PURIFICATION RITUALS IN THE *BEOWULF MANUSCRIPT*

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ABSTRACT

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In recent years, there has been a trend among Anglo-Saxon scholars to read the *Beowulf Manuscript* (Cotton Vitellius A.xv) as one complete unit linked by theme. This manuscript contains *The Passion of St. Christopher, The Wonders of the East, The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle, Beowulf,* and *Judith*, though both the first and the last entries appear in fragments. Andy Orchard, Kathryn Powell, and Heather Blurton have all identified various thematic strains in the manuscript and demonstrate that the scribes working on the document carefully planned its order and creation. In my dissertation, I argue that the *Beowulf Manuscript*'s most defining feature is fact that the texts all cause anxiety about the Other. In each section of the manuscript there is an attempt at ritual cleansing because the characters are both threatening and vulnerable, flesh is consumed or the consuming of flesh is alluded to, and violent invasion is imminent. I also argue that the scribes played an artistic role in the construction of this manuscript. We should think of the scribes not as poets but as curators. They collected various works from many different time periods and attempted to alter the content of the texts as little as possible. Changes primarily are made to the spellings of words, and words are not substituted to artificially make the text more consistent theologically or as a literary work. Their contribution to the manuscript is the arranging of these works; all five pieces of the manuscript are in conversation with one another. The scribes thought of the events,

images, characters, and landscapes as reimagined instances of purification from text to text. In each text, characters come into contact with monsters or monstrous individuals, and they seek to purify a place from the unclean presence of these creatures.

Dedicated to Richard Binkowski, my mentor and friend:

Sōð bið swicolos, sinc byð deorost,

gold, gumena gehwam; and gamol snoterost,

fyrngearum frod, se þe ær feala gebīdeð

[Truth is trickiest, treasure and gold is dearest

to all men, and the old man is wisest,

wintered through former years,

he who has experienced much]

- *Cotton Gnomes*

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FÆLSIAN: TO PURGE, TO PURIFY — LINKING THE TEXTS OF THE *BEOWULF MANUSCRIPT*

British Library Cotton Vitellius A.xv is famously known as the *Beowulf Manuscript*, and it is composed of five texts: *The Passion of Saint Christopher*, *The Wonders of the East*, *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, *Beowulf*, and *Judith.* As the manuscript's title suggests, *Beowulf* receives the most amount of attention, and it is often anthologized and treated as a separate work. Nevertheless, there are strong parallels among all the texts in the manuscript, and, recently, scholars have argued that this work is a single, unified whole. Additionally, in 2010, R.D. Fulk translated and presented the entire *Beowulf Manuscript* in one volume, and this edition is the very first to include every part of the manuscript alongside the more popular poem from which it gets its name.

In this project, I anticipate adding to an important ongoing conversation about *Beowulf*. The poem itself is a popular work, and many people read it in high school or in their early years of college. More recently, scholars have moved away from isolating the poem among the other manuscript pieces, and there is considerable interest among Anglo-Saxonists about what unites it. The way scholars think and write about the manuscript affects the way *Beowulf* is taught and understood. For example, before Tolkien wrote his famous essay, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* (1936), the poem was considered a kind of loose collection of heroic tales and digressions. Now that we understand more fully that the scribes working on the manuscript were actively curating it in different ways, it is important to think of *Beowulf* not just as a masterpiece

digression from otherwise lesser prose works, but as contributing to a certain idea that these people believed each text captured. The pieces of the *Beowulf Manuscript* are in conversation with one another, and it is important that we identify which themes unite the work in order to fully understand it.

I first came to this project in a rather unexpected way. While completing the coursework for my doctorate, I was encouraged to take a course on East Asian Religious Literature. I knew that I already wanted to write about *Beowulf* and the scribes who copied down the poem, but the readings for this course added a new level of complexity to my research. I was struck by the Shinto rituals of cleansing and the works of Mishima Yukio, who has a certain preoccupation with cleanliness and its link to spiritual purity. I saw an immediate connection between these rituals and various moments in the *Beowulf Manuscript*. I started to catalogue the various moments where cleansing occurred in the manuscript, and I realized that I had discovered a trend. Other scholars had laid the groundwork to show that the texts of this manuscript are indeed related in some way, but I wanted to refine the way we think about these stories. Even though monsters and monstrous individuals appear all throughout these pieces, there is an overarching human desire that is prevalent among the characters in the texts: the need for control, more specifically, the need to control through ritual cleansing. Moreover, there is a spiritual dimension to these works. Through the act of purging comes some knowledge and link with the divine. In the *Beowulf Manuscript*, the characters who act as purifiers are never far removed from God or some supernatural entities.

Two scribes worked on the manuscript, but nothing is known about their personal lives. We do not know their names or where they lived, and although there have been

many proposals for a location of origin, we cannot say conclusively that they belonged to one monastery or another. We also do not have any other examples of their handwriting in other documents; if they did transcribe other works, they did not survive. Their handwriting does give us one clue, however, about when they lived. We can reliably date their script to the 11th century, but no exact dates are known either pertaining to their lives or to the manuscript's composition. For our knowledge about these two individuals, known as Scribe A and Scribe B, we have to rely on what we know about trends among writers in Anglo-Saxon scriptoriums. We have evidence that other scribes worked in pairs, and that often a master would supervise his apprentice and proofread his work. Thus collaborative working was not an anomaly in this period. Scribe A copied three and a half texts: the surviving portion of *Christopher* (the first part is missing due to damage), *Wonders*, the *Letter of Alexander*, and *Beowulf* from lines 1 to 1942. He stops in the middle of a sentence with the word *scyran*, and Scribe B finishes the poem from exactly the point where Scribe A left off (1942-3184). The second scribe also wrote down *Judith* (which is also incomplete due to damage) and made corrections to the earlier texts.

For all we do not know about the scribes, we can positively say that they were not the original authors these five texts. *Christopher*, *Wonders*, and the *Letter of Alexander* are all copies of Latin texts that were translated by some earlier person into Old English. *Judith* is adapted from the Bible, and *Beowulf* comes from a variety of Germanic sources interspersed with Christian images, teachings, and references. By analyzing the kinds of mistakes these scribes made in transcribing the texts, it is clear that they were copying from other versions of the same stories. Their artistic input into the stories is virtually

nonexistent, and although there has been some debate about the exactly role these two played as actual composers of *Beowulf*, that view is largely seen as idiosyncratic today.

On the other hand, I disagree that the scribes played no artistic role in the construction of this manuscript. We should think of the scribes not as poets but as curators. They collected various works from many different time periods and attempted to alter the content of the texts as little as possible. Changes primarily are made to the spellings of words, and words are not substituted to artificially make the text more consistent theologically or as a literary work. Their contribution to the manuscript is the arranging of these works; all five pieces of the manuscript are in conversation with one another. The scribes thought of the events, images, characters, and landscapes as reimagined instances of purification from text to text. In each text, characters come into contact with monsters or monstrous individuals, and, more often than not, these monsters have human-like qualities. In *Christopher*,[1] the saint is a dog-headed giant from the race of *cenocephali*, a group of people who consume human flesh. In *Wonders*, we meet many monsters who have distorted human forms, such as the blemmyes, who have their faces in their chests. The narrator also relates tales of giant women made up of an assortment of animal body parts, and some creatures even resemble humankind closely, such as the Donestre, who use their likeness and their mastery of human language to trick their unsuspecting victims. In the *Letter of Alexander*, Alexander meets a group of giant men and women who guard a sacred grove of trees that can speak and predict the future. The Grendelkin from *Beowulf* are two trolls who have the form of a man and a woman, a son and a mother, and they grotesquely cause trouble for a group of Danes; they feud with

[1] From this point on I will refer to each text by shortened titles. Thus *The Passion of St. Christopher* becomes *Christopher*, the *Wonders of the East* becomes *Wonders*, and *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* becomes the *Letter of Alexander*.

them and consume their victims. Finally, in *Judith*, the heroine enters the camp of the monstrous Holofernes, a prideful king who intends to destroy the Israelites and rape Judith.

The *Beowulf Manuscript* is not just a mere bestiary or a book of monster sightings and stories. Each text deals with the monstrous in very different ways. While some monsters are entirely evil, others are benevolent. Saint Christopher is such an example, a reformed man-eater. *Wonders*, in fact, does not even have a central character; it is, rather, a travelogue featuring many different beasts, monstrous individuals, and strange places. *Judith* does not even have a traditional monster with distorted features and unnatural proportions. Holofernes, the antagonist of the poem, is an incorrigible drunk and an example of unweening pride. What unites these texts, instead, is the fact that they all deal with the management of the monstrous. Some creatures, like the Grendelkin, defile sacred places. Others, such as Christopher and the Trees of the Sun and the Moon, highlight a human character's pride and the inevitability of his death. Another set, such as the giant, chimera-like women and the picture of the blemmye from *Wonders*, threaten us with the threat of uncleanliness and ambiguity. The characters in these stories not only encounter the monstrous but also have to eliminate it, but the monstrous element in each text does not have to be exclusively a monster. In all of the texts, except *Wonders*, humans are punished for prideful behavior. Thus the threats do not just come from the monsters; instead, in each text, there is a threat of defilement, which can come in a number of forms: physical, spiritual, or emotional (having to do with pride). In terms of the physical kind of defilement, the monstrous people practice killing, the consuming of flesh, and overall gluttonous behavior. The Grendelkin kill and consume the Danes in

Hrothgar's mead hall, and the blemmye has its head in its stomach, a distorted blending of appetite and reason. This creature also feasts on humans. The spiritual defilement comes from various threats to the divine. Once again, the Grendelkin serve as an example here; they are at odds with the Christian God. But some of the spiritual threats are not exclusively Christian in nature. For example, Alexander enters a sacred grove only after he complies with a set of rules set forth by the guardian of the place. Similarly, in *Wonders*, there is a priest who guards temples to pagan gods and a temple to the sun, and he keeps the place pure from any threat of excess (he, in fact, follows a strict diet). Finally, there are emotional or, perhaps, "behavioral" threats that come in the form of pride. King Dagnus (from *Christopher*), Alexander, Beowulf, and Holofernes all suffer some consequence due to their pride and overreaching actions. While Dagnus' behavior is corrected by Christopher, a monster, the others suffer from premature deaths.

The manuscript is a collection of texts that depict ritualized attempts at purification. These rituals are not necessarily rooted in history, but they are more archetypal in nature. Like any ritual, these moments of purification remove the characters from the "ordinary," they help these individuals come to some deeper understanding of the world and of themselves. In the introduction to his book *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes that encounters with monsters prompt self-reflection and examination of cultural and individual values:

> Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history

> and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self knowledge, *human* knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside. (20)

Often in the texts, purity is achieved through the killing of something monstrous, and the character becomes associated with the divine and gains wisdom. Dagnus kills Christopher, but he is able to cure his own blindness, both literally and figuratively, with a concoction made from the saint's blood and the soil he was martyred on. The king converts to Christianity and gives the religion official sanction in his kingdom. Alexander, after a brutal journey through India where he must fend off monsters constantly from his army, hears the wisdom of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon, who explain that despite his conquests, he will die young. Alexander pridefully laments that he could not have accomplished more. Finally, Beowulf cleanses Hrothgar's mead hall from the threat of the Grendelkin, and the old king gives the hero a speech warning against pride and reminding him of the inevitability of death. In Beowulf's old age, he does not heed these words; he fights a dragon, who mortally wounds him and reflects on the uselessness of wisdom to his only loyal retainer Wiglaf.

