

Grendel: Boundaries of Flesh and Law

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Abstract

In *Beowulf*, Grendel presents itself as a figure of inescapable ambiguity and as an embodiment of paradox that causes consternation in the human community. There is no definite way of definition for the monster in the masterpiece of Old English literature, and Grendel is presented as an exile in space and discourse, his malicious shadow compared with other types of monsters in Scandinavian literature or as an allegory of Evil in a Christian perspective. These theoretical approaches have missed the fact that the monster is something inherent not only to epic but to society itself.

Following Michel Foucault's theories of power and resistance, this paper will offer a more comprehensive vision of what Grendel represents and what its presence and violence in human society can show. The monster has to be taken into account not only as the personification of pure evil or as the necessary antagonist for the hero, Grendel exists because power in Heorot exists. The monstrous presence in Heorot has an impact as powerful as the forms of human power that have imposed themselves on space and discourse. Grendel and his Mother inhabit the darkest space ever possible in society: that of resistance, that of being the Other against whom members inside society can define themselves and can assert their position as part of the community. With each stride and attack, Grendel enforces and articulates the community's identity. Even though the monster roams outside the field of human space, at the same time, it is inside human consciousness and space, and the monster forms the threshold and the very limit needed by society in *Beowulf* from a natural and legal perspective. Importantly, the hero's actions on the monster will be written on its body revealing an anxiety on borders and pain in *Beowulf*. Grendel is the night that Heorot needs in order to shine. A night that has to be denied but, without which, society cannot exist.

Key Words: Beowulf, Grendel, Foucault, power, resistance, old English, mutilation, beheading, monster, medieval.

Boundaries in *Beowulf* are as fragile as the human body in Grendel's maws. Unless they are strengthened or reshaped with the ambivalent power of the hero, the limits of Heorot cannot protect the order established within them.

Following Michel Foucault's theories about the monster and incorporating in the analysis the legal aspects of Grendel this paper will attempt to provide a deeper

reflection on the production of a monster like Grendel taking into account the legal aspects and the boundaries the monster in *Beowulf* tears and digest. His specific relation to order as a great figure of ambivalence and ambiguity will erode all boundaries in *Beowulf* that prove too vulnerable and unstable. Not even the violent reinforcement by the hero will contain safely the identity as the monster is an inclusive element needed from the very foundation of the community in its very specific context in *Beowulf*. Shifting the focus to the legal limits that Grendel embodies will help to relate a monster like Grendel to modern and more “human” monsters like the ones dealt with throughout this conference that prove different stages in the monster as “other”.

Violence is used both to consolidate the ever expanding human community in the reign of monsters and to establish boundaries that are not to be trespassed imposing authority on discourse and space.¹

Due to this ambivalent establishment of boundaries as permanent limits and possible transgressions, flesh proves a very vulnerable boundary in *Beowulf* as it cannot preserve identity from a greedy and blood-thirsty monster,² but in reality, space and flesh constitute ineffective boundaries when not even discourse can bound Grendel in a fixed identity, the farther from humankind the better with a his association with Cain and the ensuing Christian evil tradition³. Notwithstanding the possible allegorical functions of the monsters in medieval art,⁴ Grendel was an entity too real in his terror for the Anglo-Saxon readers, a real terror against which they had to devise mechanism of protection.⁵ He is a monster ‘who live[s] near civilized men and [is] actively hostile and harmful.’⁶

Suddenly, the *locus monstruoso* manifests itself not far from home, in fact, Grendel stands expectantly on the ‘edge’ of Heorot itself, penetrating the gates of the hall. Spatially there is no longer a safe distance to mediate between predator and prey in *Beowulf*, even though the monster is identified as an exile.⁷ It is precisely the fact that Grendel commits his crimes *inside* the social space, without any space mediating between monster and violence, that makes him the more terrible, his crimes more heinous, the more alarming he becomes.⁸ No longer a safe adornment of the borders of maps and manuscripts, ‘at a too great a remove to be personally verified’,⁹ the monster is too near for comfort because the only distance separating now the monster from the centre of the community in *Beowulf* is an uneasy and fragile surface that is inclusive to the social space, and this reveals that the *locus monstruoso* is ‘nor outside so much as it is the threshold and conductor between outside and inside.’¹⁰

