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THE GRENDELKIN AND THE POLITICS OF SUCCESSION AT HEOROT: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MONSTERS IN *BEOWULF*

JACEK OLESIEJKO[1]

Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

ABSTRACT

The article considers the significance of the Grendelkin as monsters, bringing to attention the Isidorian understanding of the monster as a sign, portent, and admonition. In the original *Beowulf* the Grendelkin are not described as possessing many of the inhuman qualities that have been applied to them in the later critical tradition or by its translators. Isidore acknowledges in *Etymologies* that monsters are natural beings, whose function in the system of creation is significant. The present article considers the significance of the Grendelkin in the poem and argues that Grendel and his mother function as signs underlying themes of feud and succession in the poem. The article also brings attention to the multiple references to body parts, such as hands, and their function within the poem as synecdochic representations of the Danish body politic. The article explores the sexualised and gendered perception of the body politic in the poem.

Keywords: *Beowulf*; Old English poetry; Anglo-Saxon England; monster studies; medieval literature.

1. Introduction

The Grendelkin and the dragon of *Beowulf* have been restored from the margins of the poem to its centre at least three times in the history of the poem's critical reception. First, J. R. R. Tolkien, in his famous lecture "Monsters and the Critics" delivered to the British Academy in 1936, defended Grendel and the Dragon's centrality to the poem's theme of "man at war with the hostile world" (Tolkien 1963 [1936]: 67). Grendel's mother was restored to her central place in the

[1] Department of English Literature and Literary Linguistics, Adam Mickiewicz University, al. Niepodległości 4, 61–874, Poznań, Poland, e-mail: jolesiejko@wa.amu.edu.pl.

narrative much later, as Jane Chance in her 1980 article "The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel's Mother" called attention to Tolkien's omission of Grendel's mother that resulted from his perception that the poem is "a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting" (Tolkien 1963 [1936]: 81). Both critics, however, interpreted the poem as an expression of the antagonism between the Grendelkin, the dragon, and people as well as in terms of their perception of the former as monsters. Chance claimed that "the poet wishes to stress this specific inversion of the Anglo-Saxon ideal of woman as both monstrous and masculine" (Chance 2002: 155). Later critical receptions of the poem restored the Grendelkin to their place among people. As Christine Alfano (1992) and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (1981) demonstrated,[2] translators and critics dehumanise Grendel and his mother, inventing epithets that do not exist in the Old English text. The word 'monster' is not used in *Beowulf*; the words that are translated as 'monsters' and 'demons' are the same words that describe Beowulf or Hrothgar.

The aim of the present article is to reinterpret the significance of monsters in *Beowulf* as well as contest some of the critically established perceptions of them. As Alfano and O'Brien O'Keeffe remarked, it is true that the Grendelkin's monstrosity is a result of the practices of the poem's translators, who invented their status of monsters, and the poem, in fact, stresses the humanlike qualities of Grendel and his mother. Still, the meaningful correspondences between Beowulf, the Danes, and the Grendelkin may not obscure the significance of the Grendelkin as monsters in the specifically Isidorian sense of the word. Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologies* understands monsters as signs and portents, grouping them under the heading *portenda*.

> Varro defines portents as beings that seem to have been born contrary to nature – but they are not contrary to nature, because they are created by divine will, since the nature of everything is the will of the Creator. Whence even the pagans address God sometimes as 'Nature' (Natura), sometimes as 'God.' 2. A portent is therefore not created contrary to nature, but contrary to what is known nature. Portents are also called signs, omens, and

[2] O'Brien O'Keeffe demonstrates that many translators obscure the fact that Grendel is called *rinc* or *hilderinc,* which mean 'warrior', inventing such epithets as a 'warlike creature' (O'Brien O'Keeffe 1981: 485–486). Christine Alfano took issue with prevailing practices of the poem's translators, who, as she claims, tend to dehumanise the Grendelkin (Alfano 1992: 3). For example, she says that *atolan clommum* (l. 1502) suggests a "terrible grip/grasp", the phrase instead becomes alternatively "horrible claws," terrible hooks", and "terrible claws" (Alfano 1992: 3). Dana M. Oswald also claims that "the reductive naming by critics and translators – Grendel's dam, the 'she-wolf' …, 'the brawny water-hag' and the like – functions as a kind of erasure outside the poem, making Grendel's mother into a recognisable, and therefore easier to overlook, female monster – a reproductive beast or witch" (Oswald 2010: 79).

> prodigies, because they are seen to portend and display, indicate and predict future events. 3. The term 'portent' (portentum) is said to be derived from foreshadowing (portendere), that is, from 'showing beforehand' (praeostendere). 'Signs' (ostentum), because they seem to show (ostendere) a future event. Prodigies (prodigium) are so called, because they 'speak hereafter' (porro dicere), that is, they predict the future. But omens (monstrum) derive their name from admonition (monitus), because in giving a sign they indicate (demonstrare) something, or else because they instantly show (monstrare) what may appear; and this is its proper meaning, even though it has frequently been corrupted by the improper use of writers. (*Etymologies*, 243)[3]

It is important to note that Isidore defines monsters against the classical tradition that casts them as contrary to nature. Instead, he acknowledges their significance in the system of creation and their belonging to the natural order established by God. The etymology of the word associates monstrous creations with their role to show forth as well as to be portents and warnings, the role that is suggested by the word's relation to the Latin verb *monstrare*, which literally means 'show'. Such an Isidorian perception of the Grendelkin as monsters was widespread in the Middle Ages and influenced not only *Beowulf,* but also underpinned the representations of monsters in the three other texts from the *Beowulf* manuscript. I would like to argue that the significance of the Grendelkin as portenta, a word which means monsters in Latin, projects from the poem's narrative structure, punctuated by the tension between the narrator's and the Danes' disparate perceptions of the Grendelkin.

