

Grendel's Mother (*Beowulf*) and the Celtic Sovereignty Goddess

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A reading of *Beowulf* from the perspective of traditional Celtic conceptions of just kingship, sovereignty, and the land ruled is to see the Grendels as the marshals of a misruled land, the kingdom Hrothgar illegitimately assumed and poorly defended. Thus, *Beowulf's* heroics can be successful in only the short term, and the mere existence of a thief in the kingdom he later rules is sufficient to precipitate his fall. The article also relates the Old English vocabulary of the terrifying and gruesome to the name Grendel and Norse Grýla.

One of the conventions of skaldic verse is that a woman may be called by any of the words in Norse that reference age, status, activities, and so on.¹ Discrete vocabulary, circumlocution, metaphor, and metonymy are all at work here. Thus the girl who serves ale in one stanza is the widow remembering the absent seafarer in the next. She is never wholly one thing and the alternative identities, *tesserae*, suggest that she is both much more than (as well as momentarily colored by) the identity singled out in any given verse. This notion of a virtual mosaic—for in a typical *lausavisa* not more than two such images are presented—will assist in coming to grips with the various affinities that are ascribed to Grendel and his mother in *Beowulf*. They are of the race of Cain, fratricide and first builder of cities, but they are, in contrast, both loyal kin and wilderness dwellers. They scorn the use of conventional weapons but have an heirloom sword hanging on the wall. They are said not to have a code of honor compared to humans' but in fact they do, and also share the human thirst for vengeance. Edward Irving

¹This essay reflects a paper given at one of the Old English sessions at the Modern Language Association of America annual conference in Washington, DC, in December 2005. I am wryly grateful for comments received on that occasion and have retained some of the stylistic features and provocative tenor of the original. Since its presentation, Stanley (2005) has appeared, an authoritative voice consonant with at least one premise of this essay.

made a pertinent observation: “This series of epithets [for Grendel] again seems much like the successive steps in additive narration or aggregative description so that no clear distinctions or discriminations are provided.”² The experience of computers and the web suggests we excise the temporal linearity in Irving’s remark from 1989, his “additive” and “aggregative,” and see all epithets as coincident, whether homonyms or antonyms. This probative essay will then focus on only a few tiles in the mosaics of the Grendels, not claiming that they provide keys to the full understanding of these beings or the poem as a whole, but rather exploring the multiple resonances, some of these narrowly cultural and historical, of these figurations.

The evidence of two proximate cultures will be reviewed: first, what is arguably a Norse reflex of Grendel’s dam, then, some Celtic analogues, monstrous females and/or telluric divinities, as both typologically comparable conceptions and, conceivably, sub- or ad-stratum influences on Anglo-Saxon story.³ But first a consideration of a key epithet.

Grendel’s mother is nameless and, from a modern interpretive perspective, this anonymity makes her more archetypal and abstract but no less monstrous. Her introduction and approach to Heorot are of particular interest. Physical description is eschewed in favor of more abstract terms: *aglæcwif* (“she-monster”), *gifre ond galgmod* (“ravenous and gloomy at heart”). Then follows a key passage:

Com þa to Heorote, ðær Hring-Dene
geond þæt sæld swæfun. þa ðær sona wearð
edhwyrft eorlum sipðan inne fealh
Grendles modor. Wæs se gryre læssa
efne swa micle, swa bið mægþa cræft,
wiggryre wifes, be wæpnedmen
þonne heoru bunden, hamere geþuren,
sweord swate fah swin ofer helme
ecgum dyhhtig, andweard scireð.⁴

²Edward B. Irving, Jr., *Rereading Beowulf* (1989), 18.

³Strictly onomastic matters are treated more fully in William Sayers, “Grendel’s Mother, Icelandic *Grýla*, and Irish *Nechta Scéne*: Eviscerating Fear” (2003). This earlier essay does not address the central question of the adequacy of royal rule in *Beowulf*. A common IE source for the analogues here adduced could be posited, but the quality of the match encourages belief in some kind of historical interaction.

⁴Both text and translation are drawn from *Beowulf*, ed. Swanton (1999), ll.

Michael Swanton's relatively recent prose translation will exemplify the received understanding of this passage.

She came then to Heorot, where the Ring-Danes slept all around the hall. Immediately then there came a reverse for the warriors, once Grendel's mother made her way in. The terror was the less dreadful by just so much as the power of women, the war-terror of a female, is that of an armed man when the patterned blade of a hammer-forged sword, stained with blood, mightily of edge, shears through the boar-crest above opposing helmet.

This passage is generally interpreted as suggesting, in a measured assessment, that Grendel's mother is less terror-inspiring than her son, principally because of the difference in sex. But events seem to belie this statement, for she proves a more formidable opponent, even downing and straddling the hero at one point in a scene from which a sexual inference is readily drawn, striking at him with a short-bladed dirk, which might provisionally be identified as a domestic tool rather than a weapon—a knacking knife from the farmyard, if we wished to push the identification.