Although the only condition for the monster in *Beowulf* seems to be his isolation and exteriority to the community ‘to be a monster means to be alienated, to be alienated means to move into the world of monsters’¹¹, in fact, the monster is never as exterior, never that far away from the centre, as the clear delimitations would have us believe. Grendel is the threshold limiting what is inside from what is outside, partaking of both at the same time. In a distance as important as the one

between what is acceptable and what is not, there only appears to be two possible positions. But the very foundations of Heorot seem to imply a possibility of transgression and of the monster reclaiming his territory by inscribing in its walls and fortifications the future violence of the monster. Like man-made wounds in space, they grant access to the most vulnerable interior. And their threshold, a nowhere space fixed into a poised position of ambiguity calls an uneasy identification with the most ambivalent figure that can still be considered a part of society even though it must be kept at the most possible distance. Constituting, then, the unwanted third element, the monster's presence in Heorot manifests 'that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses.'¹² Every threshold is a possibility of transgression that can exist in that reduced space between inside and outside, where the ambiguity of the monster fits.

Grendel's presence in the gates of Heorot, as a logical reply to the invitation of the hall, explicitly recalls the transgression of all the possible boundaries including that of the normative discourse of the creative myth that separates and limits the possible space, ordering space. Not even the superlative discourse of the ordering God in space and discourse in the Biblical community¹³ can detain the ambiguous presence from entering, marring the order just established by the human figure of authority.¹⁴ There is no order, established by humans or God, that can deter Grendel from irrupting into it and writing his own words in blood. His presence in Heorot is measured not only in discomfort but in the breach of law and space the monster embodies.

This points suggestively to the relationship of the monster to order¹⁵ and how the monster disorders effectively space and discourse and, importantly, also the most essential order for any kind of life: that of the body. In a strange proportion of perplexity and recognition, Grendel gets as close as possible to the social fabric of Heorot only when he disrupts its 'normality', when he is eating it, penetrating the softest surface which is, at the same time, alien and his own. The only proof Grendel has been able to get the closest possible is the crimson colour of the most powerful language¹⁶ both humans and monsters understand.

If the physical boundaries in *Beowulf* (those of flesh and wood) are not safe from Grendel's voracious attacks, the subtler limits imposed by discourse and social conventions that form the foundation of social life are in actual danger of total collapse because they also communicate with blood, the same essential boundary that the monster uses as his only token of expression. When Grendel enters into the community he brings with him 'a monstrous ambiguity'¹⁷ that manifests itself with the monster in the space of the community which should be the safest for its inhabitants.¹⁸

Grendel's hunger is the ruin of the community because he eats it and partakes of it socially with its consumption¹⁹ but not with his active social role. He is

usurping the thanes' position, creating new boundaries of the social in his own physical body: 'Flesh is united to flesh in an unbroken round of eating and being eaten.'²⁰ Through anthropophagy Grendel achieves a new community where he cannot be an exile because he is the very centre from which it emerges. His antisocial behaviour enters the community not only due to his attacks but also in the integration of the social fabric he consumes in his insides. By spilling and drinking the thanes' blood he sins against his dubious percentage of humanity with a powerful ink of horror and fascination but is also appropriating a *position* that does not belong to the monster.

With each attack Grendel *communicates* in a frenzy of scorn and malice more than just his need to feed. His cannibal feeding frenzy 'is never just about eating but is primarily a medium for nongustatory messages—messages having to do with the maintenance, regeneration, and in some cases, the foundation of the cultural order,'²¹ revealing that his cannibal attacks are part of his relation to order in Heorot. Again positioned as an element in relation to (dis)order Grendel's hunger is very human 'the envy of the exile at the joyous singing and communal feeling of the men in the meadhall, an emotion similar to that of Satan'²² and as a 'human' violent expression it has a legal and social dimension because of the social and legal boundaries that he consumes. This proves that the monster in *Beowulf* is ambiguously human not only in his possible physical aspect or his relationship to Cain but, importantly, in his legality, tearing a very important boundary in the Germanic community.

The human dimension of his crimes, apart from the suffering and bereavement in the community, appears in the mention of Grendel not paying *wergild* for his crimes. It seems it could have been remotely expected in the Germanic context that crimes like the ones committed by the monster²³ should be paid compensation²⁴ by the monster himself.²⁵ A question arises unexpectedly and with uneasiness: would the payment of that legal imposition have changed the impression the monster leaves behind? It seems the lack of due *wergild* is the only requirement for the monster to be unambiguously so, as there seems to be no legal or moral doubt that the monster must be punished, no matter how his 'human' plight can be likened to the Germanic reality of exile: 'The fight with Grendel, as Beowulf himself recounts, was one he could take on with a clear moral mandate'²⁶ as a consequence of Grendel's impune violation of *wergild*.