In this dissertation, I will demonstrate the kinds of connections that exist among the texts of the *Beowulf Manuscript*. I will not only argue that these parallels have to do with ritual purity and purification, but that the scribes intended to link these texts together because of this common theme. The scribes curated these texts not just because they all had monsters; there are plenty of monster stories and references in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. This manuscript is unique because it highlights how to deal with the monstrous. While the scribes were certainly not the authors of these texts, it is hard to

imagine that a manuscript that shares so many common elements was randomly compiled or simply compiled by scribes who had no knowledge of what they were reading.

In Chapter 1, I outline the ways that other scholars have tried to link the manuscript and explain the origin and place of each text in the manuscript. I begin by briefly describing the debates about the dating of the manuscript and the dating of *Beowulf*. Even though there is not complete consensus, preferring one date of composition over another does not affect my argument that the scribes curated manuscript texts that share common elements in portraying the monstrous. Next, I explain the origins of and the scribal changes to each text. Despite the fact that these texts differ linguistically and in date of composition, each has a preoccupation with encountering a threatening outsider (or outsiders) and desiring to purify that "other" in some way. From these similarities, I argue that the scribes were acting as curators of these texts, placing these works in conversation with one another and updating the words to fit their audience's needs. In advocating for this interpretation of the scribes' role in producing the manuscript, I reject Kevin Kiernan's assertion that the scribes acted as authors in some cases, especially on portions of *Beowulf*. On the other hand, I reject Leonard Neidorf's recent assertion that the scribes were mere copyists and had no creative input in the manuscript's creation.

In Chapter 2, I provide the linguistic and contextual evidence for interpreting the link among these manuscripts as having to do with purification. In terms of my method, I first read through the manuscript to find words that stood out to me as obviously dealing with purification based on the first three criteria. Next, I identified common themes that I saw among these words. I returned to the manuscript to find scenes that I felt matched

these scenes I found. For example, the burning of Heorot, mentioned in the beginning of *Beowulf,* does not immediately strike the reader as a scene having to deal with purification. It does, however, connect to the themes of fire and feuding. Using this method I have tried to compile a list of words that genuinely had something in common with each other. I also wanted to include as many words as I felt were relevant in the context of purification.

Finally, I point out that there is considerable variety of purification words in the list. We should think of the scribes not as poets but as curators. They collected various works from many different time periods and attempted to alter the content of the texts as little as possible. Changes primarily are made to the spellings of words, and words are not substituted to artificially make the text more consistent theologically or as a literary work. Neidorf documents this tendency in depth in his study *The Transmission of Beowulf: Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior* (2017). Moreover, I proposed that the scribes thought of the events, images, characters, and landscapes as reimagined instances of purification from text to text. All five pieces of the manuscript are in conversation with one another, and they all contain unique words of cleanliness and uncleanliness.

In my next chapter, I address how images of clean and unclean people and places, along with the rituals of purification, help emphasize two other major themes of the manuscript: pride and death. First, I give some context to the role of purification. There are instances of healing, conversion, buring, poisoning, and images of light that emphasize either a character's purity, on one hand, or a character's defilement, on the other. These actions and images also have religious connotations, and Dagnus' healing and subsequent conversion is perhaps the most obvious example of this kind of religious

cleansing—he literally and figuratively is cured of his blindness. When he experiences this miracle, which is brought about by Christopher's death, he chooses to become a Christian and is instantly cured of his excessive pride in attempting to rid his kingdom of Christianity. There are also people and places that are pure or impure. When these people or places are encountered, a character tries to cleanse them and, through this act, gains some sort of knowledge. This wisdom is either an acknowledgement of the ephemeral nature of life or serves as a warning against pride. I argue that these acts of purification are representations of ritual (though not historical ritual) because they are put in a religious context, and the purifier gains some kind of wisdom through the experience with the profane. This interpretation adds to a discuss among other scholars, such as Andy Orchard and Kathryn Powell, who argue that the manuscript texts are linked by themes of pride and encountering the Other.

In the final chapter, I discuss purification in terms of gender. I argue that although there are female characters in the text who are either killed for their uncleanliness or for the ways in which they act violently, they are not killed because of their gender. In fact, the characters who purify are more concerned with whether creatures are pure or impure; gender is never given as a reason for purifying someone in the manuscript. Furthermore, the deaths of these characters are parallel to many other instances of purification in the manuscript. Although there are many examples of women who act in ways that are more traditionally considered to be masculine, such as killing and feuding, these actions need not always be considered negative. Judith, for example, kills Holofernes, and she receives divine permission to do so and is celebrated by her people. Her example strongly parallels Beowulf, who also receives divine favor and is given praise for his killing of the

Grendelkin. I suggest that this kind of reading is one of the benefits of interpreting the manuscript as being linked by purification rituals—it provides a larger context in which we can interpret specific scenes in the texts. I also end the chapter with the suggestion that this new perspective may add to the discussion of the role of the peaceweaver. Nevertheless, the overwhelming number of examples of women who are killed in the manuscript has nothing to do with their gender. Instead, their behavior and associations with unclean creatures makes them targets for purification.

At the end of this dissertation, I will offer some reasons why I think the scribes may have been drawn to this theme and how their role as curators can change the way we think about the composition of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. With the release of Fulk's translation of the entire manuscript, new attention can be given to texts that have been largely ignored in the context of *Beowulf* criticism. As these new texts gain attention, it also shapes the way we read *Beowulf*. While *Beowulf* is not just a collection of monster tales and heroic speeches out into verse, the *Beowulf Manuscript* is, similarly, not just a register of monster tales. The overarching theme of the manuscript is the management of monsters, in particular, purifying them and gaining some knowledge from the strange encounters.

CHAPTER 1: THE SCRIBES AS CURATORS

The scribes working on the *Beowulf Manuscript* were not authors in the same sense that they composed any of the texts in new and original ways. Their main function was curatorial. Just as a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art might arrange certain pieces around an idea or historical moment in art history, the scribes brought together these texts in conversation with one another mainly around the theme of purification. Each text has a central conflict that pits a human against some threatening force, whether it be monsters or monstrous individuals. In this chapter I plan to show that each text, though it has have distinct differences in terms of language and history of composition and origin, has a preoccupation with encountering a threatening outsider (or outsiders) and desiring to purify that "other" in some way. First, I will address some important questions about the manuscript in terms of the scribes' input. All five texts existed before the scribes composed the manuscript, but questions about dating and the degree of authorial control are fiercely debated issues. There are virtues and vices to each critical interpretation, and while critics such as Andy Orchard and Kathryn Powell have all seen trends among the various pieces of the manuscript, I will show that thinking of the scribes as curators provides a number of benefits to *Beowulf* scholarship. In the context of the debate about dating the manuscript, my view does not rely upon accepting a specific timeframe. That the scribes were curators had nothing to do with when they would have been performing this activity. Likewise, whatever view one may take of the scribes' authorial input, my analysis is a middle ground between the two extremes. One on hand, Kevin Kiernan prefers a late 11th century dating and assigns a more creative role to the scribes; on the other, Leonard Neidorf's recent analysis points to the scribes' behavior as

copyists normalizing a text for a late West Saxon-speaking audience. I argue for a more middle of the road approach; the scribes certainly had a hand in changing the text, but their project was mainly organizational than authorial, and their input was more artistic in nature than that of a mere copyist. Finally, thinking of the scribes in this way allows a new method of interpreting the manuscript through the ritual of purification.

Dating the Manuscript

Questions about the manuscript and the scribes' input revolves around several important issues. First, the historical question, which primarily surrounds the composition of *Beowulf*, is a long and often times convoluted debate. My work in this chapter will not solve the dating problem once and for all, and I hope to show that despite the range of opinion, the behavior of the scribes as curators does not rely on accepting one specific period of composition of the actual texts. First, one of the most compelling arguments for a later date comes from Kiernan's *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*. In the first chapter, he criticizes those who date the poem from the 9th or 10th centuries, a time of ruthless Viking invasion: "If it is hard to conceive of an Anglo-Saxon poet in these centuries who would have composed *Beowulf*, it is just as hard to conceive of a scriptoria throughout these centuries that would repeatedly engage scribes to copy a poem praising the people who were ravaging their country" (21). Kiernan later argues for an extremely late composition date for parts of *Beowulf* during the reign of Cnut (1016-1035), but this view is contested.[2] If the centuries of the Viking invasions can be successfully ruled out as a impossible range of dates when the poem could have been composed, there are

[2] Andy Orchard elaborates on this debate in *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*: "More recent attempts by Kiernan to bolster his own arguments have led to spirited rejoinders by both Gerritsen and Dumville: after much head (and some light), the battle lines remain essentially where they were before" (20).

certainly scholars who argue that the poem could have preceded those years.[3] If it is implausible to believe that Alfred's court would have rejected *Beowulf* for perceived Danish sympathies, it may be just as implausible to think that English audiences would have been receptive to the poem in the early 11th century.[4]

Thus the actual date of composition for *Beowulf* is highly contested and not likely to be resolved any time soon. Nevertheless, the *Beowulf Manuscript* is easier to date, and there seems to be little doubt that the writing took place sometime during the 11th century as the handwriting of Scribe A corresponds to that time period.[5] Although Scribe B's handwriting can be dated as an earlier style (10th century), Andy Orchard, in *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, explains that scribal collaboration was quite common: "This kind of combination of scribal hands seems therefore not unusual for the period; much more striking is the fact that scribe B of the *Beowulf*-manuscript appears to have taken over in mid-line and perhaps even in mid-word" (22).[6] Thus the manuscript is a late Anglo-Saxon artifact created by at least two individuals from the 11th century. The first scribe was likely a student or apprentice, and he wrote in a contemporary 11th century

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[3] Robert Bjork and Anita Obermeier provide a useful example of such a scholar in their chapter "Date, Provenance, Author, Audiences" from *A Beowulf Handbook*: "[Dorothy Whitelock] was convinced that the epic must come from before 835, when Viking raids began in full force with ensuing deep Anglo-Saxon resentment of Scandinavians" (20). Further evidence for an earlier dating can be justified by appealing to anti-Danish sentiment during the reign of Æthelred (978-1013). In the year 1002, Danish men were attacked and killed in Oxford during the St. Brice's Day Massacre. See Nicholas J. Higham's and Martin J. Ryan's *The Anglo-Saxon World* for a full account of St. Brice's Day Massacre (343-8).

[4] To further complicate the matter, Alfred's court cannot entirely be ruled out as a possible origin for *Beowulf* either. Emily V. Thornbury, in *Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England*, notes that his court was known for its acceptance of foreign ideas and literature: "We know from a variety of sources that Alfred invited scholars from many countries to Wessex, as a means of reinvigorating national culture. His grandson Athelstan was equally receptive to foreigners [....] Given this openness to foreign influence, it seems to me not unlikely that courtly poetry as we commonly define it was introduced to English courts under the ægis of Alfred and his descendants" (93). Thornbury also refers, in an endnote, to the helpful introduction to Michael Lapidge's and Simon Keynes' *Alfred the Great*.

[5] See Orchard's *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (20). He also cites David N. Dumville's "Beowulf Come Lately" (63).

