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SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF BEOWULF'S FIGHT WITH GRENDEL

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The entire Grendel-Beowulf fight episode (ll. 703-828), perhaps one of the most celebrated passages in *Beowulf*, hints again and again at the combatants' oneness. They are tied together in hand-to-hand combat, in syntax, in alliteration—even in the combination of alliteration and syntax. This latter combination Richard A. Lewis has called "structural interlace," an Old English poetic principle producing "... a sense of design that combined one axis of word coordination with another."¹ And this combination—or interlace—of alliteration and syntax to produce a richer texture in the poetry appears to be at the heart of the fight between Beowulf and Grendel. Inevitably they meet in battle—the epitome of good, the epitome of evil—and the poet, not content simply to contrast black and white characters in this scene, interlaces a haunting chiaroscuro effect by contrasting the two in a way implying comparison.

Almost a given in Old English poetry, such contrast appears when any poet desires a richer understanding of the concept in question. Thus we find simultaneous contemplations of life and death, old age and youth, fidelity and betrayal, good and evil. Mandel has even noted such oppositions occurring through time, or "contrast as related to anticipation."² In opposing one another, two opposites must become one for resolution to occur, but once that resolution occurs, it eventually causes a later opposition.

Hence the consideration of Beowulf and Grendel. Absolute opposites, the closer approximation of one to the other brings about a comparable change in the other. The notion is an ancient one, reaching back into the realm of folklore wherein two opposites must come together to produce a synthesizing effect. During this fight episode in fact, Beowulf and Grendel almost become the reincarnation of the Mithraic twins Cautes and Cautopates—ancient

¹R. A. Lewis, "Old English Poetry: Alliteration and Structural Interlace," *Language and Style* 6 (1973), 200.

²J. Mandel, "Contrast in Old English Poetry," *The Chaucer Review* 6 (1971), 1-13.

representations of life and death.³ Beowulf, in engaging in the fight with Grendel and meeting him on his terms, becomes more like him and loses, somewhat, the innocent confidence in his own strength (and in God's, perhaps, too) that he enjoys before the fight. Beowulf rejoices in his victorious night-work (l. 827) as Grendel might have done, had he won. Beowulf, who comes away with his life, suffers the consequences of living: he changes. Ever so slightly, of course. As Dragland says:

The Beowulf poet seems to say, through his association of man and monster, that there are good reasons for the kind of dissolution that occurs at the end of the poem, that they may be traced to a darkness of the human mind, and that Beowulf himself contains this shadow, as much as he also exemplifies heroism.⁴

Indeed, as Greenfield notes in his syntactic analysis of Grendel's approach to the hall,⁵ the poet has managed to blend form and content in such a way (by means of stylistic and structural interlace) that the polarity between Grendel and Beowulf at the beginning to the passage gradually results in a merger of the two at the end of the passage—hence, a “change” for both of them.

This merger was most recently noted by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, who argues that the two combatants become as one in their mutual approach of the human Limit.⁶ However, Beowulf, according to O'Keeffe, achieves a “supremely human” status in the fight, while Grendel's attempt at approaching the human limit backfires: Beowulf becomes more a hero and Grendel dies. But then O'Keeffe's concerns lie more with Grendel and how he becomes less a monster and more a man than in this union.

³The *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, Ad de Vries, ed. (Amsterdam, 1974) reports that the twins “represent two opposites, which, in the end, have a synthesizing, complementary function, e.g. life/death, sunrise/sunset, bad/good, hunter/shepherd, vertical mountain/horizontal valley, etc.” Cautes and Cautopates appear in artwork as torchbearers, one with his torch upwards, the other with his torch downwards to “represent life and death, sunrise and sunset.” The *Dictionary* goes on to mention other instances of oneness and opposition in the persons of Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, etc.

⁴S. L. Dragland, “Monster-Man in *Beowulf*,” *Neophilologus* 61 (1977), 617.

⁵Stanley B. Greenfield, “Grendel's Approach to Heorot: Syntax and Poetry,” *Old English Poetry*, ed. R. Creed, (Providence, 1967), 275-284.

⁶Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, “Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 23 (1981), 484-494.

