found after 1010 (Klaeber xxvii). Most scholars date the manuscript from 995-1016, with Kevin Kiernan being a bit of an outlier in arguing for a date of composition that falls within King Cnut's reign.[29] This places the manuscript during the reign of King Æthelred the Unready (Æthelred II), the last English king to rule before the Danish conquest of England. [30] His father, King Edgar, was a crucial figure in the Benedictine Reform that swept through England in the ninth and tenth centuries.[31] Edgar was personally responsible for building forty monastic houses, donating land held by the king, and expelling secular canons from ecclesiastical positions. It was a politically astute move, giving him "an effective toe-hold in difficult regions of the country; attacks on monasteries founded by the king… were an attack on the King and gave an excuse for firm retaliation" (McBride 75). It also sparked a revival in education – "Monasteries provided learned men to fill the episcopate, men to whom the king could turn for advice, and whose expertise he could employ on diplomatic missions. They provided educational resources for the Church at large, and for the children of the nobility" (75). This revival of learning created a renewed interest in poetry, both religious and secular. It was "a time of monastic resurgence and of the cultivation of the vernacular written language as medium for religious teaching" (Magennis 6). According to Thomas Bredehoft, "The Benedictine Reform's intellectual investment in poetic matters, it turns out, may provide the clearest context for the ultimate survival of classical Old English verse" (144).

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[29] 'The Eleventh-Century Origin of *Beowulf* and the *Beowulf* Manuscript', *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts,* ed. Richards, pp. 277-99.

[30] He was referred to in Old English as Æthelred *unræd*. This does not, in fact, mean "unready"; it means "bad counsel".

[31] "The trigger of the reform is comparatively easy to identify; it arose from a deliberate 'government policy' – initiated by King Edward – to promote the foundation of abbeys following the *Rule of St Benedict*, in the hope that their example of life and their learning would rejuvenate the English church…" (McBride 72).

It is with this cultural context in mind that one should approach the problem of authorship. Knowing who the author of *Beowulf* was would answer a lot of questions; however, it seems that more questions have been answered than is perhaps recognized. When a text has a named author it simultaneously provides more information and limits interpretation, as Thomas Bredehoft states,

> The contextualizing power of a recognizable historically positioned authorial name, it seems clear, serves to control the range of meanings of a text, and the recognition of distant audiences, for these authors, seems to have prompted the inclusion of authorial names in an attempt to assert just that sort of interpretative contextualization and control. (45)

Works that have an author are interpreted differently than texts that do not, based on that author's oeuvre, life, and culture. Bredehoft's argument is that the writers of Anglo-Saxon England were aware of this fact and signed or did not sign their work based upon the intention of transmission;[32] monks wanting a work to be seen through a certain authorial lens would ascribe works to people who were, perhaps, not the author:

> The expectation of publication and multiple copying, of course, should be understood as an author's or compiler's perception of his or her audience as multiple and distant (in time or space) rather than single and local. This aspect of a structuring, distant audience appears to be clearly connected to the urge to attach an authorial name to a work (regardless of whether in Latin or Old English, poetry or prose) in order to provide contextualizing information about the work or to control its interpretation and use. (44-45)

This use of authorship in Anglo-Saxon England was a deliberate choice. If a text did not have a stated author, then, Bredehoft argues, the audience was more than likely local and there would not be as many copies, if any, of the manuscript made (45). For these reasons identifying the *Beowulf* author is not, in fact, as necessary as one might think:

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[32] It is easy to see when an author intended for a work to be dispersed; most would reference copies that were to be made to send to other monasteries and/or to Rome.

The audience for the poems in the 'four poetic manuscripts', then, must have been a localized audience, or a series of them, if we consider both authors' and compilers' intended audiences. These books (and any ancestors they may have had) were probably not written to serve as exemplars for future copies, but rather to be read by a specific and local readership, one that was expected to appreciate Old English verse for reasons other than its authorial innovativeness or its derivation from an authoritative source. Such a conclusion about the audience of these book not only accounts for the infrequency with which the poems in them survive in multiple copies, but it may also explain why we so rarely see clear-cut examples of literary borrowing or quoting in classical Old English poetry. (48)

Of course, to know exactly which local audience the poem was intended for would help greatly in the understanding of it. The question of authorship, however, is a minor concern. Even so, there are enough clues in *Beowulf* to help one glean an understanding of the audience, even if the specific target remains unknown.

It is clear that the adaptation of *Beowulf* is firmly placed in the heroic tradition of Anglo-Saxon England. That is, it adheres to norms set out by oral tradition, the Germanic warrior code, and the Christian present. It is not, however, an oral composition, nor should it be treated as one. It gives credence to tradition and can only be understood in terms of that tradition, namely the Germanic heroic code, but it is also a new work in that it takes the Christian present into account as well. Carol Pasternack speaks of the importance of tradition in her book *The Textuality of Old English Poetry*,

The 'implied tradition' functions as does the 'implied author' in other texts except that the entity invoked is not a particular subjectivity but a mode of thought understood to be long-accepted by the community. The patterning itself, then, not only makes the expression memorable; it also declares the traditional nature of the verse and allows the text to function within the sphere of traditional verse, oral and inscribed, by connecting the patterned expression to a multiplicity of other expressions patterned in like manner. (62)

The heroic tradition would have been easily recognizable to a contemporary audience. Certain phrases, actions, and expressions of tone all would indicate how an audience was to interpret a

poem. These indicators would have represented a deliberate choice on the part of the poet in order to help the audience understand what type of poem they were hearing.[33] This audience would have been used to "thinking in terms of the relationship between the secular world and the spiritual and would have found in traditional Old English poetry a rich body of secular imagery" (Magennis 11), as well as recognizing that "although a narrative may take place in a previous time or distant place, the beginning and end of the text connect it to a world which readers will recognize as theirs: their tradition of stories and their conception of truth" (Pasternack 198).

It was a brilliant move on the poet's part to combine the "tradition of stories" and "conception of truth." Michael Drout argues that "what is memorable is pleasurable" (123); the Anglo-Saxon audience would be much more apt to listen to and be pleased with a poem that combined their storied past and learned present. This pairing of pagan and Christian represents a

> balancing act between form and content, between novelty and tradition, between predictability and surprise, which can be analogized to Horace's ancient suggestion that poets should make their work both 'sweet' and 'useful'. The filter of aesthetic form would select for 'sweet' and the social and political filters would select for 'useful'. (122)

There can be no doubt that *Beowulf* is adapted from an older tradition. There is an Old English maxim that perfectly captures the Anglo-Saxon mindset with regard to writing:

> *A scæl gelæred smið,   swa he gelicost mæg,*
> *be bisne wyrcan,   butan he bet cunne.* (Bredehoft 104)[34]

> The learned smith must always work as similarly as he can according to the exemplar, unless he knows [how to work] better.

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[33] "A literate poet borrowing the phraseology of a written text will lift both common, repeated "formulas" and rare, idiosyncratic phrases or structures with equal facility. Thus, while the presence of similar verses in *The Meters* and, say, *Beowulf* might simplistically be seen as evidence that both were composed in a mode that shares real affinities with oral-formulaic composition, the nature and frequency of the unique parallels collected powerfully suggests the literate, "data-mining" method" (Bredehoft 98).

[34] This maxim, as quoted by Bredehoft, is adapted from N.R. Ker's 'A Supplement to *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*, 172.

This maxim calls for a discerning scribe, not the mindless copyist that some have in mind when considering the transmission of texts in the Middle Ages. Scribes were not bound by copyright laws and plagiarism the way modern writers are; quite the opposite, they were encouraged to improve texts when necessary. It is likely that the scribes who copied *Beowulf* would have deemed the inclusion of Christian explanations and exegesis an improvement upon the text. This is not to argue that the extant poem is the first to add Christian material to the narrative; it is to say, however, that the art of copying a manuscript was more of a creative exercise that allowed for changes from the exemplar. This has been demonstrated in the changes to the *Judith* and *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* texts. It would not be a stretch to state that the *Beowulf* adaptation in the Nowell Codex would be unique if compared to other copies of the poem if they existed.

