

# Heroes and Hells in *Beowulf*, the *Shahnameh*, and the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

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This paper examines the Otherworld episodes from Old English *Beowulf*, the Iranian *Shahnameh*, and the Irish *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. It focuses on the parallel elements from the wrestling matches with a pair of Otherworld monsters, as well as the similarities in the descriptions of the earthly city and the Otherworld lair at which the episodes take place. This paper discusses these details and their significance in relation to the heroic biography. Finally, it concerns itself with questions of possible sources for the analogues.

The heroes Beowulf, Cúchulainn and Rostam belong to that group of IE-heroes who function as the mediators with the supernatural and the natural world.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that two of these men each have a parentage which includes a monstrous element: Balor the *Fomóire* king for Cúchulainn, and Zohak the *div* for Rostam – this attribute is certainly responsible for a part of their inhuman powers. Each

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<sup>1</sup>This group would include heroes by virtue of the challenges they face, rather than innate powers, so it would include Beowulf, Grettir, or Hercules, who face both men and supernatural antagonists; but not Achilles or Samson, who are famed primarily as man-slayers. As to the heroic texts cited in this essay, I use primarily: Firdausi, *Shāhnāma* 6 vols, ed. D. Khalegi-Motlagh (New York, 1987-2006). I have also consulted the Mohl and Bertels *Shahnameh* editions: see J. Mohl, ed., *Le Livre des Rois* 7 vols (Paris, reprinted 1976) and E. Z. Bertels, ed., *Shāhnāma* 9 vols (Moscow, 1967-71). The reader is recommended to see the excellent new English translation by Dick Davis: D. Davis, trans., *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* (New York, 2006). As to the Irish editions cited in this thesis, I use primarily: C. O'Rahilly, ed., *Táin Bó Cúailnge Recension 1* (Dublin, 1976); also C. O'Rahilly, ed., *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin, 1967). Other editions featuring tales from the Ulster Cycle are: M. Dillon, *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dublin, 1953); A. G. Hamel, ed., *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories* (Dublin, 1956); G. Henderson, *Fled Bricreind* (London, 1899); and J. C. Watson, *Mesca Ulad* (Dublin, 1967). All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted. I am indebted to Professors Ann Dooley, Andy Orchard, and Maria Subtelny for their constant assistance and helpful suggestions; any and all errors are mine.

cycle of tales contains stories where a supernatural threat faces the kingdom of Ulster or the nation of Iran, and the mortal authorities and military are insufficient to deal with or treat with it. Celtic (especially Irish) narrative and mythology has the unique concept of the “Otherworld”, a place inhabited by both the Dead and the semi-divine *Síd*. The Otherworld seems to mirror the mortal world in some ways (geographically and socially), and can be reached by mortals through various geographic landmarks associated with the dead (e.g. mounds).<sup>2</sup> Yet despite these similarities to the mortal realm, it is realm where characters encounter beings and landscapes which are clearly supernatural – an example of a supernatural landscape is an island where people do not age. In the mundane world, beings from the Otherworld are often marked by narrative descriptors such as aberrations in size: a character who is identified as enormous or miniscule is often meant to be understood as a being from the Otherworld. The Otherworld is very much a refuge for the pagan elements that cannot or should not be found in a “contemporary” Christian Irish setting.<sup>3</sup> Cúchulainn’s father is one of the Otherworld divinities, the pre-Christian divinity Lugh. This may explain why Cúchulainn is singled out for attention by the *Síd*, on more than one occasion. In the *Serglige Con Chulainn* ‘Wasting-sickness of Cúchulainn’, a queen from the Otherworld invites Cúchulainn to visit the Otherworld to fight on her husband’s behalf. In the *Táin*, Cúchulainn is offered assistance in his trials in exchange for sexual relations with the Morrígan, and when he declines he is obliged to fight her. This is complicated by her continual shape-shifting into various animal forms, but he nevertheless succeeds in wounding her three times. Later on, unable to heal on her own (despite her divine nature), she tricks Cúchulainn into giving her his blessing, so she can regenerate her injured flesh.<sup>4</sup> Further, in

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<sup>2</sup>The Otherworld is featured prominently in such Ulster Cycle tales as *Serglige Con Culainn* (Cúchulainn’s Wasting Sickness) and *Echtraí Nera* (The Adventures of Nera). See M. Dillon, ed., *Serglige Con Culainn*. (Dublin, 1953); and K. Meyer, ed., ‘The Adventures of Nera’ *Revue Celtique* 10 (1889): 212-28.

<sup>3</sup>It is worth noting that the belief in the Otherworld persists today in some Celtic regions; folklore having to do with “fairies” often considers the Otherworld to be their place of origin.

<sup>4</sup>See *TBC* 986-2011; 2103-2120. Combat between mortal and Otherworld beings is uncommon, much as it would be for Greek or Norse heroes to engage in combat with their gods. We note that there are exceptions, such as semi-divine Hercules; or the Achaean Diomedes of the *Iliad*, who attacks

the *Táin*, Cúchulainn receives aid from the *Síd*: his father Lugh appears to fight on his behalf for three nights, and he receives healing from unnamed members of the *Síd* following his duel with Loch.<sup>5</sup>

Rostam likewise is called upon by the Shah to deal with threats of a supernatural nature, which are beyond the powers of other purely mortal heroes. This is not surprising, given that Rostam is the foster-grandson of the mythic Simorgh, the semi-divine bird, which can be found as early as the early Avestan literature, and his father is a hero who is accused of being a sorcerer. On his mother's side, Rostam is a descendant of the tyrant-*div*, Zohak. Although in the *Shahnameh* Zohak is euhemerized into a demonized mortal ruler (with snakes growing from his shoulders), in the Avestan he is the great dragon Azi-Dahak, created by the evil divinity Ahriman to wage war on creation.<sup>6</sup> Rostam inherits then a supernatural influence on both sides of his family tree, albeit a very sinister influence through his mother's side of the family.<sup>7</sup> Therefore when certain of the *divs* plague the Iranians (Akvan, the White Demon), it is no surprise that Rostam appears to be one of the only heroes capable of dealing with them.<sup>8</sup> Although there is no exact Iranian equivalent of the Otherworld – perhaps because under Islamic influence, such a realm would have been difficult to envision – the neighboring country of Mazandaran is perhaps a suitable parallel. Mazandaran is inhabited entirely by demons, albeit creatures who have a

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Apollo, Aphrodite, and Ares; see D. Miller, *The Epic Hero* (Baltimore, 2000), 219.

<sup>5</sup>TBC II. 2163-6: *Is and sin focheird in láech lossa side 7 lubri icci 7 slánsén i cneadaib 7 i créchtaib, i-náladaib 7 i n-ilgonaib Chon Culaind co téirno Cú Chulaind ina chothlud cen rathugud dó etir.* 'Then the warrior put herbs from the *Síd* and healing herbs and a healing salve into the wounds and cuts and sores of Cúchulainn, so that Cúchulainn healed in his sleep without knowing it at all.'

<sup>6</sup>It is noteworthy that whether or not Ferdowsi was aware of Zohak's pre-euhemerized form, he writes that Rostam's banner is an *azideha* 'dragon' (S. II.160.530). Cf. Davidson, O. 'The Crown Bestower in the Iranian Book of Kings', *Papers in Honor of Mary Boyce, Acta Iranica*, vol. 10 (1985), 69-71.

<sup>7</sup>When he hears of the impending nuptials, the Shah of Iran objects to Zal marrying Roudabeh for this very reason: he is afraid to see what offspring would be born to such a "mixed marriage".

<sup>8</sup>Another exception is Prince Isfandiyar, who is later tragically forced to fight Rostam in an exhausting and lengthy duel; Isfandiyar's adventures (mirrored on Rostam's) form a significant part of the later *Shahnameh*; see *Shahnameh* VI, pp.167-216.

society mirroring mortal society: they have peasants, a military, a shah – indeed even a shah’s “champion” (the White Demon).<sup>9</sup> When Shah Kavus undertakes the invasion of Mazandaran (with predictably disastrous results), only Rostam is able to undertake the perilous journey there, and defeat the enormous and powerful *div* champion who traps the Iranian army – simply by grappling the monster to death. Rostam’s supernatural strength allows him to function in this realm in a way which none of the Shah’s other champions are able to mimic. While they are utterly helpless, Rostam is able to penetrate the structure in which they are trapped, and kill the being who holds the entire army hostage. He also speaks with the Shah of Mazandaran as the representative of the Iranian Shah – so in a very real sense, he is mediating not just martially but socially between the human and monstrous sovereigns.

Each of these heroes serves as a sort of buffer between the community and the unknown and potentially hostile supernatural elements beyond the borders of civilization – this occurs both in formal and informal combat: formal, on the battlefield against *sid* or *div* armies; and informal, against monstrous opponents such as Akvan, or the Morrigan. Also, the heroes mediate verbally between the mortal and monstrous societies, speaking on behalf of humans who are otherwise unable to speak for themselves. Being the descendants of both human and inhuman beings, they are the natural choice for such a function – especially seeing that they both have not only a “wholesome” supernatural ancestry, but also a monstrous element as well, which will be discussed further below.

The hero is superior to his fellow warriors in his ability to overcome difficult and even supernatural opposition, as the early lives of Cúchulainn and Rostam show. Even in their childhood and adolescence Cúchulainn and Rostam are able to overcome large numbers of enemy combatants, and so mundane battles seem to hold little peril for them – and consequently, less glory – than for other men. Yet epic depends on violent conflict as one of its primary themes

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<sup>9</sup>This is shown in a scene where the Demon-Shah sends a herald (Sanjeh) to summon the *jang-saz* ‘war experienced’ White Demon to the Shah’s assistance against the invading Persians; this odd scene is very reminiscent of Persian champions being summoned to the Shah’s court in times of aid.

(perhaps *the* dominant theme), and so the hero depends on the supernatural world to provide challenging antagonists: against demonic or monstrous combatants, he can pit his skills and powers, at the risk of death but with a genuine chance for glory and fame.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most famous and colourful passages in the *Shahnameh* is the famous duel between Rostam and the White Demon (*Div Sepeed*). This tale belongs to the group of tales known as the ‘Seven Labors of Rostam’ (*Haft-Khan-i-Rostam*), which in all likelihood were influenced by the well-known Greek tales known as the ‘Twelve Labors of Hercules’.<sup>11</sup> To-date, few studies have identified any analogues to the Persian cycle of tales, with perhaps the single exception of the Herculean material. Nevertheless there exist remarkable and complex parallels between the ‘Seven Deeds of Rostam’ and the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, as I will demonstrate below. Further, the Irish *Cath Eógan meic Durthacht fri Conchobar* (The Battle of Eógan mac Durthacht against Conchobar) shows significant thematic parallels to both the *Beowulf* and the Persian ‘Seven Deeds’ narratives, and I will show that all three should be considered as an Indo-European analogue. It will prove instructive to present a summary of the events of the *Beowulf* narrative, followed by analogous events from ‘Rostam’s Duel with the White Demon’, and the Irish *Cath Eógan meic Durthacht fri Conchobar*. I will follow the summaries with an analysis and discussion of their narrative parallels.

### **Beowulf and Grendel**

The legend begins with the construction of the great Danish fortress Heorot ‘Hart House’ in celebration of King Hroðgar’s fifty years of sovereignty (*Beowulf* lines 64-79). Though the construction is successful and a great cultural center is born, the sounds of festivities awaken a terrible

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<sup>10</sup> Orchard argues this view, stating: ‘Beowulf fights monsters because only then is he well-matched. When he does face human champions, like Dæghrefn, his methods are distinctly inhuman, one might say almost monstrous; Dæghrefn is simply crushed to death (lines 2498-508)’; see A. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge: 1995), 32-33.

<sup>11</sup> The ‘Seven Deeds’ are found in the *Shahnameh* II. 21.275-610. It is difficult to know what access Ferdowsi had to sources dealing with Herakles, but it is almost universally agreed that the Greek material played some role in the formulation of the Persian ‘Seven Deeds’ narrative.

demon (Grendel), who inhabits a swamp in the nearby mountains (lines 86-125). Grendel begins a series of nightly raids, carrying off and eating the Danes. Despite the bravery of the king and his warriors, they are powerless to stop the monster's depredations; for twelve winters, Grendel continues his marauding unopposed (lines 131-193). In this time of despair and oppression, Beowulf (a Geatish hero) learns of Hroðgar's oppression and leaves Geatland for Denmark with a retinue of warriors, intent on slaying the demon and restoring the security of the kingdom (lines 194-228). Beowulf's credentials are established by his claims to past heroic deeds and monster-slaying; the poet tells us that: *sē wæs mon-cynnes mægnes strengest on þæm dæge þysse līfes æþele ond ēacen*. 'He was the mightiest human alive in that day and age, noble and mighty' (lines 196-7; Beowulf's account of his adventures occurs in lines 407-426). On the first night at Heorot, Beowulf lies awake in wait for the monster. When Grendel bursts into the fortress, Beowulf seizes him and a terrific wrestling match begins (lines 688-789). The Geatish retinue is powerless to intervene, since by his sorcery Grendel has rendered himself immune to all blades (lines 794-805). Realizing that Beowulf is too powerful a foe to overcome, Grendel attempts to break free of the grapple, but is only able to do so at the cost of a limb; he returns to his lair and dies from blood-loss (lines 755-6; 809-824). Beowulf is left holding the demon's arm as a grisly trophy, which is hung in the fortress as a reminder of the victory (lines 828-836). The Danish people hold a feast to celebrate Beowulf's heroism, but the victory is not entirely complete. That night as the revellers slumber, Grendel's Mother breaks into the fortress and seizes one of the king's trusted counsellors (lines 1251-1299). When daytime comes and the king laments his friend's death, Beowulf mounts an expedition into the mountains to seek out the swamp where the demons dwell (lines 1345-1382). The poem goes to some lengths to liken the swamp to the mouth of hell, and Beowulf dives down into it to find the she-demon (lines 1422-1495). Grendel's Mother perceives the hero and seizes him, dragging him into a dim, waterless cave at the bottom of the swamp (lines 1487-1517). A great struggle ensues, in which (at first) Beowulf gets better than he gives; however, through divine providence he is able to seize an ancient sword and dispatch the she-demon with a slash to the neck (lines 1518-1569). He finds the body of Grendel and beheads the monster, and

carries the head back to Hroðgar and the Danes (lines 1584-1590). Celebrations follow, and the elderly king sends Beowulf back to Geatland with praise, great rewards (horses, armor, and beaten gold) and regal advice (lines 1840-1880).