Nevertheless, although the view concerning the contenders' merging identities is a compelling one, the reading could take on an even richer texture if the implications of Beowulf's becoming like Grendel were examined, as well as those of Grendel's becoming like Beowulf. A fuller reading would be one that took into account the fighters' emergence from the deadly fray, *neither* completely unscathed. In fact, an exploration of the passage, following syntactic paths marked out by Greenfield (Greenfield performed a syntactic analysis on the passage just prior to the fight passage⁷) can provide warrant for such a reading.

Greenfield, however, stops his analysis at line 736a, just before the poet reminds the reader of Beowulf's presence in the hall. Greenfield does not analyze the passage containing the crux of the wrestling hold nor the turning of the tables on Grendel. O'Keeffe does, of course, but not in the detail Greenfield uses in his analysis. And yet, to continue a full-blown Greenfieldian analysis on this passage would, on the one hand, add weight to O'Keeffe's interpretation of what happens to Grendel and, on the other hand, reveal that Beowulf, too, is altered somewhat in his meeting Grendel on the human level. At the very least, a thorough, syntactic analysis of the Beowulf-Grendel encounter adds a richer interpretation to the passage since the reader can be permitted to see Beowulf go through the humanization process beside Grendel. The lines analyzed, then, will take up where Greenfield left off (l. 736b) and end at Beowulf's victory (l. 827b).⁸

ǣtgean ofer þā niht. Þrýðswýð behēold
 mæg Higelāces, hū se mǎnscaða
 under fǣrgripum gefaran wolde.
 Nē þæt se āglāca yldan þōhte,
 ac hē gefēng hraðe forman sīðe
 slǣpendne rinc, slāt unwearnum,
 bāt bānlocan, blōd ēdrum dranc,
 syndsnǣdum swealh; sōna hæfde
 unlyfigendes eal gefeormod
 fēt ond folma.

(ll. 736b-745)

⁷Greenfield, "Grendel's Approach," pp. 275-284. See also Greenfield, "Syntactic Analysis and Old English Poetry," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* (1963), 373-378; and Greenfield's *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* (London 1972), 109-132.

⁸Fr. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed. (Lexington, Mass. 1950). All citations from *Beowulf* are from this edition.

The opening line continues the separation noted by Greenfield of walker, sleepers, and the watcher by having the *þrýðswýðs* physically separated from *hē* (the monster), a line away in 735. An ironic parallel is also set up in the a and b parts of line 736 in the alliteration of *ðicgean* and *þrýðswýðs*. Earlier in Greenfield's analysis we saw where the alliterative pattern set up by *sceadugenga* and *scēotend* associates the two in a way that leads the reader to expect that "the *scēotend* are indeed the objective of Grendel's movement."⁹ Here, too, *ðicgean* and *þrýðswýðs* are associated in their alliteration, but ironically Grendel will not "partake of" the "mighty man" that night. Beowulf's sudden appearance as subject of the sentence also sets up a possible opposition of the intruder who has up until now, for the most part, occupied the subject position. Further, the object of Beowulf's watching is not Grendel himself, really, but the subordinate clause (ll. 737b-738) of Grendel's readying himself for attack. In other words, although Beowulf has suddenly appeared on the scene in the subject position, Grendel, too, holds a subject position, and a quite active one, with the verb in an auxiliary + infinitive (durative) form. Such a form underscores the immediacy of an action, especially in its opposition to the preterite singular *behēold* and its subject's relative inaction. Thus a balance of action is being set up between the two participants in the scene: Grendel active in his position as subject of a durative verb, but Beowulf in the controlling subject position.