The word *gryre* 'terror' occurs twice here in close succession, as a simplex and in a compound. Cognate words will be discussed below, but a brief excursus on the evidence in *Beowulf* as a whole will be instructive. The word is employed five times in the poem in its simplex form and nine times in compounds. What earlier editors and translators seem to have failed to appreciate is that, with a single exception, *gryre* is used in reference only to Grendel, his mother, and the dragon that Beowulf attacks late in the poem (see below). This has led to unevenness and disassociation in English renderings. Within the parameters of the poem, *gryre* then means not simply 'great fear' but the terror caused by facing a non-conspecific opponent, an opponent not of the human species. It also seems to suggest a more abstracted but no less immediate fear, an eviscerating susceptibility to panic, especially before battle, even fear of fear itself. Further, the word is never used by any of the characters in the poem, as if ill luck attended its very uttering. The one exception to this thematically determined

1279-87. Still deserving of consultation is *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Klaeber (1950); a further revised edition is in progress.

use is in the description of Beowulf and his troop coming ashore in Denmark in their “terror-inspiring gear” (*in hyra gryregeatwum*, 324). Perhaps it reflects the perception of aliens by the edgy, self-conscious coastguard, or the Swedes’ conception of themselves, or is a bit of dark irony on the part of the poet.

If *gryre* is restricted to the fear inspired by the monstrous, the otherworldly, then the comparison of the terror that Grendel’s mother inspires with that generated by the fatal attack of a conventional armed man founders, since terror on this scale, or better, in this dimension, can only be subjectively experienced, and is not part of the collective cultural or psychological inheritance. We have a comparison of apples and mirages. At the risk of an overreading, we might amend the translation of the above passage in the direction of irony, litotes, and epistemological uncertainty.

This [potential for] terror was lesser by just so much as is women’s power, the battle-terror of the female, compared to an armed man when the patterned blade ... shears through ... [an] opposing helmet.⁵

This understated reading is more consonant with the real threat posed by Grendel’s avenging mother, and distinguishes between the honor-driven self-exteriorizations of the characters in the poem (on which, more below) and the poem’s own assessment.

If we view Grendel’s mother as a female inspiring battle terror (*wiggryre wifes*), Norse tradition has an equivalent figure, with a cognate name. Snorri Sturluson’s work on poetic diction, *Skáldskaparmál*, lists more than sixty names for ‘troll-wives’ or female ogres, who seem to have some of the judgmental qualities of the valkyries, choosers of the slain. Snorri’s list begins *Grid, Gnissa, Grýla, Bryja*⁶ The etymology of the name *Grýla* shows it to be a reflex of the same stem as in Old English *gryre*. A fuller set of derivatives from Indo-European **ghrēu-d-* ‘to forcibly affect the mental or emotional state’ includes ON

⁵Key to our understanding of the passage is the meaning to be ascribed the preposition *be* in the phrase *be wæpnedmen*. *Dictionary of Old English* (2003), confirms the accepted reading “in comparison with,” *s.v. be* I.D.2.e. This said, a degree of ellipsis must be countenanced in order to make sense of the syntax: “compared to [that of] an armed warrior ...”

⁶Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Faulkes (1998), I.112, stanza 423.

grýla, OE *gryre*, MLG *gruwel*, MHG *griuwel* 'fright, terror, Norw. *grysja* 'to frighten, terrify,' ODan. *gruue* 'strain,' Eng. *gruesome*.⁷ I return to the simplex of this root below. No myth or tale with this troll-wife as a principal character has been handed down but there is proof that she is more than Snorri's arbitrary onomastic creation. In a scene from Sturla Þórðarson's thirteenth-century *Íslendinga saga*, the attacker of a farm-house likens himself to Grýla coming down into the field with fifteen tails on her back.⁸ The later traditions of Iceland, the Faroes, Shetland, and Orkney show us Grýla downgraded from the panic that threatened the warrior-initiate to a bugbear who carries off disobedient children during Lent or before Christmas. On Shetland, her representatives, young mummers called *grolleks*, dressed in straw suits, go "trick or treating" from house to house on the eve of seasonal festivals.⁹ Even though she is unnamed, the troll-woman who battles Grettir in the Sandhaug episode of his saga shares several of the attributes ascribed to Grendel's mother, and the similarity in the weapons and their terminology has figured large in comparisons of the *Grettis saga* with *Beowulf*.¹⁰

Multiple etymologies and meanings have been proposed for the name *Grendel*. The list can be amplified by the consideration of Old Irish *grindel* 'bed of a lake, gravel; bedrock, foundation' but also 'loathing, aversion.' This might well seem a pair of homonyms. The latter meaning is plausibly derived from the comparable *gráin* 'terror, horror; loathing, aversion.'¹¹ But the Indo-European root **ghrēu-* identified by Pokorny not only produced a range of sand, gravel, and shore terms in Germanic, Celtic, and across the spectrum of other IE-derived languages, based on the central semantics of 'grind, pulverize,'

⁷Pokorny, *Indo-germanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (1959-69), I.460-62.

