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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jenny Lea Bowman entitled "Symmetrical Aesthetics of *Beowulf*." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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SYMMETRICAL AESTHETICS OF *BEOWULF*

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Jenny Lea Bowman
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DEDICATION

for my family

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ABSTRACT

The symmetrical aesthetic of *Beowulf* occurs both thematically and structurally. The poet balances Beowulf's physical strength against that of the monsters, and Beowulf also embodies an internal balance of strength and wisdom that the poet suggests are necessary traits to cease the perpetuation of feud. Each event and character in the poem is carefully weighted against corresponding events of equal and opposite force. The balance of the poem's structure occurs simultaneously on two levels: externally, the battles of the poem are carefully arranged so as to reflect Beowulf's strength and valor as a hero; internally, the landscape is used to illustrate Beowulf's balance of character against the dark characteristics of the monsters and to represent emotional responses and instigations to feud. These elements work in harmony with each other to provide unity to the overall symmetrical structure of the poem. The symmetrical aesthetic and careful balancing of opposition within the poem speaks to greater societal concerns of reciprocity, retribution, and feuding. This aesthetic of symmetry underlies social concerns represented figuratively within the poem.

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INTRODUCTION

Presumably written between 800 and 1000, *Beowulf* tells the adventures of its hero as he battles three monsters and navigates his way within a Germanic society plagued with vendettas. It is the story of a hero's life from his definitive heroic moment in slaying Grendel in youth to his tragic death in age from his battle with a dragon. The poem is carefully crafted upon an aesthetic of balance and symmetry that reflects a pivotal aspect of social infrastructure, a system of justice based upon revenge and vendettas. This system, which was designed to encourage peace, also had the paradoxical effect of encouraging violence by necessitating blood retaliation for an equally violent offense against a person's kinsman.

Beowulf is set in a world that valued reciprocity. A successful king had a large retinue of loyal retainers; the larger a king's retinue, the more formidable his strength in battle. However, this loyalty was a commodity that the king must reward with treasure and gold-giving. This dispensation was won in battle, and so, in order to obtain gold to give to his followers, a king must incite acts of violence that would undoubtedly be met with acts of retaliation. Even though feuding and vengeance discourage violence because of this promise of retaliation, the necessity of gold-giving encouraged acts of violence that sparked feuding, thereby perpetuating violence and undermining the deterrent to hostility.

Structural and thematic elements of the poem reflect this societal foundation of reciprocity. Balance and symmetry are key elements to the poem as a whole. Not only does the poet take great care to paint Beowulf as a character balanced of both strength and wisdom, he matches each battle in such a way as to provide a symmetrical balance. Each element of the poem is carefully weighted against the next so that all aspects are met with either a balanced counterpoint or a symmetrical duality.

Reciprocity, therefore, seems a pervasive entity, both artistically and culturally. Just as the underlying structure of feud is one of reciprocity, the poet replicates this balance in *Beowulf*. The symmetrical aesthetic is found in contemporary artwork as well, suggesting that ideals of balance and symmetry were an integral part of Anglo-Saxon culture.

Central to this balance is the poet's critique of the Germanic system of feuding. The poet portrays a society built upon revenge and shows how this system collapses from its own weight. Both Christian and Pagan aspects are intermingled within the poem, adding another layer of balance. However, the overarching message is critical of Germanic ideals, and the poet presents this heroic society from the standpoint of corrective admiration. While he does not criticize heroic achievements, he ultimately illustrates how their social system, based on Germanic ideals of reciprocity and revenge, destroys itself, which suggests the preferable route of Christian forgiveness.

This paper examines the relationship between the *Beowulf* poet's symmetrical aesthetic and the cultural influences upon this aesthetic.

I.

FEUDING AND *BEOWULF*

Writing in the year 98, Tacitus describes the customs of the Germanic tribes in his ethnography *Germania*. He provides only a brief mention of feuding:

> It is an obligation to take over the father's or kinsman's feuds and friendships. But feuds do not go on with no reconciliation. In fact, even homicide can be atoned for with a fixed number of cattle of sheep. The whole family receives this compensation. This is an advantage for the community, since feuds are rather dangerous where freedom exists. (48)

The account is almost dismissive, downplaying feuding as more of a threat of retaliation, should someone choose not to compensate an act of violence, rather than an actual possibility. Tacitus ends on a rather ominous note that "feuds are rather dangerous where freedom exists." What Tacitus's account neglects is the destruction that such retaliation would enact. Feuding is a series of revenges between two kin groups that begin when one party perceives itself to have been wronged by the other and seeks redress by means of vengeance. The original party likewise perceives itself to have been wronged and retaliates. Once a feud was begun, the acts of vengeance could, theoretically, perpetuate for years. Although perhaps not continuous, these feuds could engulf generations of fathers and sons and kinsmen. The *Beowulf* poet uses feuding as a central figure in the poem. The poet has a careful eye focused upon a balanced and symmetrical structure throughout the poem, and this structure is informed by the ideals of balance ingrained in a society that centered its system of justice upon avenging misdeeds, tit-for-tat. The Germanic society painted in *Beowulf* is pinned uncomfortably upon the possibility of the next hostility to break out, and is also a society fueled by correcting wrongful acts with

retribution. This literary society mirror Anglo-Saxon society, and it is this balance of activity and payback that steered the poet's creation of the *Beowulf* aesthetic.

Du Bois notes the correlation between feuding and the poem's structure and sees this evidenced by Beowulf's strength. The fact that the hero has the strength of thirty men, Du Bois asserts, is indicative of Beowulf representing the strength of the nation. Du Bois marks that there is "a contrast between the unarmed Beowulf, thirty-strong, and the armed, official, impotent guard of Heorot, also thirty-strong" (375). In this instance, Beowulf is as strong as the Danish nation. A further rendering of this is when Beowulf escapes a harrowing battle by swimming with thirty suits of mail. Again, Du Bois notes that Beowulf is carrying the strength of the nation as represented by those suits of mail: "Beowulf's strength is the equivalent of thirty suits of armor encasing the army of a nation, represented by its official guard" (376). For Du Bois, the poem is centered upon the rise and the fall of the Geatish nation as much as it is on the rise and fall of the hero. As such, feuding is central to this theme and structure. Du Bois observes that the poem begins with Beowulf's fight with Grendel when the Geats are at their strongest, and ends with the dragon and the fall of the Geats (379). The monsters present a more vivid and daunting challenge and offer epic points of delineations in the Geat chronicle. They are also a key element in this representation of feuding because the monsters complicate the threats of vengeance and feud. According to Du Bois, the mortal forces of the poem, such as the Swedes, exacerbate the threat posed by the monsters because "they make internal weakness among the Danes or Geats all the more dangerous, make the threat of a Grendel or a dragon all the more dreadful" (379). Battling the monsters is harrowing enough, but the vengeful forces lurking on the periphery make any strife that much more dangerous. The threat of hostile nations remains an underlying thread that ties the poem together and sets vengeance and retaliation as a

foundation for the symmetrical aspects of the poem. The poet was drawing on this deeply ingrained cultural tradition and produced an aesthetic from it.

Tacitus's account of feuding in Germanic societies is ostensibly accurate in its brevity. In examining the Frankish *Lex Salica*, Murray finds that blood feuds were mostly relegated to tightly interlocked kin groups, and this tight-knit network tended to limit the number of participants in the vendetta. The interlocked nature of the various kin groups encouraged reconciliation because participants would have conflicting interests between feuding parties (Murray 137). Additionally, wergild—a monetary value placed upon an individual for purposes of compensation to his kin should he be the victim of a homicide—as a means of compensation was highly encouraged not only by kin groups but by the state authority as well. As laid out in the *Lex Salica*, blood vengeance was only sanctioned if a person was unable to pay a wergild either through his own property or through his kinsman's. Compensation was paid rightly to the victim's kindred but a portion also went to the fisc, thereby making it in the authority's best interest to limit the use of feud in favor of monetary (or property) compensation (Murray 139). The prominence of the fisc in settling retribution may be seen in the provision for renouncing kinship. Once a person has been cut loose from his kinship obligations, which would be in his best interest should a feud loom on the horizon, any inheritance or compensation owed to him goes instead to the fisc. As Murray notes, "implicit in the procedure [. . .] is the idea that the relatives are not merely renounced but that the fisc steps in to take their place" (155). Wergild, therefore, opened up a greater pathway for the governance outside the kin group to exert its authority. Power then shifts from the individual and his clan to the regulation by an outside authority.

As Hyams notes with regards to Anglo-Saxon laws, Old English law codes established wergilds and appropriate compensations for particular crimes. The laws require an intermediary to intercede in the event of a potential feud. In reference to Alfred's code, feuding was sanctioned, provided that it followed certain provisions: "before any formal resort to violence, the aggrieved should first seek aid from an ealdorman and then, only if that proved vain, the king" (Hyams 12). In this case, the party seeking vengeance was approved to carry out its vendetta only after consulting with the proper authorities. As Hyams notes, this procedure allowed a "cooling-off period" for the parties involved (12). What is notable, however, is that feuding was sanctioned under specific conditions. According to Hyams, this illustrates that "the king may have preferred litigation through his system of public courts, but he felt able to assert no more than the right to police an existing system" (12). Vengeance was such a vital part of the Anglo-Saxon's sense of justice that the king was only comfortable in regulating it slightly. The law codes assumed only to nominally intervene in the current feuding process, which was "still essentially run on private enterprise" (Hyams 12).

Phillpotts further argues that wergild dispensation was evidence for decaying kinship bonds. For example, in Norwegian and Danish laws, kindred have no responsibility for an individual's crime unless the criminal tries to flee the country, and then, only if he succeeds, must the family pay half the sum in Norway and the entire wergild in Denmark (Phillpotts 212). Already the kindred unit has weaker ties to the individual. As Phillpotts notes, the institution of feuding and the ties it created within the kindred must have had an enormous impact on the society: "A man who can at any moment surround himself with a large group of persons, all of whom are willing to make sacrifices for him, is in a very different position to one who has to depend on his own efforts and on those of his immediate family for protection against

aggression" (247). So, while feuding as a means of law and order marks the strongest period of kindred, wergild marks the first level of decay among this institution. As time progressed, the parties responsible for paying the wergild became closer and closer to the individual such that, by the thirteenth century in England, only the immediate family was responsible for wergild, meaning that the bond of kindred could only be extended as far as an individual's immediate family.

Of the Germanic clans that maintained the strongest kinship unity for longest time, these are also the states in which the individual retains his autonomy the longest. Interestingly, in regards to *Beowulf*, Phillpotts notes that kindred dies in England by the eighth century, yet survives in Denmark in the seventeenth century and Sweden beyond the fourteenth century (245). If *Beowulf* was written between 800 and 1000, the poem perhaps reflects the changing society of England and the gradual loss of freedom to the individual with the introduction of more formal legal systems, especially compared with other Germanic nations such as Sweden and Denmark. Phillpotts writes that "it is highly significant that wherever the kindreds survive the blood feud remains a privilege of all classes, recognized, if deplored, by the law," and "it is the unquestioned right of the slain man's kin in the Swedish law-books of the thirteenth century" whereas "in England [. . .] there is no trace of legitimate blood feuds after the time of Eadmund (c. 943)" (254). Regarding the individual, Phillpotts further notes that in England and Iceland, the two countries in which kinship dies out early on, "the feud was a matter between a few individuals only, and it was easy to override their wishes in the interests of the general public" (245). For Germanic heroic society, feuding was a staple for justice and perceived as a right. Feuding was so ubiquitous that Phillpotts asserts that the areas in which kindred thrived the longest probably represent the "original home, at any rate from the Stone Age onwards, of the

Teutonic race" (261). It is no wonder, then, that feuding persisted for so long despite its destructive consequences. The *Beowulf* poet clearly seeks to criticize this system of vengeful justice even while recognizing that its enforcers were more of less powerless to reject this self-perpetuating entity of violence.

Wergild and other measures that limited blood feud indicate not only increased power of the central authority (who could partake of the fines involved), but also a fundamental need for alternatives to blood vengeance. While their social code dictated they seek out vengeance for particular crimes, it was important to have avenues available that would allow the parties involved an alternative to feuding. Feuding, although capable of encouraging peace on the level of promised retaliation, also obligated vengeance once an individual crossed the line.

In *Beowulf,* the poet paints a society that is rife with feuds. Whether feuds were in reality as rampant as they are in *Beowulf* misses the point; the idea that a feud could break out at any moment was enough to have a strict set of deterrents in place, indicating that feud—however much it actually materialized—played a prevalent role in the worldview of the Anglo-Saxons. The *Beowulf* poet makes use of this worldview by employing it as a literary device to inform the general aesthetic of the poem.

Feuding abounds in *Beowulf*. Aside from the obvious feuds between Grendel, his mother, and the Danes, and Beowulf and the dragon, there are several episodes of mortal feuds as well: Ecgtheow and the Wulfings; Finn (the Friesians) and the Danes; an anticipated feud between the Heathobards and the Danes (for which Freawaru is given in marriage as a peace-weaver); Eadgils and Onela; Haethcyn's unintentional slaying of his brother Herebeald—a wrong which could not be redressed; and several acts of vengeance between the Geats and the Swedes. The poem ends with Wiglaf warning of the many feuds that lurk on the horizon—

Franks, Frisians, and Swedes will be waiting to attack when they learn of Beowulf's death. When Beowulf tells Wiglaf that he is the last of the Waegmundings, it is hardly a note of triumph, even though he has helped to slay the dragon, but rather an ominous foreboding that Beowulf's death means the death of the rest of the clan through the vengeance of the unsettled feuds. Beowulf was able to hold the feuds at bay, which was part of his heroic feats, but without the legendary hero, the feuding will run rampant and with devastating effects. In creating Beowulf, the poet has shaped a singular persona that envelops both the physical strength to combat even monstrous villains and the inner temperance to combat, but not incite, violence. Beowulf settles feuds, he discourages feuds; he does not instigate them. As long as Beowulf lives, feuding seems to merely stew beneath the surface. When he dies, vendettas boil over.

The theme of feuding underpins the general aesthetic of balance towards which the poet strives. Beowulf is the balancing point of both this theme and the structural balance of the aesthetic. Brodeur asserts, in agreement with Tolkien, that the poem is a balanced work between the beginning and the end of a hero's life. Particularly, Brodeur notes the lack of detail the poet provides about Beowulf's reign as king. Fifty years elapse without commentary. The poet apparently "preferred to present [the hero's deeds in those middle years] in a summary of intervening action; and this must have been a deliberate choice" (Brodeur 1184). This produces a "calculated balance" that highlights the "heroic ideal in its two contrasted and most meaningful states—first and last—of his hero's life" (Brodeur 1184). The result is that the poem rests thematically upon Beowulf's heroic abilities, especially with regards to feuding, and also upon the structural aesthetics of the poem, since they are hinged upon the hero himself. As Brodeur observes, in such a work, "the person of the hero must furnish the essential bond between the

balanced parts" (1185). The thematic elements, therefore, serve to reinforce the structural elements of the poem.