### **Beowulf and the Dragon**

Fifty years later, Beowulf rules as a king in Geatland, having inherited the kingdom from his uncle Hygelac (lines 2200-2210). As fate has it, one of the inhabitants from the kingdom finds a hoard of treasure, and takes a golden cup from it (lines 2210-2241). By misfortune, the horde belongs to a dragon, which (discovering the missing cup) begins to attack and burn settlements in retribution for the slight (lines 2287-2323). Beowulf is now an old man, but he is still physically powerful, and makes for the hoard of the dragon with a crew of eleven retainers (lines 2324-2565). All of the warriors abandon him for fear of the dragon (though one returns), and so he confronts the beast with only the aid of his kinsman and retainer Wiglaf (lines 2296-2299). The struggle is in three parts; it is fierce and long, and ends when Beowulf slays the beast – but he himself dies shortly after from the monster's venom (lines 2550-2820). Wiglaf assumes the Geatish kingship, and with the proper ceremony Beowulf is buried with the dragon's treasure (lines 3138-3182).

### **Rostam and the White Demon**

The 'Seven Quests' of Rostam begin when Kay Kavus, the Shah of Iran, launches a disastrous campaign into Mazandaran, an otherworldly realm which lies on the borders of Iran, and is populated by demons (*Shahnameh* II.4.15-185).<sup>12</sup> Though his counsellors try to persuade him that to do so is tantamount to suicide, the Shah's legendary hubris leads him to ignore their advice and begin the campaign (II.5.35-131). Kavus leaves behind Rostam and Rostam's father Zal so that they may protect Iran during his absence on campaign (II.11.132-4). At first the Iranian military enjoys great success killing demon peasants and farmers, and eventually they locate a fantastic city (called Mazandaran City) flowing with gold and jewels – the Iranians occupy the city, and use it as a staging base for

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<sup>12</sup> Mazandaran was, of course, a real region on the borders of Iran, but Ferdowsi's literary version is a supernatural reflection of the 'real' Mazandaran.

their raids (II.14.176-184).<sup>13</sup> When news of this invasion reaches the Shah of Mazandaran, he wastes no time in sending a messenger to summon his champion: the White Demon (II.12.155-194). This creature leaves its lair (a deep pit in the mountains), and comes to stop the Iranian menace. Using sorcery, the Demon summons a cloud of darkness which blinds the Persians and traps them inside the great city, where the monster comes daily to taunt them (II.15.195-215). Another demon, Arzhang, is left as guardian of the city, the Persian captives, and their wealth (II.16.216-222).<sup>14</sup> They despoil the Persians of riches and send them back to the Shah of Mazandaran. Shah Kavus suffers great despair at his helplessness and impotence to remedy the situation; yet somehow, he manages to send a messenger to Zal and Rostam, asking for help (II.17.223-32). Choosing a swift yet dangerous route over a slow yet safer course, Rostam undertakes a journey to Mazandaran (II.19.248-74). En route to the otherworldly realm, Rostam faces a clever lion (II.22.288-299), a three-fold assault by a fire-breathing dragon (II.26.338-88),<sup>15</sup> a seductive witch, who turns out to be a wizened hag (II.29.389-416), and a demonic chieftain named Olad, whom he recruits as a guide (II.31.417-496). He reaches Mount Aspruz, where his guide tells him about the city ahead (where Kavus and the Persians are imprisoned), and also warns him about the demon hero Arzhang, who guards the city and the captives on behalf of the White Demon (II.37.497-505). Rostam then heads towards the city, where he encounters Arzhang: the two heroes (man and monster) wrestle fiercely, but Rostam seizes the demon by the head and decapitates him (II.38.506-514). He enters the city, where he finds Shah Kavus and the Iranian captives; the overjoyed monarch warns Rostam that victory is not complete, and that the young hero must attack the White Demon in its lair before it gets news of Arzhang's death. The Shah tells Rostam of a route leading into the mountains, where he will find a terrifying grotto, guarded by monsters, and within dwells

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<sup>13</sup> Somewhat confusingly, this city is called 'Mazandaran', though it is not the dwelling place of the Shah of Mazandaran. A western parallel would be 'Rome' as both the name of both an empire and its capital city.

<sup>14</sup> Arzhang is said to be a 'captain' and 'hero' of the demon race, and one of the vassals of the White Demon.

<sup>15</sup> Fearing for his master, Rakhsh intervenes to help Rostam, who severs the head of the dragon; poison (*zahr*) pours from the stump of the neck.



the White Demon (II.39.527-543).<sup>16</sup> When he arrives at the pit, he finds it guarded by water-monsters; the poem likens the grotto to the mouth of hell (II.42.565). He is told by his guide that he should make his raid during the daytime, since the sun will limit the power of the demons and cause them to sleep (II.41.555-8). He kills some of the water-monsters before entering the grotto (II.42.561-3). Bearing his sword, he descends into the grotto (also called a well), where his sight is obscured by darkness; he washes his eyes, then he sees the mighty White Demon – a terrifying sight, iron-shod and huge as a mountain (II.42.565-570). The White Demon perceives Rostam and moves to attack him; Rostam manages to sever a limb of the creature, but the demon seizes him and the combatants begin to wrestle (II.42.571-5). The hero reminds himself that he cannot afford to lose the fight, and the White Demon begins to fear that this human warrior is too strong and that victory is beyond its reach (II.43.576-7). Rostam finally seizes the monster by the neck and stabs the creature's torso, killing it (II.43.580-2). He brings the head of Arzhang and the liver of the White Demon back to Shah Kavus, and frees the Persians from their imprisonment (II.44.594-615). After some final political intrigues and military strikes against the capital of Mazandaran, the Persian army returns to Iran (II.45.616-851). The Shah gives Rostam great rewards (clothing, horses, servants and gold), and sends him to his home province of Sistan (II.53.860-885).

### **The Battle with Eóghan Mac Durthacht**

The fourth episode of the 'boyhood deeds' in the (LU) *Táin* is known as the *Cath Eógan meic Durthacht fri Conchobar* (The Battle of Eógan mac Durthacht against Conchobar). This tale (one of the *macnámrada Con Culaind* (Boyhood Deeds of Cúchulainn), is found in the *Lebor na hUidre* recension of the *Táin* (TBC 480-524). The tale runs thus. War erupts between the forces of Conchobar, and the forces of the rival Ulster king Eógan mac Durthacht (TBC 480-2). Young Cúchulainn is left sleeping at Emain Macha, while Conchobar, Fergus, and the rest of the adult warriors engage Eógan mac Durthacht's forces; the forces of Emain Macha are badly routed, and their wailing wakes Cúchulainn (TBC 482-485). As he wakes to the

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<sup>16</sup> Here referred to as a *ghar* 'grotto', but elsewhere it is called a *chah* 'well', as on line 565.

sounds of dying Ulstermen, Cúchulainn shatters the stone pillars that brace his bed (*TBC* 485-6). He encounters Fergus at the doors to the fortress, and learns from him that Conchobar lies wounded on the battlefield. Though it is nighttime and pitch black, Cúchulainn heads to the battlefield to find the Ulster king (*TBC* 492). Upon arrival, he encounters a horrific spectacle: a zombie-like creature with only half a head approaches him, carrying half a corpse upon its back (*TBC* 492-3). The figure calls Cúchulainn by name, and asks him to help bear the corpse on his back (*TBC* 492-3). When Cúchulainn refuses, the dead man casts his dead brother on the young hero, but Cúchulainn throws the brother aside; a wrestling match ensues between the spectre and the young hero, in which the youth fares worse (*TBC* 494). At this point, the Badb (an Irish war-goddess) appears and taunts him, saying: ‘*Olc damnae laích fil and fo choassaib aurdragg!*’ ‘Bad potential for a warrior here, under the feet of spectres!’ (*TBC* 497-9). Enraged, Cúchulainn strikes the head off the spectral antagonist, and plays a macabre game of hurley using the creature’s head as a ball (*TBC* 501-2). When he finds Conchobar, he carries him safely to a nearby house, and is dispatched on a strange errand to find a roasted pig for the king (*TBC* 504-514). The youth finds a dreadful man cooking a roast pig (*TBC* 514-9); undaunted, he takes the man’s pig (and his head), and returns to Conchobar (*TBC* 519). Once Conchobar is reinvigorated from the food, he and Cúchulainn make for Emain Macha, finding Cuscraid (Conchobar’s son, ergo Cúchulainn’s cousin) en route, and Cúchulainn carries his cousin back to the fortress (*TBC* 520-3).

I will now organize these events in a table, chronologically, for the sake of demonstrating parallels. In instances where events are listed out of sequence, I indicate the anomaly with an asterisk (\*).

<b>Rostam</b>	<b>Beowulf</b>	<b>Cúchulainn</b>
1. News reaches the hero that Shah Kavus is endangered in a foreign land, and he goes to rescue him. (II.18.233-274)	1. News reaches the hero that King Hroðgar is endangered in a foreign land, and he goes to rescue him. (lines 131-193)	1. News reaches the hero that King Conchobar is endangered on the battlefield, and he goes to rescue him. (lines 480-491)

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| <p>2. The shah and his warriors are trapped in a fantastic city by a magical darkness, and attacked nightly by a 'warrior' demon, the White Demon. (II.15.198-222)</p> | <p>2. The king and his warriors dwell in a great hall, but are attacked nightly by a 'warrior' demon, Grendel. (lines 86-125)</p>          | <p>2. He reaches the battlefield by nightfall; the night is pitch-black. He is attacked by an undead warrior. (lines 491-7)</p> |
| <p>3. Both the army and king are unable to resist the demon, since it is a powerful sorcerer. (ibid; II.17.223-232)</p>  | <p>3. Both the warriors and king are unable to resist the demon, since it is a powerful sorcerer. (lines 131-193, 794-805)</p>             | <p>-</p>  |
| <p>4. The demon does not kill the king, but instead causes the deaths of his warriors, which torments the helpless king. (II.16.205-220)</p>                           | <p>4. The demon does not kill the king, but instead causes the deaths of his warriors, which torments the helpless king. (lines 168-9)</p> | <p>-</p>  |
| <p>5. The hero undertakes a long and dangerous journey to reach the shah. (II.21.275-496)</p>  | <p>5. The hero undertakes a long and dangerous journey to reach the king. (lines 194-228)</p>  | <p>-</p>  |
| <p>6. En route, the hero encounters and slays a dragon. (II.26.338-88.)</p>  | <p>*6. The hero fights and kills a dragon. (lines 2538-2708)</p>   | <p>-</p>  |
| <p>7. At the king's city, the hero wrestles the demon Arzhang, lieutenant of the White Demon. (II.38.506-515)</p>  | <p>7. At the king's hall, the hero wrestles with Grendel. (lines 736-836)</p>  | <p>7. The hero wrestles with one of the spectres. The Badb appears and mocks him. (lines 497-500)</p>                           |
| <p>8. The hero tears off the demon's head. (II.38.514-5)</p>   | <p>*8. The hero cuts off the demon's head. (lines 1584-1590)</p>   | <p>8. The hero knocks off the head of the spectre. (lines 501-2)</p>  |
| <p>9. The hero reports to the shah. (II.39.523-9)</p>  | <p>9. The hero reports to the king. (lines 957-978)</p>  | <p>9. The hero reports to the king. (lines 503-12)</p>  |

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| 10. The hero receives instructions from the shah on how to find the lair of the White Demon. (II.39.530-543)             | 10. The hero receives instructions from the king on how to find the lair of Grendel's Mother, a she-demon. (lines 1345-1382)             | 10. The hero receives orders from the king to find and retrieve a roast pig. (lines 513-4)             |
| 11. The shah says that the creature's lair is up in the mountains. (II.40.535)   | 11. The king says that the creature's lair is up in the mountains. (lines 1357-1361)   | -  |
| 12. The lair is likened to the mouth of hell. (II.42.565)  | 12. The lair is likened to the mouth of hell. (lines 1361-1381)  | -  |
| 13. Rostam launches his raid by day, since the sun makes the water-monsters guarding the cave lethargic. (II.41.555-564) | 13. Beowulf launches his raid by day, and finds that the water-monsters guarding the cave are lethargic. (lines 1422-1430)               | -  |
| 14. Rostam kills some of the water-monsters guarding the mouth of the pit, and descends into the darkness. (II.42.561-3) | 14. Beowulf's retinue kills some of the water-monsters guarding the mouth of the mere, and he dives into the darkness. (lines 1432-1441) | -  |
| 15. He finds water at the pit's bottom. (II.42.567)  | 15. He finds a water-free cave at the mere's bottom. (lines 1506-1517)   | -  |
| 16. Through the darkness the White Demon sees Rostam and attacks him. (II.42.570)  | 16. Through the darkness the she-demon sees Beowulf and attacks him. (lines 1497-1505)   | 16. Through the darkness Cúchulainn finds a dreadful man and a fire pit; he attacks him. (lines 516-8) |
| 17. Rostam severs a limb (a leg) from the White Demon. (II.42.573)   | *17. Beowulf tears a limb (an arm) from Grendel. (lines 809-824)   | -  |
| 18. Rostam and the   | 18. Beowulf and the  | 18. The hero and   |

demon wrestle fiercely. (II.42.574- 80)	she-demon wrestle fiercely. (lines 1508- 1556)	the dreadful man fight. (line 518)
19. The Demon considers escape as an option, but fears that it will loose its reputation amongst its own kind. (II.43.576-7)	*19. Grendel tries to escape, but Beowulf is too strong. (lines 761-794)	-
20. Rostam seizes the Demon by the neck and stabs with his dagger, killing it. (II.43.580-2)	20. Beowulf seizes a nearby sword and stabs the she-demon in the neck, killing it. (lines 1587-1569)	20. Cúchulainn cuts off the fearsome man's head, killing him. (line 519)
21. He returns to the king, bringing the head of the demon Arzhang and the liver of the White Demon. (II.44.594- 615)	21. He returns to the king, bringing the head of the Grendel. (lines 1612-1650)	21. He returns to the king with the head of the dreadful man and the pig. (line 519)
22. The shah richly rewards the hero, who becomes ruler of the kingdom of Sistan (a border region of Iran). (II.53.860-885)	22. The king richly rewards the hero, who later becomes ruler of a portion of Geatland. (lines 1840-1869)	-

