PARADOX AND BALANCE IN THE ANGLO-SAXON MIND OF *BEOWULF*

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Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2008

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Fox, Bonnie L. Paradox and Balance in the Anglo-Saxon Mind of *Beowulf*. Master of Arts (English), May 2008, 90 pp., references, 56 titles.

This essay argues that the Anglo-Saxon poet of *Beowulf* presents the reader with a series of paradoxes and attempts to find a balance within these paradoxes. At the forefront is the paradox of past and present, explored through the influence of the past on the characters in the poem as well as the poet. Additionally, the poem offers the paradox of light and dark, which ultimately suggests light and dark as symbols of Christianity and paganism. Finally, the land and the sea offer the third primary paradox, indicating the relationship that the characters and poet had with land and sea, while also reflecting the other paradoxes in the poem. The result is the desire to find balance within the paradoxes through the recognition of ongoing tension.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

But this I will say to you: your quest stands upon the edge of a knife.
Stray but a little and it will fail, to the ruin of all.
J.R.R. Tolkien

Literary scholars across the medieval spectrum have long since agreed with Tolkien—both before and after his now-famous lecture "The Monsters and the Critics"—that *Beowulf* is "worth studying" (9). In reality, Tolkien was largely voicing and validating the general consensus of his day. What the general consensus of his day or the days that followed has yet to agree on, however, is what *about* the Anglo-Saxon epic is worth studying and *why*. Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in the countless opinions of the many scholars who have responded to the call to study it.

Or perhaps there is no single answer. One of the most fascinating qualities of *Beowulf* is that it offers such a variety of interpretive possibilities. Critics who preceded Tolkien saw in *Beowulf* the potential for a better understanding of the early German and Scandinavian cultures, as though *Beowulf* could be mined primarily for its historical and anthropological value. Additionally, scholars of Tolkien's time looked to *Beowulf* to derive what scanty information was available about social traditions within the Germanic cultures.[1] But one of Tolkien's strongest arguments within "The Monsters and the Critics" is that these approaches rob *Beowulf* of its value as a work of literature.[2] His lecture became one of the landmarks of *Beowulf* scholarship, and his passion for *Beowulf* spawned generations of excited literary scholars eager to analyze the poem.

[1] See *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage* and Lionarons (p. 1).
[2] See also Cohen, p. 345.

As a result of Tolkien's influence, *Beowulf* remains relevant to the study of English literature, and it continues to fascinate the scholars who persist in finding new angles for examining the poem. What might be more surprising is that Tolkien's lecture "The Monsters and the Critics" also retains its relevance, despite being now over seven decades old. The secret to Tolkien's longevity seems to be, in part, the sheer impudence that he had in challenging the status quo and in encouraging the academic community to enjoy *Beowulf* for its worth as an English poem, belonging to the uniquely English tradition of poetry. In addition to this, Tolkien approached the poem with a great deal of respect, letting *Beowulf* reveal itself to him, rather than deciding on a theory about it and then attempting to force the poem into conformity with this theory. In the final words of "The Monsters and the Critics," he makes the following remark:

> Yet it [*Beowulf*] is in fact written in a language that after many centuries has still essential kinship with our own, it was made in this land, and moves in our northern worlds beneath our northern sky, and for those who are native to that tongue and land, it must ever call with a profound appeal—until the dragon comes. (33-34)

It is within these lines that Tolkien indicates his own passion for *Beowulf* and for what it represents, the intangible "kinship" of the Anglo-Saxon epic with the modern Englishman. It is also within these lines that Tolkien hints at what makes *Beowulf* such an enduring piece of literature. *Beowulf* continues to be significant and "worth studying," because it manages to speak across the boundaries of time and language; because it is a story without a clear time setting and written in a language that no longer exists as a spoken tongue for the modern man; because its hero—if such he should even be

called—is of a nationality that might very well have ceased to exist before the poem's composition and thus was only relevant for its contemporary readers as a part of history; because it is ostensibly written about the past and yet explores the mindset of the present. Because it manages to develop such delicate tensions and yet offer something so much more poignant than mere angst. Because *Beowulf* is a paradox.

The idea of paradox within *Beowulf*, however, threatens to be problematic. James Earl notes, "*Beowulf* is an ethical poem of the Christian Anglo-Saxons, but its ethics are not Christian, and its hero is not an Anglo-Saxon," (264), a comment that approaches Voltaire's quip about the Holy Roman Empire in its absurd reality. But instead of leaning in the direction of satire or absurdity, the poem provides a picture of paradox that is simultaneously simple and sophisticated. The *Beowulf* poet develops a series of tensions that begin with a paradox but that ultimately result in a delicate and not entirely comfortable equilibrium. Scholar Richard Fehrenbacher has noted that *Beowulf* abounds with "unhappy resolutions" (105), but perhaps it would be better to argue that there is no clear resolution at all. It is the lack of real resolution that shapes the poem with hints of melancholy and, as Tolkien noted in "The Monsters and the Critics," regret: "its maker was telling of things already old and weighted with regret, and he expended his art in making keen that touch upon the heart which sorrows have that are both poignant and remote" (33). More importantly, though, the paradox and lack of resolution gives the poem a sense of balance—uneasy perhaps, but essential to its tone.

Scholars have long since recognized the structural balance of *Beowulf*. The metrical lines of Old English are balanced.[3] Although the poem itself is usually divided into three primary sections, most scholars focus chiefly on the balance between the fights with the two monsters, Grendel and the dragon.[4] The beginning and the end of the poem are balanced by the funerals of two kings. In "The Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien referred to *Beowulf* in terms of balance:

> It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death. (28)

But the balance of "two moments in a great life" is not the only equilibrium that the poet seeks to achieve in *Beowulf*. The poem offers a far more deeply internal sense of paradox and balance that shapes its tone and provides yet one more reason for it its enduring appeal.

Beowulf balances the differing qualities of the Anglo-Saxon identity in a progressive series of contrasting forces. At the forefront are the forces of the present and the past, both for the characters in the poem and for the unknown poet. The present and the past are constantly competing for attention and for dominance, with no clear resolution. The poem conveys the tension that the Anglo-Saxons experienced between their increasingly English present and their still-relevant Germanic past. *Beowulf* opens with a story about a Scandinavian king who makes a name for himself

[3] See Tolkien's essay "On Translating *Beowulf*," pp. 61-62, as noted in the Works Cited.
[4] A number of scholars have noted the apparent sexism of ignoring Grendel's mother when discussing the monsters. Tolkien overlooked her, choosing instead to group her quietly with Grendel. Her lack of name and her role largely as Grendel's avenger, however, functions to set her section of the poem apart.

and establishes an impressive genealogy, and it ends with a king whose past genealogy proves to be irrelevant to his success and who leaves no issue to succeed him. Even the rise of Beowulf to the throne suggests the shift in focus from the traditional genealogy. His past is acknowledged but not relied on; his worthiness is determined as a result of his courage and nobility of character. This gradual movement away from the traditions of a previous era to the development of a new one indicates the kind of balancing act that the Anglo-Saxons performed. They were composed of multiple tribes, mixed in history and mingling with Britons. The old genealogy of the Germanic and Scandinavian pasts would have been of less importance in their ever-evolving cultural identity.

Relevant to the idea of present and past but on an even more specific level are the forces of light and dark, Christianity and paganism, that muscle against one another throughout *Beowulf*. The poem offers a literal look at the conflict between the light and the dark, with the use of light and dark descriptions at key moments. But the literal descriptions of the light and the dark also give way to a metaphorical understanding of the tension between Christianity and paganism. Obviously, *Beowulf* is not a Christian poem in setting, but its author was a Christian and was thus balancing his own faith with the pagan religion of his past. As a result, *Beowulf* offers hints of Christianity but without a clear sense of whether or not the poem can be described as a piece of Christian literature.

On the most tangible level, however, *Beowulf* resounds with the tension between the land and the sea, a tension that is perhaps the subtlest but also the most physical. More importantly, the land and the sea represent forces that can be connected to the

present and the past, the light and the dark. In *Beowulf*, the land is the present, the site of immediacy for the characters, and the place of light. The sea on the other hand is the past and the link to the past, over its “whale-road” to the lands of the Anglo-Saxon origins. At the same time, the sea also represents the darkness, with its connection to death and to the memories of the dead who have been carried out to sea. But even within this land and sea dichotomy, there is another paradox. The land to which the Anglo-Saxon people migrated was not pristine; it, too, had a past with the Brythonic and pre-Brythonic peoples. And the land held qualities of darkness, hidden deep in the fens and the barrows. The sea that linked the Anglo-Saxons to their past also separated them from it, representing a kind of freedom in the isolation. But the sea carries Beowulf, and thus hope, to Heorot, representing a light for the struggling people. As a result, the land and the sea offer what is perhaps the most complex and yet the most balanced paradox within *Beowulf*.

Throughout *Beowulf*, the paradox remains; the tension continues to pull and shift, with no clear dominance among the forces. The present may be the most dominant in terms of immediate relevance, but the past exerts a powerful force over the characters as well as the poet. While Christianity may dominate the Anglo-Saxon faith system and thus the author’s worldview, the old pagan ways will haunt the developing English consciousness, sprinkling it with traditions and a history that forever lingers. The land may dominate as “home” for the characters, but the sea calls in the background, offering a taste of possibility that the landscape lacks.

So, does a simple appreciation of paradox and balance make *Beowulf* worth studying? Without question, it does. In fact, these elements provide yet another reason

for why the poem is a valid part of the cannon of English literature. What is more, these elements explain why the poem continues to attract scholars and, more importantly, why it continues to allow them to derive such diverse interpretations of the poem. A work of literature built on such a foundation cannot fail to fascinate, and it is likely that *Beowulf* will remain worth studying for quite some time—at least, until the dragon comes.

CHAPTER 2

HWÆT!

…þæt wæs god cyning!
Beowulf

The present and the past represent conflicting forces within *Beowulf*. The poem begins with the account of a long-dead king, setting up an example with which to compare and contrast later kings. These later kings seek honor through bravery in battle and nobility in rule but are unable to discard the histories of their own families or a comparison with the model set by the king who opens the poem. In addition, the conflict between present and past occurs both within the lines of the text and below the textual surface. The poem is essentially the poet's reflection upon his own Germanic past, but it is composed within the context of his Anglo-Saxon present and reflects a distinctly Anglo-Saxon cultural identity throughout the poem: in *Beowulf*, the present and the past compete with one another, but the competition is not in pursuit of a victor but rather in pursuit of a balance. *Beowulf* indicates that the past cannot be escaped but must dwell alongside the present in a delicate state of equilibrium.

From the beginning of the poem, the past is inescapable. The primary "present" of the poem is during Hrothgar's reign and Beowulf's arrival at Heorot, and it moves consistently forward to Beowulf's successful defeat of three monsters and subsequent death. But the poet chooses to open the epic tale in the past with a kind of prologue or an episode that reads like a flashback. The reader is confronted in the opening lines with the tale of Scyld Scefing:

Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,

hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.

Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,

monegum mægþum, meodosetla ofteah,

egsode eorlas. Syððan ærest wearð

feasceaft funden, he þæs frofre gebad,

weox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah,

oðþæt him æghwylc þara ymbsittendra

ofer hronrade hyran scolde,

gomban gyldan. þæt wæs god cyning! (lines 1-11)

So. [Listen! [5]] The Spear-Danes in days gone by

and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.

We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,

a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.

This terror of the hall-troops had come far.

A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on

as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.

In the end each clan on the outlying coasts

beyond the whale-road had to yield to him

and begin to pay tribute. That was one good king. (Heaney 3)

[5] Heaney translates *Hwæt* colloquially as "So," which is used above as a part of the translation. Liuzza and Ackroyd, however, translate this as "Listen" or "What," with Ackroyd noting, "The poem begins with a call for attention" (17). Given the epic nature of the subject, their translation seems appropriate to note.

What follows is a discussion of his exploits as king, as well as a commentary on his son, his extensive funereal arrangements, and his son's reign, eventually making the story more relevant to the present of the story's setting by bringing in Hrothgar. All of this seems a little like a diversion, but *Beowulf* is too complex of a poem for that to be the case. Not without reason, the first word in *Beowulf* is *hwæt*, or "Listen!" indicating that the story of Scyld is not a vague setup or an attempt by the author to ease into the main story, but rather an intentional opening. As Clark Hall notes in his *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, the word *hwæt* is demanding and forceful in its connotation, suggesting not so much a request that the reader continue reading or listening but rather an insistence that all concentration be focused on the story that the poet will be telling.[6] Not without intention, the poet utilizes a dynamic opening to indicate to the reader from the very beginning that every part of the poem is significant. The story of Scyld, while it might at first appear to be simply a historical diversion, ultimately anchors the poem up front with the image of a great king and thus establishes the model by which future kings will be assessed. In this way, the past that Scyld represents does not disappear with him but instead becomes an unavoidable comparison for the kings who follow him.