Many of the accounts of the acts of vengeance serve both to catalog victories and defeats, but also as a warning to Beowulf to maintain his temperance for the express purpose of avoiding feuds. Feuding, in the poem, is as dangerous as the monsters. The institution of feuding itself marks the most harrowing foe. While the individuals involved in the feuds may be overcome, the feud itself remains an insurmountable affliction. It is, therefore, one of Beowulf's finest traits that he is able to live out his reign without starting a feud. To enforce this, the poet gives accounts of the other kings in the poem, all for whom this turns out to be an impossibility: Hygelac, Heardred, Onela, Ongentheow, and Finn are all killed in feuds. In fact, the poem ends with Wiglaf's recounting of all the feuds Beowulf's kinsmen have witnessed. This cataloguing at the end is designed to overwhelm the audience with the volume of vendettas and intensifies the feuds that await the clan upon their leader's death.

The poem ends with a grim picture of the aftereffects of feud, and it also, appropriately begins with the necessity of dealing successfully with feud, thereby indicating the ubiquitous nature of this act. Feuding appears early on in the poem. In the opening lines, the poet notes that, in order for a young man to successfully take over his father's kingdom, he must be generous so that when violence breaks out, his companions will stand by him: "Swa sceal (geong g)uma gode gewyrcean, / fromum feohgiftum on fæder (bea)rme, / þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen / wilgesiþas, þonne wig cume, / leode gelæsten;" [So shall a young man make good / with dispensing of splendid treasure while still in the protection of his father's breast / so that men will again stand by him / dear companions when war comes, / men standing by;] (20-24).

The seed is planted early on that dealing with feuds and acts of vengeance, which may or may not lead to a national war, will be a major factor in a king or hero's success.

Beowulf proves his worth as a hero by settling the feud between Hrothgar and Grendel. He has already been implicated, somewhat, in the Danes' tragedy because he owes Hrothgar a favor for the wergild Hrothgar paid to extricate Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, from a feud Ecgtheow himself had instigated. According to Hrothgar, "Gesloh þin fæder fæhðe mæste; / wearþ he Heoþolafe to handbonan / mid Wilfingum; ða hine *Wede*ra cyn / for herebrogan habban ne mihte" [It happened that your father slew in the greatest of feuds / Heatholaf, he became a slayer with his hands / against the Wylfings; then his kin the Wedera / were not able to keep him on account of war terror] (459-462). Rather than risk getting dragged into a devastating and perpetual feud, Ecgtheow's own kindred relinquishes him. Hrothgar, who is still a new king, attempts to mitigate the situation with wergild: "Siððan þa fæhðe feo þingode; / sende ic Wylfingum ofer wæteres hrycg / ealde madmas; he me aþas swor" [Afterwards money settled the feud / I sent to the Wulfings over the water's ridge / longstanding treasure; he swore oaths to me] (470-472). When Hrothgar finds himself in a feud that no money can settle, Beowulf appears and settles the score. For twelve years, the Danes are plagued by a force that only Beowulf—the only character capable of averting feud—can neutralize.

Beowulf's ability to end feuds is especially important. Beowulf is not simply a slayer of monsters. His most important function in terms of the poet's message to his audience is that Beowulf is able to halt the perpetuation of vendettas. Hume notes that the poem is centered thematically upon "threats to social order," which involves troublemaking, revenge, and war and that these threats are both destructive and self-perpetuating (5). Vengeance, according to Hume, is a process designed to ensure social order by means of protecting kin and allies; however, this

very same method also has the capability to "[destroy] social harmony as surely as does the troublemaker" (7). The poet makes a great effort to portray troublemaking, revenge, and war in all of *Beowulf*'s villains (Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon, respectively), and this, for Hume, is indicative of the poet's condemning these pagan ideals. As Hume observes, part of Beowulf's tragedy is that he is not able to eliminate the flawed system of vindictive justice so caustic to his society. Beowulf is one good man and he "cannot, within heroic society, eradicate [revenges]; at best he can hope to minimize the possibly miseries to his own people, and no nation can expect to succeed in war forever" (Hume 10). Beowulf has the capacity to stave feuding but not to eradicate a process upon which the society is so dependent. Feuding is representative of the greater system of justice in Germanic society, and it is this notion that the poet seeks to discourage.

In contrast to Beowulf, Hrothgar followed the prescribed measure for ending a feud peacefully by paying Ecgtheow's wergild, and so demonstrated the peaceful course to be followed in Anglo-Saxon homicide cases. However, Hrothgar later finds himself in a situation where wergild is useless. The poet sets up a contrast, as Karhl notes, "between Hroþgar's magnanimous action in paying the *wergild* for Beowulf's father involved in the greatest of feuds [. . .] and Grendel's rejection of the very notion of *wergild*" (192). Hrothgar's feud with Grendel alludes to the foundational feud of Cain: "By rejecting this system Grendel has forced Hroþgar's people nearly back into their original state of savagery" (Kahrl 192). Grendel's system of action and revenge stems from a time before measures, such as wergild, had been put in place to discourage blood feuds. As Rosenthal observes, "the composition of blood feuds by non-violent means is a major criterion in measuring the transition from a primitive to a more sophisticated society" (134). Wergild in this instance demonstrated not only compensation for the family but

also an acknowledgement by both parties that "if left completely to its own devices the vengeance of the kin group would lead only to more violence" (Rosenthal 134). It is significant, then, that Beowulf arrives to prove his worth in precisely this situation. The only way to end this feud is by killing the perpetrator, which opens the first door for the poet's commentary on feuding. As Kahrl observes, "Even though the killing of Grendel is justified it begets more killing," which allows the poet to ask, "how, following this ethic, will one bring a feud to an end other than through the total destruction of one of the two feuding parties?" (193). Ultimately, although Beowulf uses his heroic capabilities to curb the feuding while he is able, once he dies, the violence surges up again. Even with laws in place to redirect violent retribution with wergild, Kahrl argues, "violent solutions lead only to further violence, to a train of revenge that leads finally to the extermination of one of the feuding parties" (198). Beowulf, then, offers but a brief respite in a cycle of violent vengeance.

Camargo views the tragedy of Beowulf and feuding through the perceived Christian perspective of the poet. Even with his heroic virtue and selfless resolve to stand in the way of unrelenting feuds, Beowulf "still falls short of the Christian ideal. With all his virtues, he still lives according to the Old Law of retribution. He recognizes the inefficacy of human efforts to establish peace [. . .] but knows no alternative to the rule of an eye for an eye" (Camargo 131). The poet uses feuding as an example of the dangers that befall people who do not live under Christian laws. Using Hengest as a correlative to Beowulf, Camargo further argues that the tragedy of the Finn episode is that Hengest, regardless of how well Finn treated the Danes, was "steeped in an ethic which [demanded] an eye for an eye" and "Hengest [had] in reality no choice" but to retaliate and perpetuate the feud (Camargo 132). From the poet's perspective, the cycle was never-ending because "ignorant of Christian compassion, [Hengest] cannot break out

of the vicious circle of retaliation, just as the Heathobards cannot forgive the Danes nor the Swedes the Geats" (Camargo 132). Furthermore, this ethic of violence stems from Cain's murder of Abel and can only be curtailed by embracing a Christian worldview in which "compassion, perhaps even forgiveness, finds a place alongside the more warlike virtues" (Camargo 132). The poet's use of feud is didactic. Although not necessarily exclusive to or critical of a pagan frame of mind, the poet does imply that "the only hope for sure peace [. . .] lies in the love and compassion which Christianity offers as its ideal [. . .]" (Camargo 133).

This compassion, according to Camargo, is exemplified in the women of the poem. In a Cassandra-like manner, the women of the poem make calls for peace that are not acknowledged. The women, who are singularly capable of embodying peace, are also constantly the victims of violence. As Camargo notes of Wealhtheow in particular, "she actively creates harmony by carrying the mead cup from man to man [. . . yet] this exemplary woman, we are constantly reminded, will get bitter sorrow for her reward" (127). The men of the poem seem to take the women's function as carriers of peace as a matter of course and continue with their warrior vendettas. One of the most direct acknowledgments of the fruitlessness of peacemaking occurs when Beowulf comments on the futility of the peace-weaving efforts made by Freawaru's marriage to Ingeld. He predicts that seeing the lady's kinsmen at the feast will incite an old Heathobard warrior to begin stirring up trouble among the younger thanes, reminding them of battles that took place between their Heathobard fathers and the Danes:

> 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.

Þonne bioð (ab)rocene on ba healfe

aðsweor*d* eorla; (syð)ðan Ingelde

weallað wælniðas, ond him wiflufan

æfter cearwælmum colran weorðað.

[So he urges and reminds on every occasion / with bitter words, until the time comes / that he kills a thane of the woman for his father's deeds / bloodstained in consequence of the wound of the sword, / lost of life; the other thence himself / escapes alive, he himself knows well the land. / Then oaths of the earls are broken on both sides; when to Ingeld waves of enmity surge, and for him the love for that woman / becomes cooler after seething of sorrow] (2057-2067).

The "cearwælm" the poet speaks of no doubt refers to the impending feud, and it is clear, from Beowulf's speculation, that Freawaru's function of peace-weaver brings about more violence rather than inducing peace. Freawaru's situation harkens back to Hildeburh, whose tragedy foreshadows Freawaru's future.

The helplessness of the peace-weaver is further displayed in the double-meanings embedded in Wealhtheow's speeches. After Beowulf destroys Grendel and purges Heorot of his menace, Wealhtheow praises the situation at a feast. In her speech, she announces her thankfulness for Hrothgar's nephew, Hrothulf, who, older than her two sons, stands as a threat to them inheriting the kingdom: "Ic minne can / glædne Hroþulf, þæt he þa geogoðe wile / arum healdan, gyf þu ær þonne he, / wine Scildinga, worold oflætest; / wene ic þæt he mid gode gyldan wille / uncran eaferan" [I know my gracious Hrothulf, that he desires to keep these youths with honor, if you before he / lord of the Scildings, leave the world; / I expect that he will repay

with goodness / our sons] (1180-1185). However, the words of gratitude and expectations are not praises but pleadings. Hrothulf poses a very real threat. Hrothgar is the only figure keeping Hrothulf from the kingdom, and, upon the former's death, it would be in Hrothulf's best interest to kill his young nephews and claim kingship. Wealhtheow stands helpless to this situation and so makes a formal plea, disguised as praise, that he remember the kindnesses she and Hrothgar have bestowed upon him in his youth. As a further assurance to this end, Wealhtheow appeals to Beowulf to "cen þec mid cræfte, on þyssum cnyhtum wes / lara liðe! ic þe þæs lean geman" [Declare yourself with strength, and for these boys be / kind counsel! I will remember reward for you because of that] (1219-1220). Again, Wealhtheow takes political action in the only way she is able. However, her words carry little force. They appeal to compassion and generosity of the warriors she addresses but have no consequence behind them. Wealhtheow's attempts at peace, like those of Freawaru and Hildeburh, are essentially in vain.

The idea of peace-weaving, however ineffective, was nonetheless necessary. Rosenthal remarks that feuds were not always enthusiastically undertaken. At times, a recalcitrant family might have to be taunted into embarking on vengeance. Situations also existed in which a kin group would abandon a murderer in order to avoid the vendetta (Rosenthal 135). These were not honorable alternatives, however, and Rosenthal further asserts that marriage was the "one institution [that] could be resorted to without loss of face" (135). The best method to avoid one's duty of vengeance was to marry into the warring family. Marriages provided a means by which two kin groups might "prevent an interminable series of *quid pro quo* murders" between families already in conflict (Rosenthal 135). This also offered an opportunity to ease tensions before they started in families where hostilities lurked just beneath the surface. However, the problem with peace-weaving marriages is exactly what the poet displays with Hildeburh and potentially

Freawaru—the bride was a constant reminder of the cowardice expressed in the compromise. Additionally, marriages arranged to ease tensions between two families potentially at odds brought the two groups together and thereby ignited the very hostilities they were worried about sparking (Rosenthal 136). Marriage as peace-weaving was a failed institution but continued in practice because of the theoretical solutions it promised. Moreover, marriage acted as a "regulating device" in this system of justice that offered some sense of order to a "potentially anarchical situation" (Rosenthal 137).

With regards to the structure of *Beowulf* and the necessity of feuding as an element of this balanced symmetry, peace-weavers serve as an example of how things will deteriorate if out of balance. When a woman married into a clan in order to procure peace, the bride theoretically would act as a fulcrum between these two ambivalent clans. As Rosenthal states, "Her allegiance to her own kin and to her in-laws would be balanced, her affection evenly divided" (139). In this situation, her children would provide a bond both to her husband and his family, thereby balancing the kindred ties between her in-laws and her own blood ties. "The wife," Rosenthal notes, "would stand midway between the two potential antagonists and so contribute to the resolution of the quarrel" (139). The poet makes use of this dichotomy between theory and practice. Acknowledging and illustrating that peace-weaving marriages are flawed, he adds these episodes of Wealhtheow, Hildeburh, and Freawaru precisely to act as balancing points in exactly the same way that these marriage were theoretically to behave in the audience's society. The effect is a balance point upon which to center rampant feuding and a flawed social outlook. As long as vengeance was seen as an acceptable measure of justice, there could never be peace and the society would live in constant shadow of another feud.

It should be noted, however, that feuding was not wholly a bringer of violence. Rather, it paradoxically offered both an incitement towards and a deterrent from violence. What undercuts this potentially positive effect, however, was the necessity of a lord to obtain treasure to distribute to his thanes. In an effort to maintain the loyalty of his thanes and essentially his kin group, the king must seek treasure to reward his men. However, in so doing, he often incites acts of vengeance, as demonstrated by the dragon's wrath over his stolen cup. As Hume argues, vengeance was both a means of protection and an instigation of destruction, and a ruler "must always be on the watch for wealth which can be obtained with as little loss to his men as possible, and must choose whether to risk battle for the gold or not" (Hume 17). This attempt at security is ultimately Beowulf's undoing, illustrating that a leader's attempts at providing security for his thanes was as ineffectual as peace-weaving efforts between clans. Beowulf does not succeed against the dragon's wrath at his endangered gold, and the treasure does not end up being a reward. The society is caught in a net of vengeance and war, and it is this perpetuation that the poet frowns upon.

Feuding is the groundwork upon which the poet builds the poem. The structure of the poem is laid out in a manner that reflects the mentality of vengeance and retaliation; the balance of the lines and themes works to mirror a worldview in which an eye for an eye was the basis for satisfactory justice. However, the picture painted in *Beowulf* is undeniably grim. There is no escape from the cycle of vendettas enacted through generations of men. It is important to recognize that the poet's use of feuding is primarily a literary device and not necessarily representative of actual practices prominent in Anglo-Saxon society. As Rosenthal notes, "while the prosaic elements of medieval society gradually came to accept and honour the wergild system, those depicted by the literature of the time usually demanded both more drama and more

heroism in the resolution of feud" (135). Feuding offers the poet a dramatic foundation for the structure of the poem upon which to balance the symmetry of the poem, while simultaneously providing a thematic standpoint from which to offer social criticism.