These three tales possess a number of strong parallels, especially the two poems concerning Beowulf and Rostam. My analysis will focus mainly on these narratives, with parallels from the Celtic epic where relevant. Having laid down the events in chronological order, I will now discuss the narratives thematically, and will focus the discussion on these principle points:

1. The Monsters
2. Structures and Lairs
3. The Combats

### **The Monsters: Characteristics**

Perhaps the most curious element which appears in each of the three tales is appearance of two hostile supernatural characters: the *Beowulf* poem has Grendel and Grendel's

Mother; the *Shahnameh* has Arzhang and the White Demon; and 'The Battle of Eógán mac Durthacht against Conchobar' has the two undead warriors, and the man of dreadful countenance.<sup>17</sup> The reader will note that in all three cases, some of the monsters are nameless and are referred to instead by descriptive terms (e.g. 'mother', 'white'); so Grendel and Arzhang are named, but not their counterparts; the Irish undead are both nameless, neither is the dreadful man named.<sup>18</sup>

These monsters are remarkable, because in addition to the characteristics which are expected in a demon or fiend, these creatures possess (not without irony) traits which are normally used for human heroes.<sup>19</sup> Grendel, for example, is described using such Old English terms as: *ellen* 'mighty' (line 86), *heal-ðegn* 'hall-servant' (line 142), *hyrde fyrena* 'guardian of wickedness' (line 750), *mearc-stappa* 'march-warden' (line 1003), *ren-weard* 'hall-guard', and *wer* 'man' (line 105) and *wiht* 'human' (line 120); yet monstrous terms such as *æglæca* 'monster' (line 159),<sup>20</sup> *ellor-gast* 'departing spirit' (line 907); *gæst* 'spectre' (line 1002), *feond* 'enemy' (line 1001), *unhælo* 'accursed' (line 120), *hel-rūnan* 'necromancer, one who is skilled in the mysteries of hell' (line 163), *eoten* 'giant' (line 761), he is the subject of such verbs as *rixode* 'ruled' (linē44); he is capable of murder (not merely killing); he has a heathen soul (line 852).<sup>21</sup> He can be sad (line 105), he feels fear (lines

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<sup>17</sup> Arguably, the two undead warriors can be read to represent a single figure, as only one brother appears to speak with and physically interact with Cúchulainn.

<sup>18</sup> In describing the man, the *Táin* reads (lines 516-8): *Ba mór a úathmaire ind fir*. 'The dreadfulness of the man was great.'

<sup>19</sup> Orchard (*Pride and Prodigies* 29) states: 'Moreover, despite the clear antagonism between the worlds of monsters and men, there is, as in the *Passion of Saint Christopher* and *Judith* in the same manuscript, something deeply human about the 'monsters'. All are given human attributes at some stage, and the poet even goes so far as to evoke our sympathy for their plight.' For a full discussion of the human attributes of the monsters, see Orchard *Pride and Prodigies* 27-32.

<sup>20</sup> The term *æglæca* (translated with such various terms as 'wretch', 'monster', 'demon', 'hero') has attracted considerable attention; see D. Gillam, 'The Use of the Term *æglæca* in *Beowulf* at Lines 813 and 2592', *Studia Germanica Gandensia* 3 (1961): 145-69; S. Kuhn, 'Old English *æglæca* - Middle Irish *ochlach*' in *Linguistic Method: Essays in Honor of Herbert Penzl*, eds. I. Rauch and G. Carr, *Janua linguarum series maior* 79 (The Hague, 1979), 213-30, from Orchard 2003.

<sup>21</sup> For more on the terms and their translations, the reader is encouraged to

750-7) and hate (line 142). He is a member of *Caines cynne* 'the kin of Cain' (line 107).<sup>22</sup> Grendel's Mother has a similar range of nouns: she is an *āglæc-wif* 'terrifying woman' (line 1259), a *brim-wylf* 'sea-wolf' (line 1505), a *mere-wif* 'swamp-woman' (line 1519), a *modor* 'mother' (lines 1258, 1276), a *mān-scaða* 'man-slayer' (line 1339), an *ellor-gæst* 'alien spirit' (line 1349); capable of sorrow (lines 1278) and meditations on vengeance (line 1259); along with other horrors, she is descended from Cain (line 1260-6), yet simultaneously fatherless and accursedly supernatural (lines 1355-7). In terms of appearance, the text tells us frustratingly little – at a distance, both Grendel and his Mother are said to appear in rough human likeness, but are too large to be mistaken for mortals (lines 1350-4).<sup>23</sup>

As the poem shows, Grendel and Grendel's Mother are not simply mindless ogres, but monsters with attributes similar to their human prey. This mix of human and monstrous imagery creates an unnatural antagonist who possesses both animal savagery and human understanding, which makes Grendel a very different threat than a wild animal or enemy champion: he can be pitied for his loneliness and suffering, but also despised for his willingness to murder and cause

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consult A. diPaolo Healey *et al.*, ed., *Dictionary of Old English* (Toronto, 1986–); see also: J. Bosworth and T. N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collections of Joseph Bosworth* (Oxford, 1881–98); *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Supplement*, by T. N. Toller (Oxford, 1908–21); *Enlarged Agenda and Corrigenda to the Supplement by T. Northcote Toller To An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collections of Joseph Bosworth*, by A. Campbell (Oxford, 1972). See also: T. P. Feldman, 'A Comparative Study of *feond*, *deofl*, *syn* and *hel* in *Beowulf*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 88 (1987):159–74.

<sup>22</sup>Grendel's descent from Cain is the subject of a considerable amount of scholarship; see, for example, S. Bandy, 'Cain, Grendel, and the Giants of Beowulf', *Papers on Language and Literature* 9 (1973): 235–49; C. Donahue, 'Grendel and the *Clanna Cain*', *Journal of Celtic Studies* 1 (1950): 167–75; O. Emerson, 'Legends of Cain, Especially in Old and Middle English', *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 21 (1906), 831–929; T. P. Feldman, 'Grendel and Cain's Descendants', *Literary Onomastic Studies* 8 (1981): 71–87; N. Peltola, 'Grendel's Descent from Cain Reconsidered', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 73 (1972): 284–91.

<sup>23</sup>The difference in size must be significant, since the poem states that it takes four men to carry the head of Grendel (lines 1634–39). For more on the physiology of Grendel, see M. Lapidge, 'Beowulf and the Psychology of Terror', in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period: Studies in Honor of Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.*, ed. H. Damico and J. Leyerle, *Studies in Medieval Culture* 32 (Kalamazoo, 1993), 373–402.

suffering needlessly. The poem characterises him as a type of exiled monstrous (otherworldly) champion, aggressively defending his territory (i.e. the wilderness) against the order of human society, when the growing Danish territory begins to encroach on his domain; his Mother carries out the blood-feud in revenge for the slaying of her son, a uniquely human act.<sup>24</sup>

The White Demon is the *de facto* champion of the Otherworld, and this is made clear by the manner in which ‘it’ (its gender being unclear) is introduced.<sup>25</sup> When the Persian army attacks the Otherworld realm of Mazandaran, the shah of the demonic kingdom panics and sends a messenger to summon the champion of the demons, the White Demon.<sup>26</sup> Thus from the moment of its introduction, the White Demon’s role as the defender of the demonic society is established clearly by the narrative – and this makes good sense, given that the demonic society has peasants, soldiers, and a shah, much like any mortal kingdom. While, like the *Beowulf* poem, the *Shahnameh* does not trouble itself with a detailed description of the monster’s physical appearance, the White Demon is referred to as: *koh* ‘mountain’ (II.42.568), *kohi siyah* ‘a dark mountain’ (II.42.570), *barf-muyi* ‘snow-haired’ (II.42.569); he is iron-armored and iron-crowned (II.42.570).<sup>27</sup> The rich Persian tradition of illustration has provided many examples of how Persian audiences envisioned the demon champion: the White Demon is larger than Rostam (himself a giant among men), predictably white-haired, frequently spotted, horned, or tailed. It sometimes is shown wearing a

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<sup>24</sup> Consider, for example, the very human theme of exile, which characterises Grendel’s solitary existence; see J. Baird, ‘Grendel the Exile’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 67 (1966): 375–81; see also S. Greenfield, *Hero and Exile: the Art of Old English Poetry*, ed. G. Brown (London, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> This is in large part due to the fact that Classical Persian does not have a gendered 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun, and that its nouns (as in Modern English) are not identifiably masculine or feminine as they are in Avestan, Old English, or Old Irish. I am indebted to Professor Subtelny, who informs me that in some traditions of the *Shahnameh*, the White Div is understood to be a female demon; this explains the mixed practices used in illustrating the monster. For example, on folio 85v of Istanbul, Suleymaniye Kutuphanesi, MS Hacı Besir Aga 486, the White Demon is depicted with breasts, which suggests a feminine or neuter gender.

<sup>26</sup> It is strange, however, that while Arzhang is the nominal chief of the demons’ army, he himself does not take the field as part of any host, but fights alone as a champion.

<sup>27</sup> *Shahnameh* II.42.570: *ah ahan sa’ad vazaan kulah* ‘He is iron-armored and iron-crowned’.



short kilt, it sometimes bears a club (not mentioned in the epic but frequently drawn), and is depicted with male and/or female physical traits (i.e. genitalia and/or breasts), depending on the artist's tastes.<sup>28</sup> Arzhang's appearance is not described by the *Shahnameh* (though is shown in manuscript illustrations), but the poem refers to him as: *salar* 'hero, chieftain' (II.16.216), *sepahbad* 'military leader, general' (II.37.503), and *pahlevan* 'champion' (II.37.503). When depicted in art, he appears most commonly depicted as a large, black or dark-blue skinned humanoid, with a demonic face, horns, and tale; he wears a short kilt, and frequently bears a mace.<sup>29</sup> These two demons belong to an actual society of monsters, as has been said above, which mirrors human society to a large extent. They are capable of speech and understanding speech, which is demonstrated when the White Demon gives orders to his vassals and sends replies to the Shah of Mazandaran through Arzhang.<sup>30</sup> Further, he is capable of *human* speech, as he mocks the Shah of Iran after Persians have been captive for a week.<sup>31</sup>

The Irish 'Battle of Eógán mac Durthacht against Conchobar' from the *Táin* presents Cúchulainn with three very strange antagonists: a pair of spectral brothers, and a man at a fire-pit, who is described as very 'horrific' or 'dreadful'. Very little is said about these antagonists, apart from Cúchulainn's initial impressions of them, though this is due in

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<sup>28</sup>For examples of manuscripts with illustrations of the White Demon, see The Iranian National Museum, manuscript 4336, folio 152 (date unknown); National Library of Russia, Dorn 329, folio 047v (1333 CE); For examples of manuscripts with illustrations of the White Demon, I refer the reader to: Tehran, Iranian National Museum, MS 4336, fo.152; Moscow, National Library, MS Dorn 329, fo.47v; Cairo, Dar-ul-Kutub, MS Ta'rikh Farisi 73, fo.41r; Manchester, John Rylands University Library, MS Ryl Pers 933, fo.31v; Tehran, Gulistan Museum, MS 716, fo.101. These and other illustrations are available online from the Cambridge University *Shahnameh* project at: <<http://Shahnama.caret.cam.ac.uk/>>. Cf. Istanbul, Suleymaniye Kutuphanesi, MS Haci Besir Aga 486, fo.85v.

<sup>29</sup>For illustrations of Arzhang, see: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ouseley Add.176, fo.7r; London, British Library, MS Oriental 12688, fo.94v; London, British Library, MS I.O.Islamic 301, fo.51v; Manchester, John Rylands University Library, MS Ryl Persian 909, fo. 65v; Tehran, Museum of Contemporary Arts, Shah Tahmasp, fo.122v; cf. Tehran, Gulistan Museum, MS 1946, fo.134.

<sup>29</sup> *Shahnameh* II.16.217–20.

<sup>30</sup> *Shahnameh* II.16.217–20.

<sup>31</sup> *Shahnameh* II.16.207–11.

part to the shortness of the tale.<sup>32</sup> No speculations are made about their region of origin, neither are they identified by their garments.<sup>33</sup> One of the spectres is missing half his head (though he is animate and mobile), and he carries half of his brother (inanimate) on his back; the text does not specify if the division is vertical or horizontal.<sup>34</sup> They are referred to curiously as *aurddrag* (OIr. ‘spectre, phantom’, cf. ON *draugr*), which indicates that they are some sort of undead; the tale itself makes it clear that they are not ghosts, but corporeal fiends. The motif of the undead is not a common one in the Ulster cycle of tales, though it is noteworthy that the Yellow Book of Lecan manuscript, which contains a version of Recension I of the *Táin*, also contains the the *Echtra Nerai* ‘Adventures of Nera’, in which there appears an undead (and hanged) criminal who interacts with Nera (the protagonist) and also murders a family in the early part of the tale.<sup>35</sup> As the two spectres are encountered on the battlefield at night, they may well be dead warriors – and indeed, the spectres initiate combat when Cúchulainn refuses to carry one of the spectres. The more animate of the two spectres is capable of speech (and thus thought), since he is able to speak with Cúchulainn, and further he recognises Cúchulainn and calls him by name.<sup>36</sup> However the spectre does not identify himself or his brother; this namelessness suggests an incompleteness of being, emphasized by the physical incompleteness of their bodies – in fact Dooley suggests that the dead warriors may be understood not only as two siblings, but as a polluted and

<sup>32</sup>The tale is a small portion of the ‘Boyhood Deeds’, with only forty-three lines (lines 880-523).

<sup>33</sup>Later in the *TBC* (lines 3545-870), at the request of the Connacht king Ailill, Fergus identifies troops of warriors and individual champions based on descriptions of their weapons and garments.

<sup>34</sup>The *TBC* (line 493) reads: *in fer 7 leth a chind fair 7 leth fir aile for a muin.* ‘A Man with (only) half his head, and half of another man upon his back’.