What does all this mean for the understanding of *Beowulf*? It means that the extant poem was a creative work that was influenced by, but not a direct result of, the oral tradition. The audience was very much a concern of the poet, not widespread transmission of the poem. The poet was concerned with both entertaining and educating his audience. He was not concerned with a "pure Germanic heritage some modern scholars have sought" (Pasternack 75); his understanding of the past, as influenced by Bede, was of a "kind of past [that] does not record events but incorporates all that is important into the present experience, Christian interlocking with Anglo-Saxon, Norse with Christian" (76). The text should be considered in light of the other texts it was bound with, as well as recognizing that the extant text is a unique version that stands on its own without a need to search for exemplars in order to understand it. While it is more than likely that *Beowulf* was written for a local audience, it is not possible to know which audience without knowing from which scriptorium it came. It is, however, possible to glean

much information about the audience from knowing when the manuscript was written down and from looking at the other texts it was bound with.

Chapter 4

GRENDEL AND THE AUDIENCE OF *BEOWULF*

As mentioned earlier, nowhere is the harmony of the three strands as clearly visible as in

the Grendel narrative. Grendel is a foe that has defied attempts at classification from the very

beginnings of *Beowulf* scholarship. He is described in both pagan and Christian terms, as a

monster and as a man, and the lines containing the description of his stalking of Heorot before

his fight with Beowulf are some of the best of the poem. Heorot is under siege by a man and a

monster, just as Bethulia was under siege by a man – Holofernes – in *Judith* and just as

Beowulf's own kingdom is besieged by a monster – the dragon – in the second half of the poem.

It is in the descriptions of Grendel, his home, and his lineage that the poet really shines. The rest

of the poem does, of course, display this interweaving, but it is with Grendel that these strands

are at their tightest, their most cohesive. Grendel would not be the night stalker that he is without

the Christian and pagan context; if he were reduced to just one tradition he would lose the

potency, the insidiousness of the fear he inspires. J.R.R. Tolkien spoke of the blending of

traditions in his essay *The Monsters and the Critics*, specifically in reference to the monsters, in

this way:

> The monsters had been the foes of the gods, the captains of men, and with Time the monsters
> would win. In the heroic siege and last defeat men and gods alike had been imagined in the
> same host. Now the heroic figures, the men of old, *hæleđ under heofenum*, remained and still
> fought on until defeat. For the monsters do not depart, whether the gods go or come… So the
> old monsters became images of the evil spirit or spirits, or rather the evil spirits entered into
> the monsters and took visible shape in the hideous bodies of the *þyrsas* and *sigelhearwan* of
> heathen imagination (22).

The monsters are the constant in the narrative; the heroes cannot be "Christianized" in the same manner as the monsters because there is no salvation without Christ.[35]The heroes cannot attain the highest good – salvation – without the knowledge of Christ. There is no way to maintain the historical integrity of the poem and allow for Christian heroes. This constriction does not apply to the monsters. It is precisely this fluidity that allows the monsters to take on more dimension than their heroic human counterparts, making them more central to the narrative, to the interweaving of the poet.

Grendel is the first of the three monsters that Beowulf faces. He is the reason that Beowulf traverses the sea to the land of the Scyldings. Grendel has been terrorizing Hrothgar and his hall, Heorot, for twelve years, with no end in sight. Heorot is a famous hall that seems almost to be a wonder of the world, while Grendel is the infamous enemy who relentlessly besieges it. The fight between Beowulf and Grendel takes place in Heorot, at night, with Beowulf victorious. It is an odd victory, though; Beowulf succeeds in wrenching Grendel's arm from his body, which ensures death, but Grendel manages to escape the hall to die in his own home.[36] Beowulf later encounters Grendel's body there and cuts off his head to bring it back to Heorot, as this is a more fitting trophy than an arm (and Grendel's mother has taken the arm). This is, admittedly, a brief overview of the narrative. Now it is time to turn to a closer look at exactly what Grendel is, where he makes his home, and what the poet is doing with this most sinister of characters by ending with the fight between Grendel and Beowulf.

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[35] There is not space in this thesis to compare the Christian coloring of Beowulf, Hrothgar, and the other human characters to that of the monsters, but suffice it to say the "Christianization" of the monsters is much more seamless than that of the humans.

[36] Cutting off one's hand was the punishment for thievery and fraud. Grendel is guilty of both – he steals control of Heorot from Hrothgar and he is a fraudulent ruler who cannot approach the gift seat because he is an outlaw. He is not able to rule in truth.

      The clearest description the poet gives of Grendel comes after his death. The night

following Beowulf's victory, a feast is given in Heorot in which the gentility of the court is

highlighted. This is followed by Grendel's mother's revenge on the kingdom of men for her

son's death. Beowulf, who had not slept in the hall that night, is told of the tragedy the following

morning. It is here that Hrothgar tells Beowulf of Grendel's mother and the fens in which they

dwell. The tone is appropriately chilling, given the recent attack:

> *Ic þæt londbuend,   leode mine,*
> *selerædende   secgan hyrde*
> *þæt hie   gesawon   swylce twegen*
> *micle mearcstapan   moras healdan,*
> *ellorgæstas.   Ðæra oðer wæs,*
> *þæs þe hie gewislicost   gewitan meahton,*
> *idese onlicnæs;   oðer earmsceapen*
> *on weres wæstmum   wræclastas træd,*
> *næfne he wæs mara   þonne ænig man oðer;*
> *þone on geardagum   Grendel nemdo(*n)
> *foldbuende;   no hie fæder cunnon,*
> *hwæþer him ænig wæs   ær acenned*
> *dyrnra gasta.* (1345-1357a)

> I have heard countrymen and hall-counselors
> among my people report this:
> they have seen two such creatures,
> great march-stalkers holding the moors,
> alien spirits. The second of them,
> as far as they could discern most clearly,
> had the shape of a woman; the other, misshapen,
> marched the exile's path in the form of a man,
> except that he was larger than any other;
> in bygone days he was called 'Grendel'
> by the local folk. They knew no father,
> whether before him had been begotten
> any more mysterious spirits. (94-5)

This passage is meant, it seems, to introduce Beowulf to Grendel's mother; however, it gives a

clearer picture of Grendel, which until now, has merely been hinted at. While it seems

counterintuitive to start at the end, it is easier for a modern reader to grasp Grendel's appearance when it is explained in such a forthright manner. This way there is a skeleton, or form, on which the reader can attach the various descriptors that have been spread throughout the poem thus far. The modern audience, sadly, does not have the cultural awareness of the contemporary audience, which allowed them to grasp the poet's various descriptors quickly and thoroughly. To assemble the complete (or as complete as possible) monster that is Grendel requires a bit of hard work for the modern reader, but is well worth the reward. Too often Grendel is pulled apart to be studied, rather than looked at as a complete character. This section will do the opposite; Grendel will be rebuilt in order to see his wholeness, rather than taken apart and examined in pieces.

To begin with the skeleton, the poet tells the audience that Grendel is

- a *mearcstapa moras healdan.* The first is a hapax legomenon used only in reference to the Grendelkin. The first element, *mearc*, means "mark, sign, line of division; boundary, march, frontier, limit, term, border" (Hall).[37] The second element, *stapa*, means "(stepper) grasshopper, locust". It is clear from this one clever epithet that Grendel is a liminal figure who dwells on the outside of society. It seems that the poet is playing on the term *stapa*, implying both movement and plague, for it is evident that Grendel is a plague upon Heorot. The Grendelkin hold the moors as their domain, a boundary place that is unfit for human occupation.

- an *ellorgæstas*, another hapax legomenon meaning "elsewhere, else whither, to some other place" and "breath; soul, spirit, life; good or bad spirit, angel, demon". Again, this epithet contains many nuances once one takes the time to fully unpack them. The Grendelkin are spirits from somewhere else; they are clearly other.