Immediately, however, Grendel resumes his domination of the scene in l. 739, again being referred to as *agæca* (earlier in l. 732). This time the term assumes a slight difference in meaning. In l. 732 *agæca* was preceded by *atol*, for instance, leaving no doubt that the term meant "monster." However, in l. 893, less than two hundred lines ahead, the term is applied to Sigemund to mean "warrior." The use of it in l. 739 for Grendel, then, may be softened ever so slightly. Grendel, as mentioned above, has not long ago been referred to as *healdægn* (l. 142), and calling him *āglæca* may conjure up a dim memory of this earlier epithet. Too, l. 737 has made a subtle association of Beowulf and Grendel in the alliteration of *mæg* and *mānscasa*. And finally, the second immediate switch from Beowulf as subject back to Grendel as subject catches the reader unaware, still thinking in terms of Beowulf, when he sees the new subject, *āglæca*, able to be applied to either a warrior or a monster. As Huffines mentions, "The *Beowulf* poet must have been aware of associations in *āglæca* which would link man

⁹ Greenfield, "Grendel's Approach," p. 278.

and monster under one central concept. . . ."¹⁰ O'Keeffe notices a similar link (pp. 484, 485)—and cunningly the poet has begun weaving the delicate interlace of this passage that will make Beowulf and Grendel one.

Grendel, nevertheless, is meant in the poet's use of *āglæca*, for he quickly (emphasized by *Nē yldan þōhte* and *hræse*) seizes, in an uncomplicated S-V-O order, the sleeping thane from his rest and tears him open (l. 741). The alliteration in this line helps to illuminate the violent contrast between action and passivity, for Grendel *slāt* the *slæpendne* without restraint. The next two lines, as well as this one, offer us a rapid succession of active verbs, all of which have Grendel as their subject, two of which are slowed only slightly by their appearances following their objects: *dranc* and *swealh*. The pattern, in other words, follows the content in the text of Grendel's swift seizure of the warrior, his tearing and biting him, slowing only enough to drink his blood and swallow huge morsels of his body. The syntactic break in l. 743 is enough time for the monster to have finished his meal, the warrior's body *unlyfigendes* "sandwiched" appropriately between the auxiliary *hæfde* and the past participle *gefeormod* of the verb, the feet and hands, dangling in apposition, last to have disappeared into his mouth.¹¹

Line 745b brings with it the beginning of the crux of the passage with a more complicated interlacing pattern:

Forð nēar ætstōp,
nam þā mid handa hige þihtigne
rinc on ræste, ræhte ongēan
fēond mid folme; hē onfēng hraþe
inwitþancum ond wið earm gesæt. (ll. 745b-749)

The last subject mentioned, *āglæca* (l. 739), clearly referred to Grendel, although hints were there of a parallel to Beowulf. A subject is still not reintroduced here, even though we know that Grendel is still the subject who steps closer and seizes the strong-hearted warrior at rest. Line 746's alliteration graphically illustrates the proximity of *handa* and *higeþihtigne*, stalker and watcher at last brought into alignment for battle. Line 747b, however, does not clearly show Grendel doing the reaching with his hand, for *fēond* (l. 748) could be a subject meaning either Beowulf or Grendel,¹² the object

¹⁰S. Huffines, "OE *āglæca*: Magic and Moral Decline of Monsters and Men," *Semasia* 1 (1974), 71-72.

¹¹See also N. K. Kiessling, "Grendel: A New Aspect," *Modern Philology* 65 (1968), 200.

¹²Although *fēond* is usually used to refer to monsters and other enemies of the "good guys," it can be used in a neutral way to show the monsters'

meaning Grendel, or the object meaning Beowulf. The next two clauses do not clear up matters either. *Hē* of l. 748b could again be Beowulf or Grendel who grabs the other's hand in a hostile way and sits against the other's (or his own) arm. Curious results attend any interpretation.

Were we to follow one thread of the interlace, and if Grendel is the subject throughout the two and a half lines, Beowulf would be referred to as a *fēond*, and, more importantly, there would be no motive for Grendel's beginning panic in line 750. Following the opposite thread, if Beowulf is the subject throughout, he is guilty of a "hostile purpose" against Grendel and will be in trouble (say the wrestling experts) in defending himself against Grendel's claws. Splitter believes that the passage should be read thus:

'he (Grendel) seized him (Beowulf) quickly, with evil intent, and set (or leaned) him against his (Grendel's) arm' . . . the sequence of Grendel's seizure . . . as follows:

nam þā mid [one, the right] handa higeþihtigne 746
 rinc on ræste, ræhte ongēan
 fēond mid [the other, or left] folme; hē onfēng hraþe

point of view. From their points of view, the "good guys" are *fēondas*. In lines 2669-2672 such is indeed the case.