As has often been remarked, the Danes' pagan world-view is limited regarding the nature of God, for example. Hrothgar and his Danes are equally in the dark regarding the significance of the Grendelkin, whose kinship with Cain foreshadows the problem of succession that Hrothgar's Denmark is facing. The aim of the present article is to elucidate the metonymic dimension of the poem, in which gender-charged body parts construct the imagined body politic of Hrothgar's Denmark. Grendel's body represents the anarchy residual in heroic civilisation that is ever threatened from inside and out. Grendel's monstrous body is constructed as a foreign body; correspondingly the integrity of Heorot as body politic is predicated on the fear of the other. The various tribes are imagined as bodies, masculine and feminine, positioned along an axis whose extremes, hegemonic or subordinate, are gendered. In the poem's many allusions to feuds that had happened, and will happen, in the course of Danish history reverberates distrust in the exogamic sworn obligations, established at the expense of kinship

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[3] All quotations from Isidore's *Etymologies* come from Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach & Oliver Berghof (eds.), 2006, *The etymologies of Isidore of Seville*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ties. This distrust, I argue, is echoed by the poem's enquiry into the origin of the Grendelkin. The fear of Grendel is tied to the distrust in exogamic bonds, expressed by Hrothgar's poet narrating the Finnsburh's episode, and Wealthheow, who warns Hrothgar against establishing too intimate a bond with Beowulf, a foreigner.

The poem explores the multivalency of the Grendelkin as portents. The Grendelkin stands for two contradictory courses of action, the utmost disregard for kinship ties and the ardent honouring of kinship obligations. By being part of the kin of Cain, they are associated with the legacy of fratricide that displaced Cain's progeny from human society. Grendel's mother, however, meets the demands of the ethos of vengeance as expressed by Beowulf himself, in the advice that he gives to Hrothgar that avenging one's companion is the best form of consolation: *selre bið æghwæm þæt he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne* [it is better for everyone to avenge his friend that mourn too much] (*Beowulf* ll. 1384–1385).[4]

2. Grendel's hand and Heorot's mouth

In the poem, the metonymic images of the body parts construct an idealized image of the human world in the poem. Warriors are called shoulder-companions, *eaxl-gesteallan,* and Hrothgar calls Æschere, killed by Grendel's mother, his hand; Grendel's mother is herself called Æschere's "handbona", hand-slayer (*Beowulf* l. 1323). Kings, conventionally described as *beag-gyfan*,[5] ring-givers, in Old English poetry, literally extend their hands to retainers while sharing treasure with them with a view to perpetuating the masculine economy of exchange that lies at the foundation of the *comitatus*.[6]

The present article is indebted for the idea to associate hands with the body politic to earlier studies by James L. Rosier (1963) and Stanley B. Greenfield (1989). Greenfield argues that "references to the literal physical extremities of hands, feet, and heads in *Beowulf* resonate with the concept of thaneship, a concept central to the poem's meaning" (Greenfield 1989: 55). Rosier shows that the poet associates

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4 Henceforth indicated as *Beowulf* followed by verse numbers. All quotations taken from Robert D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork & John D. Niles (eds.), 2008, *Klaeber's Beowulf*. (The fourth edition.) Toronto: University of Toronto Press. All translation from Old English to Modern English are mine.

5 In *Beowulf,* the word *beaggyfa* is used at line 1102 and refers to Hnæf, a Danish prince. Hrothgar is also called *synces brytta* [the distributor of treasure] (*Beowulf* l. 607).

6 As opposed to metaphor, which establishes relations between objects by similarity, metonymy depends on the idea of contiguity. Metonymies recurrent in Old English verse, for example, a kenning like *ring-giver*, make the idea of kingship and the idea of generosity identical and, therefore, contiguous. Hands and arms, by way of metonymy, both literally and figuratively incorporate men into the body politic, thus contributing to the flourishing of civilisation.

hands with weapons and violence (Rosier 1963: 10–11). Dana Oswald associates hands and arms with the performance of masculinity in *Beowulf* and remarks that "metonymically, the hand becomes the man" in the poem (Oswald 2010: 86). She especially concentrates on the performance of violence: "the hand becomes the man when he engages in acts of violence. The arm, then, functions as a phallus, and the contest between Beowulf and Grendel will decide whose authority, masculinity, and potency are greater (Oswald 2010: 89). She also claims that the heroic victory over Grendel places "Beowulf in the position of ultimate authority and masculinity" (Oswald 2010: 89). For Oswald, Grendel's severed arm is a phallus symbolic of Beowulf's temporary authority. Contrary to her claim, the poem uses metonymic representations of hands and arms to juxtapose different parameters of performing masculinity, not only the heroic one. Hands and arms are associated with the founding and flourishing of civilisation, while carrying the potential to disrupt the order and bring about a civilisation's demise. Grendel's performance is also an inversion of all types of masculine authority.

Many critics have remarked that the feud in the first part of the poem is between Grendel and Hrothgar.[7] The poet represents Grendel as contending with Hrothgar over the hall, usurping (and parodying) Hrothgar's position and authority as ring-giver. The defragmentation of the human world, resulting from war and feud, is a threat that comes from monsters and humans in the poem. Similarly, Grendel's violence is juxtaposed and compared to cultural practices that organise and regulate the homosocial bonds between warriors.

The episode that chronicles Hrothgar's hall-building serves to sharpen a thematic juxtaposing between his role as a generous ring-giver and Grendel's anti-identity as a death-dealer. The contrast is, arguably, highlighted by a number of synecdoches and metonymies that associate body parts like hands, palms, and arms with the action of *ring-gifu*, that is, the ceremonial ring giving that Hrothgar performs as king. Hrothgar lives up to the ideal of the ring giver who *beagas dælde, sinc æt symle* [gave rings and treasure at a feast] (*Beowulf* ll. 80–81). Grendel, however, dealt out death rather than rings:

> mynte þæt he gedælde, ærþon dæg cwome,
> atol aglæca, anra gehwylces
> lif wið lice
> before morning he [Grendel] would rip [gedælde] lives from their bodies
> and devour them.
>
> (*Beowulf* ll. 731–734)

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7 William A. Chaney claims that the poem is influenced by the pagan concept of Germanic sacral kinship and that Hrothgar's *gifstol* [throne], which Grendel does not dare approach, represents the sacred aspect of Hrothgar's kinship (Chaney 1962: 514).

