

SPATIAL EFFECTS:
JUXTAPOSITIONS OF NATURE AND ARTIFICE IN *BEOWULF*

by

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ABSTRACT

Critics have extensively explored the tensions in *Beowulf* between Christianity and Paganism, literacy and orality, and heroism and kingship, yet little work has been done toward understanding another prominent binary: nature and artifice. This thesis examines instances when the *Beowulf*-poet brings images of artifice and images of nature into close proximity. Along with the introduction of literacy, new technologies and ideas were suddenly thrust into Anglo-Saxon culture, and one of the ways in which the people explored these social matters was through poetry such as *Beowulf*. The thesis first attempts to delineate the concepts of artifice and nature as they might have been viewed from an Anglo-Saxon perspective. This enables us to see how the poet utilizes these concepts to build vibrant aesthetic effects, to construct dynamic characters, and finally to bridge the conceptual divide between his current Christian audience and their Pagan ancestors. These “spatial effects” recur with enough frequency and sophistication to suggest that they stem from intentional creative decisions. Still, many Modern English translations of *Beowulf* obscure their significance or ignore them altogether. If, for instance, an image appears to waver between artifice and nature, the critical inclination has been to resolve instead of embrace the tension. Contemporary scholars and translators tend to simplify what the *Beowulf*-poet apparently wanted to complicate. The findings of this study reveal that new methodologies are needed to represent more accurately the complexity of *Beowulf* both in translation and in scholarly inquiry.

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CHAPTER I: NATURE AND ARTIFICE IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, the Venerable Bede depicts a consultation between King Edwin and an unnamed nobleman in which the latter compares

the present life of man... to that time which is unknown to us. You are sitting feasting with your ealdormen and thegns in winter time; the fire is burning on the hearth in the middle of the hall and all inside is warm, while outside the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging; and a sparrow flies swiftly through the hall. It enters in at one door and quickly flies out through the other. For the few moments it is inside, the storm and wintry tempest cannot touch it, but after the briefest moment of calm, it flits from your sight, out of the wintry storm and into it again. So this life of man appears but for a moment; what follows or indeed what went before, we know not at all. If this new doctrine brings us more certain information, it seems right that we should accept it. (trans. Colgrave and Mynors 183)

The “new doctrine,” of course, is the Christian faith, which around the time of Bede’s writing (early 8th century) was spreading rapidly across the British Isles. Bede’s strategy here is not to condemn the king’s current theological perspectives as evil or even misguided; the Pagan cosmological structures, he claims, simply lack the conceptual tools necessary to plot the trajectory of human life beyond what is visible on Earth. Christianity provides a much more stable cosmological framework for mortal human beings to consider their place in the cosmos. Still hostile, perhaps, and ever bent toward

our unmaking, the stormy chaos outside of the mead-hall is endowed with significance by Christian doctrine so that nature, as well, becomes a part of the Creator's universal construct.

Beowulf is a poem which also interrogates the nature of human existence. Unlike Bede, however, the *Beowulf*-poet seems just as transfixed by the connective tissues interweaving life, death, nature, and artifice as he is by the concepts themselves. The Anglo-Saxon poetic fabric of *Beowulf* is much more ambiguous and overlapping than the concise Latin prose of Bede so it seems almost natural that binaries like Christianity and Paganism, Literacy and Orality, Human and Monster would at certain moments within the narrative display a strange hybridity, as if the poet had purposefully conjoined two opposing concepts¹ for poetic effect. Contrasts and overlaps such as the ones listed here have received extensive critical analysis, yet one of the poem's most dynamic interrelationships has gone relatively unnoticed in all of the vast canon of *Beowulf* studies: the peculiar poetic interplay between artifice and nature.

The *Beowulf*-poet draws from a wide array of poetic techniques to craft his verse. Apposition² and alliterative flourishes lend dimension and thematic weight to prominent images, which are then woven together into ring-like structures³ and interlaced

¹ Walter Ong stresses that orality and literacy are often forced into oppositional stances by the critics who use them and that we should view orality as a positive feature "which literate cultures also have - though in a different way" (374). Composing at a time when reading and writing were not predominant in Anglo-Saxon culture, some have pondered whether or not such a proficient oral poet might have viewed literacy as a dangerous force: see Near, who argues that the "unambiguous association of writing with submersion and alienation - the suggestion that the technology of writing is part of a supernatural art practiced by those isolated from human company, by creatures such as Grendel - acknowledges the existence of literacy but simultaneously suggests that its practice is deeply suspect..." (324).

² On *Beowulf*'s use of apposition and variation, see Fred Robinson's *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*.

³ See John Niles's "Ring Composition and the Structure of *Beowulf*."

juxtapositions.⁴ A single word in *Beowulf* is capable of representing the culmination of a meticulously plotted sequence of imagery, which can then tie directly into major themes or character traits. If such a word appears out of sequence or if it is altered or misread, the resonance dissolves. Take, for instance, the sequence of imagery which represents a sword slicing through a helmet: “a sword bound and hammer-forged, its edges strong, slices through the boar on his opponent’s helm, a sword decorated with blood”⁵ (1285-87). This translation into Modern English prose captures the rudimentary essence of the overall image, but the Old English verse is much more complicated in that the operative verb “scireð” does not appear until after the entire sequence of nouns and adjectives has run its course. Conveying the chaos and confusion of battle, the poet presents a procession of objects without any logic or coherence; even the helmet is first represented through the image of a “swin” (“boar”) before it is clearly identified as a helmet. Ironically, the collage is unified by a word which means “to slice through,” signifying the swiftness with which a sword can end a man’s life.⁶

Alongside the poetic techniques listed above, the *Beowulf*-poet also utilizes a pattern of juxtaposition between artifice and nature, blending the two together in a dynamic interplay which reconstructs more than it represents reality. The boar-helm sequence features intensely intertwined images of artifice with images of nature so that its poetic form disturbingly resembles the action which it represents. A blade is not

⁴ John Leyerle compares the images in *Beowulf* to Anglo-Saxon art in “The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*.”

⁵ “þonne heoru bunden, hamere geþ[ru]en, / sweord swate fah swin ofer helme / ecgum dyhtig andweard scireð” (1285-87).

⁶ Furthermore, “scireð” does not alliterate with any other word in line 1287. This is not metrically anomalous, but it does seem to make the verb stand out more relative to the nouns, most of which do alliterate.

simply a blade – “bound and hammer-forged, its edges strong” the sword hearkens back to the fires of its creation as it falls upon its target. Conversely, blood is not simply blood – it is “swate”⁷ which bears close alliterative ties to the “swin ofer helme.” If the verb “scireð” had been placed immediately after “swin,” the sequence would resolve itself into a sword drenched with the blood of a boar. Furthermore, the “swate” decorates or adorns the blade, twisting a bestial act of violence into a heroic symbol of success in battle. The swift and terrifying interplay⁸ challenges the audience to keep up and make the correct associative ties before the fatal blow “scireð” through the helm. It is almost as if the poet places his audience in the perspective of a combatant in the thick of battle, where quick thinking and acute perception can mean the difference between life and death.

There are many instances in *Beowulf* wherein the poet challenges his audience to juggle opposing concepts and resolve them into a coherent whole. Artifice and nature provide one such dynamic dichotomy which lends a vitality and an immediacy to the verse. This can be most clearly perceived in the poet’s depiction of an object’s swift motion through space, as in the door which bursts off its hinges when Grendel enters Heorot: “The door, fast in its fire-forged bands, suddenly gave way when he touched it with his hands; hate-minded and swollen with anger, he swung open the mouth of the hall”⁹ (721-24). The Old English verb for “gave way” (“irnan”) has a curious definition.

⁷ “swate” can also be translated as “sweat, perspiration” (Bosworth-Toller). After the battle with Grendel’s mother, the poet plays on this dual meaning with the phrase “the sword was sweaty” (“sweord wæs swatig” 1569).

⁸ This sequence plays a major role in the characterization of Grendel’s mother, who is herself swift and terrifying. See more in Chapter 3.

⁹ “Duru sona onarn / fyrbendum fæst, sybpan he hire folmum (æt)hran; / onbræd þa bealohydig, þa (he ge)bolgen wæs, / recedes mupan” (721-24).

When describing persons or animals, Bosworth-Toller suggests that it means “to run” or “to move quickly,” but “irnan” can also be applied to inanimate objects like Heorot’s door, in which case it would mean “to move rapidly through space.” As with the boar-helm, the poet’s representation of the door makes it difficult to tell exactly what it is at the precise moment of its destruction. Is it recoiling instinctually from the monster’s touch? Or is it simply flying through space? The effect does not create the illusion that an audience can see these events happening so much as it conveys an array of feelings, emotions, and physical distortions which leave the audience with the task of recreating the full sequence of events.

Similar in kind to the alliterative “sound effects” of Anglo-Saxon poetry,¹⁰ these instances wherein the *Beowulf*-poet intertwines artifice and nature might fittingly be called “spatial effects.” As with the former, the poet uses spatial effects in a variety of ways and in a variety of contexts. Superficially, they serve to emphasize to an audience that what the poet is depicting in some way exceeds the normal boundaries of human thought and perception. The poet also uses spatial effects as a means of characterization, especially for the monsters, but also for some of the human characters. Grendel, his mother, and the dragon are depicted as creatures which have peculiar relationships with nature and artifice; sometimes they wield weapons, sometimes they appear as weapons, other times weapons take on strange naturalistic qualities in their presence. The spatial

¹⁰ Andy Orchard argues that “Wordplay and localised sound-effects are the *Beowulf*-poet’s stock-in-trade, and again emphasize the extent to which the poem is essentially aural in nature, and deserves to be heard” (*Critical Companion* 76). Later, he analyzes a passage (lines 2569-70) from the text which “builds on the same restricted series of sounds (*b*, *s*, and *sc* [pronounced ‘sh’]), brilliantly brought together in the chilling description of the rushing serpent” (236).

effects used to characterize the monsters draw upon many of the poem's most prominent thematic threads and are thus vital to the operation of the poem, as a whole. Another fruitful opportunity to analyze the significance of spatial effects is when the poet filters them through the actual speech of his characters. This allows us to see the poet's creation of other poets, giving us a way to assess their ability to manipulate the world around them not only through physical strength, but also through wordplay. Finally, the most intriguing potential for the analysis of spatial effects lies in their ability to reveal what the poet thought about his own work. Just as he uses these poetic couplings to test the limits of the physical through monstrous movements and spaces, so too does the poet use spatial effects to explore the very limits of poetry.

The way in which *Beowulf* utilizes images of artifice and nature interrogates the boundaries of material reality, as well. What is familiar to an audience suddenly takes on a shape or bearing that is unfamiliar or difficult to envision. Bill Brown might equate these representations to the "amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the (ap)perceiving subject" (5). The sword slicing through the helm and Heorot's ambiguous door provide two examples of this poetic interplay, forcing the audience to question and, in a sense, imaginatively reconstruct commonplace notions and concepts. For Brown, these amorphous images strive neither for epistemological nor phenomenological truth, "but the truth about what force things or the question of things might have in each society" (9). In this sense, spatial effects question the fabric of reality not by asking what artifice is or what nature is, but by representing them as if a distinction between the two has not yet been made. Such a "material complication" (7) mirrors *Beowulf's* more conceptual complications, informing the tensions between Christianity and Paganism,

Literacy and Orality, Human and Monster, etc. Harry Berger perceives another source of tension in the poem: “whereas the characters focus on ethical behavior – ideal heroic consciousness – as the key to order, the poem and the poet direct our attention to fundamental conditions of social structure that operate beneath or beyond consciousness and that constrain heroic behavior in ways not discernible by the characters” (326). The way in which a character perceives the significance of swords and other objects is not necessarily the way in which the poet intends for his audience to perceive them. While the character is caught in the action of the moment, we stand at enough of a remove so that we are able to place the moment into a larger context. In other words, the audience is implicated in the act of creation as much as the poet. Together they reconstruct an ancient Pagan past so that it fits within the context of a Christian present.

Metal, Architecture, and Works of Artifice in the Anglo-Saxon World

Before delving into specific instances wherein the poet utilizes spatial effects, it will be useful to establish some sense of what objects, spaces, and atmospheres may have been classified as either artifice or nature by an Anglo-Saxon audience. Although wood-working was likely more prominent than iron-working from around 500-1100 CE, remnants of iron and metal-craft provide the most stable artifacts upon which we can gain a sense of what an Anglo-Saxon material reality was like. David M. Wilson notes that the wood-working technique of “chip-carving” was also apparently used to craft metal ornaments (“Introduction” 9). Appropriating unique skills and techniques to manipulate a wide array of materials speaks to the remarkable adaptability of Anglo-Saxon artisans,

and it is clear from *Beowulf* that the poet recognizes the craft of the smith.¹¹ The specific techniques which Anglo-Saxon smiths utilized as well as the mining methods used to extract iron and other ores in England are less than clear, yet it is evident that mining occurred and that there were enough deposits around to support an industry. Non-ferrous metals were used primarily for ornamentation and currency (Bayley), but iron seems to have been the most prolific material mined and worked from the 5th century on into the 10th. The demand for metalwork and the degree to which it was practiced depended largely upon local rather than societal needs (McDonnell), and the local needs of the characters in the poem are dictated largely by warfare. Hrothgar orders Heorot to be built after “war-success was given to him” (“heresped gyfen” 64), suggesting that he obtained the means to build “the greatest of hall-buildings” (“healærna mæst” 78) through violent conquest.

Aside from jewelry and decorative objects, the most common artifacts recovered from archaeological sites are spears, swords, and other weapons, suggesting that there were many such local needs that revolved largely around civil defense and warfare (Wilson “Introduction”). The necessity for means of defense against Viking raids and other hostilities established the blacksmith as “a ubiquitous member of society; no community could do without him and presumably only the most skilled achieved any real fame” (“Craft” 263). Any reference to blacksmiths in *Beowulf*, then, draws connections not only between the producers and wielders of war-gear, but also between the

¹¹ References include images of the “wæpna smiþ” (“weapon-smith” 1452), “smiþes orþancum” (“skill of the smith” 406), “Welandes geweorc” (“work of Weland” 455), “wundorsmiþa geweorc” (“work of wonder-smiths” 1681), etc.

community at large and the means of its own preservation. If the blacksmith is accorded a special place in Anglo-Saxon society, then the more specialized weapon-smith is likely held in even higher esteem: “Weapon-smiths were presumably the aristocrats of blacksmiths” (“Craft” 264). Crafting swords, shields, and spear-heads was not a task to be taken lightly. Failure to construct a reliable and effective weapon might not only mean the death of the warrior who wields it, but also the eventual destruction of an entire community.

The most common practice by which sword-smiths crafted their weapons is through a process called pattern-welding. Wilson provides a detailed description of the technique:

To a flat iron strip (the centre of the blade) are welded two steel edges, leaving a channel on either face of the sword. Two separate strips – one for each face – are then inlaid in this channel. The strips are made in the following fashion. An iron rod is carburized, piled and drawn down, the process being repeated until there is a laminated rod of iron and steel (the layers of steel being formed by the fusion of the case-hardened surface of the original bars). The bars thus formed are then folded or twisted together and beaten to form the convex-faced central element (fuller) of each face of the weapon. The blade of the sword is then polished. The differing bands of iron and steel from the pattern-welded centre of the blade then appear as light and dark bands which could be emphasized by etching or rust. (“Craft” 265-66)

We see this pattern-welded design represented in the text through kennings such as “wyrmfah” (“wurm-patterned”), which metaphorically associates the interwoven light and dark bands on the blade with a dragon or serpent. This attendant effect of a pattern-welded blade might also lead a hilt which is adorned to match. William Cooke argues that we see this sort of metalwork depicted in *Beowulf* upon the giant-sword hilt (“Three Notes” 303). As one of the poem’s overarching metaphorical couplings, the “wyrmfah” blade resonates with descriptions of Beowulf’s final foe. As Andy Orchard notes, this resonance makes the dragon “an almost human protagonist” (*Critical Companion* 236), but it also lends a monstrous edge to the sword.¹²

Wooden buildings were far more common in Anglo-Saxon society than the stone churches, monasteries, and other such structures whose ruins have survived through the centuries. Recent archaeological finds support a “general conclusion that most north European migration period settlements consisted of one or more large halls... each with appropriate ancillary buildings” (Addyman 274). Many of the earliest settlements comprised mainly of sunken timber huts appear to have been structured around pre-existing urban layouts left by Roman settlers (276). The exact reasons for this sort of overlap are not apparently clear, leading Catherine Hills to argue that “It has never been established on a statistical basis that, given the frequency of Roman and Anglo-Saxon sites and the distribution of other factors such as rivers, forest, good or bad farming land and so on, the agreement between Anglo-Saxon and Roman is really more than

¹² Orchard also notes how “The poet’s choice of the term ‘battle-flames’ (*hildeleoman*, line 2583a) here is exquisite; elsewhere it and related terms are common kennings for ‘sword’ (as at line 1143b)” (*Critical Companion* 236). For more on the dragon’s association with the sword, see Chapter 3.

coincidental” (“The Archaeology” 311). Even though paved Roman roads and stone structures must have exerted considerable influence on both where and how Anglo-Saxons constructed their own buildings, craftsman and architects in the region developed their own style, as well. Addyman describes a series of Middle Saxon hall designs as displaying “considerable architectural sophistication,” with buildings “set out... with an exact understanding of proportion” (284). These massive timbered halls recall descriptions in *Beowulf* of Heorot as “that timbered hall, richly formed and gold adorned... the foremost building among men under the heavens”¹³ (307-10).

Architecture shares an intriguing parallel with the earliest Anglo-Saxon written language, which is itself shaped by a close interrelationship with wood-carving. The oldest writing system of the Germanic peoples was the wood-carved 24-character runic “futhark” (Moltke 23). Early runes first appear only on “movable objects,” but Norway and Sweden’s massive rune stones broke this trend around AD 300-400 (27). The abilities to write or even to read runes were likely not common. Erik Moltke provides a comparison between the “normal Anglo-Frisian futhork” and a picture of the “so-called Thames *scramasax* (a one-edged sword),” noting how the irregularities in the engraving of the photographed artifact “can be explained by the fact that metal-workers were usually illiterate” (27). The earliest scop who recited the stories of *Beowulf*, Hrothgar, and other Germanic heroes might also have been unable to interpret runes, but the great profusion of runic writing in the period suggests that they were at least aware of the phenomenon of literacy. The issue arises in *Beowulf* most clearly in the scene wherein

¹³ “[s]æl timbred / geatolic ond goldfah... / þæt wæs foremærost foldbuendum / receda under roderum” (307-10).

Hrothgar examines the giant-sword hilt which Beowulf brings up from Grendel's mere. While it is unclear whether this biblical tale recounted upon the hilt is marked in runes or depicted through some other sort of pictorial language, the name of the sword's original owner, at least, is said to be marked upon the hilt in "rune-staves" ("runstafas" 1695). Is Hrothgar actually "reading" what is "written" ("writen" 1688)? Or is he simply reacting to it as a wondrous work of artifice? Moltke suggests that "People who had not mastered the art of writing must have credited it with a more than natural potency when it enabled human beings to communicate without being in each other's company, perhaps indeed hundreds of miles apart" (77). Maybe this is why Hrothgar seems to linger so thoughtfully over the sword-hilt, which not only sends a message across an immense distance, but also a lengthy stretch of time.

Useful as a way for tradesmen to mark their wares and to send secret messages, runic inscription evolved and survived well into the Middle Ages, but a new form of literacy began to take precedence in Anglo-Saxon culture as Roman and Celtic missionaries gained a firmer foothold in England. Writing exerted a considerable cultural influence quite quickly with scholars such as Bede and Aldhelm translating Latin works into Old English and vice versa. Viking invasions and a growing desire for cultural identity led King Alfred the Great (871-899) to gather together a diverse team of scholars who would institute a "programme for the revival of book-learning (and thereby spiritual renewal) [which] included a policy of translation into Old English of works of particular relevance to the situation" (M. Brown 15). Like the excerpt from Bede quoted earlier in this chapter, almost all of the Anglo-Saxon literature of the time served some sort of ecclesiastical purpose. More secular representations of Anglo-Saxon oral traditions such

as *The Wanderer*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *Beowulf* were likely preserved¹⁴ due to a “10th-century trend towards the production of anthologies” (34). In the alliterative verse of *Beowulf*, we can perceive an Anglo-Saxon material reality which is not immediately graspable in the 21st century. It is certainly not a mimetic representation of what that reality was like, nor does the Pagan Danish setting necessarily have any direct bearing upon the Christian Anglo-Saxon audience of *Beowulf*. The poem manipulates these objects and environments as much as it depicts them, encouraging its audience to re-examine concepts like swords, mead-hall doors, and the smiths and craftsmen which bring them into being.

The Natural World of Anglo-Saxon England

Though it is as ever-changing as it was during the time of *Beowulf's* composition, poetic representations of the natural world are more immediately graspable to 21st century audiences than the artificial constructs. When the poet describes the sea our imaginations are furnished well enough with memories if not of the sea itself, then of photographic images, film sequences, or audio recordings. Caves, forests, and fen-paths similarly do not require significant imaginative strain to envision, although words which may appear to be synonymous might actually carry specific connotations that are obscured by modern glossaries. Margaret Gelling provides analyses of three such Old English landscape words (*hlið*, *hop*, and *gelad*) whose usage in place-names suggest a

¹⁴ The process of book-making itself might have appealed to the poet's sensitivity to the interplay of artifice and nature: “The sheets of parchment or vellum (the former technically sheep or goatskin and the latter calf, with parchment the better generic term) would be defleshed in a bath of alum and lime, stretched, scraped, perhaps whitened, trimmed, pricked and ruled, adorned with script and decoration and arranged in gatherings (quires), unless they were single sheet documents, and then bound into the book or codex form” (Brown 46).

much more specialized meaning than most glossaries and translations provide. For example, Gelling finds that “hlið” (defined by Klaeber as “cliff, hill-side, hill”) is commonly employed in place-names to refer to a “hill with a concavity, either in one side or at the foot” (8). This specialized usage might convey a much more sinister sense of a dangerous landscape feature - one which could easily hide monstrous predators like Grendel. While the current topography of England offers a much more stable referent than the artificial relics (we can look at the window and see a “hlið”), we still face the intricate challenge of understanding *how* Anglo-Saxons saw these things. For this, we turn not only to poetic works, but also to prose and legal texts which make use of descriptions of nature.

Land charters provide some of the most detailed descriptions of natural landscapes in all of Anglo-Saxon literature. The following is dated at A.D. 824 and details the transfer of ownership from a man named Ealdberht to an archbishop named Wulfred:

Bounds of Godmersham. First from the ash-tree north to stættingc ford. Thence north by the river [i.e., the Stour] to Dreama’s enclosure to the fish pool. Then due east to the south of broad wood, so by the south of pur wood, by pit wood to corner combe to that muddy pool. From the muddy pool to the old street. Then to the middle of stone pond, thence straight to the king’s lime-heap, from the heap down over high wood [or ‘clearing’]. Along meal way to the high ash-tree by the north of wol-tun. So to bishop’s thorn-tree, thence west through south tun to the middle of the

hurst. Then south up by the river to the north of board-valley. Thence to the deep pond, from the [pond] to the middle of hearcincg pond. Then to Soakham, so to the fern enclosure, so to the ash-tree.¹⁵ (trans. by Sawyer)

Notice that there are no numerical markers of distance mentioned here by Ealdberht. The author uses only cardinal directions, relative positions, and landmarks to sketch a map of his entire property. Nicholas Howe argues that Anglo-Saxons tended to “use writing rather than drawing to create maps of the known world and beyond” (4). Once named and written, an object in the physical world such as “bishop’s thorn-tree” becomes a substantive marker of territory. Presumably, a reader of the charter does not need to know the exact distance from “bishop’s thorn-tree” to “the middle of the hurst” because the nature and position of these objects is non-negotiable. One wonders what sort of confusion might have arisen if someone were to dig up “bishop’s thorn-tree” and re-plant it a few miles to the east; in such a case, it might have been a wise consideration for Ealdberht to list landmarks which would require a good deal of effort to relocate.

Contrary to the land charters, whose writers use images of nature to delineate property boundaries, Anglo-Saxon poetry tends to use nature imagery to construct spaces

¹⁵ “Hæc sunt territoria terre . octo aratrorum in Godmæres ham quam dedit Beorhtulf rex Merciorum Uulfrædo archiepiscopo . Ærest fram æsce norð to stættincgforda . ðanon norð be ea to Dreaman uuyrðe on fisc pol . ðanon east rihte be suðeuueardan bradan lea . swa be suðan Pur wuda . be pytlea to Uuincelcumbe on ðæt sol . of ðan sole on ða ealdan strete . ðanon on middan stan mere . ðanon on gerihte on cyncges lim fine . of ðære fine niðer ofer hean leah andlang mele uueges on ðone hean æsc be norðan wol tune . swa on bisceopesðorn . ðanon west ðurh suð tun on middan hyrst . ðanon suð up be ea on norðan bord dæne . ðanon on neolan mere . of ðam on middan hearcincg mere . ðanon on Sacecumb . swa on fearn edisc . swa to æsce.” (Sawyer)

that express deeply felt human emotional and psychological states. Howe observes this phenomenon in *The Wife's Lament*:

There is... a kind of cultural familiarity with boundary clauses underlying the poem's description of place, or at least a shared sense that a landscape with demarcating features is not entirely distinct from the human. Indeed, that is the predicament of the Woman in *The Wife's Lament*: to be somewhere between the legally demarcated landscape of a charter and the untraceable outlines of a natural world beyond human interpretation. Or, to return to the poet's use of variation, her *eorþsele* must be an *eorþscraef*, her hall must be a cave. (67)

Similar imagery is used by the *Beowulf*-poet in relation to Grendel's mother who, like her son, dwells in a mere "over which hang frost-covered groves, wood rooted strong overhanging the water"¹⁶ (1363-64). Whereas the Woman in *The Wife's Lament* is portrayed in a sympathetic human light, Grendel's mother is made all the more threatening and inhuman by her association with natural forces. The fact that similar nature imagery can be used to incite empathy in one poem and alienation in another speaks to the remarkable plasticity of nature imagery in Anglo-Saxon poetry – a plasticity that stands in stark contrast to the more concrete utilitarian usage in land charters.

One particular image, however, stands out for its stability in Anglo-Saxon poetry: the sea. Inhabiting an island whose landscape is fairly consistent in comparison to other larger regions, the Anglo-Saxon poets turned to the sea as "the setting to depict the

¹⁶ "ofer þæm hongiað hrinde bearwas, / wudu wyrtrum fæst wæter oferhelmað" (1363-64)

absence of a sense of lived or immediate place to call home” (Howe 72). Bereft of structure either human or natural, the open ocean provides no stable imagery with which to evoke memories of home. The sea in poems like *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* seems to overwhelm the humans undulating precariously upon its glassy surface, resulting in a “correspondence [which] depends upon the poem having been set in a seascape rather than in a landscape, in a place where human habitation cannot appear either as reality or even as possibility but only as a fleeting image of... desire” (70). Such desire appears beautifully punctuated by juxtaposed images of artifice and nature in *The Wanderer*:

He thinks in his mind that he embraces and kisses his lord, and upon his
knee lays his hand and head, just as times before in yore-days while in the
presence of the gift-throne. Then awakens the friendless man again, sees
before him the yellow waves, the sea-fowls bathing, broadening their
feathers; hoar-frost and snow fall, mixed with hail.¹⁷ (41-48)

Here, the human imagination becomes so entangled within memories of societal customs and works of artifice that the thoughts, themselves, become a sort of artificial buttress against the hostilities of the natural world. In the end, of course, they cannot hold against the immensity of the sea, whose oppressive physicality replaces “embraces and kisses”

¹⁷ “Þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten / clyppe and cysse, ond on cneo lecge / honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær / in geardagum giefstolas breac. / Ðonne eonwæcneð eft wineleas guma, / gesihð him biforan fealwe wegas, / bapian brimfulgas, brædan feþra, / hreosan hrim ond snaw, hagle gemenged” (41-48).

with “yellow waves” and the unwavering “gift-throne” with ever-falling “hoar-frost and snow.”