[6] For more information see Neil Ker's *Catalogue of Manuscript Containing Anglo-Saxon* and Kiernan's *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, especially pp. 120-70.

script. For whatever reason, the second scribe took over finishing the manuscript (the second half of *Beowulf* and the entirety of *Judith*) and proofreading it, and his handwriting is that of an older professional. The dating of *Beowulf*, or even the manuscript for that matter, does not affect my assertion that the scribes worked as curators of selected material. It does not seem that an earlier or later date would put this possibility out of bounds, and the dating of *Beowulf* should not affect an interpretation about how the scribes organized the material, since the poem most certainly existed in some form before they transcribed it. As for the other pieces of the manuscript, their origins can be traced to Latin texts that gained popularity in England, and the dates of origin of these pieces do not pertain to the curatorial habits of these scribes. Furthermore, as Orchard points out, scribes working together on a manuscript was not uncommon for the 11th century. We have evidence from other manuscripts, the *Blickling Homilies*, in particular, that more than one scribe composed the work.[7] Questions about the date of *Beowulf* play an important part in the text's criticism and interpretation, but it is only one piece of a larger whole. The manuscript itself belongs to a certain era of late Anglo-Saxon history composed for a different audience than the intended audiences of all the texts separately. Dating each particular piece of the manuscript is a separate project in its own right, and one that is fraught with many difficulties. Yet the scribes' behavior as organizers of material along a certain theme seems immune from any concerns about dating. Books from this era are mainly compilations, and it is not hard to imagine that part of the project of a scribe was to consider what material might fit together in an appropriate context.

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[7] See Orchard's *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (22).

Scribal Changes

A more complicated question about the scribes has to do with their input into the manuscript and their level of creativity when adapting the sources. There are, for example, changes made to each text that has a Latin parallel. Orchard has an invaluable analysis of these changes in the first chapter of his book *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript*; I will briefly outline a number of his major findings accompanied by other recent works of scholarship. Before I do, however, it must be kept in mind that the scribes were working from different templates, and it is not clear that they even played the role of translators as well as transcribers. Even more problematic is determining their level of creative input as authors. In fact, many scholars think that that possibility is unlikely. As we might expect in any translation or transcription, there are errors and changes to words to better help the audience understand something that was written in a different dialect or time period. R. D. Fulk elaborates: "The texts of the Nowell Codex must have been copied from a written exemplar, since they show examples of the sorts of copying errors that result when a scribe misreads a written text" (ix-x).[8] Leonard Neidorf's recent study, *The Transmission of Beowulf: Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior*, accounts for both scribes' tendencies, but I will discuss his findings later. For now, I want to address major changes in content in each piece of the manuscript.

The Passion of St. Christopher

First, *The Passion of St. Christopher* (along with *Judith*) is difficult to assess in terms of comparison to Latin sources due to its incomplete nature. We do not know what

[8] See the introduction to *The Beowulf Manuscript* (2010).

came at the beginning of of the tale and how the scribe may have altered it. We have another Old English text of the saint's life in a damaged manuscript (*The Life of St. Christopher*), and the tone of the two is different, especially at the end. Orchard citing another commentator, John Pickles, elaborates:

> The first part of [*The Life of St. Christopher's*] closing peroration, finishing with the familiar words 'ever without end' (*a butan ende*), looks more suited to a homiletic text [...] while *The Passion of St. Christopher* goes on to finish on a note more particularly suited to a reading audience, leading John Pickles to suggest that the two texts are intended for different purposes: one for the pulpit, the other for private meditation. (13)[9]

Despite this change at the end, much of the *Passion* text shares common elements with the stories of Christopher's life in other sources, namely the appearance of the Christian hero as a giant, dog-headed monster. His appearance in the *Beowulf Manuscript* matches his description in *The Old English Martyrology*: "*of þære þeode þær men habbað hundes heafod*, [....] *ond his loccas wæron ofer gemet side, ond his eagon scinon swa leohte swa morgensteorra, ond his teþ wæron swa scearpe swa eofores tuxas"* [from the land where men have dog's heads, [....] and his hair was amply long, and his eyes shone as light does from the morning star, and his teeth were as sharp as a boar's tusks] (90). Because *The Passion of St. Christopher* is fragmentary, scholars have had to look outside the manuscript to fill in the gaps in the story. Notably, King Dagnus, the antagonist who passionately tries to kill Christopher, refers to the saint as having a monstrous appearance. Orchard elaborates: "[E]ven in the mutilated text in the *Beowulf*-manuscript,

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[9] Orchard references Pickles' dissertation "Studies of the Prose Texts of the *Beowulf* Manuscript" (23-4) in a footnote.

he is described as ‘twelve fathoms tall’ (*twelf fæðma lang*) and ‘the worst of wild beasts’ (*wyrresta wildeor*), and there seems little doubt that the same dog-headed saint is depicted” (14). Christopher, however, is also a “halgan man” (2), and when Dagnus commands people to bring a piece of wood as tall as the saint, he is again referred to as a man (by the narrator): “[H]et bringan unmætre micelnesse treow Þæt wæs efn-heah Þæs halgan mannes lengo” [He ordered them to bring a most immense tree that was as high as the holy man’s height] (6). This tale is unique among the texts of the manuscript because the protagonist is also the beast. We are certainly meant to sympathize with Christopher, not Dagnus. Despite the fact that the king is the antagonist, we cannot help feeling a bit unnerved by a giant beast in the form of a man who defies death and speaks of his new God and eternal life. A few brief moments in *Beowulf* are parallel to this scene. The reader is put in the perspective, suddenly, of Grendel as he is about to attack the Danes and again when he is in the midst of his wrestling match: “*Þa his mod ahlog;*
mynte þæt he gedælde, ær þon dæg cwome, atol aglæca, anra gehwylces lif wið lice, þa him alumpen wæs wistfylle wen” [Then his mind rejoiced that he intended that he would part life from body before the day came; now the expectation of an abundance of food came upon him] (730-4) and “*he on mode wearð forht on ferhðe; no þy ær fram meahte. Hyge wæs him hinfus, wolde on heolster fleon, secan deofla gedræg*” [He became full of fear in mind and in spirit; none the sooner might he escape from there. He was eager in his mind to get away; he would flee in darkness to seek the company of devils] (753-6). The second scene is Beowulf’s entrance to the mere, in which we are given Grendel’s mother’s perspective of the Geat looking in: “*Sona þæt onfunde se ðe floda begong heorogifre beheold hund missera, grim ond grædig, þæt þær gumena sum ælwihta eard*

ufan cunnode" [At once, she who had guarded the region of the waters for fifty years, a sword-glutton, grim, and greedy, discovered that a certain one of the men there was looking into the alien creatures' home from above] (1497-1500). The poet uses these moments to emphasize Beowulf's shifting role in the poem. He is initially the guard but later becomes the invader; he is the one watching, then becomes the one watched. They also reveal Grendel's and his mother's motivations in human terms. Grendel is eager for bloodshed and frightened by Beowulf's power. The mother is trying to protect her home from an invader. This same shift of perspective occurs in the Christopher story. Christopher is given a voice, and we hear his prayers to God and His answers to them. There is also dialogue between Christopher and Dagnus, but it is the narrator who reveals what goes on in the king's mind: "*Se cyningc þa wende þæt ealle þa strælas on his lic-haman gefæstnode wæron*" [The king then turned it over that all of the arrows were fastened in his [Christopher's] body] (6). The narrator in both these selections is omniscient: he can see into the minds of everyone. These moments in which the perspective shifts link the monsters and the humans. We are meant to think of their concerns in human terms, and especially in Christopher's case, we are meant to relate to him from a Christian perspective. The authors of these texts show that the monsters' motivations can be understood as human desires.

The Wonders of the East

Next, Fulk's claim that the *Beowulf Manuscript*'s *The Wonders of the East* is "rather faithful to the Latin, with only minor omissions and errors" (xi) is a bit misleading. There are a number of significant differences that range from textual omissions to different representations of the monsters in the illustrations. We can

compare *The Wonders of the East* to another work, of the same title, from a different source, the Tiberius Manuscript. Orchard explains how substantial the omissions from the *Beowulf Manuscript's Wonders* are: "The Tiberius Manuscript preserves a slightly fuller version of the Old English text than the *Beowulf*-manuscript [...] there are sufficient differences between the texts to show that they did not derive directly from a common ancestor" (20). He identifies five more "wonders" in the Tiberius version than in the *Beowulf* one. There is yet another omission that occurs at the end of the account; in the Tiberius Manuscript, a character named Mambres "raises his dead brother's spirit from the grave, and hears him offer a stark warning of his future plight" (20). Orchard indicates that this last tale is unique to the Tiberius version, but it also offers further insight into the role scribes played in general as curators of material from other writers. The two Old English *Wonders* are also different from the Latin parallel sources in the beginning of the texts. The Latin *Wonders* begin as letters, similar to the format of *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*. In those texts, a writer sends an account of marvelous lands and creatures to Rome.[10] By contrast, the *Wonders* from the *Beowulf Manuscript* begins as if the narrator is speaking directly to us, indicating some fact about the East: "*Seo land-bunis is on fruman from Antimolime þæm lande*" [The settlement is on the beginning of the land Antimolima] (16). Thus in terms of content, the *Beowulf Manuscript Wonders* stands out in contrast to the Latin parallel sources and the Tiberius Manuscript version, and these differences point to the variety of versions of this text in Anglo-Saxon England.

[10] See especially Orchard's analysis on pages 22-7. He also references Ann Knock's unpublished dissertation "Wonders of the East: a Synoptic Edition of the Letter of Pharasmenes and the Old English and Old Picard Translations" (1982) extensively.

Furthermore, the Tiberius and *Beowulf Manuscript* texts have different pictures illustrating the wonders. Fulk offers a somewhat dismissive account of the *Beowulf Manuscript* drawings: "The drawings are not exceptionally skilled by Anglo-Saxon standards, but neither are they artless [....] But the even more numerous illustrations in the Tiberius manuscript show considerably greater skill" (xii). The quality of the drawings may fall more comfortably into the realm of subjective judgement, yet Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim spend a considerable amount of time examining the differences between the illustrations in each Anglo-Saxon manuscript. The creatures in both the Old English versions of the *Wonders* are uniquely illustrated because they break out of their frames in meaningful ways: "The images in both Old English manuscripts grasp, break, step out of their frames; in the Vitellius manuscript [or *Beowulf Manuscript*], frameless figures contest with text for space on the page" (31).[11] One example is the monstrous figure of the Donestre, a siren-like creature who lures his victims to his island and eats them. In Figure 1, included in this chapter, the Donestre speaks to a person, which is part of his trap. He steps out of the frame with his right foot and rests his left one on the border. He is also lifting up a dismembered body part, an action that Mittman and Kim point out is unique to the *Beowulf Manuscript*.[12] The figure in the Tiberius manuscript also steps out of his frame. In Figure 2, the Donestre's trick is presented in an almost comic-book like panel. In the top image, he converses with a man and is fully in the frame. In the bottom right part of the picture, he moves his left foot out of bounds while he is attacking his victim. Finally, in the bottom left, he cries while

[11] Mittman and Kim's *Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript* (2013) has several sections dedicated to the illustrations of the "wonders," including color prints of the Tiberius and *Beowulf* manuscripts.
[12] See *Cannibalism in High Medieval English Literature* (41-4).

looking at the man's head, the final ritual of his cannibalistic behavior, and he has returned to the boundaries of the frame. Clearly, the scribe has linked the violent act with the action of stepping out of the frame to heighten the feeling that this creature has a threatening nature. By contrast, Figure 3 is from a later Latin version of the *Wonders*, and the monster's actions are all within the frame. Mittman and Kim conclude, however, that the images in the *Beowulf Manuscript* are unique among the *Wonders* texts because they have the largest number of characters breaking from the boundaries, especially the female figures:

> We suggest that such transgressive insistence might be epitomized in the representation of these female figures; however insistently their 'unworthy' bodies are sealed, they remain, and remain to trouble any reading of this text which attempts to foreclose them. We also suggest that it is in the Vitellius [*Beowulf Manuscript*] version of the representations of these figures that we can witness most powerfully that resistance to foreclosure. (31)

The *Beowulf Manuscript* scribes created a unique representation of the creatures, and while their figures generally move out of the frame in keeping with the Tiberius manuscript version, they do not simply conform to the other illustrations; and as recent studies have suggested, the depictions heighten the anxiety around these "inconceivable beasts," to borrow a term from Mittman and Kim.

