Belmont University
Belmont Digital Repository

Belmont Undergraduate Research Symposium (BURS)

Special Events

4-11-2019

Raising Cain: Interrogating Monstrosity in Beowulf

Victoria Pan
Belmont University

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.belmont.edu/burs

Part of the Classics Commons, and the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation
Pan, Victoria, "Raising Cain: Interrogating Monstrosity in Beowulf" (2019). *Belmont Undergraduate Research Symposium (BURS)*. 2.
https://repository.belmont.edu/burs/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Events at Belmont Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Belmont Undergraduate Research Symposium (BURS) by an authorized administrator of Belmont Digital Repository. For more information, please contact repository@belmont.edu.

Victoria Pan
12 Nov 2018
Monteverde
Peoples of Ragnarok
Research Essay

Raising Cain: Interrogating Monstrosity in *Beowulf*

Though Beowulf lends his name to the work, *Beowulf* is defined by Other: Grendel, his mother, and the dragon. These beings are undeniably not-human, or at least not adhering to human convention and norms. However, John Steinbeck in *East of Eden* defines monsters as "variations from the accepted normal... To a monster the norm must seem monstrous, since everyone is normal to himself" (Steinbeck 71). The creatures that define *Beowulf* could be called monsters, but two of these monsters are related; Grendel and then his mother horrify the people of Heorot. If they are two variations from the accepted normal – a family, with other members implied – are they not evidence of a separate, different normal? Utilizing the Christian definition of "exile" with the Steinbeck definition of monsters as "difference", the monsters remind us that the societally-decreed realms normal and not-normal, exile and acceptance, are only a few steps away from each other.

Grendel and his mother are primarily associated with exile because of their relationship to Cain. Grendel is described as "[living] in a monster's lair for a time after the Creator had condemned him as one of the seed of Cain – the Everlasting Lord avenged Cain's murder ... the Creator sent him into exile, far from mankind, because of his crime" (Crossley-Holland 76). In Genesis, after Cain perceives his brother Abel has been favored by God in his stead and murders his brother out of jealousy, God exiles Cain. Cain cries, " 'Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.' " (Gen. 4:13-14). In this, exile is equated with not only leaving

the benevolence of society, but also leaving God Himself – to leave society is a divine curse, a sign of God's disfavor. This presence of God, referenced as "the throne of grace," parallels the poet Seamus Heaney's translated descriptions of Heorot itself, the "wonder of the world forever; it would be [Hrothgar's] throne-room" (Heaney 151). This parallel gives Heorot weight beyond a simple mead-hall. If the absence of society is a sign of God's disfavor, society itself then thrives under His eye. Its laws, which dictate the conditions of exile, are then given moral rather than just ethical (i.e., aligned with personal goodness rather than merely coded prevention of anarchy) value. Instead of living here, Grendel is now "the notorious prowler of the borderland, ranger of the moors, the fen, and the fastness" (Crossley-Holland 76). He is made, by being set apart from the Danes, "an impersonation of evil and darkness, even an incarnation of the Christian devil" (Klaeber qtd. in Chapman 335). But why is his exile so terrible, so indicative of his wickedness? The Norse peoples are no strangers to exile: Gunnar Hámundarson and his brother Kolskegg are sentenced to exile for three years, during which time they are allowed to go abroad (*Njal's Saga* 144). This exile may in fact bring them glory as it gives them the opportunity to travel and raid, doing great deeds as Kolskegg does, and he eventually "would travel to southern lands and become God's knight ... [he] became a leader of the Varangians" (*Njal's Saga* 157). What makes Grendel so different in his exile is that it is a permanent state of wandering: he is not allowed to settle elsewhere and make a home for himself. There is no hope of glory for Grendel in his exile, no chance at redemption.

Grendel inherits his father's crimes twofold. Like Cain he is a "restless wanderer", prowling about at night when all others are asleep or gathered amongst their family and friends. He, like Cain, commits murder out of jealousy: he has lost divine favor, whereas Hrothgar's people enjoy it loudly: "Day after day he heard the din of merry-making inside the hall, and the