Nature imagery also holds great cosmological significance for the *Beowulf*-poet and his Christian audience. In the song of Creation which so greatly angers Grendel, the scop sings of the natural objects with which “the Almighty” (“Ælmihtiga” 92) constructs the earth: “the bright-faced plain surrounded by waters, and the Almighty set victoriously the sun and the moon to shine their light for all land-dwellers”¹⁸ (93-95). These couplings are the foundations of Creation. Plains, waters, sun, and moon mean nothing as separate entities until they are wrought together into the ultimate work of divine artifice. Like any good piece of artifice, the Earth is also richly ornamented: “and the Almighty adorned the corners of the earth with limbs and leaves, and created life also, all kinds which move and flourish”¹⁹ (96-98). Christopher Manes argues that a common emendation of line 92 of the manuscript (from “worh” to “worh[te]”) obscures the idea that God’s creative acts were all for the sake of humankind, which he renders as the compound “*eorðan-worh*... the substance or cause of the earth” (2). Even as they operate as grim reminders of humankind’s relative powerlessness in the fallen world, natural forces still represent the constituent parts of a divine Creation which came to fruition because of human beings. This sentiment echoes Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, elevating God as the ultimate Creator and enabling humans to better conceptualize nature within a stable cosmological

¹⁸ “wlitebeorhtne wang, swa wæter bebugeð, / gesette sigehrepig sunnan ond monan / leoman to leohte landbuendum” (93-95).

¹⁹ “ond gefrætwaðe foldan sceatas / leomum ond leafum, lif eac gesceop / cynna gehwylcum þara ðe cwice hwyrfaþ” (96-98).

framework. Nature images in Anglo-Saxon poetry represent a search for identity – both for the individual and for the culture at large.

Riddles of the Exeter Book: Forging a Cultural Identity

The dream of the Wanderer momentarily distracts him from the harsh realities of the natural world. Acting as a fleeting work of artifice, the lordless man's thoughts shelter him for as brief a time as they shelter Bede's swift sparrow. Yet nowhere is thought more concisely conceived as a work of artifice than in the Riddles of the Exeter Book. Many of the Riddles have definite answers whose names are not difficult to grasp, though they may still be quite impossible to envision. Commenting on Riddle 71 "Sword," Phyllis Portnoy observes how the answer is associated with such a complex network of variegated objects that "the subject's identity, while perhaps simple to discover, is indeed complex to contemplate" (560). Fred Robinson similarly observes how a series of "puns make [the 'Book-Moth' Riddle] self-referential in a complex and sophisticated way" ("Artful Ambiguities" 104). Relatively short and self-contained, the Riddles offer brief snapshots of familiar objects and events suddenly transforming into things which are unfamiliar.

"Book-Moth" chooses human literacy and brute nature as its primary conflict, but other Riddles similarly interrogate the blurry line between nature and artifice. Some, like the infamous Riddle 44 "Key," explore this boundary through humor and innuendo: "Wondrous it hangs by the thigh of a man, under the cloak of the master. In front is a hole. It is stiff and hard, it has a good place; when a man raises up his own garment over the knee, he intends surely to touch that hole with the head of his hanging implement of

similar length[, that hole] which he often filled before”²⁰ (Krapp and Dobbie 204-05).

While racy humor is certainly the author’s primary intention with this riddle, the dynamism produced by the interplay between an artificial implement and an organic sexual organ calls the nature of both into question. The choice of the word “hangellān” in particular draws attention not only to form, but also to function. Clark-Hall proposes the very specific definition of “pendulum” for line 6’s “hangellān,” but in this case the more general “implement that hangs” offered by Bosworth and Toller would seem a better fit. The image of a timekeeping device could add intensity to the man’s desire “to greet/touch” the “hol,” but the introduction of such specific imagery at this point muddles the overriding juxtaposition. Whatever the object is that is hanging next to the man’s thigh, its intended function as an “implement” is penetrative and tactile – created with the desire not simply to open something, but more so to exert a seemingly masculine desire upon something. There is also the sense of repetition with the phrase “which he often filled before” (“pæt he efenlang ær oft gefylde”), suggesting a sort of cold mechanism to the man’s action. Through these various associations, the author calls both the desire to open things and the desire to make love into question. Is the act of lovemaking cold, mechanical? Is the action of opening a lock warm, organic?

Relatively compact and illustrative of Anglo-Saxon poetic form, the Riddles exemplify how the interplay between artifice and nature can elevate familiar images and actions into the realm of the extraordinary. Spatial effects in *Beowulf* often involve

²⁰ Wrætlic hongap bi weres þeo, / frean under sceate. Foran is pyrel. / Biþ stip ond heard, stede hafap godne; / þonne se esne his agen hrægl / ofer cneo hefeþ, wile pæt cupe hol / mid his hangellān heafde gretan / pæt he efenlang ær oft gefylde. (Krapp and Dobbie 204-05)

swords, so one of the riddles which most closely approximates what we see in the longer works is Riddle 71 “Sword”: “I am the possession of a powerful man, clothed in red, stiff and steep-jawed. My place was once with beautiful plants; now I am the remnant of wrath, of fire and file, firmly constrained, made worthy by wires. He weeps sometimes because of my grip, he that carries gold, when I must destroy [...], / adorned with rings. [...] / [...]. My lord [.. /] amend the appearance”²¹ (Krapp and Dobbie 232). Even though parts of the last few lines in the manuscript are illegible, enough of the riddle survives to preserve the potency of the central enigma. The most apparent difference between this riddle and “Key” is that the speaker is the subject: “I am the possession of a powerful [man].” From the speaker’s perspective, coats of blood are perceived as clothing. The smith’s expert handiwork also endows the sword with a strong countenance, “stiff and steep-jawed.” The artificial speaker also appears to be aware of its natural origins “with beautiful plants” and the means of its creation by “fire and file, firmly constrained.” Not only does this sword know what it is, but it knows where it came from and where it is ultimately fated to go “when I must destroy.” As Portnoy notes, the answer to the riddle is never really in doubt, which suggests that the “poet is not merely asking the reader to guess the subject’s identity... rather, he is showing off his verbal skills” (559). Thematically, though, the poet is implicating multiple parties in an undepicted act of destruction. The smith hard at work at his forge might not be able to fully appreciate the significance of his work; using the sword as the speaker allows the

²¹ Ic eom rices æht, reade bewæfed. / stið ond steapwong. Stapol wæs iu þa / wyrta wlitetorhtra; nu eom wrapra laf, / fyres ond feole, fæste genearwad, / wire geweorpad. Wepeð hwilum / for minum gripe se þe gold wigeð, / þonne ic ypan sceal [.....]fe, / hringum gehyrsted. Me [.]i[... / ...]go[.] dryhtne min [... /]wlite bete

poet effectively to trace an act of violence all the way back to its origins, placing responsibility for the action as much on the shoulders of the sword-smith as on the soldier.

Portnoy argues that discovering the identity of a riddle's subject is less important for an Anglo-Saxon audience than contemplating the myriad associations which the poet uses to forge that identity (560). These poems do not demand that the audience "Say what I am called" – instead, they challenge us to think creatively on the nature of creation itself. Objects such as arms and armor serve in *Beowulf* as distinctive markers of identity, not just for the characters but also for the audience. Clark sees symbolism in the hero's armor as part of an intricate dichotomy between order and violence, noting how Beowulf is defined and identified most often by his armor ("Beowulf's Armor" 420). He then argues that the armor connects the hero to the hopes and fears of the Anglo-Saxon audience: "In death as in life, Beowulf invades the realm of chaos, the lair of monsters, and momentarily extends the limits of human power symbolized by arms and armor" (430). In calling attention to the arms and armor which the hero bears into battle, the poet represents Beowulf as the vanguard of human craft and ingenuity. He is our representative, and, he speaks for us not only with words but with swords forged by the "aristocrats of blacksmiths" in order to protect the aristocrats as well as every member of Anglo-Saxon society.

The more than 3000 lines which compose *Beowulf* are not a riddle, though they do function very much like the enigmas preserved in the Exeter book. Objects are almost always concrete, familiar things which the poet's audience could encounter in their

everyday lives. Swords, armor, trees, and seas: they are all tangible, all common pieces of the world. But in poetry, the boundaries between concepts like artifice and nature begin to blur. Suddenly, a sword (“secg”) becomes a man (“secg”); a helmet (“helm”) becomes a lord (“helm [Scyldinga]”); a word (“word”) becomes a deed (“weorc”). Sometimes the imagery produced is frightening, shaking our preconceived notions of reality. Other times we can identify a motive behind the poetic coupling – a human motive driven by emotions and intentions that are familiar even when filtered through monstrous minds. Ultimately, this poetic fusion of artifice and nature tugs upon the fabric of the poetry itself, exerting a force which seems impossible to comprehend, let alone translate.

The following chapters work toward a clearer understanding of *Beowulf*’s visual aesthetic. Spatial effects complicate the material reality of the poet’s audience by fusing disparate elements into images and events which give rise to “questions... not about things themselves but about the subject-object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts” (B. Brown 7). What is a boar-helm when it fails to protect its wearer from a vicious sword-strike? What is a door when it no longer stands “fast in its fire-forged bands?” These particular contexts operate in a manner similar to the Riddles of the Exeter Book, contorting and confusing objects so that the audience is left confused themselves, but also exhilarated. When old objects become new things, new ways of seeing the world and our place in it are required. Unlike the Riddles, though, the spatial effects in *Beowulf* lead inexorably into other contexts, both particular and multifaceted. Many different riddles contradict, support, and contend with one another in the fabric of the poem. This polyphony of enigmas forces the audience to inhabit the more than 3000 lines of the poem for much longer periods of time than the Riddles. The poet does not allow time for

intense reflection as the author of a riddle does. His imaginative reconstitution of the familiar rolls forth, cementing the legacy of a great hero as it simultaneously calls heroic legacies into question.

CHAPTER II: THE AESTHETICS OF SPATIAL EFFECTS AND THEIR RELATION TO ANGLO-SAXON ART

One of the most intriguing artifacts recovered from the Sutton-Hoo ship burial is a helmet whose full face-guard displays a zoomorphic human-animal hybrid design framing the wearer's eyes.¹ A bristly gold mustache and nose-guard terminate at the helmet's brow, transforming into the outstretched wings, upper torso, and bright-eyed head of a bird or dragon. The silver wings spread wide over the wearer's eyes so that the warrior's countenance displays a supernaturally-charged visage. Zoomorphic blendings of human and animal are a pervasive theme in Anglo-Saxon visual art, including stone and metal-work. Though they might have inherited techniques from a pre-conversion Anglo-Saxon tradition, artists often used these designs to accompany and intensify Christian practices and texts (Webster 24). As with the Sutton Hoo helmet, the stylistic ambiguity of these works makes it impossible to determine precisely where the animal or plant stops and the human begins, resulting in "all-over complex patterns and restless movement... [which] glimmering in the firelight of the hall, or captured in the candle glow of church ceremonies, would have made a powerful visual counterpart to the formal recitation of both secular poetry and liturgical ceremony," (24) not to mention armed combat.

Poetry like *Beowulf* displays similarly "restless movement" but with even greater vibrancy than its visual counterparts. Since Tolkien famously deemed *Beowulf* more a

¹ Dated to the early 7th century. Discovered in 1939. A vivid recreation of the helmet's face-guard can be viewed on the British Museum website (britishmuseum.org).

work of masonry than poetry, scholars have perceived some unique multi-dimensional aesthetic characteristics in Anglo-Saxon poetic works. In 1967, John Leyerle explored how the artistic technique of interlace, which is so common in Anglo-Saxon metalwork and manuscript illumination, manifests in Old English poetic works. Arguing that the interlace designs are more representative of the way in which the human imagination works than the way in which Aristotelian logical or narrative order proceed, Leyerle observes that the juxtapositions and intersections of the images do not require much comment from the poet in order to convey deep significance (156). Interlaced structures in visual art had to be meticulously measured and precisely placed. Thomas Hart senses a similar sort of order in *Beowulf*'s tectonic (or mathematically patterned) structures, arguing that the poet likely drew from a wide range of artistic influences (286). It seems clear that the patterns which make Anglo-Saxon visual art so vibrant and dynamic are also present in the poetry, but their distinctive function within the narrative flow of a long work like *Beowulf* is less than apparent. Certainly, they produce a good deal of ambiguity, making both interpretation and translation quite troublesome. Marijane Osborn views the ambiguities (narrative, linguistic, etc.) as intentionally designed to "stimulate a double consciousness of event" (29) which allow, among other things, the Pagan Beowulf to be assimilated into the heroic pantheon of a Christian people. Similarly, Michael Lapidge accounts for *Beowulf*'s narrative inconsistencies by comparing it to the works of Robert Browning and William Faulkner², which often

² "In fact many aspects of *Beowulfian* narrative have closer analogues in the modern novel than in ancient epic" (Lapidge 80).

employed a collage of different perspectives and narrative trajectories (75). For Lapidge, retrospection is the key to understanding how an Anglo-Saxon audience would react to *Beowulf*:

Present action, heroic or otherwise, is... always framed in the awareness of transience, as in the poet's fundamental assertion, repeated by him three times, that Beowulf was the strongest of men 'on *that* day of *this* life' (197, 790, 806: 'on ðæm dæge ðysses lifes') - the implication being that, at a subsequent time, on another day of another life, the situation will inevitably be very different. (87)

Along the same lines, Leslie Webster observes that "The use of motif formulas [in visual art] is strikingly reminiscent of the way in which Anglo-Saxon poetry uses recurrent phrases to steer the narrative flow" (23). Flow, movement, ambiguity: these descriptions point toward a fascination with indeterminacy and continual motion which finds its most potent form of expression in Old English verse.

Typically, in Anglo-Saxon visual art, the serpentine patterns and zoomorphic designs serve as embellishments or adornments of some central representative figure or text. In the beautiful manuscript illuminations,³ for instance, the three dimensional mazes of interwoven strands lead the eye on a journey with an end in sight: "the effect is rich and, if obsessive, gorgeous; the master's intention was to tease the eye and draw the

³ Digitized images of the carpet pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels can be viewed on the British Library website (www.bl.uk).

reader's attention into the page and hence to the text... through a natural curiosity for intricacy" (Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Art* 40). The main focal point, however, is the text, which is very often liturgical, so there is no question of which art is elevated above the other. In the realm of poetry, where even the act of seeing something must first be filtered through spoken or written words, the playing field is more level. The patterns, the narrative, the characters, even the gnomic passages which impart timeless wisdom: all of these swirl around one another in a poetic verbal illumination wherein meaning and order arise only when the components are considered in relation to one another.⁴ The aesthetic distinctiveness of poetry from the visual arts allows a work like *Beowulf* to interrogate not only the relationship between the human form and nature - which the visual arts do to great effect - but also the relationship between artifice and nature.

The Fabric of Space/Time and the Fabric of Old English Poetry

There have been many studies of the separate roles of nature and artifice in *Beowulf*, but few have considered the effects of their juxtapositions within the poem's aesthetic fabric. Fred Robinson provides a pertinent reminder to readers who may be conditioned to interpret nature imagery as a positive expression of Romantic ideals: "The many artifacts pictured at intervals throughout the [poem] were not merely utilitarian objects: they were reassuring signs that man's rational order can be made to prevail over a formless and malignant nature" ("An Introduction" 62). Furthermore, Jennifer Neville

⁴ See Trilling's "Ruins in the Realm of Thoughts: Reading as Constellation in Anglo-Saxon Poetry" for similar consideration of reader/audience reaction.

argues that while Anglo-Saxons did not hold to a consistent cosmology, Old English poets almost always utilized nature imagery to symbolize the chaos which existed prior to the Creation of the world; artifice, then, results from a similar act of divine creation on the human scale. While the representation of these objects is fraught with artful ambiguity, the consensus seems to be that works of artifice symbolize the societal structures which preserve Anglo-Saxon cultural mores (treasure-giving, storytelling, lord-thane relationships, etc.) as well as social life, in general, while images of nature (anatomical features, bodies of water, dense forests, etc.) symbolize the forces of a fallen world which continually work toward humanity's destruction. Things are rarely so straightforward in Anglo-Saxon verse, however, where interlaced imagery fluidly combines opposites into forms which defy any concrete symbolic order.

Part of the reason the poet does this appears to be aesthetic. As with the visual arts, these intertwining images of human, animal, and artificial forms initiate a kinesthetic experience which tricks the mind's eye into perceiving dynamic motion. The aesthetic effect of this motion is striking. In Beowulf's battle against Grendel's mother, for instance, each piece of artifice from his "war-byrnie woven by hand" ("herebyrne hondum gebroden" 1442) to his "shining helm" ("hwita helm" 1448) stands in stark contrast to the "surging sea" ("brimwylm" 1494), "savage fingers" ("lapan fingrum" 1505), and "battle-tusks" ("hildetuxum" 1511), resulting in a rolling confusion of reality which mirrors the hero's own perceptions. Here the battle-lines are clearly drawn between human craftsmanship and natural ferocity. Occasionally, though, the boundaries

lose some of their definition. For instance, Hrothgar's mead-hall undergoes a peculiar transformation as its sturdy door becomes a "mouth" ("muþan") when Grendel bursts inside (721-24). Similarly, just before the dragon springs out of its cave toward Beowulf, the poet encapsulates its physical and emotional states with the phrase "heart of the ring-bent one" ("hringbogan heorte" 2561). And even following Beowulf's defeat of the mother, we are told that his sword was "sweaty" ("swatig" 1569), a common Anglo-Saxon metaphor referring to a blade dripping with freshly spilled blood. Clearly, the Beowulf-poet senses a powerful dynamism in the interplay between artifice and nature, and he takes advantage of this in order to convey a sense of motion which exerts a palpable effect on surrounding spaces and nearby objects.

Swift movement and powerful motion are not typically associated with Anglo-Saxon poetry, which is more often characterized by a concreteness of language that many modern readers consider excessive. Although it hardly warrants the negative assessments which it so often inspires, this view is not entirely unjustified. Beowulf receives nearly 150 lines of elaborate description and back-story before we first hear his name, making it seem as if – like the coast-guardian – we had witnessed his steady approach from afar (194-343). Grendel, though described with elusive dissonance, is treated similarly (86-102). Most of the poem's featured characters and artifacts receive extensive poetic adornments before being formally introduced, thus firmly establishing their standing either on the side of societal cohesion or in the dark realm of destructive nature. We first see them off in a distant haze, catching only brief glimpses of their physical form. This

extended elaboration makes it that much more potent when those worlds collide and coalesce – when the fabric of human society interweaves with the chaos of unmaking. Reality itself seems to bend in the wake of these creatures, suggesting a level of uncertainty about the trappings and adornments which keep chaotic nature at bay, and this may stem from the uneasy awareness that everything – whether made from iron, stone, wood, or clay – is capable of regressing suddenly back into its natural state. Naturally, the battles, which are designed to terrify and to amaze, display some of the most elaborate spatial effects. Anthropomorphized (or perhaps zoomorphized) architecture, sweaty swords, and metallic anatomy: these unique juxtapositions convey movements and moods which bend the very fabric of poetic space and time, representing the effects these superhuman beings have on physical reality.

Superhuman Kinetics and Spatial Effects

The term chosen here to describe the poetic interweaving of artifice and nature might carry with it some superficial connotations. Filmmakers use special effects to show their audiences things that cannot normally be seen: Superman flying around the earth, the Death Star destroying a planet, Roger Rabbit having a lengthy comedic dialogue with actor Bob Hoskins⁵. But what does an Anglo-Saxon poet do to capture something outside the realm of normal everyday human perception and still retain a sense of the extraordinariness of the event? Setting plays just as important role as character in this

⁵ Comic books and graphic novels offer another contemporary analog: "motion" or "speed" lines convey (often superhuman) motion in otherwise static images.

case, and no setting in *Beowulf* is more elaborately represented than Hrothgar's mead-hall, Heorot. In the beginning, the construction of Heorot is compared to God's creation of Earth: "It came to Hrothgar's mind that he would order his men to construct a hall-building, a great mead-hall, which the children of humankind would remember forever, and there within he would share all with young and old that God gave him, except for the folk-share and the lives of men"⁶ (67-73). Like Earth, Heorot is richly adorned and supportive of human life, but also like Earth, the hall is ultimately fated for fiery destruction: "Heorot awaited battle-surges, hostile flames; the time was not long when the sword-hate of oath-swearers should be awakened by hateful violence"⁷ (82-85). Fortunately, the time for Heorot's destruction is not now. Grendel's depredations may have twisted and distorted the societal cohesion associated with the grand mead-hall, but the creature does not seem willing or able to raze Heorot to the ground.⁸

Grendel "takes his toll" ("nymeð nydbade" 598) as Beowulf himself tells the Danes and then heads back to the fens to do whatever the progeny of Cain are wont to do. While he is in Heorot, however, Grendel's actions are able to be seen by human eyes. Curiously, nobody really seems to know what he looks like or important facts like his invulnerability to weapons (794-805) or his steel-sharp claws (985). This may be an indication that all who have seen Grendel either died or fled before they could get a good

⁶ "Him on mod bearn / þæt healreced hatan wolde, / medoærn micel men gewyrcean / þone ylde bearn æfre gefrunon / ond þær on innan eall gedælan / geongum ond ealdum, swylc him God sealde, / buton folcsare ond feorum gumena" (67-73).

⁷ "heapowlyma bad, / laþan liges; ne wæs hit lenge þa gen, / þæt [e]cghete apumsw[eo]ran / æfter wælniþe wæcnan scolde" (82-85)

⁸ Compare this to the dragon, who later burns Beowulf's mead-hall to the ground.

look. Survivors would only have the gore-stained hall (“heall heorudreore” 487) and a rough death-toll (“þritig þegna” 123) as indicators of Grendel’s strength and ferocity. During his approach to Heorot which precedes his fight with Beowulf, Grendel is portrayed in an almost human light as “a travelling warrior bereft of joys” (“rinc siþian / dreamum bedæled” (720-21). Elsewhere, the only reference to Grendel which comes close to this portrayal is when the poet calls him a “miserable man” (“wonsæli wer” 105). More typical are grisly epithets like “fiend from hell” (“feond on helle” 101), “grim ghost” (“grimma gæst” 102), “infamous border-walker” (“mære mearcstapa” 103), “accursed spirit” (“wergan gastes” 133), and “dark death-shadow” (“deorc deapscua” 160). But “rinc siþian” echoes the central figure of a work like *The Wanderer*, which tells the sorrowful tale of a man bereft of both hall and companions. Andy Orchard notes how “extraordinary” it is that suddenly the *Beowulf*-poet renders Grendel “as a character with a point of view, one that is capable of evoking sympathy, at precisely this key moment in the battle, when the predator becomes prey” (*Critical Companion* 192). Grendel’s proximity to Heorot is quite close at this point in the narrative; the very next line has him bursting through the hall’s door. Perhaps it is this close proximity in space to the grandest of human constructions which for an instant seems to transform the monster into a man: a glimmer of hope, a possibility of reconciliation that does not involve violence.

The humanization of Grendel has the ironic effect of making him much more terrifying. Supernaturally strong and with an insatiable bloodlust, Grendel represents all that is inimical to humankind up until these fleeting appositional images of him as a man.

Cast in this new light, Grendel is suddenly relatable. His anger, his loneliness, even his fear moments later as he is caught in Beowulf's crushing grip: these glimpses allow the audience for an instant to see a bit of themselves in the monster. Grendel's lot in life is knowable and, judging from the intense emotional extremes explored in *The Wanderer*, can be related to very pertinent issues in Anglo-Saxon society. This momentary self-reflection shatters violently as the very next action depicted is of Grendel destroying Heorot's mighty door: "The door, fast in its fire-forged bands, suddenly gave way when he touched it with his hands; hate-minded and swollen with anger, he swung open the mouth of the hall"⁹ (721-24). The sympathetic emotional resonance of "travelling warrior" ("rinc sipian" 720) does not align with the supernaturally destructive strength displayed by Grendel; in other words, this is not what an audience would expect a "travelling warrior" to do or to be capable of doing even if his emotions inspire him to violence. Warrior and monster are equally represented as definable character traits, and as the audience scrambles to reconcile the two opposing conceptions, the poet capitalizes on this confusion for terrifying effect. Grendel does not lack definition; he exhibits a profundity of definitions which contradict and overlap one another as the creature moves through and transforms the physical spaces constructed by the poet.

⁹ "Duru sona onarn / fyrbendum fæst, syþþan he hire folmum (æt)hran; / onbræd þa bealohydig, þa (he ge)bolgen wæs, / recedes muþan" (721-24). The Old English verb for "gave way" ("irnan") has a curious definition. When describing persons or animals, Bosworth-Toller suggests that it means "to run" or "to move quickly," but "irnan" can also be applied to inanimate objects like Heorot's door, in which case it would mean "to move rapidly through space." Since the door is an object that is shown in a state of apposition between artifice and nature, then perhaps the verb which describes its motion is also in apposition, portraying the door's rapid flight through space and also its instinctual retreat from Grendel's touch.

True to Anglo-Saxon verse form, the action of the door being thrust open is depicted twice, with the first emphasizing the door's expert craftsmanship and the next twisting that artifice into an organic image of nature. Stanley Greenfield calls attention to this very sequence as support for his argument that while many words and phrases used by the poet are formulaic, formalist literary analysis can still be utilized: "The first half of the sentence depicts the door as made fast with fire-forged bands, an image of strength and hardness defying entrance; by the time Grendel has finished, it is reduced, as it were, to a soft mouth, an easily-forced point of entry" (150). Grendel's mere touch ("æthran" 722) is both destructive and transformative - a reverse Midas effect which stands as one of *Beowulf*'s most potent "spatial effects." Like the Riddles of the Exeter Book, Grendel forces the audience to reimagine the world around them, to feel estranged from these images which signify safety and societal cohesion.

If Grendel's incredible strength is meant to terrify and confound, then so too is the speed with which he makes his first kill. The precise sequencing of events once Grendel enters the hall emphasizes just how superhumanly fast the creature can move. From the moment Grendel destroys Heorot's door to the moment Beowulf locks his arm in a crushing hand-grip, there are roughly 25 intervening lines which describe the following sequence: Grendel striding across the floor (724-26); glaring down at the sleeping thanes with an evil glint in his eyes (726-30); rejoicing in his mind at the thought of such a bountiful feast (730-34); failing to notice Beowulf observing his every movement (736-38); slitting open and wholly consuming a sleeping thane (739-45); and stepping further

inside (“Forð near ætstop”) to grab Beowulf, as well (745-749). While the poet rarely aims for a mimetic representation of reality,¹⁰ one might assume that the sleeping thanes would awaken quite quickly if they were to hear the door’s destruction, Grendel’s stride across the hall’s wooden planks,¹¹ their comrade’s inglorious consumption, etc. Yet the giant-bodied Grendel accomplishes a fair bit – not only in action, but also in thought – before the hall’s guardians are alerted to his presence. Grendel’s near-inconceivable speed and agility warp the very fabric of space (“mouth of the hall”), accomplishing all these horrific things with a superhuman swiftness or a supernatural command over the passage of time which confound normal human sensory perception. The only one who can see him clearly enough to “behold how that harmful sinner would proceed with his sudden siege”¹² (736-38) is someone who is similarly outside the norm: Beowulf.