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[37] All definitions provided in this section are from J.R. Clark-Hall's *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

- *earmsceapen*, meaning "wretchedly-created, wretched, ill-starred, unfortunate, miserable" . The Grendelkin are both unattractive and miserable monsters. While this is not unexpected, the strength of the term drives this home even more clearly. The Grendelkin are not merely outsiders, they are wretched outsiders with no hope of belonging. They are the essence of exiles – there is no way for them to hide the fact that they do not belong among the race of men.

- *on weres wæstmum wræclastas træd*. Grendel shares a resemblance to mankind, but as the previous descriptor indicates, there is something not quite right about him. Further alienating him from mankind is the fact that he walks the path of exile; he is a being that no self-respecting Anglo-Saxon would want to come in contact with.

- *næfne he wæs mara þonne ænig man oðer.* Grendel is larger than any other man, which is yet another way that he differs from the other inhabitants of the land. This gigantism will be explored in greater detail later on, but suffice it to say it is an important part of the anatomy of Grendel.

After these physical descriptions the poet gives a bit of personal history – he was given the name Grendel in years past by the people who live in the land.[38] It is also made known that Grendel has no known father. These are the essential parts of the monster that the poet then builds upon, weaving his Latin learning with the pagan Germanic tradition. Grendel is a large, man-shaped outlier who does not have a father, and is associated with the supernatural. He is known to the locals by the name Grendel, which is a name given by them as he does not interact with them; he sticks to liminal places. This is a very solid skeleton that is easy for the poet to flesh out. The

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[38] The meaning of Grendel's name is one of the most frustrating mysteries of the poem. Clearly, as Philip Cardew says in his essay "Grendel: Bordering the Human", the people would have not just given him any name; there has to be a reason behind it (192). Alas, it remains unknown to this day.

Christian strand will be dealt with first, followed by the pagan. As will be noted throughout, the aesthetic strand is the one which strengthens the (seemingly) disparate Christian and pagan strands, uniting all three to form a monster the likes of which had not been seen before and which continues to haunt down the long centuries.

The Christian Strand

The Christian strand is the least subtle of the three. The first mention of Grendel describes the anger he feels towards those who are feasting in the newly constructed Heorot,

> *Ða se ellengæst   earfoðlice*
> *þrage geþolode,   se þe in þystrum bad,*
> *þæt he dogora gehwam   dream gehyrde*
> *hludne in healle.   Þær wæs hearpen sweg,*
> *swutol sang scopes.   Sægde se þe cuþe*
> *frumsceaft fira   feorran reccan,*
> *cwæð þæt se ælmightiga   eorðan worh(te),*
> *wlitebeorhtne wang,   swa wæter bebugeð,*
> *gesette sigehreþig   sunnan ond monan,*
> *leoman to leohte   landbundum,*
> *ond gefrætwade   foldan sceatas*
> *leomum ond leafum,   lif eac gesceop*
> *cynna gehwylcum   þara ðe cwice hwyrfaþ.* (86- 98)

> A bold demon who waited in darkness
> wretchedly suffered all the while,
> for every day he heard the joyful din
> loud in the hall, with the harp's sound,
> the clear song of the scop. He said
> who was able to tell of the origin of men
> that the Almighty created the earth,
> a bright and shining plain, by seas embraced,
> and set, triumphantly, the sun and moon
> to light their beams for those who dwell on the land,
> adorned the distant corners of the world
> with leaves and branches, and made life also,
> all manner of creatures that live and move. (55-56)

The poet is setting up the whole of the conflict with Grendel in this one passage. Grendel is not

fond of the scop and his praise of the creator at all. Indeed, his first epithet is as an "*ellengast*"

who "*in þystrum bad*". He is set up in opposition to hall life right from the very beginning. The

hall was an enduring symbol in Anglo-Saxon literature. Hugh Magennis remarks on the

importance of the hall in his book *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*. He states,

> Ideas of community are reflected in the images of warmth and security of society found throughout Old English poetry and in antithetical images of dislocation and alienation. One such powerful image of warmth and security appears in the scene of joy in heaven in the closing lines of *The Dream of the Rood:*
> > *Þær is blis mycle,*
> > *dream on heofonum,   þær is drihtnes folc*
> > *geseted to symle,   þær is singal blis.*
> [In] this passage from *The Dream of the Rood* a Christian idea, that of eternal beatitude, is expressed in imagery which suggests the world of the secular hall with its feasting and fellowship among warriors (Magennis 3).

A bold evil spirit who lingers alone in the darkness cannot be a good thing;[39] it is in direct

opposition to the communal nature of hall life. The fact that Grendel is outside the hall makes his

position with respect to society clear from the very start. After the content of the scop's song –

creation – the poet moves to Grendel's lineage. It is here that the poet really brings the Christian

tradition to bear on the poem.

The poet goes all the way back to the beginning of creation in order to help the audience

understand Grendel. The origin of Grendel's line is found in Cain, one of the sons of Adam. The

poet says,

> *wæs se grimma gæst   Grendel haten,*
> *mære mearcstapa,   se þe moras heold,*
> *fen ond fæsten;   fifelcynnes eard*
> *wonsæali wer   weardode hwile,*
> *siþðan him sycppen   forscrifen hæfde*

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[39] The misunderstood loner does not become a trope until much later, though John Gardner does a good job of imagining Grendel in that role in his book *Grendel*.

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. (102-114)

This grim spirit was called Grendel.
mighty stalker of the marches, who held
the moors and fens; this miserable man
lived for a time in the land of giants,
after the Creator had condemned him
among Cain's race – when he killed Abel
the eternal Lord avenged that death.
No joy in the feud – the Maker forced him
far from mankind for his foul crime.
From thence arose all misbegotten things,
trolls and elves and the living dead,
and also the giants who strove against God
for a long while – He gave them their reward for that. (56)

The exegetical tradition surrounding Cain is vast and often used; he was a much more prominent

figure in the Patristic and Medieval periods than today.[40] In order to account for the depravity of

Cain that resulted in Abel's slaying, an unthinkable crime so close to the perfection of Eden,

exegetes began very early on to make the devil Cain's father rather than Adam. This meant that

> in Hebrew and Christian commentary Cain and his descendants as the progeny of Satan
> were seen as Satan's tools in his on-going efforts to destroy man… Cain was seen as the
> tropological figure of the Devil, his son through moral limitation, not natural lineage.
> This moral relationship between the force of evil in the world and Cain became the basis
> of allegorical significance of history, since Cain founded a race of men who lived in
> spiritual imitation of the father who were to be found everywhere on earth. They are and
> always will be true to their origins in envy and murder, and they build cities and states to
> satisfy their lust for power. (Williams 20)

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[40] Judas, it seems, has taken Cain's place today. 'Judas' is synonymous with 'betrayal' the way Cain used to be.

The use of Cain as progenitor is a deliberate choice on the poet's part. A fratricide who is related to the ultimate evil, at least morally if not biologically, and attacks the community in wrath, unprovoked, could not be a more perfect ancestor for Grendel. Rather than fitting oddly onto the skeleton of Grendel, this patristic tradition provides the background and motivations of the character, allowing for a deeper understanding of the evil he embodies. Indeed, as Margaret Goldsmith says, "His [Cain's] transgression was twofold: he was resentful towards God and towards his brother. The eternal law is epitomized in the proper relationships which Cain rejects – love towards God and his brother man" (150-51). This is mirrored in Grendel's attacks on Heorot and Beowulf. Grendel is provoked upon hearing the scop sing of creation and, in his wrath, destroys the people who make their home in the hall. His connection with the devil, his ultimate progenitor, is well attested in the narrative through a number of epithets: *feond mancynnes* ("enemy of mankind", 164 and 1276), *Godes andsaca* ("God's adversary", 786 and 1682), *ealdgewinna* ("ancient foe", 1776). His association with hell is also clearly seen in his epithets: *feond on helle* ("enemy in hell", 101), *helle hæfton* ("captive of hell", 788), *helle gast* ("spirit of hell", 1274). Grendel is not a morally ambiguous figure, nor is he meant to be. He is the embodiment of an evil, malevolent line that is firmly in opposition to everything mankind holds dear.