⁸Sturla Þórðarson, *Íslendinga saga*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (1953-54), Ch. 7.

⁹Evidence for Grýla is assembled in Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (1995), and further illustrated in Gunnell, "Grýla, Grýlur, Grøleks and Skelkers: Folk Drama in the North Atlantic in the Early Middle Ages?"

¹⁰A summary of earlier work on the topic is listed in Magnús Fjalldal, *The Long Arm of Coincidence: The Frustrated Connection between Beowulf and Grettis saga* (1998), which has not discouraged continued attention to the several points of contact.

¹¹*Dictionary of the Irish Language* (1913-76), *s.v.v.* *grindell* 'bed of lake, gravel; bedrock, foundation; terror trembling,' and *gráin* 'terror, horror; loathing, aversion.' Entries under the letter G have yet to be published in the *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien*.

but this same root, in the augmented form **ghrēu-d-*, also produced our run of “terror words”: Irish *gráin*, OE *gryre*, and ON *grýla*.¹² Perhaps the central idea of grinding down, i.e., destructive transformation, led, in the derived forms, to the notion of broken spirit, fear replacing courage. Thus the name *Grendel* (provisionally, the fearsome grinder), however assembled, is perfectly consonant with OE *gryre* ‘terror’ used of his mother, and the environment of the mere and its shore will be seen to belong to this semantic cluster, even if these relations may have been somewhat obscured by the time of the poem.

This understanding of *gryre* ‘fright, terror’ can be illuminated by a well known scene in an early Irish story, the culminating episode in *Macgnímrada Con Culainn* (*The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn*). The neophyte hero has challenged the three sons of Nechta Scéne: Fóill, Túachell, and Fannall.¹³ These names have been conventionally interpreted as ‘sly,’ ‘cunning,’ and ‘swallow’ (the bird). Given this nexus of terms, it may be speculated that *fannall* originated in *fóindel* ‘flightly, panicky, weakened.’¹⁴ This third opponent attacks the hero across the water (see below). Seen thus, the three opponents would represent chief threats to the warrior-initiate: the first two, the deviousness of his opponents, the third, his inner susceptibility to panic and flight. These are notions of mutability; deceit in the former cases, weakness in the second. This interpretation is supported by a consideration of the mother’s name, where *scéne* is unambiguously ‘fear, fright’ and *nechta* may reference the night, a notion of purity—‘pure terror’—or have connections with the aquatic environment.¹⁵ A similar name, constructed on a different principle, occurs in a testing scene in *Fled Bricrend* (*Bricriu’s Feast*), when three heroes are sent to Úath mac Imomain, a great sorcerer living by a lake, and must then submit to the mutual beheading test that is recast in greater detail at the end of the tale with Cú Rói, and seems the prototype for the scene in the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.¹⁶ The sorcerer’s name translates as

¹²Welsh *dychryn* ‘terror, panic, trembling’ < *cryn* ‘trembling, quaking’ has not been adduced in this context, but deserved consideration.

¹³*Táin bó Cúailgne: Recension I*, ed. and trans. O’Rahilly (1976), ll. 609-824.

¹⁴See *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, s.v. *fóindel*.

¹⁵See the discussion of cognate evidence in Sayers (1983).

¹⁶*Fled Bricrend: The Feast of Bricriu*, ed. Henderson (1899), 96-101.

'Terror, Son of Great Fear.' Since Úath mac Imomain is also characterized as a great shape-shifter, this transformative power may be to displace battle courage by terror and panic. Seen thus, the young warrior's first challenge is to overcome his susceptibility to primal fear.¹⁷

Before initiating a consideration of other Celtic conceptions of the monstrous and the supernatural, a number of motifs or details common to the accounts reviewed above, English, Irish, and Norse, may be briefly summarized. The setting is often aquatic (loch, mere, waterfall, seashore);¹⁸ there is no dialogue or the dialogue is marked by miscommunication (irony, deceit); names are lacking or unconventional and multiple (see below); the opponent may have some kind of supernatural advantage, e.g., invulnerability to weapons, or even momentarily gain the upper hand; a special weapon, often a utilitarian domestic instrument, is used by one party or both; there is a more or less explicit sexual dimension; finally, there is often an authenticating senior male figure to close and judge the encounter.

What scholarship has conventionally identified as the Celtic goddess of territorial sovereignty has multiple guises, each appropriate to a stage in a royal career, from ancestor to king-designator, from battle-goddess to goddess of death, this last when a failed king must be removed and replaced.¹⁹ At all times the goddess's overriding concern is to support a fitting husband for the land that she incarnates. In the propagandistic purposes to which such stories were put, this may also translate as support for a specific historical dynasty. The goddess has two interrelated dark faces, the one assumed in testing candidates for the kingship, the other, the more ominous one, in carrying

¹⁷Discussion in Sayers, "Úath mac Imomain (*Fled Bricrend*), Óðinn, and Why the Green Knight is Green" (1990).