Suddenly, the legal aspects of the monster in the community appear in *Beowulf* as a consequence of the monster's bloody aftermath and blur a boundary already ambivalent and easily transgressed. The monster has legal life that is specific to the community and historic context that defines it as a monster²⁷ but as a transgression whose sole existence seems to depend on his infringement of the legal order he constantly reproduces its position as a threshold element. Being a legal-natural complex the monster 'appears and functions precisely at the point where nature and law are joined'²⁸ and disappears only when it no longer poses a legal infraction.

Since law cannot apply to him, being exterior to it, the monster is defined as non-human ‘in a legal and literal case.’²⁹ But no matter how exterior he is portrayed to be, paradoxically, he is an irregularity inside law that ‘calls law into question and disables it.’³⁰ Then, the monster as an exception that disables the application and action of law is *stated* in the law. As ‘a legal labyrinth, a violation of and an obstacle to the law, both a transgression and undecidability at the law of the law’³¹ Grendel is included in the legal system of *wergild* as a flagrant exception. As a legal system to counteract the consequences of any violent deeds inside the community³² *wergild* is a mechanism that substitutes the blood sacrifices and gives cohesion to the community by preserving it from infinite blood feuds and ‘expressed both the unity of the kindred in paying for the crimes of their members and the justice of the accuser’s case.’³³ It constitutes a limit for violence by establishing the repayment of ending long-term feuds.³⁴ What the payment of *wergild* could avert in the case of Grendel’s attacks—the victims’ kin having physical and legal revenge on Grendel—is impossible. He is too strong and too violent³⁵ and does not fear the vendetta that could ensue from his actions. There is no way for any of the thanes in Heorot to be superior in violence to an enemy that will not respect the civilities of the community in peace and war: ‘Grendel exhibits disregard if not outright disdain for the symbols and ceremonies of human order, including even the civilities of warfare’³⁶. But, in fact, why should Grendel respect *wergild* when he stays in total resistance to all the order established inside the community: ‘Why should a cat come to terms with mice?’³⁷

The monster, bathed and sated with blood does not threaten with starting a fratricide war of never-ending feud *inside* the community (what *wergild* prevented against³⁸) in fact, he uses and produces a violence that will engulf the whole of the community and render useless every social and legal mechanism, including *wergild*. Grendel with his total disregard of *wergild* achieves the same as with his blood deeds, that is: ‘The dissolution of regulations pertaining to the individual’s proper place in society.’³⁹ Every time he kills athane with a particular *wergild* that goes unpaid⁴⁰ he eats his way not only into flesh but also into the hierarchical position inside the social fabric of Heorot with that specific *wergild*. With impunity the monster can attack the very own centre of the community in *Beowulf*, getting as close to Hrothgar’s throne as possible.

Grendel’s supposed exteriority to the law and the community is not so important when he attacks it, as his attacks are interpreted and translated into an operation of human violence and retribution. He is integrated into the rules, albeit only in the transgression, just as he is integrated into the legal consequences⁴¹ inside the social space where these conventions and rituals are essential to preserve order and to maintain peace:

Grendel’s refusal to negotiate put him morally and socially speaking, beyond the pale. He did not play by the rules. The

poet's audience (...) lived in a feuding culture; they were familiar with the conventions.⁴²

As it has been shown in this paper, it is not only the physical, and the most easily identified, boundaries that the monster tears into in *Beowulf*. Implied in the presence of blood, the legal boundaries have been recalled and transgressed because they are expressed ultimately with blood, an element that reminds the community of its own vulnerability and the social bounds within that are its own foundations. Once impure blood has stained the walls, Grendel has effectively dissolved all boundaries and distinctions within Heorot by disrupting order in all its aspects. With no payment for his crimes and no possibility of punishing the monster, Hrothgar is at loss as to how to recover authority and restore space since rituals cannot work properly within Heorot and power cannot be regenerated.

Due to Grendel's cannibalism and ambivalent human nature he is too close to the community he eats, ambiguous enough because he inhabits the threshold already before the establishment of social space, proving an inclusive element of Heorot. But no matter his physical monstrosity the most important monstrous acts of Grendel seem to be his total disregard of *wergild* and the legal consequences of his actions within the social space.

With the new adornments in the walls of Heorot the social space has changed and collapsed, its social conventions no longer as useful as before, the space no longer considered safe and the social and legal conventions ignored by the monster. This results in a community that needs the boundaries that Grendel has put into question and destroyed with his violent incursions in the very centre of society but, even when vanquished, mutilated and digested, still needs a monstrous element to conform those boundaries.