As the poem proceeds toward and eventually arrives at the present of Hrothgar and his problems in Heorot, it becomes clear that the past always *is* present in *Beowulf* and that the characters cannot ignore the role that it plays in their lives. Scyld functions as the example of a successful king to be compared or contrasted first with Hrothgar and then with Beowulf. In Hrothgar's case, the comparison functions as a clear contrast. Hrothgar begins impressively enough as a leader of his people:

> þa wæs Hroðgare heresped gyfen,

[6] See entry for *hwæt*.

wiges weorðmynd, þæt him his winemagas

georne hyrdon, oðð þæt seo geogoð geweox,

magodriht micel. Him on mod bearn (lines 64-67a)

The fortunes of war favoured Hrothgar.

Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,

young followers, a force that grew

to be a mighty army. (Heaney 7)

But apparently he lacks longevity as a strong king. Following one of Grendel's devastating attacks on Heorot, Hrothgar seems to be unable to work up a response:

Mære þeoden,

æþeling ærgod, unbliðe sæt,

þolode ðryðswyð, þegnsorge dreah,

syðþan hie þæs laðan last sceawedon,

wergan gastes; wæs þæt gewin to strang,

lað ond longsum. Næs hit lengra fyrst,

ac ymb ane niht eft gefremede

morðbeala mare ond no mearn fore (lines 129-136)

Their mighty prince,

and storied leader, sat stricken and helpless,

humiliated by the loss of his guard,

bewildered and stunned, staring aghast

at the demon's trail, in deep distress.

He was numb with grief, but got no respite

for one night later merciless Grendel

struck again with more gruesome murders. (Heaney 11)

Hrothgar's failure or powerlessness to act when Grendel attacks his people is a glaring disappointment when placed up against Scyld's mighty example as the "scourge of many tribes" (line 4, Heaney 3). Even more so, Hrothgar is referred to as a "mighty and storied leader," as if to contrast the disappointment of his present weakness with the glory of his past courage, and by immediate association, with Scyld's shining history.

In Beowulf's case, the comparison with Scyld is not as direct—given the distance in lines of poetry between Scyld's story and his own—but it is impossible to ignore. The exploits of the two men ultimately bookend the poem with examples of strong, successful kings, past and present. Although Beowulf is not Scyld's direct descendant—as is Hrothgar—he seems to inherit Scyld's drive for success, poetically at least, and thus becomes Scyld's heir in terms of achievements, first as a warrior and then as a king. Where Hrothgar fails, Beowulf succeeds. Even though Hrothgar is a part of Scyld's physical lineage, his own story more or less ends with the defeat of Grendel's mother, and the poet turns to Beowulf as the one who will carry on Scyld's memory and function as the ultimate comparison for him.

Scyld's example, however, is not the only one to hover around Beowulf in memory, and the past continues to demand a place in his life. Beowulf, though eager to shape his own future by leaving Geatland and pursuing heroic exploits among the Danes, is inevitably shaped by memories of mistakes that his father made. Upon

Beowulf's arriving at Heorot, Hrothgar recounts—more than likely for the benefit of his own warriors than for Beowulf—what he knows about Beowulf's father:

Gesloh þin fæder fæhðe mæste;
wearþ he Heaþolafe to handbonan
mid Wilfingum; ða hine Wedera cyn
for herebrogan habban ne mihte.
þanon he gesohte Suðdena folc
ofer yða gewealc, Arscyldinga.
ða ic furþum weold folce Deniga
ond on geogoðe heold ginne rice,
hordburh hæleþa; ða wæs Heregar dead,
min yldra mæg unlifigende,
bearn Healfdenes; se wæs betera ðonne ic.
Siððan þa fæhðe feo þingode;
sende ic Wylfingum ofer wæteres hrycg
ealde madmas; he me aþas swor. (lines 459-472)

There was a feud one time, begun by your father.
With his own hands he had killed Heatholaf,
who was a Wulfing; so war was looming
and his people, in fear of it, forced him to leave.
He came away then over rolling waves
to the South-Danes here, the sons of honour.

I was then in the first flush of kingship,
Establishing my sway over all the rich strongholds
of this heroic land. Heorogar,
my older brother and the better man,
also a son of Halfdane's had died.
Finally I healed the feud by paying;
I shipped a treasure-trove to the Wulfings
and Ecgtheow acknowledged me with oaths of allegiance. (Heaney 33)

Clearly, Hrothgar is well aware of Beowulf and of his family but feels that the payment he already made has atoned for the error that was committed (especially as it allows Hrothgar to bring up a time when he *was* an effective ruler). His payment, however, does not erase the past, and Beowulf will still have to make his own way as a warrior in order create a more positive memory of his family. Alexandra Bolintineau points out that Hrothgar also recounts the story of Heremod's descent into "bloodthirsty, avaricious, and ultimately self-destructive" behavior for Beowulf's benefit, thus "warn[ing] him not to act out the rest of Heremod's story in his own life" (268). This warning serves as means of placing the burden of the past directly on Beowulf's shoulders and offering him a way of avoiding it. On a smaller note, even Beowulf's heroic exploits have not gone unheeded among the Danes. At one point during the feast given in Beowulf's honor, Unferth attempts to challenge Beowulf's qualities as a leader by reminding him of a swimming competition that had an ambiguous outcome. But Beowulf handles the challenge confidently, reminding Unferth of his own previous failings, failings that were apparently significant enough for Beowulf to have learned about them from across the

sea (lines 499-606). The past is a constant presence in *Beowulf*, and characters cannot simply ignore or eradicate what has occurred in their own past or in their family history. More importantly, the past plays a role in shaping the characters and in providing them with an inescapable resume.

As a result, no character in *Beowulf* starts with a blank slate or a perfect record. The poet tells readers that Scyld is "a foundling to start with," but that he "would flourish later on / as his powers waxed and his worth was proved" (lines 7-8, Heaney 3). While Scyld might not have parents and a past to shape his future, he has the challenge of proving himself with absolutely no family history to assist him. Hrothgar has Scyld's example with which to contend, and Beowulf must overcome the mistakes of his father. Even Wiglaf, who makes a rather quick entrance and is then granted the honor of being made Beowulf's heir—in what might be English literature's first instance of a battlefield promotion—does not come without a pedigree of his own. The experiences of his family are recounted for the audience:

> Wiglaf wæs haten Weoxstanes sunu,
> leoflic lindwiga, leod Scylfinga,
> mæg ælfheres (lines 2602-2604a)

> His name was Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan's,
> a well-regarded Shylfing warrior
> related to Aelfhere (Heaney 175)[7]

[7] It should come as no surprise that Wiglaf's father was one of Scyld's warriors. Ever so quietly, the poet is bringing *Beowulf* full circle.

And so the information proceeds, as the poet lists for the reader all of the intricate details of Wiglaf's family and (perhaps more importantly for the culture of the day) his armor's origin, thus providing some sense of Wiglaf's motivation in charging forward to help his fallen lord. And when Wiglaf is crowned, it is with the immediate memory of Beowulf's fifty successful winters and courageous death. Beowulf's past essentially becomes the model for Wiglaf, as Scyld's past became the model for Beowulf.

Interestingly, Wiglaf's own courage in helping Beowulf seems to stand primarily on its own qualities in the story and is not celebrated wildly or even mentioned after it occurs. Instead, Wiglaf focuses on his lord's nobility and on the battles that he will now have to face as the new king. These impending conflicts resonate with the feuds of the past, feuds with Franks, Frisians, and Swedes. In the middle of his funereal comments, Wiglaf even takes a few minutes to narrate the details of these feuds, as if to say that the problems of the past are unavoidable. All of these examples suggest that the past is a powerful force that haunts the characters throughout *Beowulf* and shapes, in part, the reckoning that they will receive.

In spite of the role that the past plays in determining the character of Beowulf and his fellow kings, the past does not necessarily handicap these men in the poem, and each one is given the opportunity to overcome the past or at least to pursue a better future. As noted in the beginning of the poem, Scyld grows out of the weakness of his youth and apparently "proves his worth," rising to become a great king. The poet tells us that Hrothgar is actually the second son (line 61), but that "the fortunes of war favoured" him and thus enabled him to ascend in power and take over the throne (line 64). Beowulf is the most obvious example in that he willingly leaves behind a potentially

destructive past to pursue redemption through heroism. The success of each of these characters indicates that the past does not have to control the person but that it also cannot be ignored.

Additionally, the examples of each of the kings suggest that the past is only a part of who the person becomes. In each case, the characters have the opportunity to use the present to good advantage. Hrothgar clearly fails, and given that his success in the past is due largely to good fortune (line 64), it seems that Hrothgar is unable to balance his past accomplishment with the demands of the present. Scyld, Beowulf, and Wiglaf, on the other hand, actively overcome obstacles that threaten to impede, thus indicating that personal drive and determination play an important role in shaping their character. In Beowulf's case, as well as in Wiglaf's, the context of the obstacles seem to present an incentive. Both have something in their family history to overcome—for Wiglaf it is the memory of his father's murder of Eanmund and resulting exile—and it might be argued that nothing motivates quite like the need to prove that one is more successful or more worthy than a predecessor who did a wrong. Even Scyld provides an interesting example in that he does not have a parental history to overcome, but rather the lack of one. In a culture in which the first impression one makes is based in part on family history (as both Beowulf and Wiglaf prove), Scyld has to do more to demonstrate his worth. For each of these kings, though, the past is only a part of the equation, and in the end the worth of each is determined by his noble actions and heroic behavior in the present. Ultimately, the successful kings in *Beowulf* are successful because they are able to find a balance between the present and the past.

The balance between present and past is a delicate one, however, and the story of Grendel and his mother provides a harsh example of what happens when the equilibrium is disrupted or overturned. In the case of both characters, their past seems to overtake their present and transform them into the monsters that they become. Regarding Grendel, the *Beowulf*-text is not entirely clear about his origins. Grendel is referred to consistently in translation as a "fiend of hell" and as a "demon,"[8] with no clear indication about whether or not this description is meant to be literal:

> Swa ða drihtguman dreamum lifdon
> eadiglice, oððæt an ongan
> fyrene fremman feond on helle.
> Wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten,
> mære mearcstapa, se þe moras heold,
> fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard
> wonsæli wer weardode hwile,
> siþðan him Scyppend forscrifen hæfde
> in Caines cynne. þone cwealm gewræc
> ece drihten, þæs þe he Abel slog;
> ne gefeah he þære fæhðe, ac he hine feor forwræc,
> metod for þy mane, mancynne fram.
> þanon untydras ealle onwocon,
> eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas,
> swylce gigantas**,** þa wið gode wunnon
> lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald (99-1114).

[8] See the translations listed in the Reference List.

So times were pleasant for the people there
until finally one, a fiend out of hell,
began to work his work in the world.
Grendel was the name of the grim demon
haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
and desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
in misery among the banished monsters,
Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed
and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel
the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
Cain got no good from committing that murder
because the Almighty made him anathema
and out of the curse of his exile there sprang
ogres and elves and evil phantoms
and the giants too who strove with God
time and again until He gave them their reward. (Heaney 9)

While the text's immediate description makes it easy to dismiss Grendel simply as a monster, and thus as the "villain" in the poem, important linguistic features arise from the passage above to clear Grendel of at least a part of the infamy now attached to his name. For one, the word *feond* translates to what modern readers will recognize as "fiend," but it also translates simply to "foe" or "enemy" (Hall). Additionally, the phrase *grimma gæst* translates quite literally to "fierce stranger" or, at the worst "fierce enemy"

(Hall). The text itself does not make an immediate indication that Grendel is, quite literally, a demon or even a monster. Instead he is simply an outcast, living “among the banished monsters” (line 105, Heaney 9) and thus in some form of exile, apparently banished and now a monster along with those he has joined. Fidel Fajardo-Acosta claims that because Grendel is pursuing the destruction of Hrothgar’s people in such an active and direct manner, Grendel is arguably a former member of that community and thus a human pursuing some form of revenge (48). While hinting strongly at the monster qualities that Grendel possesses, even Tolkien admits that Grendel is as much flesh and blood as those upon whom he is preying: “This approximation of Grendel to a devil does not mean that there is any confusion as to his habitation. Grendel was a fleshly denizen of this world (until physically slain)” (“Monsters and Critics” 35). In the same passage, Tolkien goes on to indicate that readers are meant to understand the references to hell and darkness more as “symbolism” than as literal biblical references (43). Thus, Grendel is a man—or was at one time fully a man—and the hell from which he arrives to afflict Heorot is a purely metaphorical hell.

