

"The Tracks of the Vanquished Monster":
Grotesque Images in Medieval Cathedral Sculpture, Beowulf,
and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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From the word "cathedral" arise images which are holy and sacred: awe-inspiring stained glass depictions of Biblical scenes, breathtakingly high vaulted ceilings, and serene alabaster sculptures of the Virgin Mary. However, a great many medieval cathedrals offer quite different images. Portrayals of monsters, fantastic creatures, distorted humans, mermaids, overt sexual scenes, and many others are common. Such images have no apparent relation to Christianity, and yet they appear consistently in churches, supposedly sanctuaries of holiness. Several possible reasons for the appearance of such images in medieval cathedrals have been suggested, but supporting conjectures about the motives of medieval sculptors is difficult. Because some of the images in the cathedrals are also present in some of the literature of the period, such as Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, they seem to have been firmly grounded in medieval culture. Close examination of the common motifs present in the medieval cathedrals of the British Isles, Beowulf, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight suggests that all of these works share strong pagan roots.

"Grotesque" art, according to Webster's New World Dictionary, is "characterized by distortions or striking incongruities in appearance, shape, manner, etc.; fantastic; bizarre" (617). The word "grotesque" originates from the Italian word for cave (grotta) in reference to the style of ancient paintings discovered on the walls of Italian caves (Kayser 19). Wolfgang Kayser calls the world of

the grotesque "a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid" (21). Another definition which simplifies determining whether an object is grotesque defines it as an object "representing something abnormal or normally impossible such as a Centaur" (Sheridan 9). Obviously, the world of the grotesque is not the ordinary world of humans, but neither is it a heavenly hereafter. The distorted, disproportionate qualities of such art conflicts decidedly with common conceptions of religious art as symmetrical and perfect.

Some images which are common in grotesque art include giants, biting creatures, severed heads, fantastic creatures, foliate heads, the Green Man, and erotic sculptures of women. Interestingly, these motifs and several others recur consistently throughout European cathedrals. In various geographic areas, some of the figures differ in frequency. For the sake of convenience and of relevance to the Anglo-Saxon works of Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the sculptures and motifs discussed will be limited to those found in the British Isles which date from approximately 500 A.D. to 1450 A.D. Limiting the discussion in this way will preserve the integrity of the comparison and ensure relevance between the sculptures and the literature.

At Cerne Abbas church in Dorset, several figures of

giants are sculpted onto the facade (Sheridan 27). Most of them are open-mouthed, and some are in the process of devouring other creatures (Sheridan 28). Most of the giants are also accompanied by smaller creatures, emphasizing the larger sizes of the giants. Although not a cathedral sculpture, the Cerne Giant, located near the Cerne Abbas church, continues the giant motif (Fig. 1). The Cerne Giant is a two-hundred-foot long male figure carved into a chalk hillside, resulting in a green giant outlined in white. He carries a club and is ithyphallic, apparently a fertility symbol. The giants of the church are said to be depictions of the Cerne Giant (Sheridan 27).

Another set of figures, creatures which bite or devour, is common in spite of its apparent strangeness (Sheridan 50). In most cases, the creatures bite inanimate objects, often columns or other parts of the church itself (Sheridan 62). For instance, a roof boss in the cloisters at Canterbury Cathedral is composed of a head with human-like teeth which are locked firmly onto a column (Fig. 2). When the beasts do eat other creatures, they usually devour the heads first, resulting in a sculpture of a creature with legs protruding from its mouth, as in a carved beam end at Amesbury in Wiltshire (Fig. 3). Often, the devouring creature uses its hands or paws to stuff its victim into its mouth. Other biting creatures include open-mouthed beasts who sit next to their victims as

Figure 1. The Cerne Giant. Dorset, England.