Much like his adversary, Beowulf is not defined initially by his martial prowess. His physical bearing impresses the Coast-Warden with whom he first converses: “Never have I seen a greater earl on earth than that one of yours, a man in war-gear; that is not a simple hall-man, honored in weapons, unless his countenance belies him, his glorious form”¹³ (247-51). Similarly, when the Geats arrive at Heorot, Wulfgar pays particular attention to the troop’s apparent nobility in his description to Hrothgar: “They with their war-tools seem worthy of noble esteem; certainly virtuous is their leader who has shown

¹⁰ Of course, Grendel’s very presence might alter what we would consider reality just as it alters Heorot’s door.

¹¹ Later we hear Beowulf’s boots make the “hall-wood resound” (healwudu dynede 1318).

¹² “...beheold / ...hu se manscaða / under færgripum gefaran wolde” (736-38).

¹³ “Næfre ic maran geseah / eorla ofer eorþan, ðonne is eower sum, / secg on searwum; nis þæt seldguma, / wæpnun geweorðad, næf[n]e him his wlite leoge, / ænlic ansyn.” (247-51)

these strong soldiers the way hither”¹⁴ (368-70). Hrothgar then reveals that he knew Beowulf as a child and has heard of his brave exploits from “seafarers” (“sæliðende” 377) who trade with the Geats. It is through Hrothgar that we first learn of Beowulf’s reputed superhuman strength, “that he has the strength of thirty battle-brave men in his hand-grip” (“þæt he þritiges / manna mægencræft on his mundgripe / heaporof hæbbe” 379-81). This reputation is then challenged directly by Hrothgar’s “þyle,”¹⁵ Unferth, who accuses Beowulf of brashly competing in a foolish swimming contest which he lost to a stronger opponent (506-28). Beowulf displays his rhetorical prowess in a scathing rejoinder (530-606), which establishes him as a formidable wielder of words. His bravery also seems legitimate as he intends to meet Grendel on a level playing field, sans weapons: “Indeed, the prince of the Geats earnestly trusted his mighty strength, the Maker’s grace, when he took off his iron byrnie, removed the helm from his head, and gave his ornamented sword, best of irons, to his comrade in arms, and bid him hold his battle-gear”¹⁶ (669-74). The poet also contributes his own Christian interpretation of the Pagan Beowulf’s righteous path, describing the Geatish hero as a “web of victory [granted by God] to the people of the Weders” (“wigspeda gewiofu, Wedera leodum” 697).

¹⁴ “Hy on wiggetawum wyrðe þinceað / eorla geæhtlan; huru se aldor deah, / se þæm heaðorincum hider wisade” (368-70).

¹⁵ A troublesome term which, according to the commentary provided by Klaeber’s editors, could mean anything from “sage, orator, poet of note, historian, major-domo, and the king’s right-hand man” to “spokesman” [or] “official entertainer” (150).

¹⁶ “Huru Geata leod georne truwoðe / modgan mægnes, Metoddes hyldo, / ða he him of dyde isernbyrnan, / helm hafelan, sealde his hyrsted sweord, / irena cyst ombihtþegne, / ond gehealdan het hildegæatwe” (669-74).

This is Beowulf as we come to know him over the course of roughly 750 lines of Anglo-Saxon verse. The hero's truly defining moment, however, comes in delayed response to Grendel's initial penetrative incursion through Heorot's "mouth." With his patient observation and great strength, Beowulf grabs hold of the very hand which obliterated the well-crafted hall door. Here we see the hero's strength in action. All of the boasts and bluster come to a head at this precise moment of truth, and the poet takes great care to emphasize the visceral "spatial effect" of that hand-grip when the hero rips the steel-clawed¹⁷ arm from Grendel's torso: "The terrible *æglæca* felt body-pain; on his shoulder was a clearly shredded wound, sinews sprung apart, bone-locks burst open"¹⁸ (815-18). The violently organic imagery is apparent as the poet draws specific attention to the gory details of Grendel's mortal wound, but a subtle sense of the artificial also permeates this sequence. The progression from "sinews" ("seonowe" 817) to "bone-locks" ("banlocan" 818) evokes an anatomical ordering. Furthermore, the kenning "bone-locks" is a striking artificial rendering for joints which resonates with Grendel's bite into the "bone-locks" ("bat banlocan" 742) of the sleeping thane just moments earlier. The focus on the creature's "fingers held in a furious grip" ("fingra geweald / on grames

¹⁷ It is important to note that Grendel's claws are only revealed to be "most like steel" ("style gelicost" 985) after the arm is mounted atop Heorot's roof. This would be an example of Lapidge's retrospective narrative detail.

¹⁸ "Licsar gebad / atol æglæca; him on eaxle wearð / syndolh sweotol, seonowe onsprungon, / burston banlocan" (815-18). This translation neglects to render the word "*æglæca*" into Modern English because no Modern English equivalent seems to exist. Bosworth-Toller suggests "A miserable being, wretch, miscreant, monster, fierce combatant." Both Beowulf and the dragon are described together as "aglæcean" (2592) during their epic battle, and it is possible that Beowulf alone is described as such during his descent into the depths of Grendel's mere (1512). Michael Lapidge perhaps sums "*æglæca*" up best: "a difficult word implying at least the creature's terrifying nature" (82).

grapum” 764-65) echoes the destruction of Heorot’s door, as well, serving ultimately as payment for Grendel’s crimes. The specificity and concreteness with which the poet describes Grendel’s demise stands in stark contrast to the shadowy, wraith-like demon from earlier in the poem. Under the firelight of Heorot, the monster is now visible and, more importantly, just as vulnerable to bodily harm as anyone else.

Grendel’s bodily destruction is accentuated by repeated references to Heorot’s architectural stability. During the struggle, the poet tells us,

The splendid hall resounded; to all of the Danes, city-dwellers and brave earls alike, it seemed a raucous ale-sharing. Both were angry, raging house-guardians. The hall echoed. It was a great wonder that the mead-hall withstood those battle-brave combatants, and did not fall to the ground, that fair earthly building; but it was fastened inside and out with iron bands, secure in the cunning craft of the smith. From the floor flew many a mead-bench, I am told, trimmed with gold, where the grim ones fought. Wise Scyldings never thought that any man through ordinary means could break the hall apart, beautiful and bone-adorned, or cunningly dismantle it, unless the embrace of fire were to swallow it in flame.¹⁹ (767-82)

¹⁹ "Dryhtsele dynede; Denum eallum wearð, / ceasterbuendum, cenra gehwylcum / eorlum ealuscerwen. Yrre wæron begen, / reþe renweardas. Reced hlynsode. / þa wæs wundor micel, þæt se winsele / wiðhaefde heapodeorum, þæt he on hruson ne feol, / fæger foldbold; ac he þæs fæste wæs / innan ond utan irenbendum / searopuncum besmipod. Þær fram sylle abeag / medubenc monig mine gefræge /

Grendel's bones and tendons stretch past their limit, and nearly so do Heorot's planks and iron bands. This juxtaposition between the anatomical and the architectural conveys the strength and ferocity of the combatants' movements as they threaten to lay low not only Grendel, but also Heorot, itself. Just as Grendel's strength begins to give way, the poet inserts the curious description of the hall as "bone-adorned" ("banfag" 780), a word which has caused some controversy amongst critics. Rosemary Cramp links "ban-" with gables which may have been decorated with deer antlers, suggesting that "banfag" refers to the walls being "adorned with gables" (136). The commentary provided by Klaeber's editors also notes how "ban" can refer to ivory, a material commonly used by Anglo-Saxon artisans: "If (as we are told) Heorot is adorned with gold, then parts of its interior could be decorated with ivory as well, though there is room for speculation as to just what kind of features are meant" (162). In the context of the poem, "banfag" seems to resonate not only as a literal description of Heorot's adornments, but also as a metaphorical elaboration of the "mouth of the hall" ("recedes muþan" 724) image. Immediately following this description of the hall, the poet suddenly depicts the scene outside of Heorot: "The noise surged up resoundingly clear: with every one of the North-Danes stood a terrible dread, all who heard the wail through the wall, the terror-song sung by God's apostate"²⁰ (782-86). The poet is careful to filter the sound "through the wall,"

golde geregnad, þær þa graman wunnon. / þæs ne wendon ær witan Scyldinga, / þæt hit a mid gemete manna ænig / [b]etlic ond banfag tobreca meahte, / listum toluca, nympe liges fæþm / swulge on swapule" (767-82).

²⁰ "Sweg up astag / niwe geneahhe: Norð-Denum stod / atelic egesa, anra gehwylcum / þara þe of wealle wop gehyrdon, / gryreleoð galan Godes andsacan" (782-86).

so the Danes do not actually see Grendel crying in pain. Their eyes see only Heorot, and as the images of the “mouth of the hall” and “banfag” seem to suggest, it is not the Heorot they once knew. The building which has stood as the poem’s central representative of artifice is now terrifyingly naturalized.

The most significant anatomical referent in this sequence is the position of Grendel’s wound “on/upon his shoulder” (“him on eaxle”). The only other time the phrase is used in the poem is when Beowulf is saved from the mother’s knife thrust by a byrnie which is “laid upon his shoulder” (“Him on eaxle læg” 1547). We also find a slight echo in the Hildeburh story sung by Hrothgar’s scop wherein Hildeburh orders that her dead son be laid next to her brother’s shoulder on the funeral pyre (“[ea]me on eaxle” 1117), so the context of bodily harm seems to be tightly associated with this particular phrase. Shoulders also seem to work as symbols of societal customs in *Beowulf*. The poet says that Wulfgar “knew the honorable custom” (“cuþe he duguðe þeaw” 359) as he “stood by the shoulder of Hrothgar” (“þæt he for eaxlum gestod / Deniga frean” 358-59). Likewise, the loyal Wiglaf sits beside the dying Beowulf at his shoulder (2853). It is both fitting and unsettling then that the lordless Grendel should suffer such a humiliating and deadly wound precisely upon this part of his anatomy. He who has perverted Hrothgar’s mead-hall, turning it into a grotesque representation of his own voracious disregard for humankind, has his most lethal weapons (“laþum fingrum”) crushed and his socially inept shoulder torn open to reveal its broken bones and sinews. Beowulf humiliates Grendel and disfigures him in much the same way that Grendel did Heorot. Once deadly

and difficult to perceive, Grendel's arm is now a "clear sign" ("tacen sweotol" 833) of Beowulf's ability to impose order where chaos reigns.

Shouldering the Blow

The steady sequence of "eagle" echoes tie together these themes of loyalty (to one's family and to one's lord) and death (for one's family and for one's lord). It is likely not coincidental that the same phrase ("him on eagle") is used once to describe a mortal wounding and another time to describe the armor which prevents a mortal wounding. Both times "him on eagle" appears on the b-verse of similar alliterative schemes, so it may be that the poet intentionally repeats himself in order to shock his audience. Conditioned to connect both the image of a gaping wound and the expression of a mother's grief (through the Hildeburh lay) with "him on eagle," the poet's audience would then be happily surprised to hear that the "broad breast-net" ("breostnet broden" 1548) prevented the mother's blade from penetrating Beowulf's chest. But this extended spatial effect also endows the mother's attack with potent thematic significance. She strikes at the symbolic representation of the heroic society which took the life not only of her son, but also that of Hildeburh's and eventually of Wealhtheow's.²¹ In this way, Grendel's mortal wound and all of its attendant spatial effects continue to ripple throughout the narrative well after the creature's death.

²¹ The thematic implications of this particular topic are covered in more depth in Chapters 3 and 4.

Typically, whatever appears upon or near someone's shoulder ("him on eaxle") is an aid to Beowulf on his journey. Even the sad image of Hildeburh laying the body of her son next to her brother upon the funeral pyre²² could be viewed as a boon to Beowulf due to the way in which it is transmitted by the singer in the hall. John Leyerle argues that the poem's interlace structure allows Wealhtheow to receive just such poetic inspiration from the song, whose stark imagery²³ spurs her to make a plea "for good faith and firm friendship in Heorot" (154). Perhaps it also serves this purpose for Beowulf, prophetically reminding him of some important aspects of his impending battle. Strangely, though, none of the Danes have said anything about Grendel's mother. Hrothgar knows that another creature lingers just outside the bounds of his kingdom, and presumably a number of his thanes are aware of Grendel's mother, as well. No one tells Beowulf that another threat may be on the horizon, but the scop's prescient song about a bereaved mother just happens to utilize a phrase²⁴ which bears a striking resemblance to the pivotal moment when Beowulf's armor will save his life. Furthermore, Orchard notes how this decidedly unhappy lay about a mother losing a son "considerably undermines and undercuts the ostensible joy of the celebration-feast in Heorot" (*Critical Companion*

²² "The cremation itself is depicted as a kind of martial conflict, with 'war-smoke' (*guðrec*, line 1118b), 'the greatest of slaughter-fires' (*wælfyra mæst*, line 1119b), and a horrifyingly graphic description of freshly inflicted wounds (lines 1120b-1122a)" (Orchard, *Critical Companion* 182-83).

²³ Leyerle also argues that the Finnsburh lay might have been about Half-Danes going to help Frisians fight monsters just as Beowulf and his Geats do for the Danes. Some harsh words were said which might resemble the interchange between Beowulf and Unferth, leading to violence. The scop's timely song, Leyerle argues, reminds Wealhtheow of this, and she speaks in order to assuage any violent thoughts within Heorot. For more on Wealhtheow's poetic inspiration, see Chapter 4.

²⁴ Though the song itself is not explicitly recorded, the poet mentions that Hildeburh's son is "laid upon the pyre at his uncle's shoulder" ("ond on bæl don / [ea]me on eaxle" 1116-17).

179). The song and celebration were occasioned by the loss of a son, as well, suggesting that Hildeburh's grief might also inform the current emotional state of Grendel's mother. The poet very rarely presents the monsters while they live their lives outside of the range of human perception, but if he were to do so here, we might see a concurrent juxtaposition of the merriment in Hrothgar's hall and the horror in the mere as Grendel slowly bleeds to death.²⁵ Linking Hildeburh's grief with that of Grendel's mother acts not only as a means of characterization for the audience of *Beowulf*, but also as a frame of reference for Beowulf, himself. If he listens to the song as closely as Wealhtheow does, then he now has a palpable analogue for his next opponent's motivation.

If Grendel's physical introduction into the narrative is marked by a warping of space, then his mother's is marked by a strange reference to time: "an avenger still lived after the enemy for a long time after battle-care; Grendel's mother, an awesome terror-wife, dwelled upon her misery, she who had to live amongst the water-horrors, the cold streams"²⁶ (1256-61). Orchard notes the apparent inconsistency that it is not "literally true that Grendel's mother outlived her son 'for a long time' ... even now, her days are numbered" (*Critical Companion* 188). Indeed, Grendel's mother cannot have lived more than a day and night after the death of her son. Alfred Bammesberger further finds that the only way in which the passage makes sense is if the word "enemy" ("lāpum") refers

²⁵ Grendel's mother initiates her attack "after battle-care" ("æfter guðceare" 1258), which may indicate that she comforted Grendel as he lay dying.

²⁶ "wrecend þa gyt / lifde æfter lāpum, lange þrage, / æfter guðceare; Grendles modor, / ides aglæcwif yrmþe gemunde, / se þe wæteregeas wunian scolde, / cealde streamas" (1256-61).

not to Grendel, but to his long dead father: “Lines 1255b-63a of *Beowulf* make no sense as long as *lapum* at line 1257a is thought to refer to Grendel: the correct reference is to Grendel senior who definitely died a ‘long time’ ago” (400-01). It seems odd, though, that the poet would suddenly portray Grendel’s mother as an avenging wife when so many thematic threads - from Hildeburh to Wealhtheow - resonate with the plights of bereaved mothers. The apparent discontinuity bears a resemblance to the way in which the poet represents certain landscapes in the poem. For instance, the geographic feature of the fiery stream which issues forth from the dragon’s barrow leads John Niles to observe that “Although one would not expect to find such a stream (either hot or cold) issuing from any real-world monument of this kind, what the poet is presenting is a landscape of terror rather than a description of any actual place” (“*Beowulf* 2545b-2549” 28). Similarly, Grendel can be both man (“wer”) and “dark death-shadow” (“deorc deapscua”) depending upon the context in which he appears. Why, then, can we not apply this same principle to landscapes of time as well as space? A mother mourning the death of her only son might very well perceive the final hours of her life as an eternity of misery “amongst the water-horrors, the cold streams” (1261). No absent husband is needed to reconcile the disjointed time scale; time and space no longer hold the same significance for Grendel’s mother. This transcendence makes her monstrous and terrifying, but so too does it reveal the extraordinary extent of her pain.

Unlike Wealhtheow and Hildeburh, Grendel’s mother cannot be classified as “a passive onlooker in a much wider and more vicious game” (Orchard, *Critical Companion*

181). Indeed, she is an active participant who brings Beowulf closer than he has ever been to death. Orchard's use of the word "game" here is appropriate. Grendel's mother, though vengefully furious, exercises a good deal of foresight and strategic acumen in her attack on Heorot. Aware that a great warrior is now an ally of Hrothgar, the mother initiates a hit-and-run, guerilla-style assault on the mead-hall, claiming only one victim but renewing the strife which the Danes thought had passed. Unlike her son, Grendel's mother is cautious, snatching only Hrothgar's dearest thane in one hand and her son's gory limb in the other and making her way swiftly back to the mere. Her movements must have been an incredible sight for those present. The last time we saw Grendel's arm it was mounted atop Heorot's gabled roof, meaning that she would have had to have climbed or leapt to a great height in order to grab the trophy. Furthermore, she carries both the massive arm and Hrothgar's so-called "shoulder-companion" ("eaxlgestealla" 1326) all the way back to her lair, so it would appear that her strength and speed are as extraordinary as her son's. And just as the Danes displayed Grendel's arm as a symbol of Beowulf's victory, Grendel's mother leaves Aeschere's severed head upon the "sea-cliff" ("holmclife" 1421) for her pursuers to find. Much more focused on self-preservation and strategy, the mother does not wage war as her son did.

These establishing sequences set the stage for a battle of superhuman proportions, and the poet brings to bear all manner of spatial distortions in order to convey the extraordinary movements of each combatant. The Beowulf we see plunging into the mere bears little resemblance to the one we saw lying in wait for Grendel: "Beowulf geared

himself up in warrior-dress, did not care for his life”²⁷ (1441-42). Now he is the invader, and as Grendel was protected by evil magic during his incursions, Beowulf feels that he must rely upon the best of human artifice to triumph over a vengeful mother. The poet places great (almost obsessive) emphasis on the armor itself: “The war-byrnie woven by hand, broad and cunningly crafted, had to test the mere; it knew well how to protect the bone-chamber so that no battle-grip might crush his chest, nor malicious grasp harm his vital organs”²⁸ (1443-47). Gone in these descriptions are the references to Beowulf’s spiritual assuredness; they seem to have been replaced by a stalwart confidence in the wondrous work of the “wæpna smiþ” (1452). Unferth, the king’s “ðyle” (1456) who insulted Beowulf just before Grendel’s defeat, also lends the hero a sword named Hrunting, “foremost of ancient treasures; its edge was iron, adorned with serpent-stripes, hardened by battle-sweat”²⁹ (1458-60). Here the poet seems to be packing the entire sword’s history into three short lines. Davidson suggests that the “serpent-stripes” (“atertanum”) could refer either to the sword’s pattern-welded forging or to some poisonous modifications made thereafter (“The Sword” 129-35). Similarly, “battle-sweat” (“heapowate”) could evoke either a fluid used by the smith to harden the blade (Scheinert 378) or the blood which its wielder spilled in battle. Such juxtapositions and

²⁷ "Gyrede hine Beowulf / eorlgew ædum, nalles for ealdre mearn" (1441-42).

²⁸ "scolde herebyrne hondum gebroden, sid ond searofah sund cunnian, seo þe bancofan beorgan cuþe, þæt him hildegrap hreþe ne mihte, eorres inwitfeng alder gesceþpan" (1443-47).

²⁹ "þæt wæs an foran ealdgestreona; / ecg wæs iren, atertanum fah, / ahyrded heapowate" (1458-60).

interweavings of artifice and nature, of the sword's wondrous creation with its violent utilization, underscore (and perhaps undermine) its current task.

Perceiving the intruder as soon as he breaches the surface of the water, Grendel's mother first grapples with Beowulf using only her bare hands: "She grasped at Beowulf, seized the warrior in her terrible clasp, but none the sooner did she injure his sound body; the encircling rings protected him, so that she could not pierce through that war-coat, locked limb-shirt, with her lethal fingers"³⁰ (1501-05). The focus on the mother's "lethal fingers" recalls the moment in the first battle when Beowulf literally breaks Grendel's own fingers with his extraordinary hand-grip: "Grendel's fingers burst; the giant turned away, Beowulf stepped forward"³¹ (760-61). Those same fingers burst through the door of Heorot, and this steady progression of echoes reinforce the idea that the Grendel-kin possess a good deal of their strength and lethality in their hands and fingers. Human-constructed boundaries have done little to blunt their effectiveness, so it must come as a welcome surprise when the mother's claws are unable to penetrate the "locked-limb-shirt" ("locene leoposyrca" 1505). Beowulf's armor holds strong during his descent, but unlike her son, Grendel's mother dictates where and how the battle is fought.

The fight does not begin in earnest until Grendel's mother thrusts Beowulf into an underwater cave located deep within the abyss: "Then the earl perceived that he was in a

³⁰ "Grap þa togeanes, guþrinc gefeng / atolan clumum; no þy ær in gescod / halan lice; hring utan ymbbearh, / þæt heo þone fyrdhom þurhfon ne mihte, / locene leoposyrca lapan fingrum" (1501-05).

³¹ "fingras burston; / eoten wæs utweard, eorl furpur stop" (760-61)"

nether-hall of some sort, where no water could harm him at all, neither could the sudden grip of the flood reach him for the hall's roof"³² (1512-16). Strangely, the poet describes the cave as a "nether-hall," which associates the mother's habitation with a symbol of societal cohesion even as the prefix "niþ" implies natural chaos. A light burns within allowing Beowulf to see his surroundings: "Then the good man saw the earthly outcast, mighty mere-wife; a forceful strike he gave her with his war-sword - his hand withheld nothing with that blow - so that the ringed blade sang out upon her head a greedy battle-lay"³³ (1518-22). The peculiar interplay here between the sword and the mother's head³⁴ interweaves a number of sensations in order to achieve its spatial effect. Sound obviously plays a major role, as the impact of Hrunting's edge upon the mother's strong skull would likely resound in a powerful echo throughout the underwater cave. Sight is also prominent, as Beowulf's sword-strike comes hot on the heels after his immediate perception of the "mighty mere-wife." Finally, the tactile sensation transmitted by the blade's vibration is highlighted by the reference to Beowulf's hand. All of these synaesthetic interweavings show the audience what Beowulf then realizes in the next couple of lines: "Then the guest [Beowulf] discovered that the battle-flame would not bite"³⁵ (1522-23). Warriors in the hall who have swung a sword in battle would know that the last thing you want to hear following a mighty sword-strike is the vibratory hum of "a

³² "þa se eorl ongeat, / þæt he [in] niþsele nathwylcum wæs, / þær him nænig wæter wihte ne sceþede, / ne him for hrofsele hrinan ne mehte / færgripe flodes" (1512-16).

³³ "Ongeat þa se goda grundwyrge, / merewif mihtig; mægenræs forgeaf / hildebille, ho[n]d swen[g] ne ofteah, / þæt hire on hafelan hringmæl agol / grædig guðleoð" (1518-22)

³⁴ On the recurrence of specific anatomical imagery and weaponry in this battle, see Chapter 3.

³⁵ "þa se gist onfand, / þæt se beadoleoma bitan nolde" (1522-23).

greedy battle-lay,” which would indicate that the blade deflected off of a piece of armor. Through an intricate spatial effect, the poet shows his audience the failure of Hrunting before he tells them about it.

Conversely, the sensations accompanying the sword-strike which ultimately fells Grendel’s mother are much more indicative of success than of failure. After a brief tussle wherein the mother very nearly slays Beowulf, the hero spots a giant-sword amongst a collection of other weapons. In desperation, “the Scyldings’ defender grasped its belted hilt, rough and wildly ferocious, drew the ringed sword despairing of his life, struck furiously, so that it hit hard against her neck, broke her bone-rings; the blade cut all the way through her doomed flesh-shroud; she fell to the floor, the sword was sweaty, the soldier rejoiced in his work”³⁶ (1563-69). Here again we see a “ringed sword,” but this one does not sing. The b- and f-alliterations transmit a much more satisfying tactile sensation of holding onto a hilt as it makes hard contact with “**b**one-rings” and then slices cleanly through a “doomed **f**lesh-shroud.” As with Grendel’s dismemberment, the poet focuses intensely upon very specific anatomical features to highlight the killing blow. However, the lines following Beowulf’s superhuman feat make this act of violence seem slightly more ambiguous. Alliteration again works to great effect, with the s-sounds linking the words “sword,” “sweaty,” and “soldier,” but rhyme also plays a major role. In Old English, the word for “soldier” (“secg”) can also mean “sword” (“ecg”). An audience

³⁶ "He gefeng þa fetelhilt, freca Scyldinga / hreoh ond heorogrim, hringmæl gebrægd / alders orwena, yrringa sloh, / þæt hire wip halse heard grapode, / banhringas bræc; bile al þurhwod / fægne flæschoman; heo on flet gecrong, / sweord wæs swatig, secg weorce gefeh" (1563-69).

hearing “secg” recited so soon after “ecg” is forced to choose between two interpretative pathways: “the sword/soldier rejoiced in its/his work.” We have already heard a sword “sing out... a greedy battle-lay” (1521-22), so it takes little stretching of the imagination to accept that a sword can also “rejoice” (1569). Just like Anglo-Saxon visual art, it is impossible to place boundaries between these interlaced images of man and sword. We cannot tell for certain where one begins and the other ends, and this interpretative indeterminacy elevates the preceding action into a realm which defies normal human perception.

Darkness Mobile

No creature in *Beowulf* challenges human perception quite like the hero’s final combatant: “a naked nether-drake who, burning, seeks barrows and flies by night wreathed in flame”³⁷ (2272-74). The dragon’s physical introduction into the narrative space is similar to Grendel’s in that we hear of his destructive fury before we actually see him up close. Enraged by the theft of a single cup from his massive treasure hoard, the dragon unleashes his fiery wrath upon all the Geatish people, “burning the bright houses” (“beorht hofu bænan” 2313) so that his “warfare was widely seen” (“wig wide gesyne” 2316). The use of the plural form for “houses” (“hofu”) and the focus on widespread destruction keep the dragon at a distance, a formidable presence rather than an immediate physical threat. This makes his initial lunge toward Beowulf all the more visceral and

³⁷ "se ðe byrnende biorgas seceð, / nacod niðdraca, nihtes fleogeð / fyre befangen" (2272-74).

frightening: “The hero in the barrow, lord of the Geats, turned his board-shield against the dreadful stranger; then was the heart of the ring-bent one incited to seek quarrel. The good war-king had his sword drawn and ready, an ancient heirloom, with edges undulled; intending harm, each was in terror of the other”³⁸ (2559-65). Taken as a causal sequence, the raising of the massive iron shield - a piece of artifice specifically crafted to counteract the dragon’s “battle-flames” (2583) - is what spurs the dragon to spring forth with such vigor. Once again, the poet conveys both motion and emotion by focusing on a specific piece of the creature’s anatomy: his “heart” (“heorte”). Shield and heart, artifice and nature, each made ready for battle by the other’s existence. This consonance then erupts in an image of Beowulf and the dragon “each... in terror of the other” (2565).