More importantly, though, Grendel’s hell is rooted in his past. The text does not directly explain what has happened in Grendel’s past, but it suggests that the past contains memories of evil still haunting Grendel. Grendel is described as *no hie fæder cunnon* (not knowing a father), a quality that certainly defines his past. Fajardo-Acosta argues that Grendel has committed a crime against his community, most likely the crime of murdering a brother or family member (48). This argument, coupled with Tolkien’s comments about Grendel being a “fleshly denizen of this world” suggest that just as Grendel’s hell is metaphorical, Grendel himself has only become a monster

metaphorically. He is a man, haunted by something from his past, and he has let his past control him. The poet also connects Grendel to the biblical Cain, who has gone down in infamy for murdering his brother Abel (Genesis 4), but he does not necessarily claim that Grendel is a direct descendant of Cain.[9] At one point, the poet says:

þanon woc fela
geosceaftgasta; wæs þæra Grendel sum,
heorowearh hetelic, se æt Heorote fand
wæccendne wer wiges bidan. (lines 1265-1268)

And from Cain there sprang
misbegotten spirits, among them Grendel,
the banished and accursed, due to come to grips
with that watcher in Heorot waiting to do battle. (Heaney 89)

Rather than making Grendel an actual descendant of Cain, though, the poet is really just giving Grendel a kind of "past by association" that haunts him. This past might very well include the crime of murder, as Fajardo-Acosta notes and the poetic reference to Cain implies. In any event, this dark and unclear past has come to control Grendel and turned him into the monster that actively terrorizes Heorot.

Grendel is not the only monster whose past has come to control his present in *Beowulf*. While Grendel might be described as fatherless, he is not lacking in a mother, and her past seems remarkably similar to Grendel's in the nature of the crime and in the

[9] The text claims that, "from Cain there sprang / misbegotten spirits, among them Grendel, / the banished and accursed" (lines 1265b-1267a, Heaney 89), but this does not indicate a literal ancestry as it does an affiliation in exile.

outcome. The poet describes her history as one of mystery and darkness, with the implication of an unforgivable transgression against the community:

Grendles modor,
ides, aglæcwif, yrmþe gemunde,
se þe wæteregesan wunian scolde,
cealde streamas, siþðan Cain wearð
to ecgbanan angan breþer,
fæderenmæge; he þa fag gewat,
morþre gemearcod, mandream fleon,
westen warode. þanon woc fela
geosceaftgasta; wæs þæra Grendel sum,
heorowearh hetelic, se æt Heorote fand
wæccendne wer wiges bidan. (lines 1258b-1265a)

Grendel's mother,
monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.
She had been forced down into fearful waters,
the cold depths, after Cain had killed
his father's son, felled his own
brother with a sword. Branded an outlaw,
marked by having murdered, he moved into the wilds,
shunned company and joy. (Heaney 89)

The description *ides, aglæcwif* for Grendel's mother literally translates to "female monster"[10] (Hall), and the text that follows suggests that she, like Grendel, has become a monster after being forced from the community and into the mere.[11] Once again, the connection to Cain does not appear to be one of genealogy but rather of symbolism: like Grendel, his mother might very well have committed a crime of murder against a member of her society, making for an important lineage within this family and another way in which the past has come to control Grendel and to determine his present. The poet also speaks of a background for both Grendel and his mother that is "hidden in a past / of demons and ghosts" (lines 1356-1357, Heaney 95), but these demons and ghosts seem to refer to the nature of the crimes that Grendel and his mother committed than they do the essence of the two characters. Both are monsters because the past has become a controlling force in their lives.

The paradox of present and past in *Beowulf* thus demands a pursuit of balance. For the characters, the balance is one of recognizing the importance of the past and the role that it plays in shaping the present, but of refusing to allow the past to be in command of the present. The balance is delicate but essential. To upset it is to invite failure, in the case of Hrothgar, or destruction, in the case of Grendel and his mother. The characters that achieve success—Scyld, Beowulf, and Wiglaf—are those that also achieve a measure of balance between the present and the past.

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[10] Heaney's translation offers only one possible reading of the expression *ides, aglæcwif*. At its most fundamental, the phrase means "woman, female monster," and according to Hall both words are nouns. While the implication of a monstrous bride of hell is certainly arguable within the context and "queen" is one possible meaning of *ides*, Heaney's version appears to be derived more from implication than from linguistics.

[11] The word *siþðan* is open to a variety of meanings and does not necessarily indicate that Grendel's mother entered the swamp just after Cain murdered Abel. The expression also suggests a meaning of "inasmuch as" (Hall) or "in the same way," indicating that just as Cain committed a gruesome crime against his brother (a member of his community) and was banished, so did Grendel's mother.

The pursuit of balance between present and past does not exist only for the characters and the events in their lives, however. The poet must also achieve a balance between the past that opens the poem and the present that closes it. Between the section that immediately follows the defeat of Grendel's mother and the section that begins with the rise of the dragon, there is a large gap in the chronology of the poem. Beowulf returns to Geatland, and what follows is about fifty lines in which the poet travels through the next few decades at a startling rate. He uses the expression *hyrde ic* (I heard), for much that he says here, as if to suggest that the information he is including is largely hearsay and only worth mentioning in passing. Readers learn that Beowulf achieves a new respect among the Geats and eventually rises to the throne, ruling well for five decades. It would seem that this part of the past, while arguably the highlight of Beowulf's life, gets brushed aside too quickly.[12] In terms of structure, though, these fifty lines of poetry bring *Beowulf* back around to the beginning by functioning as the summary of Beowulf's success in comparison to the summary of Scyld's in the poem's opening. Had the poet ended with

> He geheold tela
> fiftig wintra (wæs ða frod cyning,
> eald eþelweard) (lines 2208b-2210a)

> He ruled it well
> for fifty winters, grew old and wise

[12] Cooke suggests (p. 305) that Beowulf might have been a well-known figure in Anglo-Saxon and pre-Anglo-Saxon storytelling and thus that the poem's audience would not have required all of the interim material about his reign. This offers an intriguing explanation for the large gap in the timetable, but without any evidence of contemporary, extra-textual mentions of the character, Cooke's theory cannot be leaned on too heavily.

as warden of the land (Heaney 151)

and then attached a few lines about Beowulf's peaceful death, the poem would have been complete, if a bit anti-climactic. What is more, Beowulf's death would have ended the poem with a perfect comparison to Scyld's, with both men dying after climbing through the ranks and achieving great success as warriors and as kings.

But the *Beowulf* poet is not offering a perfect comparison, because a perfect comparison does not exist. However much Beowulf and Scyld provide for a good structural similarity within the poem, they are two different men, and the uniquely sad ending for Beowulf is a way for the poet to indicate the role that the past is playing in the poem, with references to both character and structure. In terms of character, the examples of the two men indicate that each is still responsible for his own actions. Beowulf may be an effective comparison for Scyld, but he does not become Scyld. Beowulf remains an individual whose outcome is based on his own past and on his actions in the present. He may be compared to Scyld, but he should not be confused with Scyld. The same argument applies to the role of the past in comparing the funerals of Beowulf and Scyld. In terms of structure, the funerals that open and close the poem seem to offer a perfect (if somewhat sad) sense of completion. But even here, the poet presents a paradox between present and past. Ultimately, the funerals of the two men occur for very different reasons—Scyld's noble death in old age, Beowulf's violent death resulting from pride in fighting the dragon alone—leaving the poem somewhat lopsided in structure with Scyld's past appearing to trump Beowulf's present. Once again, though, the poet indicates how the past affects the present but does not always

determine its outcome and should not control it. Beowulf's death occurs as a result of actions that he has taken and for which he bears the full responsibility.

The difference in cause between the death of Scyld and the death of Beowulf suggests more than an intentional focus on individual responsibility, though. In fact, Beowulf's death is in many ways a sub-textual reflection for the poet as well. On the one hand, it might be argued that Beowulf's death is morally ambiguous in terms of heroism: the poem indicates that pride is his downfall (lines 2529-2528, 2677b-2680), and one critical argument is that because of this the poet is not presenting Beowulf as a hero but as an example of why the pagan ways failed.[13] But the *Beowulf*-poet is not an Anglo-Saxon Aesop and does not attempt to moralize excessively in other parts of the poem. Instead, the often melancholic tone seems to originate from the author's own struggles with the paradox of present and past that faces him as he composes *Beowulf*. What is more, Beowulf's death occurs largely because he chooses to fight the dragon by himself, even as an old man, and in this moment of the poem there is a hint of practicality on the poet's part: it is simply not going to work.

Consonant to the practicality, though, is a measure of respect from the poet for the die-hard courage of the ancestral men of the North,[14] indicating once more how the past exists alongside the present for the poet. The motives that drive an aging Beowulf to take on a dragon single-handedly are a part of the past for the poet, lost in the history and poetry of Northern heroes. But they resonate in the poet's own fascination and propel him to honor a vanished way of life. Significantly, Beowulf's funeral is as lavish

[13] See Hill, pp. 50-51.
[14] For this essay, I am following the example of other critics (including but not limited to Tolkien), who use the term "North" and "Northern" to refer to the northern Germanic peoples. I have opted to capitalize the word as a proper noun, because it refers to a distinct group of people and their cultural heritage.

as it is noble, replete with descriptions of the great barrow that is constructed for him and the wealth that will surround him in death. What is more, the poet's account speaks of the value that he places on Beowulf's honorable death and not on the reason for this death:

Him ða gegiredan Geata leode
ad on eorðan unwaclicne,
helmum behongen, hildebordum,
beorhtum byrnum, swa he bena wæs;
alegdon ða tomiddes mærne þeoden
hæleð hiofende, hlaford leofne…
Geworhton ða Wedra leode
hleo on hoe, se wæs heah ond brad,
wægliðendum wide gesyne,
ond betimbredon on tyn dagum
beadurofes becn, bronda lafe
wealle beworhton, swa hyt weorðlicost
foresnotre men findan mihton.
Hi on beorg dydon beg ond siglu,
eall swylce hyrsta, swylce on horde ær
niðhedige men genumen hæfdon…
cwædon þæt he wære wyruldcyninga
manna mildust ond monðwærust,
leodum liðost ond lofgeornost. (lines 3137-3142, 3156-3165, 3180-3182)

The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf,
stacked and decked it until it stood four-square,
hung with helmets, heavy war-shields
and shining armour, just as he had ordered.
Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it,
mourning a lord far-famed and beloved…
Then the Geat people began to construct
a mound on a headland, high and imposing,
a marker that sailors could see from far away,
and in ten days they had completed the work.
It was their hero's memorial; what remained from the fire
they housed inside it, behind a wall
as worthy of him as their workmanship could make it.
And they buried torques in the barrow, and jewels
and a trove of such things as trespassing men
had once dared to drag from the hoard…
They said that of all the kings upon the earth
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame. (Heaney 211, 213)

As this passage indicates, it is more likely that Wiglaf and his people will remember Beowulf's fifty successful winters and heroic death than they will the misguided pride that led him to take on a dragon alone and in old age. Additionally, it is significant that

the poet concludes his epic not with a moralistic condemnation of Beowulf but with a sad but fond look at a great man who did many great things in life—great things that will far surpass him in memory and will more than outweigh mistakes that he made. It is noteworthy that Beowulf's pride is forgotten by the end of the poem, suggesting that the poet is deliberately refusing to allow Beowulf's past to affect the honor that he deserves in his funeral.

The indications of a genuine respect for the noble Northern heroes bring in another element of the past that runs through *Beowulf*, an element that Tolkien understood when he spoke of the "profound appeal" that the story holds ("Monsters and Critics" 34). In many ways, the poet himself appears to be haunted by the appeal of the past that he is attempting to re-create. Why else would the poet go to such great lengths to produce this masterpiece of a poem about a time long since vanished, even in his own day? Regardless of the date of actual composition, it is safe to say that the Danish and Geatish characters within the poem (composed—or copied—in the West Saxon language) are not contemporary with its composition or at least with its copying down. The exact dates during which the Geats lived are difficult to determine, but scholars agree that this people was at the least ceasing to be a distinct historical entity around or before the time that the poet was penning *Beowulf*.[15]

In addition, it is difficult to determine whether or not the poet personally had any direct connection to Scandinavia or even if he would have had access to many primary source materials. Historian Andrew Reynolds notes that contact between Britain and

[15] Michael Drout follows the current line of argument by linking the Geats to the Swedish Götar tribe, that was absorbed into the burgeoning Swedish nation some time between the eighth and the twelfth centuries. (See Drout, "A Mythology for Anglo-Saxon England," p. 234, as listed in the Reference List.) See also Howe, p. 73.

Scandinavia most likely existed well into the fifth and sixth centuries (43-33), so the possibility remains. Peter Sawyer indicates that communication, as well as mutual influence, existed between England and Scandinavia during the later part of the Anglo-Saxon era: “It is, therefore, a reasonable assumption that there was regular traffic between England and Norway throughout the eleventh century, and perhaps earlier” (225). But he seems to think that little would have existed prior to the tenth century.[16] North builds his primary argument on the thesis that *Beowulf* was “composed for King Wiglaf in the famous minster of Breedon on the Hill, some time after the death of King Beornwolf,” which he approximates to some time between 826 and 830 (223). If this argument holds true, it would make the potential for such primary source material and even contact with Scandinavia greater, given that a wealthy religious house would have had the means and the resources to continue communication with that part of the world. But North’s argument is open to dispute, and Reynolds and Sawyer only provide theories, leaving readers with no clear information about what knowledge the poet might have had about cultural traditions and social mores in the previous centuries in another part of the world.