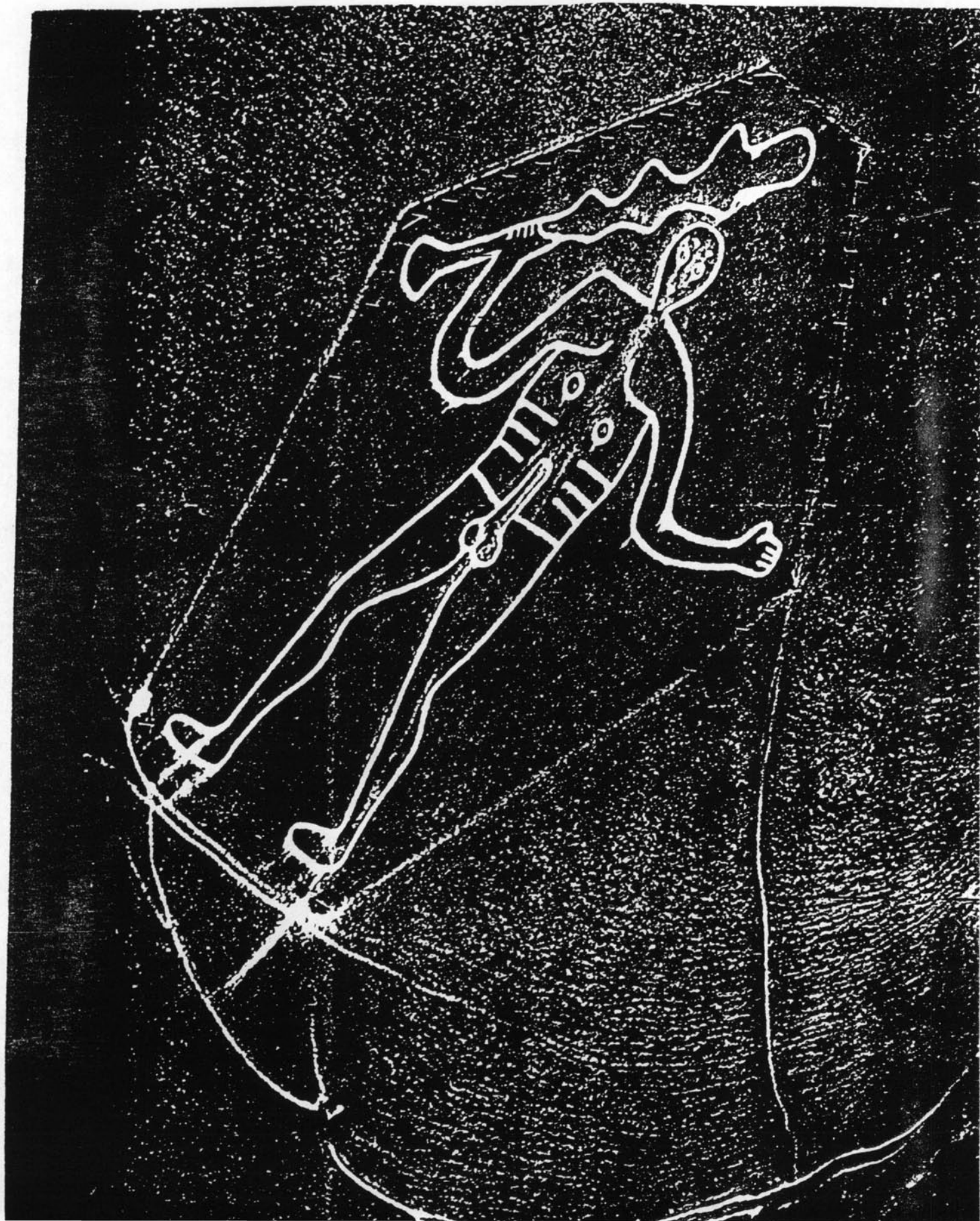


Figure 2, left. Biting
creature. Canterbury.



Figure 3, right. Giant
devouring creature.
Amesbury, Wiltshire.



though about to bite them.

A crucial motif is that of the severed head. Ronald Sheridan and Anne Ross note, "Hundreds of extremely interesting examples of the severed head motif are to be seen in churches and cathedrals all over Europe" (52). The heads are human, perhaps continuations of the human head motif which pervades ancient Celtic art. In several cases, the sculptures consist of three severed heads which blend together. At one time, this triple image was used in Christian iconography to symbolize the Trinity, but was later banned from this usage (Sheridan 52). An example of this triple head figure exists in Selby Abbey as a roof boss (Fig. 4). The faces are human and expressionless, and the two outer faces are turned slightly away from the middle face in order to achieve a three-dimensional effect. Each of the outer faces shares one eye and part of a cheek with the central face.

The category of motifs termed "fantastic creatures" includes creatures such as dragons and sea monsters, creatures which have been treated as real, existing beings by popular literature and culture, but which are in fact the objects of fantasy. These creatures have traditionally been man's opponents in literature, and the abundance of fantastic reptilian creatures suggests a connection between these images and both the Saint George and the dragon legend (Sheridan 90) and the serpent's temptation of Eve in Genesis. Some of the depictions involve fantastic



Figure 4, left. Triple
severed head. Selby Abbey.

Figure 5, bottom.
Fantastic dragon. Kilpeck,
Herefordshire.



biting creatures, commonly including dragons biting their own tails (Sheridan 35). Such a creature graces the west archway at Kilpeck in Herefordshire (Fig. 5). The dragon is curved backwards and grasps its tail in its mouth.