One of the key Old English terms at play in the fight with the dragon is “hringbogan,” which has a wide variety of potential meanings. Unfortunately, many translations and glosses do not preserve much room for interpretation, preferring instead to simplify what the poet apparently tried to complicate. R.M. Liuzza, for instance, renders “hringbogan heorte” as “writhing beast’s heart,” which admirably emulates the manuscript’s alliterative scheme but does so by excising the “hring” image entirely. Klaeber’s glossary suggests “coiled creature” as an alternative to Liuzza’s “writhing beast,” while Bosworth-Toller provides the most to-the-point option: “a serpent.” When it appears as the latter half of a kenning in *Beowulf*, “-bogan” typically refers to the object

³⁸ "Biorn under beorge bordrand onswaf / wiþ þam gryregieste, Geata dryhten; / þa waes hringbogan heorte gefysed / sæcce to seceanne. Sweord ær gebræd / god gupcýning, gomele lafe, / ecgum unslaw; æghwæeprum wæs / bealohycendra broga fram othrum" (2559-65).

“bow,” as in “horn-bow” (“hornbogan” 2435) or “arrow-bow” (“flanbogan” 1432, 1741). The word “stanbogan” (2545) also appears in reference to a “stone arch.” Similar constructions appear elsewhere in the corpus in reference to “rainbow” (“scurbogan” or “renbogan”) and even “elbow” (“elnbogan”), but *Beowulf* is the only known Old English work which uses “hringbogan.” Certainly, the most important physical sense in which “hringbogan” is used is “bent/coiled like a ring,” suggesting not only the dragon’s bearing, but also the swift momentum with which he will spring from the barrow. In conjunction with the intense heat of the dragon’s flames, “hringbogan” might also conjure images of the forge wherein rings are bent into all different forms of artifice: a mail-coat’s iron rings (“hring-iren”), for instance. In that sense, the dragon represents the anti-blacksmith, spewing his flames in a chaos of destruction and greedily hoarding works of artifice instead of creating them. Moreover, the kenning’s alliterative ties to an organic “heart” (“heorte” 2561) present so much more potential for thematic resonance. Just as the poet melds Beowulf and his sword together to convey the thrill of victory over Grendel’s mother, here the dragon is shown metaphorically twisted with his gold-hoard – an image which is capable of expressing both his physical and mental states in one fell swoop. The dragon is bent both by and like rings as he violently defends his precious treasures.

Swift and fierce, the dragon’s fire proves to be too much for Beowulf to handle alone. As the other retainers flee into the woods, noble Wiglaf comes to his king’s aid. The dragon becomes even more enraged by Wiglaf’s presence, sinking his fangs deep

into Beowulf's neck on his next attack. Wiglaf answers this blow with a vicious sword-strike: "Wiglaf did not heed the dragon's head, and the brave man's hand was burned as he helped his kinsman; he struck that nether-spirit from below, that man in war-gear, so that the sword dived deep, gilded and bloody, and the fire began to subside"³⁹ (2697-2702). The fact that Wiglaf's arm is entirely engulfed in flames makes this much more than an ordinary sword-strike, and so too does the poet's description of the sword, itself. The juxtaposition of the ornamentation of the blade ("fæted") with the dragon's poisonous blood ("fah") turns Wiglaf's sword literally into a wyrm-patterned ("wyrmfah") blade forged in the belly of the dragon⁴⁰. Ironically, this violent act of creation causes the dragon's fire to cease, allowing Beowulf to finish the monster off: "Then the king himself, still wielding his wits, drew the war-dagger that he wore on his byrnie, bitter and battle-sharp; the protector of the Weders sliced through the wyrm's midsection"⁴¹ (2702-05). Again, the specific focus upon a part of the dragon's anatomy brings the creature under the light of our inspection just as the fatal blow is struck. Strangely, it is not a storied blade which makes the kill, but a "war-dagger," which encourages one to consider how much reliance can be placed upon even the craftiest creations of the weapon-smith.

³⁹ "Ne hedde he þæs heafolan, ac sio hand gebarn / modiges mannes, þær he his mæg[es] healp, / þæt he þone niðgæst nioðor hwene sloh, / secg on searwum, þæt ðæt sweord gedeaf / fah ond fæted, þæt ðæt fyr ongon / sweðrian syððan" (2698-2702).

⁴⁰ This image recalls the playful way in which the Riddles of the Exeter Book will often literalize commonplace metaphors and idioms. For example, the 'Book-Moth' shows a moth "consuming" words upon a page.

⁴¹ "þa gen sylf cyning / geweold his gewitte, wælseaxe gebræd / biter ond beaduscearp, þæt he on byrnan wæg; / forwrat Wedra helm wyrms on middan" (2702-05).

In the end, it takes the combined efforts of two formidable warriors who must both endure extreme bodily harm in order to quench the dragon's "battle-light" ("hildeleoma"). Inert for the first time since its rude awakening, the dragon lies dead upon the rocks for all human eyes to see and to measure: "the fire-drake shimmered grimly in his colors, scorched by its own flames; it was fifty foot-marks long lying at rest"⁴² (3040-43). Now we can finally see the creature, and the poet's reference to its measured length suggests that it has now been brought within the scope of human perception. Grendel's steel-clawed battle-paw and the dragon's multicolored, flaming carcass: each operates as a visible symbol⁴³ of Beowulf's triumphant victories, but also as a reminder that we can only bring nature within the realm of artifice through destructive acts. The strange indeterminacy of those symbols - the way they continue to move and defy concrete classification even after death and measurement - highlights the lack of control humans will always have in the face of nature. Felling trees, skinning pelts, slaying monsters: these acts are vital to the survival of human society, but they can never bring the whole of creation into the light of the mead-hall, as it were. The storm outside rages on.

Grendel's destructive touch, the mother's ferocious strength, the dragon's incomprehensible swiftness, even Beowulf's ability to contend with these fierce

⁴² "wæs se legdraca / grimlic gry(refah) gledum beswæled; / se wæs fiftiges fotgemeanres / lang on legere" (3040-43).

⁴³ The absence of any physical reminder of Grendel's mother is striking, although perhaps this absence carries as much symbolic weight as the battle-paw and dragon corpse in that all three challenge conceptions of reality.

creatures: the poet brings to bear images of artifice and nature in order to accentuate these superhuman feats of strength and speed, endowing them with a tangibility which shows the audience what is happening just as much as it tells them. As pure spectacle, the effects are striking examples of art's ability to challenge an audience's imaginative faculties. It takes a mind in tune with the flow of oral verse to envision the extraordinary, to reconcile the irreconcilable however it can. That sense of wonderment at what lies at the threshold of the mead-hall recurs again and again throughout human culture, from Milton's "darkness visible" (*Paradise Lost* 1.63) to Shakespeare's "more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (*Hamlet* 1.5.170). Perhaps there is not so much more in heaven and earth, however, than are dreamt of in poetry.

Of course, *Beowulf* is not a poem comprised of pure spectacle. As the shoulder motif which permeates the first two sections of the poem shows, spatial effects operate on many different levels, drawing disparate elements of the poem together into flurries of kinetic as well as thematic culminations. Most apparently, spatial effects are used to characterize the physical, emotional, and mental states of Grendel, his mother, and the dragon. These characters cannot (or perhaps refuse to) speak for themselves, so we cannot judge their words alongside their deeds as we can with Beowulf. Even though their movements, feelings, and motivations might bear some resemblance to the human world, there is always that distance, that threshold which, while occasionally warped like Heorot's door, keeps the wintry chaos and the roiling sea from finding definite form. The

idea that there can be consciousness out there in the nether-regions is terrifying in and of itself, but especially so when that consciousness seeks to destroy all that human society holds dear. It is darkness not only visible, but recognizable.

CHAPTER III: HEROIC HEIGHTS AND MONSTROUS DEPTHS

The preceding chapter examined briefly some examples of how the poet initiates “spatial effects” in order to convey a sense of the extraordinariness of a given situation. Here the focus is restricted to characterization – specifically, how images of artifice and nature interact with and animate the representations of the monsters. Donald Fry notes how “The poet’s chief device for characterization is the formal speech, either by a person or about him” (3). The monsters, however, are not lucky enough to possess the ability to speak for themselves, and the speeches about them are decidedly one-sided. This lack of vocalization does not mean that the monsters lack dimensionality as characters. Just as the sparsely detailed descriptions of Grendel force the audience to imagine their “own monster, which must inevitably be more frightening because of its personal tailoring” (Fry 3), so too does the silence which frames his actions encourage the audience to construct an inner being for Grendel. By focusing on the peculiar way in which these monstrous beings are associated with nature and especially artifice, we can see how spatial effects operate to define characters who are incapable of defining themselves through language.

As Jeffrey Cohen observes, people often define their monsters by what they believe and hope that they themselves are not, yet there is also room in this imaginative process for connection, empathy, and potentially admiration: “We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair” (17). Grendel’s insatiable anger and incredible strength could be viewed in certain martial contexts as valuable, even desirable, attributes. Similarly, the mother’s deep emotional

pain at the loss of “her only child” (“angan eaferan” 1547) evokes a sympathy which intermingles with the dread of her monstrous crimes. Although the dragon’s indiscriminate reprisal might outweigh the initial offense in human terms, the creature’s fiery rampage following the theft of a single cup expresses to an extreme a uniquely human anger (in response to the robbery of artifice). As we fear their destructive potential, part of us might also desire to be able to do what they can do: “The monster awakens one to the pleasures of the body, to the simple and fleeting joys of being frightened, or frightening – to the experience of mortality and corporality” (17). John Friedman also notes how the “elaborate genealogy” of Grendel and his mother as the kin of Cain¹ link them closely to the human descendants of Adam (106). While the dragon might not fit within this particular cosmological scheme, his existence is also predicated on human action: the hoarding of treasure. As alienating and terrifying as they may be, the monsters allow us to see aspects of ourselves exaggerated to physical and psychological extremes.

The poet does not rely upon overtly grotesque descriptions of their physical appearance in order to achieve this effect. Margaret Goldsmith remarks on this odd style of representation when she compares the depictions of monsters in *Beowulf* to other contemporaneous works which “have the fascination of the grotesque... [and] depend

¹ Friedman also notes that the *Beowulf*-poet seems to be drawing upon two distinct traditions of monster lineage: one which views Cain and the other Ham as the origin of monstrous beings (105). While it is possible that this overlap is due to scribal error or some other unintentional inconsistency, Friedman argues that the poet possibly “knew and used an Irish form of the history of the first two ages and that, wishing to provide historical continuity, he offered the monstrous races a joint lineage.”

upon their fantastic physical details for their appeal” (99). Not only do the monsters in *Beowulf* not speak, but they also keep very closely to the shadows, attacking only at night and retreating to their mysterious and ever-changing abodes to hide from the light of day. The poet respects this characteristic in his own depictions of the creatures, which are notably sparse on concrete detail. Many of these details only become visible after the monster’s death. The peculiar claws on Grendel’s battle-paw and the exact length of the dragon are only revealed after Beowulf defeats them. Only then is there time enough for examination and reflection, and even then the observations raise more uneasy questions than they answer as the creatures are revealed to be “disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies [even in death] resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration” (Cohen 6). The poet combines images of the familiar in very unfamiliar and alienating ways, turning the monsters into representations of the “amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the (ap)perceiving subject” (B. Brown 5). These hybrid conglomerations are terrifying for the audience, but they also give rise to questions about what “force things or the question of things might have in... society” (9).

By making these creatures simultaneously difficult to perceive and conceive, the poet challenges the limitations of societal structures and thought processes which may have, at least to some extent, contributed to the monsters’ origins. What we begin to see in *Beowulf* is a growing awareness of not only individual responsibility, but also cultural responsibility. No one person is capable of the physical feats performed by Grendel, his mother, or even Beowulf, but as a collective force moving along the span of many lifetimes, the human monster is more than capable of committing atrocities greater than

any one dragon. The necessity of a more global awareness of one's place in the cosmos is brought to the fore alongside the monsters, whose lust for violence appears to have no governing conscience.² Associations with works of artifice – especially expertly crafted weaponry – evoke this sense of collective human ingenuity hijacked by the basest of natural emotions. In this sense, the monsters represent very real societal problems which cannot be conquered except by the most formidable of heroes, but their obscure origins also point toward solutions which can be enacted with the foresight of lesser heroes. In all three cases, the violence committed by these monsters could have been averted at some point in the past even without the intervention of Beowulf. The spatial effects which characterize the monsters emphasize the oversight of past generations, stressing the need for new conceptual frameworks that are capable of looking beyond a single individual's fleeting existence on earth.

Grendel's Improper Use of the Hand

A descendant of Cain who devours his prey "feet and fingertips" (745), Grendel is a character "who embodies the whole range of the other-than-human" (O'Brian O'Keefe 491). Even still the poet often frames Grendel's thoughts and actions using human traits and societal customs. For instance, as Grendel is first being introduced the poet revels in juxtapositions of natural environments with artificial customs: "the grim guest was called

² This characterization may not apply so easily to Grendel's mother, who is shown killing only once in her fulfillment of vengeance. If she had lived, it is not clear whether or not she would have carried on a violent feud with Hrothgar and the Danes. Given the fact that she raised Grendel and appears to be just as strong as her son, she would seem to have all the psychological and physical tools to carry on his depredations of Heorot. Yet of all of the monsters in the poem, Grendel's mother is the only one who did not present a clear and definite threat to humankind.

Grendel, the mighty bound-stalker, who held the moors, fens and firmament; in the land of the monster-kind the unblessed man dwelt a while, after the Creator had him condemned among Cain's race" (102-107)³. An echo of an earlier description of Grendel as a "bold demon" ("ellengæst" 86), the word "gæst" is typically translated as "spirit" or "ghost." But "gæst" could also be intended ironically to mean "guest." Elsewhere the poet describes Beowulf as the "hall-guest" (1545) of Grendel's mother, so it is quite plausible that he is establishing a similar juxtaposition here between Grendel and Hrothgar. This would present a contradictory image of Grendel as someone who is both accorded the artificial rights and privileges of a "guest" in Anglo-Saxon society and excluded from them as a "bound-stalker." Grendel continually tests these boundaries, wavering in physical form between them and even causing other physical forms to waver, as well. Throughout his careful depiction, there are hints and suggestions that his origins may not be as monstrous as one would think, suggesting that human oversight and hubris are as much to blame for Grendel's being as any distant mythological story.

Grendel's description as an "unblessed man" not only contradicts the conception of Grendel as some sort of dangerous creature, but might also conjure sympathy from the poet's Christian audience. The root which composes the latter half of the word "wonsæli" might also allow for some artificial resonance. Defined by Bosworth-Toller as "A hall," the latter part of the kenning, "sæl," might invite a more liberal translation of the

³ "wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten, / mære mearcstapa, se þe moras heold, / fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard / wonsæli wer weardode hwile, / siþðan him Scyppend forscifen hæfde / in Caines cynne" (lines 102-107).

compound as “hall-less.” Contextually, this would provide a dynamic counterpoint in a line which tells where Grendel “dwelt a while,” characterizing the monster in relation to an artificial construct which holds great significance to the poet’s audience. Heorot is described as “the timbered hall, splendid and gold-adorned... the most famous building among earth-dwellers under the heavens... its light gleamed over many lands”⁴ (307-11). Grendel twists and contorts this shining beacon of hope for mankind into hell on earth: “At morning-tide was this mead-hall, a princely hall, gore-stained when daylight gleamed, the bench-floor steamed with blood – a sword-bloodied hall”⁵ (484-87). This defilement of what John Halverson calls “a beacon of civilization” (593) must have been a shocking image for an Anglo-Saxon audience to conceive. Furthermore, Karl Wendersdorf notes how “remarkably realistic” (411) the *Beowulf*-poet’s depiction of a Danish mead-hall is save for the detail of the golden roof which, he concludes, seems to be a “calculated artistic device [whose] primary purpose was metaphorical and didactic” (424). Grendel stains that device with human blood, obscuring its significance and making it a grotesque symbol of his own violent hatred. His “hall-less” existence renders the Danes “hall-less,” as well.

These few introductory lines stretch the dimensions of Grendel across both time and space. A hostile creature that is everywhere and nowhere, the indeterminacy of his physical features means that an audience member huddled around a warm hearth-fire

⁴ “[s]æl timbred / geatolic ond goldfah... / þæt wæs foremærost foldbuendum / recede under roderum... / lixta se leoma ofer landa fela” (307-10).

⁵ “Ðonne wæs þeos medoheal on morgentid, / drihtsele dreorfah, þonne dæg lixte, / eal bencpelu blode bestymed, / heal heorudreore” (484-87).

would still need to be alert and wary of even the most familiar surroundings. Even if they did see him in time to react, we soon discover that no weapon crafted by human hands is capable of harming Grendel: “Those who fought did not know - those brave-minded men of battle who on all sides meant to strike and seek Grendel’s soul - that not even the best of iron anywhere on earth could harm the vicious attacker, for he had worked a spell upon all victory-weapons, upon the edge of every war-sword”⁶ (lines 798-805). The poet could have mentioned this bit of information about Grendel’s invulnerability to swords earlier, but its placement here suggests a subtle shift in perspective. Because Beowulf has the monster grappled, his men are able to get a better look at the creature and at what their weapons are failing to do to him. Although their attacks are ultimately futile, Beowulf’s intervention allows them to perceive the futility – something that one must assume was impossible while Grendel was able to retaliate against Danish sword strikes.

This theme of perceptual constraint appears again in a much more focused form once Grendel’s arm is mounted atop the hall’s roof for all to examine:

Then was Unferth more silent, the son of Ecglaf, in boasting
 speech about his battle-works after the noblemen, through
 Beowulf’s craft, examined the hand over the high roof, the fingers
 of that fiend - in place of nails at the end of each finger were, most
 like steel, the horrible warrior’s heathen hand-spurs; everyone

⁶ “Hie þæt ne wiston, þa hie gewin drugon, / heardhicgende hildemecgas, / ond on healfa gehwone heawan þohton, / sawle secan: þone synscaðan / ænig ofer eorþan irenna cyst, / guðbilla nan gretan nolde; ac he sigewæpnum forsworen hæfde, / ecga gehwylcre” (798-805).

agreed that not even the hardest of ancient iron could touch him or
harm the bloody battle-hand of this formidable foe.⁷ (980-90)

Here the perspective is filtered through the eyes of the noblemen examining the hand and Unferth, the king's "pyle" who brazenly questioned Beowulf's heroic stature to his face. The sharp nails on each finger which are "most like steel" almost turns Grendel into what we might today consider a sort of cyborg – another figure which brings technological artifice⁸ and organic nature into grotesque states of hybridity. The poet does not say that the claws were sharp as steel or strong as steel. With the perspective filtered through the eyes of Unferth and the noblemen looking at the hand mounted upon Heorot's roof, the poet presents "style gelicost" as a visual characteristic which is observable only now as a result of Beowulf's victory. At the very least, these strange claws establish "an abnormal relation to metal and metallurgy" (Bolens 120), but they also deepen Grendel's already unsettling monstrosity.

This deceptively simple feature presents the imagination with a number of potential interpretative pathways, each one more unnerving than the next. Renoir isolates another feature as an aspect of the poem which "further illustrates the poet's genius... Though we cannot see the monster himself, the sight of his eyes gives us the distressing sensation that *he* can see us" (165). With a single detail the *Beowulf*-poet evokes a sense

⁷ "Ða wæs swigra secg, sunu Ec[g]lafes, / on gylpspræce guðgeweorca, / siþðan æþelingas eorles cræfte / ofer heanne hrof hand sceawedon, / feondes fingras; foran æghwylc wæs, / steda nægla gehwylc style gelicost, / hæþenes handsporu hilderinces / egl[u] unheoru; æghwylc gecwæð, / þæt him heardra nan hrinan wolde / iren ærgod, þæt ðæs ahlæcan / blodige beadufolme onberan wolde" (980-990)

⁸ Grendel's steel claws resonate with other weaponized pieces of artifice which are also often associated with representations of cyborg figures in 20th and early 21st century popular culture.

of primal fear. Subsequently, after Grendel's death the poet evokes a sense of scientific curiosity. Why are Grendel's claws "most like steel?" Because Beowulf faces Grendel bare-handed and without armor, the image functions within the drama of the poem to elevate his heroic status by making Grendel seem more devious: "but tonight we two shall forego the use of the sword, if Grendel dares to seek a fight without weapons, and afterward let God in his wisdom, holy Lord, grant glory to whichever hand seems proper to him"⁹ (683-87). The fact that Grendel sports "heathen hand-spurs" ("hæpenes handsporu" 986) tips the scales unnaturally in his favor. Beowulf's word choice with "whichever hand seems proper" also seems prophetic given that we will soon discover that Grendel's battle-paw is anything but "proper." The poet draws specific attention in this instance to Grendel as a "warrior" ("hilderinces" 986), as well, which implies a certain level of skill with these weapons.

An unanswered question turns a relatively tiny detail into a grotesque enigma concerning the construction of Grendel as a character: how did Grendel's hand become so uniquely fitted for battle? Two potential solutions come to mind: (a) Grendel's steel-like claws are simply another of his supernatural attributes, or (b) they are an intentional form of body modification. Either solution spawns a litany of further inquiries. If (a) is the case, then there must be some significance to the fact that this attribute is not only supernatural, but also unnatural. Grendel's claws are not just larger than normal or sharper than normal - their steel-like appearance means that they defy classification as

⁹ "ac wit on niht sculon / secge ofersittan, gif h[e] gesecean dear / wig ofer wæpen, ond siþðan witig God / on swa hwæðere hond halig Dryhten / mærdō deme, swa him gemet þince" (683-87).

claws. Likewise their anatomical position on Grendel's hand would preclude them from being called blades. Even after death when human eyes can get a good long look at him, Grendel's nature (or unnature) thwarts any attempt to conceptualize the creature into a concrete whole. On the other hand, if the audience goes with option (b), then Grendel becomes a grotesque work of artifice himself. Either he turned himself into a walking weapon or someone else did; whichever the case, this fusion of an organic arm and an artificial blade could resonate with the poet's continued concern about the often inconsistent boundary between "man" ("secg") and "sword" ("secg"). Beowulf puts his sword down for this fight presuming that Grendel is incapable of wielding one, but the grotesque opposite turns out to be the case. A walking weapon of war, Grendel is physically incapable of achieving Beowulf's level of heroism because the only way he can disarm himself is by literally losing his arm.

Grendel is a character defined evasively through hints and shadows – as difficult to see for the characters in the poem as he is for the poem's audience. Although, the audience cannot see Grendel any more than the scop can, they can see his effects on space and time. By making the monster difficult to perceive and conceive for the human characters within the poem, the poet turns a restriction of his artistic medium into an opportunity for characterization. An example of Cohen's "mixed category" due to his metal claws, human emotions, and biblical lineage, Grendel "resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a 'system' allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration" (7). Both the characters and the audience share a desire for

Grendel to be brought within the system of human understanding, and Beowulf fulfills this desire against overwhelming odds. Still, Grendel's lifeless limb defies concrete classification as either a natural body part or an artificial weapon so that even after death Grendel continues to haunt the imagination.

The Confounding Simplicity of Grendel's Mother

It is easy to overlook Grendel's mother, both for the characters in the poem and for the critics who have examined the poem.¹⁰ More recently, though, scholars have recognized her central importance to both the narrative and thematic structure of *Beowulf*. In "The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel's Mother," Jane Nitzsche argues that Grendel's mother represents a transitional figure which shares likenesses with both Grendel and the dragon (299). She is therefore central, thematically and structurally as the middle part of the text, to the progression of the narrative. In the similarly titled "We've Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel's Mother," Wendy Hennequin finds very little textual evidence to support the characterization of Grendel's mother as a monster like Grendel or the dragon: "it is the critics and translators, not the poem itself, who demonize Grendel's mother" (513). On a more symbolic level, Renee Trilling applies Kristeva's idea of the *chora* to Grendel's mother, arguing that "she calls into question the legitimacy of the heroic order, of a feud-oriented and exchange-based culture that excludes certain people (namely women and outsiders) from meaningful action" (19). Problem, strange case, *chora*: to these James Paz would add riddle.

¹⁰ Tolkien famously left her out of his analysis in his watershed 1936 essay, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics."

According to him, Grendel's mother is a riddle personified, a self-conscious challenge to the preconceived notions of Danish society (238). Just as many of the Riddles of the Exeter Book overlap the boundaries between artifice and nature, so too does Grendel's mother. She challenges the conceptual frameworks which exclude her from the more extensive consideration given to her son and to the dragon.

The well-documented complexity of Grendel's mother sometimes obscures a more simple truth about her identity: her motherhood. More than any other of Beowulf's opponents, Grendel's mother seems to have a justifiable human motivation for her act of violence. She is not angered by human merriment, nor is she roused to hatred by theft of treasure. Her son suffered a painful, slow, and humiliating death at the hands of one man; moreover, she might have even cared for Grendel while he bled to death at the bottom of the mere.¹¹ It is not difficult to relate to her rage, most especially for anyone in the audience who has lost a child on the field of battle. Unlike the more passive Hildeburh who sings a lament as she lays her son upon the pyre and the more vocal Wealhtheow who speaks to forestall an outburst of violence which might threaten her children, Grendel's mother is equipped with the physical tools ("lapan fingrum," a sharp "seax," and prodigious strength) that enable her to express her grief in a very vengeful, visible

¹¹ The poet says that Grendel's mother "lived on after Grendel for a long time after war-care" ("lifde æfter lapan, langa þrage, / æfter guðceare" 1257-58). The kenning "war-care" is evocative of "grief-laden strife" (Klaeber) and "the care which is caused by battle" (Bosworth-Toller); since the Danes are in quite a celebratory mood following the battle, the reference must be either to Grendel or to his mother, or perhaps to both. Although it is tempting to connect the latter part of the kenning with the idea that the mother comforted Grendel or tried to dress his wound in some way, "-cearu" is most closely associated with "sorrow, grief" (Bosworth-Toller). The text does not provide enough information to determine the mother's immediate reaction to her son's dismemberment.

way. Yet, as Paz notes, her reprisal is also measured: “in her slaying of Æschere she is making a clear statement that she will be neither explained nor controlled by the community of Heorot” (232). Paz goes on to argue that Æschere, who is described as Hrothgar’s “runwita ond rædbora” (“rune-knower and advice-bearer” 1325), might have been one of the few Danes who was capable of reading and interpreting runic messages. He is also said to be Hrothgar’s “shoulder-companion when we protected our heads in battle as footsoldiers clashed together, striking against boar-helms”¹² (1326-28), so it seems clear that Hrothgar’s feelings toward Æschere are much more than simply utilitarian. He was a comrade in arms, “a steadfast nobleman, so Æschere was!”¹³ (1329), and he was very likely also a key member of Danish society.

Although no one eulogizes Grendel’s mother with such eloquence, we can gain a sense of her emotional state from the landscape in which she dwells: “Grendel’s mother, a lady *aglæc*-wife remembered her misery, she who had to live in the cold streams of water-terror, since Cain became the sword-slayer of his only brother, his father’s kin”¹⁴ (1258-63). Nicholas Howe says of the narrator of *The Wife’s Lament* that “Her state is... outside the norm of human experience, and for reasons that seem hardly at all of her doing” (66-67). A similar sense of injustice, or at least harsh justice, accompanies the description of Grendel’s mother cut off from the realm of human society by an ancient

¹² "eaxlgestealla, þonne we on orlege / hafelan weredon, þonne hniton feþan, / eoferas cnysedan" (1326-28).

¹³ "[æþeling] ærgod, swylc Æschere wæs!" (1329).