<sup>35</sup>Kuno Meyer, ed., *The Adventures of Nera (Echtra Nerai or Táin Bé Aingen)*, from Egerton 1782, fo. 71b-73b, *Revue Celtique* 10 (1889): 212-228. For a study of concept of the undead in Norse literature, see N. Chadwick, ‘Norse Ghosts: a Study in the *draugr* and the *haugbúi*’, *Folklore* 57 (1946), 50-65 and 106-27. Cf. J. Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy: Encounters with Monsters in Early Irish Texts; an Investigation Related to the Process of Christianization and the Concept of Evil*, *Instrument Practica* 29 (Turnhout, 1996).

<sup>36</sup>*TBC* (lines 494-5): *Congna lem, a Chú Chulaind,* ‘ol sé. ‘Rom bíth & tucus leth mo bráthar ar mo muin. Beir síst lim.’ ‘Ní bér,’ or sé. ‘Aid me, Cúchulainn!’ he said ‘I’m wounded and I’ve brought half my brother on my back. Take him from me.’ ‘I won’t’ said (Cúchulainn).

undifferentiated pair, for which reasons Cúchulainn (very rightly) is reluctant to engage them.<sup>37</sup> The other antagonist of the tale is the ‘dreadful man’, whom the young hero finds cooking a pig at a firepit in the middle of the forest; he bears weapons (we are not told whether this is sword or spear) while he is cooking, which identifies him as a warrior-figure.<sup>38</sup> The man does not speak to Cúchulainn, neither is he addressed before Cúchulainn attacks him. The tale does not specify if the man is terrific by virtue of deformity (perhaps monstrously so?) or by virtue of his size. As with the two spectres from earlier in the same tale, we do not know the origins of this silent figure, and indeed the tale promotes a sense of unnaturalness or wrongness to have a silent living man, and a talking dead man within several short lines of each other. While it is possible to speculate that this figure could be a mortal warrior, forest-dwelling hunter, or bandit, the context (the emphasis on the theme of Horror) strongly suggests that this figure belongs to the hostile Otherworld forces which are active and abroad on the night in question.<sup>39</sup>

A final human characteristic (or motif) that the monsters from all three traditions share is a social relationship with another monster: Grendel and Grendel’s Mother are blood relatives; Arzhang is the *pahlevan* ‘champion’ of the White Demon; the two spectres which Cúchulainn encounters on the battlefield are identified as brothers. In the case of the English and Iranian epics, this relationship is mentioned by the authors as justification for hostility from the second

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<sup>37</sup> *TBC* lines 494-6. Dooley states (*Playing the Hero* 111-12): ‘The cultural poetics of warrior initiation constructs the narrative in specific ways: as a night raid, the scene is one of inversion and transgression and it is precisely the horror of the dark unclean that constitutes the theatre of meaning. The encounter with the walking wounded deconstructs humans at war into two unsustainable halves. The brothers, twinned in their split condition constitute a paradox; linked and unnaturally unitary as they now are, one half-headed and one half-bodied, they can no longer be reconstituted as normal integrals. That they speak at all represents a challenge and a danger: they are already in the world of the shameful dead, and to consort with them is to risk being taken with them to their shadowy world beyond the human. The throwing of the half-body at the hero is a deliberate effort to engage him through physical contact in the polluted world of the dead.’

<sup>38</sup> *TBC* lines 516-9.

<sup>39</sup> Dooley states that the attack on the dreadful man and subsequent seizing of his goods can be read as a ‘virtual raid on the otherworld’; for a discussion of this episode, and the theme of *úathbás* ‘terror’ in this tale, see Dooley 112-13.

monster encountered: Grendel's mother attacks Heorot out of a desire for vengeance;<sup>40</sup> Rostam is ordered by Kavus to attack the White Demon before it learns of Arzhang's death and retaliates.<sup>41</sup> In the case of the Irish fiends, the animate brother attacks Cúchulainn following an implied insult to the spectre's brother (i.e. that Cúchulainn will not carry the half-corpse).

### The Monsters as Magicians

In addition to their supernatural strength and resilience, Grendel and the White Demon are more dangerous than other brutish monsters (e.g. the 'common' demons & sea-serpents who guard the villains' lairs) in their respective poems because they are skilled in sorcery.<sup>42</sup> Grendel is referred to as a *hel-rūnan* 'hell-knower' or 'witch' (line 163), and he uses sorcery to protect himself from the blades of the Danes (*Beowulf* 798-805):

*Hie þæt ne wiston, þa hie gewin drugon,  
heardhicgende hildemecgas,  
ond on healfa gehwone heawan þohton,  
sawle secan, þone synscaðan  
ænig ofer eorþan irenna cyst,  
guðbilla nan, gretan nolde,  
ac he sigewæpnum forsworen hæfde,  
ecga gehwylcre.*

'They did not know as they neared the enemy, those battle-hardened retainers, trying to hew from every side, trying to end the villain's life, that not even the best iron (blade) or spear on earth could harm him, since he had foresworn all blades.'<sup>43</sup>

Grendel's use of sorcery takes place 'off-stage', so the reader

<sup>40</sup> *Beowulf* lines 1276-959: *ond his modor þa gyt, gifre ond galgmod, gegan wolde, sorhfulne sið, sunu deað wrecan.* 'And his mother still sad and bitter wanted to avenge the death of her son, on a sorrowful quest.'

<sup>41</sup> *Shahnameh* II.39.531-2: *Gar ayad bi Div Sepeed agahi / kaz Arzhang shod ravi giti tahi/ hame ranghayi to be bar shod/ ze divan jehan pur az lashkar shod* (Kavus said): 'If news of Arzhang's death reaches the White Demon, you'll be in great trouble, and the world will be full of an army of demons'.

<sup>42</sup> These lesser monsters (Persian demons, Anglo-Saxon wurm-kin, and sea-drakes) are overcome with little difficulty, unlike the greater fiends whose lairs they guard.

<sup>43</sup> All Old English translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

does not see him casting spells or enchantments, but the results are undeniable: no blade (sword, axe, spear) can harm the fiend.<sup>44</sup> He also carries a *glof* 'sack' made of *dracan fellum* 'the skin of dragons' and *deofles cræftum* 'the craft of devils', clearly a unique piece of equipment and supernatural in origin.<sup>45</sup> Given his magical skill and innate physical gifts, Grendel is able to raid Heorot nightly with impunity, until Beowulf grapples him, thus circumventing whatever immunities Grendel enjoys to slashing or piercing weapons.<sup>46</sup> While Grendel's mother is never spoken of as a witch per se, although she too possesses an immunity to 'mortal' weapons, much like her Grendel, it is reasonable to assume that she is able to use similar sorcery as her son, or else he has enchanted her to be as resilient as himself.<sup>47</sup> While the use of magic in *Beowulf* is only a subtle part of the narrative, its effects are critical to the plot, as Grendel's extraordinary resilience to man-made weapons is what necessitates the intervention of the Geatish hero.

The White Demon is also a sorcerer: indeed, this appears to be the main attribute that raises him above and beyond the other 'champions' of the demon race.<sup>48</sup> When facing the question of how to stop Shah Kavus and the massive Iranian army, the White Demon does not use brute force (though it is clear from the fight with Rostam that battle would have been a viable option), but rather sorcery. The monster summons a

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<sup>44</sup>For further reading on Grendel's invulnerability, see: E. Laborde, 'Grendel's Glove and his Immunity to Weapons', *Modern Language Review* 18 (1923): 202–04; G. Storms, 'Grendel the Terrible', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 73 (1972): 427–36.

<sup>45</sup>*Beowulf* lines 2085–8. Orchard (*A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, 121–22) compares Grendel's glove with the glove of Skrímir, a giant Thor encounters. Cf. E. Anderson, 'Grendel's *glof* (*Beowulf* 2085b–99), and Various Latin Analogues', *Mediaevalia* 8 (1982), 1–8.

<sup>46</sup>For an examination of magic in *Beowulf*, see P. B. Taylor, '*searonidas*: Old Norse Magic and Old English Verse', *Studies in Philology* 80 (1983), 109–25; also P. B. Taylor 'Grendel's Monstrous Arts', *In Geardagum* 6 (1984), 1–12.

<sup>47</sup>For studies on Grendel's Mother and her supernatural resilience, see, for example, C. Alfano, 'The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother', *Comitatus* 23 (1992): 1–16; Chadwick, (1959): 171–203; cf. Gillam (1961): 151–52.

<sup>48</sup>See: C. Herrenschmidt & J. Kellens 'Daiva' in *Encyclopedia Iranica* ed. E. Yarshater (New York, 1996–2007); M. Omidsalar 'Div' in *Encyclopedia Iranica* ed. E. Yarshater (New York, 1996–2007); see also M. Omidsalar 'Magic in Literature and Folklore in the Islamic Period' in *Encyclopedia Iranica* ed. E. Yarshater (New York, 1996–2007).

magical cloud of darkness, which covers the city and blinds the entire Persian army (*Shahnameh* II.15.196-8):

*Shab amad yeki abr ba sepah / jehan kard chon ravi zangi sepah  
/ Cho dariya qaveest gofti jehan / hameh roshaniyesh gashte nehan  
/ Yeki khimeh zad bar sar az davad va qir / siyeh shod jehan  
cheshmha khir-i-khir.*

‘Night came, and darkness came over the army, the world turned dark as an Ethiopian’s face. You’d say that the world was like a sea of tar, and all the light had gone to ground. A tent of smoke and bitumen was over everyone’s heads, and the world turned dark before (the soldiers’) eyes.’<sup>49</sup>

Further, when Rostam finds Shah Kavus in the demons’ city, the Shah tells him that the ‘cure’ for the blindness is three drops of the White Demon’s blood in the eyes of the blind, which indicates that the demon is the source of the blindness.<sup>50</sup> While references are made frequently to sorcerers among the ranks of the demon army, neither Arzhang or the demonic host’s other captains demonstrate any magical abilities, apart from the White Demon. Nevertheless, the single enchantment that the Persian monster uses is sufficient to effect the events of the narrative in a critical way, i.e. the invasion of Mazandaran is brought to a decisive halt and the army and Shah are incapacitated.

### Structures and Lairs

An examination of the structures and important locations of the three epics yields a surprising number of parallel motifs. One of the first observations which even a cursory reading will show is that the major events (combats, interactions between hero and king) do not occur in a region to which the hero belongs, but instead take place in a remote locale which necessitates a journey to rescue the monarch. Once the journey is complete, the hero seeks and finds the king in a man-made structure of great value. In the case of the Beowulf poem, Beowulf leaves Geatland and undertakes a journey overseas to the neighbouring land of Denmark to rescue

<sup>49</sup> All Persian transcriptions and translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>50</sup> This remedy (i.e. the cause of the disability is also its cure) is found in *Shahnameh* II.40.541–43.

Hroðgar in the great hall ‘Heorot’.<sup>51</sup> In the case of Rostam, the hero undertakes a perilous journey to the Otherworld realm of Mazandaran and to Mazadaran city itself, in order to rescue Shah Kavus, who has taken over Mazandaran city as a kind of ‘staging base’ for his invasion. In the Irish tale, Cúchulainn finds Conchobar on the battlefield and carries him to a house (conveniently nearby), about which the story says little except that the young hero leaves the king there when he goes on his errand to find a roast pig.

If we examine the description of Heorot and Mazandaran city, we find significant formulaic parallels. The *Beowulf* poet describes the approach of Beowulf and his retinue towards Heorot as follows (*Beowulf* 306-311):

*Guman onetton,  
sigon ætsomne, oppæt hy sæl timbred,  
geatolic ond goldfah, ongyton mihton;  
þæt wæs foremærost foldbuendum  
receda under roderum on þæm se rica bad;  
lixte se leoma ofer landa fela.*

The warriors advanced, and together they saw the wide-beamed and **gold-covered** hall; that was the greatest hall for folk under **heaven**, in which the king dwelled; its light could be seen in many regions.

Ferdowsi describes the otherworldly Mazandaran City with similar imagery (*Shahnameh* II.14.176-180):

*Yeki chon behasht bareen shahr did / keh z khirmi nezad u behar  
did / Bi har kohi va bazin fazoun az hezar/ bar sitar ba toq va  
ba goshvar/ Pur sitande zeen bshtar ba kulah / bi chahre bkardar  
tabande mah / Bi harjahi ganji puragande zar / bi yekjahi denar  
va degar gehar/ Bi indaze gard indaresh charpayi / biheshtast  
gofti hamidun bijayi*

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<sup>51</sup>A considerable amount of scholarship exists on Beowulf and material culture, including archaeological studies of early Danish/Anglo-Saxon halls and settlements; see, for example, R. Cramp ‘Beowulf and Archaeology’, *Medieval Archaeology* 1 (1957): 57–77; R. Cramp, ‘The Hall in Beowulf and in Archaeology’, in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period: Studies in Honor of Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.*, eds. Helen Damico and J. Leyerle (Studies in Medieval Culture 32; Medieval Institute, Kalamazoo, 1993), 331–46; C. Hills, ‘Beowulf and Archaeology’, in *A Beowulf Handbook*, eds. R. Bjork and J. Niles (Lincoln, 1997), 291–310.

(The hero) saw a city that appeared like **heaven**, filled with all sorts of pleasures. In each building and street there were a thousand maidens with torcs and earrings, wearing wreaths and with faces (as beautiful as) the moon. Every part of the city was **covered in gold**, and **gold** coins and gems were everywhere. Herds dwelled in the surrounding region, and you would call that place ‘**heaven**’.