Æfter ðām wordum wyrum yrre cwōm
 atol inwitgæst ðōre sīðe
 fyrwylmum fāh fionda nīos(i)an,
 lāðra manna.

Here, men are the enemies of the dragon. Signe N. Carlson ("The Monsters of *Beowulf*: Creations of Literary Scholars," *Journal of American Folklore* 80 (1967), 357-364, says that words referring to monsters are also words used in neutral places in the poem or as good words referring to Beowulf, etc. He says:

The fact that "fiend" is a modern derivative of *fēond* does little to recommend it as an accurate meaning of the Old English word and its association with the Satan figure. Therefore, it seems that the interpretation of *fēond* as "fiend" must be replaced by the translation "enemy" ("foe," "adversary") . . . (p. 359).

O'Keefe, too, says "Given the poem's perspective here [l. 748], Beowulf is a *fēond*." (p. 489). Finally, the first definition in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1933) reads as follows: "1. An enemy: foe." (p. 196). Literally translated, therefore, the line states, "The enemy reached toward him with his hand."

[that is, settled or received in his double grip]
 inwitþancum on wið [the left] earm gesæt.¹³

But Fry counters with another interpretation:

I believe that Grendel reaches toward Beowulf with his right hand, and the hero seizes it, twisting it behind the monster's back. Beowulf then stands up behind Grendel, safe from the menacing claws, and eventually twists the arm off at the shoulder. . . then lines 748a-49 could be translated: 'He [Beowulf] seized him [Grendel] with hostile intentions and pressed [his weight] against his [Grendel's] arm.'¹⁴

Other combinations of subjects and objects at various points have also been suggested to maintain Grendel's *feond* status and *inwitþanc*, to keep Beowulf good and pure of heart, and to allow the hero the upper hand in the fight from the very moment of contact. These things, the critics assume, must have been what the poet intended. Perhaps he did, on one level.

On a deeper level, however, if we were to consider the interlaced texture of the poem's fabric as a whole rather than isolate individual threads, the author's obscuring the subject ties in neatly with the action described. The rapid grabbing on each side may have left a spectator of the fight unsure who grabbed whom first, the participants themselves perhaps slightly hazy as to who was really in control of the situation. Beowulf, the author has earlier promised, will eventually triumph, but at this point, the struggle appears to be equal. And yet, since we do not know who has hold of whom, the struggle is one inviting fear. Deeper still, the possibility for Grendel and Beowulf to be sharing equal status is ironic, too, since the tide will turn

¹³H. W. Splitter, "Note on a Beowulf Passage," *Modern Language Notes* 63 (1948), 120.

¹⁴Donald K. Fry, "'Wið Earm Gesæt' and Beowulf's Hammerlock," *Modern Philology* 67 (1970), 364-365. Fry, interestingly enough, offers an initial translation to the passage, minus his later bracketed interpolations, that preserves the ambiguity quite nicely:

he stepped forward nearer, then seized with his hand the strong-minded warrior on his bed; the enemy reached toward him with his hand; he grabbed him quickly with hostile intentions, and sat against his arm (p. 364).

Fry goes on to say, "A translator may commit himself to Boewulf's sitting up on his own elbow or against Grendel's, or he may leave the pronouns ambiguous, as in my literal translation" (p. 364).

very shortly, and Grendel, the very antithesis of Beowulf, will have been beaten at his own game. There is more, however. The poet's emphasis on the wrestler's oneness in handgrip, the union anticipated verbally throughout the poem up until the very moment of its happening, stresses ironic implications not only for Grendel but for Beowulf. It is ironic that Beowulf could have monstrous characteristics, that he could be somebody's enemy or take a warrior's hand with hostile purpose. It is ironic that Beowulf "onfeng hraþe" (l. 748) as Grendel "gefeng hraþe" (l. 740). The poet realized the implications of his making hero and foe into one. He wanted to illustrate subtly the real similarities between the two in their respective human natures—brave warriors both in their mutual rejection of weapons, fiends both in their love of battle and killing. They are the flesh and blood realization of Cautes and Cautopates, the mythic twins of good and evil, becoming one in this primal union. Their synthesis, then, signals the world of change the poem as a whole represents. O'Keeffe states that ". . . this ambiguity is intentional, unresolvable, and designed to prepare us for the merging of hero and hostile one." (p. 489)