¹⁴ "Grendles modor, / ides aglæcwif yrmþe gemunde, / se þe wætergesan wunian scolde, / cealde streamas, siþðan Ca[in] wearð / to ecbanan angan breþer, / fæderengmæge" (1258-63). Again, "*aglæc*" remains untranslated. For consideration of this particular application of the word, see Menzer.

crime committed by someone else. Subtle hints embedded in the nature imagery also emphasize hers as a human condition, with “water-terror” (“wætergesan” 1260) and “cold streams” (“cealde streamas” 1261). These waters are described not in a vacuum, but in relation to a human mind which would apply the ideas of “terror” and “cold” to them. There is emotional weight attached to these physical objects – a weight that would not be heeded by the “wurm-kin” (“wyrmcynnes” 1425) and “sea-drakes” (“sædcracean” 1426) which also inhabit the mere. Grendel’s mother, on the other hand, is shown feeling both fear when she is startled in Heorot and vengeful fury as she attacks Beowulf, suggesting that she has a range of emotions much more comparable to humans than to beasts. Right away, the audience is invited to feel alongside Grendel’s mother, to see things from her perspective and to understand her plight.

After granting this brief glimpse of the mother in the mere, the poet then summarizes in 15 lines all of the circumstances which have led to this moment: Cain’s treachery and flight into the “wastes” (“westes”), Grendel’s birth and fight with Beowulf, and finally Grendel’s death. This sequence of events stretching across great swaths of time and space culminates in an image of Grendel’s mother, “driven and grim-minded, wanting to go on her sorrowful journey to avenge the death of her son”¹⁵ (1277-78). Her movement toward Heorot, then, starts all the way back with Cain’s cold-blooded fratricide, lending a cosmological edge to her motivation for vengeance.

¹⁵ “gifre ond galgmod gegan wolde / sorhfulne sið, sunu [deað] wreca” (1277-78). The word “gifre” can also be translated as “greedy” or “covetous,” but Bosworth-Toller also lists “voracious, eager, desirous” as alternatives. Given that Grendel’s mother is not seeking treasure and that she only takes one life, “driven” seems to me to be a more appropriate rendering in this context.

Grendel's mother reaches Heorot and causes a "sudden reversal" ("edhwyrft" 1281) for the Danes slumbering inside. The way in which the poet depicts her approach as something which began long ago with Cain and only now culminates in an act of violence is mirrored by the sudden and enigmatic description of a sword striking a helmet: "The horror was less by as much as the strength of a maiden, war-terror of a woman, is less than a weaponed man when a sword bound and hammer-forged, its edges strong, slices through the boar on his opponent's helm, a sword decorated with blood"¹⁶ (1282-87). Oddly, this rather abrupt interjection appears immediately after we are told that Grendel's mother entered the hall. No details tell us how she got into the hall; perhaps the door had not yet been repaired or maybe she snuck in through a window. In any case, Grendel's mother is inside Heorot, which is clearly something the sleeping Danes failed to anticipate. Perhaps, then, the "strength of a maiden" is something that the Danes similarly underestimate. Wendy Hennequin argues that the image is not so much a comment on the mother's physical strength, but rather "the horror" ("se gryre" 1282) elicited by the idea of a female in relation to a male warrior (506). With his "sword decorated with blood" (1286), this is obviously a male warrior who, like Grendel, has slain many others. As far as we and the Danes know, Grendel's mother has never killed anyone. She dwells in "cold streams" ("cealde streamas" 1261) far from the heat of

¹⁶ "Wæs se gryre læssa / efne swa micle, swa bið mægpa cræft, / wiggryre wifes be wæpnedmen, / þonne heoru bunden, hamere geþ[ru]en, / sweord swate fah swin ofer helme / ecgum dyhtig andweard scireð." (1282-87)

“battle-sweat” (“heaðoswat” 1668): why, the Danes might think, should she be feared as much as her son?¹⁷

This sequence must have been especially poignant for members of the audience who have seen the horrors of war firsthand, of which, Dorothy Whitelock asserts, there were likely many: “We may take it that the poet of *Beowulf* spoke of battle to men who knew what these things meant” (87). By using war imagery to define how the Danes conceived Grendel’s mother, the poet is essentially revealing their thought process. These are men who measure threats through comparison with what they think they know about how the world works. Hrothgar and his people know that there is another “march-stalker holding the moor” (“mearcstapan moras healdan” 1348). This one, however, “as clearly as they could ascertain, bore the likeness of a woman” (“þæs þe hie gewislicost gewitan meahton, / idese onlicn[e]s” 1350-51). Grendel’s mother is a woman who has not killed nearly so many people as her son; therefore, the idea of her does not strike fear into the hearts of men as did the idea of Grendel. She does not stay an idea for long, however: “Then in the hall was the hard edge drawn, swords over seats, many a broad shield heaved firm in hands - none remembered his helm or broad byrnie, when the terror seized them”¹⁸ (1288-91). The “hard edge” echoes the line prior wherein the “edges strong” cut through the boar-helm, yet while the former was thrust in offense, the latter are drawn in

¹⁷ The association of Grendel’s mother with cold streams is further deepened when the sword Beowulf uses to slay Grendel’s mother and behead Grendel subsequently melts due to the creatures’ “battle-sweat” (“heaposwate” 1606).

¹⁸ “Ða wæs on healle heardecg togen / sweord ofer setlum, sidrand manig / hafan handa fæst; helm ne gemunde, / byrnan side, þa hine se broga angeat” (1288-91).

defense. The “broad shields” also seem to be raised as more of a reflex reaction than an actual strategic use of war-gear. Furthermore, the seasoned warriors of Heorot are unable to don their armor, either in a rush of fear or because Grendel’s mother moves so swiftly. Clearly, the idea of Grendel’s mother, the “horror” (“gryre” 1282), is much less threatening than the “terror” (“broga” 1291) of her actual presence.¹⁹ This image very nearly equates Grendel’s mother, or at least the spatial effect of Grendel’s mother, with the blade which slices through the helm. Both hit their mark and penetrate artificial defenses before their targets even know they are there. Before the Danes know what hit them, it is already too late.

Grendel’s mother apparently feels as much fear as the Danes: “She was in haste, meant to get out of there, to save her life, when she was discovered”²⁰ (1292-93). Before she leaves, she grabs a sleeping thane and Grendel’s severed limb from atop Heorot’s roof. The arm had been a sign of Beowulf’s triumph, and fittingly, Grendel’s mother also leaves a sign of victory for any avenging humans to discover: “To all the Danes, men of the Scyldings, it was a grave sight to endure, a pain in the heart of every earl, when those many thanes met Æschere’s head on the sea-cliff”²¹ (1416-21). Once again, the poet presents a steady sequence of images and moods (1416-20) which do not fully cohere

¹⁹ Sarah Elder argues that the verb “onġeat,” which is usually translated as “seized,” more accurately represents an act of perception – specifically, Grendel’s mother’s perception of the Danes sleeping in the hall (316). The “terror” (“broga” 1291) would then refer more to perceiving that they are being perceived, rather than simply seeing Grendel’s mother.

²⁰ “Heo wæs on ofste, wolde ut þanon, / feore beorgan, þa heo onfunden wæs” (1292-93). Her fear is understandable given that she likely knows the creature that tore the arm off of her extraordinarily powerful son is probably still nearby.

²¹ “Denum eallum wæs, / winum Scyldinga weorce on mode / to ġeþolianne, ðegne monegum, / oncyð eorla gehwæm, syðþan Æscheres / on þam holmclife hafelan metton” (1416-21).

until we see “Æschere’s head on the sea-cliff” (1421). First, we see an amorphous profusion of emotional effects without actually seeing the catalyst for those effects, and then there it is in the starkest, most objective language possible: “on þam holmclife hafelan metton” (1421). It is not immediately clear from the text whether Grendel’s mother leaves Æschere’s head as a trophy for the Danes to find or if she simply tossed it aside. Either way, its sudden discovery causes the Danes a great deal of distress and sets the stage for Beowulf’s plunge into a hellish environment.²²

Not content to wait for her foe to reach the underwater “nether-hall” (“nīpsele” 1513), Grendel’s mother attacks Beowulf almost immediately after his dive into the mere. His armor holds against her “hostile fingers” (“lāpan fingrum” 1505), but she is still able to carry him “into her abode” (“to hofe sinum” 1507). The mother’s level of control in this underwater battle is striking, and her domination continues in the open air of the “nether-hall,” as well. Beowulf’s first offensive strike with the sword named Hrunting echoes the figurative sword-strike image: “but the edge failed the man at need; many times before it had endured hand-meetings, often sheared through helms and fated war-garments; then was the first time that the glory of that excellent treasure failed”²³ (1524-28). The echo is direct and stark, yet the image in front of us now is of Beowulf – a man whose mere presence inspires fear and awe in all around him – swinging a sword which had “often sheared through helms” against an unarmored woman. Nowhere does the poet

²² "This last detail might be thought merely grotesque if one were not aware that this is no naturalistic landscape, but rather a ghastly one that calls up Christian ideas of hell" (Klaeber "Introduction" ci).

²³ "ac seo ecg gewac / ðeodne æt þearfe; ðolode ær fela / hondgemota, helm oft gescær, / fægæs fyrðhræg; ða wæs forma sið / deorum madme, þæt his dom alæg" (1524-28).

state that the mother wears any sort of armor, let alone a helmet, so what could have prevented such a storied blade from penetrating her bare skin? Apparently, she is protected by the same work of magical artifice which defended her son against swords. If Beowulf cannot drive a man-made blade into the skull of Grendel's mother, then it would seem that no man or woman can, which reinforces the idea that these monsters represent that which lies far outside the realm of human control. An artificial blade can shear through an artificial helm, but there are parts of nature (a mother's grief, for instance) that simply cannot be broken without the aid of a higher power.

Beowulf quickly regains the upper hand as he grabs Grendel's mother by the shoulder and throws her to the ground. Whereas Grendel meant to flee from Beowulf's grasp, his mother "grappled him to her" ("him tongeanes feng" 1542), forcing the "strongest of warriors... [to take] a fall" ("wigena strengest... þæt he on fylle wearð" 1543-44). This is an astounding show of raw strength and tactical awareness that completely undermines the idea that the mother's martial prowess "is less than a weaponed man" (1283-84). Without the aid of weapons, Grendel's mother has brought vengeance well within her grasp. It is somewhat curious then that she attempts to exact vengeance with a weapon: "She sat upon her hall-guest and drew her knife, broad and bright-edged; she would avenge her son, her only child"²⁴ (1545-48). The knife is not a fantastic blade with a storied past, yet it presents as much of a threat to the young Beowulf's life as the dragon's battle-flames do to the king of the Geats fifty years later.

²⁴ "Ofsæt þa þone selegyst, ond hyre seaxe geteah / brad [ond] brunecg; wolde hire bearn wrecan, / angan eaferan" (1545-48).

The absence of poetic elaboration makes the knife much more of an immediate threat; this is not a blade with the illustrious history of Hrunting. Its simplicity belies its significance, but it also lends a sense of immediacy to the motion of the mother's attack.

Events unfold very swiftly in this fight; no other battle in *Beowulf* features such intricately plotted attacks and counter-attacks. Strangely, we do not actually see Grendel's mother stab Beowulf. She closes on her foe, draws her knife, and then the next action depicted is the armor stopping the blade. We the audience see it as Beowulf must have. He might glimpse the dagger's gleam or hear its metallic shriek as it is swiftly drawn – enough information to assess danger – but before he can react it is already too late: "There the son of Ecgtheow would have perished under the broad earth, the Geatish champion, had not his battle-mail offered him help, hard war-net, and holy God granted him battle-victory; the wise Lord, Ruler of the heavens, easily decided it right, after Beowulf stood up again"²⁵ (1550-56). The emphasis placed on the "broad earth" represents the immense power of the natural. Beowulf is cut off from the light of Heorot, yet a single piece of artifice provides enough of a foothold for God to intervene. Significantly, it is the "hard war-net" *and* "holy God" which prevent the blade from taking Beowulf's life; also, the Lord grants victory only *after* Beowulf stands up on his own. The defeat of Grendel's mother is therefore a collaborative effort between the

²⁵ "Hæfde ða forsiðod sunu Ecgþeowes / under gynne grund, Geata cempa, / nemne him heaðobyrne helpe gefremede, / herenet hearde, ond halig God / gewold wigsigor; witig Drihten, / rodera Rædend hit on ryht gesced / yðelice, syþðan he eft astod" (1550-56).

human and the divine. Although this reinforces the Christian perspective of the poet, it also elevates Grendel's mother as an immensely powerful foe.

The Danes measure the threat posed by Grendel's mother just as the Coast-Warden measures Beowulf, with direct reference to artifice. She wears no artifice that we can see and she has not killed as her son has, so she does not sport the conventional signifiers that inspire fear. The Danes²⁶ fail to account for a mother's thirst for vengeance, and consequently they pay dearly for this oversight. Grendel's mother challenges the prominence of human artifice on two levels. Physically, her own magical artifice protects her and her son from "every sort of edge" ("ecga gehwylcre" 805). This places the exalted work of the "aristocrats of blacksmiths" (Wilson, "Craft" 264) in a much more humble light. Though a sword might shear through a helm, even the best of irons has limits. Grendel's mother also undermines the thought process which measures strength with reference to artifice. The drunken Danes slumbering in Heorot after Grendel's defeat should have seen her coming. They know another creature exists and that she bears some relation to Grendel, yet they do not perceive her as a threat until she is physically present in their midst. The Dane's lack of foresight results from a poor understanding of their enemy, yet such an understanding threatens to destabilize the martial vigor of armed combat. If a warrior grants that his mortal enemy, whether Grendelkin or human, has a mother who will feel a pain of unimaginable depth if his

²⁶ The Geats, on the other hand, cannot be blamed because the Danes fail to tell Beowulf about Grendel's mother in the first place. The fact that he gears up in his armor before plunging into the mere suggests that the hero does not underestimate Grendel's mother as the Danes did.

sword should hit its mark, might he not think twice in the heat of battle? Grendel's mother brings the pain felt by Hildeburh and soon to be felt by Wealhtheow into the immediate present. The danger she poses represents one of the oft unanticipated repercussions of "war-victory" ("wigsigor" 1554): the grief of those left behind.

There is no simple answer to the riddle of Grendel's mother. The ease with which the Danes seem to overlook her as a threat is indicative of a more general shortsightedness and lack of empathy. An individual warrior on the field of battle might bear his father's sword or some other marker of his family's identity, but these items alone do not encompass all of the social ties which will be severed by his death. Granted, no human mother (or father, for that matter) is capable of striking back with the extraordinary swiftness and ferocity of Grendel's mother, who is in a unique position to be able to express her anguish through vengeance. But the pain of bereavement is representative of a tangible reality which lingers for a long while after the death of a loved one, and given the indeterminant futures in which that pain will dwell, it is impossible to predict how it might one day manifest. By shortening that timescale and doling out immediate retribution, Grendel's mother makes this pain inescapably visible to those who have the most difficulty seeing it.

Swords Wide Sprung

The characterization of the dragon hinges primarily on two figurative images: treasure and fire.²⁷ He does not so much guard his treasure-hoard as revel in it. For three

²⁷ Christine Rauer lists four types of imagery in order of prominence: "fire, the compulsive hoarding of treasure, the dragon's nocturnal nature and its inquisitiveness" (34).

hundred years the serpent slumbers amidst his precious arms, jewelry, and cups until the theft of a single piece from his vast hoard is enough to rouse an apocalyptic furor which threatens to destroy entirely the world of mankind. The dragon means to answer this offense with a weapon that would not only shear through a helm, as the blade which characterizes Grendel's mother does, but would also melt both helm and head – an image which recalls the grotesque way in which Hildeburh's son and brother burn upon the mound earlier in the poem: "the heads melted, wound-gates burst open as the blood sprang out, battle-bites of the body" ("hafelan multon, / bengeato burston, ðonne blod ætspranc, / laðbite lices" 1120-22). If Grendel and his mother represent and operate in darkness, the dragon brazenly wields his "battle-light" ("hildeleoman" 2583) for all to see. A comingling of fire, treasure, and hatred for mankind, Beowulf's final foe evokes imagery associated with the blacksmith's forge wherein intense heat turns lumps of gold and iron into beautifully interlaced pieces of art. Perversely, this creature uses his flames to do the opposite, hoarding his own treasures and destroying others: "Beowulf's own home, best of hall-buildings, melted in fire-waves, the gift-throne of the Geats" ("his sylfes h[a]m, / bolda selest brynewylmum mealt, / gifstol Geata" 2325-27). In the dragon we see human emotion and ingenuity taken to an extreme which becomes more and more prescient as humankind's ability to destroy itself grows ever sharper.

Critics differ on precisely to what degree the dragon can be said to resemble or reflect humanity. As Kenneth Sisam puts it, "There is rather more information about the Dragon [than about the Grendelkin], but on many points curiosity about his nature and shape is unsatisfied" ("Beowulf's Fight" 133). Daniel Calder expands this idea in his

argument that the “world of the dragon... belongs to an order entirely different from that of Hrothgar’s court” (29). He is well over three hundred years old and he inhabits a space which “begins to lose measurable physical reality” (31). The dragon thus cannot be classified as *superhuman* as perhaps Grendel and his mother can; he is so far beyond human dimension and perception that he cannot be defined in relation to human experience. Conversely, Raymond Tripp senses some very human features in the dragon, even going so far as to argue that the creature was once a man (60). Peter Braeger concurs with Tripp in his analysis of the Old English word “earmsceapen,” arguing that its meaning may have implied a transformation from man to beast (329). This stance is controversial, but Christine Rauer suggests that Tripp’s interpretation is by no means groundless: “the events prior to the theft of the cup do indeed leave a very disjointed and convoluted impression” (40). While the poet does not explicitly draw a connection from man to dragon, he certainly allows his audience to do so.²⁸ Rauer also notes how uniquely crafted *Beowulf*’s dragon episode is compared to other contemporaneous sources wherein “attributes of the dragon really seem to be... more or less interchangeable and self-contained elements which usually have no implications for the rest of a given narrative” (35). Just as the rest of the poem interrogates where humankind stands in relation to the boundaries between artifice and nature, so too does this creature. Even though it does not

²⁸ Following Grendel’s defeat, one of the Hrothgar’s thanes praises Beowulf’s victory with reference to another dragon-slayer, Sigemund.

physically resemble the human form as Grendel and his mother seem to, the dragon still invites reflection on what it means to be human.²⁹

The dragon's paradoxical nature is heightened by the poet's representation of the hoard, itself. Characterized as both an "eorðsele" ("earth-hall" 2332) and a "wyrmhord" ("worm-hoard" 2222), the dragon's store of treasure wavers eerily between artifice and nature. Rauer suggests that this might imply a fusion of conflicting sources that the poet is drawing upon (39), but the wavering may also be by design – a part of the poet's atmosphere of terror. Though this section of the manuscript is badly damaged and heavily corrected,³⁰ enough of the text remains to piece out that these works of artifice were placed within this barrow "in yore-days [by] some man" ("on geardagum gumena nathwylc" 2233) who was apparently the lone survivor of a defeated nation. The poet does not name him, which makes it all the more strange that he allows this character to deliver a lengthy lament (2247-66). The precise execution of this unnamed man's death is also quite poignant: "Sad of mind, he bemoaned his sorrow, alone after all; unhappily turned the days and the nights, until the welling of death touched his heart"³¹ (2267-70). Time stretches with the mention of days and nights, cruelly extending the man's sorrow. Death is characterized as "wylm," a word which often ties together imagery of the natural

²⁹ Tripp's interpretation is also supported by the tale told by Hrothgar's thane following the defeat of Grendel in which Sigemund slays a dragon. In other Norse and Icelandic sources, Sigemund's son Sigurd kills Fafnir, Sigurd's uncle who had transformed from a man into a dragon (Orchard, *Cassell's* 314-20).

³⁰ "It now seems impossible to sort out when, by whom, and to what effect the many corrections have been made" (Tripp 24).

³¹ "Swa giomormod gιοhðo mænde / an æfter eallum, unbliðe hwe(arf) / dægес ond nihtes, oð ðæt deaðes wylm / hran æt heortan" (2267-70).

world with heightened emotional stress: e.g., “breast-welling” (“breost-wylm” 1877), “care-welling” (“cear-wylm” 282), “sea-welling” (“brim-wylm” 1494). These treasures are clearly not the ornaments, weapons, and armor that Hrothgar “so manfully” (“Swa manlice” 1046) bestows upon Beowulf for his brave deeds. The “unknown man” encapsulates his grief with images of silent instruments and tamed animals: “No pleasure of the harp have I, no glee-beaming joy; nor does the good hawk beat its wings through the hall, nor the swift steed stamp its feet in the city-place”³² (2262-65). Memories of artifice express the depth of the survivor’s loneliness and anguish. These images also inform the significance of the hoarded treasure which initially made it possible to construct a “city-place” wherein harps could play and animals could be tamed to serve human needs.

Domesticated creatures such as hawks and steeds bear a resemblance to the gold which once meant so much to the structures of human society but which must now lay unused under the ground. Alvin Lee’s argument that the poem does not “devalue the skilfully fashioned... technical achievements” of humankind is certainly accurate (85), however the poet still implicates these very valuable pieces of artifice in the dissolution of heroic society. Gold and treasure are significant in more than just a monetary sense. They help to preserve societal structures such as treasure-giving and the lord-thane relationship, and they also aid in memorializing the glorious deeds of long-dead ancestors. Similarly, the trained hawk and the riding horse represent humankind’s power

³² “Næs hearpan wyn, / gomen gleobeames, ne god hafoc / geond sæl swingeð, ne se swifta mearh / burhstede beateð” (2262-65).

to extend its scope of influence. Humans can neither fly like a bird nor move across the earth with the swiftness and power of a horse; our movements are clumsy and awkward compared to these graceful creatures. Yet we are capable of harnessing their unique abilities to enhance our own. A hunter with a trained hawk will have greater range than one without; a warrior on horseback will have multiple advantages over one on foot. These animals use their distinctive characteristics to assist their human handlers, to aid them in their continued acquisition of material wealth through trade and conquest. Fittingly, the hawk's ability to fly and the steed's raw physical power find monstrous expression in the dragon, who appears to be an utterly untameable beast. The wyrm represents all that lies beyond humanity's ability to harness nature, which makes the dragon's association with the hoarded artifice all the more wondrous and strange.

In a sense, the dragon's existence is the result of this untamed gold, for "He must seek out a hoard in the earth, where he guards heathen gold, old and wise in winters, though it does him no good at all"³³ (2275-77). The poet's use of the word "sceall" indicates that it is the dragon's natural inclination to find a hoard of gold and guard it. From the perspective of the poet, this action seems to violate both natural and artificial order. The hoard provides neither nourishment nor monetary value to the ancient serpent. Presumably, he can find shelter in any one of the many caves along the Geatish coast. Perhaps he could even find an unworked deposit of gold ore deep underground, a stronghold which would surely be more secure from human greed. Yet this creature's

³³ "He gesecean sceall (hea)r(h on) hrusan, þær he hæðen gold warað wintrum frod; ne byð him wihte ðy sel" (2275-77).

natural inclination to nest near the fire-forged metalwork of human creation means that he is just as much a product of human sin as is Grendel, who descends from Abel's murder at the hands of Cain. Like the ocean barnacles which attach to a ship's hull, the dragon would not exist as we know it were it not for human creation and circulation of material artifice. Just as the Danes fail to account for the threat of Grendel's mother following Beowulf's victory, the dragon is the similarly unanticipated by-product of human craftsmanship.

Whereas Grendel's mother killed *Æschere* alone and perhaps meant to take a single life only, the dragon unleashes his battle-flames upon the whole of Geatish society: "that hostile air-flyer would leave nothing alive. The *wyrm*'s warfare was widely seen, the cruelly hostile spite near and far, how the war-terror hated and harmed the Geatish people"³⁴ (2314-19). Even Grendel seems to have exercised some small measure of restraint, targeting only the thanes in Heorot during his twelve year reign of terror (120-43). The dragon, on the other hand, burns indiscriminately by night and then returns to his barrow before dawn: "He had encircled the people of the land in fire, flames and burning; he took shelter in his barrow, trusted in its walls and strength; this faith deceived him"³⁵ (2321-23). This last statement from the poet offers the slightest reassurance that the dragon will not reign supreme, but the creature's fires have already destroyed so much that it seems all but a hopeless endeavor.

³⁴ "no ðær aht cwices / lað lyftfloga læfan wolde. / Wæs þæs wyrmes wig wide gesyne, / nearofages nið nean ond fearran, / hu se guðsceaða Geata leode / hatode ond hynde" (2314-19).

³⁵ "Hæfde landwara lige befangen, / bæle ond bronde; beorges getruwode, / wiges ond wealles; him seo wen ge Leah" (2321-23).

Guillemette Bolens views the origins of the dragon's flames as something more psychological than physical: "The dragon's intellect is the source of flames because fire is produced not by organs but by a psychophysical event" (122). They are simultaneously an expression of the dragon's emotional state and a very real physical threat to human beings. Often harbingers of death, destruction, and bereavement, flames are a recurring image elsewhere in *Beowulf*. Grendel's eyes glow "like fire" ("ligge gelicost" 727) as he stalks amongst the slumbering soldiers. Heorot is fated to be destroyed by "hostile fires" ("laðan liges" 83). Similarly, every warrior in the poem will meet his end in the flames of the funeral pyre, which will reflect in the tear-filled eyes of those left behind. Along these lines, Hilda Ellis Davidson suggests that the Anglo-Saxon dragon is closely associated with funereal practices, "a mythical figure who has emerged as a result of ritual at the grave" (*Gods and Myths* 161). This links the dragon very closely with death and also with the grief of those still living. More subtly, fire is associated with weapons of war through kennings such as "battle-light" ("beadoleoma" and "hildeleoma") and even with the dragon itself through descriptions of the "wurm-patterned" ("wyrmfah") blade. Unless the wielder's intent is to destroy everything – as the inhuman dragon's is – fire would seem to be a less efficient weapon than the sword, which in theory can be brought to bear against one foe at a time. Yet as we have seen throughout the poem, acts of violence reverberate far beyond the purview of those who carry them out.

Beowulf's prediction of the dissolution of the Danish/Heathobard alliance provides one of the most striking examples of the chaos caused by a single act of violence. As he relates his forecast to Hygelac, Beowulf expects that an "old spear-

warrior” (“eald æscwiga” 2041), drunk and angered by the sight of his former enemy, will goad a younger Heathobard into battle:

‘Can you, my friend, recognize that sword, dear iron, which your father bore into battle for the last time under his war-helm when the Danes slew him, took the slaughter-field as Withergyld fell after the destruction of heroes, those valiant Scyldings? Now here one of his slayer’s sons, joyful in his treasures, struts upon the floor, brags about the murder and bears the treasure that you should possess by right.’³⁶ (2047-56)

After many such promptings, Beowulf predicts that the young Dane will slay the visiting Heathobard and flee into the wilderness: “He urges him so and reminds him in each conversation with sore words, until the time comes that the thane of Freawaru, for his father’s deeds, sleeps bloodstained after the bite of a blade, forfeits his life; his killer knows the land well and escapes alive”³⁷ (2057-62). Violence erupts once again, but Beowulf perceives that it will begin with thought rather than action. The “dear iron,” by its mere existence and visibility, sets a chain of events inexorably toward an outburst of violence. In this way, the sword is much like the flame, which can grow from the most meager of cinders into a world of fire given the right conditions. The poet makes this

³⁶ “‘Meaht ðu, min wine, mece gecnawan, / þone fæder to gefeohte bær / under heregriman hindeman siðe, / dyre iren, ðær hyne Dene slogon, / weoldon wælstowe, syððan Wiðergyld læg, / æfter hælepa hryre, hwate Scyldungas? / Nu her þara banana byre nathwylces / frætwum hremig on flet geap, / morðres gylpe[ð], ond þone maðpum byreð, / þone þe ðu mid rihte rædan sceoldest” (2047-56).