¹⁸See, most recently, Carey, "The Encounter at the Ford: Warriors, Water and Women" (2004). To be added to the "warrior at the ford" we have the topos of the hero on the beach, identified in Germanic poetry, and, I would contend, the figures of debilitated rulers in marine environments (see note 32, below).

¹⁹Trail-blazing studies of the sovereignty goddess include Bhreatnach, "The Sovereignty Goddess as Goddess of Death?" (1982); Breatnach, "The Lady and the King: A Theme of Irish Literature" (1953); Herbert, "Goddess and King: The Sacred Marriage in Early Ireland" (1992); and Mac Cana, "Aspects of the Theme of the King and Goddess in Irish Literature" (1955-56, 1958-59). Much from the foregoing is summarized and further discussed in Ford, "Celtic Women: The Opposing Sex" (1988).

out judgment on the deficient ruler. The first of these is illustrated in the story of the future Níall of the Nine Hostages and his half-brothers. As the second in a set of tests of suitability for the kingship, the lads are sent hunting by a sorcerer smith, and then, thirsty after a meal of grilled game, in turn go searching for water. Each meets a hag at a well, who will give up water only in exchange for a kiss. She is initially described as follows:

Is amlaid bui in chaillech, co mba duibithir gual cech n-alt ⁊ cach n-aigi di o mullach co talmain. Ba samalta fri herboll fiadeich in mong glas gaisidech bai tria cleithi a cheandmullaich. Consealgad glasgeg darach fo brith dia corran glaisfhiacra bai 'na cind co roichead a hou. Suli duba dethaighe le, sron cham chuasach. Medon fethech brecbaindech ingalair le, ⁊ luirgni fiara fochama siad, adbronnach leathansluaistech si, glunmar glaisingnech. Ba grain tra a tuarascbail na cailligi.²⁰

This is how the hag looked: as black as charcoal was her every part and her every joint from the top of her head down to the ground. Like the tail of a wild horse was the bristling gray shock of hair that sprouted from the crown of her head. The live acorn-laden branch of an oak would have been severed by the sickle of green teeth that stretched around her head to her ears. She had smoke-dark eyes and her nose was crooked, with cave-like nostrils. Her body was all sinewy and spotted with festering sores, and her shins were bowed and crooked. Her knees were swollen, her ankles knobby, her green-nailed feet as wide as shovels. The appearance of the hag was truly loathsome.

Here we might note in passing the presence of *gráin* ‘terror, horror; loathsomeness’ in the concluding sentence above. Only Níall is brave enough to overcome his disgust, to proffer a kiss, and even offer to lie with her. The kiss transforms this *puella senilis* or ‘loathly lady’ into the beautiful goddess of the land. Her descendants are known from continental Arthurian romance, especially in stories associated with Gawain, and from

²⁰ “Echtra mac Ehdach Muigmedoin: The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedon,” ed. and trans. Stokes (1909), 196. The translation that follows is by the present author. The possible source of this imagery in leprosy is examined in Eichhorn-Mulligan (2006).

the Wife of Bath's tale. The Wife herself might even count as one reflex.

The goddess as divinity of battle is seen to good effect in *Táin bó Cúailgne* (*The Cattle-raid of Cooley*), where her interaction is chiefly with the hero Cú Chulainn, since she is siding with Connacht, not Ulster, in the great engagement. In this guise called the Mórrígan (perhaps 'Great Queen') and Badb, the carrion crow, she may appear in avian or other animal form, or as an innocuous old crone.²¹ A snapshot of a mother and battle goddess is found early in the tale *Do Síil Conairi Máir* (*Of the Descendants of Conaire the Great*), one of the stories which sets the stage for *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (*The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*), prior to the accession of Conaire to the throne.

A máthair riam to-árlaic a hinar impe coa cris anós, a
mmong dub tathmigthe ima cend, trelam dub mór lé 7
drúith rann-nemnaig roeimpe 7 fianscéith 7 cánti 7
chornaire resna slógaib móraib 7 batir móra ind fir.

His mother before him, she had loosened her tunic about her down to her belt, her black tresses fell loose about her head. She held a great black weapon and jesters uttering venomous verses went before her and a shield-bearer and mockers and hornblowers ahead of the mighty host, and the men were of great size.²²

Another member of this sorority is met in the latter tale, which goes on to recount the death of King Conaire, an early embodiment of justice who later pronounced a biased judgment favoring his kin. After the forced infraction of a number of tabus and on his way to the fatal hostel where he will be attacked and die in battle, he is met by a giant rustic, carrying a singed pig (for the feast) and an iron staff (in lieu of weapon), who calls himself the Man of the Woods. With him is an ugly female introduced as follows:

... ben bélmar már dub duabais dochraid ina diaid. Cía
fo-certa didiu a ssrúb ar géisce fo-lilsad. Tacmaicead a bél

²¹ *Táin bó Cúailgne: Recension I*, ll. 955, 3942, 4033; see in particular the encounter between Cú Chulainn and the Mórrígan, first with the goddess as a young beauty, ll. 1845-73, then, after her interference in his fighting in three animal guises, as an old crone, ll. 2038-71.