Another very common figure is the foliate head. Such sculptures consist of heads covered with leaves, stems, and/or vines, or heads which have some type of foliage emerging from their mouths, ears, nostrils, or eyes. The heads are sometimes human, sometimes animal, and sometimes of indefinite species or fantastic. In many cases, the foliage seems to grow from the head, while in others the face seems to emerge from a tree trunk or from among a cluster of leaves and vines. Two good examples of foliate heads include one on a roof boss in the cloisters at Norwich Cathedral and one at Winchester on a roof boss in the nave aisle. The Norwich specimen consists of a face barely emerging from behind leaves which sprout from its cheeks and forehead (Fig. 6). The example from Winchester is a more visible face which has large bunches of leaves growing from its mouth and the bridge of its nose (Fig. 7).

A similar motif is the "Green Man" (Sheridan 31). The Green Man is always manlike, and usually has foliage growing from his head. Like the foliate heads, the Green Man may have foliage sprouting from his mouth and/or nostrils, and his face may blend with the plant life. Often, the Green Man carries a gardening tool or a branch.



Figure 6, above
left. Foliate
head. Norwich.

Figure 7, above
right. Foliate
head. Winchester

Figure 8, right.
Foliate heads.
Canterbury, Kent.



In Canterbury Cathedral, the roof bosses in the cloisters contain several examples of the Green Man, grinning faces with foliate hair (Fig. 8). At Dorchester in Oxfordshire, a Green Man overlooks the altar (Fig. 9). This example seems to wink, and a vine runs through his mouth, which resembles an infinity symbol.

The grotesque sculptures of women are invariably sexual. These types of sculptures include the Sheelagh-na-Gig figure, an image found chiefly in Irish art, but also present in Britain (Sheridan 64). The Sheelagh-na-Gig is "haglike and coarse, and indicates her genitals with her hands" (Sheridan 64). A good example of this figure can be found at Kilpeck Cathedral in Herefordshire. The woman is crude and simple, with the focus of the sculpture being her large round eyes and enlarged genitalia (Fig. 10). Some other grotesque sculptures of women involve women involved in sexual intercourse, women as allegories of Lust, and women enveloping entire bodies of men in their vaginas. One explanation for sculptures such as these might be their power to warn people away from sexual promiscuity, but, like the grotesque in general, the figures are often too eye-catching and interesting to merit this explanation. Perhaps instead the women are crude continuations of the Sheebagh-na-Gig fertility figure. In some cases, such as depictions of Adam and Eve, female figures obviously act in didactic roles. However, in the more simple and blatant portrayals, pure sexuality and, in connection, fertility, seems to be the point.





Figure 10. Female fertility figure. Kilpeck,
Herefordshire.

Clearly, the presence of such grotesque motifs in cathedrals is startling, and suggested explanations abound. One idea, proposed by Geoffrey Harpham, is that the grotesques disturb aesthetic sensibilities so that the viewer turns to "images that are more ennobling" (37). Although this purpose would appear to be a valid motive of the Church, it is an invalid explanation because the grotesques, far from repulsing the eye, call upon it to linger. Harpham also suggests that gargoyles and other grotesques "represent the human element" (37), thus reminding people that cathedrals, however magnificent, were built by mortals (37). This proposal also falls short. Although many of the grotesques involve humans, these humans are always distorted or combined with nonhuman elements, for the grotesque is inherently nonhuman and otherworldly. Especially when contrasted with the holiest of Christian art, the grotesques do not seem to suggest the ordinary world. Another speculation is that the grotesques on the exterior of cathedrals emphasize the contrast between the secular, evil outside of the church and the safe, holy inside (Sheridan 12). As Ronald Sheridan and Anne Ross point out, however, this theory is weakened by the large number of grotesques which occur inside the cathedrals (12). The most often proposed explanation is that the figures represent evil beings such as Satan (Sheridan 7). Most of the figures, however, do not resemble any usual portrayal of Satan or demons, and they generally are not presented in an allegorical or didactic fashion.

Certainly, allegorical scenes do appear, but such scenes are usually depictions of biblical stories or traditional Satanic figures, not the grotesque motifs mentioned here.

A better explanation suggests that the grotesques are remnants of the ancient pagan religions and traditions which long preceded Christianity in Europe. Most grotesque images can be traced to pagan origins; the severed head, for instance, was a common image in Celtic art and mythology. Such continuations of pagan imagery seem to have been deliberate, according to M.F. Hearn, who points out, "the more distinct the identity of the motif and the clearer its form, the more nearly it resembles images that existed earlier in other media. . . .the more impressive ones were probably adapted from preexisting images" (53). So the clarity of the images and the striking similarities of motifs, even over wide geographic areas, suggests that the images were well-ingrained in medieval thought.