But, to reiterate, the implications are only suggested in the poem. Of course the two are at opposite poles of good and evil; the poet makes this contrast clear at every turn. And yet implicit in every contrast is a comparison, and the author truly seems to be asking the reader to see something of Grendel in Beowulf, as well as something human in Grendel. The poet is making Beowulf less a hero and more a man with whom the reader can identify. In fact the passage is one which could very well have been included in those passages mentioned in Marijane Osborne's examination of *Beowulf*—passages whose ". . . deliberate ambiguities [are] designed to be appreciated as such by the audience of the poem."¹⁵

Further analysis of the rest of the fight adds weight to this notion, but no more so than does this fuzzy image of the two combatants' first merging into one in ll. 747-749, hazily rendered in a brilliant use of syntactic ambiguity. And here we have found the essence of interlace. The poet has so craftily knotted together the strands of his tale at this point that the principles' characters have blurred. Not satisfied with merely suggesting shared traits between Beowulf and Grendel by means of alliteration, the poet has opted for ambiguous pronouns to do his work for him. Now so many variations on the two personalities have been interwoven that the pair might just as well switch places.

¹⁵ Marijane Osborne, "Some Uses of Ambiguity in *Beowulf*," *Thoth* 10 (1969), 20.

However, line 750 reestablishes Grendel as the subject in "fyrena hyrde," although not until the b hemistich.

Sōna þæt onfunde fyrena hyrde,
 þæt hē ne mētte middangeardes
 eorþan scēata on elran men
 mundgripe māran; hē on mōde wearð
 forht on ferhæ; nōþý ær fram meahte.
 Hyge wæs him hinfūs wolde on heolster flēon,
 sēcan dēofla gedræg; ne wæs his drohtosþær
 swylce hē on eaderdagum ær gemētte. (ll. 750-757)

The subject of "Sona þæt onfunde" could perhaps be Beowulf's discovering a fateful turn of events (rather than Grendel's), and that split second of the reader's not being sure is enough time for the poet to suggest that Beowulf very easily *could* have been caught in the position that Grendel finds himself in. Grendel's slowly dawning awareness of the reality of his plight is punctuated further in the proleptic use of þæt in l. 750a and the subsequent periphrasis and variation in the next two full lines. Prolepsis here anticipates the object of the verb *onfunde* even before the subject is mentioned and suggests the inkling of realization Grendel has before the full thrust of the discovery actually dawns on him. These lines stand in ironic contrast to ll. 728-730 where another of Grendel's expectations had not been realized, that time in a happier way. Those lines read:

Geseah hē recede rinca manige
 swefan siggegedriht samod ætgædere
 magorinca hēap. Þa his mōd āhlōg; (ll. 728-730)

Here Grendel's surprise is stated in a hardly complex V-S-Adv-O (followed by object modifiers) manner—to mirror the simple way Grendel perceives the discovery. This earlier discovery ends in Grendel's delight, however, while the later discovery is slower in its arrival and more awful in its implication. The syntax in the later episode allows the monster a moment for an unverbally "Uh oh" as he is locked tightly and more tightly in the hero's grip. Grendel's thoughts continue in 753b, the alliteration in 754 summing up the gist of those thoughts—*forht*, *ferhæ*, *fram*—the monster's spirit being caught neatly between fear and a desire for escape. In fact, the reader is given a psychological look at Grendel alone in ll. 750-757, as his thoughts move from surprise to fear to sheer panic, a pitiable picture.