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[13] A close up of Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, f. 103v from the British Library's online gallery: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_vitellius_a_xv_f103v

[14] A close up of Cotton MS Tiberius B.v., f. 83v from the British Library's online gallery: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_tiberius_b_v!1_f083v

[15]

The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle

The next section of the manuscript is *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*. This text is the only Old English *Letter* we have; however, there are Latin versions that we have that the scribes must have been familiar with in some capacity. Certainly, the figure of Alexander the Great was well known throughout the medieval era[16] and had a mixed reception in Anglo-Saxon England. Orchard explains that portrayals of Alexander tend to be either overwhelmingly positive, emphasizing his adventures and military

[15] A close up of MS Bodley 614, fol. 43v from the Bodley Library online gallery: http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet/s/hx0r42

[16] See George Cary's *The Medieval Alexander* (2009) for a broad account of the representation of Alexander in the Middle Ages.

achievements, or negative, highlighting his pride and *hubris* (117-120).[17] In terms of scribal changes, Omar Khalaf, in his article "The Old English *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*: Monsters and *Hybris* in the Service of Exemplarity," provides an overview:

> In fact, the *Letter* is substantially faithful to the narrative structure of the source-text, but it does not limit itself to a *verbatim* translation. On the contrary, the translator submitted the source-text to a twofold work of re-elaboration. On one hand, it aims at adapting the *Epistola* to the Anglo-Saxon linguistic and, more generally, cultural constraints. On the other hand, and in a more subtle way, it affects the role of Alexander and his army play in the narration. This determines a shift in the system of meanings which may suggest a function of the *Letter* that is quite different from the proper one of the source-text. (2)

Thus there are three major differences from the Latin *Letter*: the character of Alexander is elaborated on,[18] there is a difference in language and tone (giving it a more regional Anglo-Saxon character),[19] and the ending of the Old English text terminates with Alexander's discovery that he will die before he reaches home. Orchard stresses that this feature of the ending is unique among the manuscripts and forces the reader to think about the character of Alexander in a way that is different from the other texts; it emphasizes his mortality and his negative character: "The effect of this is to focus attention firmly on the character of the king himself [....] Alexander exudes what in the Latin is a touching pride in the appearance of his men, and in the Old English is a

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[17] Orchard dedicates an entire chapter to Alexander in *Pride and Prodigies*: "The Alexander-Legend in Anglo-Saxon England" pp. 116-139.
[18] See Orchard's *Critical Companion to Beowulf* (25) and Khalaf's article (3-6).
[19] See Orchard's *Pride and Prodigies* (133) and Khalaf's article (2-3).

disturbing arrogance in his own esteem" (135-6). The translator changes the tone of the Latin original from a praise of the great king to a warning about pride and overreaching. Alexander's reminder of his own mortality echoes throughout the rest of the manuscript: a prideful Beowulf dies when facing the dragon in his old age, and Holofernes, believing himself secure in victory, dies by the hands of Judith while he is drunk from the celebrations.

Furthermore, the *Letter* continues the theme that links monster and man in the *Beowulf Manuscript*. The creatures from the east, in both the *Wonders* and the *Letter*, are explicitly human in many cases. Often the narrator of the *Wonders* introduces the various creatures by saying that they are people with some exaggerated feature. Some have shining eyes, others have enormous ears, and others are giant and hairy. In the second text, Alexander encounters many of the same wonders, and his encounters with them are not always negative. For example, a ten foot tall bishop leads him to the trees of the sun and the moon. What is striking about *Beowulf* in this respect is that the monsters are always the enemies, while in every other section of the manuscript, only some of them are evil or bad-intentioned. By examining the physical traits of the monsters in each text, we have our most superficial comparisons. So many of these creatures are giant, have shining eyes, are flesh-eaters, and live in harsh environments. More significantly, they are part human, a characteristic that forces us to consider them differently than the account of the phoenix, for example, found in the Exeter Book. There the bird is clearly an animal, and it only has a connection to human life symbolically. In the *Beowulf Manuscript*, the monsters are often literally part human, and their concerns and motivations are what make them so unique. Admittedly, they all could be interpreted allegorically as well, but

that type of interpretation may not be fully warranted in a text where no explanation of what they represent is provided or alluded to. What we find instead are portrayals of creatures that live among humans. They are perhaps no different to the Anglo-Saxon mind than a camel would be to them.[20] Moreover, the humans in the manuscript often act in monstrous ways. Orchard elaborates, "The way that Alexander [...] can be depicted as a monstrous figure of pride, a monster-slayer who, in Christian eyes, is every bit as outlandish and inhumane as the creatures he fights, is surely instructive in considering *Beowulf* in the context of the manuscript which contains it" (139). Surely this depiction of Alexander can be applied to King Dagnus, Beowulf, and Holofernes, all examples of prideful rulers. I will return to this theme in Chapter Three.

Beowulf

Beowulf is the most difficult of all five texts to comment on. As I have shown earlier with the dating controversy, scholarly opinion on the text varies widely. This fact extends to discussions of the poem's sources, analogues, and possible manuscript variants. So far, no one has found another story of Beowulf, although other characters such as Hrothgar, Finn, Scyld Scefing, and Hygelac all are referenced in other texts. Scholars have also found parallels in Vergil's *Aeneid*, at least two Norse sagas (*The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* and *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*), and the Bible. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine if the scribes made any drastic changes to *Beowulf*, though there is consensus that they must have been copying from a template.[21] There is also a

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[20] Mittman and Kim have an excellent point in this regard: "Indeed, a camel would have been no more familiar in Anglo-Saxon England than an Onocentaur, and both would have been known only through the Bible, hagiographies, geographies, encyclopedias, and traveler's tales, like this text and like the *Letter of Alexander*, bound with it, which recounts the two thousand camels the conqueror has in his retinue" (13).

[21] See Orchard's *Pride and Prodigies* (1-4) and *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (12-23) for a summary of these findings, Kiernan's *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (especially Chapter 2 pp. 65-170) for a

wealth of material concerning this topic,[22] but as we cannot know what exactly the scribes might have changed, we cannot comment authoritatively about how they may have approached this poem in a unique manner. Later I will comment on an idiosyncratic view (put forth by Kiernan) that the Scribe B actively wrote portions of *Beowulf* while he was copying the rest of the manuscript.

Beowulf's popularity during the Anglo-Saxon era is also a the topic of much debate. Kiernan is optimistic that the poem enjoyed great success in the 11th century. He asserts: "[I]t is worth suggesting now that if the *Beowulf* MS was at the start of its history a separate codex, it enjoyed a particular popularity at the time it was copied. It indicates, surely, that *Beowulf* was understood and appreciated in the early 11th century" (71). Kiernan's argument is not without some merit; perhaps the most obvious example of *Beowulf*'s popularity is the opening of *Andreas* that mimics the now famous opening of the poem. Mary Clayton, in her book *Old English Poems of Christ and His Saints,* explains, "[T]he *Andreas* poet seems to have known *Beowulf* and may have drawn inspiration from it for the opening of his own poem and perhaps for such features as the sea voyage or the description of the flood overcoming the Mermedonians" (xviii). Fulk is less optimistic, and he comments on the poem's "obscurity" by appealing to paleographic evidence: the scribes made many spelling mistakes when copying the text (xxv). Even more pronounced is the blending of pagan and Christian references in such an explicit way, a technique that is not common for Old English poems. The poem must have been known in some capacity, and perhaps it even enjoyed popularity among a small audience

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fuller account of the history of the manuscript, and Neidorf's *The Transmission of Beowulf* for the most recent account of the scribal behavior.

[22] Theodore M. Andersson's chapter "Sources and Analogues" in *A Beowulf Handbook* (125-148) is an excellent source, and he provides an outline of the dominant views about *Beowulf's* sources dating back to the 1850s.

of scribes at one point. Given that the poem survives in only one copy, it could not have had lasting success, but this does not preclude the possibility, put forth by Kiernan, that the poem existed as a separate manuscript at one point.

Judith

Finally, *Judith* is another fragmentary piece, and we do not know just how much longer the poem may have been. *Judith* is the story of a woman who tricks her way into the tent of Holofernes, the general of a force that is attacking her people. After he becomes drunk, she cuts off his head after obtaining permission from God. Then she uses it to embolden her people. The Israelites fight off the Assyrians and gain victory from God. Both Orchard and Fulk identify a Latin source for the poem and are in agreement that the poet, unfortunately another anonymous person, took many liberties while translating. Fulk summarizes the difficulty of finding the corresponding sources: "The fragmentary *Judith* is a very free rendering of portions of the deuterocanonical book of Judith [....] Precisely which Latin version the poet used cannot be determined with certainty, but undeniably he made use of a version resembling the Vulgate (xxii).[23] There are two important concerns about what changes the scribes may have made to the poem. The first has to do with its belonging to the manuscript at all. Kiernan points out that the last page of *Beowulf* used to be the last page of the manuscript. He argues that the evidence of wear and tear and the scorch marks from a fire indicate that *Judith* was added on later. Also, the preceding poem ends with space to spare, a detail suggesting that *Judith* was an afterthought. He provides two possibilities for its inclusion:

[23] Orchard continues along the same thread in *Pride and Prodigies* (4-12).

> The early modern transcript of the closing lines in the bottom margin of fol. 206v, and the manner in which the *Judith* fragment was added to the Nowell Codex, are demonstrable facts, both of which support the theory that *Judith* was taken from its original codex in early modern times [....] The alternative is that *Judith* was already a fragment when pulled from its original codex, but unless there is real evidence of this there is little point in accepting it. (162)

Responding to Kiernan in the negative, Peter J. Lucas engages in an analysis of the word endings in the article "The Place of Judith in the Beowulf-Manuscript." Lucas suggests that there is not sufficient evidence to show that the poem does not belong to the manuscript, and evidence concerning its "separateness" is circumstantial, not entirely conclusive. His article is mainly an overview of these different views, but he does try to present positive proof that the poem does belong to the manuscript; he analyzes the scribal copying of *io* endings instead of the more common *eo* endings: "In other words, I suggest that the *Beowulf*-manuscript is a compilation based on two collections, one containing *Judith* and *Christopher*, from which the io-spellings had been eliminated, and one comprising *Marvels*, *Alexander's Letter*, and *Beowulf*, in which io-spellings were spellings were still relict" (474). The absence of *io* endings in *Judith* and *Christopher* suggest that parts of the manuscript were copied from an original source in a Merican dialect but the endings were changed by Scribe B to *eo* endings as he was transcribing. As is the case with the other parts of the manuscript, the scribes were certainly transcribing from other *Judith* sources. The meter changes and the various word endings suggest that the pieces of the manuscript must have at one time existed separately.