The idea of tit-for-tat justice was so ingrained in Anglo-Saxon society that it quite possibly made its way into the artistic aesthetics of the time. Thematic and structural balance in *Beowulf* builds an aesthetic of symmetry and balance. This was, in turn, probably heavily influenced by this strong desire to right wrongs with an equal force. Hyams argues that feuding was an ingrained custom of the Anglo-Saxons that resisted royal authority to completely dismember it. For the Anglo-Saxons, the deepest wrongs could only be avenged with blood. As Hyams states, "when men and women felt themselves wronged [. . .] their first thoughts were doubtless about protecting themselves against further harm. But their next impulse was to seek to get even, to avenge their wrong" (43). This is the underlying basis for Germanic justice and it prevails into Anglo-Saxon law codes. It is a deeply ingrained system which undoubtedly made its way into myriad aspects of the culture, such as poetry, and it is not surprising that *Beowulf* has such a high preponderance of feuds and feud aesthetics.

II.

KINSHIP AND STRUCTURAL SYMMETRY

The *Beowulf* poem is divided into three main parts: Beowulf's fight with Grendel, Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother, and Beowulf's fight with the dragon. Although these are logical divisions for a poem that has a recursive structure and less narrative thrust, the poem is perhaps better examined in terms of unity illustrated in these three events rather than their divisiveness. The poem is a balanced work in which each event carefully maintains the equilibrium of the work as a whole. To create this symmetry, the poet balances the work thematically and structurally upon oppositions and dualities. The thematic balance of the poem may also reflect a dying value of reciprocity, especially between lord and retinue, throughout the Germanic clans. The *Beowulf* poet seems to have prized an aesthetic of symmetry throughout the poem, which is most especially noticeable in his treatment of structure, and reflects the foundation of the changing Germanic society in which he was writing.

The poet uses character traits as a manifestation of structure. Grendel is the first adversary we encounter in *Beowulf*, and it is interesting that the monster's first encounter is not with the hero, but with Hrothgar. While on one level, this gives the poet a chance to establish Grendel's wickedness, it also provides two literary foils for Beowulf. On the one hand, we see an old king, whose days of valor have passed, and on the other we see the most remarkable and heinous adversary in the country. In his essay "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien remarks that *Beowulf* is a balanced work, "an opposition of ends and beginnings" (28). As Tolkien suggests, the story is the "rising and setting" of a hero's life, "an elaboration of ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death" (28). Indeed, when we first meet Beowulf, he is a young man who comes to the court of Hrothgar, an

old and proven King: "Þa wæs Hroðgare heresped gyfen, / wiges weorðmynd, þæt him his winemagas / georne hyrdon, oðð þæt seo geogoð geweox, / magodriht micel" [Then was Hrothgar given success in war, / glory of war, so that his kinsmen / eagerly obeyed him, until the young warriors grew increasingly, / into a great band of young retainers] (64-67). From these lines, we understand that Hrothgar was once a hero in his own right. Although perhaps not as remarkable a hero as Beowulf will prove to be, Hrothgar obviously accomplished courageous deeds worthy of earning him his kingdom. He was not an ordinary man. At this point in the poem, Beowulf has yet to prove himself as a hero. We learn of his qualifications as a champion—his swimming match against Breca, his reputation of having "þritiges / manna mægencræft on his mundgripe" [the strength of thirty men in his handgrip] (379-380)—but it is his actions at Heorot that will test his valor as a hero.

This initial contrast between the established Hrothgar and the young Beowulf is an important dichotomy for the overall symmetry of the poem. Hrothgar's literary role in this first meeting is to foster Beowulf's heroic deeds; Hrothgar's inaction and inability to protect his hall provides Beowulf the opportunity to establish himself as a hero. By the end of the poem, Beowulf takes over Hrothgar's role as the old and proven king. The foil device plays through to the conclusion when, even in old age, Beowulf—unlike Hrothgar—is still a man of action and shows that he is still capable of meeting the threats to himself and his kingdom and defeating them in heroic, albeit ultimately tragic, ways. This comparison between Beowulf and Hrothgar, then, works on two levels. On the one hand, we see their similarities as good rulers and just kings. However, instead of giving Beowulf a perfect reversal (in which he succumbs to ineffectuality) to show his equality with Hrothgar, the poet provides the equilibrium in the opposition. That is, Beowulf's strength balances out Hrothgar's weakness.

The balance of opposition provides a comparison to highlight Beowulf's heroism. During the Grendel battle, Hrothgar is described as lost and helpless. He is "unbliðe" [sorrowful] (130), suffering "gewin to strange, / lað ond longsum!" [hardships too strong, / grievous and enduring to bear] (134). In fact, Beowulf arrives because Hrothgar's misfortunes are so infamous: "torn geþolode / wine Scyldinga, weana gehwelcne, / sidra sorga; forðam [secgum] wearð, / ylda bearnum undyrne cuð" [grievously endured / the friend of the Shieldings, each of his miseries, / great sorrow; / therefore his hardships became well-known to men, / not hidden to sons of men] (147-150). By contrast, Beowulf enters confident and eager for battle. The poet's confident tone assures the audience of Beowulf's victory over Grendel. The poet describes Beowulf as "ellenrof" [brave], "wlanc Wedera leod" [the proud leader of the Geats], "heard under helme" [strong in his helmet] (340-342). Beowulf himself declares that he "nu wið Grendel sceal, / wið þam aglæcan ana gehegan / ðing wið þyrse" [shall now against Grendel, / against the monster, / settle affairs alone in a single / meeting against the demon] (424-426). Indeed, Beowulf takes action to make it a fair fight (announcing that he will use his bare hands just as Grendel does) and increase his claim to heroism. For the poet's part, the move serves to set Grendel up as the second foil for Beowulf.

While Hrothgar provides a picture of what Beowulf's future may hold as a leader, Grendel serves as Beowulf's complete antithesis. Certain peripheral elements link the two characters, and it is the inversion of these similarities that forms the basis for the nemeses. Both characters are powerful warriors: during Grendel's raid, the poet writes that he grabs thirty men before rushing back to his cave. We are also told that Beowulf has the strength of thirty men in each hand. Both characters are associated with water: Grendel skulks to Heorot from his home in the fens. Presumably he lives under the water, but definitely within the swamp. Beowulf

arrives in Denmark from across the sea. While Grendel is a creature of the water, it is interesting that Beowulf displays mastery of the water and its creatures both in his association with sailing and ships and his tale of the swimming match with Breca. Also, both villain and hero encounter the men of Heorot in exactly opposite spirits. Grendel arrives when the men "sorge ne cuðon, / wonsceaft wera" [could not know worry, / could not know the misery of men] (119-120), and Beowulf arrives when they are wallowing in these very emotions. Moreover, Grendel seems to have attacked because the joyous sounds from the banquet hall offended him. For Beowulf, the news of Heorot's affliction provokes his journey: "secgað sæliðend þæt þæs sele stande, / reced selesta rinca gehwylcum / idel ond unnyt, siððan æfenleoht / under heofenes haðor beholden weorþeð" [seafarers say that this hall stands, / hall for each of the best warriors / idle and useless for each warrior, after evening light / becomes concealed under heaven's vault] (411-414). Beowulf and Grendel are also antithetical in character: the poet remarks more than once on Beowulf's generosity, resoluteness, and patience. Grendel, by contrast, is impetuous and wild: "ond no mearn fore / fæhðe ond fyrene" [he never shrank from / hostile acts and wicked deeds] (136-137). It is also interesting to note that while Grendel has a strong association with his mother, we learn that Beowulf was something of an orphan, fostered out by his father at the age of seven: "Ic wæs syfanwintre, þa mec since baldor, / freawine folca æt minum fæder genam; / heold mec ond hæfde Hreðel cyning, / geaf me sinc ond symbel, sibbe gemunde" [I was seven-winters when the prince gave treasure for me, / the lord of the people took it from my father; / the king Hrethel kept me as my guardian, / gave for me treasure and a banquet, remembered our kinship] (2428-2431). The battle, then, between these two characters represents a confrontation of opposites. Their struggle serves as another example of the equilibrium suffused throughout

the poem. Beowulf is an equal match for Grendel as well as a complete opposite, thus providing a symmetry.

On a larger level, the final battle with the dragon serves to balance the battle with Grendel while incorporating specific features of this initial confrontation. As Tolkien suggested, the dragon battle represents the evening of the hero's life, and this is felt poignantly, especially in contrast to the vigor of the Grendel scene. The poet's tone towards Beowulf has taken a dramatic turn. Instead of being assured of his victory, we now understand that his death is at hand. The tragedy is foreshadowed even before he confronts the dragon: "Him wæs geomor sefa, / wæfre ond wælfus, wyrd ungemete neah, / se ðone gomelan gretan sceolde / secean sawle hord, sundur gedælan / lif wið lice; no þon lange wæs feorh æþelinges flæsce bewunden" [His spirit was mournful to him, / restless and ready, fate was exceedingly near, / that ancient thing which he must greet, / go to the treasure of life, sever asunder / his life from his body; the life of the prince was not to be flesh-bound for long] (2419-2424). However, while Hrothgar suffered passively in his sorrow, Beowulf's heroism prevails. The audience is aware of the contrast between the two old kings and struck even more by the fact that, even as an aged king, Beowulf will attempt superhuman feats. He will face the dragon, living up to his duty as a king and protector of his people, rather than submitting to his own mortality. While his death is inevitable, he will die in action rather than waiting for old age to take him.

The balance between these two battles is very intentional as the poet reminds the audience of the adversaries of Beowulf's youth. In his speech, Beowulf talks about the fights he had survived, and his account echoes elements of Grendel. Beowulf recounts King Hrethel and how the king's son Haethcyn had killed his brother Herebeald. This theme not only recalls Unferth's supposed fratricide from the beginning of the poem, but it also calls Grendel to mind

because of his association with Cain. As Beowulf's address continues, we are reminded of Grendel's mother and the grief she suffered with the death of her son: (referring to Hrethel) "Þæt wæs feohleas gefeoht, fyrenum gesyngad, / hreðre hygemeðe; sceolde hwæðre swa þeah / æðeling unwrecen ealdres linnan" [that was a fight beyond monetary compensation, wickedly sinned, / wearying to the heart; in whatever way / he was to avenge the prince or lose his life] (2441-2443). It is interesting to see these two antithetical elements working in synchronization. Beowulf obviously reveres Hrethel and loathes Grendel and his mother. Such a comparison is not wholly out of character for the poet as he does allow us a moment of sympathy for Grendel when he is facing off with Beowulf. The fact that we are privy to the monster's emotions of terror provides a vehicle for sympathy from the audience; the poet allows that the creature—however wicked it may be—might garner a marginal level of compassion. Likewise, we are encouraged to remember the contrast between Hrethel and Grendel's mother in that, while Grendel's mother sets out to avenge her son in a bloody and brutal way, Hrethel, because the killer was his son, "wihte ne meahte / on ðam feorhbonan fæghðe gebetan; / no ðy ær he þone heaðorinc hatian ne meahte laðum dædum, þeah him leof ne wæs" [was not able in any way / to settle the hostile act of the life-slayer; / there was no way he could persecute the warrior for his loathsome deeds, although he was no longer dear to him] (2464-2467). As a final note of contrast, the poet mentions that Hrethel turned to God, whereas we are made very aware of the fact that Grendel's mother takes no such path. That Beowulf's story should tie all these characters together speaks further to the poet's intention of balancing the good and evil elements of the poem.

It is interesting that while Hrothgar's sorrow was mitigated, at least in terms of the audience's empathy, by the expectation of a hero, Beowulf has no such benefit. By the end of

the poem, we understand that not only was Beowulf the last of the great heroes, but that Wiglaf is also the last of this great clan. In his dying words, Beowulf declares to Wiglaf, "Þu eart endelaf uses cynnes, / Wægmundinga; ealle wyrd forsweop / mine magas to metodsceafte" [You are the last remnant of our people, / the Waegmundings; fate has swept away all / my kinsmen to death] (2813-2816). With the Swedes waiting to attack and Beowulf's thane having displayed their shameless cowardice, Wiglaf's fate is obviously sealed.

The two battles serve, then, to balance the action of the poem. They act as a frame for the life story of the hero, one great battle in youth, another in old age. We meet Beowulf at his "birth" as a hero, and we end with his funeral. The battles are not random, and Herbert G. Wright notes several important similarities between Grendel and the dragon that speak to the unity intended by these two separate occasions. Wright notes that both monsters live in remarkably similar abodes: "[. . .] Grendel has his haunts in the wild forests, moors, and fens, and lives in a cave under a lake [which] reminds one of the setting for the dragon's home, which is [. . .] near the sea, and difficult to access" (2). The two monsters are further alike in their association with an unnatural light. Wright notes that the dragon's "fiery glow associates him with the earlier passages in which the light of Grendel's eyes and the light on the mere and in the cave are mentioned" (6). Both monsters raid at night. The fiery light associated with each contrasts two the natural, golden gleams of the men's armor in the hall and recalls the reflections of sunlight off the metal war gear mentioned throughout the poem. Additionally, while Grendel's ancestry is directly attributed to Cain, and he carries with him a sense of Christian evil, the dragon, although a seemingly pagan element, is also portrayed with an element of evil inasmuch as it is "quite prepared to attack without provocation" (Wright 4). Wright notes that the dragon is remarkably serpent-like and carries with it a hint of the serpent from the Garden of

Eden: "The poem draws no parallel between the two and makes no direct statement about the perpetual warfare between the serpent race and the descendents of Adam. Yet the fact should not be overlooked that the reign of terror instituted by the dragon was not the first of its kind" (4).

The Christian-pagan dichotomy here serves as a microcosm of the structure of the whole. Not only are both monsters doing double duty as natural and evil beasts (or abominations against nature and against God), they are also representing the ambivalence of a society coming to terms with its own heroic past. Beowulf battles Grendel, who is explicitly linked to the Bible, and he also battles a dragon, which is the hallmark of northern mythology. Beowulf encapsulates Christian ideals of patience and kindness, but he is also a warrior and fights in many feuds, which are antithetical to Christian society that places more stock in forgiveness than in revenge. Before his fight with Grendel, Beowulf seems assured of battle, knowing that God would grant victory to the most deserving party. However, Beowulf is also a pagan who dies a hero's death. When he dies, his remaining clan is doomed to be swallowed up by the system of feuding and vengeance upon which their entire system of social order is based. Throughout the poem, the poet seems to look admirably upon the individuals of this heroic culture, while simultaneously condemning it and demonstrating to the audience that Beowulf's pagan society fell under its own weight. Tolkien notes that, above all, the poet is "concerned primarily with *man on earth*, rehandling in a new perspective an ancient theme: that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die" (23). Like the structure, then, the theme seems to speak to both pagan and Christian society. Regardless of one's religious status, man's time on earth is limited. The confluence of pagan/Christian elements is less important than man's ultimate destiny on earth. The poet is a learned Christian "writing of old times, who looking back on the heroism and

sorrow feels in them something permanent and something symbolical" (Tolkien 26). Again, these dual elements lend themselves to an overall unity of theme in the poem. The Christian elements neither outweigh nor are overshadowed by the pagan, and the poet reconciles these balanced dualities by linking each to the overarching melancholy of inevitable death. Beowulf dies in the dragon's onslaught, but throughout the poem we are reminded that it is God who ultimately determines the victor of every battle.