The evidence of medieval contemporary opinion of the grotesques is revealing. Around 1125, St. Bernard of Clairveux commented on the grotesque sculptures:

But in the cloister, under the eyes of the brethren who read there, what profit is there in these ridiculous monsters, in that beautiful deformity? To what purpose are those unclean apes, those fierce lions, those monstrous centaurs, those half-men, those striped tigers, those fighting knights, those hunters winding their horns? Many bodies are seen there under one head, or again, many heads to a single body. Here is a four-footed beast with a serpent's tail; there, a fish with a beast's head. Here again the forepart of a horse trails half a goat behind it, or a horned beast bears the hind-quarters of a horse. In short, so many and so marvellous are the varieties of shapes on every hand, that we are more tempted to

read in the marble than in our books, and to spend the whole day wondering at these things than in meditating the law of God. For God's sake, if men are not ashamed of these follies, why at least do they not shrink from the expense? (Hearn 54).

St. Bernard found such pleasure in the "beautiful deformity" (Hearn 54) of the grotesque sculptures that he was distracted from his religious meditations. His list of grotesque creatures, while not an exhaustive account of grotesque motifs, is probably a very thorough account of a certain cathedral; from his familiarity with the images, St. Bernard would appear to have spent many days "wondering at these things:" (Hearn 54). In his final comment, he reveals that his fascination is not unique, for not only are men "not ashamed of these follies" (Hearn 54), but they also do not "shrink from the expense" (Hearn 54). Apparently, the grotesques were quite popular in St. Bernard's time, even with saints.

Art is a reflection of its age, and grotesque art is no exception. Religion held primary importance during the medieval period; the Church was involved in education, architecture, art (Trapp 5), and many other aspects of medieval life. As art reflects a culture, so does literature, so it is not surprising to find that some of the same grotesque motifs which appear in sculpture also appear in medieval literature. Two excellent examples of this occurrence are Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Beowulf is an epic poem which was written down in Old English around the eighth century. The work itself,

part of the old Anglo-Saxon literary tradition, is probably much older in oral form. Beowulf is generally considered to be a Christian poem because most scholars agree that it was created by a Christian for a Christian audience, as cathedrals are.

Also resembling cathedrals, this Christian work contains several grotesque images. Grendel and his mother are both giants and biting or devouring creatures. The dragon can be defined as a fantastic creature, as can the necors, or sea monsters. In addition, two heads are severed in the poem: Grendel's and Aeshere's. In the same sense that the cathedrals share common motifs in their sculptures, the grotesque images in Beowulf are common in the cathedrals, further supporting the idea of common roots of the figures.

Grendel and his mother are repeatedly called monsters, demons, and other such names, but are never fully described. Grendel is a giant, "huger far than a human form" (Beowulf l. 1239), and has a "baleful glare" (Beowulf l. 688), but the two are described primarily through their movements. Grendel "steal[s]" (Beowulf l. 667) and "creep[s]" (Beowulf l. 675) toward the mead hall like a devious, guilt-ridden creature, and the description of his eating his last thane is gruesome; the "demon" (Beowulf l. 699)

Tore him in pieces, bit through the bones,
Gulped the blood, and gobbled the flesh,
Greedily gorged on the lifeless corpse,
The hands and the feet (Beowulf l. 701-704).

Although no explicit physical description of Grendel and

his mother is included in Beowulf, such descriptions of action are evidence that the two are unnatural and grotesque.

Because Grendel and his mother eat humans, they can also be categorized as biting or devouring creatures in addition to being giants. Unlike the biting creatures in cathedral sculptures, however, Grendel and his mother seem to eat only living creatures, and, as far as the poem reveals, only humans. Their size and monstrous appearances are frightening, but this thirst for human blood and flesh is their main frightening quality. More than any other characteristic, this cannibalism emphasizes their "otherness" and makes them horrible, for they violate humanity when they "Gulped the blood, and gobbled the flesh" (Beowulf l. 702).

The fantastic creatures also lack thorough physical description. The dragon is called by such names as "waster of peoples" (Beowulf l. 2144) "worm" (Beowulf l. 2153), "fire-drake" (Beowulf l. 2160), "hostile flier" (Beowulf l. 2130), and "monstrous warden" (Beowulf l. 2277), but the description of its appearance is limited to such vague adjectives as "hideous-hued" (Beowulf l. 2840) and the descriptions of its actions consist mostly of its breathing fire, as when the creature "belched fire and flame" (Beowulf l. 2173). No sea monsters play a substantial role in the plot of the poem, but they are mentioned several times. When Beowulf speaks to Hrothgar for the first time, he describes his journey and says that he

slew the nicors that swam the sea
 Avenged the woe they had caused the Weders,
 And ended their evil (Beowulf l. 407-409).