sound of the harp and the bard's clear song" (Crossley-Holland 76). When he ruins their gathering, "his hall behavior is a grotesque perversion of the civilized and the good" (O'Keeffe 492). Exile, besides simply being setting apart, also becomes a malignant state where the disfavored resents the intentions of the favored, and even acts to invert them. This inheritance of crime and characteristics is both Norse and Biblical: when Beowulf arrives on Hrothgar's shores he identifies himself as the son of Ecgtheow. Hrothgar says, "I settled your father's feud by payment, I sent ancient treasures to the Wylflings over the water's back; and Ectheow swore oaths to me" (Crossley-Holland 85). In *Njal's Saga* as well people are introduced by their lineage and the feats of their ancestors: "There was a man named Otkel. He was the son of Skarf, the son of Hallikel who fought with Grím and Grímness and killed him on the holm" (*Njal's Saga* 93). Likewise, in the Old Testament, God declares, "For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me" (Deut. 5:9-10). Interestingly, this, paired with God's promise to avenge Cain "seven times over" should someone kill him in his exile, shows an understanding of revenge that would have been familiar to the Norse (Gen. 4:15). Njal's and Gunnar's families become embroiled in a feud instigated by their wives, who goad their sons and servants into action. Bergthóra, Njal's wife, says, "You are not men of honour if you do not pay for [insults and killings] in some way or other!" (*Njal's Saga* 87). Revenge is an imperative. Exile and revenge then go hand in hand, sometimes as consequences of the other, as part of the same cycle.

But the reference to Cain also implies something about Grendel completely unrelated to the Bible: that he is a *son*, implying a family, a society with its own rules. Grendel's descent from Cain puts him in a category of demon-children: "In [Cain] all evil-doers find their origin, monsters and elves and spiteful spirits of the dead" (Crossley-Holland 77). His evil does not exist

in singularity, but rather, there is a whole reviled multitude living with him on the fringes of society. It is easier to mark off one aberration, with a unique and bizarre hatred of the society so beloved, so glorified in the eyes of God and man. But to have an entire family – especially a mother, with the accompanying connotations of nurturing and childhood – living their own obscure lives is to imply that the society inside Heorot is maybe not as singular in God's affection as they previously believed. Living outside of God's favor becomes dangerously possible, even familiar. Instead of being a monster pitted against humanity, the story of Grendel and his mother against Beowulf and the Danes becomes a story of family pitted against family. The division is not even a pathetic family against the might of the Danes and Beowulf. It is true that Grendel himself has no kingdom of his own to rule, but what about these others in his monstrous family? His mother dwells in a "little-known country" that, in its mystery, contains her own twisted kingdom (Crossley-Holland 108). When Beowulf plunges into his lair he notices "that he had entered some loathsome hall ... a vaulted chamber where the floodrush could not touch him" (Crossley-Holland 111). Not only does this family exist, but they could potentially thrive in their exile, with their own inversion of Heorot. When Beowulf enters Grendel's mother's lair, he is called "her hall-guest", recognizing that he is now in the territory of the Other, and subject to its rules (Crossley-Holland 112).

But Grendel's mother is fluent in Norse culture – she acts, too, on honor-bound revenge – and that reminds them that perhaps their culture is not so holy and untouchable as they thought. It is no accident that Grendel's mother is solely referred to as his mother. Although critics note "a curious ambivalence [in *Beowulf*]. The poet execrates the monster, yet feels and expresses sympathy" about Grendel (Chapman 334). This can be applied in greater force to Grendel's mother. She inspires a terror that, "compared to her son, equalled the terror an Amazon inspires

as opposed to a man" – terror even greater than that evoked by her son because she is understandable (Crossley-Holland 106). Unlike her son, who comes with only his own strength as a weapon, she is compared to "the razor-sharp blade stained with blood [shearing] through the boar-crested helmets of the enemy" (Crossley-Holland 106). She is armed with the righteousness of her cause, which gives her actions even greater weight than those of Grendel. He could be dismissed with his own obscure motivations – there is little to no concern as to *why* Grendel is waging war against the Danes, and no one offers a solution to address that. But the sympathy evoked in the image of a "mother, mournful and ravenous, [resolving] to go on a grievous journey to avenge her son's death", reminds the society that they are no longer special, and thus their sympathy gives way to terror (Crossley-Holland 106). They can understand that Gunnar had Kolskegg, Hallgerd had Thjóstólf, and Cain even had the reluctant promise of vengeance from God, who serves as his only family after leaving his parents and murdering his brother. Grendel has his mother, who in avenging him "fulfills the duty of the kinsman" (Nitzsche, 292). When referring to Grendel's mother, the poet calls her "*ides agalaecwif*": " 'Ides' elsewhere in *Beowulf* denotes 'lady' and connotes either a queen or a woman of high social rank" (Nitzsche 288). A direct contrast to the peace-keeping and mead-bringing Wealtheow, she is a monster queen in her own right. Thus, Hrothgar acknowledges her motive: "The wandering, murdering monster ... has avenged her son... with vice-like holds". Angered by the loss of his most-beloved thane, Hrothgar then goes on to say, "Many a thane... may feel she has avenged that feud [for Grendel] already, indeed more than amply" (Crossley-Holland 107). Though they do not question the label of "monster", the Danes are forced to confront their cultural values as no longer untouchable, but relatable even to those they hate and deem monstrous. Suddenly the assumed divine support behind their mores becomes not so divine through interaction with alleged demons.