In each epic, ‘heaven’ and ‘gold’ are used when describing the dwelling places of the kings Hroðgar and Kavus. Specifically, Heorot and Mazandaran City are covered in gold, likely as roof-top decorations, making them visible to the eye at a distance.<sup>52</sup> The hall and city are symbols of security and successful human society, and both poems use evocative imagery to hint at the potential these centers have for the benefit and pleasure of those who dwell there. In fact the *Beowulf* poet goes so far as to say that Heorot is the *foremærost* ‘foremost’ building on earth at that time, while Ferdowsi goes so far as to place Mazandaran city in the otherworld realm of Mazandaran – it is not even really intended for human use.<sup>53</sup> These structures are almost too good to be true, and in fact both tales demonstrate shortly that any sense of joy or security is quickly destroyed when the demons (Grendel and the White Demon) begin their assaults, which defeats the purpose of the hall or city, and turns them each into a place of horror and sorrow for the powerless monarchs. Neither is either structure destined to last: Kavus cannot hold Mazandaran City for long and must

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<sup>52</sup>For an examination of Heorot and the theme of gold, see A. Lavin, *Gold-Hall and Earth-Dragon: ‘Beowulf’ as Metaphor* (Toronto, 1998); cf. C. Scull, ‘Before Sutton Hoo: Structures of Power and Society in Early East Anglia’, in *The Age of Sutton Hoo*, ed. M. Carver (Woodbridge, 1992), 3-23; B. Raw, ‘Royal Power and Royal Symbols in *Beowulf*’, in *The Age of Sutton Hoo*, ed. M. Carver (Woodbridge, 1992), 167-74.

<sup>53</sup>In reality, Mazandaran is a northern province of Iran, and is characterized by coastal plains and rugged mountainous terrain; snowfall is frequent during all seasons in the mountainous areas, making it an inhospitable region. The Mazandari were especially resistant to Islamic conversion, and maintained a strong Zoroastrian population well into the late medieval period. The demonic, otherworldly realm described by Ferdowsi has little bearing on the historical region sharing the same name. For more geographic details on Mazandaran, see H. Rabino, *Mazandaran and Astarbad* (London, 1928); also M. Kazembeyki, *Society, Politics and Economics in Mazandaran, Iran, 1848-1914* (London, 2003).



ultimately withdraw to Iran, while the *Beowulf* poet reminds us that Heorot is fated to burn to the ground.<sup>54</sup>

The primary difference between the two centers is that Heorot is a single structure, while Mazandaran City is made up of many buildings. Yet we are never told which building Kavus uses as his own hall, and no particular building is described in any detail – for the sake of the narrative, the entire city appears to operate as a single structure. It is important to point out that this difference in detail (hall vs. city) relates to a difference in the respective cultures of the epics: early medieval Germanic culture did not have large population centers on the same scale as Baghdad, Fars, or Tus. Neither did Persian lords commonly rule from isolated fortresses or halls, but rather from towns or cities.<sup>55</sup>

In short, the human ‘structures’ share similar motifs of surpassing excellence, gold, and the references to heaven. The other region of importance in each epic is the lair of the monster – and indeed, here we find more striking parallels than in the descriptions of the human centers. In his study *Pride and Prodigies*, Andy Orchard discusses the early Latin and Anglo-Saxon Christian sources from which the *Beowulf* poet drew the imagery used in his description of Grendel’s hellish mere.<sup>56</sup> It is important to state that there is strong evidence that the poet had access to a range of literature describing hell, with an emphasis on darkness, fire, and monsters.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Shahnameh* II.62.852-4; *Beowulf* lines 80-6.

<sup>55</sup> The exceptions to this rule are Zal and Rostam, who rule the border region (later kingdom) of Sistan from a remote mountain fortress. For an examination of the warrior aristocracy and feudalism in pre-Islamic Iran, see J. D. Howard-Johnston, *East Rome, Sasanian Persia and the End of Antiquity: Historiographical and Historical Studies* (Burlington, 2006); and for studies on medieval Persian social structure and culture, M. Brosius, *The Persians: an Introduction* (New York, 2006); V. Curtis and S. Stewart, eds., *The Age of the Parthians* (New York, 2007); A. Lindsay, *The Persian Empire* (Chicago, 2005); and J. Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia: from 550 BC to 650 AD*, trans. A. Azodi (New York, 1996).

<sup>56</sup> Orchard, A. *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript*. (Cambridge: 1995), pp.37-57.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, M. Andrew, ‘Grendel in Hell’, *English Studies* 62 (1981): 401–10; W. Lawrence, ‘Grendel’s Lair’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 38 (1939): 477–80; A. Renoir, ‘The Terror of the Dark Waters: a Note of Virgilian and Beowulfian Techniques’, in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. L. Benson, Harvard English Studies 5 (Cambridge, MA, 1974), 147–60; cf. R. Schraeder, ‘Sacred Groves, Marvellous Waters, and Grendel’s Abode’, *Florilegium* 5 (1983): 76–84. I

Through the voice of Hroðgar, the *Beowulf* poem describes the mere as follows (*Beowulf* 1357-67):

*Hie dygel lond  
 warigeað, wulfhleopu, windige næssas,  
 frecne fengelad, ðær fyrgenstream  
 under næssa genipu niþer gewiteð,  
 flod under foldan. Nis þæt feor heonon  
 milgemearces þæt se mere standeð;  
 ofer þæm hongiað hrinde bearwas,  
 wudu wyrstum fæst wæter oferhelmað.  
 þær mæg nihta gehwæm niðwundor seon,  
 fyr on flode. No þæs frod leofað  
 gumena bearna, þæt þone grund wite.*

They dwell in a secret land, wolf-slopes, windy headlands, dangerous fen-tracts, where the **mountain-stream** goes down under the head-lands' mist, the flood under the ground. It is not far from here in the tally of miles, where the mere stands, over which hang frosty groves, a wood firm-rooted overshadows the **water**. There one can see each night a **dreadful wonder**, fire on the **flood**. **No one lives so wise of the sons of men that he knows the bottom.**<sup>58</sup>

Several lines later *Beowulf* arrives at the mere with his retinue. The poem continues (*Beowulf* 1408-17):

*Ofereode þa æþelinga bearn  
 steap stanhlido, stige nearwe,  
 enge anþaðas, uncuð gelad,  
 neowle næssas, nicorhusa fela.  
 He feara sum beforan gengde  
 wisra monna wong sceawian,  
 oppæt he færinga fyrgenbeamas  
 ofer hærne stan hleonian funde,  
 wynleasne wudu; wæter under stod  
 dreorig ond gedrefed.*

Then the sons of princes passed over **steep, rocky, slopes**, thin courses, narrow single tracks, unknown paths, precipitous crags, **many dwellings of water-monsters**; (*Beowulf*) went on ahead with a few wise

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discuss the theme of the infernal realms further below pp.169–72, 185–90.

<sup>58</sup> Here I use Orchard's own translation, pp.37-8.

companions to view the place: until suddenly he perceived mountainous trees towering over the grey rock, a joyless wood; **water stood beneath**, bloody and disturbed.<sup>59</sup>

The mere is not unguarded: Beowulf and his retinue find it is surrounded by fell creatures (*Beowulf* 1425-1432):

*Gesawon ða æfter wætere wýrmcýnnes fela,  
sellice sædracan, sund cunnian,  
swylce on næshleoðum nicras licgean,  
ða on undernmæl oft bewitigað  
sorhfulne sið on segrade,  
wyrmas ond wildeor; hie on weg hruron,  
bitere ond gebolgne, bearhtm ongeaton,  
gudhorn galan.*

They saw **many worm-monsters** on the water, weird sea-drakes that **knew the bottom** (of the mere), and **water-monsters that lay on the rock-ledges**, which often took a wretched journey in the afternoon on the wate; **wyrms** and **wild creatures**, these departed swollen and bitter when they heard the song, the call of the war-trumpet.

Likewise, the Persian poet speaks with the voice of Shah Kavus to describe the approach to the lair of the White Demon (*Shahnameh* II.40.535-9):

*Gozar kard bayad baveen haft koh / z divan bi har jayi beeni  
garoh / Yeki ghar bish iayadat howlanak / chenan shenidam tala  
bi maghak / Gozar gah bar nazae divan jang / hameh razm-ra  
sakhtheha chon pelang / Bi ghar indaroun gah div sepeed kaz-o  
hast lashkar bi beem va omeed*

You need to cross seven **mountains**, and you'll see **hordes of demons everywhere**. You'll come upon a terrifying **grotto**, I heard it's a **pit full of dread**. **Demons** of war **guard the entrance**, they fight like leopards in every combat. The White Demon is in that grotto, it is the courage and hope of the (demon) army.

Ferdowsi's description of Rostam and his guide's approach to the grotto of the White Demon follows shortly after (*Shahnameh* II.41.550-2):

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* p.38

*Vaazan jayegah tang baste kamar / biyamad pur az keeneh va  
jang-sar / Cho Rakhsh andar amad bedan haft koh / bidan naze  
divan gashte garve / Nazdeeki ghar bi bam raseed / bi gard  
indaresh lashkar div deed*

Bearing his war-gear, he set out from that place. He travelled with his mind set on vengeance and war. When Rakhsh reached the seven **mountains** and the warlike demon hordes, Rostam saw an army of **demons** guarding the mouth of the **bottomless cavern**.

Rostam dismounts from his horse, ties up his reluctant guide to a nearby tree, then continues closer to the cavern mouth (*Shahnameh* II.42.565-568):

*Bekandar dozakh yeki chah deed / tan dev az an tirki napdeed /  
zamani hami bud dar chang-i-tigh / band jayi didar va jayi  
garigh / cho dideh bemaleed va mazhgan bosht / vazaan chah  
tareekh lakhti bejost*

Rostam saw a **well** like **Hell**, but he didn't see the body of the demon on account of the **darkness**. He stood there **with his sword in hand**, he saw nothing, and he held his ground. He rubbed his eyes and **washed his face**, then looked into the **darkness**.<sup>60</sup>

Below, I will the formulaic and thematic parallels between the Old English and Persian poems. The central motif is that the lair of the demon (be it mere or grotto) is described as if the entrance to **Hell** itself. As I have discussed above (pp.24-5), the *Beowulf* poet accomplishes this by using motifs from early Christian texts describing hell; Ferdowsi almost certainly had access to both Islamic and Zoroastrian texts with descriptions of Hell, hence likely sources for his imagery, and he includes the Zoroastrian term for Hell (*dozakh*) to make certain the audience understands the nature of the imagery. Several motifs are combined to create this image:

- a. The hero takes a journey into the **mountains** to seek the

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<sup>60</sup>The Persian word for this lair is alternately: *ghar* 'grotto, cave' and *chah* 'well'. Here, the word *chah* 'well, pit' is used; cf. Avestan *chagh* 'well', whereas 'cave' in Avestan is *ēafcha* or *hannkanga*. This suggests that Ferdowsi was aware of the fact that the White Demon's lair was associated with water.

monsters' lair (*Beowulf* lines 1357-1361).

The hero takes a journey into the **mountains** to seek the monster's lair (*Shahnameh* II.40.535).<sup>61</sup>

- b. The lair is a deep and dark (**water**), with a **cave** at its base (*Beowulf* lines 1506-1517).  
The lair is a deep and dark **cave** with **water** at its base (*Shahnameh* II.42.567).<sup>62</sup>
- c. The entrance to the lair is guarded by **sea-drakes and monsters** (*Beowulf* lines 1432-1441).  
The entrance to the lair is guarded by **hordes of demons** (*Shahnameh* II.42.561-3).
- d. The **king states** that **No one (...)** knows the **bottom** of the mere (*Beowulf* 1345-1361).  
The **king states** that the lair is said to be a **bottomless cavern** (*Shahnameh* II.39.530-543).
- e. The **king states** that the mere holds a **dreadful wonder** (*Beowulf* lines 1361-1381).  
The **king states** that the pit is **full of dread** (*Shahnameh* II.42.565).

As this list above demonstrates, the passages describing Grendel's mere and the cavern of the White Demon show numerous thematic and formulaic parallels, even more than those between Heorot and Mazandaran City discussed above. I will return to the discussion of Hell and infernal imagery further below in this essay; it will be advantageous to move from here to a discussion of the events which take place inside the lairs themselves: the duels between the heroes and the monsters.

### **The Combats: Hero and Monster**

At the core of all three tales is the conflict between malevolent otherworldly (or supernatural forces, and a warrior

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<sup>61</sup>While Denmark is not generally considered a mountainous area, Mazandaran is almost entirely mountainous, except for the coastal region; thus Ferdowsi's casting of the events there is in keeping with the character of the region.

<sup>62</sup>Not only is water suggested by the repeated use of the word 'well', but by Rostam's washing his face (*Shahnameh*). Further, the illustration of the grotto from Cairo, Dar-ul-Kutub, ms. Ta'rikh Farisi 73 folio 41r shows a pool of water at the base of the cave.

who defies them when all others are powerless to resist. Grendel and the White Demon are each tormenting a king and his warriors with impunity, and the Irish epic places the two malicious spectres on a battlefield where a king and his warriors lie helpless and wounded to the point of death.<sup>63</sup> As I have shown above, each of the narratives has two combats: Grendel/Grendel's Mother (*Beowulf*); Arzhang/the White Demon (*Shahnameh*); the Spectres/the Dreadful Man (*Táin*). In each of the three cases, the first combat occurs at or near the Structure of the monarch; the second combat occurs when the monarch dispatches the hero on a quest either to destroy the second monster, or (in the Irish tale) when the monarch dispatches the hero to seek out food.

The first duel from the *Beowulf* poem occurs inside Heorot, where Beowulf ambushes Grendel, expecting that the monster will launch one of its nightly raids. The *Beowulf* poet makes clear that Beowulf possesses an excellent sword with which he has slain monsters, but he disdains to use it, since Grendel himself is unarmed.<sup>64</sup> The duel seems a lengthy and kinetic ordeal with descriptive imagery, yet much of the action takes place around the combatants: Beowulf's retainers try to intervene, while benches and tables are smashed and destroyed as the wrestling combatants tumble to and fro inside the hall.<sup>65</sup> Three motifs which are essential to the episode are: the use of wrestling (i.e. no weapons); the monster's fear and the hero's resolve; and Grendel's loss of arm. Regarding the wrestling and the loss of arm, the poem reads (*Beowulf* lines 745-66):

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<sup>63</sup> *Shahnameh* II.15.198-222; *Beowulf* lines 86-125; *TBC* lines 491-97. It is noteworthy that the kings themselves are not attacked, but instead tormented by their helplessness. See: W. Chaney, 'Grendel and the *Gifstok*: a Legal View of Monsters', *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 77 (1961): 513-20; R. Kaskie, 'The *Gifstok* Crux in *Beowulf*', *Leeds Studies in English and Kindred Languages* 16 (1985): 142-45.