If Grendel and the dragon rest upon opposite ends of a structural lever, then it is the ambiguous elements of Grendel's mother that serve as the fulcrum for the unity of the poem. Perhaps the most striking component of this medial battle is that the foe is feminine. Although several points serve to illuminate the mother as more insidious than the son, the fact that she is female seems to mitigate these elements. On the one hand, if Grendel represents evil, the mother must be the originator of evil. The poet also writes that Grendel is of Cain's clan: "Þanon [Cain] woc fela / geosceaftgasta; wæs þæra Grendel sum" [From thence (Cain) came many misbegotten spirits; Grendel was among them] (1263-1266) meaning that Grendel's mother should, herself, be one step closer to Cain and therefore more wicked than her son. However, a major component to the viciousness of Grendel's character is that his attack was unprovoked. Grendel's mother, on the other hand, acts as redress to her son's death even if her revenge is not justified.

Curiously, the mother is afforded more understanding for her ravages on the hall than her son. The very description of the mother is full of contrasting symmetry and marked with a tone of sympathy. She is at once "gifre ond galgmond" [greedy and fierce] (1277) and "sorhfulne" [grievous] (1278) in her act of vengeance. Furthermore, while we are privy to Grendel's terror upon meeting Beowulf, the emotion is not nearly as poignant as the poet's description of

Grendel's mother. We understand Grendel to be a mighty foe, against whom weapons are of little use. Grendel's mother, on the other hand, is notably less daunting: "Wæs se gryre læssa / efne swa micle, swa bið mægþa cræft, wiggryre wifes be wæpnedmen" [The terror she[1] brought was less / by as much as her physical strength, the war power of a woman in comparison to men] (1282-1284). Also, the moment she attacks, she awakens the sleeping warrior and "wæs on ofste, wolde ut þanon, / feore beorgan, þa heo onfundan wæs" [was in haste, she desired to get out, / to save her life, before she was found out] (1292-1293). Her mission, therefore, seems less of an unprovoked attack and more of an act of duty, and by virtue of such a mission, the poet conveys a sense of empathy for this enemy.

Perhaps because she is a monster and behaves in unseemly ways, Grendel's mother is not portrayed as totally feminine. The poet uses a mix of masculine and feminine pronouns to describe her. Also, while both the Grendel is associated mostly with the fen and the dragon with a cave near the water, the mother arises from beneath the marsh in cave. We are therefore unsure of what sort of habitat to attribute to her. She is somewhat amphibious since she can move from land to water, but she also, apparently lives in a well-lit hall. It is important that a portion of Beowulf's battle with her also takes place in the water. Also, combining elements of both Grendel and the dragon, Beowulf at first uses mail and weapons against the mother, but his weapons fail and he resorts for a time to hand-to-hand combat. The ambiguity of this middle section again lends further balance to the poem, serving as the balancing point for the two battles at either end of the epic.

Structurally, Grendel's mother provides an element of symmetry by compromising between the perfectly balanced battle scenes with Grendel and the dragon. Hume offers a

[1] The poet here uses the masculine nominative pronoun, rather that the feminine.

compelling argument for thematic symmetry as well. Hume notes the perplexing element that Grendel's mother provides in the narrative framework; Grendel and his mother are too similar, and this likeness is made jarring by the dragon's radical diversity. Hume explains this "flaw" by means of relating the theme to feuding. According to Hume, the monsters represent principles of vengeance, such that Grendel acts as an originator of feuds and Grendel's mother represents revenge: "[if] the second adversary is to represent the revenge-principle, then Beowulf must do something which would incur vengeful retaliation" (Hume 8). Thematically, the second monster must be kindred to the first, thereby providing unity for the poem.

This thematic and structural symmetry may have had a profound resonance for Anglo-Saxon culture in general, as may be gleaned from Victor M. Hamm's essay "Meter and Meaning." Writing of poetry generally, Hamm remarks that an underlying attribute of poetic meter is its relationship to stresses of natural language. That is, meter works to emphasize an already ingrained element, rather than ordering the language in a new way. According to Hamm, "because meter means emphasis, it can play directly into the hands of sense, reinforcing the natural stresses of language and the emphases of rhetoric" (701). Meter, therefore, is less a decorative element of novel order and more a keen foundation of the poem that reflects an inherit structural property of the language. Hamm repeatedly defers to the long-standing notion that art mimics nature. Hamm asserts that "the more poetry performs expository or rhetorical functions, the more regular and cooperative its metrical structure will be" (709). Although Hamm's essay focuses on relatively modern poets, the point is still applicable to *Beowulf*. Specifically, if art mimics nature, then the alliteration used throughout this poem and other examples of Anglo-Saxon poetry must inform a valued aesthetic of the writer and his culture. The symmetry found in the structure of each half-line represents in a specific form a symmetry governing the culture

of which the poem is a product. That is, the structure that governs the poem might also illuminate the structure which governs that society.

Jurasinski also notes the manifestation of social conventions and character in poetry. According to Jurasinski, the language in *Beowulf* is highly legalized. Citing Jakob Grimm's *Deutsche Rechtsalterthümer*, Jurasinksi points out that the language in *Beowulf*, especially during speeches, may actually be a preservation of the language used during legal proceedings (23). In his study, Grimm looked at the existing early Germanic legal statutes and catalogued the lexicon therein. Grimm noticed that the glossaries of legal terms were consistent in all the Germanic languages and concluded that "all speakers of the Germanic languages inherited an ancient and culturally homogenous system of legal norms" (Jurasinski 29). This unity was important for Grimm because he was looking to find the spirit of the Germanic people through their legal codes. Of the written legislation, Jurasinski notes, none pre-dates the Germanic tribes' conversion to Christianity "and so all result in some way from the fusion of Roman-Christian and Germanic culture" (28). In his attempt to strip away the foreign influences and find the true fabric of Germanic society, Grimm hypothesized that all Germanic legislation must have originated and be preserved in poetic form. Supporting this idea, Jurasinksi cites Dorothy Bethrum's assertion that alliteration and meter of old English and Old Frisian laws was consistent with those of Old Norse laws and contends that the similarities mark "some probability to the hypothesis of an original poetic form for the Germanic laws" (Jurasinski 31). If we assume that *Beowulf* originated as an oral epic, the language in the poem may be a preservation of this original poetic legal form. In this case, according to Grimm and others, the language and meter offers a means by which to study ancient Germanic societies. Poetry was the form of the social conventions and laws that governed society, and the language and meter

provide insight into those conventions. Following to this hypothesis, it is no great leap to suggest that the *Beowulf* poet was influenced in his aesthetics of balance and symmetry through the long-standing tradition of feuding—an ostensibly legislative device itself based on balance. Poetry and legal traditions were apparently quite closely integrated, and so the symmetry and balance of the poem correlates to system of justice based on reciprocal violence by which the Germanic societies, including Beowulf's, ordered their nations. The poet structures the poem in response to cultural issues surrounding its composition. Feuding is a system based upon reciprocity and revenge and, as such, fuels a perspective and aesthetic that is based upon balance and symmetry.

Leyerle's discussion of the interlace structure of *Beowulf* adds further credence to the notion of art mimicking nature and suggests that the reciprocity and ingrained responses of revenge may indeed have affected the production of poetry. Leyerle notes that Anglo-Saxon interlace designs in various forms (carvings, weapons, jewelry, manuscripts) in the seventh and eighth centuries were quite abundant. For Leyerle, the interlace designs show that the visual artistry was "controlled with geometric precision and executed with technical competence of very high order" (3). The preferred aesthetic was one of symmetry and a high degree geometric order that would offer an overall balanced piece. This high level of skill and craft may also be witnessed in poetry. Stylistically, the writer weaves past events with the present, as seen in the poets intertwining of past battles with Beowulf's trials with the monsters. As Leyerle notes, this stylistic braiding is "the literary counterpart for interlace designs in art that are decorative rather than structural," such as designs on weaponry or coffers (5). The symmetrical pattern appears to be ubiquitous as it relates to the arts and suggests a cultural interest in such balanced frameworks.

Structurally, Leyerle asserts that the poet is following a pattern of artificial order, which Classical rhetoricians thought particularly suited to epic poetry (6). Artificial order involved a recursive structure that presented narrative elements anachronistically. Leyerle cites the *Scholia Vindobonensia*, in which the author points to Virgil as a demonstrative example of artificial order, thereby evidencing its application to epic poems. With regards to *Beowulf*, Leyerle asserts that it "is a work of art consistent with the artistic culture that it reflects and from which it came, eighth-century England. It is a lacertine interlace, a complex structure of great technical skill, but it is woven with relatively few strands" (7). Leyerle's assertion correlates with Hamm's idea of poetical conventions as manifestations of some more fundamental societal aesthetic. Leyerle notes several specific instances of this in the poem, of which the Hygelac strand seems most important. According to Leyerle, the episodes involving Hygelac "have positional significance" and "cannot be taken out of context" or else the structural integrity will unravel (8). The poem, then, rests upon this interlaced design, which is in turn a reflection of an interlaced aesthetic appropriated into other areas of art.

This interwoven pattern is fashioned in such a way as to produce an overall symmetrical design, which speaks to the culture's high regard for balance. As Leyerle notes, "[the] monsters are the elongated lacertine elements that thread through the action of the poem making symmetrical patterns characteristic of interlace structure" (10). Furthermore, Leyerle relates this symmetry derived from the structural integration of the monsters to the notion of feuding, in that "monsters are closely associated with the slaying of friends and kinsmen. They function in part as an outward objectification and sign of society beset by internecine slaughter between friend and kin" (11). It is this connection with feuding that relates art to its society. Feuding required wrongs to be righted with vengeance and reciprocal hostilities. A wrong without redress would

offset the balance of this idea of justice and thereby violate the social aesthetic. Just as the structure, style, and narrative figures of the poem interweave to demonstrate a contemporary artistic convention, so too do these elements work to reflect social conventions, such as feuding, as well.

Other paradigms for the structure of *Beowulf* offer similar correlations to the preference for balance suggested by revenge justice. In his article, "Ring Composition and the Structure of *Beowulf*," Niles draws attention to the ring composition of the poem; that is, "a chiastic design in which the last element in a series in some way echoes the first, the next to the last the second and so on" (924). The series my rest on a central key element and thereby develop the pattern of ABC…X…CBA (Niles 924). This technique was used as a way of ordering both short phrases and entire epic works, as in *Beowulf*, and, according to Niles, "[the] poet [. . .] relied so greatly on this sort of patterning that for him balance and symmetry of thought must have been almost second nature" (925). The importance of balance and symmetry to the poem cannot be overstated, and, because the aesthetics of the period art mirror the society's ideas on social structure and governance, the two aesthetics must be related. Niles points to the overall symmetry of *Beowulf*: "(A) introduction, (B) fight with Grendel, (C) celebrations, (D) fight with Grendel's dam, (C) celebrations, (B) fight with dragon, (A) close" (929). Each narrative element has a balanced counterpoint. As Niles notes, "the poem ends where it begins, with a eulogy for a dead king" and in both the battle with Grendel and the fight with the dragon the result is certain: "[the] moment the hero puts his hands on Grendel, the joyful outcome of the fight is no longer in doubt" and in the fight with the dragon, "the narrator's frequent and all too clear asides [. . .] impress on the audience the dark end that is drawing near" (929). The beginning is neatly and intentionally balanced with the beginning ordering the poem both structurally and thematically in

a quite symmetrical way. Ring composition set the pattern of the poem such that each line revolving around this central element would be balanced with each other so that the poem was resting upon a balanced and symmetrical foundation. Just as Beowulf and Grendel form a dualistic symmetry to one another, Niles notes several other instances of contrastive pairs that work in the ring structure. Niles points out that a prominent characteristic of the poet's style is "the way in which thesis is answered by antithesis" (927). In this paradigm, the balance of opposition serves as integral structure to the poem. This balance, especially among antagonistic elements, mirrors the nature of feud.

Feuding, therefore, provides a cultural reality of these symmetrical artistic aesthetics. By definition, symmetry and balance require that what is done to one side must be done with equal treatment to the other. Likewise, early Germanic societies had specific rules for equating acts of vengeance. The foundation for this justice system was provided by kinship, which, in turn, reflects the underlying reciprocity of early Germanic tribes. According to Swanton, authority in Germanic society was based not on lineage but on actions, such that any man might advance his rank by heroic deeds. Likewise, the position of king did not automatically grant the chosen individual authority. Anglo-Saxon kingship was centered upon the king's retinue and upon the king's generosity in distributing treasure. As Campbell *et al* note, a king lived "surrounded by noble warriors who feast with him, sleep in his hall by night, fight for him and are ready, or anyway sincerely hoped to be ready, to die for him. Their number and loyalty are crucial to royal power" (54). To maintain his retinue, the king relied upon gold-giving, which encouraged loyalty by rewarding it. A king won gold in battle and so gold was a sign of success. Additionally, a king with much gold to distribute could "attract followers from other kingdoms, because noblemen [were] often on the move through hunger for reward or the necessities of

exile" (Campbell 55). A king's retinue, therefore, was not guaranteed and required an active role on the part of the king to maintain his status through rewarding his followers and thereby ensuring their loyalty. Swanton writes that the "position of king is dignified and worthy of respect insofar as he personifies the unity and dignity of the tribe [but] this kingship forms nothing more than a title of honor unless he personally has the reputation of military prowess" (17). The reciprocity of this establishment was kept in check by the right of the people to depose, by means of exile or homicide, a king who ceases to act for the good of his people. Government then was a reciprocal institution, the balance of power resting between the leader and his constituents. According to Swanton, "[popular] consent remained a critical factor governing kingship; and [. . .] early Anglo-Saxon kings were subject to such considerations, especially where decisions might encroach upon established custom, like those involving religion or the law" (27). Anglo-Saxon society was ordered upon a foundation of reciprocity that defined a lord's relationship with his thanes as well as how justice was distributed.

This reciprocity is honored both thematically and syntactically in *Beowulf*. In his description, the poet portrays Hrothgar as a generous king who rules with his people's best interest at heart. During the time of peace before Grendel's attacks, the poet writes that Hrothgar turned his mind to hall-building: "Him on mod bearn, / þæt healreced hatan wolde, / medoærn micel men gewyrcean" [It came into his mind, / that he would order a hall to be built, / that the men should build a great mead hall] (67-69) in which he would "on innan eall gedælan / geongum ond ealdum, swylc him God sealed, / buton folcsare ond feorum gumena" [distribute gifts to all, / young and old, all that God had given him, / except for the folkshares and the lives of men] (71-73). This last element resonates of the limitations of the king's powers. While Hrothgar is free to distribute his wealth on his retainers, there are certain factors under his

kingship that he is not to disturb—those elements that most prominently affect the daily lives of his people. As for Beowulf, the balance appears as a contrastive pair. The poet does not provide a description of his kingship, merely that "syððan Beowulfe brade rice / on hand gehwearf; he geheold tela / fiftig wintra – wæs ða frod cyning, / eald eþelweard – ," [when the wide kingdom / passed into Beowulf's hand, he held it well / for fifty winters, until he was an old king, / an old guardian] (2207-2210). By this point, the audience understands enough of Beowulf's heroic character to know that he is a courageous, fair, and valiant king. When we first meet Hrothgar, he is already in the twilight of his duty as king. We meet him at a moment of inaction, and his greatest deeds are in the past. By contrast, when we meet King Beowulf, we have witnessed and are witness to his deeds. He need not be described to us again as we are already aware that he is a man of action over words. He does not shirk from his duty as protector and prince.