The same verb *dælan* is applied to Hrothgar's ring-giving and Grendel's killing. The most significant contrast between Hrothgar as a ring-giver and Grendel as a death-dealer continues until Beowulf destroys the monster by severing his arm. Grendel's arm, which never served the social function of giving and sharing, is a metonymic illustration of his abjection from the economy of honour and exchange.[8]

The characters in *Beowulf*, as well as the poem's narrator, represent Grendel's body as sexed, gendered, and queered in a way that fits their patriarchal ideology, which is circumscribed and centred around "a particular group of men, associated with their rank, their kin, and their lords" (Lees 1994: 140).[9] Grendel defies the cultural and legal connotations of personhood as applied to the society in *Beowulf*. Having no father, he defies the patriarchal structure of Hrothgar's society (Lees 1994: 141). As Oswald notes, "the Danes are 'motherless' while Grendel is 'fatherless'" (Oswald 2010: 74). What is more, coming from the lineage established by the Old Testament's most notorious fratricide, Cain, he is associated with the greatest taboo of Anglo-Saxon culture (Oswald 2010: 75). Also, he bears no weapons; he has no attribute such as an heirloom that would inscribe him into a personal history of origin. Finally, Grendel's world is not acknowledged as a legitimate settlement, but a borderland.

Even though the pagan Danes in the poem represent Grendel as stripped of social significance, their rhetorical strategy to do so turns out to be unsuccessful, since Grendel's actions are depicted as a sexual assault on Heorot imagined as a penetrated body. In the poem emerges the tension, if not a contradiction, between the desire to represent Grendel as queer and Grendel's potential to assault Heorot in a penetrative act that detracts from the vision of Heorot as the centre of the masculine world.

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8 Grendel, arguably, shares with other monsters and men who imitate them an attitude to treasure that undermines the ideal of masculinity upheld in the poem. Cameron Hunt McNabb argues that the spaces inhabited by Grendelkin, the Dragon, and Beowulf are "treasure spaces" (McNabb 2011: 145) and cites Abram's reading of treasure in the poem as "useless treasure" that remains "uncirculated" (Abram 2010: 213). On account of its uselessness, not only does the dragon-hoard not generate 'image' and 'worth' in its solitary guardian, but also the monster may not confer 'worth' and 'image' on others, as it is not bound by either kinship or sworn obligations.

9 As Jos Bazelmans demonstrates, "the significance of wealth in Germanic society lies not in the aesthetic enjoyment of the life comforts that it yields… but rather *in the raising of the personal worth* of its giver of recipient" (Bazelmans 1999: 162). Bazelmans's important contribution was to realise that, apart from such essential attributes of personhood like mind, soul, and life, there are other constituents, which he calls 'image' or 'worth', defining human personhood in the heroic language of *Beowulf* (Bazelmans 1999: 157). 'Worth', Bazelmans claims, is an external quality that is ostentatiously represented by war accoutrements and other trappings that raise the esteem that the hero enjoys (Bazelmans 1999: 159).

> Duru sona onarn,
> fyrbendum fæst, syþðan he hire folmum æthran;
> onbræd þa bealohydig, ða he gebolgen wæs,
> recedes muþan.
>
> Soon he opened the door, fixed with bars forged with fire, just as he touched them with his hand; he swung open the mouth of the building, being *fierce* with anger.
>
> (*Beowulf* ll. 721–724)

Apart from mouth, *muþ* in Old English could indicate an opening of any kind, as in *Genesis A,* where it denotes the door in Noah's Arc (*Genesis A* l. 1364). Here, the mouth of Heorot is strongly aligned with the recurrent references to hands as instruments of violence; Grendel violates it with his *folmum* [hands] (*Beowulf* l. 722). As Ruth Mazo Karras remarks, "the line between the active and passive partner in the Middle Ages was very sharp, and closely related to gender roles. To be active was to be masculine, regardless of the gender of one's partner, and to be passive was to be feminine" (Karras 2005: 23). These associations create the unambiguous vision of the emasculation of Denmark's body politic. Grendel's body threatens Hrothgar's body politic, whose members he violently dismembers and consumes.

Beowulf's severing of Grendel's arm restores the virility of Hrothgar's body politic. The poet calls the arm *tacen sweotol* [clear sign] (*Beowulf* l. 833) and describes Beowulf's transfer of the arm as gift to Hrothgar. Once Heorot is cleansed of Grendel, Hrothgar can act according to the ideals of the heroic society and his identity of a ring-giver is restored to him. His practice of ring-giving, however, elicits mixed reactions from some characters in the poem; when it interferes with the Danish politics of succession, it is perceived as harmful by his wife Wealhtheow. Hrothgar is magnanimous with the rewards he showers on Beowulf after he defeats Grendel, not only giving him treasure, but also extending his fatherhood over him: *Nu ic, Beowulf, þec, secg betsta, me for sunu wylle freogan on ferhþe; heald forð tela niwe sibbe* [Now, I will love you in my heart as my son, Beowulf, the best of men, be mindful of your new kinship, *Beowulf* ll. 946–949].[10] However, as his nephew Hrothulf is next in line of succession,

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[10] Michael D. C. Drout claims that "the potential conflict over succession to the Danish throne after Hrothgar's death makes apparent dynamics of inheritance that are otherwise obscured by the smooth passage of power and identity from Scyld to Beowulf Scyldinga [often emended to Beow, JO] to Healfdane" (Drout 2007: 202). It is important to note that the exchange of treasure that Hrothgar maintains fits the model of kingship and succession established at the beginning of the poem, where the distribution of treasure is linked to succession. As Clare A. Lees points out, "the poem opens with the patrilineal family of the Scyldings – the ruling family of motherless Danes" (Lees 1994: 141). As the poet discusses the transfer of power between Scyld Scefing and his son Beow, he provides advice that a

followed by Hrothgar's sons, Hrethric and Hrothmund, Hrothgar's disregard for kinship ties is apparent.