Another important characteristic of Cain, shared by Grendel, is that he is an exile who is cast out into the world by God. Bede says, "Cain was to be forever unstable and wandering, of uncertain abode" (qtd. in Orchard, *Pride* 61) and "he should always be a wanderer and exile in the same earth, and never dare to have a peaceful abode anywhere" (61). Cain is cut off from his family, his Lord, and the blessings that come from him. The *Genesis A* poet is even more stringent in his interpretation of God handing down Cain's exile:

> *þu þæs cwealmes scealt*
> *wite winnan   and on wræc hweorfan,*
> *awyrged to widan aldre.   Ne seleð þe wæstmas eorðe*
> *wlitige to woruldnytte,   ac heo wældreore swealh*
> *halge of handum þinum;   forþon heo þe hroðra oftihð,*
> *glæmes grene folde.   Þu scealt geomor hweorfan,*
> *arleas of eared þinum,   swa þu Abele wurde*
> *to feorhbanan;   forþon þu flema scealt*
> *widlast wrecan,   winemagum lað.* (1013-21)

> You shall forever for this killing win punishment, and go into exile,
> accursed for ever. Nor shall the earth grant you fair fruits for your
> worldly use, but the holy one has swallowed the blood of slaughter
> from your hand; therefore she shall hold back from you her comforts,
> the green earth her beauty. Sadly you must go, graceless from your
> land, since you were Abel's slayer, therefore you must tread the exile's
> path, a fugitive, hateful to your dear kinsmen. (Orchard, *Pride* 63)

Not only is Cain deprived of the comfort of family; he is deprived of the comfort that comes from the earth. These two components of exile are clearly seen in Grendel. This lack of community is an important part of the character of Grendel. The importance of community and the stigma of exile were tenets of the Anglo-Saxon socio-cultural paradigm. As Hugh Magennis says, "Grendel himself is the antithesis of everything which the hall represents; hall imagery is associated with him ironically (as *healðegn*), and his own and his mother's dwelling-place is appropriately presented as a kind of anti-hall" (62). The loneliness of exile is highlighted by the fact that there is no war band for Grendel to command; he has no comrades in arms, though he clearly resides in a place of monsters. The unity that mankind is able to maintain is impossible for the monsters of the fens and moors. This is where the local aesthetic again strengthens the Latin tradition by using a biblical exile paired with contemporary images to define Grendel more clearly. Tacitus offers a clear picture of what a Germanic war band consisted of, the principles of which had not changed all that much from Tacitus to the *Beowulf* poet:

Exceptional nobility or great accomplishments on the part of fathers earn dignity of high rank even for adolescents; they attach themselves to others who are stronger and who have long since proved themselves. Neither is it an embarrassment to be seen among one's followers. Rather, the *comitatus* itself has its ranks as assigned by the one they follow; and the rivalry of the followers is great as to which of them will have pride of place in the esteem of their chieftain, and of the chieftains as to which will have the most numerous and keenest followers. This is a mark of honor and strength, always to be surrounded by a crowd of select youths, in peace an honor, in war a protection. Neither is it only among his own people but in adjacent states as well that it is a source of reputation and glory if one's *comitatus* stands out in size and strength; indeed, such men are sought out for legations and are showered with gifts, and commonly by their very reputation they attenuate wars. (Klaeber 308)

And also,

When they have come onto the battlefield, it is a disgrace for a chieftain to be surpassed in bravery, and for the *comitatus* not to match the bravery of the chieftain. Furthermore, it truly renders the one who survives his lord disgraced for life and infamous, to have fled the battlefield; to defend him, to look after him, and even to ascribe one's own brave deeds to his glory, is one's pre-eminent obligation; chieftains fight for victory, followers for their chieftain… Indeed, they demand of the generosity of their chieftain that war-horse, that bloody and conquering spear; feasts and certain rough but lavish displays serve for pay. (308)

The difference between Grendel and Heorot could not be more pronounced. The entire society is built upon and preserved by the strength of the *comitatus*; Grendel has no hope of creating his own because the very nature of exile is isolation. The fact that he is a descendant of Cain further precludes acceptance because he is exiled from humanity in general, not simply the Scyldings. The Cain tradition paired with local tradition – the *comitatus* – compounds the meaning of the exile of Grendel; he is the epitome of what an exile is. He is exiled from humanity and from God with no hope of redemption.

As mentioned earlier, there are two components of Cain's exile – exile from family and exile from the goodness and beauty the earth can provide. The poet picks up on this idea with another clever interweaving of Latin tradition and local aesthetic. The description of Grendel's

mere is one of the creepiest parts of the poem. The first description occurs right after Hrothgar

tells Beowulf of Grendel's mother:

> *Hie dygel lond*
> *warigeað, wulfhleþu,   windige næssas,*
> *frecne fengelad,   ðær fyrgenstream*
> *under næssa genipu   niþer gewieð,*
> *flod under foldan.   Nis þæt feor heonon*
> *milgemearces   þæt se mere standeð;*
> *ofer þæm hongiað   hrinde bearwas,*
> *wudu wyrtum fæst   wæter oferhelmað.*
> *Þær mæg nihta gehwæm   niðwundor seon,*
> *fyr ond flode.   No þæs frod leofað*
> *gumena bearna   þæt þone grund wite.*
> *Ðeah þe hæðstapa   hundum geswenced,*
> *heorot hornum trum   holtwudu sece,*
> *feorran geflymed,   ær he feorh seleð,*
> *aldor on ofre,   ær he in wille,*
> *hafelan [beorgan];   nis þæt heoru stow.*
> *Þonon yðgeblond   up astigeð*
> *won to wolcnum   þonne wind styreþ*
> *lað gewidru,   oð þæt lyft ðrysmaþ,*
> *roderas reotað.   Nu is se ræd gelang*
> *eft æt þe anum* (1357b-1377a).

> … That murky land
> they hold, wolf-haunted slopes, windy headlands,
> awful fenpaths, where the upland torrents
> plunge downward under the dark crags,
> the flood underground. It is not far hence
> – measured in miles – that the mere stands;
> over it hangs a grove hoar-frosted,
> a firm-rooted wood looming over the water.
> Every night one can see there an awesome wonder,
> fire on the water. There lives none so wise
> or bold that he can fathom the abyss.
> Though the heath-stepper beset by hounds,
> the strong-horned hart, might seek the forest,
> pursued from afar, he will sooner lose
> his life on the shore than save his head
> and go in the lake – it is no good place!
> The clashing waves climb up from there
> dark to the clouds, when the wind drives
> the violent storms, until the sky itself droops,
> the heavens groan. (95)

The brilliant poet has created a lair that is most suitable to creatures that are associated with the devil. The tone is one of foreboding; this is clearly a place were mankind is not welcome. It is the antithesis of Heorot with its soaring golden gables. As Heorot represents civilization, so Grendel's mere represents barbarism. Grendel is Cain's heir in that his home is the most inhospitable place in the poem. The approach of Beowulf's party to the mere reveals even more insidious details about this water:

> *Flod blode weol   - folc to sægon –*
> *hatan heolfre.   Horn stundum song*
> *fuslic (fyrd)leoð.   Feþa eal gesæt.*
> *Gesawon ða æfter wætere   wyrmcynnes fela,*
> *sellice sædracan   sund cunnian,*
> *swylce on næshleoðum   nicras licgean,*
> *ða on undernmæl   oft bewitigað*
> *sorhfulne sið   on seglrade,*
> *wyrmas ond wildeor* (1422-30a).

> The flood boiled with blood – the folk gazed on –
> and hot gore. At times a horn sang
> its eager war-song. The footsoldiers sat down.
> They saw in the water many kinds of serpents,
> strange sea-creatures testing the currents,
> and on the sloping shores lay such monsters
> as often attend in early morning
> a sorrowful journey on the sail-road,
> dragons and wild beasts.