Although Beowulf's generosity as a lord is somewhat obscure, the poet implies that he possess the proper temperament for a generous and prudent lord and protector. He is portrayed as a fair and patient man, Hrothgar declares to Beowulf, "Eal þu hit geþyldum healdest, / mægen mid modes snyttrum" [you hold all things steadily, / strength with a wisdom of spirit] (1705-1706). Beowulf's discretion and diplomacy is further evidenced by his interaction with Unferth. Despite Unferth's strange rudeness upon Beowulf's arrival at Heorot, Beowulf maintains a dignified composure towards him. Then, after the episode with Grendel's mother, he returns Unferth's sword without any mention of its impotence. When the blade is returned, Beowulf indicates to Unferth that "he þone guðwine godne tealde, / wigcræftigne, nales wordum log / meces ecge; þæt wæs modig secg" [he regarded the war-friend as a good one, / strong in battle, said he found no fault in the sword's edge; / that was a thoughtful man] (1810-1812). Despite the fact that the blade was of no use whatsoever, Beowulf wishes to honor Unferth's gesture in

lending the sword in the first place. He displays a generosity of character here that must apply to his fitness as king. He is balanced in both strength and temperament and at the same time a just and singular lord. These traits present Beowulf as a well-balanced individual, but they also speak to the larger social issue of feuding because, of all the kings mentioned that may be taken as Beowulf's foil, he is the only one who manages to check the feuding.

Reciprocity between a lord and his retinue depended upon the existence of blood feud. A leader required warriors for protection and these warriors required treasure in exchange for their loyalty. Likewise, kinship bonds were strongest when members of a kin group were needed for protection. As blood feud fell out of favor, kinship ties diminished and the reciprocity between lord and followers was lessened. Power shifted to a central authority who partook of fines (such as wergild) for offenses. According to Bertha Phillpotts, feuding is a sign of a strong sense of kin relations within a society. Kindred encouraged reciprocity by "discouraging the rise of petty local chiefs" (Phillpotts 256). The balance was affected by not only prohibiting the expansion of stronger individuals, but also by protecting the weak. Feuding emerged as a system of solidarity towards a kinsman in need: "[a] kindred can only be said to exist at the moment when it groups itself round a given kinsman, and a large proportion of this group must merge into other groups if some individual is in need" (Phillpotts 256). Despite the necessity of feuding for strong kindred, the *Beowulf* poet notes the inevitability of blood feud with disapproval and uses it to illustrate the destruction of all the heroic kings, Beowulf included, to appear in the poem. The poet may have been addressing uncertainties on the part of his pagan audience who saw their system of reciprocity weakening in the face of new Christian-influenced hierarchies. The poet's stance clearly favors the new system of social order that does not reward violence with violence, but rather seeks to end hostilities with an underlying base of forgiveness.

Discouraging feuds would profoundly affect the entire social system because, as Phillpotts notes, the decline of blood feuds coincides with the decline of kindreds, which in turn marks a decline in the autonomy of the individual. Institutions, such as the Christian church, began to frown upon feuding and encouraged wergild as a means of compensation for a crime. Wergild stood in as a way to mitigate the outbreak of feud in that, a feud was not necessary if a person could pay the wergild. Feuding only became necessary when monetary compensation was not possible. The threat of feud, therefore, encouraged the criminal and/or his kin to pay the wergild rather than suffer the harsher consequences of blood feud (Phillpotts 219). However, while this is ostensibly a more stable means of justice, it is not balanced in this same way as a system that favors a life for a life. Furthermore, depending on who must pay the wergild and where the money goes, the replacement of goods for life eventually favors power to a central authority or system of authority, numbing the importance and power of kinship. In England, as Phillpotts notes, wergild reduced the rights of the small landowner. For the person having to pay the wergild, the penalty may lead to "debt, serfdom, poverty, when the price was paid out of the cattle and household goods possessed by the individual slayer and his immediate family" and, contrarily, "when dispersed among a whole kindred it was comparatively little felt" (251). *Beowulf* illustrates this correlation between weak kindred ties and wergild in the history between Hrothgar and Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow. Beowulf is compelled in a legal sense to come to Hrothgar's aid in order to repay the debt Hrothgar had fulfilled for Ecgtheow because his own kindred would not fulfill it.

The poet is influenced both thematically and structurally by the Germanic system of reciprocity that produced a destructive mechanism of justice in feuding. The balance and symmetry suggested by this system of vengeance manifests itself in the poem, but the poet is

critical of such a destructive and self-perpetuating force and instead favors a Christian paradigm of forgiveness that would cease the vengeful violence. Feuding may have offered a vehicle for peace (in as much as assured retaliation would serve as a deterrent), but the poet highlights the negative aspect of feuding. The autonomy of individuals as expressed through kin groups' ability to enact their own revenge has its trade-offs: the poet highlights the destructive aspects of local (or individual) governance, which favors institutional policy (such as the Church) by default.

The symmetry throughout *Beowulf* operates on several levels. Thematically, the battles between Beowulf and Grendel and the dragon serve to balance the structure of the poem with opposing yet balanced elements. Centrally, the battle with Grendel's mother provides a gray area incorporating aspects of both battles to provide yet further unity to the overall literary structure. However, these literary elements are a result of a society that favors reciprocity and justice administered locally by kin groups. As Roman law and Christianity spread throughout the pagan Germanic tribes, the people witnessed a gradual decay in the symmetry of their laws and social structure. The autonomy of the individual shifted to a centralized government. Feuding, acts of vengeance founded on symmetrical retribution, gave over to wergild, which marked the first step towards disproportion of the individual's rights and those of the central authority. At the same time, kinship groups fell apart further exposing the individual to the subjugation of a central ruler. The *Beowulf* poet reflects these elements not only in structure of the poem but also embodies them in character of the hero Beowulf and his deeds.

III.

AMBIGUOUS ELEMENTS AS COUNTERPOINT

In *Beowulf*, the symmetrical aesthetic works in a contrapuntal way—external symmetry of actions and deeds bolsters the structure of the poem, while the integrity of this structure is underpinned by ambiguity. One of the most important of these ambiguous elements is the poet's description of landscape, which harbors the psychological ethereality of the characters. The general application of poetic conventions in *Beowulf* work to keep symmetry on two levels. On the one hand, the very balance of the alliterative verse and structural symmetry speak to a culture that idealizes reciprocity and is plagued by feud and vengeance. On the other hand, the same conventions turned inward reflect the effects of these cultural values upon the individual's character—the archetype that emerges from this Anglo-Saxon poem is one of a hero who is strong in deeds and actions while also steadfast and even-tempered in a world of feuding and fatalism. The events, actions, and behaviors displayed throughout the poem are balanced by the cognition, emotion, and comprehension expressed through the elements of ambiguity and representing the response to the external aspects of the poem. The uncertainty expressed by the ambiguous elements of the poem, including the supernatural and landscape, mirrors the uncertainty felt by a society plagued with perpetual feuding, and these elements of the ill-defined work as the photographic-negative to the structural symmetry of the poem by turning the outward symmetries in.

Essentially, two aesthetics are at work in *Beowulf*—one aesthetic, which surrounds the hero, illustrates balance and symmetry, and the other, effused through the monsters, is mystery and ambiguity. While these themes seem paradoxical, they work together to create one unified symmetry. The symmetrical aesthetic within the structure of the poem points to heroes and their

deeds while reflecting the reaction to the values and operations of the external society. The ambiguous aesthetic contributes to the overall symmetry and reflects the internal struggles of the individual moving within this society. Just as the poet represents external conflict symmetrically (e.g., between Beowulf and Grendel) throughout the poem, he equally illustrates internal struggle through the elements of eeriness, mystery, and ambiguity.

This ambiguity is a characteristic of *Beowulf*'s monsters. Inasmuch as the poet relies on the audience's response to these dark and eerie elements, the monsters are a necessary representation of internal turmoil. The poem is not simply about mortal adversaries and feuds. The poet also seeks to address the response these feuds held for the overall morale and cohesion of the afflicted society, which he accomplishes through the otherworldly beings in the monsters. In addition to the emotional response to feud, the poet also portray the emotional contributors to feud. Whatever feuding is, it is not a rational application. It is a reactionary system that is hinged on volatile emotional responses. As Hume remarks, "Feuds do not start unless some interested party has a streak of unreasonableness, whether as aggressor or as injured party unwilling to accept fair compensation" (7). For Hume, Grendel embodies such a mentality. Embarking on vengeance requires a churning up of and responding to hostility that was justified by a socially sanctioned sense of obligation. To represent only the monsters actions in inciting feud would provide only half of the balance needed for the full symmetry of the poet's aesthetic. Rather, the poet must also account for the internal elements responsible for the feuds they instigate. To do this, he represents abstract emotional elements as ambiguity and gives concrete representations through landscape.

What unites all three monsters is their association with water. Grendel and his mother dwell in a mere, and the dragon is said to have taken over a barrow that is "wæteryðum neah"

[near the waves of the sea] (2242). Traditionally, dark seas are associated in origin mythology of the chaos that existed before Creation, and that chaos lurks beneath the surface, creating a fertile environment for dark imaginings.

The monsters come from dark, murky places—ill-defined areas that harbor unknown and dangerous things. Beowulf's first foes appear in his exchange with Unferth. During his swimming match with Breca, Beowulf is attacked by "merefix" [sea-fish] (549) and "aglæca" [monsters] (556). He claims to have been repeatedly attacked by "laðgeteonan" [evil-doers] (559) of the deep, which, despite being rather fierce, get no further description. The lack of detail attributed to these creatures is somewhat odd considering that Beowulf is attempting to convince Unferth and any other doubters in Hrothgar's company of how harrowing the ordeal was. Because these creatures inhabit the same landscape as the other monsters and are also strange, hostile foes, one would expect an elaborate description of the vile sea creatures or at least some distinguishing features such as the poet provides for Grendel and the dragon. However, these creatures are not important in and of themselves as much as they serve to defile and darken the landscape of which they are a part. The sea becomes a fearful place with the knowledge of loathsome monsters lurking beneath its surface.

Inasmuch as the poet relied on the use of landscape to portray the abstract through imagery with regards to the monsters, he likewise uses landscapes in relation to Beowulf. Again, the technique applied to the evil forces of the poem is balanced out by its application to the hero. In the battle with Grendel, Grendel is, of course, associated with the mere from whence he arrives at Heorot. But during the battle, the poet takes care to discuss the structure of the great hall, cutting away from the immediate action of the battle to discuss the integrity of the construction: "Þa wæs se wundor micel, þæt se winsele / wiðhæfde heaþodeorum, þæt he on

hrusan ne feol, / fæger foldbold; ac he þæs fæste wæs innan ond utan irenbendum / searoþoncum besmiþod" [It was a great wonder, that the wine-hall withstood the battle-brave warriors, that it did not fall onto the ground / fair building; but it was firm / in and out banded with iron / fastened with skill] (771-775). On one level, this speaks to the fierceness of the battle that was so intense it jeopardized the very roof under which it took place. However, Heorot seems to be representing Beowulf in this instance. The hall belongs to the Danes, but they are unable to defend it and it is Beowulf alone who possess the strength of character to purge the hall of Grendel's wicked marauding. The hall is as solid and secure as Beowulf is steadfast and resolute.

The poet uses structure to illustrate Beowulf's strength in battle and deed. To illustrate his inner character, the poet again turns to nature. Beowulf also has an association with water. Most memorable are his talents for swimming, which certainly seems to be a superhuman feat. While it is tempting to view these moments as supernatural gifts specific to the hero, Puhvel observes that this gift for swimming is not unique to *Beowulf* among traditional Germanic literatures and notes correlations in Icelandic sagas (277). Moreover, Puhvel marks that "Breca is obviously a not unworthy companion; thus the incomparable Beowulf is not the sole super-swimmer in the Anglo-Saxon epic" (278). What is unique to Beowulf, however, is the sheer enormity of his swimming abilities; Beowulf is capable of swimming across entire seas carrying heavy loads of armor, and Puhvel has found this degree of ability to be unique in Anglo-Saxon and Germanic literature, although correlations exist within ancient Irish literature (278). What is important to note for issues of balance and symmetry is that Beowulf's almost amphibian abilities endow him with a heroic strength to match his supernatural enemies. The poet draws on

these literary traditions for the specific purpose of painting a hero who can cross into the monsters' thresholds by means of an established literary convention.

Beowulf's most memorable moments in the water are during the swimming match with Breca, and his journey to the bottom of the haunted mere, which ostensibly spans several hours under the water. These actions point to superhuman feats, but the poet also seems to go to some effort to emphasize Beowulf's skill both on water and on land by using coastal images. As has already been noted, water harbors chaos, and the very fact that Beowulf is able to make his way through this dangerous landscape speaks to his ability to order, or at least navigate, chaos. Beowulf is first introduced by way of his voyage over the sea to Denmark. Feuds come from over the sea, and as the scene with the coast guard illustrates, the coast marked an initial point of conflict. Beowulf arrives in Denmark determined to settle a feud between Grendel and Hrothgar, and by his unwavering resolution he has proven his heroic worth. Then, when Beowulf returns to Geatland, the poet again turns to coastal imagery to belie Beowulf's worthiness as a hero—he left Geatland to prove himself and he returns having accomplished this goal. In terms of balance and symmetry, the coastal images associated with Beowulf serve to underpin his formidable strength, as represented by the unruly ocean, and to draw attention to the wisdom of his character.

Originating from the chaotic aquatic settings, the monsters all possess mysterious, ill-defined qualities. Grendel and his mother are quite ambiguous; they are neither wholly human nor altogether inhuman in both action and physical being. The dragon, though clearly a monster, also seems to possess human-like traits, such as hoarding, greed, and unchecked vengeance. The poet takes measure to instill in his audience a greater sense of fear, or at least repugnance, towards the monsters by drawing attention to their negative human traits. This moves the

monsters beyond the realm of mighty adversary and firmly into that of nefarious beings. The human attributes provide the monsters with a further level of strangeness that makes them more otherworldly and allow the poet, through this representation of the supernatural, to illustrate the internal response to these characters as well as the evilness of their natures. This aversion to the monsters, in turn, serves to highlight Beowulf's heroic greatness. Not only is he a perfect match in strength and able to combat the physical threat they pose, he also possess an internal balance that allows him to battle the emotional affront also.