Interestingly enough, Lucas does not go so far as Kenneth Sisam, an earlier scholar who argued that there is a link among all the parts of the manuscript, and that the *Beowulf Manuscript* is necessarily a book organized around stories of monsters. Lucas does admit, however, that the work was put together carefully: "Whether or not the manuscript was intended as a 'Liber de Monstris', as suggested by Sisam, there can be no doubt that considerable planning went into its compilation" (464).

Without a doubt, *Judith* raises many concerns about the original ordering of the manuscript, and there has been debate about what the alternative orderings might have looked like. Although this debate is important in one area of *Beowulf* studies, it does not have much bearing on my argument. I agree with Lucas that *Judith* belongs with the rest of the texts, but the ordering of them is of no great significance. The scribes curated around a certain idea, and even if we randomized the order of the texts we would still be able to see the theme of purification clearly.

A Refutation of Kiernan: The Scribes Were not Authors

Even though we cannot know how much the scribes changed each individual part of the manuscript, it is reasonable to believe that they had some level of creative input. Anglo-Saxon poets often changed the original texts that they worked from, and a major example of that practice comes from the famous story of Cædmon. Bede recounts how the brother received divine inspiration and sang a song of creation (which Bede paraphrases). Later, when the superiors of the monastery want to verify that Cædmon actually has a holy gift, they ask him to put to verse various stories of the Bible:

> *At ipse cuncta quae audiendo discere poterat rememorando secum et quasi mundum animal ruminando in carmen dulcissimum convertebat,*

> *suaviusque resonando doctores suos vicissim auditores sui faciebat. Canebat autem de creatione mundi et origine humani generis et tota Genesis historia de egressu Israel ex Aegypto et ingressu in terram repomissionis, de aliis plurimis sacrae Scripturae historiis*

[But he himself thought over all which he was able to hear and to remember, and, like a clean animal chewing on something, he converted it into the sweetest song, and, by singing the same material, he would make his teachers his listeners in turn. Moreover, he sang of the creation of the world, the origin of the race of humankind, all of the history of Genesis from the exiting of Israel from Egypt and entering into the Promised Land, and of many other stories from sacred Scripture.] (144-6)

Cædmon "*convertebat*," or "converted," the stories he is given into "*carmen dulcissimum*," "the sweetest song" at the behest of these holy men. Even though the historical veracity of this story is dubious, it reveals an attitude about the creation of poetry: manipulation is accepted and expected.[24] In fact, Cædmon must change the words of the stories in order to make them musical; otherwise, the church officials would not test him. They praise his ability to adapt the verse into the "sweet songs," not his ability to sing them sweetly (though we can assume he does this well, too). There is an obvious difference between Cædmon, who is illiterate according to Bede, and scribes, who worked in monasteries copying texts. Yet the story is instructive because there is another change to the text that Bede adds. Instead of quoting the poem verbatim, he paraphrases it: "*Quo accepto responso statim ipse coepit cantare in laudem Dei conditoris versus quos numquam audierat, quorum iste est sensus*" [At that received answer, he himself

[24] I am indebted to Thornbury for this example. She uses Bede's account of Cædmon in a different context, but an excellent discussion of the relationship between poets and their audiences, using this story, can be found in *Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England* pp. 4-7, 183-187.

immediately began to sing in praise God the creator verses, none of which he had heard before, of which the sense is this] (142). There was no expectation to reproduce texts exactly, and Bede merely gives the "*sensus*" of the song. We know that this practice continued in the Anglo-Saxon era, and the Old English poems such as *Genesis* and *Exodus* provide solid examples. In these works, the poet adds to his Biblical sources freely.[25] These kinds of extrapolations were not limited to poetry; there are other examples of prose works that were given additions by either scribes or translators.[26] Certainly, the first three prose works of the *Beowulf Manuscript* and their parallel sources are a testament to this fact.

Although it was common for scribes to change texts, the scribes of the *Beowulf Manuscript* did not author any parts of the stories. Kiernan, however, asserts otherwise. I have noted before that the debate surround of dating the manuscript (or any of the pieces) does not affect my argument that the scribes were acting as curators; however, Kiernan has two views that I reject and must be rejected in order to accept my thesis. The first of the arguments centers around a paleographic study of the manuscript. Kiernan concludes that Scribe B added the dragon episode to the *Beowulf* poem and thus must be considered one of the authors of the poem. He writes, "If the last poet of *Beowulf* was the second scribe, as the paleographical and codicological evidence encourages one to believe, he increased, and continued to polish, an Anglo-Saxon treasure during the reign of a Danish Scylding lord" (278). Leonard Neidorf, in a recent study on the *Beowulf Manuscript*, firmly rejects Kiernan's analysis. In fact, as we saw with Lucas' objection to Kiernan's argument about *Judith* being a later addition, many scholars have found these strong

[25] Daniel Anlezark provides an overview of these kinds of additions in his introduction to *Old Testament Narratives* (vii-xxi).
[26] See Christine Rauer's comments in *The Old English Martyrology*, especially pp. 4-25.

claims of scribal authorship idiosyncratic. Overall, the scribes did not change the text's content; they simply made changes to the spellings. Neidorf elaborates, "The evidence suggests, contrary to recent theoretical scholarship, that scribes painstakingly preserved the poems structural features, making no attempt to update or recontextualize the text beyond the modernization and Saxonization of its orthography. It is therefore more reasonable to regard *Beowulf* as a unified archaic poem than as anything else" (149).[27] There are two other compelling reasons to reject Kiernan's claim. First, the audience of *Beowulf*, which he assumes is the court of King Cnut, cannot readily be identified. Yet there is no doubt that a large gap between the composition of the poem and the transcribing of it means that different audiences responded to the poem differently. Therefore, we must distinguish between separate audiences for the poem: one is an audience contemporary with the poet, and the other is contemporary with the scribes. Neidorf emphasizes this distinction: "An interpretation of *Beowulf* reliant upon a nuanced understanding of its language and a deep grasp of its constituent heroic-legendary traditions is an interpretation belonging to the period of its composition, not the period of its reception. Such an interpretation appears to have become a historical impossibility by the eleventh century" (161).

I reject Kiernan's view because it relies solely on paleographic evidence and does not factor in a literary analysis of the poem. Both must be considered in conjunction with one another because the words, the ordering of the texts, and the way in which the scribes transcribed the manuscript are not separate from its ideas. These texts also do not exist in a vacuum, and the parallel sources should indicate to us that certain works had a hold of

[27] The following three quotations from Neidorf come from *The Transmission of "Beowulf," Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior* (2017).

early medieval imaginations. While I have generally agreed with Neidorf's arguments, he does play down the idea that the scribes played a large creative role in the creating of manuscripts. He asserts, "The corpus of parallel texts therefore indicates that it would be a grave error to begin one's study of any Old English poem with a priori assumption that the scribes substantially recomposed it during its transmission" (151). I think that his point is well-taken if we consider it from a paleographic or authorial standpoint. Yet in terms of the creativity that goes into places texts together, his claim falls short, for there is a certain amount level of "authorship" that one can claim by organizing materials. There is no denying that the scribes were subverting something that already existed. Their role is ultimately not too different from a modernist pop artist like Roy Lichtenstein who takes already existing texts (comic books) and re-present them in a new format to be considered by a new audience. Perhaps in this sense we can think of the scribes as "authors," but this presents a final difficulty in ascribing authorship status to the scribes, for the idea of an author is a modern construction, and we must be careful not to ascribe our conceptions of what an author is and does to Anglo-Saxon writers. Emily Thornbury's recent study of Anglo-Saxon poets highlights many of the ways in which writers viewed themselves and how audiences viewed them. Perhaps most notable is her assertion that no professional class of poets in England during this time: "Finally, there is no solid evidence that a professional class of poets existed in Anglo-Saxon England. It was uncommon to speak of oneself as a poet at all, and even more uncommon to designate one's contemporaries as poets" (34). She compares the status of the term to our contemporary understanding of "statesman" — perhaps a title conferred when considering the totality of one's deeds without being too specific (35). In this chapter, I

have used the word "curator," and even here I want to add a word of caution. When we think of what the scribes did in assembling the manuscript, we may compare their project to that of a modern day curator, but the scribes did not know this word. They would have at least been familiar with the concept, however, for "curator" is a broad term as well. I chose this title over "organizer" because "curator" has more associations with art and art history, whereas the former is far too broad to gain any kind of insight into what they were doing. Certainly curators organize materials, but it is done so with a kind of artistic intention in mind. A curator can provoke and elicit certain feelings and ideas, and that is the role that I wish to attach to the scribes.

A Second Objection to Kiernan: *Beowulf* Has Common Themes with the Prose Texts

There is reason to believe that the scribes had an active role in the creation of the manuscript. Their role was curatorial as opposed to authorial. Many of the scholars I cited above have spent a considerable amount of time examining the paleographic and linguistic traits of the texts, but what they ignore are the strong literary themes that connect the works. On the other hand, scholars such as Kenneth Sisam notice a trend among the texts,[28] and his particular research is augmented by Orchard's study of the miraculous creatures in the manuscript. Mittman and Kim both examined the texts and images together, and there is a trend now to see the manuscript as being a cohesive whole. A testament to this attitude is the recent release, through Dumbarton Oaks, of R.D. Fulk's translation and commentary on the entire *Beowulf Manuscript*. This text is the first to put the entire manuscript (though unfortunately without the images from the

[28] See Sisam's "The Compilation of the Beowulf Manuscript" (1953).

Wonders of the East section) with the Old English on the left and the contemporary translation on the right.[29] Another compelling reason to recognize a link among the manuscripts is the practice of Anglo-Saxon poets and scribes of placing words, texts, and stories alongside others of similar value. Orchard, using the *Wonders* as an example, elaborates, "This technique of placing key themes in a text in apposition is one with which Old English poets, particularly that of *Beowulf*, were fully familiar. The way in which individual marvels in the *Wonders of the East* are occasionally connected in sequence, or contain parallels with other elements of the text [...] provides of itself a useful analogy for the putative compilation of the *Beowulf*-manuscript" (27).[30] Other scholars have seen connections among the manuscript pieces. For example, Kathryn Powell argues that the manuscript is unified by an interest in kings and foreigners and that it is didactic in character: "[T]o understand the *Beowulf* manuscript as compiled around an interest in rulers and foreigners renders it more than a literary collection. In particular, it becomes a collection of texts which offer subtle moral commentary upon contemporary political and social developments" (10-11). There are scholars, however, who express doubt about the connectedness of the manuscript in terms of theme. The second serious objection that Kiernan makes that I wish to reject has to do with *Beowulf* and his belief that it once existed separately from the manuscript. He argues that it does not belong to the Nowell Codex because of any link among the various stories; rather, it was added in by some anthologist who did not fully understand the material:

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[29] Fulk is cautious to give an exact reason the manuscript was assembled: "Why these particular texts were collected in one book is not plain, but one influential explanation that has been offered is that the manuscript is devoted to narratives about monsters" (x).

[30] See also Fred C. Robinson's *'Beowulf' and the Appositive Style*. Orchard, in a footnote, highlights pages 60-1 as being especially important in considering his statement, which I quoted above.

> The probability that the *Beowulf* MS first existed as a distinct codex [...] should not be surprising. After all, it has nothing of significance in common with the prose texts that now precede it, despite Sisam's familiar characterization of the Nowell Codex as an English *Liber Monstrorum*. *Beowulf* may have been added to the prose codex in late Old English times because some Anglo-Saxon anthologist perceived a loose connection in the lore about monsters, yet it is sad to think that the same person did not also perceive how far apart *Beowulf* stands from the prose texts in all other respects. (139-40)

While the *Beowulf Manuscript* is full of fantastic creatures, Kiernan completely disregards the deep connections these creatures have with human identity. Earlier I used the examples of Christopher and Grendel exhibiting human qualities, even though they are at odds with the other main characters of the stories. In each text, there is anxiety about "the Other," and some attempt to resist these creatures is at the heart of the manuscript.