²² Bhreathnach, "The Sovereignty Goddess as Goddess of Death?", 247, citing M. A. O'Brien, "Do Síil Conaire Máir," in *Irish Origin Legends*, unpublished booklet from the 1950s.

íchtarach co a glúin.²³

Behind him came a huge, black, gloomy, big-mouthed, ill-favoured woman; if her snout were thrown against a branch, the branch would support it, while her lower lip extended to her knee.²⁴

At the hostel the hag is further described:

Sithir cloideb ngarmnai ceachtar a dá lurcan. Bair dubithir dethach. Brat ríabach rolómar impi. Tacmaicead a fés in t-íchtarach co rrici a glúin. A beóil for leith a cind. (537-41)

As long as a weaver's beam, and as black, her two shins. She wore a very fleecy, striped mantle. Her beard reached to her knees, and her mouth was on one side of her head. (76)

There is reason to believe that these references to lower lips and beard are to genitalia and pubic hair, comparable to the obscene statuary of the *Sheela-na-gigs*. The dark face of the goddess inspires not only fear and disgust, it is also reminiscent of a battlefield corpse ravaged by the Beasts of Battle and eventual decomposition. When Conaire says that he is forbidden to receive a woman after dark—ostensibly into his residence for the night, but the sexual dimension is apparent—the woman, emphasizing corporeality, prophesies that neither hide nor hair of Conaire will escape the hostel, save what the birds carry off in their claws. She then identifies herself with a litany of names that recalls Snorri's catalogue of troll-wives. These names, supernatural pseudonyms, refer to harsh weather, physical discomfort, negative emotional states and their expression.²⁵ The hag and churl are identified by the leaders of the party attacking the hostel as the 'instruments of Conaire's fate.'

In another king's tale, a similar string of names is found attached to a beautiful young woman who seeks out King Muirchertach mac Erca.²⁶ But she is a sorceress and in becoming the king's mistress, she expels his queen, family, and attendant

²³ *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. Knott (1975), ll. 354-56.

²⁴ *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, trans. Gantz (1981), 71.

²⁵ Fuller treatment in Sayers, "Supernatural Pseudonyms" (1994).

²⁶ *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*, ed. Nic Dhonnchadha (1964).

Christian clerics, then drags the king with magical feasts that leave him increasingly debilitated when he rises the next morning to battle with phantom hosts that are no more than sods and stalks and stones. *Sín* or 'Storm,' as she is called by her primary name, has all the attributes of the sovereignty goddess as goddess of death, even conjuring up parodies of the drink of red ale that the young sovereignty goddess offers the king-designate, in a kind of rebus where *flaith* means both 'ruler, sovereignty' and 'ale.' But the story has been given a Christian turn. *Sín* turns out to be a mortal maiden whose family had been killed and their land usurped by Muirchertach. This unjust appropriation of the land would warrant divine vengeance and the king eventually does die in the threefold death that references his polyfunctionality, to use a Dumézilian term, falling, pierced with a weapon, and drowned. But here vengeance is of an earthly kind and, predictably, the Christian clerics re-enter the tale to set things right, rather than have the goddess seek out a new consort. The story of *Díarmait mac Cerbaill* has many of the same motifs, such as the three-fold death, and the superficial attractiveness of a *Sín* is there represented by a host's offer of his daughter for what will prove *Diarmait's* last night.²⁷

Against this background, in what further ways can *Beowulf's* adventure with the *Grendels* be seen as consonant with Irish tales of kingly inadequacy? The eulogy of *Scyld Scefing* with which the poem begins gives us a summary of the successful king, one who would enjoy the goddess's favor. Essentially, he has protected the borders of his kingdom through aggressive military activity and has been generous toward his people in the redistribution of wealth. *Scyld* is favored with a son, *Healfdane*, who goes on to have four children. While the poem is reticent at this point, it suggests that *Heorogar*, not *Hrothgar*, was the eldest son (and, we later learn from *Hrothgar*, the better man), and that after his death *Hrothgar* was given victory in battle and won the support of the men of his house. While the statement is positive, it does not fully preclude a question as to the legitimacy of *Hrothgar's* rule. If *Hrothgar's* accession were preceded by internecine strife

²⁷ "Aided Dhiarmada meic Cherbaill: Death of King Dermot," ed. and trans. O'Grady (1892), I.66-82, II.76-88, and for a modern translation of the "second recension" of the tale, Wiley, "Stories about *Diarmait mac Cerbaill* from the Book of Lismore" (2002).

over the succession or somehow by the displacement of Heorogar's son Heoroward, this usurpation would be seen to return, in a sense be repaid, in the enmity and treachery of a second nephew, Hrothulf, son of the third brother, Halga, a nephew ironically fostered in Hrothgar's own court. Initially, Hrothgar commands his people's support. But he diverts their resources into ostentation, conspicuous consumption, and commissions the construction of a great hall.²⁸ Its totemic identity as a hart, a prey animal with a flashy rack but neither fang nor claw, is telling. Ironically, mention of his young kinsmen growing up in his court, a reference to the future treachery, is made just before the description of the hall. In the poem the hall bulks larger than the quality of Hrothgar's rule, where generosity is perhaps emphasized at the expense of any mention of justice. As the poem sets it out with its frequent instances of prolepsis, the hall seems threatened with flame from the moment of its completion.