All of this, rather than invoking difference, illustrate similarity. So where is the difference that makes them so monstrous? It cannot simply be the relationship to Cain, for "Cain's destruction of Abel provides the moral pattern for every man and woman in all times and places" (Kroll 118). It cannot be the actual inheritance of crime either, because Beowulf's father, too, committed a crime "by striking a blow, [which] began the greatest of feuds", much like Cain did unto Abel (Crossley-Holland 85). But Beowulf is traditionally interpreted as "the most virtuous of the characters ... he chooses to reverse the sin of Cain " (Kroll 119). Perhaps, but he is also given the chance to reject Cain's sin from the very beginning, as he is introduced by his father's crime as Grendel is, but welcomed for it. Instead of shouldering both the crime and the punishment of his father as Grendel does, Beowulf is recognized and honored for his heritage. When preparing to fight with Grendel Beowulf brags, "I will not send him to sleep with my sword ... we, this night, shall forego the use of weapons" (Crossley-Holland 91). Thus, when they grapple together, they become indistinguishable: "The two hall-wardens were enraged ... It was a wonder the wine-hall withstood two so fierce in battle" (Crossley-Holland 93). Their wrestling together "highlight[s] the mix of the human and monstrous, the civilized and uncivilized, and the protective and destructive in each" (Kroll 122). Translators of *Beowulf* mark that the word *aglaeca* is used "twenty times in *Beowulf*, chiefly, as Klaeber notes, for Grendel and the dragon. Yet *aglaeca* is also used for Beowulf and Sigemund ... the word need have been no more specific than 'formidable one'" (O'Keeffe 484-485). So, if the exact same word is used for Grendel, who has inherited the exact same sin as Beowulf, what makes them different? What makes one of them the monster, and one of them the hero?

In order to find this crucial difference, a more thorough examination of what Grendel is becomes necessary. Before Beowulf kills him, Grendel is called a "hellish monster, grim and

greedy, brutally cruel", with "gruesome footprints" as he comes "shrithing through the shadows" (Crossley-Holland 77, 91). He is "the wicked ravager" who "hungrily seized a sleeping warrior, greedily wrenched him, bit into his body, drank the blood from his veins, devoured huge pieces", committing the most dehumanizing of acts towards his victims (Crossley-Holland 92). As he ravages Heorot and haunts the outlands, he is more a collection of evil characteristics than a physical entity, more symbol than being. Some have actually suggested that Grendel is some kind of monster who "appears as spirit and mist in the fens, but who is manifestly corporeal in his contact with men" (O'Keeffe 486-487). This could imply that he is literally and symbolically stealing humanity from the Danes, committing his own raids against them as they do against others while at sea. Or, more likely, Grendel is becoming more human by behaving like them and entering their space, suggesting that to achieve humanity is simply to change perspective of space. In other words, there is no difference between being human and being an exiled monster: it all depends on where the being is in relation to where society is.

Grendel's actual shape does not solidify until Beowulf tears off his arm. The wound makes his body both tangible and meticulously inventoried: "the sinews sprang apart, the muscles were bursting", and "Beowulf, brave in battle, placed hand, arm and shoulder – Grendel's entire grasp – under Heorot's spacious roof" (Crossley-Holland 94). Rather than being a mysterious demonic claw as we might have expected from a being wrenching thanes from their sleep, Grendel has an arm only remarkable in its recognizability. It is only after Grendel has been defeated and his mother appears that the poet takes the final step in describing both monsters: "I have heard my people say... that so far as they can see one bears a likeness to a woman; grotesque though he was, the other who trod the paths of exile looked like a man" (Crossley-Holland 107). Perhaps it isn't that Grendel was becoming human through his crimes,

or inverting humanity through his perverse reenacting of their deeds. Perhaps it is that he is human, and always was, and thus is no monster more than a "human who hates his own kind" (O'Keeffe 486). There is, physically speaking, ultimately no difference between Beowulf and Grendel. It is the similarity between them, and through that similarity, the potential for Beowulf to thus become Grendel, or Grendel Beowulf, that is monstrous. It is only after he is defeated – the threat of Grendel himself is over, and the humanity of a grieving mother seeking revenge cannot be denied – that the poet can finally admit this.