Beowulf, however, has not been specifically named as a subject since l. 736, and one wonders what has been on *his* mind throughout the struggle. Line 758 shows him suddenly remembering the boast he had made earlier,

but before that sudden recollection there is no direct clue as to what he has been thinking about. ("Gemunde þā se gōða, mæg Higelāces, æfenspræce," l. 758). Indirectly, nevertheless, one may reasonably infer that Beowulf's thoughts before he remembers the boast are close to Grendel's. Grendel's musings are very human, after all; his surprise in Beowulf's strength is not that it is greater than his own, but as great as his. Strength "on elran men" was not that of thirty, as it truly is in Grendel and Beowulf. Even the fear Grendel feels is human, for in meeting his match in strength, Grendel realizes that he no longer has the advantage, that the outcome will not be so assured as it used to be, and that fate will surely enter the picture. All these things just might be passing through *Beowulf's* mind, too, until he remembers the boast; then things change.

The change is signalled by the change in subject in l. 758:

Gemunde þā se gōða, mæg Higelāces,
 æfenspræce, uplang āstōd
 ond him fæste wiðfēng; fingras burston;
 eoten wæs ūtweard, eorl furþur stōp.
 Mynte se mæra, (j)ær he meahthe swā,
 wīdre gewindan ond on weg þanon
 flēon on fenhopu; wiste his fingra geweald
 on grames grāpum. (ll. 758-764a)

Even in his panic, Grendel has up until now maintained subject position, deemphasizing his weaker fighting position. Now Beowulf takes the position of control for two and a half lines to gain a slight edge in the struggle that has been equal up to this point. Equivalency by means of interlace is more or less kept in balance, however, in the ambiguity of l. 760b "fingras burston" and in the balance of subject positions in l. 761 (*eoten* and *eorl*), the latter further reinforced by the alliteration. Hanning, too, notes the ambiguity in 760b in his reference to *fingras burston* as an "almost absolute image of physical division. . . . It is absolute in the sense that there is no indication in the text whose fingers are referred to."¹⁶ Joseph L. Baird, in an article on Grendel the exile, mentions the ambiguity of *eorl* in l. 761. "It might be remarked too in passing that *eorl* of line 761 is ambiguous. In view of the poet's tendency toward applying ironical epithets to Grendel, this title might well be another example of the poet's grim

¹⁶ R. W. Hanning, "Sharing, Dividing, Depriving—Verbal Ironies of Grendel's Last Visit to Heorot," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 15 (1973), 206.

humor."¹⁷ Another possibility for a Grendel/Beowulf equation appears in l. 762 in the poet's referring to Grendel as "se mǣra." Though here translated by Klaeber as "notorious," *se mǣra* is most often used in reference to royalty or esteemed objects elsewhere in the poem and in other Old English poetry. Even Bosworth-Toller has a question mark after "762,"¹⁸ and Nicholas K. Kiessling devotes an entire article to the problematic nature of the expression here.¹⁹ But if the word can be considered as another indication of a link-up between antagonist and protagonist, the passage achieves a richer reading rather than a more confused one. Additionally, in ll. 769-770, where

Yrre wǣron bēgen,

rēpe renweardas.

or where (l. 772) the pair become "heapodēorum," the equation of the foes is continued: they are *both* guardians of the hall, both angry, and both are battle-brave ones. Only exceedingly gradually does Beowulf gain power over Grendel in this fight, for the poet is at great pains to show us the real balance in strength and endurance. Indeed, contrary to Brodeur's estimation,²⁰ Grendel gives Beowulf an excellent fight. Constant reminders of Grendel's craven longings for escape do not remove the fact that he is struggling mightily against Beowulf's grip, enough to cause the hall to resound (ll. 767, 770) and mead benches to overturn (ll. 775-776). The Danes, too, are held in terror at the prospect of an unpredictable outcome for such an even fight. "What they [the Danes] see and we hear is that hero and hostile one, prey and predator, have become indistinguishable," says O'Keeffe (p. 490). The duration of the fight is further proof of the combatants' evenly-matched abilities, notwithstanding the fact that the description of the fight proper is interrupted by comments on the Danes and the hall itself. If Beowulf were easily the more powerful, he could have emerged victorious in five lines rather than the seventy it actually takes. Additional equalities are pointed to in l. 777 where the two are both "graman"; in the duplication of ll. 790 and 806, the former in reference to

¹⁷ Joseph L. Baird, "Grendel the Exile," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 67 (1966), 378.