As an Anglo-Saxon that would have been the fens and moors; the poet, however, is not content with leaving it at that. In order to reinforce the malevolence that is embodied in Grendel, his abode is not simply unwelcoming, it is evil. Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur describes the feeling one gets when reading or hearing of Beowulf's approach to the mere:

> The moor is murky (*myrce*); the rocky slopes are steep; the paths narrow and mysterious (*nearwe, enge, uncuð*); the water of the mere is bloody and troubled (*dreorig ond*

gedrefed). The only adjective at all unusual is *wynleas*, applied to the forest that overhangs the water. The water-monsters are strange (*sellic*), cruel, and enraged; the one slain by Beowulf is wondrous and grisly (*wundorlic, gryrelic*). The nouns and adjectives are carefully selected, not so much to *portray* a particular landscape as to *suggest*, vividly and powerfully, the peril and horror to which the hero and his companions must expose themselves to reach the fearful lair of the troll. The description is symbolic rather than representational – symbolic of evil in its most appalling form. (26)

Grendel's mere bears a striking resemblance to the entrance of hell as described in Blickling

Homily XVI, a homily meant to be read on Saint Michael's Feast Day:

> *Swa Sanctus Paulus wæs geseonde on norðanweardne þisne middangeard, þær ealle wætero niðergewitað, ond he þær geseah ofer ðæm wætere sumne harne stan, ond wæron norð of ðæm stane awexene swiðe hrimige bearwas. Ond ðær wæron þystrogenipo, ond under þæm stane wæs nicra eardung ond wearga. Ond he geseah þæt on ðæm clife hangodan on ðæm isigean bearwum manige swearte saula be heora handum gebundne. Ond þa fynd þara nicra onlicnesse heora gripende wæron, swa swa grædig wulf. Ond þæt wæter wæs sweart under þæm clife neoðan. Ond betuh þæm clife on ðæm wætre wæron swylce twelf mila, ond ðonne ða twigo forburston þonne gewitan þa saula niðer þa þe on ðæm twigum hangodan, ond him onfengon ða nicras.* (Kelly 144)

> As St Paul was looking towards the northern region of the earth from where all waters pass down, he saw above the water a hoary stone, and north of the stone the woods had grown very frosty. Dark mists existed there, and under the stone was the dwelling place of monsters and abominable creatures. He saw many black souls with their hands bound hanging on the cliff of these icy woods. The devils in the likeness of monsters were seizing them like greedy wolves. The water under the cliff beneath was black. Between the cliff and the water there was a distance of about twelve miles, when the (cliff) twigs broke the souls who hung on these twigs fell down and the monsters seized them. (145)

The imagery presented is too similar to be coincidental. The poet is strengthening the ties of

Grendel and the devil of the Latin tradition in a way that is not obvious to the modern audience

but one the contemporary audience would have, more than likely, been familiar with.[41]

According to exegetical tradition, "The chief characteristics of Cain's place of exile were that it

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[41] Andy Orchard points out several instances of this description of a cliff with a hellish place at the bottom. Even if the audience were unaware of the Blickling Homily, the tradition was such that they would have recognized the allusion (Orchard, *Pride* 41-42).

was a desert place, a waste, solitary, and dark" (Williams 26). Grendel's mere is so unwelcoming, so other-worldly, that the men have to sit down and take it all in for a bit. It is overwhelming in its monstrousness, just like Grendel himself. As Heorot is a reflection of Hrothgar, so too is Grendel's mere a reflection of Grendel. Without the Latin tradition the depiction of the mere would not have the resonance that it does; the insidiousness of it would not have the otherworldly connotations that the Latin tradition brings.

There is one last aspect of the Cain tradition that bears mentioning, and that is the association of Cain with darkness. According to David Williams, "Many of the characteristics of the description of Cain rest on the idea of the first murderer as the antithesis of light. St. Ambrose seems to see Cain's antipathy to light and his seeking of a shadowy dwelling as expressive of the state of his soul" (26-27). Several of Grendel's more remarkable epithets reflect this tradition by associating him with the shadows – he is called a *deorc deaþscua* ("dark death-shadow", 160) and *sceadugenga* ("shadow walker", 703); both *deaþscua* and *sceadugenga* are hapax legomena and serve as attestations to the poet's linguistic creativity. Grendel is also described as *se þe in þystrum bad* ("the one who waited in the darkness", 87) and is one of the *scaduhelma gesceapu* ("shapes of darkness", 650). Grendel only attacks Heorot under the cover of night; it is clearly when he feels most comfortable. The connection between darkness and Cain lends itself to an allegorical interpretation of Grendel that is subtle and complex. The poet has already laid out Grendel's ancestry – Cain and his monstrous descendants – so there is no need to keep referring back to this. The association of Cain and darkness does this for the poet. Not only is the darkness harmful on the physical plane, it is also harmful on the spiritual one. Grendel is a representation of what happens to a soul when it welcomes the darkness; he is a complex character that supports the multiple levels of reading without being stretched too thin, thanks to

the poet's skillful interweaving of the three traditions (Christian, pagan, and local). The oral-formulaic tradition's contribution to Grendel's person will be examined next. Though, unfortunately, it is not as complete as the Latin tradition, it still bears examining as it is an important part of the character of Grendel.

The Oral-Formulaic Strand

The oral-formulaic tradition is, admittedly, the most obscure of the three traditions. Instead of leaving behind a *Liber Monstrorum* or an etymology in the way of Isidore, the ancient Germanic peoples left few clues behind as to the nature of their monsters and gods. It is clear, however, that it was a vibrant tradition that was handed down for centuries. While not strong enough to combat the freezing of memory that comes with writing, echoes of it remained, giving tantalizing glimpses into the pagan mind. It is from this tradition, as much as from the Latin Fathers, that *Beowulf* was formulated. The character of Grendel has a pagan component that the poet uses to add to his malice. These descriptions of Grendel are harder for the modern audience to understand but are no less a part of his character. To go back to the skeleton metaphor, it is now time to add to the pagan tradition to the musculature and soft-tissue of the Latin tradition, fleshing out this most distressing of monsters more fully.

Grendel's epithets and descriptions from the oral-formulaic background are extremely interesting. The ones discussed here are the ones that have analogues in the Norse sources; the reason for this is that it is the only way to understand the pagan tradition the poet was drawing from. There may be more examples scattered throughout the poem, but they may no longer be discernible. The focus here are *þyrs* and *eoten* as they are the Germanic terms that are applied to Grendel specifically. Though scant, these particular references have long traditions behind them

that history has been kind to make available to the modern reader, though there are still lamentable gaps preventing total comprehension. This, as has been shown, is exactly how medieval scribes liked it; there is a responsibility that comes with reading as there is a responsibility that comes with writing. One cannot simply read at a surface level. That would be anathema to the exegetical tradition.

The term *þyrs* is a fascinating one. It comes with a heritage that seems as if one is peering through a glass, darkly. It is not used often in Old English but two of the nine or so uses (including glosses) are of particular interest. The first comes from *Maxims II,* lines 42-43: "*Ðyrs sceal on fenne gewunian ána innan lande*" (Dobbie 8), meaning, "Þyrs must dwell in the fen, alone in the land". The second use comes from Riddle 40 in the Exeter Book – "*Ic mesan mæg meahtelicor ond efnetan ealdum þyrse*" (Krapp and Dobbie 202), meaning "I can eat as mightily, as much as the old *þyrs*". The *þyrs* was a solitary creature who was known for its huge appetite. The last thing one is able to glean from the scant uses is that the "Corpus glosses equate *Orcus* with *þrys, heldiobul,* while others equate *þrys* and *colossus*, or *þrys* and *cyclops*" (Cardew 200). The *þ*yrs, then, appears to be some giant figure that dwells alone in the fens and has an enormous appetite. All of these line up nicely with Grendel, but when one turns to the Old Norse sources a clearer picture begins to emerge of what a *þyrs* might be; it is not anything benign or harmless and it is not something to be trifled with.

Þurs is the Þ rune in the Icelandic and Norwegian rune poems (the Old English being *þorn*).[42] The poems that go with the rune, in both runic systems, are foreboding, especially if one is of the female sex:

Norwegian: *Þurs vældr kvinna kvillu (*"Þurs causes pain to women")

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[42] *Þyrs* is the Old English spelling and *Þurs* is Old Norse. *Þyrs* is used when referencing the Old English texts, while *þurs* is used when referencing the Old Norse material.