Thus, within twenty lines of the introduction of this ruler, we learn that Hrothgar may have assumed the kingship in unorthodox fashion, that, while open-handed, he is an ineffective defender of his people, and that he is doomed to die, perhaps in a process similar to his rise to power. The unjustified joy in the hall, now unsupported by true kingly activity, and the scop's songs of the past (often a dark one) rather than warriors' deeds in the present, awaken the latent power of the misruled land in the form of Grendel—Grendel the Fearsome. In a linguistic analogy Grendel's moors and marshes are the unmarked in relation to the marked, human settlement. But Grendel represents all the land, not just its wilderness part, scorned then feared by the king and his retainers.

Grendel's predations clearly prove that Hrothgar can no longer ensure the domestic safety of his land. Whatever *sapientia* he may have gained over the years is more than offset by his lack of *fortitudo*, or it may be that he, like Conaire, has no

²⁸ Hughes, "Christianity Wrestling with Ghosts: Interpreting Grettir Ásmundarson *sterki* and Jon Guðmundsson *lerdi*," paper presented at the Modern Language Association of American annual conference, Washington, DC, December, 2005, suggests that the site of Heorot "violated the boundary between Civilization and Wilderness," citing the gazetteer of Icelandic this-world and other-world sites assembled in Árni Óla, *Álög og bannhlegi*. (1968). I suggest a different ideological framework within the Beowulf poem, with a greater geographical range for the supernatural, i.e., the goddess's concern for effective secular rule.

means to avoid his destiny. Here the poem seems almost surrealistic and we can almost believe that Hrothgar and his retainers are somehow *fated* to drink and dine blissfully (*eadiglice*) in Heorot each evening, and suffer ongoing losses. Over twelve years, through death and defection, the great hall is emptied. Appeals to the pagan gods prove vain. To jump ahead a bit, two details confirm the contention that Grendel is not simply attacking a people but is the instrument called into play to effect a judgment on a deficient ruler: The sword Hrunding of one of Hrothgar's chief functionaries, Unferth, will not prove adequate to the task to which it is assigned, clear proof of the military inadequacy of Hrothgar's host and its leadership, and the last Dane taken, this by Grendel's mother, is the king's closest counselor, Æschere, symbol of other inadequate properties of his rule. This reading is supported by Alfred Bammesberger's recent suggestion that the "famous arm" that Grendel's mother carries off from Heorot is not her son's severed arm, but Hrothgar's "right hand man."²⁹ On this same tack, Unferth is a kin-slayer yet enjoys high status in Hrothgar's court. Most of the interleaved stories of other kings, beginning with the scop's song on the way back from the mere and then continued with the Fight at Finnsburh, point to similar inadequacies, if we take the broader view that all internal dissension and revolt must in terms of responsibility be laid at the king's door for his failure to reconcile the constituent parts of his kingdom.

Beowulf's motives are self-aggrandizement, glory. This is not an invalid ambition but his altruism in coming to the relief of the Danish kingdom entails the diversion of resources from his own land. Admittedly, he had already rid it of similar predators. Perhaps this is too narrowly economical a view of what is generally seen as legitimate heroics. Although Beowulf fights without weapons and this would seem utter recklessness, it is all for the good, since Grendel was immune to weapons.

The English poem realizes quite different descriptive conventions than the Irish texts. There are no portraits that compare with the Irish cameos of the goddess of death in their raw physicality. Instead, the Grendels are described in categorizing, judgmental, even condemnatory terms, suggestive but elusive, as if they were "beyond the limits of

²⁹Bammesberger, "Old English *cupe folm* in *Beowulf*, line 1303A" (2005).

representation.”³⁰ This lexicon has a strong Christian stamp, whatever the archaic origins of the conception of these moor-dwellers. Only the shoulder and arm that Beowulf tears off in combat is seen in a sharply contoured snapshot. This prompts the observation that it is an essentially martial solution that the hero effects, as symbolized in the arm and later head trophy.