³⁷ “‘Manað swa ond myndgað mæla gehwylce / sarum wordum, oð ðæt sæl cymeð, / þæt se fæmnan þegn fore fæder dædum / æfter billes bite blodfag swefeð, / ealdres scyldig; him se oðer þonan / losað (li)figende, con him land geare” (2057-62).

association explicit with his use of the word “battle-light” (“hildeleoma”) to describe both a sword (1143) and the flames which spew from the dragon’s mouth (2583). This equation encourages the audience to consider the relationship between sword and flame. While it may seem as if the sword represents a more focused and pointed distillation of fire’s destructive power, the *Beowulf*-poet seems to suggest that a well-crafted blade can spark a wave of destruction more powerful than any wildfire.

Still, the characterization of the monsters reveals an unease about the potential for these objects to breed violence and widespread destruction. Treasure lives on long after its human possessors, as the dragon’s rudely interrupted three hundred year guardianship clearly shows. Once those who own the beautiful cups, arms, and armor perish, the poet’s words concerning Scyld Scefing’s ship burial once again ring true: “Men do not know to speak truly, not hall-counselors nor heroes under heaven, who received that cargo” (“Men ne cunnon / secgan to soðe, seleræden[d]e, / hæleð under heofenum, hwa þæm hlæste onfeng” 50-52). The tamed hawk and steed do not keep to their training when their human handlers are gone; they revert back to their instinctual drives in order to survive. The dragon complicates the idea of treasure and material wealth by associating these pieces of artifice with such animals. Untamed gold lays rusting in the earth, transforming over the course of centuries into shapes impossible to fathom and giving rise to destructive forces which can neither be tamed nor bartered with.

Swords, trained hawks and horses, even grand halls such as Heorot: all such works of artifice and domestication invite an illusion of man’s control over nature. The monsters – immensely powerful and immeasurably old – continually thwart this

conception. They are the products of mankind's hubris – a hubris which stretches back to the individual sin of Cain and also to the collective works of a long-forgotten nation. In both cases, the causes lie too far in the past to be remedied directly. Only an equally supernatural hero such as Beowulf is capable of defeating these monsters, yet even he succumbs to forces far beyond the bounds of human control. These forces nevertheless spring not from some distant chaos, but from the fires of the forge. These creatures have local human origins – fratricide, hoarded treasure, feud – and if they are given spaces and timescales that lie outside the purview of human perception, they can grow into the monstrous threats represented by Grendel, his mother, and the dragon. If Cain had not killed Abel and if the hoarded treasure had remained in circulation, Grendel and the dragon would not have come into being. Often what begins as something that is well within the scope of human control transforms over time into unimaginably destructive forces.

What the poet seems to be drawing our attention to is not so much these monstrous results as their root causes. When the sword-smith crafts a pattern-welded blade, does he take into consideration the lives which it will take or the hatred that it might one day inspire?³⁸ Does the hoarder of treasure think that his greed will die with him and not transform into a force which will burn entire nations? The poet's own craft is

³⁸ Neither the sword nor its maker can bear direct blame for the dissolution of the Heathobard/Danish alliance, for example. The blade is simply a hunk of metal and the smith is simply plying his trade, yet the appearance of the sword still gives the "old spear-warrior" (2041) the opportunity to drive a younger man to kill. Human misuse of such weapons and the extraordinary craft of their makers seem to be what the poet is critiquing.

even susceptible to such transformation as it is the song of the scop which draws Grendel's ire in the first place. In a much more immediate sense, Grendel's mother shows how the effects of war and violence resonate far beyond any single sword-strike. The Danes thought that their strife was over and did not consider the possibility that Grendel's mother could feel as deeply as they could. Hrothgar underestimated his enemy's humanity and paid dearly for it. Although Grendel "embodies the whole range of the other-than-human" (O'Brian O'Keefe 491), his relationship with his mother connects him inextricably to the human.

The movements and associations of the monsters challenge us to take into account the implications of actions which may seem wholly innocent and even insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Executed thoughtlessly and in the heat of emotion, the aftereffects of these actions will reverberate throughout human history, spawning new monstrosities in their untraceable wake. Unless a Beowulf is born once or twice per generation, the only measure of control we can hope to have is individual prudence in the here and now. In wrestling with the origins of Grendel's steel claws, the mother's desire for vengeance, and the dragon's gold, the poet connects the monsters' motions through space to larger movements through time. These are enemies whom the Danes and the Geats fail to understand, and this is a failure which affects not only them, but also future generations who are wholly innocent of the initial oversight. More than reaffirm all that we are not, these monstrously interwoven images of artifice and nature show us what we are capable of becoming.

CHAPTER IV: THE RHETORIC OF SPATIAL EFFECTS

The *Beowulf*-poet's rhetorical situation never changes. His audience, whether gathered around a hall-fire or with Klaeber's edition in hand, experiences the ebb and flow of the verse consistently from a fixed perspective, and the poet shapes his words, images, and poetic figures with that perspective in mind. If he is using "spatial effects" in order to convey a sense of the extraordinary, then his intent is to convey this sense to an audience which we know very little about. There are instances within the poem, however, when a human character addresses other human characters as part of a fictionalized rhetorical setting. Of course, the characters still speak using the conventions of Anglo-Saxon verse, but these words function on both a poetical and rhetorical level. Occasionally, the rhetorical need arises for these characters to convey a sense of the extraordinary, and to do this they often utilize spatial effects in a manner similar to the *Beowulf*-poet. Analysis of these instances reveal a poet using not only language but language-users to craft his poem. How they utilize poetic figures like spatial effects is as integral to their characterization as is their martial prowess or societal standing. Throughout *Beowulf*, the ability to speak with poetic vigor is presented as a skill that is as integral to the preservation (or usurpation) of a kingdom as the ability to wield a sword. We cannot judge necessarily how well a character bears arms without the poet's own evaluative observations and accentuations, but we can see how well (that is, how much like the poet) a character wields words and poetic figures.

The Coast-Warden

Beowulf is often cited as a *scop* of comparable mettle to the *Beowulf*-poet, but the unnamed coast-warden with whom he first converses is also a competent wielder of his “word-hoard.” Having just made landfall in Danish territory with a fierce retinue of heavily armed and armored soldiers at his side, the Geatish Beowulf is greeted with a challenge from the Danish coast-warden: “What are you, armor-bearers, wearing coats of mail, who have come sailing thus in a tall ship over the sea-road, hither over the waves?”¹ (237-40). The coast-warden laces his injunction with images of artifice and nature, and stark ones at that. His challenge to the Geatish seamen is marked by concrete nouns and extensive variation. This densely layered description is meant to convey both to the audience and to the Geats that the coast-warden possesses a high level of perceptiveness and insight: characteristics which must serve him well in his profession. His words show more than they tell, and what they show is a recognition of the threat which these heavily armored Geats pose to Danish lands. After establishing his perceptive acuity, the coast-warden then narrows the focus to Beowulf alone: “Never have I seen a greater earl on earth than that one of yours, a man in war-gear; that is not a simple hall-man, honored in weapons, unless his countenance belies him, his glorious form”² (247-51). Not only have the Geats sent a retinue of armor-bearing soldiers, but they seem also to have sent their most formidable warrior. The coast-warden sees in Beowulf something that exceeds the

¹ "Hwæt syndon ge searohæbendra, / byrnum werede, þe þus brontne ceol, / ofer lagustræte lædan cwomon, / hider ofer holmas?" (237-40)

² "Næfre ic maran geseah / eorla ofer eorþan, ðonne is eower sum, / secg on searwum; nis þæt seldguma, / wæpnum geweorðad, næf[n]e him his wlite leoge, / ænlic ansyn." (247-51)

normal societal customs of treasure-giving. Now his thankless and quite dangerous job is to determine whether this extraordinariness is guided by good or by evil.

Viewing the hero as both a physical and a verbal warrior, Stevens argues that Beowulf's first real combat is when "he engages in flyting with Unferth" (231). This view, however, overlooks the rhetorical evasions and parries which Beowulf utilizes in his conversation with the coast-warden. Compared to the coast-warden's initial challenge which makes elaborate references to images of artifice and nature, Beowulf's response is relatively pointed. After naming Hygelac as his lord and Ecgtheow as his father, Beowulf arrives at the reason why he and his men sailed to Danish lands in the first place: "We with a friendly heart have come to seek your lord, the son of Healfdene, protector of his people; be of good counsel to us!"³ (267-69). The most concrete image used in this translation is "friendly heart," but the word "hige" could also refer to "mind" or "soul" (Bosworth-Toller). The word "hige" is grammatically singular, whereas it is a group of men who possess it, so perhaps Beowulf's intent is to emphasize his troop's shared resolve more so than any individual, concrete referent. Most of the subsequent imagery in Beowulf's speech is similarly indistinct or abstract: "dark nights" ("deorcum nihtum" 275), "generous spirit" ("rumne sefan" 278), "care-wellings" ("cearwylmas" 282). He ends his speech by mentioning "the best of houses" ("husa selest" 285), but the stark contrast between the concrete way in which the coast-warden speaks and Beowulf's

³ "We þurh holnde hige hlaford þinne, / sunu Healfdenes secean cwomon, / leodgebyrgen; wes þu us larena god!" (267-69).

largely abstract response underscores the rhetorical significance of imagery.⁴ The coast-warden draws an extraordinary amount of attention to the troop's arms and armor, to their perilous sea-voyage, and to the formidable physique of Beowulf himself. In a response that would impress the most seasoned politician, Beowulf eludes those direct, concrete challenges by focusing attention on abstract ideas and emotional states. Notice especially how he evades the obvious reason why he bears so much armor: "I can counsel Hrothgar with a generous spirit, teach him how he, wise and good, can overcome the fiend"⁵ (277-79). Beowulf means to empower Hrothgar as the agent of Grendel's destruction with words, not swords. This answer sidesteps the original challenge of accounting for the weaponry that the Geats openly carry. What would be the harm in Beowulf telling the coast-warden truthfully that he brings these weapons to slay Grendel? Gillian Overing would term this the "Beowulfian" mode of language in which "intention or boast is tantamount to deed or actuality" (93). It is as if the mere mention of swords and armor could substantiate these objects as much as their actual martial utilization. They are most certainly present in the physical world, and the coast-guardian knows that they are there; but because Beowulf does not acknowledge (or instantiate) their existence, the weapons and armor remain safely in the background.

Before Beowulf responds with these intentionally muted words to the coast-warden, we are told "the leader of the troop unlocked his word-hoard"⁶ (259). What is a

⁴ Anglo-Saxon visual art displays a similar sort of dissolution from concreteness into abstraction.

⁵ "Ic þæs Hroðgar mæg / þurh rumne sefan ræd gelæran, / hu he frod ond god feond oferswyðeþ" (277-79).

⁶ "werodes wisa, wordhord onleac" (259)

word-hoard, exactly? Critics perceive it to be one of the poem's thematic focal points, but the kenning's precise meaning proves elusive. Stevens, for instance, senses a link between "gold-hoard" and "word-hoard," arguing that the poem's two-part structure hinges upon the thematic consonance of words and treasure. Focusing more on bodily structure, Jager proposes that Anglo-Saxon poets viewed the chest as the "physical and psychological source of words themselves" (853). A potent symbolic figure, the Anglo-Saxon word-hoard entangles artifice and the human body within the poem's overarching thematic threadwork. In this sense, the word-hoard is a spatial effect within itself, bending and intertwining the fabrics of reality to emphasize that the expression of thought through language is something special, strange, multifaceted, and potentially dangerous. Like a store of arms and armor, the word-hoard can be used to defend human society, but it can also threaten it from within. Throughout the speeches in the poem, we see characters treading down this narrow pathway, sometimes carefully as in Beowulf's conversation with the Coast-Warden, but oftentimes with a reckless abandon that bears more resemblance to natural forces than to artificial constructs.

The Unferth Exchange

As the first speaker of direct discourse in the entire poem (disregarding the actual poet, of course), the coast-warden sets the barometer against which subsequent characters can be measured. In stark contrast to the coast-warden, Unferth flings wild words with little substance at Beowulf in their competitive flyting. Whereas Beowulf draws from a "word-hoard," Unferth initiates verbal combat by "unbound[ing] his battle-secrets" ("onband beadurune" 501). The suffix "-rune" can be tricky to translate. It is tempting to

read it as a reference to written language, as with the “rune-letters” (“runstafas” 1695) seen later on the giant-sword’s hilt. Bosworth-Toller, however, defines “run” as “a *whisper*, (v. runian), hence *speech not intended to be overheard*.” Later we discover that Unferth is “drunk with beer” (“beore druncen” 531) when he speaks these words, suggesting that they would have remained whispers were it not for the speaker’s inebriation. Unferth’s brazen “battle-secrets,” then, differ markedly from Beowulf’s carefully constrained “word-hoard.” The verbs used to describe each speech are even more distinct. Beowulf “unlocked his word-hoard” (“wordhord onleac” 259), whereas Unferth “unbounded [or unleashed] his battle-secrets” (“onband beadurune” 501). The former carries connotations of elaborate control and careful foresight, positioning the speaker as one who uses an instrument to gain access to objects which he has carefully stored away; the latter connotes a willful forfeiture of control as Unferth severs the bounds which keep his wild thoughts imprisoned within his own mind. Beowulf’s response to the coast-warden is designed to quell violent thoughts, while Unferth’s wild challenge seems destined to incite them.

Like the coast-warden, Unferth lays out a number of specific challenges to Beowulf’s reputation. He has heard of Beowulf’s failure in the “swimming contest” (“ymb sund flite” 507) with Breca, and he provides a number of details which support his argument that the Geat will meet a grisly end in Heorot. However, unlike the coast-warden, whose speech was supported by his immediate perception of the Geats and their accoutrement, Unferth’s account of the swimming contest is second-hand at best. He was not present during the event and so he cannot attack Beowulf with the same sort of

concrete language which the coast-warden used. The most detailed account Unferth can offer is that “there you embraced the sea-streams in your arms, measured the sea-paths, flung yourselves through them with your hands, glided over the ocean; the sea surged in waves, wintry wellings. In the power of the water for seven nights you labored; then Breca outswam you and had more strength”⁷ (513-18). In these words, we can glimpse the poet intentionally trying to be unpoetic. Though he does use variation in order to add flourish to the “sea-streams,” “sea-paths,” “waves,” and “wintry wellings,” the perspective never delves deep enough to substantiate a convincing poetic image of the contest between Beowulf and Breca. One might expect Beowulf to tread carefully within the hallowed halls of Heorot, but the hero answers Unferth’s challenges with strong, concrete imagery: “hardship on the waves” (“earfeþo on yþum” 534), “out on the ocean” (“on garsecg ut” 537), “naked swords” (“swurd nacod” 539). Indeed, Beowulf sounds more like the poet with his alliterative flourishes and his use of variation to add depth to his swimming match with Breca: “until the flood drove us apart, the welling waters, coldest of weathers, darkening night, and a battle-grim northern wind against us. The waves were rough; the spirits of sea-fishes were stirred up”⁸ (545-49). Layer upon layer of imagery add a tangible sense of nature’s overwhelming power. Beowulf wants his audience to see the “welling waters” and “darkening night,” but he also wants them to

⁷ þær git eagorstream earmum þehton, / mæton merestræta, mundum brugdon, / glidon ofer garsecg; geofon yþum weol, / wintrys wylm[e]. Git on wæteres æht / seofon niht swuncon; he þe æt sunde oferflat, / hæfde mare mægen" (513-18)

⁸ "oþ þæt unc flod todraf, wado weallende, wedera cealdost, / niþende niht, ond norþanwind / heaðogrim ondhwearf. Hreo wæron yþa; wæs merefixa mod onhrered" (545-49)

feel the “coldest of weathers” and even to sense the direction of the “battle-grim northern wind.”

The specificity here turns Unferth’s two-dimensional picture into a three-dimensional kinesthetic experience which places the Danish audience alongside Beowulf and Breca. As if to reassure them, Beowulf balances nature’s hostility with an elaborate description of artifice: “There against those hostile creatures my mail-coat, hard and hand-locked, offered me help; my woven battle-shirt lay on my breast, adorned with gold”⁹ (550-53). Human ingenuity triumphs over the ocean’s “wicked destroyers” (“manfordædlan” 563) just as Beowulf’s measured poetic rejoinder triumphs over Unferth’s wild accusations, but defeating Unferth is less important here than winning the trust of Hrothgar and his Danish warriors. Following the speech, it is clear that Beowulf has successfully won the hearts and minds of his audience: “Then the dispenser of treasure was pleased, grey-haired and battle-brave; the leader of the Bright-Danes had faith in the offered help; the guardian of his people heard the steadfast thought in Beowulf. There was laughter amongst warriors, sounds harmonious and words winsome”¹⁰ (607-10). Beowulf and his audience feel and think as one community held together by the social glue of oral poetry. More than lineage, armor, or countenance, Beowulf’s artful use of poetic figures aligns the Danes’ course of thought toward the

⁹ “þær me wið laðum licsyrce min / heard hondlocen helpe gefremede, / beadohrægl broden, on breostum læg / golde gegyrwed” (550-53).

¹⁰ “þa wæs on salum since brytta / gamolfeax ond guðrof; geoce gelyfde / brego Beorht-Dena; gehyrde on Beowulfe / folces hyrde fæstrædne gēpoht. / Ðær wæs hælepa hleahtor, lhyn swynsode, / word wæron wynsume” (607-10).

reassurance that Beowulf is who he says he is: both monster slayer and, more importantly, human warrior.

One particular image from Beowulf's account confirms his poetical superiority over Unferth and might even help illuminate a troublesome passage later in the poem. The "battle-grim northern wind" which impedes the competitors' progress appeals to human faculties beyond the five senses. Wind is, of course, completely natural. But the direction "north" is an artificial concept. An animal would sense little significance in a breeze which blew from the north unless it carried the scent of another animal. To a person - particularly to those Danish and Anglo-Saxon persons who dwelt in coastal regions - northern winds spell doom and cold gloom. Godfrid Storms examines one particularly enigmatic northern image of the Danish citizens described as "North-Danes" ("Norð-Dene" 783) as they bear witness to Grendel's defeat: "The use of *North-Denum* indicates first the fiendish character of the monster and secondly the duration of the struggle, which passes from inside the hall to the open air, though still within the confines of Hrothgar's *tun*. When the 'Danes in the north', i.e., those guarding the northern wall of the royal residence, hear Grendel's cries of pain, they are terrified" (17). This could also account for Beowulf's use of "northern wind" to evoke the terrors of the open ocean. Furthermore, T.M. Pearce notes how the conversion efforts of Christian missionaries began in the south, which may have contributed to the view¹¹ of the predominately Pagan

¹¹ A biblical association between Satan and the north may have also contributed to this view: "For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north" (*Holy Bible*, KJV, Isaiah 14.13).

north as the geographic antithesis of God's grace (68). The figure's significance is made even more clear by its contrast with the end of Beowulf's speech: "when the morning light of another day, the bright-clothed sun, shines from the south over the children of the departed!"¹² (604-06). Pearce perceives the association between the "southern sun" and "Heaven's care for the safety of mankind against monstrous demons" and argues that Beowulf's use of this image to signal his impending victory "express[es] the sovereign will of the Creator and the direction from which it came" (68). As if for emphasis, Beowulf's victory light shines from the "bright-clothed sun" - an image implying that the sun is an ornamented piece of artifice clothed in divine radiance. By juxtaposing the "northern wind" from his past and the "morning light of... the bright-clothed sun" in his future, Beowulf is essentially plotting a course to victory not only for himself, but also for God.

All of these allusive effects work toward the rhetorical end of winning the hearts and minds of the Danish people. Answering Unferth's words blow for blow, this is not the evasive speech of a politician that we first see from Beowulf. In fact, the latter part of his speech is decidedly apolitical. After labeling Unferth a kinslayer and claiming that he had failed to defend his lord against Grendel, Beowulf extends the accusation:

Grendel has found that he need fear no feud, no terrible sword-storm from
the Victory Scyldings; he takes his toll, shows no mercy to any of the
Danish people, but has his pleasure, kills and defiles, expects no resistance

¹² "siþþan morgenleoht / ofer ylða bearn opres dogores, / sunne sweglwered suþan scineð!" (604-606)

from the Spear-Danes. But soon I will show him the strength and courage of the Geats in war.¹³ (595-603)

Is this the friendly counsel Beowulf has come to deliver to Hrothgar? Sitting in the heart of the Danish kingdom and surrounded by many an armed warrior, Beowulf directly blames the Danish people three times by name¹⁴ for their own afflictions (lines 597, 599, and 601) and then claims that he will succeed because of his Geatish heritage (603). It would appear that the time for diplomacy is over. These are most certainly fighting words, and one might expect there to be a fitting reprisal from the insulted Danes.

However, as with the coast-warden, Beowulf's word-hoard proves its worth: "Then the dispenser of treasure was pleased, grey-haired and battle-brave; the leader of the Bright-Danes had faith in the offered help; the guardian of his people heard the steadfast thought in Beowulf"¹⁵ (607-10). Hrothgar's reaction to Beowulf's words establishes an important distinction between the rhetorical force and the denotative function of speech. Nowhere does the poet say that the lord of Heorot was in agreement with Beowulf's assessment of the Danish people. In fact, he might even think that Beowulf is completely in the wrong. How could this brazen Geat know all the facts, anyhow? He has only been on Danish soil for half a day. But the information that

¹³ "ac he hafað onfunden, þæt he þa fæhðe ne þearf, / atole ecgþræce eower leode / swiðe onsittan, Sige-Scyldinga; / nymeð nydbade, nænegum arað / leode Deniga, ac he lust wigeð, / swefeð ond sendeð, secce ne wenep / to Gar-Denum. Ac ic him Geata sceal / eafoð ond ellen ungeara nu, / gupe gebeodan" (595-603).

¹⁴ On his potentially ironic choice of "Victory Scyldings," see Storms (1957)

¹⁵ þa wæs on salum sincas brytta / gamolfeax ond guðrof; goece gelyfde / brego Beorht-Dena; gehyrde on Beowulfe / folces hyrde fæstrædne gēpoht. (607-10)

Beowulf imparts is much less important than the “steadfast thought” (“fæstrædne geþoht” 610) that he conveys to his audience. Beowulf’s ability to wield his word-hoard is ultimately what he is judged by. Unferth’s drunken attempt to wield language, on the other hand, represents the height of artifice hijacked by the basest of natural instinct. It is this lack of design – this chaos of unchecked aggression that we later see brought into the physical world by the dragon’s battle-flames¹⁶ – which threatens to take language down the destructive path of the sword.

Wealhtheow: Valkyrie, Diplomat, or Poet?

As the only female character through whom the poet actually speaks, the Danish queen Wealhtheow represents one of the poem’s most complicated crossroads. This crossroads is mirrored in the scholarly community, as well, where Wealhtheow is often characterized either as a person of considerable political power exhibiting “vigor and independence of action” (Damico 23) or as the doomed to fail “peace-weaver” who becomes further ensnared by her attempts to exert power through speech (Overing 91). Wealhtheow’s characterization is particularly difficult to untangle due to the fact that the poet expects his audience to possess a certain level of extratextual knowledge concerning events that lie outside the narrative: namely, the precise manner of the Danish succession. As the queen approaches to address her husband Hrothgar, the poet mentions that the king and his nephew Hrothulf sat together in peace, “each true to the other” (“æghwylc oðrum trywe” 1165). Taken alongside the poet’s earlier observation that “no deceitful

¹⁶ See Chapter 3 for more on the dragon’s flames.

treacheries did the Scylding people plot at that time”¹⁷ (1018-19), it would seem as if the poet means to imply that there will eventually be future deceitful treacheries involving Hrothulf and his accession to the throne. The precise nature of that involvement is not clear. What does seem clear from a few analogous sources is that at some point following Hrothgar’s death, his nephew rose to power and continued to rule instead of one of Wealhtheow’s sons. John Niles warns that we should not get caught up in speculative lacunas because of “what the poet chooses not to say” about Hrothulf, especially when the only evidence from Norse traditions suggests that his conduct was “exemplary” (*The Poem and Its Tradition* 175). Kenneth Sisam further states that the analogous texts scholars use to support a treacherous Hrothulf are “conflicting and untrustworthy” (“Structure” 35). Even though Hrothulf’s treacheries or non-treacheries lie outside the purview of the text, they still inform the characterization of one of the poem’s most important figures in Wealhtheow.

If we did know the particulars of how Hrothulf’s accession occurred, then the significance of Wealhtheow’s words would be much more apparent. Her first address aimed at Hrothgar and Hrothulf reveals her concerns about the Danish succession: “Heorot is cleansed, the bright ring-hall; use while you can your many rewards, and to your kinsmen leave the folk and kingdom when you must go forth and see the Maker’s decree”¹⁸ (1176-80). John M. Hill interprets these lines as Wealhtheow’s attempt to

¹⁷ "nalles facenstafas / þeod-Scyldingas þenden fremedon." (1018-19)

¹⁸ "Heorot is gefælsod, / beahsele beorhta; bruc þenden þu mote / manigra medo, ond þinum magum læf / folc ond rice, þonne ðu forð scyle, / methodsceaft seon." (1176-80)

convince Hrothgar not to bequeath his kingdom to someone who is not a “kinsman.”¹⁹

William Cooke, however, disagrees with Hill, arguing that “all the evidence goes to show that a Germanic king in the Migration Age could not designate a successor without the consent of his *gesiðas*” (“Hrothulf” 181, f. 21). If that is the case, then Hrothgar’s designation of Beowulf as a son might give the Geatish champion some ground to stand on if he should seek the throne, but the final decision would ultimately not rest with the king. Wealhtheow’s second speech is directed toward the retainers in the hall and Beowulf, especially: “You have attained such a height that far and near, forever and ever, men will praise you as wide as the shores which surround the home of the winds”²⁰ (1221-24). By referencing the “home of the winds” (1224) and wishing Beowulf well with his “hard-earned treasures” (“*sincgestreona*” 1226), Wealhtheow seems to be drawing the Geat’s attention to anything but Heorot and its gift-throne. The queen concludes her speech with a maternal request and an image of her kingdom which stands slightly at odds with how the Danes have hitherto been characterized: “Be to my sons kind in deeds, help them keep hold of joy! Here every earl is true to the others, mild in heart, loyal to his lord; the thanes are united, the people alert, the lord’s retainers, having drunk my mead, will do as I bid”²¹ (1228-31). It is clear that Wealhtheow is attempting to

¹⁹ Early translators were eager to latch onto Old English “*magum*” as “sons” when the word more likely refers to “kinsmen” (Cooke 180).

²⁰ “*Hafast þu gefered, þæt ðe feor ond neah / ealne wideferhþ weras ehtigaþ, / efne swa side swa sæ bebugeð / wingearð weallas*” (1221-24).

²¹ “*Beo þu suna minum / dædum gedefe, dreamhealdende! Her is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe / modes milde, mandrihtne hol[d], / þegnas syndon geþwære, þeod ealgearo, / druncne dryhtguman doð swa ic bidde!*”

protect the future interests of her children, but the more immediate end goal of her speeches and thus some major points of her characterization remain a mystery.