Later, when Unferth tries to belittle Beowulf's swimming match against Breca, Beowulf cites the "grisly sea beasts" (Beowulf l. 536) as the cause for his loss. When Beowulf and his companions look at the water where Grendel's mother lives, they see "The swimming forms of strange sea-dragons" (Beowulf l. 1311)

Dim serpent shapes in the watery depths,
 Sea beasts sunning on headland slopes;
 Snakelike monsters that oft at sunrise
 On evil errands scour the sea (Beowulf l. 1312-15).

One of the "Enraged and savage" (Beowulf l. 1317) sea monsters is "despoiled of life" (Beowulf l. 1319) by Beowulf. Neither the dragon nor the sea monsters appear to be unusual or unique, for there are several sea monsters in the text, and Beowulf speaks of a pouch Grendel carries which is made from the "skin of dragon" (Beowulf l. 1960), indicating that the dragon which dies in Beowulf is not the only one known to the characters in the work.

The Beowulf poet does not describe Grendel, Grendel's mother, the sea monsters, or the dragon in explicit physical terms. However, through descriptions of their movements, the poet does convey some characteristics of the creatures which can be translated through imagination into visual images. The severed heads, however, are treated differently. Grendel's head is described much more fully than Aeschere's: it is so heavy that "Four of the stoutest, with all their strength/Could hardly carry [it] on swinging spear (Beowulf

1. 1523-24). "Grendel's head by the hair was carried" (Beowulf l. 1532) and is called a "terrible sight" (Beowulf l. 1534) and a "gruesome vision" (Beowulf l. 1535). When Beowulf and his companions go to kill Grendel's mother, they see that she has left Aeschere's severed head perched high on a cliff, but the head is not described at all. However, the effect of seeing the head of a familiar companion detached and lifeless is universally horrible and needs no description, unlike the other grotesque elements of the work.

As mentioned earlier, Beowulf has been called Christian because of the assumption that the poet and audience were Christians. However, as William Whallon writes, "the epic knows little of Christianity besides two stories from the first nine chapters of Genesis" (31). There are several possible Christian allusions, such as the fact that the person who steals from the dragon's den is, like Judas, the thirteenth member of the band (Whallon 34). However, this evidence is insufficient because the number thirteen is designated as unlucky in dictionaries of many languages and by many peoples, not only Christians (Whallon 34). Other possible allusions involve as little evidence, so that Beowulf, while considered a Christian poem, is somewhat lacking in Christian elements. Nowhere is there a reference to "Christ, to the cross, to the virgin or the saints, to any doctrine of the church in regard to the trinity, the atonement, etc., or to the scriptures, to

prophecy, or to the miracles: (Blackburn 12). The Christianity that does exist in Beowulf is superficial and peripheral, not central to the story or to the theme.

The pagan elements of the work are much more distinct. Even the "point of view. . . language and diction, and. . . tone" (Moorman 4) are not Christian as some of the other poems of the time period are, but fit more closely with the Germanic/pagan literary tradition. The poem is in Old English, a language "associated with worldly matters" (Malone 138) in medieval times; Latin was "the tongue of God" (Malone 138). The poem's action occurs in ancient Germania, not Christianized England (Moorman 139). Much of the subject matter is also pagan; the Danes pray in "heathen temples" (Beowulf l. 174), the concept of wyrd is used to explain events, the Geats burn Beowulf's corpse on a funeral pyre rather than interring him in a Christian burial, and they also urge Beowulf to seek Hrothgar after they "viewed the omens" (Beowulf l. 203). The plot is non-Christian in that it ends pessimistically without hope or a mention of an afterlife for the hero (Moorman 5). Beowulf seems to be a Christian "except when Christianity and the warrior code conflict. Then Christianity comes off a poor second. . ." (Ogilvy 33), perhaps because Christianity was not yet as deeply ingrained as the warrior code at the time of Beowulf's composition.

Several scholars argue that the poet and audience themselves were pagan, at least to some extent. William

Whallon writes:

The poet of Beowulf. . .regarded the Danes, the Swedes, and the Geats of his epic as closely related to him in culture. . . .he thought the action past rather than present, but not in the long ago so much as in a time of uncertain remove. The age in which the men of the epic lived was to the poet neither censurable nor hopeless, nor even heathen; it was his own age, and Beowulf and Hrothgar were to him Christians of his own kind (86).

Charles Moorman agrees that "the audience of Beowulf must have been very close indeed to its pagan heritage and could still understand and appreciate in its own terms a pagan tale, even though that tale might be shaped and rendered respectable with an eye cocked toward the local clergy" (3).