Notes

- 1 'Thereafter they would never hinder the passage of sea-voyagers over the deep water' *Beowulf*, 565-569. All the *Beowulf* quotes used in this paper belong to Talbot Donaldson translation *Beowulf* (New York: W.W Norton Publishers, 1966).
- 2 Jeffrey J. Cohen; *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 14; Judy Anne White, *Hero-Ego in Search of self: A Jungian Reading of 'Beowulf'*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 29.
- 3 Frederich Klaeber, 'Die christlichen Elemente im Beowulfe'. *Anglia* 35 (1911) and *Anglia* 36 (1912), trans. 'The Christian Elements in *Beowulf*', *Old English Newsletter Subsidia* 24 (1996): 111-135; Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of 'Beowulf'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958 [1951]), 5-12; David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature*. (Exeter: University Exeter Press, 1996), 11.
- 4 Susan Kim, 'Man-Eating Monsters and Ants as Big as Dogs'. *Medievalia Groningana* XX, *Animals and the Symbolic in Medieval Art and Literature*. (Gronigen: Egbert Forsten, 1997), 43.
- 5 Asa Mittman, 'Headless Men and Hungry Monsters'. *The Sarum Seminar Stanford University Alumni Center*, (March 2003), 3.
- 6 John B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000 [1981]), 107.
- 7 *Beowulf*, 106-110; 1351-1352; R. E. Kaske, 'Sapientia et Fortitudo as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*', in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980 [1964]), 287-288; Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 63.
- 8 Mittman, 'Headless Men', 10.
- 9 Asa Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 11.
- 10 Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, 17.
- 11 Andreas Haarder, '*Beowulf*': *The Appeal of a Poem*, (Viborg: Akademisk Forlag, 1975), 278.
- 12 Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980 [1977]), 33.
- 13 Averil Cameron, 'Redrawing the Map: Early Christian Territory after Foucault'. *Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986): 268.
- 14 *Beowulf*, 89-98.
- 15 Andrew N. Sharpe, *Foucault's Monsters and the Challenge of Law*.

- (New York: Routledge, 2010), 24; Michael Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France 1974-1975*. (London: Verso, 2003), 63.
- 16 Eric Wilson 'The Blood Wrought Peace: A Girardian Reading of *Beowulf*'. *English Language Notes* 34 1996.
- 17 Magrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 10-11.
- 18 *Beowulf*, 120-125.
- 19 Reay Tannahill, *Flesh and Blood*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), 6.
- 20 Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 24.
- 21 Peggy R. Sanday, *Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as a Cultural System*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3.
- 22 Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, 106.
- 23 'He [Grendel] wanted no peace with any of the men of the Danish host, would not withdraw his deadly rancor, or pay compensation: no counselor there had any reason to expect splendid repayment at the hands of the slayer' (*Beowulf*, 153-158).
- 24 *Beowulf*, 153-158.
- 25 Ward Parks, 'How Heroes Perceive Monsters in *Beowulf*'. *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* vol. 92 No. 1 (1993): 6-8.
- 26 Albrecht Classen and Nadia Margolis, ed. *War and Peace: Critical Issues in European Societies and Literature 800-1800*. (Berlin/ Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co, 2011), 147.
- 27 Foucault, *Abnormal*, 55.
- 28 Ibid. 65.
- 29 Sharpe, *Foucault's Monsters*, 23.
- 30 Foucault, *Abnormal*, 64.
- 31 Ibid. 63.
- 32 D. J. Fisher, *Anglo-Saxon Age*. (Harlow: Longman, 1992 [1973]), 121-122.
- 33 Mary Murray, *The Law of the Father? Patriarchy in the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 99
- 34 Stephen S. Evans, *Lords of Battle: Image and Reality of the 'Comitatus' in Dark-Age Britain*, (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1997), 68; Guy Halsall, *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*, (Rochester: Boydell Press, 1998), 25.
- 35 *Beowulf*, 129-137; 144-150.
- 36 Parks, 'How Heroes', 6.
- 37 Ibid. 7.
- 38 Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963 [1952]), 260-261.

- 39 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, (London: Continuum Books, 1977 [2005]), 59; Wilson, 'Girardian Reading', 1996.
- 40 Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*. (Clarendon: Oxford University Press. 1989 [1943]), 303.
- 41 *Beowulf*, 1052-1054, 1333-1344; Whitelock, *Beginnings of English Society*, 41, 143.
- 42 Richard A. Fletcher, *Bloodfeud: Murder and Revenge in Anglo-Saxon England*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 10.

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