Hill interprets both the speeches and the gifts which Wealhtheow gives Beowulf as inducements to leave Heorot and to encourage him to remain loyal to, but not superior to, her sons (102). Much of her speech is composed of imagery which would support this argument. Addressing him as “beloved Beowulf” (“Beowulf leofa” 1216), Wealhtheow draws his attention to his newly acquired “neck-ring” (“beages” 1216), “war-shirt” (“hrægles” 1217), and other Danish treasures (“þeodgestreona” 1218). These images of artifice then give way to expansive nature imagery: “as wide as the shores which surround the home of the winds” (efne swa side swa sæ bebugeð / wingearð weallas” 1223-24). Taken at face value, Wealhtheow’s spatial effects represent enticing lures away from her own home, compelling Beowulf to seek glory elsewhere. On the other hand, Cooke argues that she might actually be attempting to forge an alliance with Beowulf should her son Hrethric need future Geatish support (“Hrothulf”). This would mean that we cannot know who if anyone specifically is being linked to the “deceitful treacheries,” which leads Cooke to assert that “the only person whom the poet depicts as actually disturbing the joy and concord at the feast in Heorot is Wealhtheow” (182). Craig Davis concurs that Wealhtheow “is aggravating rather than soothing tensions in Heorot” (127). The key ambiguity here comes down to a single, but important, dramatic point in *Beowulf*: is Wealhtheow pushing Beowulf away (Hill) or is she sowing the seeds of an alliance which may one day support her son’s accession to the throne (Cooke, “Hrothulf”)?

The answer to this problem may lie in what John Leyerle sees as the correlating thematic interlace of Wealhtheow's speech: the lay of Hildeburh sung by the scop just prior to Wealhtheow's formal introduction (154). The sad story of Queen Hildeburh contains some of the most vivid interwoven images of artifice and nature (specifically, human and organic nature) in all of *Beowulf*. At its heart is an intensely wrought funeral sequence wherein Hildeburh orders that her son, slain in battle, be placed upon the pyre alongside her brother, Hnæf:

Upon that pyre was easily visible the blood-stained shirt, the gold-wrought swine, iron-hard boar, the many noblemen destroyed by wounds; so many fallen in battle! Then Hildeburh commanded at Hnæf's pyre her own son to be consigned to the flames, his bone-vessel to burn, placed in the fire at his uncle's shoulder²² (1110-17).

The armor-imagery here is indeed striking, as it must have been for the characters in the story gathered around the funeral pyre. En masse and still arrayed in their armor, the fallen warriors are presented from a safe distance, their honor and glory still intact. But once Hildeburh has her son laid down upon the pyre, the description of the cremation turns from the glory of the dead to the anguish of the living:

The lady unveiled her grief, lamented with sad songs. The war-smoke ascended. The clouds wound about the mighty death-fire, which roared

²² "Æt þæm ade wæs eþgesyne / swatfah syrce, swyn ealgylden, / eofer inrenheard, æþeling manig / wundum awyrdded; sume on wæle crungon! / Het ða Hildeburh æt Hnæfes ade / hire selfre sunu sweoloðe befæstan, / banfatu bærnan, ond on bæl don / [ea]me on eaxle" 1110-17

upon the mound; the heads melted, wound-gates burst open as the blood
 sprang out, battle-bites of the body. Greediest of spirits, the flame
 swallowed all on both sides who were carried off by war; their glory was
 gone.²³ (1117-24)

In stark contrast to the boar-helms and battle-shirts, these images are intensely focused upon visceral detail. The boiling blood bursting forth from the still fresh wounds is likely something that would not be so clearly seen even by the grieving Hildeburh, who we presume must be quite close to the roaring fire. These ghastly images act as counterpoints to the lofty symbolisms commonly associated with warriors who die in battle, effectively portraying a single event from two very divergent perspectives. With minute detail, the poet takes his audience into the flames, unveiling the unsettling truth of material reality that, enemy or ally, humans are made of the self-same earthly substance as everything else.

The most curious aspect of the Hildeburh lay is that the *Beowulf*-poet does not offer a word-for-word transcription. We see many of its images and effects, but none of its formal aesthetic features. This differs markedly from, for example, *Beowulf*'s recounting of his own adventures told in Hygelac's court, where the poet gives the Geatish hero the floor for more than 150 lines (2000-2151). The Hildeburh story told by Hrothgar's scop similarly occupies a great number of lines (1071-1159), yet its narrative

²³ "Ides gnordode, / geomrode giddum. Guðrinc astah. / Wand to wolcnum wælfyra mæst, / hlynodde for hlawe; hafelan multon, / bengeato burston, ðonne blod ætspranc, / laðbite lices. Lig ealle forswealg, / gæsta gifrost, þara ðe þær guð fornam / bega folces; wæs hira blæd scacen" 1117-24

purpose does not become clear until Wealhtheow comes forth “in her golden crown” (“under gyldnum beage” 1163) to address Hrothulf and Hrothgar, “nephew and uncle” (“suhtergefæderan” 1164). That the poet focused so intently upon a nephew and an uncle burning together upon a funeral pyre just a few lines prior is likely not a coincidence, and here he presents a compound image of “suhtergefæderan” melded together in a single kenning. Wealhtheow’s immediate perception of Hrothulf and Hrothgar entwines her perspective with that of Hildeburh, allowing the audience to view retrospectively the poet’s elaborate depiction of the scop’s song as an imaginative interpretation co-constructed with Wealhtheow. One would likely not expect to hear such gory detail in what the poet describes as the scop’s “Hall-entertainment” (“Heal-gamen” 1066) unless there is an interpretative lens that can see past the symbol-laden armor imagery which is so “easily visible” (“eþgesyne” 1110).

Wealhtheow, “a passive onlooker in a much wider and more vicious game” (Orchard, *Critical Companion* 181), provides that lens. Inspired by the song of the scop and frightened by her own imagination’s gory rendering of the funeral scene, Hrothgar’s queen steps forth to bind any hostile battle-secrets which may lie festering between the Geats and the Danes.²⁴ However harsh her speech might come across to some, it must be considered in the context provided by the Hildeburh lay. Given the multitude of perspectives present in that story’s rendering as well as Wealhtheow’s apparently acute

²⁴ This aligns with Wealhtheow’s role as Danish “peace-weaver” (“feoðuwebbe” 1942). Modthryth (1931), a queen who ordered any man who looked upon her to be killed, is offered as a counterpoint to queens such as Wealhtheow and Hygd (1926).

ability to apply its wisdom to the present situation, it is not a stretch to see Wealhtheow's own speech from multiple angles. In other words, she might be simultaneously forging a future alliance with Beowulf (Cooke, "Hrothulf") and inducing him to seek glory elsewhere (Hill). The poet's own use of language often displays this "double consciousness of event" (Osborn 29), and it seems likely that Wealhtheow - speaking immediately after an apparently intense imaginative interaction with poetry - could attain this heightened linguistic sensibility. The fact that she then uses this knowledge in an attempt to avoid violence makes her not only a dynamic character, but also one worthy of emulation. Unlike Grendel, who responded to the clear song of the scop with anger and violence, Wealhtheow uses her voice to quell anger and violence in Heorot. The fact that her efforts are ultimately futile²⁵ should not be taken as a slight against Wealhtheow's strength as a character, but more so as an indication that the society which does not heed the voices of all its members – mothers, poets, and "pyles" alike – is doomed to fall.

The Messenger

This theme comes to fruition in the speech of another unnamed character later in the poem. After Beowulf's death, a messenger delivers the news of the Geatish king's demise to his people: "Now is the joy-giver of the Weders, lord of the Geats, secure in his death-bed, laid upon a bed of slaughter by the deeds of the wrym; beside him lays his life-enemy, sick with dagger-wounds"²⁶ (2900-04). The messenger then goes on to relay

²⁵ The poet repeatedly tells us that Heorot will burn.

²⁶ "Nu is wilgeofa Wedra leoda, / dryhten Geata deaðbedde fæst, / wunað wælreste wrymes dædum; / him on efn ligeð ealdorgewinna / s[e]xbennum seoc" (2900-04).

an extensive 100+ line portent of the tribulations which the Geats must soon face, foretelling that once rival nations learn of Beowulf's death, nothing will stop them from seeking to settle old feuds. This lengthy speech delves into great detail concerning the roots of those feuds as well as the "enmity and the fiendish hostility, the mortal hate of man" ("sio fæhðo ond se feondscipe / wælnið wera" 2999-3000) from which they emanate. The messenger encapsulates these thoughts with what must have been a terrifying variation on the familiar "beasts of battle" motif: "Thence forth shall the spear be clutched by fingers in many a morning-cold, hefted in hands, and the sound of the harp shall not wake the warriors, but the dark raven, longing for the dead, will talk much with the eagle, telling him how he gorged himself at his meal when he plundered the warrior corpses with the wolf"²⁷ (3021-27). The commentary to Klaeber's 4th edition notes how this is the first time the beasts of battle appear in *Beowulf* and also how "Of the numerous occasions on which the beasts of battle are introduced in OE poetry... this is the only one in which raven and eagle hold a conversation" (263). Mark Amodio further observes that the conventional motif is usually attached to an immediate context of battle while the *Beowulf*-poet divorces the beasts from the martial context (52). In a study of all of the uses of the motif in Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus, M.S. Griffith concludes "Formalist analysis of conventions cannot, perhaps, adequately prepare us for this kind of free treatment [used in *Beowulf*]" (196). The use of the harp image immediately prior to the

²⁷ "Forðon sceall gar wesan / monig morgenceald mundum bewunden, / hæfen on handa, nalles hearpan sweg / wigend weccan, ac se wonna hrefn / fus ofer fægum fela reordian, / earne secgan, hu him æt æte speow, / þenden he wið wulf wæl reafode." (3021-27)

beasts of battle is peculiar as well, leading Adrien Bonjour to argue that the poet breathes new life into a tired motif through “the stirring contrast between the sound of the harp and the harsh voice of the carrion beasts” (570). Though he does not pursue this idea beyond this particular image, the “stirring contrast” which Bonjour perceives is produced largely by one of the poem’s most potent spatial effects - one which serves as a culmination of every major theme, from art to nature, language to sound, music to noise, life to death, and most prominently, human to beast.

One of the most peculiar things about this spatial effect, however, is that the poet does not lay sole claim to it. An unnamed messenger who until this point in the poem has served neither a narrative nor an ornamental purpose delivers a poetic construction which inspires Bonjour to assert, “If ever one can speak of the alchemy of genius it is here” (571). Following up on the respective wonderment and befuddlement of Bonjour and Griffith, Joseph Harris notes that the poet’s presentation of “the inter-beast discourse” as the words of the unnamed messenger finds no corollary in any of the extant Old English/Old Norse literature and thus “leaves all the comparanda behind for complexity and imagination” (14). Why filter such originality through a relatively insignificant figure? Would not Beowulf be a much more fitting warrior-poet to bear the responsibility of such originality? Near the end of the poem Wiglaf would also appear to be the ideal mouthpiece through which to deliver such a vibrant, vital piece of imagery, yet all we have from him following Beowulf’s death is a rebuke of the warriors who fled their king’s side: “each man of you must go among your kinsmen stripped of land-right, when

noblemen from afar hear of your flight, your gloryless deed”²⁸ (2886-90). The messenger, also, is very likely one of the cowardly thanes whom Wiglaf is speaking to in this instance. Carnicelli argues that the messenger functions as more of a representative of the Geatish people than as an individual character; thus, the harsh words he speaks to the Geats about their past transgressions and future tribulations inform a sort of societal self-realization which allows them as a people to “admit their past failings and take responsibility for their own bleak future” (256). The unique spatial effect which *Bonjour* holds in such high esteem belongs to the Geats, as well. Because it is conveyed through a speech delivered within a fictional rhetorical situation, the strange image of silent harps and talking birds encapsulates the thoughts and feelings of a leaderless people beset on all sides by humiliation and impending doom.

This characterization of a society in decline might also lend itself to the poet’s interest in his own craft. The dying king tells Wiglaf to build a monument “high on Whale’s Head” (“heah hlifian on Hronesnæsse” 2805) so that sea-farers from near and far will forever remember the name, Beowulf. Given the dour portents and somber ruminations that follow Beowulf’s death, it seems unlikely that enough of the Geatish culture will remain to preserve the memory of their departed king. Without people who understand its significance, the power of the monument is likely to wane even if the name “Beowulf’s Barrow” (“Biowulfes Biorh” 2807) is preserved. Like the buried statue of Ozymandias, Beowulf’s grand legacy will succumb to the forces of nature and time. The

²⁸ "londrihtes mot / þære mægburge monna æghwylc / idel hweorfan, syððan æðelingas / feorran gefricgean fleam eowerne, / domleasan dæd." (2886-90)

poet, on the other hand, does not tie his legacy to a sinking ship. The monument to his fame, his “crowning picture of calamity... most carefully prepared” (Bonjour 569) is intentionally embedded within the poem’s lower functions. Though it bears resemblance in its rhetorical tactics, this is not Mark Antony distilling the memory of a king into righteous fury. This is the *Beowulf*-poet intentionally underplaying his most important message so that those who seek it out can enrich it with the power of their own imagination. In this way, the *Beowulf*-poet conquers with his words what Beowulf himself continually failed to conquer with swords: his own mortality.

This chapter examines how spatial effects modify the characterization of human beings when used in and around speech allowing us to see more clearly how the poet turns his characters into poets themselves. Beowulf’s artful evasions of the coast-warden’s concrete challenges is perhaps the starkest example, but so too is the eerie silence which lingers after the speeches of Wealhtheow. Her words inspire no reaction from her audience. How could they? The Geatish and Danish warriors in the hall likely had a fairly typical response to the scop’s lay, preferring to focus on what was so “easily visible” (“eþgesyne” 1110) rather than what was gruesomely implied. There are, in fact, a number of times throughout *Beowulf* when the poet renders speeches, songs, and other vocalizations without actually providing his audience with word-for-word transcriptions. These moments challenge us, like Wealhtheow, to engage imaginatively with the silent spaces, to see what is not “easily visible.” Once the poet brings these grisly spectacles to the fore, it is up to his audience to act.

CHAPTER V: RESOUNDING SILENCES

Spatial effects operate as aesthetic accentuations and as grounds for characterization in *Beowulf*, but they can also reveal something fundamental about the way in which the poem is meant to function within its own society. John Niles views Anglo-Saxon verse as a means of self-exploration which was vital not only for the preservation of a cultural history, but also for conversion efforts:

Anglo-Saxon poets transmitted the medium of Old English verse into an instrument of Christian teaching and mental exploration. At the same time, by continuing to take their subjects from Germanic legendry as well as from Christian history, they salvaged what was salvageable from the historical ideas of their ancestors, not so as to compete with a Christian faith but to bring this faith to more perfect expression, in terms that made culturally specific sense. ("Locating *Beowulf*" 94)

Just as Christianity and Paganism are interwoven into an exploration of cultural significance, the poetic blending of artifice and nature interrogates ways of being in a world which, around the time of the poem's composition, was undergoing radical cultural, technological, and social transformations. The tools for knowing oneself and one's history no longer operated as they used to, so poetry offered new tools, new ways of incorporating the non-Christian past within the Christian present. *Beowulf* carves out a cultural space for these distant pasts and unlike-minded ancestors, placing them within a cosmological framework that allows for both veneration and critique.

As a piece of artifice, the poem necessarily examines its own nature with the same level of critical acuity which it brings to bear on swords, halls, and hoarded treasure. It is the building of Heorot which draws Grendel's ire, but it is also the scop's song of creation which inspires him to attack the proud symbol of human creativity. This depiction of poetry's reception by an audience suggests that the *Beowulf*-poet is aware of his own artistic responsibilities. His words carry a power greater than he can control, and he cannot predict exactly how an audience might react to them, for good or for ill. To some extent, this might explain the confounding complexity of Old English verse, in general, in that it is meant to bear more meaning potential than other pieces of artifice. In its martial context the sword, for instance, is an ingeniously crafted work of art with one very pointed purpose: to extinguish life. Even used in defense of one's homeland, the sword's impact reverberates into realms imperceptible. Its creator, the weapon-smith, cannot predict whether his creation will be used for good or for evil, whether it will be used to slay the enemy or misused to incite future conflict. With their extensive variation and enigmatic kennings, works such as *Beowulf* make themselves more difficult to misuse.

That is not to say that words by themselves resist abuse. Throughout the poem, words are acknowledged as physical entities, objects which can be manipulated but which also impact the material world around them. They even occasionally take the form of what Bill Brown would call "things," or "the amorphousness out of which objects are materialized" (5). It is a peculiar attribute of poetry that language itself can be

represented as an unintelligible “thing” even when it is clearly intended for communication by a writer or speaker. This effect is most clearly articulated by the strange scene in which Hrothgar “examined” (“sceawode” 1687) the hilt of the giant sword which slew Grendel’s mother. Does he understand what is written? If not, is he attempting to understand, attempting to reign in the amorphousness under his own conceptual framework? Vocalized messages are also sometimes represented by the *Beowulf*-poet with all of the “suddenness with which things [not ideas] seem to assert their presence and power” (B. Brown 3). In the presence of the dragon, words seem to take on a physicality that is much more reminiscent of warfare than of poetry. Though still formidable, the aged hero king faces a foe who sees no subtlety in human language; consequently, Beowulf’s own words begin to take unfamiliar shapes as he nears the end of his life. Finally, after Beowulf’s death, an unnamed Geatish woman sings a lament which oddly intermingles with the flames of her king’s funeral pyre. We cannot know the content of what she said, but we can feel the words nonetheless and observe how they interact with the physical world. These moments bring human communication into the foreground, interrogating its depths and its limitations with as much vivacity as the poem does with other subjects. Consequently, these depictions are accentuated by spatial effects which are designed to animate language itself.

A Sermon

Hrothgar's most famous speech in which the Danish king warns a victorious Beowulf against the dangers of excessive pride is preceded immediately by a depicted interaction with written language:

Hrothgar spoke – he examined the hilt, old remnant, upon which was written the origin of the ancient war, when the rushing seas of the flood slew the race of giants, who suffered horribly; they were a foreign people to the eternal Lord; the Ruler gave them a final reward with overwhelming waters. Also on that sword-plate of shining gold it was rightly marked in run-staves, set down and said for whom that sword had first been made, best of irons, wyrm-patterned and with a hilt bound round by twisted wire. Then the wise one spoke, the son of Healfdene; all fell silent.¹ (1687-99)

As Hrothgar's imagination engages with the hilt, nature and artifice interweave gracefully. Like the Hildeburh lay, we do not see the exact words engraved upon the hilt; instead, the poet describes them for us and places them within a Christian context through references to "Dryhtne" and "Waldend." Their physicality is also emphasized by the elaborate focus on the "work of wonder-smiths" ("wundersmiþas geweorc" 1681) that

¹ "Hroðgar maðelode – hylt sceawode, / ealde lafe, on ðæm wæs or writen / fyrngewinnes, syðþan flod ofslōh, / gifen geotende giganta cyn, / frecne geferdon; þæt wæs fremde þeod / ecean Dryhtne; him þæs endeleas / þurh wæteres wylm Waldend sealde. / Swa wæs on ðæm scenum sciran goldes / þurh runstafas rihte gemearcod, / geseted ond gesæd, hwam þæt sweord geworht, / irena cyst ærest wære, wreoþenhilt ond wyrmfah. Ða se wisa spræc / sunu Healfdenes; swigedon ealle" (1687-99).

brought the artifact into being. The hilt's mythological significance and physical presence within the narrative are juxtaposed, resulting in a dynamic interplay between subjective interpretation and objective perception. The resulting spatial effects can be likened to those that accompany the monster battles, only this time the vicious push and pull is not between two "aglæcean," but between two works of artifice: language and weaponry.

The strangeness of this sequence is apparent in that Hrothgar's act of perception, of seeing the writing upon the sword-hilt, is sandwiched between two acts of speech. We first see the conventional initiation of a formal speech, "Hroðgar maðelode," which indicates that the speaker is about to address his audience. Then the poet devotes thirteen lines of verse to the object of Hrothgar's inspection rather than the content of his speech. It is not uncommon for two verbs to initiate a single speech in *Beowulf*. Before inciting the dragon to meet him in battle, "Beowulf spoke, said boast-words for the last time" ("Beowulf maðelode, beotwordum spræc / niehstan siðe" 2510-11). Reiteration of this sort lends an added significance to the speech which follows. During the actual battle when Beowulf appears to be nearing his end, Wiglaf's words take on extra significance from similar repetition: "Wiglaf spoke, many right words he said to his companions" ("Wiglaf maðelode, wordrihta fela / sægde gesiðum" 2631-32). Only the poet can know that these are the last "boast-words" ("beotwordum") Beowulf ever spoke; similarly, from his privileged perspective outside of the narrative, the poet assesses Wiglaf's "many right words" ("wordrihta fela") in a positive light. In both of these instances, the first verb ("maðelode") immediately receives contextual elaboration from the second ("spræc" and

“sægde”), allowing the poet to represent an expanded perspective of the action. In between Hrothgar’s two speech verbs, however, are many more verbs and many more images which seem to have very little direct correlation to Hrothgar’s words or to the poet’s assessment of those words.

Instead, the strange hilt, “old work of giants” (“enta ærgeweorc” 1679), takes center stage as Hrothgar examines its serpentine contours and indecipherable scrollery. Heavy artifice/nature imagery permeates an account of God’s destruction of the giants: the flood is marked by a “rushing sea” (“gifen geotende” 1690) and “overwhelming waters” (“wæteres wylm” 1693), while the hilt itself is “shining gold” (“sciran goldes” 1694) and “wyrn-patterned... with a hilt bound in twisted wire” (“wreopenhilt ond wyrmfah” 1698). These spiraling patterns welded onto the sword-hilt are indicative of a rich stylistic tradition which “appears not only in metalwork and in the pages of manuscripts, but also in sculpture” (Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Art* 114). The technique is meant to “tease the eye,” to lure the examiner’s gaze into the swirling motion of the scene (40). The way in which the visual image of the hilt seems to take precedence over Hrothgar’s speech indicates that this piece of artifice holds a great deal of allure. It is almost as if Hrothgar is distracted momentarily by the rousing flood myth as well as the hilt’s wondrous construction, and what the audience sees is the king’s imaginative engagement as he marvels at an object of mythic proportions.

The poet devotes almost equal attention to the sword hilt’s extraordinary aesthetic characteristics as he does to the flood story it depicts. The Old English word “Swa”

(“Also”) marks the dividing line between the relation of the story transmitted by the hilt and the description of the hilt itself, upon which the name of the original owner is marked in runes. Curiously, the significance of the rune-marked name receives no elaboration. The poet simply observes its presence and makes passing reference to the craft with which it was marked upon the “shining gold” (“sciran goldes”), but its existence in the physical world of the poem evokes nothing more than superficial appraisal: “it was rightly marked” (“rihte gemearcod”). If it was so “rightly marked,” then why does the poet not tell his audience what it said? As a single name of someone whose deeds are long forgotten, the name may simply not be worth reading. Unlike the flood myth, it holds little significance for either the Pagan Hrothgar or *Beowulf*’s Christian audience. Long ago, it might have struck fear into the hearts of “giant-kin” (“giganta cyn” 1690), but in the light of Hrothgar’s examination, it is reduced to a superficial feature which only serves to exalt the prowess of the nameless smiths who originally crafted the blade, “best of irons, wyrm-patterned and with a hilt bound in twisted wire” (1697-98).

Two potentialities for the use of language are shown in contention upon the plated gold of the giant-sword hilt. As a storytelling device, language can connect people from diverse backgrounds and geographic locales – it can even leap across great gaps in time. The flood myth depicted on the hilt might not hold exactly the same cosmological significance for Hrothgar as it does for the *Beowulf*-poet’s Christian audience, but therein lies an opportunity for human connection, for a conversation between a Christian and his or her Pagan ancestor. The spatial effect of the story creates an imaginative space

wherein the mythologies of the present and the mythologies of the near-past can connect with and inform one another. As a piece of artifice, the hilt itself only resonates with those who recognize the artful craft of an expert weapon-smith. Only the beauty accorded it by its maker strikes Hrothgar as worthy of his consideration. The juxtaposition of language upon the sword-hilt thus represents a fitting analogue to the poet's own wondrous poetic work, which will surely resonate more resoundingly through time – preserving the legacy of a great hero – than “Beowulf's Barrow” (“Biowulfes Biorh” 2807) sitting high atop Hronesnæsse ever could.

Beowulf's Lost Words

As the title character, Beowulf is the poem's most prominent manipulator of language. From Hrothgar to Hygelac, Beowulf's words never fail to impress those around him. His boasts are strong, his stories rousing, his final speeches stirring and heartfelt. Furthermore, Andy Orchard argues that, “unlike Unferth, whose words and deeds do not tally, Beowulf can transform his words into courage and his courage into deeds” (*Critical Companion* 255). As the politically adroit exchange with the Coast-Warden shows, Beowulf is equally adept at interpreting and responding to the words of others. Yet there are moments when even Beowulf seems to lose control over his word-hoard, when what he speaks carries more weight than meaning. Although this obscurity places the audience at a distance from the hero, it also allows us to perceive speech as action. A word's physical effect on the world around it can be as destructive as the dragon's flames or as constructive as the scop's Hildeburh lay. Beowulf's own words often reach both

extremes, and the spatial effects which lend them substance are as striking and complex as those which bring the dragon's battle-flames to life.

One of the text's most poignant moments of silence occurs alongside the depiction of a very loud utterance: "The ruler of the Weather-Geats, enraged, let a word fly out from his breast, stormed stark-hearted; the voice came roaring in battle-clear under the grey stone"² (2550-53). Robert Bjork notes how the poet's presentation of Beowulf's word leaves ample room for interpretation: "The single word or several words - hardly a speech at all, perhaps even an expletive inserted - cannot have been polite, since the dragon reacts poorly, but the word or words themselves remain a mystery" (1000). The action ("let a word fly out") that the poet attaches to the undefined "word" here is curiously reminiscent of the way in which Unferth "unleashed his battle-secrets" (501) upon the young Beowulf. In both instances, the speakers are shown willfully forfeiting control over their words. Yet with Unferth, we hear and are able to understand exactly what these "battle-secrets" are, whereas we have no idea what the word is that causes the dragon to get all riled up.³ Eschewing the word's denotative features, the poet instead focuses intensely upon its existence as part of the observable world. Unlike other spoken words in the poem which hold the potential for a multitude of meanings, this one serves only one purpose: to incite violence. Punctuated by weather imagery ("Weder-

² "Let þa of breostum, þa he gebolgen wæs, / Weder-Geata leod word ut faran, / stearcheort stymde; stefn in becom / heapotorht hlynnan under harne stan" (2550-53).

³ Else von Schaubert, however, finds an analogous instance of a hero inciting a dragon to battle in *Wolfdietrich B*: "her wurm, sit ir hie heime?" (line 663).

Geata” 2551 and “styrnde” 2552), it is a natural response to the “surging stream hot with the dragon’s battle-fire”⁴ (2552-53). Perhaps the reason we cannot hear it is that its primal single-mindedness does not fit within the variegated tapestry of Anglo-Saxon verse.

Beowulf the man does not use the word as either language or poetry, so *Beowulf* the poem treats it as it would any object (i.e., the dragon’s flames, a warrior’s weapon, etc.), simply noting its physical effects on the world: “he stormed stark-hearted; the voice came roaring in battle-clear under the grey stone” (“stearcheort styrnde; stefn in becom / heaðotorht hlynnan under harne stan” 2552-53). These effects are eerily reminiscent of the way in which the dragon awoke from his long slumber and “sniffed and slithered⁵ along the stones, stark-hearted” (“stonc ða æfter stane, stearcheort” 2288). Beowulf and the dragon both are described as “stark-hearted” in the only two instances in which the word is used in the poem, which further supports Andy Orchard’s interpretation that they are “inextricably linked” (*Critical Companion* 237). This inhuman utterance estranges Beowulf from the poem’s human audience. Clark observes a similar phenomenon with reference to war-gear: “Arms and armor in *Beowulf* ambiguously proclaim man’s humanity and reveal his savagery; references to weapons edge our awareness of the chilling contrast between heroic strength and monstrous power, allusions to arms

⁴ “burnan wælm heaðofyrum hat” (2552-53).