Beowulf scholar Nicholas Howe has suggested that the poem is more general than it is specific with regard to many of the descriptions and particularly regarding geographical descriptions. Concerning the *Beowulf*-poet as well as others, he notes that, “While these poets name places and give some sense of relative location, they think of Germania less as a region to be mapped than as one to be evoked” (50). More specifically, the physical descriptions of place within *Beowulf* are “hopelessly imprecise”

[16] This is assuming, of course, the traditional dating of *Beowulf*. If Kevin Kiernan is correct in his later dating of the poem, however, the possibility for good communication between England and Scandinavia is greater (see Kiernan pp. 19-20). See also Smith (p. 34) for more on this.

(56) and thus not of value in determining how much the poet knew. Osmo Pekonen follows this up with the comment that "*Beowulf* is a poem, not a text-book of geography" and that, "The various natural circumstances alluded to in the poem (whales, mighty waves, fierce north wind, headlands, and wind-swept cliffs) could have been set anywhere in the northern world" (152). As Howe suggests, these descriptions intend to "evoke" and not to describe, perhaps in much the same way that modern film makers utilize the public perception of the past in extremes of generality (treatment of women, costuming, etc.) rather than the complexities of what was real in order to call to mind a historical time. The result, in *Beowulf* at least, is reflection of a time long since vanished, but no real value in determining geography, much less the historical activities and mindsets of the Germanic and Scandinavian peoples. It is arguable that *Beowulf* offers far more in terms of understanding the activities and the mindset of the author in his own day than it does about those in the days about which he is writing. Whether or not the past is literal or accurate in *Beowulf* is insignificant; the real value in the poem is what the poet is revealing about the Anglo-Saxon people.

Ultimately, the entire body of *Beowulf* is a re-creation of what we assume to be a part of the poet's past, a part that remains very much alive and present for him. The significance of a pagan-centric poem from a Christian Anglo-Saxon will be explored more fully in Chapter 2, but suffice it to say the pre-Christian past must have fascinated the poet enough to prompt him to compose over three thousand epic lines about it, containing several of the most important and the most seminal characters in English literature. As Hill explains so clearly,

> If a devout monk living in a community of similarly devout souls is concerned about the threats of heathen burial practices, worship, curses, witchcraft, and spells, he might well consign the world of Ingeld—the world of heroic life—to damnation…But it is highly unlikely that he would labour for 3,182 lines to re-create it." (50)

In the end, just how "Christian" *Beowulf* really is may not be as important as the overarching paradox that it is a poem by a Christian that still manages to create an admirable, if not worshipful, persona of pagans from the past. Hill concludes by pointing out, "In *Beowulf* the poet recreates or recalls something not understood as fictive invention or as a benighted social post, but as a great past that justifies insistence on the same values and social relations highlighted there" (50). In other words, there is little chance that the poet went to such great lengths to write so long and intricate a poem about something he did not value or even that he intended to condemn. *Beowulf* offers too much of a sympathetic look at the characters and their heroism for condemnation to be even a small part of the poet's purpose.

At the same time, the *Beowulf*-poet does not worship the pagan past, nor does he discount or disrespect it. Instead, he offers a sympathetic look at it as a time that has disappeared and does not need to return, but that deserves to be remembered for its qualities as a part of the past. And this past does not need to be perfect in its historical or geographical specificities but can be described through the Anglo-Saxon lens of importance—the fierce determination of the Northern men, their courage in the face of insurmountable odds, their willingness to die simply for the honor of being a great warrior. Several critics have suggested that *Beowulf* is actually the poet's tongue-in-

cheek poking at paganism and that the poem's purpose is essentially to undermine the value of what a character like Beowulf represents.[17] Further, Mary Catherine Davidson notes that "medieval clerical culture enjoyed the purpose of adopting and rejecting the past," indicating that *Beowulf* somehow manages to accomplish both tasks (155). While interesting in theory, these arguments seem to push the boundaries of satire to their limits. Everything heroic and noble in the poem, the gaze toward the past and the tribute that the past is afforded, every emotion and sentiment displayed by the characters and usually read as honorable and dignified, suddenly becomes ridiculous if these theories hold water. Instead, the appearance of conflicting worldviews becomes poignant when taken in the context of the paradox that the Anglo-Saxon poet faces. For the poet, the past represents a defining element, however pagan and lacking in immediate relevance for him, that cannot be ignored and that certainly cannot be disrespected.

The past, however, does not necessarily control the poet any more than it controls the characters. The poet seems capable of shaping the past thoughtfully, with an effort toward exploring the meaning that it holds for him and for those who would be reading (or listening to) *Beowulf*. The result in his shaping of the past is something that is never fully defined or decided, leaving the poem balancing delicately between the reality of the present and the memories of the past. Just because the past cannot control the poet does not mean that it fails to affect him. This balance is what gives the poem its often-ambiguous tone of melancholic heroism—respect for the past, but no real desire to return to it or to restore it in any way but through poetry. This balance is also what makes the poem continually fascinating.

[17] See Hill, pp. 49, 50 and Earl, p. 264.

That the poet manages to balance the present and the past without resolution suggests not so much that the poet is unable to find a resolution but that he is not necessarily seeking one. And perhaps there is no resolution to be found. This tension—and the paradox—is in large part what continues to make *Beowulf* relevant to the study of English literature and certainly what makes it “worth studying.”

CHAPTER 3

BRIGHTENING DAWN AND *MISTIGE MŌRAS*

Eala earendel, engla beorhtost!
Cynewulf

The pursuit of balance in *Beowulf* continues with a paradox of light and dark, a paradox that reflects the paradox of present and past in the need for opposing forces to dwell alongside one another. What is more, the presence of light and dark manifests itself throughout the poem in literal descriptions that ultimately point to the metaphorical role of light and darkness for the characters and for the poet. While the function of these descriptions suggests symbolic simplicity, the poet is not presenting a case of light defeating the darkness in a grand vision of good versus evil. Instead, the vision is one of equilibrium, and the conclusion is one without a clear resolution. Just as with the paradox of present and past, the poet does not make a clear case for a victor in the paradox of light and dark. In *Beowulf*, the two forces must find a balance by existing side-by-side.

Obviously, a symbolic use of light and dark is not unique to *Beowulf*,[18] but in this poem it performs role that is simultaneously textual and sub-textual. On the one hand, the images of light and dark that appear within *Beowulf* suggest a function for the light and the darkness that is inclusive of the story being told. In the same way that Grendel and the dragon reside in the darkness of the fens and the barrow, respectively, so darkness is frequently connected to the monsters and thus to the evil of the unknown. And just as the sun rises following a raid by Grendel or the sun brightens with the appearance of Beowulf, so light is clearly represented as a necessary foil for

[18] Peter Ackroyd notes that the symbolic placement of light/dark descriptions was a common feature in Anglo-Saxon literature (80).

darkness—in some cases successful, and in other cases unsuccessful. On the other hand, though, the light and the darkness perform a larger role for the poet, indicating the tension that exists between the darkness of the pagan past and the light of the Christian present. As a result, the tension that is created between the darkness and the need for light exists of a variety of levels within the poem and ultimately points back to the balance that is created between the past and the present.

Arriving at a balance between the light and the dark requires locating the literal descriptions of light and dark and analyzing their purpose within the poem. In the description of Grendel's raid, *Beowulf* appears to lack a strong representation of light as a successful force with which to counter darkness. The poet references it, but the darkness appears to dominate the characters and their outcomes, and the light fails to invigorate. Not surprisingly, readers are told early on that darkness is Grendel's ally and that he uses the cover of darkness for perpetrating his crimes against Heorot:

> Gewat ða neosian, syþðan niht becom,
> hean huses, hu hit Hringdene
> æfter beorþege gebun hæfdon.
> Fand þa ðær inne æþelinga gedriht
> swefan æfter symble; sorge ne cuðon,
> wonsceaft wera. (lines 115-120a)

> So, after nightfall, Grendel set out
> for the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes
> were settling into it after the drink

and there he came upon them, a company of the best

asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain

and human sorrow. (Heany 9,11)

By having Grendel commit his evil deeds under the cover of darkness, the poet gives darkness the symbolic role of evil and connects it to fear and to the potential for danger. The obvious solution would be the infusion of light to counter the darkness and thus to bring hope to Heorot. The rising of the sun, however, does not offer the expected optimism:

ða wæs on uhtan mid ærdæge

Grendles guðcræft gumum undyrne;

þa wæs æfter wiste wop up ahafen,

micel morgensweg. Mære þeoden,

æþeling ærgod, unbliðe sæt,

þolode ðryðswyð, þegnsorge dreah,

syðþan hie þæs laðan last sceawedon,

wergan gastes; wæs þæt gewin to strang,

lað ond longsum. Næs hit lengra fyrst (lines 126-134)

Then as dawn brightened and the day broke

Grendel's powers of destruction were plain:

their wassail was over, they wept to heaven

and mourned under morning. Their mighty prince,

and storied leader, sat stricken and helpless,

humiliated by the loss of his guard,

bewildered and stunned, staring aghast

at the demon's trail, in deep distress. (Heaney 11)

Following Grendel's murderous raid, the light only reveals the evil that has occurred during the darkness, and it is apparently not enough to fill Hrothgar and his people with the resolve needed to destroy the monster. Hrothgar, after all, is unable even to act, and his paralysis can hardly give his people confidence. The poetic shift to dawn without the expected demand for revenge and insistence on victory suggests that the light in *Beowulf* might lack a potent force in the poem and that darkness might ultimately be victorious over the light.

In addition, the poet uses light in its false or corrupted forms to indicate the power of darkness and to suggest the difference between true light and its counterpart. Just as Grendel resides in the murky darkness of the fens, so the dragon makes his home in the darkness of the ancient barrow where the only is the dangerous glitter of the cursed gold that the dragon is hoarding and the fire that he belches forth. In some ways, this monster is even deadlier than Grendel or his mother. While Grendel and his mother must physically sneak into Heorot in order to commit their crimes and then sneak back out, the dragon can cover the night sky with his dark shadow and fiery blast. The poet also notes that he begins to "dominate the dark" during the night (line 2210, Heaney 151), becoming a constant terror and systematically destroying the entire nation of the Geats. What is more, the dragon can unleash a fiery fury that destroys the people, their homes, and their entire livelihood. The poet describes the anger of the dragon when he discovers that his hoard of treasure has been violated and that he has been robbed:

þa se wyrm onwoc, wroht wæs geniwad;
stonc ða æfter stane, stearcheort onfand
feondes fotlast; he to forð gestop
dyrnan cræfte dracan heafde neah...
Hordweard onbad
earfoðlice oððæt æfen cwom;
wæs ða gebolgen beorges hyrde,
wolde se laða lige forgyldan
drincfæt dyre. þa wæs dæg sceacen
wyrme on willan; no on wealle læg,
bidan wolde, ac mid bæle for,
fyre gefysed. (lines 2286-2290, 2302b-2309a)

When the dragon awoke, trouble flared again.
He rippled down the rock, writhing with anger
when he saw the footprints of the prowler who had stolen
too close to his dreaming head…
So the guardian of the mound,
the hoard-watcher, waited for the gloaming
with fierce impatience; his pent-up fury
at the loss of the vessel made him long to hit back
and lash out in flames. Then, to his delight,
the day waned and he could wait no longer

behind the wall, but hurtled forth

in a fiery blaze. (Heaney 155, 157)

As with Grendel and Grendel's mother, the dragon waits until the nightfall to wreak havoc on the people. In the case of the dragon, through, he brings a corrupted kind of light with him—the light of his own hellish fire that burns the Geatish people and their homes. Not surprisingly, the dragon's fiery illumination does not offer the potential for hope and healing that should connected to the light of the sun, though, but rather suggests a mockery of the daylight and the failure of the true light to overcome the darkness.

It is significant to note that Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon are all destroyed within *Beowulf*, a plot element offering the immediate suggestion that darkness is ultimately defeated. This does not happen, however. Rather than darkness suffering defeat, it continues to reappear in even more destructive forms. Grendel's death only predicates the arrival of Grendel's mother on the scene, and she appears wielding the dark fury of a woman deprived of her child. And in destroying Grendel's mother, Beowulf has yet to face the monster that will be his ruination. More importantly, the death of the dragon is more ambiguous than it is clear in terms of the destruction of darkness. Beowulf kills the dragon but at the expense of his own life, making the defeat of this element of darkness more bittersweet than it is encouraging. It is possible to argue that the death of the dragon and the death of Beowulf's exist in isolation, because the dragon—as darkness—must be destroyed, while Beowulf is punished for his pride. Fidel Fajardo-Acosta suggests that the dragon is simply Grendel in a more threatening form, returned to punish Beowulf (100). Whether or not this theory is tenable, Fajardo-

Acosta offers an interesting suggestion with regard to the darkness that surrounds the dragon. A returned Grendel or a new horror on the landscape, the advent of the dragon indicates that darkness—and thereby, evil—will continue to reappear and consequently to compete with the light. What is more, a reappearing Grendel in new form provides a fascinating potential for the return of the past and the way that the past continues to haunt the present, as viewed through a paradox of light and dark. As a result, the poem suggests that darkness does not disappear or face defeat but that it constantly reappears in more powerful forms.