So Beowulf contains elements of both Christianity and paganism, and seems to be a poem of transition, a work of paganism overlaid with a coating of Christianity. Although it is often tempting to imagine Anglo-Saxons converting to Christianity overnight, the process was actually gradual, and Beowulf reflects the slow change (Ogilvy 27). Whallon says that Grendel and his mother strongly resemble Germanic creatures of legend and would have been familiar to the Beowulf poet's audience (Whallon 91). Because the Anglo-Saxons actually believed in these creatures and in dragons, missionaries may have given such beings "a biblical basis, such as the fusion of the stories about Cain [where Grendel is said to be descended from Cain], the giants, and the Flood" (Whallon 92). The actual Christian elements which do appear in Beowulf are not central to the theme, which leads F.A. Blackburn to suggest that the story of Beowulf

was once a wholly pagan tale, and the Christian elements were added later (21).

As well as being glossed with Christian heritages, the grotesque creatures in the poem are also interpreted from a Christian standpoint. For instance, Grendel is called "a fiend from hell" (Beowulf l. 97), "demon" (Beowulf l. 699), and "shepherd of sins" (Beowulf l. 703). He is also compared with a "death-shadow" (Beowulf l. 153), an epithet which also refers to Satan. In spite of these associations of Grendel with evil, he does possess a quality which a Germanic audience would have considered positive: Grendel is a warrior. The poem mentions his "war-might" (Beowulf l. 24) and his "heart firm-fixed in the hateful war" (Beowulf 155). A Germanic warrior would have admired such qualities. Moreover, Grendel is comparable to the Danes, whose "heathen hearts. . .looked to hell" (Beowulf l. 179) for help in their crisis. Although the Danes are hoping for Satan's help, they are not condemned as evil, but only heathen. By reversal, since Grendel is repeatedly called evil and related to hell, perhaps he is more representative of paganism than of evil and suffers condemnation more because he opposes the central character than because he is descended from Cain. In less literal terms, maybe he is portrayed as evil in order to dispel any attractive qualities he might have had for people immersed in the Germanic pagan tradition. Another possible example of a Christian interpretation of grotesques concerns the

treatment of Aeschere's severed head. The head is presented in negative terms, as an object of horror and motivation for revenge against Grendel's mother. Perhaps this presentation is an attempt to break the positive fertility associations of severed heads which existed in Celtic paganism and which are represented by the severed head and foliate head motifs in medieval sculpture. The Christianized interpretations of grotesques in Beowulf as devils, demons, or other negative figures seem to parallel the interpretation of grotesque sculptures as allegorical symbols; both of these interpretations find evil where it may not have originally occurred.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a much different type of poem. Composed sometime in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, this work is much more obviously Christian than Beowulf and is not usually considered a pagan work. However, among the references to Mary and Mass, pagan elements still exist in Sir Gawain in the form of the giant, the Green Man, the foliate head, severed heads, and grotesque women.

Carefully described, the Green Man, who is, of course, the Green Knight, presents quite a striking image. He is

an awesome fellow

Who in height outstripped all earthly men.
 From throat to thigh he was so thickset and square,
 His loins and limbs were so long and so great,
 That he was half a giant on earth, I believe (Sir
Gawain l. 136-40).

This description so resembles the giant motif that it is reminiscent of the Cerne Giant. Both the Green Knight and the Cerne Giant are green and huge, and the comment that "mainly and most of all a man he seemed" (Sir Gawain l. 141) suggests a connection between the Green Knight's virility and the ithyphallic fertility of the Cerne Giant. The "glittering green" (Sir Gawain l. 150) of the Green Knight emphasizes his role as a fertility image, and his green hair and beard suggest the foliate head motif in cathedral sculpture.

The severed head motif is also prominent in Sir Gawain. When Gawain strikes the Green Knight with the axe,

The fair head fell from the neck, struck the floor,
And people spurned it as it rolled around (Sir Gawain
427-28).

If the Green Knight's severed head is the fertility symbol which it appears to be, the fact that the knights of King Arthur's court kick it about suggests the same lack of virtue and understanding which prevents them early in the poem from volunteering to accept the Green Knight's challenge. The Green Knight's ability to live without his head and the rejoining of his head and body emphasize both his role as a fertility image and his identity as a supernatural being. The Green Knight's head, however, is not the only severed head in the poem. When Bertilak/ the Green Knight goes hunting and kills the hart and the boar, he severs their heads from their bodies. Although

this practice may not be particularly unusual in hunting, the fact that it is mentioned certainly continues the motif and contrasts the animals' finite lives with the Green Man and the continuing cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in nature.