So, what distinguishes Beowulf from becoming monstrous? If he is the un-Cain to Grendel's Cain, where is this moment Kroll identifies as his choice to "reverse the sin of Cain" (Kroll 119)? Cain's sin was jealousy at being dismissed by God, which then led to wanton murder. If Grendel is God's disfavored, there is never a moment where Beowulf is not God's favored. From the moment he sets foot on the Danes' shore, the watchman says, "I've never set eyes on a more noble man, a warrior in armour ... may his looks never belie him and his lordly bearing" (Crossley-Holland 80). Although Unferth attempts to mock Beowulf, Beowulf gains the upper hand, reminding him that "I showed the greater stamina, enduring hardship without equal... Neither you nor Breca have yet dared such a deed with shining sword" (Crossley-Holland 87-88). In both the contest with Breca and the contest with Unferth, Beowulf wins: in every moment of risk, his offering is always accepted. The closest Beowulf ever is to Cain is through his interactions with Grendel, where he "disarms, leaving behind the appurtenances of the human... adopting his enemy's primitive mode of fighting" (O'Keeffe 487).

Rather than reversing the sin of Cain, Beowulf reverses Grendel's sin. He steals into Grendel's mother's mead-hall, intent on nothing but murder. From her perspective, he must have been a malicious intruder just like Grendel was into Heorot. He enters a feud with Grendel's

mother, bent on revenge for her revenge: "no wergild has been offered by the homicide Beowulf", just as Grendel never compensated for the lives he took (Nitzsche 292). This time, however, Beowulf brings with him the trappings of humanity: "Beowulf donned his coat of mail ... Not least among his mighty aids was Hrunting, the long-hilted sword Unferth lent him in his need" (Crossley-Holland 110). When Hrunting fails him, he briefly reverts to the primitive way he wrestled with Grendel, "[trusting] in his own strength, the might of his hand" (Crossley-Holland 112). But "holy God granted him victory ... Then Beowulf saw among weapons an invincible sword wrought by the giants" (Crossley-Holland 113). Grendel's mother is armed too: "she dropped on her hall-guest, drew her dagger, broad and gleaming; she wanted to avenge her son, her only offspring" (Crossley-Holland 113). She has her knowledge of Germanic tradition, the surety of her cause, but it is not enough. Beowulf's sword is divinely favored, and as indicated at the beginning of this paper, that divine favor goes hand in hand with the righteousness of societal values. He is the one defending the people of Heorot once again: he stands on the side of humanity. No matter how closely she aligns with the traditions of these enemy peoples, she is still wrong: "A woman's primary loyalty as peace-pledge was reserved for her husband, not for her son ... her attempts to avenge her son's death could be justified if she were human and male" (Nitzsche 292). In other words, she is wrong because no matter what she does, she cannot escape who she has been labeled as: a monster, and a female one at that. She can never win against the humans, no matter how she tries.

Ultimately, what separates a hero from a monster is a completely arbitrary designation of perspective. The story is skewed in the society's favor: those within the society validate it by casting aside the outcasts. In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck calls the story of Cain and Abel a story that has "haunted us and followed us from our beginning", and perhaps is the story of every one

of us (Steinbeck 264). In analyzing *Beowulf*, we often forget that what caused Cain to fall was a slight from God, made for capricious and obscure reasons. Like his father, Grendel was cast aside by the gods of society, into shadows where he and his kind could not remind them of something truly monstrous: how similar these "monsters" are to themselves, and what this similarity implies about their own humanity. Thus when we look at everything we call horrific, terrible, Other, we must ask: what makes them different from us, if not chance and perspective? Are we really so sure of our own humanity?

Works Cited

The Bible. New International Version, Biblica, 2011. *Biblegateway.com,* https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+4&version=NIV.

Beowulf. *The Anglo-Saxon World.* Translated and edited by Kevin Crossley-Holland, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 52-56.

- -, trans. Seamus Heaney. *Monsters*. Edited by Andrew J. Hoffman, Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2016, pp.151-154.

Njal's Saga. Translated by Carl F. Bayerschmidt and Lee M. Hollander, Wordsworth Editions, 1998.

Chapman, Robert L. "Alas, Poor Grendel." *College English*, vol. 17, no. 6, 1956, pp. 334-337. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/372370.

Kroll, Nicole. "*Beowulf*: The Hero as Keeper of Human Polity." *Modern Philogy*, vol. 84, no. 2, 1986, pp. 117-129. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/437569.

O'Keeffe, Katherine O'Brian. "*Beowulf*, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1981, pp. 484-494. *JSTOR,* https://www.jstor.org/stable/40754660.

Nitzsche, Jane C. "The Problem of Grendel's Mother." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1980, pp. 297-303. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40754612.

Steinbeck, John. *East of Eden*. Penguin Books, 2002.