At times, it seems that the darkness is on the way to overcoming the light within *Beowulf*, but light ultimately provides an essential contrast to the darkness in this poem. In spite of the one example of dawn breaking after Grendel's raid, and without the expectation of hope to accompany it, light does peer through the shadows at important moments throughout the poem. For instance, as Beowulf and his men approach Heorot, they notice the light pouring forth from the hall, light that represents the good of the people in stark contrast to the darkness that resides outside the hall:

Guman onetton,
sigon ætsomne, oþþæt 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. (lines 306-311)

They marched in step,

hurrying on till the timbered hall

rose before them, radiant with gold.

Nobody on earth knew of another

building like it. Majesty lodged there,

its light shone over many lands. (Heaney 23)

Whether or not Hrothgar is acting as the most effective protector for his people at this point in the poem, Heorot still retains a powerful sense of light that welcomes Beowulf and his men when they arrive. Interestingly, it is this very light, in part, that angers Grendel and inflames his wrath toward Hrothgar and his people. Carrying his own darkness with him, Grendel cannot abide the brightness of Hrothgar's hall, and it angers him even more as he approaches to commit his crimes:

Wod under wolcnum to þæs þe he winreced,

goldsele gumena, gearwost wisse,

fættum fahne….

Com þa to recede rinc siðian,

dreamum bedæled. Duru sona onarn,

fyrbendum fæst, syþðan he hire folmum æthran;

onbræd þa bealohydig, ða he gebolgen wæs,

recedes muþan. Raþe æfter þon

on fagne flor feond treddode,

eode yrremod; him of eagum stod

ligge gelicost leoht unfæger. (lines 714-716a, 720-727)

Under the cloud-murk he moved towards it
until it shone above him, a sheer keep
of fortified gold…
Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead
and arrived at the bawn. The iron-braced door
turned on its hinge when his hands touched it.
Then his rage boiled over, he ripped open
the mouth of the building, maddening for blood,
pacing the length of the patterned floor
with his loathsome tread, while a baleful light,
flame more than light, flared from his eyes. (Heaney 49)

The “baleful light” in Grendel’s eyes serves as a contrast to the good light from Heorot, light that pours from the building as the people celebrate Beowulf’s arrival and light that comes from the gold that covering the keep. In this case, the light from the gold of Heorot’s keep does not perform that same function as the false light from the dragon’s gold later on. Heorot’s gold reflects the hope that has arisen with Beowulf’s determination to destroy Grendel, while the dragon’s gold reflects only his destructive fire. More importantly, the light from Heorot prefigures the environmental light that will appear once Grendel is defeated. Once Beowulf has successfully defeated Grendel, the poet records that light has proven to be a successful force against the darkness that has haunted Heorot:

ða wæs morgenleoht

scofen ond scynded. Eode scealc monig

swiðhicgende to sele þam hean

searo-wundor seon (lines 916b-919)

The light of day

broke and kept brightening. Bands of retainers

galloped in excitement to the gabled hall

to see the marvel. (Heaney 61)

It is significant that at this point in the poem the light not only breaks but also continues to brighten as if to say that the breaking of the lights represents the breaking, in part at least, the curse that has surrounded Heorot. Here the light of the sun represents a force sufficient enough to defy the darkness and to compete with it.

At the same time, the *Beowulf* poet does not indicate that darkness is ever fully destroyed but rather presents it as reappearing throughout the poem. No sooner does Beowulf defeat Grendel than another darkness arises to counter the light that has encouraged the Danes. When Grendel's mother arrives to avenge her son, darkness returns to Heorot, and Beowulf must seek her out in the fens in order to destroy the Grendel curse once and for all. When he succeeds, the poet notes that light once again appears over Heorot as a successful foil for the darkness:

Lixte se leoma, leoht inne stod,

efne swa of hefene hadre scineð

rodores candel. (lines 1570-1572a)

A light appeared and the place brightened
the way the sky does when heaven's candle
is shining clearly. (Heaney 109)

As with the defeat of Grendel, Beowulf's success in defeating his mother causes a light to shine, and not merely to shine but also to brighten, emblematic of the hope and the promise of success that he brings with him. But with the appearance of the vengeful dragon in the third section of the poem, the darkness returns yet again, and Beowulf must rise to the challenge. This constant back-and-forth movement between light and dark suggests not that one or the other ultimately prevails but that they will remain in constant competition. What is more, the frequent reappearance of the darkness functions like the reappearance of the past in the poem, seeping into the light as the past seeps into the present and ultimately exists alongside it. As a result, the poem indicates that light is not a force that defeats darkness soundly and completely but rather a force that exists alongside it. The outlook is not so much one of the pursuing the eventual victory of light or acknowledging the eventual victory of darkness but of understanding the existing paradox of these forces and seeking a balance. The dark encroaches on the light, just as the past encroaches on the present. The reappearance of darkness in *Beowulf* suggests that it exists equally and alongside the light in an ongoing tension. The only possibility for success lies in finding a balance between light and dark, recognizing that darkness will persist but that it cannot be allowed to dominate permanently. Light and dark are equal forces in *Beowulf* and persist in paradox.

The use of light a force that competes on an equal footing with darkness, instead of a force that ultimately destroys it, makes for a read that is refreshingly lacking in the modern expectation of a “happy ending.” At the same time, this quality seems to make *Beowulf* a more simplistic poem, in which light versus dark equals good versus evil. As *Beowulf* critic Johann Köberl suggests, “Good and Evil may be symbolized by Light and Darkness, with the poem characterizing the monsters’ domain in terms of darkness, and reserving expressions of brightness and light for the heroic effort” (37). On the most basic level, this reading is not without validity, but it takes away from the complexity that most scholars attribute to *Beowulf*. But the simplicity of the reading is not the real concern. More importantly, an interpretation of light and dark as equals presents a complication when considering *Beowulf* in terms of its Christian implications.

The literal balancing of light and dark descriptions, while important to the immediate structure of the poem, ultimately function to highlight the more symbolic reading of the light and dark as representations of Christianity and paganism within the poem. By setting up light and dark as an irresolvable paradox, in which darkness does not win but neither does light, the poet also suggests that Christianity represent a paradox that requires a balance between the two instead of a clear case of Christianity defeating paganism. This is not to say that *Beowulf* is necessarily a “Christian” poem, however. *Beowulf* is unique in that it is written by a Christian author, but about characters and a subject matter that is distinctly pagan. Any attempt to make *Beowulf* into a Christian poem or to turn the characters into would-be Christians tends to collapse under the weight of the comparison, and it is difficult to argue that there is a Christian conversion at any point in *Beowulf*.

It is difficult to ignore, however, that there are strong arguments for infusions of a Christian worldview in *Beowulf*. As noted above, the author of the poem is almost certainly a Christian, even if the poem is not, so the possibility for hints of Christianity leaking into the text is much greater. By the time of *Beowulf*'s composition—and certainly by the time it was copied down into the manuscript that scholars now have[19]—the Anglo-Saxons had been entirely Christianized,[20] so there is little doubt that the poet was a Christian, in name and baptism at the very least. More importantly, the poem provides specific examples of what appears to be a Christian mindset. During Grendel's ravages on Heorot, the poet notes:

> þæt wæs wræc micel wine Scyldinga,
> modes brecða. Monig oft gesæt
> rice to rune; ræd eahtedon
> hwæt swiðferhðum selest wære
> wið færgryrum to gefremmanne.
> Hwilum hie geheton æt hærgtrafum
> wigweorþunga, wordum bædon
> þæt him gastbona geoce gefremede
> wið þeodþreaum. Swylc wæs þeaw hyra,
> hæþenra hyht; helle gemundon
> in modsefan, metod hie ne cuþon,
> dæda demend, ne wiston hie drihten god,

[19] *Beowulf* scholars (who continue to debate this topic hotly) date the composition of the poem anywhere from the 8th century to the 11th century, with the sole extant manuscript dated 1010. The Anglo-Saxons were converted primarily during the 7th century.
[20] See also Ward-Perkins, p. 51.

ne hie huru heofena helm herian ne cuþon,

wuldres waldend. Wa bið þæm ðe sceal

þurh sliðne nið sawle bescufan

in fyres fæþm, frofre ne wenan,

wihte gewendan; wel bið þæm þe mot

æfter deaðdæge drihten secean

ond to fæder fæþmum freoðo wilnian. (lines 170-188)

These were hard times, heart-breaking

for the prince of the Shieldings; powerful counselors,

the highest in the land, would lend advice,

plotting how best the bold defenders

might resist and beat off sudden attacks.

Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed

offerings to idols, swore oaths

that the killer of souls might come to their aid

and save the people. That was their way,

their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts

they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge

of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,

Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,

was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he

who is time of trouble has to thrust his soul

in the fire's embrace, forfeiting help;
he has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
who after death can approach the Lord
and find friendship in the Father's embrace. (Heaney 13, 15)

Obviously, these statements are extra-textual to the story itself and function as the poet's side comments about what the pagan characters were missing and why they were unsuccessful. But they give the poem a specific tenor and make the religion of the pagan characters somewhat more ambiguous in places. For instance, as Beowulf lies dying, he comments:

Ic ðara frætwa frean ealles ðanc,
wuldurcyninge, wordum secge,
ecum dryhtne, þe ic her on starie,
þæs ðe ic moste minum leodum
ær swyltdæge swylc gestrynan. (lines 2794-2798)

To the everlasting Lord of All,
to the King of Glory, I give thanks
that I behold this treasure here in front of me,
that I have been thus allowed to leave my people
so well endowed on the day I die. (Heaney 189)

These are hardly the words of a seasoned pagan warrior and seem to reflect more of the author's perspective than of Beowulf's. In various places within the poem, there are

references to God, the Lord, the Father, the Almighty, and similar expressions.[21] The author appears to be substituting names of the Christian God for the pagan gods that the Danes and Geats would historically have worshipped.[22] If the poet (or copyist) was indeed a monk, such a substitution indicates the paradox of writing about pagan characters while remaining true to personal Christian principles. Instead of clear references to the names of Germanic deities, there are vague references to "God" and the "Almighty," all of which can be interpreted as an attempt to find a compromise in the poetic representation of the pagan religion. These references suggest insertions of a Christian worldview, without attempting to make the characters—who would unquestionably be pagans—into Christians.

Another possible presence of Christian influence within *Beowulf* hints at an idea that emerges quite distinctly from the New Testament and offers a further indication of the presence of a Christian mind behind the text of the poem. The frequent mention of adoption within the poem provides an interesting New Testament perspective for reading *Beowulf*. After Beowulf defeats Grendel, Hrothgar tells the warrior that he is adopting him as a "dear son" (lines 945-946, Heaney 63) out of gratitude—although Beowulf does not literally become Hrothgar's heir. But when Beowulf is dying from wounds acquired in his fight with the dragon, he must name an heir and thus chooses to pass his armor to Wiglaf, essentially adopting the young man and naming him the next king (lines 2809-2812). In the New Testament, adoption functions as a symbol of salvation, with Christians becoming adopted sons of God alongside Christ. Romans 8.15 claims, "you received the Spirit of adoption," and Galatians 4.5 speaks of,

[21] See lines 381, 478, 685-686, 928, 945, 955, 979, 1397, 1661 for examples.
[22] See Cohen, pp. 362, 364.

"redeem[ing] those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (NKJV). In terms of *Beowulf*, adoption would have been a distinctly Christian reference, because it would have suggested the passing of a traditional genealogy (in the way that Scyld bequeathed his kingdom to his son Beow, and down the family line) and the embracing adoption to create a new kind of genealogy (in the way that Beowulf adopted an heir in Wiglaf). For the Anglo-Saxons, the idea of adoption would also have reflected the concept of the evolving English people as a kind of chosen race, supplanting the Jews and being adopted as God's newly favored children.[23]

In addition to the idea of adoption, another argument for Christian influences follows the presence of characters that are described as "virtuous pagans" in an attempt to categorize otherwise pagan characters that appear to have Christian qualities. *Beowulf* scholar John Niles is among those who have made the argument in favor of virtuous pagans, and he further comments:

> While the *Beowulf* poet depicts the characters of his poem as pagans, as is historically accurate, he also presents at least some of them as admirable persons. Both Beowulf and Wiglaf are models of courage. The aged Beowulf rules as a *rex justus*, pious and kind, somewhat nearer to the ideal of Augustine and Gregory the Great than one would predict of a Germanic warlord of the Heroic Age. (145)

To add to this, the image of Beowulf as a gentle king and more of a "warden of the land" (line 2210, Heaney 151) than a true warlord contrasts directly with Scyld as the

[23] See Howe 49, 52.