Grendel in this context appears to be an admonition that the disregard for kinship ties may bring about a tragedy. It is especially important that the Danes' genealogy is contrasted with Grendel's symbolic genealogy that associates him with Cain. Grendel's association with Cain's progeny forges a link between honouring kinship ties and inheritance. It has not passed unnoticed that the difference between Grendel and the society drawn by the poet is that Grendel does not recognise money and treasure as the cultural forces that civilise men by regulating violence and preventing feuds.[11]

> sibbe ne wolde
> wið manna hwone mægenes Deniga,
> feorhbealo feorran, fea þingian,
> ne þær nænig witena wenan þorfte
> beorhtre bote to banan folmum,
>
> He did not want to make peace with the Danes after doing those wrongs, settle the conflict with money; there was no man who would hope for a more magnificent relief from the hands of the murderer.
>
> (*Beowulf* ll. 154–158)

Grendel does not pay wergild for the deaths he has caused: If arms and hands are metonyms for male bonds and, more broadly, for civilisation in *Beowulf*, Grendel's death-dealing arm is perceived as monstrous in Isidorian terms, because it is a portent of the violence that cannot be settled, such as fratricide.

> Some portents seem to have been created as indications of future events, for God sometimes wants to indicate what is to come through some defects in new-borns, and also through dreams and oracles, by which he may foreshadow and indicate future calamity for certain peoples or individuals, as is indeed proved by abundant experience.
>
> (*Etymologies*, 244)

Grendel's monstrous violence is a portent of the violence that cannot be avenged; Cain's killing of Abel foreshadows Haethcyn's accidental slaying of Herebeald and their father's death from grief. Haethcyn's murder is described as *feohleas gefeoht* [fight that cannot be settled with money] (*Beowulf* l. 2441), which alludes to Grendel's not paying wergild to the Danes.

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young prince must be generous with the wealth that he receives from his father to build an army of loyal retainers that will follow him once he becomes king. Hrothgar also created a strong comitatus of retainers before he built Heorot.

11 Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe argues that "as Grendel inhabits the hall, he negates Heorot's function as the locus of civilised life" (O'Brien O'Keeffe 1981: 491).

Grendel's association with fratricide links him to the problems of succession in Hrothgar's Denmark more directly. Some readers of *Beowulf* believe that Hrothgar's nephew Hrothulf, next in succession to the Danish throne, is to kill Hrethric, Hrothgar's son.[12] There is little explicit intratextual and extratextual evidence for such a conflict between Hrothulf and Hrothgar's sons, however.[13] Still, Hrothgar's adoption of Beowulf destabilises the political situation in which Unferth, Hrothulf, Hrethric, and Hrothmund are twice described as living in harmony by the poet.

> þa cwom Wealhþeo forð
> gan under gyldnum beage,
> sæton suhtergefæderan;
> ægwylc oðrum trywe.
> æt fotum sæt frean Scyldinga;
> þæt he hæfde mod micel,
> arfæst æt ecga gelacum.
>
> þær þa godan twegen
> þa gyt wæs hiera sib ætgædere,
> Swylce þær Unferþ þyle
> gehwylc hiora his ferhþe treowde,
> þeah þe he his magum nære
>
> Then came Wealhtheow, carrying a golden ring, to the place where the two good men, uncle and nephew [Hrothgar and Hrothulf] were sitting. At that time there was peace between them; they were faithful to one another. There was also Unferth, the speaker, sitting at Lord of Scyldings' feet. Each entrusted their lives to another; he had a generous mind, although he was not faithful to his relatives.
>
> (*Beowulf* ll. 1162–1165)

The poet complements Beowulf's limited understanding of Grendel's arm as a sign. The presence of Unferth, who is scolded by Beowulf for killing his own brothers in the past, serves as a reminder of Cain's fratricide that accounts for the Grendelkin's abjection. Hrothgar's decision is thus viewed from the poet's Christian perspective that juxtaposes contrasting examples, one of the heroic obligation to protect the rights of one's kin group, apparently endorsed by the members of Hrothgar's royal house, and the other of the most contemptible sin

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12 Klaeber claims that lines 1018, 1164, 1178, and 1228 foreshadow Hrothulf's treachery (Fulk 2008: xxxii). Joyce Hill claims that "Wealhtheow, realistically enough, offers advice to Hrothgar about his conduct as a treasure-dispensing king, about his response to Beowulf, and about the problems of succession, alluding obliquely in the process to the risks of rival claimants when primogeniture is not the exclusive hereditary principle" (Hill 1990: 238). As Gwara puts it, it is ironic that Wealhtheow teaches Hrothgar to superimpose his kinship relationship with Hrothful over the alliance with Beowulf, since it is Hrothulf, Hrothgar's nephew, that will cause the death of Hrothgar's sons, Hrothmund and Hrethric (Gwara 2008: 179). Another scholar who suggests that the conflict is foreshadowed in *Beowulf* is Frederick M. Biggs, who claims that the poet "considers a system in which a new king can be drawn from a broad kin group" (Biggs 2003: 641–642).

13 Mary Dockray-Miller also claims that the motif of Hrothulf's treachery is an invention of modern readers (Dockray-Miller 2000: 110).

of fratricide. Many critics remarked that *þa* [then] in line 1164 above is in fact ironic and the period of equilibrium between Hrothulf and Hrothgar's son will actually terminate.[14] I would say that the poem focuses on the potentiality of the disruption caused by Beowulf's promotion to the status of Hrothgar's son to the line of succession that privileges Hrothulf as Hrothgar's relative.