The description of Grendel captures both this sense of the supernatural as well as a twisted heroic. The poet introduces Grendel in relation to his clan (Cain) and to a landscape: "wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten, / mære mearcstapa, se þe moras heold, / fen ond fæsten" [the grim spirit was called Grendel, / notorious border-wanderer, who ruled the marshes, / fen and stronghold] (102-104). Although the poet has already associated Grendel with the sinful wickedness of Cain and as a demon with phrases such as "feond on helle" [fiend in Hell] (101), the poet ties Grendel to the marshy wastelands to reinforce his sense of otherness. The landscape serves as a concrete illustration of the murkiness of Grendel's being. Grendel is not a natural enemy, like a wolf or other dangerous animal, and he cannot be defeated in the same way as a natural adversary could. Grendel represents a contrast to Beowulf in action, as clearly illustrated in the battle scenes, and in spirit through the eerie and dark qualities of Grendel's environment. By contrast, the poet provides a forthright description of Beowulf's temperament, and Beowulf is associated with a nation and its people, not just a semi-terrestrial landscape. The ambiguity associated with Grendel creates a symmetry of opposites with Beowulf as a clearly-defined heroic ideal.

Grendel is portrayed as a powerful enemy, but it is the poet's description of Grendel as a frightful monster that balances his worthiness as an adversary to Beowulf. After Grendel's first onslaught, the account is simply that he attacked and then traveled home "mid þære wælfylle" [with their slaughter] (125). The language conveys the violence of Grendel's attack but is insufficient to fully render the emotional aftereffects. It is significant that Grendel returns to the fens as this represents for the audience the ill-defined and dark quality of Grendel's motives and being. The mysterious aspects of Grendel leave Hrothgar and his men unsure how to combat him. Hrothgar's reaction to the attacks—unbliðe sæt, / þolode ðryðswyð þegnsorge dreah" [sat sorrowful, / endured suffering strong sorrow] (130-131)—describes the loss the men felt after the attack, but not the horror of the ordeal. The monster acts as a tool for the poet to vividly represent both the internal turmoil of the victims and the dark quality of the perpetrator. Beowulf's mode of action, in comparison to the mournful Danes, accents his ability to keep his calm in a fight that renders others helpless in mind and spirit.

Calder asserts this relationship between landscape and psyche when he notes that the settings themselves serve as characters in the poem. The settings interact and change in such a way as to "[provide] an epistemological system by which the monsters themselves may be known" (22). The monsters provide a level of psychological turmoil by their otherworldliness that the mortal foes of the poem cannot render. The eerie landscapes from which the monsters come further this mysterious quality and also provide a concrete grounds upon which to evaluate the associated monsters. Regarding the dichotomy between Heorot and the mere, the hall is a symbol of all that can be achieved by civilization: "Hrothgar's hall is the symbol of perfection which mankind seldom reaches but which is within his grasp" (Calder 22). It is no coincidence that the hall is ravaged (but not destroyed) by Grendel and that Hrothgar and his men are unable

to protect it. The perfection Calder refers to is only attainable by Beowulf. When Beowulf arrives at the hall, it "is already a fallen ideal [. . .] tarnished by the introduction of evil, and the inhabitants of Heorot have, in their own way, been participants in that evil. They have permitted it to continue" (25). The nearness of Grendel's mere to Heorot and the ease at which he makes his way there suggest that Grendel's evilness is at a potency capable of afflicting all mankind; that is, the average (non-heroic) folk of the poem are perfectly susceptible to the dark side that Grendel bears. Beowulf, by contrast, is above it. Beowulf is separate from this landscape in a way that Hrothgar and his men are not. Therefore, as a stranger from a foreign land, Beowulf "carries with him the possibility of restoring the original goodness of that place" (Calder 25). The monster provides a supernatural representation of evil that works psychologically as well as physically. The perfection that Grendel corrupts is likewise on a level that average humans could not restore.

By associating the supernatural forces of the monsters with landscape, the poet provides a means of measuring these abstract elements. According to Calder, "[by] emphasizing the particularity of the physical world, those things which do exist in space and time, one can then perceive the existence of those creatures who, although they have an earthly abode, cannot be wholly contained within man's temporal and spatial conceptions" (27). Grendel's and his mother's power as adversaries can be measured against their association with the mere. Hrothgar tells Beowulf that the mere is bottomless, "No þæs frod leofað / gumena bearna, þæt þone grund wite" [none of the wise who live / of the sons of men, knows the bottom of that place] (1366-1367). However, Beowulf manages to reach the bottom after a long and arduous swim: "Ða wæs hwil dæges, / ær he þone grundwong / ongyten mehte" [It was most of a day, / before he the pool's ground / might perceive] (1495-1496). The discrepancy reflects that fact

that while Grendel and his mother are insurmountable forces for Hrothgar and his men, they are no match for a hero of Beowulf's stature. The poet uses landscape as a means of portraying the ferocity of the monsters and Beowulf's movement within that landscape as a representation of his heroic force.

Inside Heorot, the poet again turns to landscape as a means of establishing internal aspects. The poet uses the imagery of destruction of the hall and its inhabitants to illustrate Grendel's viciousness on both physical and psychological levels. The violence portrayed in Grendel's later attack serves to illuminate his worthiness as a foe, rather than to underscore his frightfulness as a monster. The violence in both the poet's language and in the actions themselves, solidifies Grendel as a worthy opponent but is not what makes Grendel fearful in a spiritual sense. When Hrothgar tells Beowulf of Grendel's attacks, he says that his men bravely vowed to protect the hall, but in the morning, "drihtsele dreorfah, þonne dæg lixte, / eal bencþelu blode bestymed, heall heorudreore;" [the splendid hall was stained with gore, when day shone through, / all the bench planks were wet with blood, / a battle blood hall;] (485-487). Hrothgar, like the poet, lacks the theoretical framework to describe the psychological effects of the monster's attacks, and so he turns to a physical description of the aftermath of the landscape with which they are associated. The description serves as both a means of representing the physical destruction of the attack, but also to convey the inner turmoil that Hrothgar and his men felt at its outcome. Grendel is a monster who is capable of incurring and representing dramatic destruction on both an external and internal level. Because Beowulf has both the strength to combat the adversary and the inner fortitude to withstand the attack, Grendel is ultimately represented as the hero's reversal. This serves to set a counterpoint towards balance of action as well as a psychological balance.

These representations of the internal were a key element to the poet's use of feud, which in turn influenced the balance and symmetry of the poem. Just as feuding operated upon overcharged emotional responses, the outcome of a feud could be determined by internal factors. As Du Bois notes, the dangers of feuding did not only originate from external forces. The monsters gain strength and present a greater challenge when the internal factions of the humans involved are weak: "a king cannot well fight internal factions because his strength is divided against itself since he has either to fight two of his own destructive armies or, amidst general destruction, to array himself with one against the other" (392). This concept is most clearly illustrated in Beowulf's fight with the dragon when the internal decay of Beowulf's own clan is apparent. His kindred abandon him during this trial, clearly indicating a lack of group fortitude on the part of the Geats. As Du Bois notes, "[the] dragon is [. . .] a materialization of the disintegration of the Geatish-Scandinavian empire from within" that "made the Geats liable to attack from Swedes and Franks" (392). The flawed reciprocity of the Geats will be their undoing, and it is precisely because they are weak internally that they fail. Despite the fact that Beowulf seeks treasure to reward his men and, as we know from Wiglaf's report, he was a generous lord, his men are not cohesive amongst themselves and are apparently not loyal to Beowulf. The poet represents this by means of the monster in that "the dragon is strong, not only in its own fiery right, but also because the Geats and Danes are weak" (391). The dragon ravages the land of the Geats and may therefore be seen as an internal force materialized as a monster. Related to Grendel, Du Bois points to the tension presented by Hrothulf. Wealhtheow's distrust for Hrothgar's nephew is apparent in her plea for Beowulf to look after her sons. As Du Bois notes, "Hroþulf is strong in the power Hroþgar has given him and, at least until Onela's death, in his connections with the Swedes" (382). The hostilities presented by

these opposing agents results in a feud that "shows that they were indeed liable to the doom of Cain, killing each other off like weeds, a doom which, not the Danes, but only a being like Beowulf could stave off" (382). The tensions between Hrothgar's potential heirs are present during Grendel's attacks and, as Du Bois asserts, the Danes are incapable of settling the internal antagonisms, which Grendel represents. Beowulf alone slays the monster and, throughout the poem, it is Beowulf alone who staves off feuds. The supernatural aspects of the monsters serve to illustrate the abstract destructive forces of feuding and vengeance against which Beowulf provides the singular heroic balance.

The poet uses Grendel as a representation of violence and a concrete means of illustrating power, but the monster is also used as a means of invoking fear. The violence Grendel is able to enact makes him a fierce foe, and the poet uses Grendel's grim powers as a means of intensifying Beowulf's heroism. During the confrontation between Grendel and Beowulf, the language is some of the most graphic in the poem:

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

[The monster did not think to hesitate, / but he quickly seized the first time / a sleeping warrior, greedily tore into him, / bit into his body, drank blood from veins, / swallowed huge morsels; soon he had / eaten up all the dead, / even feet and hands] (739-745).

Although intimate and grisly violence would have been commonplace for the poet and his audience, the repugnance of this description not only highlights Beowulf's stalwartness by contrast (Grendel's violence is out of control while Beowulf is measured), it also provides a vehicle by which the poet may allude to the inner destruction the fiend is wreaking. The violence takes place inside the Dane's hall. The violence of the poet's description paints both the intensity of the battle as well as the strangeness of the foe. As a result, the description captures both the external element of the deed and the internal reaction to that deed.

Grendel's fierceness is intensified by his association with the unknown of the fens and the ambiguous nature of his being. Grendel is not quite human and yet, perhaps, too much like a human to be a true monster. We are able to read in him both monster and human, which makes him both familiar and unpredictable. On a symbolic level, this speaks to acts of vengeance, which, while they may have been anticipated, may not have been justified or acted out in ways that equaled the crime for which the vengeance was being paid. Grendel embodies both power and monstrosity. He is unchecked vengeance and stands as both human and monster. The poet describes Grendel's riven hand as animal-like "stið[r]a nægla gehwlyc style gelicost, / hæþenes handsporu hilderinces / egl[u] unheoru;" [each of the nails on the hand were very much like steel / heathen's claw of the warrior / hateful and horrible;] (985-987). Grendel is equipped with claws or talons, and, later, from Hrothgar's description, we know that Grendel appears similar to a man, but warped or disfigured. In fact, when Beowulf returns from the mere with Grendel's head, it takes four men to hoist it upon a spear. Additionally, Grendel apparently possesses human paraphernalia, like the dragon-scale pouch that Beowulf describes to Hygelac: "Glof hangode / sid on syllic, searobendum fæst; / sio wæs orðoncum eall gegyrwed / deofles cræftum ond dracan fellum" [a pouch hung / spacious and strange, / fixed with a cunningly wrought clasp;

it was all prepared with skill / with a demon's craft and from dragon skins] (2085-2088). Grendel, therefore, serves as an ambiguous character who straddles both human and otherworldly; his persona further intensifies the ambiguity that he inherits from his domain in the fens. Not only is he a villain in action, but, lacking motive, he is also slippery in terms of character because his attacks could not be anticipated. Unlike the other feuds presented in the poem, Grendel's attacks of vengeance catch their victims (the Danes) totally unaware. In this way, Grendel works to represent the initiation of feuding. While stories of mortal feuds abound in *Beowulf*, they are not able to fully capture the emotional response to these acts of vengeance. Rather, they express sentiments of regret or admonishment towards such a system. To relay the internal turmoil caused by and responsible for this perpetual system of revenge, the poet turns to monsters like Grendel and his mother. Their attacks fit a paradigm of feuding but are senseless and unjustified.

Grendel's mother is perhaps one of the most mysterious characters in the entire poem. Not only does she have all the foggy elements of her son—resembling a human in appearance but not quite, dwelling in the marshes—but her gender seems to be called into question. The poet uses both masculine and feminine pronouns to describe her, although he is quite definite to point out her relative weakness in battle. Additionally, as Rogers notes, concerning the account of the fight with Grendel's mother, "The air of folk-tale is stronger; Grendel's mother is not so clearly the foe of God, and she did not attack without provocation" (247). Her motives and attributes are not the clear reversal of heroic deeds that Grendel's are. If Grendel may be seen to represent the initiation of feuding and the psychological effects such a cycle invokes, Grendel's mother stands in for the perpetuation and unrelenting continuation of such an act of vengeance. The ambiguity that surrounds this character, then, serves to represent the murky grounds upon

which retaliation must have rested. The men in Heorot did not anticipate her attack, even though Hrothgar was apparently aware that Grendel dwelled with another monster in the fens.

Although Grendel's mother seems less fierce than her son—she takes only one thane, she is motivated by vengeance for her son, and she is fearful when discovered in the hall—the sense of the otherworldly is intensified with Grendel's mother because Beowulf faces her in her lair beneath the water rather than in his terrestrial realm. In this way, she becomes more dangerous and more frightening; not only are the monster's capabilities as yet undefined (especially with regards to feud and vengeance), her lair also presents a terrifying gauntlet in itself. Grendel's mother couples the possibility of retaliation with supernatural setting, thereby embodying the psychological response to feuding. Hume views Grendel's mother as an embodiment of revenge, an "often unreasonable emotional drive" (7). It is this drive that perpetuated the feud, and it is this drive that the poet wishes to dramatize with the landscape of the mere. There mere is bottomless only to those who cannot defeat its inhabitants. Beowulf reaches the bottom and kills the final avenger of Grendel's clan, thereby ending the feud and establishing the limits of this setting.

One of the most striking passages of the poem revolves around the haunted mere and occurs when Hrothgar tells Beowulf where he might find Grendel's mother. The tone seems to darken and take on an ominous hue. Hrothgar's message seems more like a campfire folktale than directions to a battle site, and he begins the passage as such, declaring that he has heard ("Ic [. . .] secgan hyrde" [1345-1346]) about these two legendary creatures as though in a camp story rather than a factual account. Additionally, the tale continues to take on folklore qualities by persisting with this yarn motif in describing Grendel and his mother. One of these creatures, Hrothgar reports, is in the shape of a woman, the other is "þæs þe hie gewislicost gewitan

meahton" [as far as anyone might know for certain] (1350) in the shape of a man. The account becomes further obscure by the poet's use of the word "mearcstapan" (1348) to describe Grendel and his mother. Klaeber glosses this word as a "wanderer in the waste borderland." Both monsters are fringe creatures in a boggy and murky fen of the outskirts. The land itself seems to represent a type of border between rationality and emotion through its ill-defined and mysterious qualities.

The foggy description of the surrounding land prepares the reader for the strange and terrifying description of the mere that follows, the home of Grendel and his mother, about which Hrothgar fittingly comments "nis þæt heoru stow" [that is not a pleasant place] (1374):

Nis þæt feor heonon
milgemearces, þæt se mere standeð;
ofer þæm hongiað hrinde bearwas,
wudu wyrtum fæst wæter oferhelmað.
Þær mæg nihta gehwæm niðwundor seon
fyr on flode. No þæs frod leofað
gumena bearna, þæt þone grund wite.