<sup>64</sup> For more on Beowulf's blades, see: T. Cuthbert, 'The Narrative Function of Beowulf's Swords', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 59 (1960): 13-20; P. Jorgensen, 'The Gift of the Useless Weapon in *Beowulf* and the Icelandic Sagas', *Arkiv för nordisk Filologi* 94 (1979): 82-90.

<sup>65</sup> For studies on the wrestling match between Grendel and Beowulf, see: R. Chambers, 'Beowulf's Fight with Grendel, and Its Scandanavian Parallels', *English Studies* 11 (1929): 81-100; F. Peters, 'The Wrestling in *Beowulf*', *English Language Notes* 29.4 (1992): 10-12; R. Tripp, 'A New Look at Grendel's Attack: *Beowulf* 804a-815a', in *Geardagum: Essays on Old English Language and Literature*, ed. L. Gruber and D. Longbill (Denver, CO, 1974), 8-11, from Orchard 2003.

*Forð near ætstop,  
nam þa mid handa higeþihtigne  
rinc on ræste, ræhte ongean  
feond mid folme; he onfeng hraþe  
inwitþancum ond wið earm gesæt.  
Sona þæt onfunde fyrena hyrde  
þæt he ne mette middangeardes,  
eorþan sceata, on ebran men  
mundgripe maran. He on mode wearð  
forht on ferhðe; no þy ær fram meahte.  
Hyge wæs him hinfus, wolde on heolster fleon,  
secan deofla gedræg; ne wæs his drohtod þær  
swylce he on ealderdagum ær gemette.  
Gemunde þa se goda, mæg Higelaces,  
æfenspræce, uplang astod  
ond him fæste wiðfeng; fingras burston.  
Eoten wæs utweard; eorl furþur stop.  
Mynte se mæra, þær he meahte swa,  
widre gewindan ond on weg þanon  
fleon on fenhopu; wiste his fingra geweald  
on grames graþum. þæt wæs geocor sið  
þæt se hearmscaþa to Heorute ateah.*

Then **Grendel advanced**, he reached for the hero with his hand, he groped with his hand for the hero at rest – **who, resting on his side, seized the evil one quickly**. Soon the guardian-of-evils found that he had never met someone with a stronger grip anywhere on earth, in the corners of the earth. In his heart, he wanted to escape, but he could not do so. **He wanted to leave**, to flee to his hiding place and the company of devils, but he could not do now as he had done so often in previous days. Then the kinsman of Hygelac remembered what he'd said at evening; **up he came and seized his foe firmly**, whose fingers burst. The monster tried to make off, but the chieftain stepped up his attack. **The monster meant, if he could, to leap away and flee to the fen-mounds**. His fingers felt the strength in the grim one's grip. That was a sorrowful journey to Heorot that the malefactor took.

So Grendel, sensing that his opponent is too strong and skilled to be overcome, attempts to escape Beowulf's hold and flee, but finds he cannot. Grendel's fear and Beowulf's renewed resolve is also a very essential part of the tale, which I will discuss below in connection with the combat in the White

Demon's lair. Then several lines later, Grendel's arm is torn off as he attempts to escape Beowulf's grapple (*Beowulf* 809-818):

*ða þæt onfunde se þe fela æror  
 modes myrðe manna cynne  
 fyrene gefremede (he wæs fag wið god),  
 þæt him se lichoma læstan nolde,  
 ac hine se modega mæg Hygelaces  
 hæfde be honda; wæs gehwæper oðrum  
 lifigende lað. Licsar gebad  
 atol æglæca; him on eaxle wearð  
 syndolh sweotol, seonowe onsprungon,  
 burston banlocan.*

Then the murderous one, who in earlier days hated God and killed many men, discovered that his body would not endure, but rather the sharp-minded kinsman of Hygelac gripped him; each alive was hateful to the other. The terrible monster suffered a wound; **his shoulder tore visibly**, its sinews ripped, and **the socket burst**.

Grendel ends the wrestling match and tears himself free from the Beowulf's arm-lock, but can only do so at the cost of losing an arm, and upon reaching the mere he dies from the resulting blood loss. Following his wrestling match with Grendel's Mother, Beowulf severs Grendel's head, and brings it back to Hroðgar as proof of Grendel's death.

The first of Rostam's two wrestling matches takes place at Mazandaran City, though unlike Beowulf's duel with Grendel, the wrestling match takes place outside the city, since Arzhang seeks to deny Rostam entrance to the City to prevent him from reaching the Persian shah and captives.<sup>66</sup> It is remarkable that Rostam engages in wrestling, as the text makes clear that he is carrying his full set of weapons, especially his signature weapon: the heavy mace of Sam. Throughout his career, most of Rostam's kills are accomplished with his grandfather's mace – the sword and bow are used rarely. Nevertheless, when it comes time to dispatch Arzhang, the poem states:

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<sup>66</sup>For a study of the history of wrestling in Iranian culture, see: M. Abbasi, *Tarikh-e Koshtigari dar Iran* 'The History of Wrestling in Iran' (Tehran, 1995); H. Beizai, *Tarikh-e Varzesh-e Bastani (Zoorkhaneh)* (Tehran, 1967). See: A. Loewen, *The Concept of Jawānmardī (Manliness) in Persian Literature and Society* (PhD Diss, University of Toronto, 2001).



*Bar zeen indar afgand gorz niya / hameh raft yek del pur az keema / yeki mghfur khosroui bar sar-esh / khoyi aloudeh bibarbayan dar bar-esh / beh Arzhang salar binahad royi / cho amad bar lashkar namjuyi / yeki naareh zad dar miyan garoh / tu gofti bedareed darya va koh / baroun amad az kheemeh Arzhang div / cho amad be goshesh khoroush va ghariv / Cho Rostam bedidesh bar ingekht asp / bedu takht manand adar gashasb / sar va gosh begereft va yalesh deleer / sar az tan bekonadesh bekardar sheer.*

He strapped his grandfather's mace to the saddle, and advanced with a heart full of vengeance. He wore a kingly helmet on his head, and a (tiger-skin hauberk soaked in sweat) on his body. He went to find the captain Arzhang, until he came to the fiend's famous host. He gave a yell – you could say it rocked the very (earth) and sea. From his tent, the **demon Arzhang advanced towards** Rostam, when the shouts reached his ears. When Rostam saw him, he spurred Rakhsh towards him (like fire). He **seized Arzhang** by the head and ears, and the body of his rival hero with the other hand. Like a lion, he **tore the head from the body**.

In each case, the first fight begins with the demon making the initial advance, but the hero seizes the monster before it is able to execute a successful attack. Although the combat in the *Shahnameh* is shorter in terms of length, in terms of actual deeds the combat in *Beowulf* is not much longer. The monster never harms the hero (though the structure might suffer), and the hero is never in any danger once the grapple begins. The Irish tale, however, presents some significant variants in terms of the description of the fight between the hero and the malevolent dead (*TBC* 497-502):

*La sodain focheirt in n-aire dó. Focheird-som de. Immasínithar dóib. Doscathar Cú Chulaind. Co cuala ní, in (m)boidb dinib collaib.*

*'Olc damnae laích fil and fo chossaib aurddrag!'*

*La fónérig Cú Chulaind 7 benaid a c(h)end de cosind luirg áne 7 gabaid immá(í)n líathráite ríamdar in mag.*

Then the (dead man) cast his burden onto Cúchulainn. Cúchulainn cast it away from himself. Then they wrestled

each other. Cúchulainn was thrown down. Then he heard the Badb calling from among the corpses: ‘Bad potential for a warrior here, under the feet of spectres!’ Then Cúchulainn rose up and struck its head off with his hurley stick, and taking (the head) he drove it like a ball across the field.

In the *Táin*, like the Persian and English epic, the monster makes the initial move to assault the hero. However, unlike the two other epics, the Irish hero is not able to properly forestall the assault: he is able to throw aside the half-corpses, but then he is drawn into a grapple where he is the weaker combatant. He is even thrown to the ground: this is a vulnerable position in wrestling. Here the war-goddess (the Badb) intervenes by mocking the young Cúchulainn;<sup>67</sup> he recovers and strikes the head off the spectre with his toy stick (or hurley).<sup>68</sup> It is essential to remember the hero is still a child during this episode – he has not yet come into his full strength as an adult, and this contributes to the difficulty he faces in grappling with the ‘adult’ spectres. At the same time, the fact that Cúchulainn is a child creates a discrepancy of size between himself and his attacker, which creates a parallel with the Persian and Anglo-Saxon epics, as their fiends are larger than the adult warriors they are wrestling.

When analysed together, these three episodes share a common narrative formula:

**a. The duel begins at an architectural structure**

- Grendel attacks Beowulf at (inside) a structure (Heorot). (*Beowulf* lines 86-125)
- Arzhang attacks Rostam at (outside) a structure (Mzdr. City). (*Shahnameh* II.15.198-222)
- The spectre attacks Cúchulainn near to a structure (the unnamed house). (*TBC* 491- 97)

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<sup>67</sup>This complex divinity (the Badb) has been examined recently by Brent Miles (Miles 2005, 156-65), and demonstrates parallels (and is often confused or identified) with the Morrigan, and also the classical divinity Athena. Cf. F. Le Roux, *Mórrígan - Bodb - Macha: la Souveraineté Guerrière de l'Irlande* (Rennes, 1983).

<sup>68</sup>For a study of the Irish sport of hurley and its history, see S. King, *A History of Hurling* (Dublin, 1996); L. Ó Caithnia, *Scéal na hIomána: ó Thosach ama go 1884* ‘The Story of Hurling from its beginnings to 1884’ (Dublin, 1980).

**b. Monster advances on Hero**

- Grendel advances towards Beowulf. (*Beowulf* lines 736-836)
- Arzhang advances towards Rostam. (*Shahnameh* II.38.506-515)
- The spectre casts his dead brother towards Cúchulainn. (*TBC* lines 497-500)

**c. Hero seizes and wrestles with Monster**

- Beowulf seizes Grendel before the monster can seize him. (*Beowulf*)
- Rostam seizes Arzhang before the monster can seize him. (*Shahnameh* II.38.514)

**d. Monster suffers a fatal wound during the grapple**

- During the grapple, Grendel suffers a fatal wound. (*Beowulf* lines 809-824)
- During the grapples, Arzhang suffers a fatal wound. (*Shahnameh* II.38.514-5)
- During the grapple, the spectre suffers a 'fatal' wound. (*TBC* lines 501-2)

**e. Monster is decapitated (before or after death)**

- Grendel's head is taken. (*Beowulf* lines 1584-1590)
- Arzhang's head is taken. (*Shahnameh* II.38.514-5)
- The spectre's head is taken. (*TBC* lines 501-2)

The other significant duel, and by far the more challenging for the heroes, is the second match, the duel in the lair or territory of the monster. Here the hero enters the otherworldly realm (discussed above), where he is attacked by a more dangerous adversary than the one he has just defeated. However, unlike the initial match in which the hero seizes the monster and decisively out-classes it in terms of skill, this wrestling match is much more serious, and the hero is hard-pressed to defend himself.<sup>69</sup> In the *Beowulf* text, the battle begins shortly after Beowulf dives into the mere (*Beowulf* 1497-1556):

*Sona þæt onfunde se ðe floda begong*

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<sup>69</sup>For examinations of this wrestling match, see R. Huisman, 'The Three Tellings of Beowulf's Fight with Grendel's Mother', *Leeds Studies in English and Kindred Languages* 20 (1989): 217-48; also P. Frank 'The Wrestling in *Beowulf*', 10-12; P. Taylor, 'Beowulf's Second Grendel Fight', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 86 (1985): 62-69.

*heorogifre beheold hund missera,  
 grim ond grædig, þæt þær gumena sum  
 ælwihta eard ufan cunnode.  
 Grap þa togeanes, gudrinc gefeng  
 atolan clommum. No þy ær in gescod  
 halan lice; hring utan ymbbearh,  
 þæt heo pone fyrðhom ðurhfon ne mihte,  
 locene leodosyrcan lapan fingrum.  
 Bær þa seo brimwylf, þa heo to botme com,  
 hringa þengel to hofe sinum,  
 swa he ne mihte, no he þæs modig wæs,  
 wæpna gewældan, ac hine wundra þæs fela  
 swencte on sunde, sædeor monig  
 hildetuxum heresyrcan bræc,  
 ehton aglæcan. ða se eorl ongeat  
 þæt he in niðsele nathwylcum wæs,  
 þær him nænig wæter wihte ne sceþede,  
 ne him for hrofsele hrinan ne mehte  
 færgripe flodes;*

Soon the grim and greedy one, eager to destroy, who had watched fifty years of the flood's courses, perceived that some human from above, some man, was exploring her monster-dwelling. **She reached for him with terrible [hands], and grabbed the warrior.** Yet she did not harm his healthy body; the chainmail surrounded him, so that she was not able to break the armor, the chainmail, with wretched fingers. Then when the sea-wolf touched bottom and brought the lord of rings to her lair, so that even though he wanted to, he could not wield weapons though many monsters attacked him in the water; many terrible sea-beasts came after him and assailed his armor with warlike tusks. Then Beowulf perceived that he was in some cavern, where no water hindered him, neither could the currents of the flood reach him on account of the ceiling.

Beowulf is seized by Grendel's mother, and dragged to the bottom of the lair. During the descent, he is assailed by monsters, but he strikes at them with his sword. He discovers he is in a hall, though the poem adds several lines later that he can see due to fire-light. The poem tells us that Beowulf perceives the she-demon through the murk (1518-9); he slashes at her with his sword, but the blade cannot pierce her skin, and he casts the sword away in anger (lines 1520-33). He decides to try his skill at wrestling, as it served to overcome

Grendel (*Beowulf* 1537-44):

*Gefeng þa be eaxle nalas for fæhðe mearn  
Guðgeata leod Grendles modor;  
brægd þa beadwe heard, þa he gebolgen wæs,  
feorhgeniðlan, þæt heo on flet gebeah.  
Heo him eft hraþe andlean forgeald  
grimman grapum ond him togeanes feng;  
oferwearp þa werigmod wigena strengest,  
feþecepta, þæt he on fylle wearð.*

The Geatish prince did not hold back from hostility, but seized Grendel's mother **by the shoulder**. The battle-hardened warrior, swollen with rage, **threw the deadly foe to the ground**. She rapidly **repaid him with a grim grasp**, and **wrestled together with him**. Weary from fighting, the champion – the strongest of men – ended up on the ground.