There is a dramatic irony between the Danes' diegetic representation of the monstrous body as insignificant and the function of the monstrous body as a portent. In the early Middle Ages, the symbolic function of the monstrous body in art and literature was to admonish. Grendel's body is an admonition not to neglect one's kinship obligation, articulated by the poet's reference to the genealogy of Grendel that goes down to the preeminent biblical fratricide by Cain. There is a contrast in *Beowulf* between different perceptions of Grendel's arms articulated by diegetic readers within the poem and the omniscient *Beowulf*-narrator. For Beowulf, the severing of an arm may be a sign of the end of the feud, but within the poem's narrative structure, the arm is actually revealed to be a portent of imminent change due to the disregard of kinship ties.

3. The danger of cross-tribal alliances

It has been remarked that Old English heroic poetry encodes a transition from the tribal stage, in which kinship ties prevailed, "to the more dynamic stage where lordship usurped kingship and set out to replace the functions of kinship with a hierarchical system of political bonds based on oaths among men" (Earl 1994: 111). However, the poem intertwines the representation of the Grendelkin as a sign with the theme of the Danish succession to emphasise the obligation to protect kinship ties at the expense of cross-tribal obligation. The corporeal imagery structures the central part of *Beowulf* that focuses on Hrothgar's adoption of Beowulf, Wealhtheow's resistance to his decision, and the Finn episode, a heroic song performed by Hrothgar's courtly poet, which has often been argued to be a warning directed at Hrothgar against forming an alliance with Beowulf.

Grendel's severed arm is called *tacen* [sign] (*Beowulf* l. 833) in *Beowulf*. Its function is to sharpen the multivalency of hand words in the poem and the underlying corporeal metaphor that imagines the society as a body.[15] The Danes

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[14] Sisam (1965: 82) disagrees that line 1164 express irony: "it can be explained as an allusion to a final breach between Hrothgar and Hrothulf. Yet nothing is known of such a quarrel: that it was about succession is a guess, not to be found in medieval sources".

[15] As Oswald notes, "Grendel's hand is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar – like Grendel, it is both human, and more than human" (Oswald 2010: 71). After the arm has been severed from Grendel's body, it continues to function (Oswald 2010: 73). "Grendel's arm is not merely a sign of victory or relief for the Danes, but rather a sign of Beowulf's inflated masculine prowess – an identity that is not wholly human, but also not solely his own" (Oswald 2010: 90). "Surely it is no accident that Beowulf mortally wounds Grendel by pulling

decorate Heorot with Grendel's dismembered arm. The episode describing the decoration of Heorot reverses the feminized vision of Heorot that emerges in the scenes of Grendel's attack on Hrothgar's hall. The hall is now *folmum gefrætwod* [decorated with hands] (*Beowulf* l. 992). The expression alludes to Grendel, who penetrated Heorot through *recedes muþan* [the mouth of the building] (*Beowulf* l. 724) with his *folmum* (*Beowulf* l. 722). Those hands belonging to the Danes are also described as *folma*, and the passage uses the synecdochic image of their hands to depict a normative performance of collective identity.[16]

James L. Rosier demonstrates that *folm* is most often used in the context of violence not only in *Beowulf* but also in other poems (Rosier 1963: 12). For Beowulf, the arm is therefore an apt symbol of his victory over Grendel. The appositive use of *folm* to describe the Danes and the reconstructed integrity of the Danish body politic revives the long-lost virility of Hrothgar's own body politic. This conviction proves false the next night, when Grendel's mother attacks Heorot in order to avenge her son's death. Before she is discovered and runs away, she kills Æschere, Hrothgar's favourite advisor. With Æschere's body, she also carries away *cuþe folme* [famous hand] (*Beowulf* l. 1303) that belongs to her son, an action symbolic of the renewal of the strife between Hrothgar and the Grendelkin.

The episode showing Grendel's mothers attack articulates the sexualised perception of Heorot as an injured and dismembered body politic. Hrothgar's own references to Æschere's role at Heorot and his killing reinforce this perception.

Sorh is geniwod	
Denigea leodum.	Dead is Æschere,
Yrmenlafes	yldra broþor,
min runwita	ond min rædbora,
eaxlgestealla,	ðonne we on orlege
hafelan weredon,	þonne hniton feþan,
eoferas cnysedan.	Swylc scolde eorl wesan,
æþeling ærgod,	swylc Æschere wæs!

Sorrow came again to the Danes. Æschere is dead, Yrmenlaf's older brother, my advisor and shoulder-companion. We wore helmets to the same battles, in which foot-troops clashed, warriors fought. Every earl should be like him, a preeminent nobleman. Such was Æschere.

(*Beowulf* ll. 1322–1329)

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off his arm at the shoulder, thus recapitulating in symbolic terms the damage the monster had inflicted upon Hrothgar's *comitatus*" (Scherb 2009: 39). "The poem presents an economy of violence in which one body part can be exchanged for another, a symbolic system in which metonymic shoulders are substituted for physical ones" (Scherb 2009: 40).

16 John R. Byers, Jr. disagrees with Rosier's interpretation of *folmum gefrætwod* and suggests that Heorot was decorated with tapestries representing the ornamental representations of hands (Byers Jr. 1965: 299).

Hrothgar calls Æschere *eaxlgesteall* 'shoulder-companion' (*Beowulf* l. 1326). As Victor I. Scherb claims, "most subtly, the *Beowulf* poet uses *eaxlgestealla* to evoke an idealised and emotionally charged *comitatus* relationship" (Scherb 2009: 34).