[Not a far measure of miles hence, stands a mere; / over which hang groves covered with frost, / trees overhang the water with fixed roots. / There may be seen each night a fearful wonder/ fire on the water. No one who is wise among the sons of men, knows the bottom] (1361-1367).

While the description of the mere itself is quite unsettling and vivid in its clear attempt to dissuade one from going near the place, the poet furthers the sense of ill-will with his description of the hunted stag:

Ðeah þe hæðstapa hundum geswenced,

heorot hornum trum holtwudu sece,

feorran geflymed, ær he feorh seleð,

aldor on ofre, ær he in wille,

hafelan [beorgan] . . . .

[There the heather-stepper would be injured by dogs, / hart with strong horns seeking the forest, / who is put far to flight, before he gives up his life, / gives up his life on the bank, before he would go into the mere, / to save his head . . .] (1368-1372).

As these passages clearly illustrate, the mere is a haunted and malevolent place. The addition of the hart as a figure in the evil landscape heightens the sense of maliciousness associated with the mere. The hart provides a striking description of the emotional response to the vile setting. In no other segment of the text does the poet devote such care to draw the landscape so vividly, and this description is very effective and intentional in its efforts to capture both the imagery and the sense of place. However, the landscape is not just a way to add suspense and unease to the plot of the poem; rather, it provides a means by which to dramatize internal turmoil, and this representation, in response, provides an important structural balancing point. While the actions and deeds of the heroes and monsters work symmetrically and mirror the process of feud, the internal elements complete the balanced aesthetic and serve to illustrate the response to perpetual vengeance and likewise dramatize the role irrational reactions play in instigating violent acts of vengeance.

As Richard Butts eloquently writes in his article "The Analogical Mere: Landscape and Terror in *Beowulf*, "[this] metonymic shrinking of men's fear into the image of the fugitive hart has the typical function of condensation in dreams: there is conveyed an intensity of impression that could not have been achieved by the mere statement that all creatures, including men, fear

Grendel" (118). The sentiment could not have been expressed with words and was instead experienced by the audience through careful use of imagery. To describe the events would fall short of fully matching the battle scenes in terms of intensity and balance. A dramatized "action" of internal is needed to invoke a sense of fear rather than just empathy and to show the danger such a level of emotion is capable of enacting.

The mere is important for more than simply being a home of malice. As Butts observes, Hrothgar's description intentionally points towards the supernatural as a way of expressing "some sense of men's imaginative and psychological response to Grendel" (113). For a poem that is so centered upon action and consequences, how to present in an equally active way the dark emotional aspects the monsters surely conveyed and allow the audience to fully appreciate the ensuing terror must have been a challenge. However, the frightening landscape does not merely serve as a means of expressing psychological terror. The poet uses the otherworldly sense of place to convey abstract sentiments and ideas. According to Butts, the use of landscape captures both feelings towards Grendel as well as "all the greater unknown which he represents" (114). To use Butts's example, "the Dane's reference to the bottom of Grendel's mere is as much figurative emblem of the limits of what can be known and said by men as it is an allusion to the depth of a body of water" (114). Part of this unknown may have been the security that rampant vengeance obscured.

The device works on multiple levels, both to convey its concrete necessity as a place in the poem and as a place marker for abstract concepts not easily expressed to a real-world audience. As Butts writes, "[when] the mind is turned inward to focus on a psychological mood as an object of knowledge, the mind must perceive it more intimately and less through the medium of sense" (114). In other words, in order to make the complex sentiments the poet

wishes to convey more accessible, he sets them in a tangible medium of vivid and direct imagery. The imagery that the landscapes afford provide structural integrity throughout the poem by representing the internal, as balanced against the external elements, such as the battles. Each of the monsters of the battles are associated with a noteworthy landscape (the fen, the mere, the barrow), making the landscape and use of this device a key feature of the symmetrical aesthetic throughout.

That the poet was intentionally striving for *psychological* representations may be explained by viewing the landscapes as representations of dreams and the subconscious. As Butts argues, to achieve the strangeness of the eerie landscapes, the poet painted dreamscapes. The landscapes frequently combine contradictory elements, such as burning water of the mere, that, although inappropriate for a natural setting, "might easily be combined by the associative logic of dreams or visionary experiences" (Butts 115). Because the audience cannot experience the imagery in a logical way, since it conforms to no natural precedent, the dream-like landscapes elicit a "non-intellectual, almost emotional response in the reader; the reader is left with the impression of having submitted to a subtle sensual experience rather than to a carefully marshaled description of a body of water" (Butts 116). The goal, Butts asserts, is to put the audience firmly into a dreamscape because dreams "embody our most profound and primal fears" (116). By tapping into this innate sense of fear, the poet was able to successfully render the monsters both as mighty enemies and as horrific monsters as well as to allow the audience to experience the unsettling effects they carried in their wake. According to this argument, the poet employed a sophisticated and well-crafted technique to probe into the receiver's emotions. It was important for the poet to reach his audience's emotions in a direct way and to convey amorphous emotions that would be clearly received. The inclusion of the internal provides a

vital component to the structural symmetry of the poem and the work's aesthetic effectiveness as a whole.

The ferocity that Grendel's mother holds is not apparent until Beowulf finds himself in her lair. Like Grendel, the mother possesses animal-like characteristics. She anticipates Beowulf's retaliation, and knows, seemingly by means of a superhuman sense, that Beowulf has entered her murky domain: "Sona þæt onfunde se ðe floda begong / heorogifre beheold hund missera, / grim ond grædig, þæt þær gumena sum / ælwihta eard ufan cunnode" [soon she discovered the one who the region of floods / fiercely ravenous occupied for a hundred half-years, / savage and greedy, that there was a certain man / exploring the monsters' home from above] (1497-1500). Her senses are sharp and animalistic and, in her own lair, the mother is a formidable foe. Her ties to the murky landscape from which she arose adds a further layer to the ambiguity of this villain through an increased association with the supernatural. The fact that Beowulf faces her in her mere gives the poet an opportunity to show her frightfulness—the landscape captures the psychological response to the scene and its participants. In this battle, Beowulf is involved in a feud with a legendary clan of Cain, with an opponent whose strength and assets he cannot fully assess. Grendel's mother's lair represents the obscurity of the end of feuding. Because Hrothgar and his men failed to foresee the mother's retaliation, it stands to reason that the possibility for further acts of vengeance remains after Grendel's mother has been killed. The murky quality of their being suggests that the existence of further avengers is unknown. The obscure landscape indicates that, once begun, a feud could only certainly be ended when all participants were killed, which is exactly what happens when Beowulf kills the mother.

The battle with Grendel's mother seems to carry an air of weariness. While the battle with Grendel was epic, when the hostilities continue, all parties require greater motivation to continue. Beowulf's victory seemed almost assured in his battle with Grendel. He announces resolutely that he plans to be a match for Grendel, and, as such, will face him in hand-to-hand combat, since Grendel himself carries no weapon. Additionally, Beowulf announces that he will trust God to decide the outcome: "ond siþðan witig God / on swa hwæþere hond halig Dryhten / mærðo deme, swa him gemet þince" [and thereupon wise God / on whichever hand the holy Lord / assigns fame, as he thinks him fit] (685-687). There is a different expectation with Grendel's mother. Before he departs, Hrothgar promises him a great reward, which speaks both to an increased ferocity of foe deserving a greater reward, but also perhaps to the hero's motivation. Beowulf slew Grendel both as a heroic deed but also to repay a debt to Hrothgar. Beowulf has no such obligation to Hrothgar to slay Grendel's mother and so Hrothgar must provide him ample compensation to take on the deed. Rather than the feud dissipating, it is renewed with money, which acts as a reversal to the idea that wergild would discourage further acts of blood vengeance. Additionally, during the fight with Grendel's mother, Beowulf's life is spared by his chain mail, and he must use a weapon to finally kill the *mihtig merewif*.

Rogers interprets this contrast between Grendel and his mother to be a shift in cultural perspective. The battles represent first a Christian paradigm with Grendel and then shifts to a Germanic paradigm with the mother. In the fight with Grendel, Rogers argues, Beowulf relied on the strength—Old English *mægen*, which, as Rogers notes, encompassed both spiritual and physical strength—that had been bestowed by God. Rogers further asserts that because "Grendel was God's adversary; Beowulf, his champion was easily victorious" (236). With regards to the symmetrical aspects of the poem, this very *mægen* seeks to unify the contrasting forces of

Beowulf and Grendel. According to Rogers, Grendel is the only villain for whom the poet also ascribes the word *mægen*, an important distinction because, as previously mentioned, the word carries a divine connotation (Rogers 240). Therefore, it is even more significant that Beowulf confronts Grendel without weapons. They must match physical strength in order for the poet to illustrate the power of divine strength.

As for Grendel's mother, the battle is characterized by Germanic elements of which the use of weapons is most significant. Beowulf uses a sword that seems to have a legendary background: "Geseah ða on searwum sigeeadig bil, / ealdsweord eotenisc ecgum þyhtig, / wigena weorðmynd; þæt [wæs] wæpna cyst, — / buton hit wæs mare ðonne ænig mon oðer / to beadulace ætberan meahte, / god ond geatolic, giganta geweorc" [Then he saw the victorious sword among the armor, / ancient sword made by giants with a strong blade, / honor of warriors; that weapon was the best, — / but it was more than any other man / might bear to battle, / good and stately, the work of giants] (1557-1562). Rogers argues that Beowulf's use of the sword to slay the mother is evidence of a Germanic influence because he requires an ancient weapon, as indicated by "the work of giants" and especially valued by Germanic society rather than relying on his God-given talent. Beowulf does not use a divine *mægen* but rather a man-made weapon. As a result, "The air of folk-tale is stronger" and "Beowulf is more a Germanic hero and less of a Christian knight. He speaks now of revenge and glory, not of God's judgment" (247). The poet merges these Christian-Germanic elements when he relates the Cain-Abel parable, which serves as a fulcrum point to balance the Grendel-Mother battles. As Rogers points out, the poet refers to Cain as his brother's *ecgbanan* "sword-slayer" (line 1262), which is the poet's invention, rather than a Biblical citation (Rogers 241). Rogers takes this to indicate that weapons "are useless on the supernatural level, but capable of causing human woe" (242) and reads this as a

further sign of the poet's attitude that the earthly world is doomed to fail. It is interesting to consider these contrasting elements between the two battles as balancing forces for one another, given the poet's equal consideration of these contrastive paradigms. The Christian-Pagan dichotomy represented by these two scenes is an important component to the overall symmetry of the poem because it illustrates the poet's willing and skillful juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory elements. The poet weaves together in his work the strands that he saw working together within the Anglo-Saxon society of his audience.

In his article, "Reconceiving *Beowulf*: Poetry as Social Praxis," John D. Niles notes that oral poems were more than just a performative piece, "they constitute a praxis affecting the way people think and act" (143). Poetry was influential not just for its imaginative and entertainment qualities, but also for expressing ideas, and especially wisdom. According to Niles, a poem, such as *Beowulf*, would not be merely a platform for reiterating time-honored wisdom but would constitute a vehicle whereby old ideas could be challenged and mutable, new ideas could be displayed. "For poetry," Niles writes, "not only gives voice to a given mentality or worldview, but is also a form of play, a mental theater in which issues of worldview are precisely what are at stake" (146). The wisdom expounded in the poem, therefore, is inclusive to the listener's own experiences and challenges, and might thereby provide an opportunity to meld together and reconcile seemingly contradictive viewpoints. Oral poetry, like *Beowulf*, according to Niles's argument is perhaps better viewed as an expounder of change, rather than a static issuer of traditional wisdom.

This idea is important when considering the Christian-Germanic colorings of the poem because, as Niles notes, the Germanic qualities didactically enhanced the Christian elements of the poem and vice versa. For the clerical audience, "[by] telling of Old Germanic heroes and the

acts by which God made known his power in former times, *Beowulf* must have played an educative role in a society where schools were for the ecclesiastical elite" (151). Likewise, for a secular audience, the poem would have "offered lessons in life to an aristocracy whose interests were not always served by education through the church. Some members of the warrior class seem to have felt that training in letters led to loss of manliness" (151). The two elements need not be seen as mutually exclusive and could have existed quite comfortably together in terms of audience reception. Indeed, as Niles asserts, "[if] *Beowulf* did have a place in native educational tradition that was cultivated alongside Latin letters, then the poem is of interest for the evidence it presents of how the two value-systems came to merge" (152). Taking this argument into consideration, it seems appropriate that Christian-colored episode with Grendel and the Germanic-tinged episode with the mother may stand as complementary events that work to create the poem's symmetrical aesthetic in balance.

If Grendel displays Beowulf's might as a Christian warrior and his mother displays Beowulf's might as a Germanic warrior, the dragon presents a special problem. The dragon is certainly more "folk-tale" than Grendel's mother, and though not at all human in appearance, the dragon does embody some of the basest characteristics of mankind. In a society that valued generosity and treasure-giving, the dragon must call to mind the vilest of lords. In this way, the dragon also represents a level of ambiguity between monster and human; the monsters, throughout, are driven by only the most negative of human motives and they act in otherworldly vessels. While Grendel seems to be the perfect reversal for Beowulf, as represented in their battle, Kroll notes that the dragon is perhaps even more closely related to Beowulf than is Grendel. Kroll argues that in *Beowulf*, the poet "transforms the idea of original sin" in the poem by marking that "Cain's destruction of Abel provides the moral pattern that is inherited by every

man and woman in all times and places" (118). A character's virtue, then, is judged by the hero's actions that seek to maintain humanity. As Kroll observes, "The hero has done the best he or any human can do: instead of acting always on his destructive impulses" as seen in Grendel, "he chooses to reverse the sin of Cain, to accept rather than reject his duty as his brothers' keeper" (119). The poet, therefore, seeks to reinforce the dangers of vengeance and encourage tranquility. Beowulf, like Grendel, experiences dark thoughts, but chooses not to exercise them.

With regards to the dragon, the central focus is the treasure. Kroll asserts that the treasure is not simply a means of gaining glory, but rather a type of weapon that the hero can use to battle for brotherhood. Treasure is important because it "can serve to maintain political order" (121). Where the dragon seeks to hoard the gold so that it cannot serve any good towards mankind, Beowulf seeks the gold because it "might have linked men socially and politically within a civilized order" (Kroll 128). In this way, the dragon acts as the spirit of feuding that, although lies dormant, will be awoken with a vengeance. Beowulf is the only man who can battle the dragon, and therefore the only man who, because of his temperance, could battle such a spirit of vengeance. The gold is returned, useless, to the ground after Beowulf dies. As Kroll notes, "the death of the king whose strength alone guarantees his people's civility in the hall makes such gold useless" (128). The fact that Beowulf alone stands between his people and annihilation is evidenced when his thanes abandon him during the fight with the dragon. Wiglaf chastises his companions that Beowulf's—and ultimately their clan's—fall is a result of their cowardice: "Wergendra to lyt / þrong ymbe þeoden, / þa hyne sio þrag becwom" [Too few defenders / thronged around their prince, / when distress itself befell him] (2882-2883). The dragon is defeated only with the help of Wiglaf's attack. Wiglaf's rebuke to his fellow warriors suggests that the outcome may have been different for everyone if the retinue had not abandoned

their lord. The dragon would have still been defeated, but Beowulf, and ultimately his people, would have been spared. The fact that the gold is returned useless further foreshadows the destruction of Beowulf's people, indicating that, with the arrival of the Swedes, there will be none of Beowulf's thanes left to enjoy it.