Some of the women in Sir Gawain are comparable to the cathedral sculptures. Lady Bertilak can not be considered grotesque because she is not unnatural; she seems to be as human as Gawain. However, she does relate to the sculptures of women as fertility symbols . She tries mercilessly to seduce Gawain by trapping him in the bounds of chivalry, telling him her "young body is yours" (Sir Gawain l. 1237) and forcing him to kiss her "out of courtesy" (Sir Gawain l. 1300). Lady Bertilak's strong associations with sexuality, her possession of the green girdle, and her marriage to Bertilak, who is also the Green Knight, suggest that she is the female fertility component in the poem. Morgan le Fay, while not actually involved directly in the action, is a better example of a grotesque woman. Her identity as a sorceress and as possibly the sole truly negative figure in the work make her grotesque. As a witch, Morgan might be identifiable as a priestess of pagan magic; her spells certainly have nothing to do with Christianity.

Some less prominent grotesques are mentioned in connection with Gawain's journey from Arthur's court to Bertilak's castle. Gawain battles dragons, "wild men"

(Sir Gawain l. 721), and "ogres that panted after him on the high fells" (Sir Gawain l. 723). According to the poem, his loyalty to God prevents him from being harmed, making these grotesques negative by relative association.

The Christianity in Sir Gawain is obvious. The characters continually pray, go to Mass, and attribute positive occurrences to God. According to Morton W. Bloomfield, the meanings of any pagan rituals still extant in the fourteenth century were lost by the time of Sir Gawain's composition (43).

However, the pagan elements are undeniable present. The Green Man may be related to tree-worship, one of the Church's major adversaries in the Middle Ages (Sheridan 36). As mentioned earlier, the severed head was also extremely important in Celtic religion. The Celts were headhunters, but they also worshipped severed heads as embodiments of divine power: "prophecy, fertility, speech, song, and hospitality and, perhaps more than anything else, the power of averting evil" (Sheridan 15) were attributed to the human head. The severed head also expressed the intertwined concepts of death and fertility (Ross 126) as related to pagan nature worship and life and death as an eternal cycle. Another pagan image in Sir Gawain is the Green Chapel, which can be considered a combination of pagan fertility and Christianity through its name alone.

As in *Beowulf*, the pagan roots of *Sir Gawain* are

not limited to the grotesque images, but also underlie the plot. The Green Knight's challenge is of Celtic origin (Kittredge 10), and the beheading game is present in an eighth-century Irish story (Bromwich 210). The plot may also be read to some extent as a struggle between paganism and Christianity: Christianity, challenged by paganism, tries to fight it through Christian behavior, but, tempted from Christianity, uses pagan magic to protect itself against other pagan forces. There after, Christianity wears a remnant of that paganism to remind itself of the experience. Meanwhile, paganism has survived decapitation and escaped death. Although the author certainly intended no such interpretation, the parallel between this interpretation and the actual medieval struggle between the Church and paganism is interesting, for it suggests an unconscious awareness of the existence of pagan remnants among the crosses and implies an explanation for their presence there.

Both Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight contain a dichotomy of grotesque characters in which they either oppose the hero or are neutral. In Beowulf, Beowulf fights Grendel, Grendel's mother, the sea monsters, and the dragon, while the severed heads (in spite of the negative connotations of Aeschere's head previously mentioned) are basically neutral. In Sir Gawain, Gawain is pitted against the Green Knight, Lady Bertilak, Morgan le Fay, and, in a sense, the Green Knight's severed head,

for the head defeats Gawain by holding him to his bargain and by rejoining with the Green Knight's body rather than dying. However, all of the grotesque creatures in Sir Gawain are not entirely negative, because Gawain is not entirely positive. The Green Knight plays fairly by the rules of his challenge, as Bertilak he exchanges the spoils of his hunt fairly with Gawain, and he spares Gawain's life, thus exceeding Gawain's virtues in every way. Lady Bertilak tries to seduce Gawain, and although she never compromises her own virtues, she causes Gawain to compromise his through trapping him into accepting the green girdle. Only the sorceress Morgan le Fay appears to be consistently negative: she places a spell on Bertilak/the Green Knight in order to scare Guinevere. However, Morgan, unlike the Green Knight and Lady Bertilak, is an integral part of the King Arthur tradition, and she is commonly presented negatively. Furthermore, Morgan never actually appears in Sir Gawain. The more central grotesque figures are not presented as being absolutely negative, demonic creatures as the grotesques in Beowulf are. Perhaps this different presentation suggests that in the interval between Beowulf's composition and Sir Gawain's, some of the grotesque images became more unconscious and more familiar in conjunction with Christianity, and maybe the suppression and "demonizing" of such images became less necessary. In those terms, Morgan le Fay might be explained as left-over evidence of negative

Christian attitudes painted over paganism.