Another remark by Hrothgar contributes to his perception of himself and Æschere as metonymic of the organic correspondences between individual bodies that form a single body politic: *nu seo hand ligeð, se þe eow welhwylcra wilna dohte* [now the hand, which has done you so much good, is lying] (*Beowulf* ll. 1343–1344). Greenfield claims that "in this passage Hrothgar is also referring to his *own* hand, symbolising the renewed sense of impotence brought on by this latest disaster; that is, the hand that 'lies low' – is dead – is not only thane Æschere but the king's own hand, synonymous with his power and ability to avail as a king" (Greenfield 1989: 59).[17] This gendered perception of war is projected onto other feuds, narrated in proximity to the Grendelkin's narrative. Indeed, in the central part of *Beowulf* these two possible types of feud are examined.

One type is that between members of a family, as exemplified by Cain's and Unferth's fratricides.[18] The representations of the bodies of Grendel and his mother encode the Anglo-Saxon anxiety over the fragility of kinship ties. When Grendel's mother is mentioned for the first time, she is at once identified with the offspring of Cain (*Beowulf* ll. 1261–1268) The symbolic genealogy of monsters who were fathered by Cain represents giving birth to monsters as punishment for fratricide, the greatest taboo in a society which values vengeance for injuries done to family members as the most important duty. Fratricide is the greatest shame in Germanic society, as exemplified by Unferth.

Another type of feud results from a conflict between tribes, and Wealhtheow's actions are underlain by an anxiety that such a dispute may occur if Beowulf disrupts the line of succession by inheritance. The Finn episode exemplifies this type of feud.[19] The Finn episode is sung by Hrothgar's poet during the celebrations of Beowulf's victory over Grendel and is an account of a conflict between the Frisians and the Danes. Hnæf, a Danish prince, is visiting the Frisian court of Finn, who married Hnæf's sister, Hildeburh. A conflict between the in-laws breaks out, as Finn launches a surprise attack on Hnæf and his men. The five-day carnage between the Frisian and Danish forces leads to the death of Hnæf

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17 Victor I. Scherb says that Hrothgar's remark (ll. 1343–1344) "accentuates how Hrothgar's warriors were once his agents, potent extensions of his power and regal body, even while the line also acknowledges that his own aged body no longer fulfils his wishes at it once did" (Scherb 2009: 37).

18 In the second half of *Beowulf*, King Hrethel's grief caused by the death of his son at the hands of another son of his strongly alludes to the motif of fratricide from the first half.

19 Another example is Beowulf's speculations over the results of the peace-weaving between the Danes and Heathobards, articulated on his arrival in Geatland later in the poem.

as well as Hildeburh's (and Finn's) son. After the funerals of Hnæf and Hildeburh's son, an uneasy truce is made between the Frisians and the Danes. Hengest, the new leader of the Danes, and his men swear oaths of allegiance to Finn, their lord's slayer, but after a long winter passes, they kill Finn in his hall and leave Frisia for Denmark, carrying Hildeburh and looted treasure home with them. As a consequence Wealhtheow is represented as strengthening ties between Hrothgar and Hrothulf with a view to preventing a possible contention between Beowulf and the Danes from breaking out.

Like the episodes that described the Danes' conflict with Grendel, the song is replete with allusion to corporeal metaphors. What it stresses is the embodied representation of the body politic as fragmented and consumed by its members' violence. Synecdochical elements that illustrate the tragedy of Hildeburh reveal the portentous significance of the Grendelkin that the Danes fail to perceive. The mutilated bodies and severed body part are also graphically represented in the Finnsburh episode, which mirrors the dynamics of the violence performed by Grendel and men.

Ad wæs geæfned ond icge gold
ahæfen of horde. Herescyldinga
betst beadorinca wæs on bæl gearu.
æt þæm ade wæs eþgesyne
swatfah syrce, swyn ealgylden,
eofer irenheard, æþeling manig
wundum awyrded; sume on wæle crungon.
Het ða Hildeburh æt Hnæfes ade
hire selfre sunu sweoloðe befæstan,
banfatu bærnan ond on bæl don
eame [in the manuscript the word *earme* is used, JO] on eaxle.

The pyre was constructed and a hoard of gold was placed on it. The best Danish warrior was ready to be cremated. A blood-stained golden boar was visible on the pyre; many thanes, whose bodies were marred with wounds, were placed on it. They fell in the battle. Hildeburh ordered to place her son and confine his body to fire. The uncle was put next to the shoulder (of Hildeburh's son) in the fire. [in the manuscript: his arm was placed next to Hildburh's son's shoulder, JO].

(*Beowulf* ll. 1107– 1117)

Although Klaeber emended the manuscript *earme* to *eame,* Kevin Kiernan restores the manuscript's reading of *earme* (Kiernan 1984: 29). Mary Dockray-Miller follows Kiernan and claims that "the restoration of the manuscript reading reveals that both Hildeburh and the Seawolf [Grendel's mother, JO] are bereaved mothers whose sons die by having their arms torn from their bodies" (Dockray-

Miller 2000: 99).[20] It has often been argued that Hrothgar's poet selects the episode to warn Hrothgar against forming an alliance with Beowulf, who is a foreigner.[21] I would add that the graphic descrition of Hnæf and his nephew's mutilated bodies (strengthened in the manuscript with *earme* as a metonym for Hnæf) offers a sharp contrast to the peace and the integrity of Hrothgar's body politic, exemplified by the present harmony between the Danish king and his nephew Hrothulf.

The episode supports Wealhtheow's exhortation that Hrothgar should honour his kinship obligation to Hrothulf more than his alliance with Beowulf.[22] Wealhtheow's expression of hostility towards Hrothgar's alliance with Beowulf immediately follows Hrothgar's minstrel's performance of the Finn episode. She reinforces the poet's admonition, as she is trying to remind Hrothgar of his ties to his nephew Hrothulf, the future heir to the Danish throne, as well as to his own sons, Hrethric and Hrothmund.[23] She also directly addresses Beowulf himself.

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20 James L. Rosier perceives a number of connections between the formula describing Grendel's consumption of bodies at Heorot, the feast enjoyed by the battle beast and the fire of the funeral pyre in Finn's episode, and sees them as being "described in a common formula as the 'most ravenous of spirits' which swallows up the bodies" (Rosier 1963: 10).