Icelandic: *Þurs er kvenna kvöl*
         ok kletta búi
         ok varðrúnar verr
         Saturnus þengill

         ("*Þurs* is harm of women
           and dwells in cliffs
           and is the husband of the warden of runes
           Saturn king"). (Taylor 124)

An important feature of the *þurs* is here highlighted that is missing from the *þyrs* in *Beowulf*. The *þursar* of Norse tradition are sexually violent beings, particularly towards women. In the poem *Skírnismál*, when Skírnir is trying to persuade the *jötunn* maiden Gerðr to become the Freyr's wife, he has to resort to threatening her with *þurs* runes,

     Þurs ríst ec þér   oc þría stafi
     ergi ok æði   oc à ópola

     I scratch thurse-runes against you and three runes:
     filth and waste and every-yearning (Taylor 126).

Paul Beekman Taylor further explains that, "All of these runes are associated with sexuality: excess, sterility and deprivation, respectively, and all three qualify what charm powers are contained in the þurs-rune" (126). The *þurs* is never presented in a positive light the way the *jötunn* are, which will be discussed more in depth in the following section. The sexual threat of the *þurs* adds another layer of evil onto Grendel without the poet's having to mention anything explicit. *Beowulf* is, after all, a strangely prudish poem, with no hint of sexual conduct, positive or negative, other than the fact that Hrothgar and Wealtheow share a bed. By naming Grendel a *þyrs*, however, the poet is able to bring to bear the association of *þyrs* with sexuality without having to state it outright. The fact that Grendel is potentially a sexually active monster would

strike fear into the female audience's heart in a way that even a grisly death might not be able to. There are no sources to shed light on what type of offspring a *þyrs* and a human would produce, but there is little doubt that such progeny would not be welcome in any community.

The next epithet bears a close resemblance to *þyrs* but does not have the same pejorative connotations. This is the word *eoten*, the common Old English word for "giant," which has caused much confusion in relation to *þyrs*. While they are similar, the *eotenas* are more ambivalent creatures than the *þyrsas*. An *eoten* can be a positive force or a negative force, implying a more diverse type of giant than the *þyrs*.[43] The Old Norse equivalents – *jötnar* – are both good and bad, ugly and beautiful, just like the *Æsir*. The Old Norse tradition differentiates between the two in a way the *Beowulf* poet does not. While this might be due simply to stylistic alliterative or metrical concerns, it seems that the poet is making a deliberate choice in his use of the two words. In including *þyrs*, he retains the sexual threat as well as the traditional dwelling-place of the *þyrs,* the fens. By including *eoten* he brings to the poem the doom of the *Æesir,* for it is the *jötnar* who bring about the end of the world. They are "not only...adversaries to human heroes in Germanic tradition but are also the chief threat that brings about Ragnarök, the downfall of the gods, in Norse mythology" (Eldevik 89). These are beings who strive against gods and are victorious; the fact that the gods beat them occasionally does not mitigate the final outcome. This elevates the threat level of the *eotenas*. The audience would be aware, of course, that the ultimate victory is decided by God (as the poet makes very clear), but one cannot simply dismiss the multiple associations: *eotenas* are forces to be reckoned with and taken seriously.

Two more interesting things about the word *eoten* is the fact that it is very similar to the word *etan*, meaning, "to eat, devour, consume," and that it is used in the poem to mean "Jute".

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[43] In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the Green Knight, who is a 'good' character, is described as being half *eoten.*

The polysemous nature of the word, the denotations and connotations associated with it, makes it

ideal for a medieval writer. A reader/listener has to be paying constant attention to keep up with

the context of each use so as to know which meaning to apply. Rather than being a cause for

confusion, the poet is showing the audience how clever he is. The voracity of a *þyrs* appetite has

been established, but the description of Grendel feasting in the poem has yet to be provided. This

is one of the most grisly sections of the poem. The poet does not shy away from describing

Grendel's cannibalism:

> *Ne þæt se aglæca   yldan þohte,*
> *ac he gefeng hraðe   forman siðe*
> *slæpendne rinc,   slat unwearnum,*
> *bat banlocan,   blod edrum dranc,*
> *synsnædum swealh;   sona hæfde*
> *unlyfigendes   eal gefeormod,*
> *fet ond folma.* (739-45)

> Not that the monster meant to delay –
> he seized at once at his first pass
> a sleeping man, slit him open suddenly,
> bit into his joints, drank the blood from his veins,
> gobbled his flesh in gobbets, and soon
> had completely devoured that dead man,
> feet and fingertips. (75-6)

The similarity in sound between *eoten* and *etan* would ensure that this aspect of Grendel's

character would be impossible to forget. The poet reminds the audience again, later, that Grendel

preyed upon the Danes; he did not just kill them, he devoured them:

> *   him Grendel wearð*
> *mærum maguþegne   to muðbonan,*
> *leofes mannes   lic eall forswealg.*
> *No ðy ær ut ða gen   idelhende*
> *bona blodigtoð,   bealewa gemyndig,*
> *of ða goldsele   gongan wolde,*
> *ac he mægnes rof   min costode,*
> *grapode gearofolm.   Glof hangode*

sid ond syllic,   searobendum fæst;
sio wæs orðoncum   eall gegyrwed
deofles cræftum   ond dracan fellum.
He mec þær on innan   unsynnige,
dior dædfruma   gedon wolde
manigra sumne   (2078b-2091a).

                Grendel was that
famous young retainer's devourer,
gobbled up the body of that beloved man.
None the sooner did that slayer, blood in his teeth,
mindful of misery, mean to leave
that gold-hall empy-handed,
but in his mighty strength he tested me,
grabbed with a ready hand. A glove hung
huge, grotesque, fast with cunning clasps;
it was embroidered with evil skill,
with the devil's craft and dragon's skins.
Inside there, though I was innocent,
that proud evil-doer wanted to put me,
one of many. (116-17)

This aspect of Grendel's character is especially insidious considering the way the poet identifies

him as a man, which is explored in greater detail in the next section. The poet also uses the word

eoten to refer to the Germanic people group of the Jutes. In the poem they are the enemies of the

Danes, responsible for killing Heremod (902-3), who was a king of the Danes, and also for the

hostilities as depicted in the Finnsburg digression (1070-1159). Each meaning of the word

differs, but they are used in such a way that the intent, that is, the malevolence of the person or

action associated with it is clear. An *eoten* is at once a man and a giant, a being capable of great

harm and a contender against the gods. The *Beowulf* poet knows how to say a lot by saying very

little. The dual use of *eoten* evokes both the monstrosity of Grendel and his humanity. The

monstrous part of Grendel's nature tends to overwhelm the human, but the poet is very clear that

he is more than a mere beast. In order to understand this issue better, one must look to the local

aesthetic to understand the kind of man Grendel is.

The Aesthetic Strand

In his seminal book, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, Fred Robinson talks about the

importance of the two strands – the Christian and pagan – and how they are central to reading the

poem,

In reading *Beowulf* it is important to notice that the monsters are presented from two points of
view. To the pagan character in the poem, these creatures are *eotenas, fifelcynn, scinnan,
scynscaaþan, scuccan,* and *ylfe* – all terms from pagan Germanic demonology, which the
characters (and the poet when he is adopting the characters' perspective) use to refer to the
monsters. But the poet in his own voice tells the audience much more about these preternatural
creatures, including the true genealogy of the Grendelkin: they are monstrous descendants of
Cain, whose progeny was banished by God and punished with the flood. They are the *gigantes* of
the Vulgate, who remain in conflict with the Lord of Heaven… this dual perception is of signal
importance to our understand of the poem. (31)

There is one more strand that the poet interweaves into Grendel, making a triple, not only a

double, perception necessary. Grendel is more than a threat to the body or the soul; he is also a

threat to the community. As shown before, community is of utmost importance to Anglo-Saxon

society and Grendel is not a part of any community – Scylding, Danish, Geatish, or otherwise.