⁵ The verb “stonc” has caused considerable controversy. Editors and critics wavered between “sniffed, followed the scent” and “moved rapidly,” but Klaeber’s commentary suggests that the “most proximate evidence” supports the former (240). A combination of meanings and modes (as in “hringbogan”) is also possible.

ironically link human and bestial violence” (“Beowulf’s Armor” 413). Even at the level of verbal communication, where one would expect Beowulf to stand far above the fire-breathing wyrm, the poet presents both monster and man in interlaced imagery. As the hero “invades the realm of chaos... and momentarily extends the limits of human power” (430), so too does he begin to resemble chaos. Devoid of creative potential, Beowulf’s word is language turned monster, disfigured and hell-bent on destruction.

This metaphysical distortion of Beowulf’s word encourages the audience to question the humanity of Beowulf himself. At this pivotal moment just before the climactic battle between good and evil, we are suddenly estranged from the former. The effect is reminiscent of the way in which Grendel is described as a “travelling warrior” (“rinc sipian” 720) just before he bursts into Heorot, yet here at the dragon’s barrow, the opposite happens. Beowulf and his words are seen at a distance. Such a striking shift in perspective suggests that the hero we once knew might no longer have the control over reality which he exhibited in his defeat of Grendel – that he in fact might be as caught up in the natural forces as the works of artifice which waver so terrifyingly between the two realms. Going into the battle, the poet makes it clear that Beowulf senses his impending death: “His heart was sorrowful, wavering and hastening toward death, doom immeasurably near” (“Him wæs geomor sefa, / wæfre ond wælfus, wyrd ungemete neah” 2419-20). Even his thanes try to dissuade him from facing the dragon as Wiglaf later reveals: “We could not convince our beloved king... that he should not greet that gold-guardian” (“Ne meahton we gelæran leofne þeoden... / þæt he ne grette goldweard þone”

3079-81). Beowulf's death portends dire consequences for the nation he leaves behind, yet he persists in his heroic quest to conquer the wyrm. The incomprehensible word thrust into the dragon's barrow casts that heroic drive in a monstrous light, implicating Beowulf's courageous deeds in the eventual dissolution of Geatish society.

For the dragon, the meaning of the word is completely irrelevant. Beowulf could simply have said, "Hello, I've come to discuss your terms of surrender," and the dragon would have launched out of his barrow with just as much ferocity. Unlike with the perceptive Coast-Warden, politics do not work when every word you speak represents exactly the same thing: "Hate was stirred up, the hoard-warden recognized the voice of a man; there was no more time to ask for friendship"⁶ (2554-56). This is decidedly different from Grendel, whose anger is roused not by the voices of men alone, but by the "clear song of the scop" ("swutol sang scopes" 90). Presumably, if the Danes had been lamenting their lot in life, Grendel would not have taken offense to even their loudest expressions of grief. Because they were shaped by a poet, though, these particular voices represented something that the kin of Cain simply could not abide. To the dragon, the "voice of a man" ("mannes reorde"), whether boisterous and rhythmic or sad and mournful, can signal only one thing: an objective threat to the treasure hoard.

The hero's loss of control is re-emphasized by the metaphor which accentuates one of Beowulf's final speeches: "Then with the treasures Wiglaf found the glorious

⁶ "Hete wæs onhrered, hordweard oncnioð / mannes reorde; næs þær mara fyrst / freode to friclan." (2554-56)

king, his blood-stained lord at the end of his life; he began once again to wash his lord with water, until the point of a word broke through Beowulf's breast-hoard. The old man gazed upon the gold in sorrow"⁷ (2788-93). These words mark the beginning of a speech in which Beowulf thanks God for the treasures and orders Wiglaf to erect a monument to Beowulf's memory. This structure shares an intriguing parallel with the start of Hrothgar's "sermon" in that both speakers are looking at specific pieces or collections of artifice as the poet initiates their speeches. Seeing what they see is as important as hearing what they say, and Eric Jager perceives in this image an overlap between two of the poem's overarching thematic threads:

Since the dragon's *hord* is mentioned several times just before Beowulf speaks (2773, 2781), and since he is looking at plunder from the hoard as he pronounces his last speech, *breosthord* is particularly resonant term here. As a metaphor (technically, a kenning), the term coalesces the word-hoard with the treasure hoard just at the point when the dying hero is losing control over both of these repositories and resources. 851

Jager also notes how the "wordes ord" metaphor turns Beowulf's speech into a weapon, inverting the action of penetration by sword or spear point.⁸ Characterizing this as a "lack

⁷ "He ða mid þam maðmum mærne þioden, / dryhten sinne driorigne fand / ealdres æt ende; he hine eft ongon / wæteres weorpan, oð þæt wordes ord / breosthord þurhbræc. [Biorncýning spræc] / gomel on gio[h]ðe gold sceawode" (2788-93).

⁸ See Bjork, as well, whose translation differs slightly from mine, but resonates more clearly with the barrow's stream: "...enraged at the dragon, Beowulf lets 'word ut faran' ('the word[s] pour forth,' 1.2551b), much like a weapon into the dragon's lair" (997 f.21).

of control” is particularly appropriate for a warrior who never could keep his immense strength from shattering even the best of weapons. Now a weapon from within turns against its wielder, serving only to remind him that he no longer controls his fate.

Beowulf’s speech here also bears a striking difference from Hrothgar’s sword-hilt digression, which is bookended by two verbs signaling his address (“maþelode” and “gespræc”). Not even a single conventional verb signals that Beowulf’s address is about to begin.⁹ This confusion may stem from damage to the manuscript which obscures the original text so that line 2792 contains only one verse (“breosthord þurhbræc”). Many editors, including Klaeber, emend line 2792 with a phrase like “The warrior king spoke” (“Biorncýning spræc”) so that the b-verse more formally initiates Beowulf’s speech. John Niles, however, argues that such “superfluous” editorial emendations ignore the possibility that the “absence of an alliterating *b*-verse... can be taken as signaling an appropriate dramatic pause” (“Editing” 455). He finds a similar use of such a dramatic pause in *The Battle of Maldon* (line 172), and asserts that these two examples are “as artful... uses of silence as can be found in English literature before Chaucer” (456). If this is an intentional departure from the formulaic presentation of speech, then it would likely be as glaring to the poet’s audience as it is to modern scholars who have the manuscript before their very eyes. Both literally and metaphorically, Beowulf’s words

⁹ Niles, however, translates “wordes ord” more literally as “the first word of speech” and interprets this as a “formula of direct speech” (“Editing” 455). Also see Orchard (*Critical Companion* 50) for consideration of this emendation alongside similar issues in *Beowulf*.

“break through” as if the elaborate bonds which once held them in check are now broken, weakened by the dragon’s poison coursing through Beowulf’s veins.

Like Jager, Bjork views this sort of physicalization of language in a negative light: “As the bracing, steadying power of speech and other man-made items in Beowulf gradually falls away, so does speech’s ability to reflect accurately the world that the poem’s characters experience around them” (1004). If we take the “point of a word” to refer to a specific utterance, then the word which breaks through Beowulf’s breast-board is first-person pronoun “Ic.” In a span of ten lines, the hero says “ic” five times (lines 2794, 2796, 2797, 2799, and 2801), the possessive “mine” twice (2799, 2804), and his own name once (2807). This spatial effect intertwines spoken language with the physical body in a powerfully evocative aural accentuation. The pronunciation of “Ic” (/itʃ/) echoes the cracking sensation of an unwieldy blade stabbing through the hero’s breastplate with each utterance. For the poisoned Beowulf, to speak is to be in pain.

Still, the hero king bravely uses these last words to thank God “for what I gaze upon here” (“*þe ic her on starie*” 2796) and to express his desire for a monument to be raised in his honor: “The battle-brave will bid a tomb be built bright over the pyre on the cliffs by the sea; it shall be a memorial for my people towering high on Hronesnæsse, so that sea-travelers ever after will call it Beowulf’s Barrow as they drive their ships from afar over the dark flood”¹⁰ (2802-08). Beowulf holds firm to a faith in the power of

¹⁰ “*Hatað heaðomære hlæw gewyrcean / beorhtne æfter bæle æt brimes nosan; / se scel to gemyndum minum leodum / heah hlifian on Hronesnæsse, / ðæt hit sæliðend syððan hatan / Biowulfes Biorh, ða ðe brentingas / ofer floda genipu feorran drifað*” (2802-08).

artifice to preserve his people and his legacy against the ravages of time. To the bitter end, he believes the dragon's treasure will sustain his people and that the barrow on Hronesnæsse will preserve in their memory the stories of his great deeds. He cannot know that neither will be the case – that the Geats will inter the treasure alongside their beloved king and that the hate-fueled avarice of neighboring nations will obliterate the Geatish people. Along with them, the significance of “Beowulf's Barrow” will fade until all that is left is a name. Beowulf's folly is the same as that of the original owner of the melted giant-sword who tied his name to a concrete piece of artifice. However, unlike that poor forgotten soul whose legacy is now only preserved as a component part of a spatial effect, more than just Beowulf's name lives on through the words of the scop. His words and deeds now exist not as singular monuments – a sword or a tomb – but as multifaceted threads in a poetic tapestry.

The Geatish Woman's Lament

Although a legacy preserved in storytelling is better able to withstand the stress of societal transformation, it does so at the expense of concrete stability. *Beowulf* shows its hero's faults as much as it revels in his accomplishments, and this duality most movingly appears in the form of a lament sung by an unnamed Geatish woman at Beowulf's funeral:

the wood-smoke rose dark over the flames, the roaring fire intermingled
with weeping – the blowing wind lay still – until it had broken the bone-
house, hot upon the heart. With troubled spirits they mourned their soul-

sorrow, the death of their king; the Geatish woman with hair bound up sang a mourning-song for Beowulf, with sorrowful cares, earnestly uttered that she dreaded the hard struggles that lay ahead, the many slaughters and the terror of the hostile armies, harm and captivity. Heaven swallowed the smoke.¹¹ (3144-55)

The details of the song are bookended by two images which emphasize the Geatish woman's voice even though we do not hear what that voice says. As she sings her song, physicality and spirituality intermingle. Elsewhere in the poem, the word "bewunden" ("intermingled" 3146) is used to describe things like hands clutching weapons (1461 and 3022), wire wound around armor (1031), a spirit enclosed within a body (2424), and a curse bound to hoarded treasure (3052). In each of these prior usages, there is a clear (albeit sometimes metaphorical) dichotomy established between a creator or user and that which is being created or used. Whatever objects are "bewunden" retain their original forms even as they are brought into a compound image. The hand clutching the sword becomes the clutched sword; the armor holding the wire becomes the ornamented armor; the body enclosing the soul becomes the human body; and the treasure bearing the curse becomes the cursed treasure; but what exactly is the relationship between the fire and the weeping? They are not co-creative of a unified entity; in fact, they are co-destructive of

¹¹ "wud(u)rec astah / sweart ofer swi[o]ðole, swogende le[g] / woþe bewunden - windblond gelæg - / oð þæt he ða banhus gebrocen hæfd(e) / hat on hreþre. Higum unrote / modceare mændon, mondryhtnes cw(e)alm; / swylce giomorgyd (Ge)at(isc) meowle / (æfter Biowulfe b)undenheorde / (sang) sorgcearig, sæ(id)e (ge)neah(he) / þæt hi hyre (here)g(eon)gas hearde ond(r)ede, / wælfylla wo(r)n, (w)erudes egesan, / hy[n]ðo ond hæf(t)nyd. Heofon rece swealg." (3144-55).

one another in that an excess of fire will evaporate tears just as an excess of tears will quench fire. This irresolvable image culminates in the destruction of Beowulf's "banhus" ("bone-house" 3147), lacing this physical action with emotional potency as the corpse falters under the compounded pressure of the fire's heat and a people's grief. Release comes in the form of a gustatory image as Heaven swallows the smoke.

Marijane Osborn argues that an Anglo-Saxon audience familiar with the oft-used word for "heavenly kingdom" ("heofon-ric") would immediately perceive that the word "rece" ("smoke" 3155) is to be read as a pun for "rice" ("ruler") (34). Such ambiguity would allow the Christian poet to hedge his bets as to whether or not Beowulf's soul actually ascended to Heaven. The fact that Heaven "swallowed the smoke" amplifies the ambiguity by positioning Heaven as some sort of predatory figure. Elsewhere in the poem, the verb "swelgan"¹² implies this sort of natural inclination to consume with Grendel's ingestion of Hondscio (line 743) and again soon after that with the idea of flames destroying Heorot (782). A similar phrase is also used in relation to artifice in a description of the celebration in Heorot following Grendel's defeat: "The hall swallowed the noise" ("Heal swege onfeng" 1214). The act of swallowing in *Beowulf* evokes a sense of disproportionate value. Hondscio's comrades assess his significance by terms which differ greatly from Grendel, who simply views the Geat as a fitting meal. Similarly, fire burns indiscriminately. Even Heorot, a mead-hall which means so much to humankind,

¹² The closely related "forswealgan" also appears associated with the flames on Hnæf's funeral pyre (1122) and in Beowulf's retelling of Grendel eating Hondscio (2080).

cares little about the noisy celebrations of its occupants. Heaven consumes Beowulf's soul with similar indifference. It does not pause to recognize the passing of a great man, nor does it respond at all to the moving lament of the Geatish woman. It simply offers a natural counterpoint to the grief felt by a doomed nation.¹³

Though we cannot know the exact content of the Geatish woman's song, the fact that the poet throws such potent spatial distortions around it speaks to its thematic weight. The "hard struggles" she sings of might also represent a very concrete reality with which an Anglo-Saxon audience would be familiar. In his study of Ibn Fadlan's documented interaction with the Rus Vikings, H.M. Smyser suggests that the lament anticipates a fate similar to the female slaves in Fadlan's account: "Germanic peoples, for example, the Frisians, sometimes sold other Germanic people into slavery, and one recalls lines 3016b-3021a of *Beowulf*, where slavery is anticipated for women of the conquered Geats" (104-5). Fadlan relates in great detail the fate of one particular Rus slave who after volunteering to accompany her lord into the afterlife must allow the male higher-ups as well as the male members of the deceased lord's family to rape her. She is then strangled and stabbed to death before ultimately being cremated alongside her lord's body on board the Viking ship. The Geatish woman is said to have her "hair bound up" ("bundenheorde" 3151), which may indicate that she is of an advanced age.¹⁴ She might

¹³ The "yellow waves" and "sea-fowls" of *The Wanderer* function similarly.

¹⁴ Smyser suggests "she may be analogous in some fashion to the Angel of Death in Ibn Fadlan." According to Fadlan, this woman prepared the female slave for the burial ritual and also performed the fatal stabbing (110).

be older than Beowulf, old enough even to have witnessed the horrors of war prior to his peaceful kingship. Her words, then, may spring from the experience of actually having seen what happens to the survivors of a conquered people. In the here and now, the hot flames of the funeral pyre signal the end of a great man, but they also portend gruesome “harm and captivity” (3155) for those left behind.

To the bitter end, Beowulf clings to the reassurance that he lived a good life, yet his are far from the poem’s final words: Wiglaf’s rebuke of the cowardly retainers; the messenger’s grim portent of future strife; and an unreadable lament that accompanies the king’s soul as it rises to be swallowed by the heavens. Unlike Beowulf, the poet acknowledges the gruesome fate of the Geatish people – not only the men who, as the messenger portends, will die in battle with “spears clutched in frozen fingers” (“gar wesan... / mundum bewunden” 3021-22), but also the women who must soon “tread into foreign lands not once, but often” (“oft nalles æne elland tredan” 3020). Drowned out by fire and ignored by Heaven, lost words such as the ones sung by the unnamed Geatish woman signify the grief felt by a people who must now reap what their king sowed.

***Beowulf* as Spatial Effect**

On a purely technical, aesthetic level, the study of spatial effects and how they operate within *Beowulf* illuminates how at least one poet utilized the juxtaposition of artifice and nature in order to bring his images to life. This helps us answer at least in part Tolkien’s injunction to better understand the poet’s craft (17), but it also sheds light on two intensely controversial subjects in *Beowulf* scholarship: namely, what the poem is

and how its title character is portrayed. George Clark summarizes the complexity of these questions and finds in his survey of critical interpretations that “the character of the hero and the theme of the poem seem both to require and to resist separate analyses” (“The Hero” 275). Single out one and obscure the other; take them both together and they playfully contradict one another. In this way, the poem as a whole is one long extended spatial effect whose motion through space and time is as impossible to define as its superhuman subjects.

Though the debate has cooled in recent years, the issue of *Beowulf*'s stance on heroism is certainly not resolved. Focusing on the poem's final word “lofgeornest,”¹⁵ Eric G. Stanley argues that the poet is intentionally inexplicit on the fate of Beowulf's soul, which casts the heroic ideal in a decidedly negative light (136). George Clark sees the contradiction most clearly in the poem's representation of arms and armor, which paradoxically unifies order and violence in the heroic world (“Beowulf's Armor” 413). He argues further that while Beowulf ultimately dies believing in the values of a heroic culture, the poet clearly does not share his hero's perspective (435). A more integrative interpretation begins to take shape with Fred Robinson, who suggests that negative and positive lights do not necessarily cancel one another out: “Amid the historically determined ambiguities of his Cædmonian formulas, the poet finds a place in his people's mind and language where their ancestors can remain, not with theological security, but with dignity” (“An Introduction” 59). Similarly, John Niles views *Beowulf* as an attempt

¹⁵ A superlative applied to Beowulf which Bosworth-Toller defines as “most desirous to deserve praise.”

to craft an imaginative space wherein Germanic culture and Christian faith can coexist as parts of a growing national identity (“Locating *Beowulf*” 106). Scholars such as Niles tend to embrace rather than resolve the tensions, interpreting *Beowulf* “as a site of ideological conflict, a complex work of art that responded to lively tensions, agreements, and disagreements from which it came, just as its text has provoked many conflicting approaches in the last two centuries” (80).

This trend has built toward a more integrative view of *Beowulf* as a poem of intricate complexity capable of venerating a heroic past while simultaneously acknowledging that contemporary society must move forward. As Andy Orchard puts it,

In considering the deeds of the pagan past, this poet does not put them entirely beyond criticism, nor yet does he seek to suggest that they are unworthy of sincere celebration. This poet seems all too aware of human limitations, and judiciously suspends judgment. We might do worse than to follow his example, however quixotic such a course of action may seem. (*Critical Companion* 263)

Spatial effects offer another way to contextualize the contradictions in *Beowulf*. If we conceive of the text primarily as a movement, as an action taken within a specific cultural and physical context, then tension transforms from ambiguity to necessity. Niles argues that the inciting factor, the first movement, which brought *Beowulf* as we know it into existence was not an oral poetry performance, but an “oral poetry act” (“Locating *Beowulf*” 104). He defines this “act” as something which is undertaken at the behest of

“another interested party” outside of the poet’s typical audience (102). There is some contention on this point. Kevin Kiernan, for instance, gives much more credit to the scribes who created the manuscript,¹⁶ asserting that they have as much to do with the creative composition of *Beowulf* as its roots in oral poetry. The debate rages on in greater depths than will be examined here, but both sides notably agree on something which must have influenced the composition of *Beowulf* as much as any other contextual factor: the cultural co-presence of literacy and orality.

The *Beowulf*-poet knew that there were things which he could not know. Runic symbols, written manuscripts, monstrous women: these are “objects asserting themselves as things,” and they confound the imagination because they refuse to be reduced easily from amorphous “things” to solid “ideas” (B. Brown 4). If Niles is correct and the poet performed his song so that it could be transposed by literate Christian monks, then both literacy and Christianity exerted a considerable presence during the act of *Beowulf*’s composition. As Niles notes, “Any performer who is not a mere memorizer is used to reshaping his materials to suit a particular audience and is unlikely to forego this habit for no good reason” (“Locating *Beowulf*” 104). This contextualization evokes an intriguing parallel between the poem’s depiction of “unknowable messages” (Paz 232) and the poet’s own immediate perception of monks transposing his words into written symbols. Perhaps he examined these literate acts with as much intensity as Hrothgar does with the

¹⁶ “Paleographically and codicologically, at least, all of the facts converge to support the theory that *Beowulf* is an 11th-century composite poem, and that the *Beowulf* MS is the archetype of the epic as we now have it” (277-78).

giant sword hilt, and it is even possible that this image derives from a “reshaping” in response to this particular audience. As he observes the motion of the quill and the subsequent appearance of strange marks upon parchment, maybe the poet allows these motions to impact his own performance.¹⁷

Whether or not the poet was literate himself, we cannot know. But it is a near certainty that he learned his craft from the expert tutelage of oral poets who were not literate. *Beowulf* brings those tensions into sharp focus. An audience cannot merely consume the poem’s ideas; like the hero, they must wrestle with its objects and reform them into their own concepts. Such an imaginative exercise must have been pertinent for audiences who were transitioning not only into a world of writing, but also into a Christian theological worldview in which societal anchors like Pagan prayers and funereal rites no longer functioned like they used to. Strange new images and concepts recorded in a foreign tongue vie for cultural supremacy, turning Anglo-Saxon England truly into a world composed of riddles wherein one could not simply “say what I am called” in order to reach understanding. You had to observe how objects and language moved through space and time, how they altered themselves and everything around them in their flight. Knowledge yielded only to those with a Beowulfian strength of intellect,

¹⁷ See Paz, who argues further that many aspects of Grendel’s mother could work as symbols for literacy: “I connect this passage to the process of reading because the terms *lastas* (tracks) and *swapu* (tracks or trails) are also found in Riddle 51 of the Exeter Book to describe the black marks left behind by the pen” (239).

sharpened by the battle-sweat of poetry and wielded against the natural forces of violence and decay.

The Future of Spatial Effects

Moving forward, there are many potential avenues for further study of spatial effects and of the use of artifice and nature imagery in general. Translation practice stands to gain the most in this regard. To look at one example, the description of the dragon as “ring-bent” (“hringbogan” 2561) is variously rendered as “writhing beast” (Liuzza), “outlandish thing” (Heaney), “coiled foe” (Gummere), “twisted tangle-thing” (Alexander), etc. Most translations do an admirable job of capturing the dragon’s physical appearance suggested by “hringbogan,” but few retain the artificial resonance present in the Old English.¹⁸ Such literalization takes the metaphorical bite out of the kenning, reducing the lithe and complex dragon into a more easily digestible idea. Granted, certain kennings and turns of phrase are more difficult to translate gracefully into Modern English equivalents than others: “wreopenhilt,” for example, which describes a sword “having a hilt bound round [with wire]” (Bosworth-Toller). All the meanings the poet packed into the kenning require a few more Modern English words to translate effectively. In such cases, the translator’s task is to gauge how vital the imagery is to the surrounding context. Take the “hring” out of “hringbogan” and a potent psycho-

¹⁸ Notable exceptions are “ring-coiled” from Pearson and “ring-bow’d” from Thorpe.

physical aspect of the dragon's character goes with it. Spatial effects demand that we pay close heed to the imaginative possibilities which the poet's words provide.

Spatial effects can also provide scholars from a wide variety of fields with opportunities for comparative analysis, unique pedagogical instruction, and historical contextualization. How do other Old English poets represent artifice and nature in their work? The resemblance of *Beowulf* to other contemporaneous art forms is well established,¹⁹ but is its unique patterning of opposed imagery exclusive to the Anglo-Saxon period, or do we see the same sort of phenomena in later medieval culture or even beyond? Instructors of *Beowulf* might also find spatial effects to be useful illustrations of the poem's aesthetic complexity. Often vibrant, violent, and full of spectacle, intertwinings of artifice and nature find fitting analogues in the art and entertainment of contemporary society. Students grappling with the poem's obscure imagery and unfamiliar rhythms may find such a correlation helpful and stimulating. Historians and archaeologists could also glean insight from the way the poet manipulates images of objects which no longer exist. The poet rarely aims for a mimetic representation of reality, however he does refer to objects which were very real to his audience. We cannot construct an exact replica of Hrothgar's mead-hall from the information provided by the *Beowulf*-poet, but we can gain a very clear sense of what it was like for an Anglo-Saxon to gaze upon it.

¹⁹ See Hart's "*Ellen: Some Tectonic Relationships in Beowulf and Their Formal Resemblance to Anglo-Saxon Art*" and Leyerle's "*The Interlace Structure of Beowulf*."

Ultimately, *Beowulf* offers us this opportunity to see not only “see things... through monstrous eyes” (Orchard, *Critical Companion* 173), but also through human eyes – a feat which is often much more difficult. At the outset of the poem, the exalted life and glorious death of Scyld Scefing illustrates the limitations of even the greatest of heroes. A great king who rose from humble beginnings, Scyld is honored with an extravagant ship burial:

There at the landing stood a ring-sterned ship, icy and outbound, vessel of a nobleman; there they laid their beloved king, giver of rings, in the bosom of the ship, glorious by the mast. There were many treasures and adornments from faraway lands loaded there. I have never heard of a more fitting keel arrayed in battle-weapons and war-trappings, blades and byrnies. In its bosom lay many treasures that were meant to travel with Scyld far into the keeping of the flood.²⁰ (32-42).

The poet concludes this historical interlude with an ominous statement: “Men do not know – neither hall-counselors nor heroes under the heavens – how to say truly who received that freight”²¹ (50-52). With its emphasis on an inability “how to say truly” what happens after death, this dour outlook resembles the metaphor of the mead-hall in Bede’s

²⁰ “þær æt hyðe stod hringedstefna / isig ond utfus, æþelingas fær; / aledon þa leofne þeoden, / beaga bryttan on bearm scipes, / mærne be mæste. þær wæs madma fela / of feorwegum frætwa gelæded; ne hyrde ic cymlicor ceol gegyrwan / hildewæpnum ond heaðowædum, / billum ond byrnum. Him on bearme læg / madma mænigo, þa him mid scoldon / on flodes æht feor gewitan” (32-42).

²¹ “Men ne cunnon / secgan to soðe, seleræden[d]e, / hæleð under heofenum, hwa þæm hlæste onfeng” (50-52).

Ecclesiastical History in which a trusted hall-counselor advises King Edwin that Christianity allows men to expand their cosmological viewpoint beyond the confines of earthly reality. Among other things, such a perspective would enable Scyld's people to know who precisely received the freight of their king's soul, but it would also put Scyld's violent conquests and heroic valor²² into a context wherein these individual achievements are not as significant.

Through his words, the *Beowulf*-poet challenges his audience to view everyday objects and commonplace notions with such foresight, to forge a connection with ancestors and future generations alike so that their actions in the here and now can be viewed as part of a continually unfolding (and repeating) history. If the poem's characters had had this level of understanding, they might have prevented Grendel's birth, predicted the mother's vengeance, and preserved the security of an entire nation. The societal importance of such an expanded perspective is made clear by Beowulf's inability to predict the fate of his people. He dies bravely in an epic battle against a colossal serpent, but his tale does not end there. The consequences of Beowulf's actions and inactions reverberate long after his death, signaling the need for an expanded perspective of human responsibility. This is above all a collective responsibility. The weapon-smith tempers fire into the sword; the warrior slays the man with cold steel; and the poet makes this murky association unflinchingly clear. Spatial effects show us how monstrous beings

²² "Often Scyld Scefing seized the mead-benches from the people of many nations and frightened their earls" ("Oft Scyld Scefing sceapena preatum, / monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah, / egsode eorl[as]" 4-6).

grow from human origins, effectively revealing that our only hope of control lies in empathy, foresight, and a palpable self-awareness. If Bede argues that we can know what frontiers await beyond the light of the mead-hall, the *Beowulf*-poet emphasizes why we should.

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