"scourge of many tribes"[24] and makes Beowulf appear to be even more of a virtuous pagan. In reality, Beowulf's only named sin in the poem (apart from his paganism) is pride, and he lacks any other qualities that might be described as truly evil, while demonstrating a multitude of qualities (nobility, bravery, generosity) that hint of true virtue in his character. While it is difficult to dispute the term "virtuous pagans" or the value of its applicability, I would suggest that it offers yet another paradox that contributes to the pursuit of balance in *Beowulf*. If a character like Beowulf is indeed a virtuous pagan, he is one more example of the sense of tension within the poem. By making Beowulf into a pagan who behaves with Christian qualities, the poet has created a character who is essentially paradoxical. And in doing so, the poet is balancing the appearance of Christian elements in pagan characters. As Christopher Cain notes, "The ambiguity and vagueness of the Christian references in the poem merely contribute to the general feeling that the poem is *in some way* Christian without any explicit mention of the tenets of the faith" (227). Of course, the recognition of this paradox is more confusing than it is useful and only succeeds in leaving future readers to question just how "Christian" the poem can be described.

Ultimately, to compare the dichotomy of light and dark to the dichotomy of Christianity and paganism in Anglo-Saxon England is not to make *Beowulf* a more simplistic poem. Far from it, in fact. It turns out that the author is performing a very complex balancing act in his comparison, turning the balance between light and the dark into a reflection of another kind of balance that he is attempting to find in the poem.

[24] Given the similarity between this description of Scyld and the description of the dragon as the "scourge of the people" (line 2278), it is tempting to counter Fajardo-Acosta's argument that the dragon is a reincarnated Grendel and suggest that he is really a returned Scyld, come back to compete with Beowulf in the ultimate test of present and past. The potential for campiness, however, prevents me from pursuing this line of thought too far.

In the end, the balance of light and dark reflects the balance of Christianity and paganism at play in *Beowulf*. But as with the paradox of present and past, there is no clear resolution when the light and the dark are pitted against one another. *Beowulf* appears to be a darker poem in which the light shines through at important moments, just as it is a pagan poem in which Christian principles make significant appearances. But this does not mean that in *Beowulf* the darkness, or even paganism, succeeds in the end. Köberl suggests that the appearance of darkness dominating in *Beowulf* is but a likeness of the traditional Norse religion in which the world "is doomed to end in a valiant but hopeless fight against chaos, with the gods themselves destined to die in the last battle against the cosmic monsters" (39)—in other words, a world in which the darkness (or chaos) will win in the end. Johann Köberl further notes that even Tolkien suggested this with regard to the dragon episode in the poem (36), indicating that the image of the dragon is but the image of final destruction.

While *Beowulf* contains hints of this pessimistic worldview, though, the tug of Christianity is undeniable. What the poem offers is not so much a sense of the encroaching darkness that will ultimately destroy the world in an Anglo-Saxon version of Ragnarök, but rather a glimpse of the challenge that the author—and perhaps many of the Christianized Anglo-Saxons—experienced when looking back to the pagan past. The darkness was certainly not a lure into a better place: it simply *had* a place. In "The Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien commented on the complex relationship between the poet and the subject of his poem: "It is a poem by a learned man writing of old times, who looking back on the heroism and sorrow feels in them something permanent and something symbolical." But at no point does the poet indicate any need to return to this

pagan past or to give it more than a respectful backward glance. What is more, the author's purpose in *Beowulf* is not so much to suggest that either light or darkness will win, but rather to suggest that light and darkness are competing forces in the same way that Christianity and paganism are competing forces.

Of course, any student of Anglo-Saxon literature will know that Christianity "wins" the competition historically. This does not mean, however, that paganism or its influences disappear entirely. The pagan ways are a part of the Anglo-Saxon past. To eradicate them is to eradicate the past, and if the examples in *Beowulf* are any indication, the past holds a measure of authority in the life of a person. For an Anglo-Saxon, and specifically for an Anglo-Saxon poet, the only way to explore this past and to attempt to balance it with the present is through his own language. David Jeffrey points out, "for a medieval writer language had central value because it mediates between mankind's two appreciations of reality: the causal limitations of history and the freer syntax of memory and dream" (67).[25] To some extent, the *Beowulf* poet is faced with these "appreciations of reality"—those of the real history of his people (about which his own knowledge is limited) and the memory that he can essentially create in his poem. Both are a part of the past for him, and both influence the present.

The very fact that the poet is writing a poem such as *Beowulf* about noble but pagan heroes indicates that the pagan past holds some interest for the Anglo-Saxon. But again, interest is not the same as control. The past and the pagan ways do not control the poet, any more than the darkness does. The poet is simply showing readers the balance that he and other Anglo-Saxons must find, of the paradox in which they dwell. And inherent to this balance is also the tension and melancholy that they

[25] See also Prendergast, p. 131.

experience who, while they may not serve two masters, cannot entirely forget the previous one.

CHAPTER 4:

SUNLIT CLIFFS AND THE WHALE-ROAD

Listen! You hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand
Begin, and cease, and then again begin
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.
Matthew Arnold

Although the landscape and seascape of *Beowulf* are distinctly Germanic in setting, they reflect the Anglo-Saxon setting of the poet in the quality of their descriptions, creating a paradox of land and sea that ultimately reflects that paradoxes of present and past, light and dark. In one sense, the land represents the present and the place of light, with its immediacy as home and its function as an island to isolate and protect. In contrast, the sea is a dangerous force, an image of darkness in its deadly power and a symbol of the past that holds the memories of death and a path to the old way of life. At the same time, the land itself contains its own paradox as a place that is both a beloved home as well as a site of mystery and fear. The land hides a darkness that is connected to the past and thus threatens to have power over its inhabitants if they exploit its past. Achieving a balance requires finding a means of respecting the landscape's history and living alongside the darkness it contains, while not allowing the past and its darkness to gain mastery. The sea, too, offers a paradoxical reading in that it is not only an image of death and darkness but also a symbol of hope. The sea is the path on which Beowulf travels to bring the promise of a bright future to Heorot, as well as the boundary that protects the border and contains the prosperity of the present. The balance pursued in the relationship with the sea is one of acknowledging its power and

purpose but not fearing it. As a result of these multiple contrasts, the paradox of the land and the sea is the most complex of the poetic paradoxes and reflects constantly back on the tension between past and present, light and dark. More importantly, though, the multifaceted paradox of the land and the sea ultimately represents the sense of balance pursued throughout *Beowulf*, a balance only found in living with paradox.

Within the landscape, the world that the poet describes is one of contradiction, of a world light and beauty, as well as one of mists, shadows, and murky fens—elements of darkness that conceal an unknown past. It is a landscape that might in poetic perspective be Denmark and Geatland but ultimately represents the poet's own landscape of Anglo-Saxon England. Although Osmo Pekonen's comment that the features described in the poem are generic enough to fit any location in the North returns to mind, within the context of *Beowulf* and the paradoxes already described, the landscape is one that becomes distinctly the landscape of the Anglo-Saxon. Peter Ackroyd notes that the island in which the Anglo-Saxons made their home was stark and desolate, a landscape that simultaneously offered destiny and mystery:

> much of England was still a wilderness covered with thick woods or with cold moorlands broken by outcrops of stone, marshland fends and heaths; log huts with thatched roofs betrayed their presence with thin plumes of smoke rising into the vast English sky, while in certain places the ruins left by earlier settlers were visible among the woods and scrubland. Here, except for the wind sighing among the trees and the rain falling upon the damp soil, was silence—silence together with the calls of the natural world. (71)

From such a world, a poem like *Beowulf* seems to arise naturally. The tone of the poem suggests a somberness of character and a sense of impending doom that reflects the landscape that the Anglo-Saxons settled; there are monsters in the meres and shadows and dangers outside the safety of the community. It is not surprising, then, that the monster who wreaks havoc on Hrothgar's hall is not a monster in the sense that modern readers would expect but rather a man who has isolated himself from the community and has chosen to live (or has been forced to live) in what seems to be an uninhabitable part of the landscape—the fens.

The word *fen* comes to English speakers directly from Anglo-Saxon and can be defined as "water meadow," "bog," or "marsh" (OED). Its Old Norse ancestor (also *fen*) meant "quagmire" and was more ominous in connotation, indicating not only a swampy element of the landscape but also hinting at being trapped in it or unable to escape from it (OED). It might be this darker meaning that the poet had in mind when he relegated Grendel and his mother to the fens, but given the poet's own nationality it is more likely the fens of the English landscape in which he pictured the monsters.[26] Although the fens became a retreat for religious figures during the Anglo-Saxon period, they would have continued to represent a wasteland of isolated swamps, appropriate for those who were removed from the community.[27] As a result, the poet's description of the fens does not reflect a place of chosen sanctuary so much as scenery that is appropriate for enforced exile. When Beowulf arrives to challenge Grendel's mother, he is faced with a landscape replete with dangers and symbolizing a variety of evils to be avoided:

[26] Additionally, the use of fens in the poem might offer some indication of the author's origins, as the fens region dominates the Cambridge and Lincolnshire landscape and remain a distinct topographical phenomenon to this day.
[27] See Blair, 252-253.

Ofereode þa æþelinga bearn
steap stanhliðo, stige nearwe,
enge anpaðas, uncuð gelad,
neowle næssas, nicorhusa fela.
He feara sum beforan gengde
wisra monna wong sceawian,
oþþæt he færinga fyrgenbeamas
ofer harne stan hleonian funde,
wynleasne wudu; wæter under stod
dreorig ond gedrefed…
Feþa eal gesæt.
Gesawon ða æfter wætere wyrmcynnes fela,
sellice sædracan, sund cunnian,
swylce on næshleoðum nicras licgean,
ða on undernmæl oft bewitigað
sorhfulne sið on seglrade,
wyrmas ond wildeor. (lines 1408-1417a, 1424b-1429a)

So the noble prince proceeded undismayed
up fells and screes, along narrow footpaths
and ways where they were forced into single file,
ledges on cliffs above lairs of water-monsters.
He went in front with a few men,

good judges of the lie of the land,
and suddenly discovered the dismal wood,
mountain trees growing out at an angle
above grey stones: the bloodshot water
surged underneath…
The water was infested
with all kinds of reptiles. There were writhing sea-dragons
and monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff,
serpents and wild things such as those that often
surface at dawn to roam the sail-road
and doom the voyage. (Heaney 99)

As this passage indicates, hell in *Beowulf* is in the haunted landscape of the fens. To the Anglo-Saxon mind, the landscape must have been hellish indeed—a world between land and water, a land in which a man could sink but could not swim and certainly could not sail. Historian Peter Hunter Blair notes that the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons largely left the fens alone and did not even use them as a burial ground, indicating an attitude of fear toward this feature of the landscape and the unknown evils that it held (252-253). Consequently, Beowulf's success in defeating Grendel's mother represents as much a conquest of the evils within the landscape as it does a conquest of a monster.

The defeat of Grendel's mother makes Beowulf the unchallenged *eþelweard*, or "warden of the land" (line 2210, Heaney 151), suggesting a protection of but not a control over the landscape. After all, Beowulf's reign is described as "fifty winters" (lines 2209), a comment that indicates just how the Anglo-Saxons measured time on the

island of Britain. Ackroyd notes that time was closely connected to landscape as well as to climate:

> In the writing of the Anglo-Saxons it is always winter; it is cold there, in a culture where the natural world is commonly considered to be an enemy. Winter, and darkness, were the prevailing conditions in a land of frost and snow falling. Storms of rain and hail pass through night and touch “the dank earth, wondrously cold.” Endurance is all. (78)

As a result, Beowulf’s endurance for fifty winters is a complicated metaphor, one that is both a commentary on the place over which he is ruling and one that is also a compliment to his own longevity in the harsh world. It does not appear to be, however, a metaphorical analysis of his reign, as are the “nineteen long winters” that historians have dubbed the reign of the later King Stephen (Fry 34). Grendel, it must be noted, is said to have terrorized Heorot for twelve winters, “seasons of woe” (line 147, Heaney 11), but placed alongside the reference to Beowulf’s reign, this method of measuring time does more to reflect the mindset of the poet and his projection of the relationship with the landscape than it does the quality of the time.

As a result, Beowulf’s reign is one of successfully living within the harshness and dangers of the landscape as much as it is one of nobility and generosity of rule. Beowulf is *eþelweard*, because he manages find a balance of living within the land and ruling it. But Beowulf’s prosperous reign and position as *eþelweard* are interrupted by the dragon who represents another force of darkness, a force that is an ancient one and suggests the encroachment of the past and thus of the darkness into the light of the present. What is more, the evil of the dragon is one that originates in the barrows that already

speckle the landscape; just as the dragon is an image of a dark past, so the barrows represent elements of the past that contain the potential for evil within their darkness. The use of barrows was not unique to the Anglo-Saxon culture. In fact, upon arriving in Britain the Anglo-Saxons would have discovered that barrows were already in existence, barrows that contained the potential for great treasure but also the danger of an unknown past belonging to the previous inhabitants. The barrow belonging to the dragon that ultimately brings Beowulf's fifty glorious winters to an end offers an important topographical feature for analysis and a significant point of contrast for the hellish fens. Unlike the fens, the barrow is not a natural element of the landscape, but it is one that—in the poem, at least—predates the characters. The word *barrow*/*beorh* is Germanic in origin and suggests quite simply "rock," but it has a linguistic connection to the Old Irish *brigh*, meaning "mountain" (OED), a denotation that makes far more sense for the image of a barrow rising from the landscape. What is more, the Celtic root suggests the earlier Brythonic and Goidelic inhabitants of Britain, who would have left their mark on the landscape. Alfred Siewers notes that, "pagan Anglo-Saxons may have derived their limited barrow-building habit from earlier prehistoric examples in the British landscape" (213), suggesting not only that barrows were already in existence that but those present would have held an honored place due to their pre-existing presence in the landscape and that the few barrows the Anglo-Saxons themselves built would have been equally as sacred.