The poet emphasizes this using the Latin tradition, the pagan tradition, and the local one; that is,

the poet uses words that would apply to humans to describe Grendel as well. This brings him

uncomfortably close to humanity in a way that the Latin and pagan traditions did not. The

distance between a monstrous descendant of Cain and a warrior hero in the mead hall would

seem to have to be more pronounced than the *Beowulf* poet allows. This is, perhaps, the poet's

greatest stroke of brilliance – while he uses the Patristic and pagan traditions to reinforce the

isolation of Grendel, he uses the local traditions to pull him in closer to human community,

showing that anyone, without the grace of God, can fall prey to the sins that Grendel is eaten up with.

Grendel is referred to as *dior dædfruma* ("brave, fierce doer of deeds", 2090), *wonsæli wer* ("unfortunate man", 105), and *rinc…dreamum bedæled* ("man deprived of joys", 720-21). He is *weres wæstmum wræclastas træd, næfne he wæs mara þonne ænig man oðer* ("misshapen, marched the exile's path in the form of a man, except that he was larger than any other", 1351-53). There is no doubting that Grendel is somehow both fully human and fully monstrous.[44] Grendel's humanity is easily visible when contrasted with Beowulf. Several of Grendel's epithets are shared with the Geatish hero – *aglæca* (one inspiring awe or misery, 159, 425, 433, 592, 646, 732, 739, 816, 989, 1000, 1269), *renweardas* (guardians of the house, 770), *heaþodeorum* (battle-brave ones, 772), and *healðegn* (hall thane, 142). Both have the strength of thirty men (122-3, 379-81). The most clear, most wonderful example of the connection between Grendel and Beowulf is also the poem's crowning literary passage, Grendel's approach to Heorot:

> *Com on wanre niht*
> *scriðan sceadugenga.   Sceotend swæfon,*
> *þa þæt hornreced   healdan scoldon,*
> *ealle buton anum   – þæt wæs yldum cuþ*
> *þæt hie ne moste,   þa metod nolde,*
> *se s[c]ynscaþa   under sceadu bregdan –*
> *ac he wæccende   wraþum on andan*
> *bad bolgenmod   beadwa geþinges.*
> *Ða com of more   under misthleoþum*
> *Grendel gongan,   Godes yrre bær;*
> *mynte se manscaða   manna cynnes*
> *sumne besyrwan   in sele þam hean.*
> *Wod under wol[c]num   to þæs þe he winreced,*
> *Goldsele gumena   gearwost wise*
> *frætum fahne.   Ne wæs þæt forma sið*

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[44] He is, in a way, an inversion of Christ, who was both fully God and fully man. Also, like Christ, he has no known earthly father; he is the product of evil and an earthly mother.

þæt he Hroþgares   ham gesohte;
næfre he on aldordagum   ær ne siþðan
heardran hæle,   healðegnas fand.
Com þa to recede   rinc siðian
dreamum bedæled.   Duru sona onarn
fyrbendum fæst,   syþðan he hire folmum (æt)hran;
onbræd þa bealohydig,   ða (he ge)bolgen wæs,
recedes muþan.   Raþe æfter þon
on fagne flor   feond treddode,
eode yrremod;   him of eagum stod
ligge gelicost   leoht unfæger. (703- 27)

               In the dark night he came
creeping, the shadow-goer. The bowmen slept
who were to hold that horned hall –
all but one. It was well-known to men
that the demon foe could not drag them under
the dark shadows if the Maker did not wish it;
but he, wakeful, keeping watch for his enemy,
awaited, enraged, the outcome of the battle.
Then from the moor, in a blanket of mist
Grendel came stalking – he bore God's anger;
the evil marauder meant to ensnare
some of human-kind in that high hall.
Under the clouds he came until he clearly knew
he was near the wine-hall, men's golden house,
finely adorned. It was not the first time
he had sought out the home of Hrothgar,
but never in his life, early or late,
did he find harder luck or a hardier hall-thane.
To the hall came that warrior on his journey,
bereft of joys. The door burst open,
fast in its forged bands, when his fingers touched it;
bloody-minded, swollen with rage, he swung open
the hall's mouth, and immediately afterwards
the fiend strode across the paved floor,
went angrily; in his eyes stood
a light not fair, glowing like fire. (74-75)

The description of Grendel's approach is chilling, to say the least. The closer he gets, the more

corporeal he becomes, until the reality of him, including his glowing eyes and swelling rage, fills

the hall. Unbeknownst to Grendel, however, there is a rage equaling his own waiting for him. It

is this rage that binds them more closely than anything else. Indeed, Beowulf is the only positive

character to be described by the term *gebolgen* or *gebolgenmod* (enraged, enraged in mind),

> The fury experienced by both Beowulf and Grendel is a further factor which links the combatants; Beowulf waits for Grendel's arrival 'furious at heart' (*bolgenmod*, line 709), while the door of Heorot collapses at Grendel's touch 'since he was furious' (*ða (he ge)bolgen wæs*, line 723); it might be noted that precisely the same reason is given for Beowulf's ability to overwhelm Grendel's mother in their first grappling (*þa he gebolgen wæs*, line 1539), and that throughout *Beowulf* the only figures who are described as 'furious' in this way (*gebolgen* or *bolgenmod*) are Beowulf, in each of his three monster-battles (lines 709, 1539, 2401, and 2550), Grendel (line 723), the monsters at the mere (line 1431), the fallen prince Heremod (line 1713), and the dragon (lines 2220 and 2304). (Orchard, *Pride* 32)

The line between monster and human seems to be blurred when it comes to battle. Beowulf is

never more like Grendel than when he is waiting to fight him; indeed, 'fight' is too gentle a

word, as it is a battle to the death. Grendel, however, is at his most human when compared to

something else, something perhaps prized even more than valor, and that is the mead hall.

Community in the Anglo-Saxon world was based on the communal relationship between

a lord and his people (Magennis 14). This is where the rings, treasure, and land would be

dispensed, as well as where a man would swear fealty to his lord. The community was contingent

upon this system and it was to be protected. Exile left one with no land, no money, and no

support base. It is just this system that Grendel is so angry at, where he focuses his attacks. It is

his humanity that understands where to hit the hardest to do the most damage to a society that he

can never be a part of. It is this local aesthetic, this picture of community centered on the mead

hall, that completes the picture of Grendel. Strangely, it is not his association with Cain, for Cain

is the father of monsters, not humans. Rather, the poet appeals to the local tradition in order to

help the audience understand exactly what Grendel is. His attacks are not mindless nor are they

widespread; he focuses only on Heorot, the symbol of the power of community in Germanic

society. After Grendel attacks, the Danes try to appease him as they would any other man,

> *Swa rixode   ond wið rihte wan,*
> *ana wið eallum,   oð þæt idel stod*
> *husa selest.   Wæs seo hwil micel:*
> *twelf wintra tid   torn geþolode*
> *wine Scyldinga,   weana gehwelcne,*
> *sidra sorga.   Forðam [gesyne] wearð*
> *ylda bearnum,   undyrne cuð*
> *gyddum geomore   þætte Grendel wan*
> *hwile wið Hroþgar,   heteniðas wæg,*
> *fyrene ond fæhðe   fela missera,*
> *singale sæce;   sibbe ne wolde*
> *wið manna hwone   mægenes Deniga,*
> *feorhbealo feorran,   fea þingian,*
> *ne þær nænig witena   wenan þorfte*
> *beorhtre bote   to banan folmum* (149b-158).

> So he ruled, and strove against right,
> one against all, until empty stood
> the best of houses. And so for a great while –
> for twelve long winters the lord of the Scyldings
> suffered his grief, every sort of woe,
> great sorrow, for to the sons of men
> it became known, and carried abroad
> in sad tales, that Grendel strove
> long with Hrothgar, bore his hatred,
> sins and feuds, for many seasons,
> perpetual conflict; he wanted no peace
> with any man of the Danish army,
> nor ceased his deadly hatred, not settled with money,
> nor did any of the counselors need to expect
> bright compensation from the killer's hands. (58)

Grendel does not want anything to do with their compensation. His hatred of this community is

so great that he would rather see it destroyed and unable to prosper rather than accept payment.