Apparently, some pagan elements remained present in art and literature for quite a while, and the grotesque sculptures and literary figures are not the only remnants of paganism. In fact, much of medieval Christianity was built upon pagan foundations. Until the Norman Conquest of England, the Christianity there was only an outward conformity; "the people and many of the so-called Christian priests remained in unabated heathenism" (Murray 31-32). The Church fought paganism, but the "constant influx of Pagans through several centuries more than counterbalanced the small number of immigrant Christians" (Murray 17-18). Eventually, the Church, unable to eradicate paganism, incorporated parts of it into Christianity. There was a constant "rededication of sanctuary sites" (Sheridan 14) by successive groups which strove to utilize the previous religious associations of those places to consecrate their own structures, and, therefore, their faiths. Christianity followed this practice in choosing sites for cathedrals, and so literally built Christian churches on the very foundations of paganism

Times for celebrating Christian holidays were often based on pagan tradition. Held quarterly, pagan Sabbaths correspond with Candlemas day (February 2), Rood Day (the Eve of May), Lammas (August 1), and All Hallow Eve (the Eve of November). The celebration of Christmas in December is also based on a pagan festival which celebrated the

"birthday of the invincible sun" (Cooper 195), in spite of the probability that Christ was actually born in the springtime (Cooper 195). The birth of the sun out of the cold, dead bleakness of winter, the promise that spring and life will return to the earth, is the concept which underlies the placement of Christ's (and the Sun's) birth in the winter (Heffernan). The significance of the Green Knight's arrival during Christmas is the same. Easter is another such holiday, pairing Christ's resurrection with the resurrection of life in nature.

The importance which the pagans placed on fertility also carries over to Christianity. The pagan priests were also rain-makers, and early Christian saints demonstrated power over rain and other weather conditions (Murray 153). The pagans even practiced human sacrifice for the sake of fertility. This sacrifice of a "divine victim" (Murray 160) is based on the idea that the "spirit of God takes up its abode in a human being. . .who thereby becomes the giver of fertility to all his kingdom" (Murray 160). This "divine sacrifice" is comparable to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to ensure fertility for the Kingdom of God. Because John the Baptist is considered to be a forerunner of Jesus as a prophet, John's severed head might also be included in the Christian fertility motif. Perhaps motifs such as these two, already existent in Christian mythology, allowed the Church to incorporate corresponding pagan elements more easily.

Where it could do so unobtrusively and without much compromising, the Church incorporated paganism. However, in some cases the Church fathers worked to lessen the appeal of paganism.

In York Minster there is a late Gothic representation of the giant. . . .The giant's stomach has become a glaring face with staring eyes and protruding tongue. Unlike earlier representations which have normal feet and hands, these figures have only dog-like claws, and the giant has been fitted with feathered wings. The intention is evidently to equate the pagan giant with Satan, and we can thus see how the transformation was made from pagan Celtic to Christian (Sheridan 30).

Similarly, the horned god, "One of the most ancient and widespread deities worshipped all over pagan Celtic Europe" (Sheridan 44), was often depicted as Satan or other evil forces in Christian iconography (Sheridan 44). In The Green Man, Kathleen Basford comments on the dark side of the Green Man image. In spite of such characteristics as a "mouth in the form of an infinity symbol" (Basford 18), which seems to associate the figure with the eternity of life in nature, Basford concludes that "it is very unlikely that he was revered as a symbol of the renewal of life in springtime" (Basford 20). From the photographs in Basford's book, the frequency of demonic, dark-looking Green Men seems to increase as the centuries progress (Basford). Perhaps the Church exerted a control over this image similar to its altering of the giant and the horned god. After all, the early Christians "knew how to get the best out of both worlds by controlling, but canalizing, the powers of the old gods" (Sheridan 14).

The pagan roots of Christianity, then, are readily visible in medieval cathedral sculptures and in literature. As unfamiliar and strange as such images in conjunction with Christianity may seem to a modern viewer, they were familiar and even inviting to early medieval Christians of the British Isles. The medieval period was a period of religious transition as Christianity was built on the base of paganism and the paganism faded, leaving only remnants behind. The transition is beautifully reflected in Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, for these works contain the contrast between the initially thin veneer of Christianity which veiled paganism, and the later pagan remnants which clung in spite of the increased development of Christianity which had occurred by the late medieval period. The medieval incorporation of paganism into Christian art and literature and into the religion itself performed an important function. It preserved a certain continuity in religious thought and practice which allowed Christianity, the Church, and the many Church-related benefits (such as education and printing) to flourish without razing the culture already existing in the British Isles. Incorporation also aided in preserving history which, if paganism had been entirely suppressed, would have been virtually lost to the modern world. In turn, this history reveals much about the background of certain Christian customs, and therefore about the background of the Judeo-Christian world. Furthermore, the

pagan images in art and literature are timeless reminders that human existence is a continuing process of building and change, and not simply eradication and creation.

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