Just as the barrows are a part of the past, so the dragon, too, seems foreign in the tale and calls back to a day before the Anglo-Saxons. Christine Rauer suggests a Breton link to the dragon tales in Anglo-Saxon literature, arguing that in Brittany stories

about fights with dragons received an extra focus and that the Bretons made a name for themselves with this genre of storytelling, thus influencing surrounding cultures (60). Given the potential that Rauer further notes for communication between Brittany and Anglo-Saxon England, a strong possibility exists for the dragon being a Breton import (95). The dragon also seems reminiscent of the dragon (*y ddraig goch*) that has become an emblem of Celtic Wales, many of the Welsh people having made their way to Brittany during the political and ethnic upheavals that early Britain endured. Additionally, historian Sarah Semple suggests that the section about the dragon within *Beowulf* offers a crucial perspective for understanding the relationship between the Anglo-Saxons and the landscape that they inhabited. She claims that the poem

> depicts two essential parts of the ideology of middle Anglo-Saxon England: the terror of the dragon and the prehistoric barrow as the dragon's home. It forms a descriptive link between the spiritual imagination and superstitious reaction to physical elements of the surrounding landscape. (109)

In other words, the dragon performs a multifaceted role as a symbol of the past and the darkness and also as an inhabitant of the barrow—which in itself symbolizes the past and the darkness. Taken together, the dragon and his barrow represent the image of a dark and bygone era that remains a visible part of the landscape, but it is one that must not be disturbed.

But the dragon and his barrow *are* disturbed, and the consequences are deadly, indicating the danger of meddling with the darkness and the past. As a result, the dragon becomes an active threat and a great evil across the landscape. Readers are told: *oððæt an ongan / deorcum nihtum draca ricsian* (lines 2210-2211), "one

began / to dominate the dark, a dragon on the prowl" (Heaney 151). Goaded into anger, the dragon deliberately spreads his darkness across Geatland in pursuit of the destruction of the one who has profaned his barrow through theft:

Hordwynne fond
eald uhtsceaða opene standan,
se ðe byrnende biorgas seceð,
nacod niðdraca, nihtes fleogeð
fyre befangen; hyne foldbuend
swiðe ondrædað…
ða se gæst ongan gledum spiwan,
beorht hofu bærnan; bryneleoma stod
eldum on andan. No ðær aht cwices
lað lyftfloga læfan wolde. (lines 2271b-2275a, 2312-2315)

Then an old harrower of the dark
Happened to find the hoard open,
the burning one who hunts out barrows,
the slick-skinned dragon, threatening the night sky
with streamers of fire. People on the farms
are in dread of him…
The dragon began to belch out flames
and burn bright homesteads; there was a hot glow
that scared everyone, for the vile-skywinger

would leave nothing alive in his wake. (Heaney 155, 157)

Clearly, the dragon represents darkness, the kind of darkness that sneaks and hides and hoards in the black shadows. In spite of all this, however, the poet also suggests a measure of respect is required for the dragon and for the hoard in his barrow. The poet comments that the dragon is an ancient figure in the landscape and has dwelt there for many years, giving him a place of authority over the landscape:

Swa se ðeodsceaða þreo hund wintra
heold on hrusan hordærna sum,
eacencræftig, oððæt hyne an abealch
mon on mode. (lines 2278-2281)

For three centuries, this scourge of the people
had stood guard on that stoutly protected
underground treasury, until the intruder
unleashed its fury. (Heaney 155)

As the poet indicates, the dragon may represent a source of evil, but he does not actually begin his slaughter of the people and their homesteads until being disturbed. Despite Farjardo-Acosta's claim about the dragon as a resurrected form of Grendel, the dragon is not the same monster as Grendel. While Grendel and subsequently his mother are deliberately seeking to harm the people of Heorot, the text suggests that dragon only pursues revenge when his barrow is invaded and robbed. While he may indeed be a "scourge of the people," he does not appear to be actively terrorizing them until his barrow is invaded and robbed. The dragon certainly symbolizes darkness and

even death, but his might ultimately be a case of avoiding the darkness and definitely not disturbing it. After all, he has been guarding the hoard for three centuries; it is not until the theft occurs that he becomes angry, launches out, and attacks the Geats. Nowhere does the text imply that the dragon is anything less than darkness itself, but the text does suggest that had the theft not occurred, the dragon might have lacked a motive for going on his terror spree. The intruder who sneaks in and begins plundering the dragon's treasure—however the dragon may have acquired it—is duly and rightly punished, for he has ultimately profaned the past and allowed the darkness to gain in power over the landscape.

The progression of events from the thief's invasion of the barrow to the dragon's fury indicates that the dragon's barrow was not to be invaded in the first place but rather left alone, regardless of, or more likely because of, the darkness that it contained. In itself, this plot element is far from the requirement that Beowulf physically go to the fens and enter them in order to destroy Grendel's mother. As Semple notes

> The creator of *Beowulf*, as an ambassador of his culture, had an understanding that mounds were raised for burial, and an expectation that they would contain treasure. A clear indication is given that the barrow was not entered by ordinary people…Only the dragon, consistently represented as a symbol of death, evil and greed, dares to make it his home. The one human who does enter is a slave and significantly, an outcast. (110)

Additionally, the poet describes the barrow in terms of being sacred and untouchable:

> swa hy on geardagum gumena nathwylc,
> eormenlafe æþelan cynnes,

þanchycgende þær gehydde,

deore maðmas. (lines 2233-2236a)

because long ago, with deliberate care,

somebody now forgotten

had buried the riches of a high-born race

in this ancient cache. (Heaney 153)

Clearly, the barrow belongs to the past, and more importantly, to a “high-born race” of the past. As Howard Williams further notes, the barrow “evokes the memory of a distant, mythological past in ancestral homelands on the Continent,” (91) essentially performing a dual role as the physical representative of another culture’s past and the symbolic representative of the Anglo-Saxon past. How much greater the crime that a slave enters this hallowed barrow and takes something from it. Desecrating this mark upon the landscape immediately acquires the reputation of evil and seems to be more of an offense than the man’s greed for gold, however great his “desperation” to return to his lord’s favor (line 2223, Heaney 151). The theft appears to pale in comparison to the thief’s violation of something that should have remained untouched, a burial mound for the dead and for the dark past that they inhabit. What is more, the dragon himself is also a part of the past, and in this case a very evil part of the past but all the more reason for him to be respected and avoided. And, as Semple notes, since the dragon further represents the death within the barrow, he should not be disturbed but should be left in peace with his ancient treasure (110).

In terms of landscape, the dragon/barrow episode suggests the need to honor the land as it remains and to respect the topographical changes that previous inhabitants made, without digging into them or desecrating them. Concerning the landscape that the Anglo-Saxons began inhabiting, Muir notes that little was done to make immediate changes:

> The countrysides that the Saxon settlers and redundant mercenaries trickled into were already ancient and had experienced several cultural phases of colonization and retreat. Around the period and the aftermath of the Roman withdrawal from Britain, the Anglo-Saxons arrived, probably in modest numbers, in countrysides undergoing deep decline and depopulation: the era of the Saxon "colonization" was not one of pioneering advances , but a time of wholesale retreat, disruption and decay. (149)[28]

As Muir suggests, the Anglo-Saxon attitude was not to disrupt the landscape but rather to revere it, to the point, apparently, of failing to cultivate it altogether. In discussing the concept of location and a people's relationship with it, Gillian Overing and Marijane Osborn comment on the significance of a veneration of the landscape that manifests itself both in a devout attachment to it as well as a dread of it with regard to the influence that the landscape might have over those who live within it (52). This sense of veneration becomes evident in *Beowulf* in the description of the barrow and the poet's treatment of its desecration. For the poet, there is no need to remove treasure from barrows, regardless of the motivation. What is part of the landscape can and should be

[28] See also Biggam, Fox, Gelling, Oosthuizen, and Unwin for more on the Anglo-Saxon relationship to the landscape and to the culture of the Britons who had inhabited it. In particular, the frequent appearance of words and names that reflect a Brythonic origin indicates that the Anglo-Saxons were loathe to change or to affect the landscape.

left alone to be absorbed into the landscape and to become a permanent part of its past, lest it assume a power over the people who live within that landscape. Significantly, once the dragon is killed, Beowulf's people do not go in to plunder his riches:

Him big stodan bunan ond orcas,
discas lagon ond dyre swyrd,
omige, þurhetone, swa hie wið eorðan fæðm
þusend wintra þær eardodon.
þonne wæs þæt yrfe, eacencræftig,
iumonna gold galdre bewunden,
þæt ðam hringsele hrinan ne moste
gumena ænig, nefne god sylfa,
sigora soðcyning, sealde þam ðe he wolde
(he is manna gehyld) hord openian,
efne swa hwylcum manna swa him gemet ðuhte. (lines 3047-3057)

Beside him stood pitchers and piled-up dishes,
silent flagons, precious swords
eaten through with rust, ranged as they had been
while they waited their thousand winters under ground.
That huge cache, gold inherited
from an ancient race, was under a spell—
which meant no one was ever permitted

to enter the ring-hall unless God Himself,

mankind's keeper, True King of Triumphs,

allowed some person worthy of pleasing Him—

and in His eyes worthy—to open the hoard. (Heaney 205)

Instead, the barrow is respected. The treasure, as belonging to "an ancient race" (line 3051), is part of the past and thus will remain visible through the barrow but will remain untouched. To take and use the treasure would allow it—as a part of the landscape and a part of the dark past—to have a measure of control over the present and subsequently over the future.

At the end of *Beowulf*, the barrow remains a barrow and a mark on the landscape that comes to define it. The treasure is cursed and is removed from the dragon's barrow only to become a part of Beowulf's barrow, thus remaining sacred and a part of the past. The landscape imagery within *Beowulf* is thus one of paradox and ultimately of balance: a balance between an appreciation for the adopted landscape and a fear of it, a balance between owning it and respecting it. Just so, the balance in response to the landscape is only part of the overall paradox of present and past, light and dark. An overriding push-and-pull exists in the Anglo-Saxon mind: balancing the forces of land and sea.

While described primarily as a means of transportation, the sea functions as an important symbol of cultural identification in *Beowulf*, indicating an origin that is more Anglo-Saxon than Scandinavian. The *Beowulf*-poet uses a variety of colorful expressions for describing the sea, the most notable of which are *swan-rāde* (swan-road), *sæ-lāde* (sea-lanes) and, perhaps more famously, *hron-rāde* (whale-road). Peter

Ackroyd acknowledges that the connection between the Anglo-Saxons and the sea that surrounded their island home was very complex:

> He [King Alfred] uses many compound variants for the sea—*egorstream*, *bronmere*, *laguflod*, *fifelstream*, *merestream*—as if its reality could only be understand as shifting and multitudinous…In *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* we read of "the tossing waves, the gannet's bath, the tumult of waters, the homeland of the whale," this fervent litany calling up the spirit of the deep. The poetry of the sea is deeply implicit in the Anglo-Saxon imagination. (273)

Ackroyd's comment about the linguistic challenge of describing the sea, in itself, suggests the paradox that faced the Anglo-Saxons and their relationship to it. No single word could encompass the sea, such as exists in modern English. The words are combined expressions, embracing two concepts of the waters and their often-varying qualities. As a result, the words become a tentative balance of thought, an attempt to overcome the paradox and to find the equilibrium through language.