For lovers of the poem it would be offensive to say that Beowulf in Denmark is the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. And it would be an oversimplification to state that Denmark is only a testing ground for the hero, who then returns to Sweden to become king, leaving Hrothgar to the fate he has called down on himself and his people. Yet Beowulf’s is essentially a stopgap measure, albeit a heroic one. While he relieves Hrothgar of the apparently external scourge, all parties concerned—the king, his queen Wealhtheow, Beowulf himself—sense that the kingdom has not been fully restored to peace and tranquility. Wealhtheow had earlier sought Beowulf’s “help against crimes from any man” and now seeks protection for her sons. It is too late for Hrothgar to right his collected errors; at best he can offer Beowulf the benefit of his experience and give counsel on a balanced kingship, the avoidance of arrogance and laxity. But first Grendel’s mother seeks vengeance in a scene where the poet does not try to rival the account of Grendel’s approach to the hall. Instead, in a flashback not in the poet’s voice, we have a rhetorical renewal in Hrothgar’s reminiscences of Grendel’s earlier life, especially of his wilderness environment and its mere.

Beowulf’s contest with Grendel’s mother is too well known to need rehearsing here. The hero is now bearing armor and arms, but the sword Hrunting fails, and only his mail protects him when the troll-wife gains the upper hand. Then he spots the huge sword, the work of giants. The sword, with its inscription, is as polyvalent as many of the other key entities in the poem. From the perspective adopted in this essay, I suggest that sword represents sovereignty, but sovereignty in abeyance. That the Grendels possess it means that Hrothgar and the Danish rulership are no longer worthy of it. When Beowulf wields it, he achieves his immediate purposes but the weapon

³⁰ Borrowed from Paul V. Rockwell’s review, in *Speculum* 80:4 (2005): 1283-85, at 1284, of Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas’s *La tentation de l’Orient dans le roman médiéval: Sur l’imaginaire médiéval de l’Autre*.

melts away, leaving only the hilt. With Grendel and his mother dead, many Danes killed and all avenged, the mere and wilderness demystified and returned to human frequentation, the blade of the heirloom sword of the past dissolved—with all this, it would seem that the scene had been swept clean, the playing field leveled, and that just and effective rule could be restored. But this is illusory, because only the external enemies of the crown—in truth the judges on its internal weaknesses—have been removed. Beowulf has not excised the cancer, but only dismissed the surgeons. That Grendel's severed head should be one of the trophies is an ironic comment on the future of the royal head of Hrothgar. More important but little recognized, the late appearance of Grendel's mother and her quick departure from the poem's concerns after Beowulf's triumph suggest that on the symbolic level Beowulf and Hrothgar have not understood with whom they have been dealing. This is more than male chauvinism in boar-appointed helmets. They have simply not recognized the goddess, as the attention to her son, even in death, amply proves. As Irving notes with respect to Beowulf's account of the combat to Hrothgar: "It is not Grendel's mother he mentions but once again some abstract heroic action (*wigge*, *guð*, *hild*—words for battle), all of them emphasizing only the hero's own behavior as if it took place in a vacuum, or in a mirror" (72). And, as noted above, there is no mention of *gryre* 'terror.' Grendel *fils* is best seen as an ancillary instrument, like with the Man of the Woods of the Irish tales, a giant rustic and psychopomp, companion of the goddess.³¹ It is his mother, the earth as mother, who is the true arbiter of royal adequacy and of Hrothgar's doom.

Georges Dumézil's efforts to trace the evidence of classical antiquity and medieval literature and legend back to an ideology common to the Indo-European tribes that was articulated through three functions, roughly, rule and law, martial activity, and the somatic life of human and animal sexuality, the fertility of the land, etc., have been hotly debated in recent decades.³² On the level of detail rather than

³¹On a point of comparison with Fer Cailli, the Man of the Woods, Grendel is called *fjrena hyrde* "shepherd of sins," v. 750 and might be thought a kind of herdsman of the semi-monstrous aquatic creatures in the mere.

³²The vitality of current scholarship is reflected in the collection of essays in *JES* 34, numbers 1 and 2 (2006).

of theory many of the homological sets identified in earlier scholarship still command attention and are useful heuristic tools. Thus, to take the three-fold death of deficient or defective kings as an example: 1) the aerial dimensions relates to falling and hanging, and the royal head; 2) the terrestrial, to weaponry and resulting wounds to the military leader, his arms and upper body; 3) that of the under-earth and sea, drowning, interment, to sexual hyperactivity (rape, exploitation) or dysfunction (castration, impotence, sterility) in the lower body, sexual organs, and legs. In *Beowulf* we have seen associations of terror and stoney lakeshores, encapsulated (perhaps too neatly) in Irish *gráin* and *grindel* but available in English as OE *gryre* and *grindan*, from a common IE root. Thus there is a suggestion in the poem that, while Hrothgar may have succeeded to the throne under questionable conditions, he then turned his efforts toward generosity and ostentation at the cost of martial effort, so that his kingly sin may have its true center of gravity in the third function. Thus, the association of the Grendels with the mere and underearth; other tales of royal deaths often have a comparable maritime setting and feature sexual dysfunction, e.g. Chrétien's Fisher King.³³ Queen Wealhtheow's sons, for whom she invokes Beowulf's protection, are clearly by Hrothgar, as the names in *Hr-* suggest, but their young age means that they would likely have been conceived during the twelve years of Grendel's predations, again expressive of a misdirection of Hrothgar's attention. The name *Wealhþeow*, 'foreign (= British) captive,' and the resulting combination of royal and captive status also points toward the third function, or even an extra-functionality beneath it. The basic concerns of Grendel's mother and Wealhtheow are not really that dissimilar, and there is a kind of mirroring effect *disponible* in their common Celtic affinities. In summary, I suggest that Hrothgar's sin is against the land. It results in a punishment associated with monstrous hyperphagy, lakes and the underearth, and has its consequent psychic effect in a crushing, emasculating—but not effeminizing—terror.