Yet, while these creatures have some definite human component, they are often described in ambiguous ways. We never have an exact description of what it means when Hrothgar calls Grendel "*mara Þone ænig man oðer*" [larger than any other man] (1351) or what the author of the *Wonders* has in mind when he says that the Donestre "*syndon geweaxene swa frihteras fram oð ðone nafolan*" [are grown as soothsayers from the navel up] (24). I agree with Mittman and Kim, however, that there was no need for precision in these texts; part of the artistry is their ambiguity.[31] Moreover, we can understand more

[31] They conclude, in their discussion of Grendel's form, that "Grendel could have been clearly and precisely described, as Heorot is, and as Beowulf's arms and armor are [....] But perhaps Grendel was

clearly this unifying feature of the manuscript if we compare these monsters to the beasts of the Exeter Book. Certainly the authors of the riddles intended to utilize double-meanings, puns, and ambiguous terms, but the conventions of that genre of poetry demand that the answer is not immediately clear. The allegories of the phoenix, the whale, and the panther are also not ambiguous in the way that the creatures from the *Beowulf Manuscript* are. These Exeter creatures are symbols, and their deeper significance is explained by appealing to Christian thought. The other monsters under consideration are not clearly allegorical, and their mixed natures are meant to intimidate. Unlike the creatures in the riddles, and unlike the allegories, the manuscript monsters

> make visible the fragile and unstable 'two-ness' of the human identities they point to, identities troubled *both* by the differences and by the absence of those differences between the human and the non-human body; between the body and its representations; between languages, and between their capacity to represent; between representations in word and in image. (83)[32]

Moreover, these creatures are clearly monstrous: three of their most common traits are gigantism, flesh eating, and burning or shining eyes. The phoenix has an immortal body, the whale has a rocky shell, and the panther has a strange coat of shifting colors, but we already know that these creatures are beasts alone. On the other hand, there is no denying Grendel's human qualities and ancestry, Christopher's preaching and miracles, and the

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sharper for having been left more vague [....] Like any good horror film director, their creators know that the most effective moments were those in which the creatures were mere shadows" (21).

[32] Mittman and Kim discuss how the creatures from *The Wonders of the East* provoke questions about human identity. Their chapter "The Dittology of the Tripled Double Men" is of particular relevance here, and I think their analysis can be applied to many more of the monsters, not just those found in the *Wonders*.

Donestre's body of a soothsayer. The *Beowulf Manuscript* monsters are paradoxically human and not human at the same time.

Finally, the texts all cause anxiety about the Other, whether it be a foreigner or a monster. In each section of the manuscript there is an attempt at ritual cleansing,[33] the characters are both threatening and vulnerable, flesh is consumed or the consuming of flesh is alluded to, and decapitation is prevalent. These themes are most evident in *Beowulf* and *The Wonders of the East*. Beowulf arrives in Heorot to kill Grendel, and he pursues Grendel's mother to her haunted mere. In the *Wonders* some creatures avoid all human contact, others burn up at the sight of people, and Alexander kills some for the uncleanliness. Yet, the author of the fragment of *St. Christopher* reveals that King Dagnus wishes to rid his land of Christians and the dog-headed Christopher. After numerous, elaborate attempts to kill the saint, he is finally done away with. Alexander also does his share of killing monsters and ridding himself of untrustworthy guides.

That the monsters of the manuscript are dangerous is obvious. The Donestre lures people to him and consumes them, the Grendelkin have brute strength, Alexander's army is attacked multiple times by gigantic beasts, and Christopher comes from a race of dog-headed flesh eaters. At the same time, they are vulnerable: the Donestre weeps over the head of his victims, Grendel is overcome by brute strength, his mother's home is invaded, Alexander is not allowed to examine or touch many of the strange people he encounters, and Christopher is martyred. Interaction with these creatures is fatal, either for the human or for them, and some of the creatures simply disappear never to be heard of again. The

[33] An old article "Beowulf and Germanic Exorcism" by Gustav Hübener (1935) and a more recently written chapter in the book *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* by Andy Orchard (1995) are both helpful in analyzing how ritual cleansing was an important theme for the Anglo-Saxon and Norse societies of the middle ages.

two-headed beasts with Valkyrie's eyes, the Homodubii, and the monsters around the Grendelkin's mere are all examples of these fleeting creatures. Moreover, part of the fear they inspire is their paradoxical states of being: they are people yet not, threatening but vulnerable, and tangible or impossible to hold all at the same time. Mittman and Kim have another valuable comment in this regard: "The most foundational threat of the *Wonders* lies in their confusion of categorical boundaries" (133). Again, we can extend their thesis to include many, if not all, of the *Beowulf Manuscript* monsters. In this context, Christopher, the Donestre, the Blemmye, the *ictifafonas*, and Grendel's mother are important examples, but by no means the only ones.

In every text of the manuscript a human attempts to kill monsters (or in the case of *Judith*, a monstrous individual), but the reasons all vary. Strikingly, all the texts deal with some kind of ritual "purging." Dagnus explains his motivations to kill Christopher in religious terms: "*þu wyrresta wild-deor, hu lange dyrstlæcest þu þæt ðu þis folc framme tyhtest, swa þæt him nis alyfed þæt hi minum godum onsecgen?*" [You worst of wild beasts, how long do you dare that you incite this populace against me, so that they not become weak that they may sacrifice to my gods?] (4). Similarly, Alexander kills the giant women at the end of the *Wonders* because of "hyra unclennesse" or "their uncleanliness" (28). This same sense of cleansing is noted by Orchard in *Beowulf*: "The word *landhreinsun* ('land-cleansing') here calls to mind the repeated use in *Beowulf* of the word *fælsian* ('cleanse' - *Beowulf*, lines 432, 825, 1176, 1620, and 2352), always with reference to Beowulf's battles with Grendel or his mother" (163). Interestingly, Alexander in the *Letter of Alexander* does not purify the land. He comes as a conqueror, but it is his appearance at the mysterious grove that holds the trees of the sun and the

moon is marked by an attempt to conform to the giant bishop's request that the men who enter the sacred area go in naked and that they "beoð clæne from wif-gehrine" or "are clean from female contact" (74). In this scene, Alexander and his men are the ones who need to be cleansed in order to enter a sacred area. Thus there is a certain anxiety that characters express about their contact with the Others. Often these feelings cause one of the parties to attack the other. When Grendel hears the *scop* sing about creation, it is just as hateful to him as it is for Dagnus to hear Christopher's preaching. The sight of Grendel's entering the hall is hateful to Beowulf in the same way Grendel's mother's sight of Beowulf's entering her mere is hateful to her. One more example is the Donestre, who lures people to him with details about their lives, and then weeps while looking at the severed head of his victim. In his case, we might conclude that his own monstrous nature is hateful to him.

We might also link the Donestre with Grendel's mother. Both have some kind of humanoid form that is clearly distorted: the mother is referred to by male pronouns (1496) and is some sort of lake-dweller. Marijane Osborn, in her article "Manipulating Waterfalls" Mythic Places in *Beowulf* and *Grettissaga,* Lawrence and Purnell," comments on the ambiguity of the language in the text: "The monsters are identified not as trolls, a word apparently not available in English at the time, but (among other things) as wargs, whatever that means; Grendel is called a *heoro-wearh* at line 1267 and his mother a *grund-wyrgen* at line 1518" (212). The Donestre is equally ambiguous: he has the body of a "soothsayer" (*frihteras*), and he weeps inexplicably over the heads of his victims (25). The detail about the severed heads is perhaps significant - Grendel's mother leaves the head of Aschere but consumes, supposedly, the rest of his body. Both creatures

are meant to unnerve us (as many of the other wonders do) because of the way they capture their victims. They also engage in male and female roles. The Donestre eats people after luring them close, and he is masculine in his aggressiveness. But he is also a mourner, a role more associated with women in Anglo-Saxon society. *Beowulf* itself ends with an elegy by a woman who mourns the state of their people without their king. Grendel's mother is also masculine in her aggressive fighting: she seeks to settle her own feud, she overpowers Beowulf, and she leaves the head of Æschere at the entrance to her lair.

Anglo-Saxon England was a place where confrontation with other groups of people was inevitable. It is not unlikely that the scribes assembled stories that expressed fascination and concern with the Other. We do not need to turn to analogues or archetypal myths to see that the *Beowulf Manuscript* is linked by portrayals of these kinds of ritualistic actions, and that the confrontation between men and monsters is primarily an expression of anxiety about foreign people and creatures, beasts with the distorted bodies of men, and flesh-eaters, who prey upon the weak and unsuspecting. Mittman and Kim have another useful comment in this regard:

> The outside was indeed, for the Anglo-Saxons, a place of frightening chaos and excess. And yet, when viewed from a distance [...] the chaos tends to cohere into a unified albeit certainly monstrous body which we might compare with the normative body politic of England. Just as the individual could compare his 'normal' body to the chaotic bodies of the

> individual wonders, so too, on the macro scale, a "normal" society could compare its body to this monstrous collective. (149)[34]

Yet these parallels within the text are not vague; rather, they are deliberate and intended. Even the drawings that accompany the *Wonders* section are important in this respect — they are a reflection of the various kinds of gazing, both vulnerable and threatening, that is performed in this text.

In the conclusion of Geoffrey Russom's article "At the Center of *Beowulf*," he notes that the poet conceived of Grendel as a creature belonging to two traditions, Biblical and Germanic, that were not necessarily separate in this person's mind (237). He continues by arguing that "[w]hat we have in *Beowulf* are representations of the uncanny quite consistent, as far as they go, with all proximate traditions" (237). In addition, these "uncanny" creatures are consistent with "all proximate" texts, in this case: *The Passion of St. Christopher*, *The Wonders of the East*, and *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*. One one hand, these texts prepare us for what is to come in *Beowulf*, which is a blending of pagan and Christian traditions. Yet they are also blended stories themselves. No one text in the *Beowulf Manuscript* is distinctly one "thing" — whether that "thing" be Germanic legend, Norse saga, Classical mythology, or Christian hagiography. Furthermore, these shared traits among the texts are evidence that the scribes were not mere copyists,who assembled texts about monsters. I have chosen to discuss a number of techniques that they used to link what is monstrous to what is human. These examples are not isolated. We may consider the threatening yet vulnerable beasts that occupy Grendel's mother's

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[34] Sarah Foot's article "The Making of *Angelcynn*: English Identity Before the Norman Conquest" (2002) is also useful in this context. Part of being "English" in the Anglo-Saxon Age was accepting that there were many foreigners who mingled with the various peoples of England. The island was always a place where many cultures met, often in hostility.

mere, the people with exaggerated physical features, and the gigantic men and women Alexander encounters in India. Clearly the scribes curated these texts and sought tales about monsters and humans being compared in relatively similar ways. They did not collect monster stories or simply select a story for inclusion in this manuscript because it dealt with alien creatures. If the manuscript were exclusively a collection of monster and beast tales, *The Phoenix*, *The Panther*, and *The Whale* are conspicuous absences. If anything, the Exeter Book has a better claim to be "part bestiary" if we consider the beast riddles and beast tales together. We could explain these omissions from the *Beowulf Manuscript* by considering that no part of the manuscript is allegorical,[35] while each of these three accounts (and the riddles) are highly symbolic. One conclusion, however, we should avoid is that Scribe A is the actual poet and composer of each of these stories.[36] Yet we should also not assume that he or she had no artistic impulses. The manuscript is like a collage piece, and each text has been catered to suit a number of themes ranging from a fascination with monsters[37] to the dangers of pride and poor kingship[38] to the fading pagan past that the Anglo-Saxons were aware of.