What the compound-word descriptions indicate is that for the Anglo-Saxons there is no simple way to understand the sea. As Alfred Siewers suggests, "To the evolving Anglo-Saxon sense of identity, the sea was both an ethnic historical border and an allegory for the Christian sense of the fleeting nature of mortality" (226). In other words, the sea could certainly perform both functions, symbolizing both protection from harm as well as the inevitability of death. In *Beowulf*, it is certainly arguable that the sea becomes a symbol of death. Within the first few lines, the poet describes the death of Scyld:

Hi hyne þa ætbæron to brimes faroðe,

swæse gesiþas, swa he selfa bæd,

þenden wordum weold wine Scyldinga (lines 28-30)

His warrior band did what he bade them

when he laid down the law among the Danes:

they shouldered him out to the sea's flood. (Heaney 5)

He is not buried on land or even cremated but rather sent out to sea in a ship. In this sense, the sea comes to represent the home of the dead, a tossing and turbulent piece of imagery that is far from the restful picture of a quiet churchyard and a silent grave. Additionally, the poet presents images of the sea as a powerful force that cannot be controlled but that must be respected, as a force that can send a man to his death. The minstrel during the feast of Heorot speaks of a time when *holm storme weol, / won wið winde*, "Wind and water raged with storms" (lines 1132b-1133a, Heaney 79). At his death, Beowulf refers to the sea as *genipu*, "shrouded" (Heaney) or "dark" (Liuzza), indicating a sense of unknown danger on the waters (line 2808). R.D. Fulk follows other critics by arguing that the marshland or *mere* (line 845) where Grendel runs when Beowulf has wounded him is linguistically a reference to the sea (147), indicating that the fens are also hell in the form of exilic death. But as the Siewers comment above suggests, the sea also represents a boundary for the Anglo-Saxons, a way to establish a frame of protection for themselves against invaders and a means of creating a unique identity through isolation. To counter the darker constructs of the sea as death, the poet

also speaks of the ships as objects that “preen on the waves” (line 297, Heaney 21), suggesting a sense of delight in being able to be a part of the sea.

The result is a balance in the Anglo-Saxon relationship with the sea, a balance of fear and respect. In the same way that *Beowulf* suggests a complex balance in the relationship between various images of the landscape, so it also indicates a balance in the understanding of the multifaceted role that the sea performs. The poem offers the contrasting images of the sea as death and as hopeful possibility. The same sea that is feared is the one that carries Beowulf to Heorot, thus presaging the end of Grendel’s twelve horrific winters and the eventual beginning of Beowulf’s fifty successful ones. In fact, the description of Beowulf’s journey from Geatland is almost majestic in its detail:

on stefn stigon; streamas wundon,
sund wið sande; secgas bæron
on bearm nacan beorhte frætwe,
guðsearo geatolic; guman ut scufon,
weras on wilsið, wudu bundenne.
Gewat þa ofer wægholm, winde gefysed,
flota famiheals fugle gelicost,
oðþæt ymb antid oþres dogores
wundenstefna gewaden hæfde
þæt ða liðende land gesawon,
brimclifu blican, beorgas steape,
side sænæssas; þa wæs sund liden,
eoletes æt ende. þanon up hraðe

Wedera leode on wang stigon,

sæwudu sældon (syrcan hrysedon,

guðgewædo), gode þancedon

þæs þe him yþlade eaðe wurdon (lines 212-228)

Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank,

sand churned in surf, warriors loaded

a cargo of weapons, shining war-gear

in the vessel's hold, then heaved out,

away with a will in their wood-sheathed ship.

Over the waves, with the wind behind her

and foam at her neck, she flew like a bird

until her curved prow had covered the distance

and on the following day, at the due hour,

those seafarers sighted land,

sunlit cliffs, sheer crags

and looming headlands, the landfall they sought.

It was the end of their voyage and the Geats vaulted

over the side, out on to the sand,

and moored their ship. There was a clash of mail

and a thresh of gear. They thanked God

for that easy crossing on a calm sea. (Heaney 17)

If this passage existed as the sole Anglo-Saxon source concerning the sea, it would be difficult not to assume that the Anglo-Saxons had a very positive relationship with the waters that surrounded England. Of course, within the context of the poem, the passage is describing a voyage from Geatland to the land of the Danes, but the attitude toward the sea and the description of it would have come from the poet's own experience and knowledge—that of England and the English seas.

Similarly, the sea offers hints of freedom. England is an island and therefore isolated, a quality that can be either comforting or stifling.[29] The urge that the Anglo-Saxons would have had to go to sea would certainly be an inheritance from the Scandinavian forebears, who were inveterate sailors and single-handedly charted the seas of northern Europe. But England as an island makes this desire for the freedom of the sea that much more poignant. After all, the sea in *Beowulf* is frequently described as a road and thus as a path for exploration instead of an impassable barrier. It may well be that the ship acts as the medium for uniting the Anglo-Saxons and the sea. With the ships, the sailors are able to utilize the sea waves for their own ends, although never with the intention of taming them. The ship will "ply" the waves and "preen" on them, but never beat them down. The relationship with the sea is thus fully a paradox and exists only in finding that delicate balance between the dread of the waves and the mastery of them. The Anglo-Saxons may or may not love the sea. Either way, it surrounds them and is thus a part of their cultural identity. In the same way that the past and the darkness are an inevitable and often unavoidable element of this cultural identity, so the sea cannot be ignored, even more so because the paradox it holds is so much more

[29] As an inhabitant of one of the Hawaiian islands (for the second time now), I can claim a measure of authority in attesting that this is true.

complex. And in the same way that a balance must be found in the relationship between the present and past, the light and the darkness, so a sense of balance must be achieved in the response to the sea. Attaining this sense of balance requires learning to live with the sea but never stooping to fear it, learning to understand its power but not allowing it to take control.

The poet does not allow the reader to forget the presence or the power of the sea within *Beowulf*. The sound of the sea is always just in the background in *Beowulf* as a constant reminder of a great force that cannot be ignored. The first reference to the sea is only ten lines into the poem, with the use of the term *hron-rāde*, or whale-road. Kelley Wickham-Crowley suggests that the sea performs a much larger role for the Anglo-Saxon people of a "connection that water forms between the past, present, and future as the sea carries people to and from each other" (105), and in *Beowulf*, the sea is highly emblematic of the present and the past. The waves essentially become a road, containing the means of experiencing the present while also holding the memories of what has gone before. The sea might represent death in one sense, but it also represents a physical and very visible reminder of those who have died, thus providing a kind of constant present for them. This function of the sea is not lost on Beowulf, and as he is dying, he gives clear instructions for his funeral, indicating that he wants for a part of his memory to remain on land but that he also wants for his memory to be noticeable to those at sea:

> Hatað heaðomære hlæw gewyrcean
> beorhtne æfter bæle æt brimes nosan;
> se scel to gemyndum minum leodum

heah hlifian on Hronesnæsse,

þæt hit sæliðend syððan hatan

Biowulfes biorh, ða ðe brentingas

ofer floda genipu feorran drifað. (lines 2802-2808)

Order my troops to construct a barrow

on a headland on the coast, after my pyre has cooled.

It will loom on the horizon at Hronesness

and be a reminder among my people—

so that in coming times crews under sail

will call it Beowulf's Barrow, as they steer

ships across the wide and shrouded waters. (Heaney 189)

In the beginning of the poem, readers learn that Scyld's body is "shouldered" out to sea in a boat at his personal request (line 30, Heaney 5). In death, Scyld thus belongs to the sea and to the memory that courses along its waves, remaining a presence only in the image of the sea. Beowulf, however, pursues a memory and a presence both on land and at sea. Beowulf is burned on a pyre, but his remains are placed in a barrow overlooking the sea built especially for him, a barrow that will also be named for him and will become a permanent part of the landscape as well as the seascape. Beowulf's goal within the context of the story, of course, is for passing ships to see his barrow and to recognize the nobility of the one for whom it is named, but his request to be contained in a barrow that overlooks the sea serves the larger purpose of finding a balance within the paradox of the land and the sea. Scyld lives on only in the image of the sea, and his

memory threatens to be lost in the darkness of passing time. Beowulf, on the other hand, forges a connection between the present and the past, as well as the light and the dark, by forging a connection to the land and the sea. In his death and burial, Beowulf becomes the symbol of balance for the poem.

Beowulf's death thus reflects the author's purpose in the story, a purpose of finding a balance within the paradoxes at play in the poem. In the complexities of Beowulf's funeral arrangements lies the source of the balance for the poem. Unlike Scyld, Beowulf is cremated, and the ashes of his body will belong to the wind and thus be carried out to the sea over which he sailed, the sea that carried him to the success he found in heroism. His memory, however, through his belongings, will belong to the landscape in the barrow now named for him—a barrow that also overlooks the sea. The barrow on the land will belong to him in name, hallowed, untouched, and empowered with a very physical memory. Thus with Beowulf's burial, the land and the sea both contain elements of the present and the past, the light and the darkness.

In this sense, Beowulf in death will essentially bridge both land and sea, offering a tangible mark of the balance that the poet and, through him, the Anglo-Saxons pursued. By going out to sea, Scyld joins the past and fades into the darkness. By remaining on land—in name, at least—Beowulf places himself firmly in the present and in the light of relevancy. His barrow on the seacoast functions as the balance between the present and the past, the light and the darkness, the land and the sea. In his death, Beowulf becomes the symbol of the balance for which the poet seems always to be searching.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: PARADOX AND BALANCE FOR THE FUTURE

"Write it then."
"It is written."
"Good. It is finished."
Bede

The paradoxes that are explored throughout *Beowulf* and the balance that the poet pursues represent not so much an end to be desired as they do a way of life, for the poet and for his countrymen. Living in a land not originally their own, mingling with other Germanic as well as British peoples, the Anglo-Saxons built a life that was, perhaps inevitably, one of paradox and balance. It might even be argued that they made a habit of locating some kind of harmony within the paradoxes in order to endure the challenges they faced. Specifically referencing the Christian poetry of the Anglo-Saxon people, Sarah Larratt Keefer suggests that this is the case:

> A preference for letting disparate and discrete strands of ideas lie together in tension seems to have been a natural point of departure. A native energy, able to encompass a number of truths at once, was thus brought by the Anglo-Saxons to their enthusiastic adoption of learning and letters, permitting them to create a flavor, or style, that remained uniquely their own. (180)

Her argument is not limited to poetry, though, and can be carried over into all of Anglo-Saxon literature and life. This ability to dwell within paradox and to find some kind of balance eventually resulted in what Keefer calls a "style" but might also be recognized as a cultural identity, unique to the Anglo-Saxon people. Accompanying the paradox and existing alongside the balance is the tone of melancholy that manifests itself throughout *Beowulf*—the yearning for something long since vanished and the

occasional note of regret, as well as the recognition that what is gone cannot and should not return. The poet, and by extension the Anglo-Saxon people, might have been able to find a sense of balance, but it was always a delicate one.

This cultural identity of paradox and balance is not unique to the age of the Anglo-Saxons, however, nor is it merely an atavistic trait that has disappeared from what is now the English cultural identity. As Peter Ackroyd points out,

> The power of the Anglo-Saxon culture springs in part from absorption and assimilation… This has been the pattern of the centuries, and indeed it can be maintained that English art and English literature are formed out of inspired adaptation; like the language, and like the inhabitants of the nation itself, they represent the apotheosis of the mixed style. (xxix)

To continue Ackroyd's chain of thought, the qualities that helped to define the Anglo-Saxon culture did not disappear with the era that was named for them. These qualities became a part of the English identity and are thus embedded in "those who are native to that tongue and land," as Tolkien described it ("Monsters and Critics" 28). Michael Wood has commented on "the peculiar mix of archaic and modern" in the English system (104), specifically referring to England's system of government; but that is only one example. How else to explain a nation that seems to have found some kind of balance in what could for some be uncomfortable paradoxes? What else to make of a thoroughly modern nation that proudly embraces and celebrates its past without seeking to return to it? What is to be said of a city that can tastefully balance the Tate Modern next door to Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, a city in which houses several hundred years old often hold the surprise of a fiercely modern interior? England remains a nation

described by the faith that is named after it, but that continues to see a decline in church attendance[30]—creating an interesting kind of reversal with regard to the Christian/pagan pattern in *Beowulf*. And rather than attempting to defeat its tumultuous Channel, England simply chose to build beneath it, offering a new kind of land and sea bridge that tackles an age-old problem with modern technology. It could easily be argued, of course, that these qualities appear in any number of nations that have a rich and colorful history and that England is hardly unique. But as Ackroyd points out, England is unique in that this quality has become a defining trait.

With reference to *Beowulf* the idea of paradox also continues outside the text and into the present era. Seamus Heaney's acclaimed translation of the poem attempts to bridge the past and the present with by reflecting the Anglo-Saxon rhythm while also incorporating an often-contemporary dialect; Joseph McGowan notes that Heaney "cements the bond between scop and modern poet" (38). Viewing *Beowulf* from a perspective that is both practical and appreciative, Edward Christie comments on the challenge of studying the Anglo-Saxon epic in an increasingly digital era and points out the need to "consider the effect of new media on the textuality of manuscripts whose material presence is frequently considered essential to authoritative reading" (130). For any medieval scholar, the physical document is an inherent part of appreciating the text itself, but how to balance this with the presence of high-quality and unquestionably relevant digital media for preserving and transmitting it? This paradox has yet to find a balance much less a resolution. But the addition of one more paradox to the already rich text of *Beowulf* merely adds to its fascination.

[30] See http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_rate.htm

It would be “straining credulity” to place the burden of too great a foresight on the poet of *Beowulf* in assuming that he was intentionally juggling his own present and past with what would become a future present and past. But it is tempting to consider that *Beowulf* might not merely be a glance back into the Germanic and Scandinavian past but also a look into the English future, that it is not merely atavistic but also prophetic. In the end, *Beowulf* is not so much a search for a cultural identity as it is the beginning of one. And that certainly makes it worth studying.

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