Clearly, this is a very different fight than the one which precedes it. Unlike the wrestling match with Grendel, Beowulf grapples and is grappled in turn. The she-demon pins the hero down and tears at him with her claws, but he is kept safe for the moment by his chainmail (lines 1502-4). Grendel's mother hefts a short sword (*saex*) to stab him, but Beowulf's armor resists the weapon (lines 1545-49). Things look grim for the hero, but Fate gives him a fighting chance (*Beowulf* 1557-69):

*Geseah ða on searwum sigeeadig bil,  
eald sweord 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.  
He gefeng þa fetelhilt, freca Scyldinga  
hreh ond heorogrim hringmæl gebrægd,  
aldres orwena, yrringa sloh,  
þæt hire wið halse heard grapode,  
banhringas bræc. Bil eal ðurhwod  
fægne flæschoman; heo on flet gecrong.  
Sweord wæs swatig, secg weorce gefeh.*

Then Beowulf saw a victory-worthy blade, an old giantish blade, lying in the midst of war-gear; with a worthy edge, an heirloom of warriors. It was a choice weapon, but it

was bigger than any other man could carry to battle; it was good and stately, the work of giants. The chieftain of the Scyldings took the belted-hilt, fierce and savage, he drew the ringed sword, despairing of life, angrily he struck so that **it took her fiercely by the throat** and broke the collarbones. The blade cut through doomed flesh; she collapsed to the floor. The sword was bloody, the blade was content with its work.

Where the sword from the mortal world fails, the giantish sword is able to wound and kill Grendel's mother: the hero triumphs, having severed the monster's head.<sup>70</sup> Following the fight, he finds the body of Grendel which he beheads (using the giantish sword) to bring back proof of the monster's death to the Danes; but curiously, he leaves behind the head of the she-demon. He also brings back the hilt of the giantish sword; the blade itself is able to kill the demon, but her blood melts the blade as if it were ice.<sup>71</sup> The poem goes on to say that it takes four men to carry the head of Grendel (lines 1637-9), and that the hero returns with his retinue to the hall of the king, where he receives rich rewards for his assistance to the Danish people.

The Persian account of Rostam's "Seventh Deed" is strikingly similar in several respects. Rostam arrives at the mouth of the lair (described above) and sees that it is swarming with monsters. He attacks the monsters at the mouth of the cave, and they scatter. He descends into the hell-like pit, and is blinded by the darkness. After he washes his eyes, he looks into the darkness and perceives the White Demon. The text reads (*Shahnameh* II.42.569-575):

*Bi tariki indar yeki koh deed / sar a sar shodeh chah azu napedeed  
/ bi rangi sheba ravi chun barf moyi / jehan bar z pehani va  
bolayi ouyi / sovi Rostam amad cho kofi siyah / az ahanesh sa'ad  
vaazahan kulah / az u shod del piltan barnehad / baraashafte*

<sup>70</sup>A considerable body of scholarship deals with this supernatural sword; the reader may consult, for example: D. Cronan, 'The Rescuing Sword', *Neophilologus* 77 (1993): 467-78; J. Köberl, 'The Magic Sword in *Beowulf*', *Neophilologus* 71 (1987): 120-28; R. Schraeder, 'The Language on the Giant's Sword Hilt in *Beowulf*', *Neophilologische Mitteilungen* 94 (1993): 141-47.

<sup>71</sup>On the melting of the giantish blade, see: M. Puhvel, 'The Melting of the Giant-Wrought Sword', in *Beowulf and Celtic Tradition* (Waterloo, 1979), 39-44; H. Whitman, 'Corrosive Blood in *Beowulf*', *Neophilologus* 61 (1977): 276; S. Viswanathan, 'On the Melting of the Sword: *wel-rapas* and the Engraving on the Sword-Hilt in *Beowulf*', *Philological Quarterly* 58 (1979): 360-63.

*barsan peel zayan / yeki tigh teeresh bezad bar mayan / z niroyi  
Rostam za bolayi ou / beenadakht yek zan oh yek payi-ou /  
bareedeh baravikht ba oh beham / cho peel sarafaraz oy sheer  
dezham / hami pust konad een as an an az een / hameh gul shod  
az khun sar a sar zameen.*

He saw a mountain there, it was so huge he couldn't see the cave on account of it. It seemed as dark as night, and its pelt was the color of snow; it seemed to fill up all the world with its height and breath. It came towards Rostam like a dark mountain, it was iron-shod and iron-crowned.<sup>72</sup> Rostam's heart was full of fear, he was afraid he might not walk away from this fight. He charged forward like a rampaging elephant, and **he slashed with his sharp sword** at the demon's torso. From the force of the blow, **he severed a leg from the stump**. But **the demon seized him**, and **they wrestled each other** like an elephant and a lion. Each one tore at the other, and their blood turned the ground into mud.

This is a much more difficult match than when Rostam faces Arzhang; in fact, it is one of rare moments in his centuries-long life that he feels fear facing an opponent.<sup>73</sup> The poem emphasizes the massive size of the fiend, and given the loss of a limb early in the fight, it shows remarkable resilience by continuing to fight with viscious warrior. Likewise, this is one of the three times in his career that Rostam faces a foe of equivalent physical strength, where other foes are usually dispatched with a single blow or defeated as soon as he seizes them. Despite the fact that Rostam is afraid, the poet tells us that he is not alone in feeling fear (*Shahnameh* II.43.576-82):

*Bi del goft Rostam, gar amruz jan / bimanad beh man zende-am  
javudan / hamidoun beh del goft Dev Sepeed / keh az jan shireen  
shodam nalumid / gar ayidunak az chang en azhdeha / barideh  
bi va پشت یابام رها / نا کهتار نا برتر مانیش مهتران /*

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<sup>72</sup>In all the manuscripts cited (and for that matter, those available through the Cambridge *Shahnameh* digital image project) there are no illustrations with the White Demon actually armoured; this suggests that the expression could be a poetic figure referring to the monster's supernatural resilience.

<sup>73</sup>The other two times Rostam feels fear are when he fights his son Sohrab, and when he fights the invulnerable Isfandiyar; see C. Monette, 'Indo-European Elements in Celtic and Indo-Iranian Epic Tradition: the Trial of Champions in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and the *Shahnameh*', *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 32 (2004), 61-78.

*nabeenand nezam beh Mazandaran / berad dast va bar  
daneshtesh nazeh sheer / beh garden ba avarad va afgand zeer /  
faroubarad khanjar delesh bardareed / jegaresh az tan tereh beroun  
kesheed / hameh ghar yekseer tan keshth bud / jehan hamju darya  
khun gashteh bud*

In his heart, Rostam said: 'If I survive this, I'll live forever.' Meanwhile, the White Demon said to himself: 'I'm becoming afraid of losing my sweet life. If I escape from the claws of this dragon, with a missing leg and torn skin, neither small or great in Mazandaran will respect me.' Rostam grabbed him by the neck and threw him to the ground; he roared like a lion. He stabbed the monster in the heart and stomach with his dagger. All the cavern was filled with the demon's corpse, and the floor became like a sea of blood.

Rostam then returns to the surface bearing the liver of the demon, since the blood of the creature is needed to heal the blindness of the king and his men. He brings with him the head of Arzhang (or in some later medieval recensions of the *Shahnameh*, the head of the White Demon) as proof of the kill. The king's blindness is cured, due to the magical power of the monster's blood. Once he reports his deeds to the Shah and they return to Iran, he is richly rewarded.

These two duels demonstrate several parallels. We can see that this narrative formula is common to both episodes:

**a. The hero readies a sword.**<sup>74</sup>

Beowulf enters the mere bearing Hrunting (*Beowulf* line 1461)

Rostam enters the lair bearing his sword (*Shahnameh* II.42.566)

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<sup>74</sup> *Beowulf* line 1461: *para þe hit mid mundum bewand* '(Beowulf) had (the sword) gripped in hand'; *Shahnameh* II.42.566: *zamani hami dar chang teegh* 'Rostam stood there with his sword in his hand.'

Beowulf enters the mere holding Hrunting, the sword of Unferth. It is critical to the plot that Rostam enters the lair of the demon not with his trademark mace, but with a sword, as he uses it to sever the limb of the demon during the combat.



- b. The hero enters the monster's domain and must repel many lesser monsters.**  
Beowulf fights through swarms of sea-drakes and wurm-kin (*Beowulf* lines 1432-1441)  
Rostam fights through hordes of demons (*Shahnameh* II.42.561-3)
- c. Through the darkness, he is perceived by the demonic owner of the lair.**  
Grendel's mother sees and attacks Beowulf before he is aware of her (*Beowulf* lines 1497-1505)  
The White Demon sees Rostam before he is aware of it (*Shahnameh* II.42.570)
- d. The hero attacks (once) with the sword.**  
Beowulf slashes and fails to wound Grendel's mother (*Beowulf* lines 1520-25)  
Rostam slashes and maims the White Demon (*Shahnameh* II.42.573)
- e. The hero and monster wrestle fiercely.**  
Beowulf and Grendel's mother wrestle each other (*Beowulf* lines 761-794)  
Rostam and the White Demon wrestle each other (*Shahnameh* II.42.574-80)
- f. The hero makes a decisive attack to the neck.**  
Beowulf slashes at the neck of Grendel's Mother (*Beowulf* lines 1587-1569)  
Rostam seizes the Demon by the neck and pins it down (*Shahnameh* II.43.580-2)
- g. The monster is killed by a blow from a bladed weapon.**  
Beowulf beheads Grendel's mother with the sword (*Beowulf* lines 1587-1569)  
Rostam stabs the White Demon with a dagger (*Shahnameh* II.43.580-2)
- h. A considerable amount of blood floods the lair.**  
The blood of Grendel flows from the cave and into the water (*Beowulf* lines 1591-94)  
The blood of the White Demon is likened to water (*Shahnameh* II.43.581-82)

In addition to these parallels, the reader will notice some variants related to the earlier combats with Grendel and Arzhang. The *Beowulf* poem makes clear that during the fight with Beowulf, Grendel is afraid and desires to flee; likewise, the White Demon despairs of winning and considers escape as an option; neither of the fiends escapes alive. Grendel loses a limb (arm) in fighting Beowulf; the White Demon loses an arm (leg) fighting Rostam.<sup>75</sup> Further, although Rostam and Beowulf possess ancestral weapons of quality (and use them in most other combats, according to their respective epics), they do not employ them in any of their fights with these two fiends; this is especially strange in the case of Rostam, as his grandfather's mace is mentioned only a page earlier when he ties it to his saddle, and he has used the mace to slay countless other demons during the Mazandaran campaign – so the absence of the mace is a mystery.<sup>76</sup> This suggests that Ferdowsi was aware of a tradition which insisted that the White Demon be grappled and stabbed, as opposed to Rostam's more traditional style of bludgeoning or crushing opponents to death. Likewise, Beowulf is aware that his sword has slain giants (*eotans*) in the past; it seems strange that he would trust a foreign blade to a task that might well have caused his death if the weapon were to fail (and indeed, Hrunting does).<sup>77</sup> Just as the weapon (the giant's sword) with which he kills Grendel's mother is not the weapon with which Beowulf enters the mere, Rostam uses a dagger (not a sword) to stab his antagonist to death – not the sword with which he dispatched the fiendish hordes. In both cases, the struggle is prolonged, vicious, and in doubt – but ultimately the hero emerges without any serious harm.

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<sup>75</sup> It is important to note that in each epic, the limb is severed from the torso; Grendel's shoulder bursts, while the White Demon's leg/arm is severed at the hip / shoulder – as opposed to the elbow or knee.

<sup>76</sup> Clearly Rostam's mace is capable of killing even very powerful fiends, since in his battle with the shape-shifting Akvan Demon, Rostam crushes the monster's skull with his mace. The Akvan Demon episode is found at *Shahnameh* III.279-295. Prof. Subtelny suggests that this is in keeping with the fact that this is a highly ritualized duel, and that as the Demon lacks a mace, Rostam will not employ his own; Rostam's use of the dagger is honorable since the Demon has claws.

<sup>77</sup> The *eotenas* (giants) which Beowulf has fought are discussed in R. Kaske, 'The *eotenas* in *Beowulf*', in *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*, ed. R.P. Creed (Providence, 1967), 285-310.

### **Man and Monster**

The Irish, Iranian, and Anglo-Saxon narratives all possess an element of blurring between the hero and monster, whether the result of deliberate grammatical vagueness, or the result of the hero taking on the role of the monster.<sup>78</sup> Orchard discusses the manifestation of this theme in the parts of the tale where Beowulf enters the lairs of the Grendel and the dragon: instead of being the attacked, Beowulf becomes the intruder and assailant of the otherworld.<sup>79</sup> In the case of Rostam, some (later) variant versions of the *Shahnameh* include a coda to the tale, in which having slain the White Demon, Rostam takes its head and wears it atop his helmet, as a symbol of his victory;<sup>80</sup> this can be read as a seizing of the demon's power for himself.<sup>81</sup> Even in the most reliable manuscripts, the duel episode shows the same blurring of language and grammar which *Beowulf* employs.<sup>82</sup> Dooley demonstrates that Cúchulainn, through facing the terror embodied by the undead and silent man, will do more than just destroy it: 'The concept of terror, *úathbás*, will not just be overcome by the hero; he will internalize it as he himself becomes in turn an agent of terror'.<sup>83</sup> In essence, then, these three narratives take the hero and transform him by putting him in contact with supernatural forces, and incorporating those forces into his being; he may walk again in the land of

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<sup>78</sup>This theme is examined in: S. Dragland, 'Monster-Man in *Beowulf*', *Neophilologus* 6 (1977): 606–18; S. Greenfield, 'A Touch of the Monstrous in the Hero, or Beowulf Re-Marvellized', *English Studies* 63 (1982): 294–300.

<sup>79</sup>Orchard 2002, 29–30.