Unity of Theme in the *Beowulf Manuscript*: Purification

While we can now see these strong links among the first four texts, we should also consider how *Judith* fits into the rest of the manuscript. After all, there are no monsters in the poem, and the story is more strictly Christian than *Beowulf* is. One

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[35] Alvin A. Lee summaries the various attempts to interpret *Beowulf* allegorically and why those attempts have proven to be insufficient in many cases. For his analysis see "Symbolism and Allegory" from *A Beowulf Handbook* (1998).

[36] Another helpful article from *A Beowulf Handbook* is the chapter "Date, Provenance, Author, Audiences" by Robert E. Bjork and Anita Obermeier.

[37] See Kenneth Sisam's *The Structure of Beowulf* (1965).

[38] See Kathryn Powell's "Meditating on Men and Monsters: A Reconsideration of the Thematic Unity of the *Beowulf* Manuscript" (2006).

obvious way to link this poem to the rest of the story is to appeal to its hagiographical content: *St. Christopher* and *Judith* are linked by the same attempt to immortalize Christian heroes. There are also scholars who see strong links between *Beowulf* and *Judith*. Both Orchard and Fulk identify both poets use of "hypermeter" (a type of meter typically found in Old English epics), but this view is not without its problems. For example, Megan E. Hartman argues, in her article "A Drawn-Out Beheading: Style, Theme, and Hypermetricity in the Old English Judith" that the *Judith* poet used hypermeter differently than the *Beowulf* poet did. She points out that these sections in *Judith* where the verse is found are essential moments that reinforce the major themes in the poem: "Ultimately, analysis of the hypermetric verse in *Judith* shows that the poet very deliberately adapted more traditional styles of hypermetric composition to create an especially elevated tone in the hypermetric sections, which he then used to emphasize the major themes in the poem" (423). Later, she analyzes these themes in relation to other Old English works, and they are: a moral contrast between the hero and the antagonist, a reversal of fortunes, and God's essential role in these events (432-33). This use of hypermeter in these sections is also important because Judith is a woman, and Hartman argues that the poet emphasizes how her violent actions are justified because they come from a direct order from God. There are some obvious parallels between *Beowulf* and *Judith*, however. First, Holofernes dies, and he is sent to the *wyrmsele* (119), or Hell, and Beowulf's descent into Grendel's mother's mere is a descent into the underworld, complete with snake-like fish trying to tear away at his armor. Next, when the soldier enters Holofernes' tent and finds his commander dead, he rips out his hair and goes mad. The grief of seeing one's lord die is common throughout the manuscript. Similar

expressions of loss occur when Wiglaf watches Beowulf die, when the Geat woman laments at the end of at the sight of her lord's body being placed in the barrow, and when Alexander learns that he is doomed to die young, and his men weep. Nevertheless, there are differences, most notably the ending; *Judith* ends in the complete opposite way *Beowulf* does. The latter poem descends into an elegy essentially, and there is no hope at the end for Beowulf's people — invaders will come and destroy them. In *Judith*, however, the people fight back against a major invading force through God's will. God does not grant ultimate victory to Beowulf; the hero's fight is a Pyrrhic victory. Judith, on the other hand, has great success. We also have to consider the paleographic evidence (some of this debate I discussed above). *Judith* does not naturally fit in with the rest of the manuscript, and there is no denying that at one time the ending of *Beowulf* was the last page of the manuscript. As Fulk points out, some scholars have tried to solve the problem of the poem's placement at the end by suggesting it should follow *St. Christopher*.[39] Given these various lines of thought, *Judith*'s place in the manuscript remains dubious; yet, there is a better approach to thinking of the manuscript's unity.

Though there are many relationships among the texts, what truly unites the manuscript is an interest in purification rituals. As the main characters encounter something or someone with monstrous identity, they always seek to find a way to get rid of it. The scribes working on the *Beowulf Manuscript* were not the authors of the five parts of the document; rather, they acted like curators, and their central topic was purification. There are many words for the concepts of "purity" and "impurity" in Old English, and not all of them appear in the manuscript. The scribes do, however, collect a

[39] See the introduction to *The Beowulf Manuscript* pp. xxii-xxv.

large number of words having to deal with these concepts — clean and unclean — as we should expect in a volume made up of stories from several different centuries. Furthermore, the scribes do not apply a single concept for purification to their transcribing. They do not, so to speak, fit the manuscript on a Procrustean bed and make the stories fit some a priori idea of Christian purity. Instead, the scribes placed texts that have a common theme next to each other; the manuscript parts are in conversation with one another. That conversation is about cleanliness. Each text deals with encountering the "Other," recognizing its threat, and attempting to purify it in some way. Sometimes, a hero must cleanse (*fælsian*) a place of a creature, such as Beowulf cleaning up Hrothgar's hall from the plague of trolls. Other times, a simple attempt to touch the other is enough to send a creature running or burning up before our very eyes, such as with the red hens of Lentibelsinea, who self-immolate (*forbærnaþ)* in the *Wonders of the East*. Thus the manuscript contains the experiences of encountering what is alien to us and attempting to get rid of it.

In the next chapter, I will closely examine all the words of purity and impurity that we can find in the manuscript. Here it is worth noting that there are many words that repeat throughout the texts, such as *halig* (holy), but many words are unique to their various sections. *Beowulf*, for example, is the only place where *fælsian* (purify) is used, and *gehæl* (heal) is used only in *The Passion of St. Christopher*. Clearly, the connection among the manuscript pieces, in terms of this theme of purification, is not linguistic. The scribes made few significant changes to the texts they copied. Nevertheless, we can see the common themes of these words in context: these words deal with snakes, consuming

human flesh, fire, light, killing, and beheading.[40] We also find these words used in identical contexts among parallel sources in Latin and Old Norse. *Fælsian* appears in two other Old English poems, *Advent Lyrics* and *The Fates of the Apostles*, and it is an Old English gloss and translation for the Latin *lustrare*. The theme of cleansing also appears in the parallel scenes of hall-cleansing in the Old Norse tale *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* and *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*. These words and episodes have close connections with concepts and stories of purification and suggest to us that the scribes actively put these five pieces together in one document to amplify a theme important to them. Thus the *Beowulf Manuscript* is not just a book of monsters, an early bestiary; it is a book of what it is like to cleanse the stain of the Other.

[40] See especially Appendix II for a list of these themes with the words that match them.

CHAPTER 2: WORDS OF PURIFICATION

The *Beowulf Manuscript* has a complex set of words dealing with purification. On one hand, we find Old English words that are commonly associated with cleanliness both in a literal and a figurative sense. There are a number of examples of these words throughout the texts, such as *umwemme* [unblemished] and *gehæled* [healed]. There are, however, other words such as *fælsian* [purify] that do not appear frequently in other Old English writings and have very narrow meanings. In this chapter, I will discuss the words that mean, literally, "to purify" and the words that share in this meaning through common elements that repeat through the texts. There are four qualifications I used to determine if a word should be counted as a purification term. Some words clearly contain the concepts of "clean" or "unclean" through their shades of meaning. One obvious example is *widle* [filth, pollution] that we find in *Judith* (59). There is a literal sense of the word meaning that Holofernes, who the word is being used in reference to, is dirty, but it is also clear that there is a religious component to this term. The king is not just drunk and filthy, he is monstrous in his intention of trying to rape Judith. Second, there are words that have an explicitly religious usage, but they have to do with judgments about purity. *Halgan* [holy] is often used to denote something's divine status, such as the Trees of the Sun and the Moon, which are found in a holy grove. Their supernatural power makes them divine figures. But Judith is *eadigan* [blessed, holy] (35) in comparison to Holofernes, who is filthy. Third, some words have an association with purification through context. The Donestre, for example, *beswicaþ* [deceives] (24) his victims before eating them. The act of deception does not denote impurity, but in the context of the manuscript it does; it shares a common concern about knowing the truth that can be found in all the other texts.

Dagnus does not know the truth about God's power until he is cured of his blindness, Alexander learns of his own mortality when entering the pure and sacred grove of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon, similarly Beowulf is lectured about his own mortal limits after purifying Hrothgar's meadhall, and Judith deceives Holofernes in order to kill him and save her people. Thus the words that share in these kinds of contexts can be included among the other purification words in the manuscript. Finally, some words have just one meaning, which is specifically "purification." *Beowulf* contains the word *fælsian,* which is only used in Old English to mean "to purify" and nothing else. This word is especially rare in Old English literature in general, but it indicates that there is a variety among the purification words themselves. I pointed out in Chapter 1 that there is considerable variety of purification words in the list. We should think of the scribes' technical role not as poets but as copyists. They collected various works from many different time periods and attempted to alter the content of the texts as little as possible. Changes primarily are made to the spellings of words, and words are not substituted to artificially make the text more consistent theologically or as a literary work. Neidorf documents this tendency in depth in his study *The Transmission of Beowulf: Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior* (2017). Moreover, I proposed that the scribes thought of the events, images, characters, and landscapes as reimagined instances of purification from text to text. This fact that the scribes did not compose the manuscript, however, should not cause concern about the potential unity of theme among the texts. The scribes' role, as I showed in the previous chapter, was primarily curatorial; they were not interested in changing the meanings of words but in placing stories together that shared a common theme. All five

pieces of the manuscript are in conversation with one another, and they all contain unique words of cleanliness and uncleanliness.

First, some words make a clear reference to cleanliness or uncleanliness. For example *clæne* is used when the bishop informs Alexander's men that they must be free from a woman's touch (clean) in order to enter the sacred grove of the trees of the sun and the moon. Similarly, in *Wonders,* Alexander kills the female giants because of their filthiness (*unclennesse*). These words are fairly straightforward in meaning. A simple search through the *Bosworth-Toller* Anglo-Saxon Dictionary yields all the associations we might have with this concept of *clene*: "clean, pure, clear." What is striking about the manuscript is the fact that we do not see these two words being used as often as we might expect. The sense of being physically unclean and in needing of some purification is an important part of the manuscript, but this notion appears most frequently in the texts before *Beowulf*. *Wolberende* is another example of a word that fits into this category: it is a word for the poisonous vapor that kills men in Alexander's camp (57). The filth in the air is deadly, and I count it as a purification word because it is an obvious example of uncleanliness. In *Judith*, however, there are many words used to describe Holofernes and his men that fall into this same literal meaning of being filthy. It is their actions during and after the feasting that make them so filthy, and Holofernes, in particular, is referred to eight times as being unclean especially because of his intentions to rape Judith. He is *æwisce* [offensive, foul], *unweorþe* [of no value, of low estate, of no dignity], *widle* [filth, pollution] (he plans to defile Judith with filth and pollution), *womme* [a spot, mark, blot, stain, filth, corruption], *atolan* [dire, horrendous creature, foul or loathsome thing], *unsyfra* [impure, unclean, foul],

womfull [full of filth], and he plans to *besmitan* [to besmut, defile, dirty, pollute, contaminate] Judith (302-4).[41] There is no particularly wide range of meaning among these words, but the variety in this small passage from *Judith* may have to do with the meter of the poem. Anglo-Saxon poetry did not rhyme; instead, it relied on alliteration and stress. Thus the poet used a variety of words to emphasize the same point and to do it through a poetic expression.