Calder notes that the dragon serves as a counterpoint for Grendel. By looking at their associative landscapes, Calder argues, it is clear that Grendel and the "evil of the Grendel tribe is that of the physical world of knowable reality"(28). Grendel's fen is in measurable proximity to Heorot and, as Calder points out, Grendel and his mother have inhabited the mere for a knowable amount of time (fifty years). Judging from the setting, Grendel is a monster of measureable characteristics. By contrast, the dragon is limitless and works outside of mortal time, thereby providing a balanced duality to Grendel. As Calder notes, the dragon has guarded his hoard for three-hundred years (beyond a lifetime) and, once awakened, is associated with unenclosed spaces and open sky. Calder observes that "the environment of the dragon, the battlefield on which Beowulf meets his final enemy, has none of the concrete settings in Part I" (29). As a result, the dragon seems to exist beyond mortal time and space. Additionally, whereas Grendel seemed to represent the evil present in humankind, the dragon, in its immensity, represents the universality of evil. As Calder asserts, the dragon "is an elemental force for evil unleashed in the universe, totally beyond and separate from the merely petty evils of aggression and revenge symbolized in the Grendel tribe" (35). Whereas Grendel encapsulates this spirit of evil necessary for feuding and hostility, the dragon *is* that spirit loose in the universe. The dragon, therefore, offers another moment of symmetry both as an opposition to the nature of evil manifested in Grendel and as the nature of Beowulf's final foe. Beowulf successfully defeated Grendel in youth, but will fall to the dragon in age. The evil incarnate in the dragon, Calder

argues, speaks to "a human world that is constantly on the brink of destroying itself and forever facing the forces of universal negation" (37). Beowulf alone was able to battle such a vast monster because he possessed the strength of character to combat such a level of evil and not fall prey to the sentiments that breed hostility. However, the evilness perpetuates in the spirit of the feuds that wait on the shores following Beowulf's death.

It is Beowulf's internal balance, then, that is his most important aspect as a hero, and it is this trait which fundamentally represents the balance that the poet created aesthetically. Kaske argues that the poet made a great effort to portray Beowulf's internal balance of character between wisdom and strength throughout the poem. "While it is perhaps no great novelty in the literature of any age or race to find an epic hero wise and brave," Kaske writes, "the formulary use of the *sapientia et fortitudo* ideal in *Beowulf* [seems to] speak for a higher degree of consciousness in its employment" (269). What is unique about Beowulf's particular qualities regarding the character of his heroic persona is the degree to which they proportionally blend Christian and Germanic ideals. The poet "draws on both traditions primarily as they related to *sapientia* and *fortitudo*" creating an equal balance between the two ideals and then "seems to emphasize those aspects of each tradition that can be made reasonably compatible within the viewpoint of the other" (Kaske 273). The result is an internal balance of character that speaks to and works within the greater framework of balance and symmetry in the overall aesthetic of the poem.

The poet uses this balanced personality as a device and it is peculiar to the hero, in the same way that the poet used eerie landscapes as a way to illustrate the unsettled quality of the monsters' personas and motives. Beowulf alone stands as the perfect reversal to the monsters of the story, and it is made further clear why Beowulf alone possesses amphibious and otherworldly

characteristics. His superhuman features stand above even his heroic stature—he also possesses a blend of personality traits of which an ordinary man would not be capable. As Kaske notes, Hrothgar's wisdom in the poem may be distinguished as Christian and Wiglaf, Germanic (273). "In Beowulf himself, however, the equivocation seems [. . .] to be generally maintained" (Kaske 274). Beowulf acts as a device for the poet to navigate two competing, or at least co-existing ideals. Recalling Niles's argument that oral poetry was a way of acting out social imperatives that the audience might put into practice, it seems reasonable to assert that Beowulf may have provided a model for a resolved compromise for Christian and Germanic paradigms. At the very least, the combination of these ideals within the hero is a reflection of these two contrapuntal worldviews within the receiving audience.

Regarding the monsters, Kaske notes that the evil-doers of the poem are as unbalanced as Beowulf is settled. Beowulf maintains equilibrium between temperament and strength, where the monsters represent grotesque imbalances of these ideals. Grendel, Kaske notes, is "a perversion of *fortitudo*, completely freed from the restraints of *sapientia* and directed instead by *malitia*" (287). In this sense, Beowulf's fight with Grendel may be seen as an outward representation of a hero's struggle to maintain the ideal balance between brains and brawn. The device, then, works both on the larger structure of the poem and on the inner balances as well, completing the overall aesthetic of the poem.

Another foil in this regard is Hrothgar, who, as Kaske observes, stands as the complete opposite of Grendel: "Grendel [. . .] is all action and no reflection, and Hroðgar and his Danes, who reflect a good deal more than they act" (289). In fact, it is Hrothgar's propensity for inaction that seems to invite the rash attacks of Grendel. To rid the menace of Heorot requires a great deed, which Hrothgar is incapable of enacting because of his over-reflection (Kaske 289).

The battle serves as a warning for the dangers of too much thought and no reaction. Paradoxically, the battle between Grendel and Beowulf is set up as a test for Beowulf's ability to not be swayed too far to either side of *sapienta* or *fortitudo*. His physical strife is as much a test of his battle worthiness as it is his ability to remain even-tempered in the face of adversity.

The poet uses Beowulf's kingship as a medium for which to represent his balance of temperament and sets his rule between Hrothgar and Hygelac. Hrothgar was noted as a wise king and, aside from the attacks by Grendel, departs his kingdom an old man—a sign of relative peace. Hygelac, by contrast, is a caricature of excessive *fortitudo*. His reign is marked by feuds and he is killed during a battle. As Kaske notes, "Hygelac himself is presented as a king of unblemished *fortitudo*, but lacking in the developed *sapientia* of an ideal hero-king" (290). Between these two kings stands Beowulf, who Kaske asserts is a rare and ideal balance between two extremes. Bearing this singularity in mind, the ending of the poem takes on that much deeper a tragic tone.

Beowulf's fight with the dragon represents a battle with the most vicious of human vices—malice. As Kaske argues, Grendel was "an embodiment of external evil, or violence" but the dragon "represents the greatest of internal evils, the perversion of the mind and will, *malitia*" (302-3). The dragon, as has already been discussed, carries several human characteristics, all significant as traits a good lord should avoid. The dragon is greedy and vengeful, and once its wrath has been unleashed, there is no manner of recompense that will satisfy it. It seeks out and takes over ready-made barrows and hoards treasure for which it has no use. The particular treasure in *Beowulf* already seems to be cursed, and so the dragon's association with it makes both elements seem that much viler. However, just as Beowulf defeats Grendel with a wisdom and moderation of *fortitudo*, so the dragon is defeated by a strong sense of *sapientia*. Beowulf

has no choice but to kill the dragon, since, as Hume notes, "a dragon unchecked in its ravages would invite invasion as readily as news of [Beowulf's] death" (17). Additionally, as has already been noted, Beowulf alone possess the inner balance to take on such an intense force of evil. Kaske sees *malitia* as a "perversion or abandonment of *sapientia* and is combatted by it" (303). Whereas Grendel represented extreme *fortitudo*, the dragon's quantity of this unchecked power is so grotesque that it is pure malice. When Beowulf finally slays the dragon, albeit with Wiglaf's help, it completes the test of his inner balance and provides another moment of symmetry for the poem. The fact that Beowulf required assistance from Wiglaf speaks tragically to his pending doom. Wiglaf seems to possess a spirit similar to Beowulf's and could potentially be a future heroic figure, but the point falls moot with the unfortunate end Beowulf's entire clan certainly meets.

Brodeur also notes an intentionality in Beowulf's balanced persona and sees Beowulf's character as the central cohesion of the poem. Illustrated by his relationship throughout the poem with Hygelac, Beowulf demonstrates a consistency of temperament that allows him to avoid feuds and provide a balancing point for the poem. According to Brodeur, "[through] all that has changed, the heart of Beowulf has not changed; and this constitutes the binding unity of the poem" (1188). Brodeur notes that Beowulf's fondness for his lord and uncle is apparent in the speeches he makes to Hrothgar before he fights both Grendel and his mother. He makes a point of insisting that, if he should be killed in battle, all the treasure that Hrothgar promised in reward, should go to Hygelac. Furthermore, even after Hygelac is killed, "the recollection of Hygelac remains, a living, moving force, in [Beowulf's] heart" (1192). As Brodeur notes, from the first part to the second part of the poem, only Beowulf survives—Hrothgar and Heardred are not mentioned further. Even after Hygelac's death, the poet provides several accounts of the

king's fall. This serves to keep Hygelac in memory and highlights the steadfastness of Beowulf's sentiment towards him. Beowulf, in order to protect his followers, acts upon the hostilities that Hygelac's actions incite, but Beowulf does not display the mentality of unchecked emotional uproar required for vengeful feuding; he maintains a balance of wisdom and strength. As Brodeur points out, "Hygelac's death was the primary cause of the decline of the Geats; and [. . .] Hygelac's overthrow of Ongentheow furnished the motive, as Beowulf's end afforded the eagerly awaited opportunity, for the [Swedes] to fall upon and crush the Geats" (1194). Hygelac set up the necessary elements for feuding, but these elements could not be set into motion until after Beowulf dies. The contrast highlights Beowulf's quality of temperament and internal balance, which also served to fortify the balance and symmetry the poet sought to create throughout the poem.

Regarding the poet's use of landscape, it seems significant that, upon his death, Beowulf's remains are placed in a barrow, which, like that dragon's lair, is near the coast. While significant differences exist—Beowulf's barrow is constructed, the dragon's was found; the dragon lives in the barrow hoarding its treasure, Beowulf's barrow is a final resting place—it is interesting to note that both barrows ultimately stored treasure that is of no use to mankind any longer. In fact, the poet makes a special note of this: "forleton eorla gestreon eorðan healdan, / gold on greote, þær hit nu gen lifað / eldum swa unnyt, swa hi(t æro)r wæs" [the warriors let the ground hold the wealth, / gold in the earth, where it now yet lies / as useless to men as it ever was] (3166-3168). The fact that Beowulf is buried with the treasure in a barrow comparable to the dragon's is a clear symbol of the dragon's malice having been exorcised. The treasure will not serve Beowulf's people, who seem to bear the brunt of the curse, but now that Beowulf, and not the dragon, is the keeper of this treasure, the curse is apparently lifted.

The poet's use of the supernatural is an integral part of the aesthetic of the poem. Not only does the supernatural serve to highlight the maliciousness and evil of the villains, separating them from their mortal, human adversaries, it also serves to illustrate for the audience the internal aspects of a culture whose worldview was dominated by a persistent anticipation of the next outbreak of hostility. Just as the carefully balanced symmetry of the battles and hero/nemesis conflicts express the Anglo-Saxons' preoccupation with feuding and ideals of reciprocity, so the representation of the internal feeds this system of balance and symmetry by expressing the psychological consequences of these realities. The pervading sense of doom illustrated by these representations can only be expected of a society that, even without the monsters, anticipated the reality of violent death on a daily basis.

The poet's use of landscape provides an important structural element of the overall symmetry of the poem. The eeriness the poet is able to exact through his use of landscape portrays the internal struggles of the characters as representative of individuals within the poet's society. Aside from their very virtue of being monsters, the villains in *Beowulf* are defined by both their nefarious acts and the landscapes from which they emerge. By associating the monsters with strange landscapes, the poet was able to instill a sense of horror in addition to the monsters' power as battle adversaries. In this way, the emotional response to the villains acts as another balancing point in the overall structure of the poem. Not only is the poem balanced in terms of external battles, it is also hinged precisely upon the reactions and emotional response to those battles. The battles then serve to both highlight the social acts of vengeance which the poet's audience was experiencing, as well as mark the emotional response to that social construction.

CONCLUSION

The *Beowulf* poet's representation of the internal is undeniably grim. It sprouts images of monsters and wickedness in reflection of a society for which doom seemed to be lurking in the horizons of tomorrow. The poet makes several references to the nearness of death. Before he sets forth for mere, Beowulf tells Hrothgar not to grieve for it is better that one avenge his friend than to mourn extensively, and that "Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan / worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote / domes ær deaþe; þæt bið drihtguman / unlifgendum æfter selest" [Each of us shall wait our end / of this world's life; let he who might acquire / glory before death; / that is the best for warriors after death] (1386-1389). Implied in this statement is the finality of a pagan death. The proximity of death in *Beowulf* is quite acute, thus driving home the point that systems of justice based upon revenge are ultimately and inescapably destructive.

As reflected in the structure and symmetry of the poem, the *Beowulf* poet was responding to, or at least reflecting, balance and reciprocity as integral elements of Anglo-Saxon society. This reciprocity extended more power to the individual, in that a lord must work for his thanes' loyalty as much as they must work for his generosity, but it also demanded retribution for hostilities, which could lead to feud. Reciprocity acted as both a deterrent to violence because of this threat of retribution, but also a self-perpetuating pathway to violence in its demand for reward in the form of gold and treasure. In *Beowulf,* these elements materialize by means of the accounts of actual feuds within the poem and through the battles with the monsters, which work to symbolize the results of a society dealing with feuding conflict.

The portrayal of feuds (i.e., feuds between nations) is not exclusive to fantastical feuds between Beowulf and the monsters. Rather, the poet also tells of numerous feuds between clans, and both types of battle work to reinforce the other. While the mortal feuds represent external

conflicts and realities, the poet uses the monsters to portray the internal forces responsible for perpetuating vengeance, that is, unchecked emotional reactions and irresponsibly violent responses. Again, the poet maintains the working structure of symmetry throughout the poem. The poet uses the aesthetic of balance and symmetry both as a means of representing the mentality that insisted upon feuding but also as a reflection of a society that so valued balance and symmetry that it was manifest in myriad aspects of the culture from art to social conventions.

Above all else, *Beowulf* is a snapshot of a society caught in flux of conflicting, or at least contrasting elements. The poet skillfully weaves these elements together to produce a texture that illustrates the synthesis and viability of just such juxtaposition. The most obvious example of this is the elements of paganism juxtaposed next to Christian elements. This use of contrasts does not represent a hodge-podge of conflicting ideas, but rather a careful and realistic representation of a society working within two contrary values and worldviews. Likewise, the poem's attitude toward feuding mirrors a society in which feuds acted as both legal cement and corrosive. Feuds operated on a complex system of rules and operated to prevent social decay into anarchy, but the framework was flawed and once a feud began, it was difficult for the violence to finally find an endpoint. The poet views this system from a Christian perspective and seeks to show the inherent flaw of this devastating pagan force that even the hero Beowulf cannot end.

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