<sup>80</sup>Examples of such variants are the *naqqāli* Versions I & II presented in M. Omidsalar. See: M. Omidsalar, 'Rostam's Seven Trials and the Logic of Epic Narrative in the *Shahnama*', *Asian Folklore Studies* 60 (2001): 259–93, especially 272–80.

<sup>81</sup>Omidsalar (2001, 272) argues that in seizing the head, liver and blood of the White Demon, Rostam incorporates the essence of the creature into himself. See: M. Omidsalar, 'Rostam's Seven Trials and the Logic of Epic Narrative in the *Shahnama*', *Asian Folklore Studies* 60 (2001): 259–93.

<sup>82</sup>For example, *Shahnameh* II.42.574–575: *baredeh barwikhht ba-u beham* 'He seized him', and *hami pust-konad in az an, an az in* 'Each one tore at the other'.

<sup>83</sup>Dooley *Playing the Hero* 112. For more on the transformation achieved through warrior-initiation, the reader is advised to see: K. McCone, *Pagan Past*, 203–32; also K. McCone 'Werewolves, *Cyclopes*, *Diberga* and *Fianna*: Juvenile Delinquency in Early Ireland,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (1986), 1–22.

the living, but mortals cannot ever be truly comfortable around such a character. The hero may go on to fight other human antagonists, but only supernatural forces are hereafter capable of presenting him with any real challenge.

### At the Gates of Hell

Perhaps the most interesting narrative feature, common to both *Beowulf* and the *Shahnameh*, is the comparison of the demonic lair to Hell, and the use of infernal imagery in the descriptions of the lairs of the demons. Such early Persian texts as the Sassanian *Arda Wiraz Namag* 'Book of Arda Wiraz' provide detailed descriptions of the Zoroastrian concept of an infernal realm of Hell: a subterranean realm of noxious darkness and torment, ruled by Ahriman (the spirit of evil) and inhabited by demons and damned souls; it is characterized by great extremes of heat and cold.<sup>84</sup> Significantly, as Orchard notes, the *Beowulf* poem incorporates infernal imagery that shows parallels to the (Latin) Vision of St Paul, which appears to have been incorporated into the Old English Blickling Homily XVI.<sup>85</sup> Compare, for example, the description of Grendel's mere (lines 1357-75):

They dwell in a secret land, **wolf**-slopes, windy headlands, dangerous fen-tracts. Where the **mountain stream** goes down under the headlands' **mist**, the flood under the ground. It is not far from here in the tally of miles, where that mere stands, over which hang **frosty** groves, a wood firm-rooted overshadows the water. There one can see each a dreadful wonder, **fire on the flood**. **No one lives so wise of the sons of men that he knows the bottom** ... From there the tumult of the waves rises up dark to the clouds, when the wind stirs up hateful storms, until the sky turns grim, the heavens weep.

with the description of Hell from the vision of St Paul in Blickling XVI:

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<sup>84</sup>See, for example, P. Gignoux, ed. and tr., *Le Livre d'Ardā-Virāz* Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations 14 (Paris, 1984). J. Kellens, 'Yima et la Mort', *Studies in Honor of Edgar C. Polomé* (Berlin, 1988), 329-34; C. Zaehner, *The Teachings of the Magi* (London, 1956), 131-50.

<sup>85</sup>Orchard *Pride and Prodigies*, 157-58. I use Orchard's translations in the next two passages, emphasis mine.

So Saint Paul was looking at the **northern** part of this world, where all the waters go down, and he saw there above the **water** a certain grey rock, and there had grown north of that rock **very frosty woods**, and there were **dark mists**, and under that rock was a dwelling place of water-monsters and wolves; and he saw on that cliff there hung in those icy woods many black souls, tied by their hands, and their foes, in the guise of water-monsters, **were gripping them like greedy wolves**, and **the water was black underneath that rock, and between that cliff and the water was a drop of twelve miles**, and when the branches broke, the souls who hung on those branches went down, and **the sea-monsters snatched them**.

By comparison, we find a similar set of themes in the vision experienced by the Zoroastrian cleric Arda Wiraz:

(Ch.16: 2-4) I came to a place, and I saw a great **river** which was gloomy as dreadful hell; on which river were many souls and guardian angels; and some of them were not able to cross, and some crossed only with great difficulty, and some crossed easily. (Ch.17: 24) ... in the **northern region** of the demons... (Ch.18: 3-12) In that manner, I beheld **cold and heat**, drought and stench, (4) to such a degree as I never saw, nor heard of, in the world. I also saw the greedy jaws of hell, **like the most frightful pit, descending in a very narrow and fearful place; in darkness so gloomy** that it is necessary to hold by the hand; and in such stench that every one whose nose inhales that air will struggle and stagger and fall; and on account of such close confinement no one's existence is possible; and every one thinks thus: 'I am alone'; and when three days and nights have elapsed he says thus: 'The nine thousand years are completed, and they will not release me!' Everywhere, even the lesser noxious creatures are as high as mountains, and **they so tear and seize and worry the souls of the wicked, as would be unworthy of a dog**. (Ch:19: 3)... and many other **snakes ever seized all the limbs**.<sup>86</sup>

Both *Beowulf* and Vision of St Paul incorporate Germanic pagan imagery into a Christian narrative, as the two texts contain references to: terror, cold, water, darkness, and creatures that

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<sup>86</sup>Emphasis mine.

tear at the damned souls.<sup>87</sup> *Beowulf* and the *Arda Wiraz Namag* contain references to terror, cold, water, darkness, and creatures which tear at condemned souls, as well as references to canines (dogs or wolves), fire/heat mixed with cold, and profound depth. This is suggestive of Indo-European underworld imagery common to northern Iranian and Germanic tribes (indicated by, for example, references to the cold), but one recalls also that Gnostic/Zoroastrian narrative traditions were transmitted to Roman Britain, as suggested by the prevalence of Mithraic sites.<sup>88</sup> It has long been suggested that the Christian concept of Hell indicates Persian influence; these passages certainly indicate that common themes exist between the Iranian and early Christian images used in the description of the infernal regions. It is important to recognise that Ferdowsi describes the lair of the White Demon with the Persian word *dōzakh* 'Hell'; this term refers specifically to the hell of the Zoroastrian faith, originating as the Avestan word: *daozhangh* 'Hell'.<sup>89</sup> The deliberate choice of this Zoroastrian term in favour of such Arabic (Islamic) terms as *Nār* 'the [lake

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<sup>87</sup>These elements are examined in detail in D. Fry, 'The Cliff of Death in Old English Poetry', in *Comparative Research on Oral Traditions: a Memorial for Milman Parry*, ed. J. Foley (Columbus, 1987), 213-33. Cf. Orchard *Pride and Prodigies* 36-47.

<sup>88</sup>See, for example, M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: the God and His Mysteries* (Edinburgh, 2000).

<sup>89</sup>See P. Gignoux, 'Hell' in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (Cosa Mesa, 2003): 'Hell is very deep, darker than anywhere else, most terrifying, and the hideaway of all the demons and the *druzes*. It stinks and is full of dirt, pain, and unhappiness; wickedness is not mixed with goodness as in this world, and this makes it extremely awful. In hell, the soul of the damned [...] finds the demon that corresponds to its sins, as in the *Arda Wiraz-Namag*, which will torment it until the day of the final renovation. It has never enough of the filthy food which it is made to eat forever, and its punishment is related to its principal sin. [...] The author defines three infernal places: *hamestagan* (q.v.), hell (*duæox*) or "worst existence," where poison grows, and *drujaskan* (Av. *druêas-kana*), which is at the bottom of darkness and where the chief demon resides. These places are even geographically situated at the north, the demoniac direction, under the earth; and the gate to hell is the "Arzur ridge" ... which is very famous for its demons and which is in the Alborz mountains (cf. *Bundahišn* 12.8; *Vendidad* 3.7) ... In the *Bundahišn* (27.53), it is also said that in hell darkness is so thick that it can be held in one's hand, the stench is so strong that it can be cut by a knife, and loneliness is absolute. Hell is related to the seven planets, especially to Saturn (Kewan), which is very cold, and to Mars (Wahram), which is very hot. Finally, the *Denkard* V summarizes all these data: Hell is situated under the earth, it is dark, narrow, stinking and without bliss, and contains all wickedness.'

of] Fire' or *Jehennam* 'Hell, Gehenna' can be read as a deliberate device of Ferdowsi's to remind the audience that the lair and its inhabitant belong to an older religious tradition and a by-gone age. In a similar fashion, the Old English description of Grendel's mere suggests that the composers were deliberately employing imagery from a Christian text, perhaps with an awareness of the pagan themes from St. Paul's Vision, and very likely with the goal of better incorporating a pagan monster into a tale intended for a Christian audience.<sup>90</sup> While, then, Ferdowsi does not make use of the cold, northern imagery of these three texts, his tradition does include the aspects of water, great darkness, hordes of monsters waiting to attack an intruder, and a great (unique) demon who rules the domain.

The lair of the monster, through identification with Hell, becomes a type of netherworld on earth. While they are finite (unlike the greater realm which they symbolise), this finitude also allows the heroes to make their intrusions: the Christian or Muslim spirit world cannot be invaded, and while (for example) the ghost of Cúchulainn can boast of fighting in Hell, the living Cúchulainn cannot. By creating (with the narrative) a physical representation of Hell on Earth, Ferdowsi and the Beowulf poet provide their heroes with a locus that is challenging and dangerous, but vulnerable to assault. Significantly, Dooley argues that the 'Battle with Eógan mac Durthacht' episode can be read as a 'salvic visit to the netherworld', in which the ritually dead king must be saved by the young hero's invasion of the Otherworld and subsequent struggle against the personification of terror waiting there.<sup>91</sup> I suggest that likewise, the raids on Grendel's mere and the grotto of the White Demon can be read symbolically as raids on the underworld, since they share similar motifs of the salvic rescue of the king and a raid on the netherworld.

The theme of the underworld raid is a common theme not in Christian or Islamic texts, but rather in Classical

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<sup>90</sup>This process is demonstrated by the incorporation of the Biblical figure of Cain into Grendel's genealogy.

<sup>91</sup>Dooley states (Dooley 113): 'The king is in a sense ritually dead and buried, and Cú Chulainn's rescue is a kind of salvic visit to the netherworld. The rescue is not just a physically heroic thrusting of the king back on his feet again; it is a virtual raid on the otherworld, where not only is the king rescued but, in typically Irish archetypal story pattern, the nourishment of the other world, fire and flood cauldron, are carried off as well.'

tradition.<sup>92</sup> In the famous twelfth labor of Heracles, the hero is sent by King Eurystheus to the Underworld to capture Cerberus, the monster hound of Hades.<sup>93</sup> When Heracles asks permission of the underworld divinity to capture the hound, Hades agrees on the condition that Heracles does not employ weapons to overcome Cerberus. What follows is a fierce grapple, in which Heracles is bitten repeatedly by Cerberus, but ultimately crushes (or perhaps strangles) the dog into submission, and is able to lead the monster briefly into the land of the living. Apollodorus' inclusion of this episode as the twelfth and final labor draws emphasis on the fact that this final labor is the greatest of all the quests which Heracles undertakes at Eurystheus' bidding, and his greatest deed.<sup>94</sup> Certainly, we must consider the possibility that the underworld raid (or its Celtic/Germanic/Iranian reflex) is heroic tradition which dates to the early classical period and was consciously incorporated as a borrowing into the medieval epic cycles; certainly the 'Seven Labors of Rostam' are generally agreed to have been influenced by Heracleian tradition, though the same cannot necessarily be said for *Beowulf* or the *Táin*. If, however, this reflex is not a conscious borrowing from the classical tradition, then it strongly suggests that the underworld raid is a popular Indo-European motif which has been transmitted into the Greek, Celtic, Germanic, and Iranian traditions.

Yet more importantly, whether or not a parallel with the

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<sup>92</sup>An exception from Christian tradition is, of course, the Harrowing of Hell, in which Christ descends from the cross to Hell to free the souls of the righteous. For a primary source containing this tradition, see: H.C. Kim, ed., *The Gospel of Nicodemus*. Gesta Salvatoris. TMLT 2 (Toronto, 1973). Examples of underworld journeys in Classical tradition are found in the adventures of Hercules, Odysseus, and Aeneid, although significantly, Hercules alone engages in combat (wrestling, to be specific) while in the underworld.

<sup>93</sup>Apollodorus 2.5.12: 'When Hercules asked Pluto for Cerberus, Pluto ordered him to take the animal provided he mastered him without the use of the weapons which he carried. Hercules found him at the gates of Acheron, and, cased in his cuirass and covered by the lion's skin, he flung his arms round the head of the brute, and though the dragon in its tail bit him, he never relaxed his grip and pressure till it yielded. So he carried it off and ascended through Troezen. But ... Hercules, after showing Cerberus to Eurystheus, carried him back to Hades.'

<sup>94</sup>Indeed, according to Apollodorus' account of Heracles' biography (Apollodorus 2.1.1 – 2.7.8), this is the hero's last heroic deed before death.



ultimate Herculean labor was intended or understood by the composers of the *Táin*, *Beowulf* and the *Shahnameh*, the relative rarity of this sort of heroic underworld adventures draws into relief the fact that a hero who can invade Hell/the underworld/the Otherworld is truly exceptional, even among other heroes from his respective tradition, for whom such an otherworld adventure would prove impossible. In other words, the purpose of the otherworldly combat motif is to establish the primacy of a hero within his tradition, placing him above other lesser heroes who, however capable, lack the gifts necessary to enter the chthonic realm, wrestle its denizens, and return again to the land of the living.

This paper has examined three traditions which feature the motifs of the Otherworld raid and the Hero's combat with an Otherworld champion. It has done so by examining parallels themes in the descriptions of the monsters (as magicians, as champions), as well as the description of the earthly city in which the initial wrestling matches are fought. In addition, it has considered the common elements in the structure of the duels (e.g. wrestling, severing of limbs, and beheading). Clearly, these tales serve to emphasize the Otherworld mediator aspect of the hero, by showing the young hero's exposure to monstrous or otherworldly forces, and the subsequent incorporation of those alien elements into the essence of the hero. Finally, this paper has examined the potential influence of the Classical Herculean tradition on the later medieval heroic traditions, and studied the significant parallels in the medieval descriptions of Hell and the monstrous Otherworld lairs.