Beowulf is said to rule well for fifty years. But only a half-verse is given over to such an optimal outcome. The king's responsibility is total and reality is constantly being renewed.

³³See Picard, "The Strange Death of Guaire mac Áedáin" (1989) and Sayers, "Teithi Hen, Gúaire mac Áedáin, Grettir Ásmundarson: The King's Debility, the Shore, the Blade" (forthcoming).

The fact that his society could produce a single thief, who steals from a treasure unchecked, makes attention to the consequences of such action a royal obligation. If we can entertain the idea of the Grendels as forces that have the ultimate good of the kingdom as their objective, we might see the dragon, another telluric force, as presiding over a Fort Knox of treasure. It is not active in the economy but is counted among its fundamental resources and lends legitimacy to the activities of the kingdom. In this, the hoard parallels the heirloom sword.

The poem is bracketed by two funerals. Within the poem the architectonics are chiasmatic: a royal deficiency is followed by a heroic solution and the hero is elevated to the kingship, after which a new sin occurs on the lowest level of society, in the thief. Beowulf's death is heroic, as might be expected, and is also tragic, not because of a flaw in his character but because the organization of his society itself is open to fault. Good governance may take decades to develop but can be undone in a trice, since the energy of just rule can not be stored. It is dissolved in a first great lie or dissipated with the funeral ship pushed burning out to sea.. This does raise a larger but little addressed question of whether the Hero is a suitable candidate to become king.³⁴ Ruling is much more than heroics, which are often naive, unreflective, un-self-reflective. But, the poem suggests, this would perhaps all play out differently in a Christian world.

This review of the Grendels is not intended to posit a Celtic origin for parts of the Beowulf story, or conjure up the British land rising in revolt against its Anglo-Saxon rulers. At most it calls attention to some analogues, some archaic conceptions of sovereignty in harmony with the land, of the destinies of kings and kingdoms, other comparable examples of which are readily found in Irish and Welsh story or in Norse accounts such as the early part of *Ynglinga saga*.³⁵ Superficially,

³⁴On this important topic, see Miller, *The Epic Hero* (2000), 177ff.

³⁵Puhvel, *Beowulf and Celtic Tradition* (1979). See, too, *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry, II: The Major Germanic and Celtic Texts in Translation* (1983). Studies devoted in whole or part to Grendel's mother are listed in Sayers (1999). Studies on the Grendels that have been published in the last decade include: Bammesberger (1999) and (2002), Day (1999), Eyles (2004), Marvin (2003), Menzer (1996), Osborne and Streuber (1999), Stanley (2001), Steele (2003), and the relevant essays in *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (2003).

the *Beowulf* poem is about heroics but heroism alone can provide only a temporary respite, a provisional solution; it is no substitute for just and effective rule, even though the latter must have a martial component to assure the defense of the kingdom. We know that as far as Denmark is concerned, Beowulf's efforts will have been futile in the longer term, and thus such efforts must be viewed through the prism of irony. We meet the terrifying Grendels, marshals of the Otherworld, on the boundary between nature and culture, wilderness and isolation on the one hand, settlement and the community on the other.³⁶ Here, on the *limes*, we also situate the relatively simple physical tests of the heroic, to rise from simple courage to battle fury, or sink into eviscerated panic. Here, too, are situated some of the more complex problematics of the kingship, a comprehensive responsibility that runs from the security and fertility of people and livestock through a range of martial activity in relation to neighboring kingdoms to effective relations with the supernatural that are maintained and fostered through the exercise of justice. They begin with legitimacy in the accession to rule. Something was rotten in the state of Denmark. The Grendels sought to provide one radical solution. Beowulf another. Hrothgar's nephew Hrothulf will provide yet a third. *Beowulf*: monster story? hero tale? a disquieting reflection on the adequacy of royal rule, where the interlace of narrative reflects the complexity of ethical decision? A reader's choice.

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³⁶We do well to resist the romantic notion of British Celts being "pushed back" into Wales by the Anglo-Saxon invasion, but may nonetheless speculate on some degree of dispossession and marginalization. British affinities with the uplands or forests may have had subtle effects on Germanic culture. See, for example, Sayers, "Middle English *wodewose*: A Hybrid Etymology?" (2004).

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