21 Scott Gwara argues that "Wealhtheow's gift encumbers Hrothgar's plan to enthrone a foreign mercenary and highlights the conviction that her native children have more trustworthy allegiance than outside" (Gwara 2008: 148). Gwara, convinced that the poem predicts Hrothulf's killing of Hrothgar's offspring, argues that her conviction is false; as "human relations will always deteriorate and because even the sincerest pledges will fail, Hrothulf will ultimately kill his cousins, and Wealhtheow will suffer" (Gwara 2008: 148). Gwara's overall argument, as those arguments formulated by many earlier critics, stipulates that Hrothgar's scop selects the tale to fit the context of Hrothgar's adoption of Beowulf as his son and Wealhtheow's critique of his decision (Gwara 2008: 151). Gwara, however, claims that his reading elucidates the significance of the episode's focus on Hengest as "a foreign-born leader whose interests lean towards self-promotion rather than an expected good" (Gwara 2008: 178). "Hrothgar's scop compares Beowulf to Hengest, implicitly identifying Beowulf as wrecca – a trusted outsider whose sword and councel are valued even above those of native kinsmen" (Gwara 2008: 178). Mary Dockray-Miller claims that Wealhtheow views Beowulf as a threat to Hrothulf's kingship" (Dockray-Miller 2000: 111).

22 The theme of the Finn episode is that cross-tribal alliances invariably fail to settle ancient feuds and as has been noticed the song is chosen by Hrothgar's minstrel to warn Hrothgar against forming too strong an alliance with Beowulf. Scott Gwara claims that "Hunferth sees in Beowulf a threat to the warband: Beowulf's allegiance to his men extends only as far as it intersects with his ambition" (Gwara 2008: 135). The same claim is made by Mary Dockray-Miller (2000: 112).

23 Her protective maneuvers are amply described in criticism. Mary Dockray-Miller, for example, claims that the she is hostile to Beowulf and her words directed at Hrothgar and Beowulf "protect what she views as the safest course for her children – the ascension of Hrothulf" (Dockray-Miller 2000: 112). She claims the necklace she gives to Beowulf, associated by the narrator with the Brosing necklace, is cursed (Dockray-Miller 2000: 112).

Beo þu suna minum
dædum gedefe, dreamhealdende.
Her is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe,
modes milde, mandrihtne hold;
þegnas syndon geþwære, þeod ealgearo,
druncne dryhtguman doð swa ic bidde.

Be kind with deeds towards my sons, Beowulf, who now are both happy. Each earl is here mindful of the oaths to one another and faithful to their lord. The retainers are ready, drunk with ale, and they do as I bid.

(*Beowulf* 1226–1232)

Wealhtheow's address to Beowulf is conveyed in the imperative mood and also conveys threat and hostility towards the hero.[24]

4. Grendel's mother and the question of the Danish succession

Hrothgar and Beowulf never give their responses to Wealhtheow's admonition. As John Hill remarks, "Grendel's mother comes later that night, and so we lack an answer to this question the morning after" (Hill 2008: 50). The perception of the feud is again strongly sexualised, with the masculinised body of Grendel's mother and the emasculated body politic as the images of dismemberment continue to haunt the central episodes of the poem. Grendel's mother's violence against Heorot is sexualised as a penetrative act, just as when Beowulf comes to Grendel's lair to avenge Æschere's death, perceived as an assault on the Danish body politic – Grendel's mother herself is described as if she was a man.

Sona þæt onfunde se ðe floda begong
heorogifre beheold hund missera,
grim ond grædig, þæt þær gumena sum
ælwihta eard ufan cunnode.

S/he soon found out, he that had inhabited the expanse of water, fiercely ravenous, grim and avaricious, a hundred half-years, that a man from the surface of the earth had trespassed her territory.

(*Beowulf* ll. 1497–1500)

The poet tries to accommodate this by distinguishing between Grendel's mother femininity and her actions. For example, whenever Grendel's mother's maternity

[24] See Mary Dockray-Miller (2000: 112–113). She further claims that Wealhtheow casts a curse on Beowulf, endowing him with a corselet that is associated with Hygelac's death, "a necklace of doom" (Dockray-Miller 2000: 112).

is stressed, she is called *ides*, 'woman, lady' (*Beowulf* l. 1259) or 'mother' (*Beowulf* l. 1276), but she is referred to with a masculine pronoun when she fights with Beowulf.

According to Jane Chance, the poem "symbolically projects the mystery and danger of female sexuality run rampart" (Chance 1986: 4). Shari Horner claims that Grendel's mother's "environment is not a male-controlled enclosure, such as Heorot, but a fluid, bloody, feminized space that suggests as well the mysteries of the female body and the (perceived) dangers that lurk therein" (Chance 2002: 84). However, it is difficult to maintain that Grendel's mother's attack represents any aspect of female sexuality.

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.

She seized the warrior in a hostile grip. She did not injure his whole body; a ring-mail protected him and she could not penetrate the war-garment, the locked coat of mail with her hostile fingers.

(*Beowulf* ll. 1501–1505)

Her sexuality, like her performance of vengeance, is also represented as masculine, constructing it as a reversal of symbols, since her body represents agency and violence, while the heroic body politic faces her threat of its imminent emasculation. The presentation of the violence of Grendel's mother as masculine also reinforces the perception of feuds, the emasculation of the body politic, and suggests the destructive potential of male aggression. Grendel's mother's violence sustains the gender reversal articulated in the descriptions of Grendel's attacks on Heorot and maintains the emasculating vision of Heorot being penetrated by the hypermasculine violence of the enemy from the moors.

Ofsæt þa þone selegyst ond hyre seax geteah,
brad ond brunecg, wolde hire bearn wrecan,
angan eaferan. Him on eaxle læg
breostnet broden; þæt gebearh feore,
wið ord ond wið ecge ingang forstod.