The wording suggests the Danes tried every measure to sue for peace but Grendel denied all of

them. It would not make sense to try and deal with a monster on human terms, yet that is what

the Danes tried to do.[45] The implication is that Grendel's humanity is an integral part of his character, one Hrothgar and his men thought they could appeal to. The contemporary audience, and even the modern one to an extent, would be able to see the danger in such a man, monstrous or not, that would not be appeased by anything. The fact that the Scyldings treat Grendel as a human requires the audience to take this aspect of his character seriously; he is enough of a man that others treat him as such.

The last way that Grendel's humanity is shown is in his death song. The characterization of Grendel has come full circle; he is first introduced by his hatred of the scop's song of creation (86-90) and he exits the poem by singing his own song in the hall,

> *Sweg up astag*
> *niwe geneahhe; Norð-Denum stod*
> *atelic egesa, anra gehwylcum*
> *þara þe of wealle wop gehyrdon,*
> *gryreleoð galan Godes andsacan,*
> *sigeleasne sang, sar wanigean*
> *helle hæfton* (782-88b).

> The music swelled
> very much new; the North-Danes stood,
> dreaded terror in each of them
> who heard through the wall the wailing lamentation,
> who heard God's adversary sing a terrible song;
> the captive of hell sang of defeat, bewailed his pain.[46]

The two songs, the creation song and Grendel's death song, bookend the Grendel narrative. The differences between the two serve to highlight the nature of Grendel's humanity. The song of joy, of creation at the beginning incites Grendel to wrath. The song at the end is chilling, a death song of one about to depart for Hell; the scop is articulate and Grendel is not. Grendel's song is a primitive, shadowy copy of the creativeness of the scribe. Grendel does not speak in the poem;

[46] This translation is mine.

this is the only noise he makes. He sings of his own impotence and his own demise, a fitting end

for a man who has no one to sing for him.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Beowulf is a poem that was created from multiple interweavings, both in the traditions that influenced it and the merging of those traditions within the poem, specifically in the monsters. The Patristic strand was an interweaving of Greek philosophy, Christian dogma, and Latin rhetoric. The oral-formulaic strand was an interweaving of history and scribal practice. The aesthetic strand was an interweaving of local community, values, and customs. All of these strands converge to form the unique monsters of *Beowulf.* The monsters are able to traverse time, space, and culture in a way that good cannot; they are able to anchor the three traditions so that the poet can weave around them. The interweaving of the three concerns, the Latin-Patristic, pagan, and local, is at its most cohesive in the monsters. These traditions are meant to be read together; one is not privileged above the other. The Christian tradition is not more important than the pagan or the local. It is the three of them, woven together, that is most effective. Grendel is not a Christian monster, a pagan monster, or an outlaw bent on violating a community; he is an amalgamation of all three. In order to fully understand the depth and complexity of Grendel the reader must take into account all three strands. This why people such as Margaret Goldsmith struggle in their allegorical reading of the poem; it is not meant to be read solely as such, but rather contains elements of the allegorical. Indeed, the most troublesome of the problems in an allegorical reading of the poem is Beowulf himself, not Grendel. The crux of the matter is the fact that there is much to learn from a character like Grendel. However, there is much one can

learn from Beowulf. David Williams points out that "Beowulf does not struggle with sin any more than Grendel struggles with virtue, but provides instead the measure of the virtue attained in past civilization by which historical figures can be judged and their societies understood" (18). Beowulf does not experience a moral dilemma in the monster fights; he is fighting for the good of the community, not for his own morality. Beowulf is more representative of how a community should function and how its leaders should act, not how individuals should live their daily lives.

Grendel, on the other hand, is able to speak to individuals as well as to the community. The fact that Cain is his progenitor is enough to give one ample material for drawing spiritual lessons. All of Cain's progeny share in his exile; none can be redeemed. Their depravity is so thorough that Christ is anathema to them. There is no need to try and evangelize them; it is best to stay away, to keep them outside of society so that they cannot lead others astray. Grendel is most comfortable in the dark, which is a reflection of the state of his soul. In being identified as a *þyrs*, his predilection towards excess is highlighted. The *þyrsas* were beings of immense appetite, both for food and for women. This excess is also shown in his uncontrollable temper. Grendel is a very, very angry being. He refuses to give up or temper his wrath, continually ravaging Heorot until he is physically unable to do so. Interestingly, there is a connection between Cain and anger. Tertullian provides an allegorical rendering of the idea of Eve's having been impregnated by the Devil in his *de Patientia*, further disseminating the theme of Cain's diabolical parentage: "Having been conceived of the seed of the Devil, she [Eve] immediately through the fecundity of evil gave birth to Anger, her son" (Williams 15). This association of Cain with anger continues into the late Middle Ages,

> More frequently in the later Middle Ages, domestic genre scenes, particularly well illustrated by Bosch's Prado painted table-top of the Seven Deadly Sins, show Ira as harm to one's fellow man… [In the Somme le Roi] Cain kills his brother Abel and below them Moses endeavors to break up the fight between the two Hebrews. (O'Reilly 182-83)

Grendel, as a descendant of Cain is inherently evil, according to the Christian tradition. It does seem, however, that he is better acquainted with anger than any of the other sins. The poet states that Grendel *Godes yrre* bær ("bore God's wrath", 711), the meaning being delightfully ambiguous in that it could mean Grendel was the object of God's wrath, or it could mean he was the instrument of God's wrath. It is possible that it is both; God is pouring his wrath on Grendel through exile, while at the same time, using him as his instrument to humble a proud and pagan people. There is also a small, yet tantalizing, use of the word *gryndle* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where it is clear the word means "angry" (2299, 2338). It would not be a stretch to read Grendel as an allegorical representation of anger. Given that the poet is careful to describe him in human terms as well, Grendel functions also as a warning of what unbridled sin can do in one's life. He is a very useful teaching tool, as the embodiment of monster, outsider, and communal threat.

As has been shown there are many interweavings that went into the formation of *Beowulf.* The Latin-Patristic strand was an interlacing of Greek philosophy and Christian exegesis. The ability to interpret a text in multiple ways was a tool that the Christians used to appropriate pagan literature, to make it useful so as to be worthy of reflection. The tools of rhetoric as created by the Romans were used to strengthen the Christian written tradition. The influence of this tradition on Bede insured that Anglo-Saxons would be well aware of these tools and how they applied to Scripture. The importance of history and learning from the past was also passed along by Bede, which allowed for an appreciation for the past. This was important for the second strand.

The second strand, the Oral-Formulaic tradition, was an interweaving of written and spoken language and the heroic ideal. It is this tradition that brings the modern reader closest to

the contemporary audience. The *Beowulf* poet does not offer any clues, aside from his writing style, as to what type of audience the poem was written for. When one takes the Nowell Codex as a whole, however, the way Anglo-Saxons thought about and dealt with the monstrous becomes clearer. It contains all types of monsters; those who are physically monsters, those who appear monstrous but are human, and those who act in a monstrous fashion. The interweaving of pagan and Christian traditions ensured a lively, ever-changing idea of what was and was not monstrous.

It is the aesthetic strand that completes the tripartite interweaving in its setting, plot, and characterizations. *Beowulf* is the closest of the texts in the Nowell Codex to Anglo-Saxon England as far as place and culture, so the aesthetic strand is localized in a way that it is not in the other works. The character of Grendel displays the interweaving of the traditions to greatest effect. The way the poet uses Christian and pagan monsters in describing Grendel, as well as the human, allows for reading on multiple levels, thereby ensuring the poem is both thematically complex and morally opprobrious. The importance of this cannot be overstated. The poet does a wonderful job of providing material for an allegorical interpretation of Grendel without turning him into merely an allegorical figure. All three of these traditions were necessary to the composition of *Beowulf*: the traditions complement one another, and are woven together in a way few works manage to do. The poet provides a holistic view of Grendel. *Beowulf* is a psychomachia that is context-centered, allowing the poet to draw characters that are both real and archetypal. Grendel is the definitive monster of Anglo-Saxon England, exhibiting the enormous benefits of interweaving traditions to create a fuller, more complex evil that truly reflects the mores and values of that society.

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