¹⁸ J. B. Bosworth and T. N. Toller, eds., *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, (Oxford, 1882).

¹⁹ N. K. Kiessling, "Grendel: A New Aspect," *Modern Philology* 65 (1968), 191-201.

²⁰ A. G. Brodeur, "Design for Terror," *The Art of Beowulf*, (Los Angeles, 1969), 114.

Beowulf, the latter to Grendel (although, admittedly, to different points); and even in ll. 814-815, when defeat is near, we find their reciprocal hatred. In ll. 809-812, however, Beowulf gains another slight edge, in Grendel's body's failure to respond.

Ða þæt onfunde sē þe fela æror
 mōdes myrþe manna cynne,
 fyrene gefremede —hē [wæs] fæg wið God—
 þæt him se lichoma læstan nolde,
 ac hine se mōdega mæg Hygelāces
 hæfde be honda; wæs gehwæþer ðorum
 lifigende lāð. Licsār gebād
 atol æglāca; him on eaxle wearð
 syndolh sweetol, seonowe onsprunon,
 burston bānlocan. Bēowulfe wearð
 gūðhrēð gyfeþe. (ll. 809-819)

Here the phrase "Ða þæt onfunde" provides an echo of Grendel's earlier unhappy realization and signals the reality of his eventual defeat by Beowulf. As before, the periphrasis used in the description of that realization allows Grendel a gradual dawning in awareness of his own demise, but once the truth hits home, only four short lines away, his bonelocks break: the word "Beowulf" in the following hemistich announcing the one responsible for the breakage and reiterating the announcement in the alliteration of B's.

Thus we find the whole of the combat episode fraught with evidence equating Beowulf and Grendel. At Beowulf's victory, of course, the inequality is reaffirmed, but what can be made of the union in the first place? O'Keeffe explains that Grendel's presence in the affairs of men has brought along a taint: either the monster devours humanity or soils it by association. She also notes that those Danes who have not been eaten have nonetheless become flawed and have given themselves over to heathen ways. Grendel, on the other hand, has had some of the Danes' and their hall's goodness rub off on him by association, and he therefore can approach the human limit in his final scene in the hall. Beowulf, too, approaches the human level, but he comes *down* to it from his position as pristine hero. O'Keeffe says that "Beowulf's great triumph is to approach the human limit and return unscathed" (p. 492). But a more reasonable assumption is that Beowulf has not emerged untainted. Hero or no, he is a man just like the taintable Danes and men live in a world that changes them.

As Anderson says, "*Beowulf* is a poem essentially about mutability"²¹—whom do we find fitter than Beowulf himself to exemplify such change in the poem?

Change was a popular topic in Old English poetry. Perhaps as a way of clinging to the vestiges of paganistic beliefs in the face of the onslaught of Christianity, or perhaps *because* of the onslaught of Christianity and its emphasis on eternity over transience, poets tended to write about change and eventual death as opposed to the immutability of Heaven. And even in heavily Christian Old English poems, we discover the theme of change. In *The Dream of the Rood*, for example, we see that the movement of the whole poem is one of transformation. At first the dreamer is contrasted to the cross, but before long that contrast is broken down when we find the cross wounded as the dreamer is. Likewise in *The Wanderer* we find a movement, or a change, in the speaker from concern with self, then with the world, and then with God. These themes at some time carried over into Middle English practice in poetry as well, where we find King Arthur falling from the topmost point on Fortune's Wheel, eventually to his doom.

Ultimately, the Beowulf-Grendel encounter prefigures the change in Beowulf at the end of the poem—an old man bereft of innocence and the faith in the power of God he had initially, who finally eschews God's help for his own shrewdness and ends up losing his life to the dragon. In the Beowulf-Grendel fight episode both Beowulf and Grendel indeed meet in humanity; Grendel, as a result, loses his life while Beowulf, far from reestablishing his "superman" status, becomes more a human being.

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²¹T. M. Anderson, "Tradition and Design in *Beowulf*," in *Old English Literature in Context: Ten Essays*, ed. John D. Niles (Cambridge, 1980), 105.