> She sat on the hall-guest [Beowulf, JO] and drew her knife, broad and with bright brown edge. She wanted to avenge her son, her only offspring. But a broad mailed shirt covered his shoulder. It protected his life, preventing the point and edge from entering his body.
>
> (*Beowulf* ll. 1545–1549)

Of course, Beowulf defeats Grendel's mother, but, as Dana Oswald remarks, "Beowulf's masculine authority in battle, and particularly in this sexually charged battle, is called into question by his near-defeat by Grendel's mother" (Oswald 2010: 95). The gender reversal, however, is very subtly underpinned in the poem by Grendel's mother's care for her son and the Danes' neglect of their kinship bonds. Beowulf will defeat Grendel's mother with an heirloom that belongs to the giants; the Danish sword Hrunting, given to Beowulf by Unferth, fails him. It is appropriate then that Unferth's sword does not penetrate Grendel's mother's body:

> ða se gist onfand
> þæt se beadoleoma bitan nolde,
> aldre sceþðan, ac seo ecg geswac
> ðeodne æt þearfe
>
> the guest/Beowulf found out that the shining blade would not bite and threaten Grendel's mother's life, but the edge proved weak and failed the retainer when he was in need.
>
> (*Beowulf* ll. 1522–1525)

Being morally inferior to her, on account of his fratricide, Unferth does not possess either the appropriate strength or weapon to stand against her right, as acknowledged by the poet, to avenge her child. In contrast, fighting for the Danes with a Danish weapon, Beowulf is associated with the Danish cause. More to the point, Grendel's mother seizes his shoulder, *eaxl* (*Beowulf* l. 1547), which is strongly allusive to Æschere as Hrothgar's *eaxgeastalla* [shoulder-companion] (*Beowulf* l. 1326) and, therefore, to Beowulf's own sworn obligation to Hrothgar.

By bringing to attention Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother's care for their offspring, the poet emphasizes his perception of Hrothgar's disregard of the kinship ties. The poet also brings to the audience's attention the gap between Hrothgar's dehumanizing representation of Grendel and his mother as being abject and the poet's association of them with the kin of Cain. As Manish Sharma observes, the poet forges an association between Grendel as *mearcstapa* and the mark of Cain: "the term gemearcod in the description of Cain's mark echoes the locus to which Grendel the exile has been consigned (that is the mearc) (Sharma

2005: 266).[25] The connection between Grendel and Cain, which Hrothgar is unable to perceive from his non-Christian perspective, strengthens some dramatic irony inherent in the poem: the association of Cain with Grendel, Hrothgar's supreme enemy, and Unferth, a fratricide who remains Hrothgar's courtier and advisor, serves as a gloss on Hrothgar's neglection of his relatives' inheritance rights. This association suggests that Hrothgar's action puts the peace between Hrothulf and sons at risk and might cause a family feud in the future. The poet subsequently provides a Christian perspective from which to view Hrothgar's failing to support Hrothulf's inheritance rights.

Secondly, another way in which the monsters' significance is revealed to the audience, but not to the Danes, also pertains to their dwelling. Hrothgar locates Grendel's mere in the wilderness: *hie dygel lond warigeað, wulfhleoþu, windige næssas, frecne fengelad* [they inhabit a mysterious land, wolves' slopes and windy cliffs, a frightening treacherous passage] (*Beowulf* ll. 1357–1359). While Hrothgar describes their habitation as a wasteland, the poet describes Grendel's mere as a hall. For instance, the poet uses words that represent Grendel's dwelling as another hall in Hrothgar's Denmark. When Beowulf enters Grendel's mere, he is received by Grendel' mother as *selegyst* [hall-guest] (*Beowulf* l. 1545); the mere itself is called *nið-sele* [a war-hall] (*Beowulf* l. 1513) and *hrofsele* [a roofed hall] (*Beowulf* l. 1515). It seems that in the poem Hrothgar's mead-hall is deliberately contrasted with Grendel's mother's war-hall to emphasise the positive role that Wealhtheow plays in the protection of Hrothgar's kinship loyalties. In Hrothgar's mead-hall, the ceremony of cup-bearing, performed by Wealhtheow, ties the knots of peace between Hrothgar and Hrothulf. The humanlike quality of their dwelling is only revealed to the audience to make the correspondence between Grendel's mother and Wealhtheow's protective actions and consequently render Hrothgar's disregard for kinship obligations even more glaring.

In conclusion, the poet depicts Grendel's mother and Grendel's mere as a warning to Heorot, a warning of which the poem's heroes remain unaware due to their limited knowledge. The Grendelkin's function to provide a warning against disregarding kinship ties is made apparent again at the critical moments in the narrative, after Wealhtheow's tempering Hrothgar's desire to adopt Beowulf at the expense of his kinship obligation to Hrothulf and after Grendel's mother has avenged her son's death, which acts as a reminder of the necessity to exact vengeance for the injuries done to one's family member. The Isidorian perception of the monsters in *Beowulf* elucidates the role their play in the poem's narrative and thematic structure. The narrator's representation of Grendel and his mother

[25] Another similarity between Grendel and Cain, noticed by Andy Orchard (1995: 61), is that both are described as *fag*, meaning 'guilty' or 'marked'.

as well as their relation to the kin of Cain anchor his moral evaluation of the Danish politics within his Christian frames of reference.

Furthermore, the multiple references to body parts, such as hands, function within the poem as synecdochic representations of the Danish body politic. The poem encodes a fear that the hegemonic social body might be penetrated and dismembered by the enemy but also by the possibility of an internecine feud. The poet's standpoint is that kinship obligations take precedents over cross-tribal alliances bonds. Violence, whether human or monstrous, causes the fragmentation of society. It is not surprising therefore that the poet represents monsters dismembering and consuming human bodies as a reversed incorporation into the monstrous body.

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