On the other hand, some words often have a religious connotation in this manuscript. St. Christopher is proudly *umwemne* [unblemished] because of his faith, and the Trees of the Sun and the Moon are *halgan* [holy]. This link between physical cleanliness and holiness still exists today. Consider the metaphorical significance of the sacrament of baptism or the refrain in the Catholic mass that is spoken before receiving communion: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." But we can also find a simple Anglo-Saxon parallel in *The Dream of the Rood*: "Syllic wæs se sigebeam ond ic synnum fah" [The tree of victories was most wondrous, and I stained by sins] (13).[42] The act of healing can also be a cleansing. Christopher says that Dagnus will be *gehæled* [healed] of his blindness if he mixes Christopher's blood and the soil on which he is martyred (8). When the king performs this ritual and asks God to heal him, he *ontynde* [recovered] his sight and gains faith (10). Christopher also asks God to *gehæl* [heal] those who are sick who also come to visit his body after death (8). Clearly, there is a sense of both physical and religious purification: those who are cured also experience a miracle, which leads to faith. Another instance of this connection between holiness and cleanliness occurs in the *Letter*

[41] Here I listed page number instead of line numbers.
[42] See Bjork *Old English Short Poems Volume II: Religious and Didactic*.

of Alexander. At the end of the text, the bishop of the sacred grove informs Alexander that if he and his men are *clæne* [clean] from a woman's touch, as Fulk elaborates in his translation "undefiled by intimacy with women," then they may enter the sacred area (74). Alexander refers to the grove three times as *halgan* [holy] (74-6), and he cannot enter the area without the bishop being present. The bishop affirms his guest's description by referring to the grove as *godcundan* [of the nature of God, divine, religious, sacred] (80).

Holofernes, however, due to his wickedness, is bound for the *helle-bryne* (hellfire). In hell, his soul sinks down and is tormented by *wyrmum* [snakes] in the *wyrm-sele* [a serpent-hall, a place where there are serpents, hell] (119). Serpents are a constant source of impurity and danger in the manuscript, for it is their *attor* [venom] that poisons many characters. That they would have a close association with hell is not surprising. The dragon is a Christian symbol for the devil, and these *wyrms* [serpents] of many different sizes in the manuscript all send many people to their deaths. Thus, there are parallels we can draw between sin and uncleanliness. Additionally, earlier in *Judith*, the narrator describes the king as *hæðenan* [heathen, pagan], *laðne* [hated, harmful, enemy], *unlædan* [poor, miserable, wretched - in a moral sense], *feond-sceaðan* [enemy, fiend], and *fagum* [guilty, criminal, outlaw, hostile] (304-6).[43] Grendel is similarily a *fag* [guilty one], too: "*he wæs fag wið God*" [he was an enemy against God] (811). The mark of Cain is another obvious example that the monster bears and that the *Beowulf* poet utilizes in his conception of impure sinner. These words have strong connections to purification, and we can take their meanings at surface value.

[43] Here I refer to page numbers instead of line numbers.

Another way these words share a common meaning is through context. In the examples above, the words are used in very specific senses having to deal with purification. Nevertheless, while some words precisely mean "purification," others have a connection to the common elements among the purification words. *El-reordigra* [foreign-speaking] is an example of this kind of word. It appears in the manuscript when Alexander kills the barbarians who attack his army. This word, on its surface, does not appear to have anything to do with uncleanliness, but through its connection with the monstrous actions that characters wish to put a stop to, it belongs among the other words; it has the connotation of being "barbaric" or "deceitful" in behavior. Foreign-speakers *(el-reordge* and *el-reordegestan*, 22-24) also appear in *Wonders* near the lakes of the sun and the moon (not to be confused with the holy grove of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon). These people are barbaric speakers with barbaric kings, said to be the *wyrstan* [worst people] (24) alive. Another sense of this deceitful behavior comes from the Donestre who live on an island in the Red Sea. These creatures seemingly know everything, *beswicaþ* [deceive, entice, seduce, betray] people with *leaslicum* [false or vain words], call them by name, and then eat them (24). After consuming people, the monster clutches his victim's head and weeps. Another common example of a word that has a close relationship to "impurity" is *unwæstmberenlicu* [barren; sterile] from *Wonders*. Near the city of Persia, the surrounding area is unfruitful because of a large number of snakes that inhabit it. The word, through context, has a connection with purification: snakes are a common element among these words and are dangerous and filthy enough to make a place uninhabitable.

Another set of words that deal with uncleanliness have to do with the hospitibility of a place. In many cases, these areas are unclean because of the large population of snakes that live there. In *Wonders*, for example, the area around Persia (classified as a city in the text) is *unwæstmberenlicu* [unfruitful] because of the serpents that live there (18). Similarly, in the *Letter of Alexander*, Alexander's guides lead him to a *unarefnedlican* [intolerable, impossible to bear] land full of snakes and wild animals (42). One area has *biterre* [bitter] water, such that the river is so *grimre* [sharp, bitter, severe] no human or animal can consume it (46). Instead, the men drink their own urine to survive the harsh conditions of the land. An important association that these words have is not just the fact that snakes are present, but that these creatures are *wolberende* [pestiferous, pestilential, pernicious, poisonous]. Poison, either from snakes or from an unclean area, takes the lives of many characters in the manuscript. For example, a poisonous vapor appears in Alexander's camp, which kills many in his army (56), and Beowulf succumbs to the dragon's *attor* [poison, venom] (2715) at the end of the poem.

Finally, some words suggest unclean behavior or actions. In the *Letter of Alexander*, the Trees of the Sun and the Moon reveal to the king that his mother will die in a *scondlicne* and *unarlicne* [disgraceful, foul, shameful, obscene] way, will be left *unbebyrged* [unburied] on the road, and will be eaten by wild birds and animals (80). We never learn why she is to be punished with such a death, but we know that her death will be impure and undesirable. Holofernes is another character who dies in a disgraceful and obscene way, and his shameful actions are the direct cause of his fall. His men also share in his filthiness. They are *drencte* [to plunge under, to immerse, drown] drowned figuratively in wine (29). They are also described as *swiman* [swimming in the head,

dizziness, giddiness] and *oferdrencte* [to overdrench, to give a person too much to drink]. Thus these characters exhibit some behavior that is so egregious that they must die for it. As with many of the other characters in the manuscript, their deaths are necessary because they must be purified. By contrast, images of light are indicators of purity in the manuscript. Judith, for example, is referred to as a *beorhtan* [bright, radiant] woman (58), and when she returns to the city with Holofernes' head, she sees the walls *blican* [glimmer] (137). Brightness is a common signifier of purity, and it is usually reserved for descriptions of heaven and heavenly people.[44] Finally, when Beowulf defeats Grendel's mother, a *leoht* [light] from heaven appears in the underwater lair, which signifies Beowulf's victory and God's approval of his action (1570-2).

Ritualistic words are the final important indicator of purification theme. In the manuscript, there are words that are lifted from specific religious texts and incorporated into the stories of poetic purposes. First, *fælsian* [to purify], as I pointed out earlier, is used in other poems about religiously cleansing a place. *Lustrare*, a Latin word with a similar meaning, is glossed as *fælsian*, and in parallel Norse sources, the word is replaced with *landhreinsun* [land-cleansing[[see Chapter 1]. We also find Anglo-Saxon writers using *fælsian* in a similar context in *Fates of the Apostles* and *Advent Lyrics*, which should lead us to believe that this word has a specific usage with fewer shades of meaning than *clæne*, which has physical and religious connotations. The first (and most explicit) example comes from the *Advent Lyrics*, where the author uses the word *fælsian*, meaning "to purify." Nathan Ristuccia, in his article "Fœlsian and the Purification of Sacred Space in the *Advent Lyrics*," provides context for this word: "Among vernacular

[44] *Halige* [holy, sacred] is another word the narrator uses to describe her (56), and it is also used to describe Christopher and the sacred grove of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon.

authors, moreover, the Old English word fœlsian serves almost as a technical term for the ritual purification of a holy place, complete with certain expected ritual actions: the dramatic entrance of a cleansing figure, the purification of a delineated space, and the eradication of some specific impurity" (1-2).[45] This word is important because it also appears in *Beowulf* a number of times. Because it is a word with a specific usage, we should understand that the author saw Beowulf's actions as strictly spiritual and ritualistic. By contrast, *clœnsian* (to clean) also appears in the *Beowulf Manuscript*, but it has a wider range of meaning. Ristuccia elaborates:

> The word clœnsian has a quite extensive semantic range, but most often provides the idea of a purgation—either from a physical problem such as dirt and disease or from a spiritual issue like personal sin. Similarly *feormian* usually describes a physical form of cleansing, such as a washing or scouring. Finally although *aþwean* can denote either physical or spiritual washing, it is typically used with a person and often has the specific meaning of 'baptize.' *Fœlsian*, on the other hand, as some scholars have noted and much of this paper will seek to demonstrate, refers not primarily to outward washing or cleansing, but to intemal spiritual purification. (7)

What is so important about the word *fœlsian* then is its connection to an archetypal process in which a hero receives some approval from God and either imparts or receives wisdom. Ristuccia specifically references *Beowulf* in his article and draws a connection

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[45] Ristuccia elaborates on this word's use in other Old English sources in the next section of the article: "The word fœlsian appears barely a dozen times in the entire Old English corpus, and is limited in its usage to Anglo-Saxon poetry and a few Latin glosses. Its related adjective and adverb *fœle* (faithful, excellent) was somewhat more common, occurring around forty times in surviving texts and, unlike the verb, it stayed in the language into the Middle English and even Renaissance periods" (5-6).

between the ritualistic action in the *Advent Lyrics* to Beowulf's fights with the Grendelkin:

> Beowulf s purification of these places is a distinctly spiritual phenomenon; the spaces are still physically dirty. When Grendel's mother dies, the poet claims a light shines forth, filling the lair. This light has similarities not only to the sudden sunrise after defeat of the sea-monsters earlier in the poem, but also with the cleansing of Ethiopia in the *Fates of the Apostles*, where the purifying teaching of Matthew is described as '*daeges* or ... *leohtes geleafan*' (the dawn of the day, of the light of belief). Thus, in both of these poems, light shines forth after the purification of a space (*fælsian*) and the destruction of an impure foe. (14-15)[46]

This wisdom is also intimately connected with death. What connects the humans and the monsters in the manuscript is their mortality. Grendel will *swylt* [die] for his crimes (1255), *swylt* seizes the beast the men pull from Grendel's mother's mere (1436), the *corsiae*, the snakes with horns as large as a ram, will immediately die if anyone touches them (18), and Beowulf speaks to Wiglaf of his *swyltdæge* [death-day] after his fight with the dragon (2798). *Swylt* may be a common word that appears in a number of religious texts,[47] but its appearance in the manuscript a larger spiritual context is significant. Wisdom of one's own mortality often follows the purification events. Even Alexander laments that he will die by poison after he has entered the sacred grove and learned of his

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[46] That Beowulf is purging a specific place is also emphasized: "The poets seem to employ *fælsian* only to express the purification of some kind of location (the hall, the mere, Ethiopia). Moreover, some individual (Beowulf, Christ, Matthew) is depicted as coming from a distance to perform this purification, and the act of cleansing is directed at some pollutant, at times only implicitly (such as sin or the Grendelkin)" (8).

[47] The *Bosworth-Toller* indicates that this word appears in a series of saint's lives, including the *Andreas*, *Life of St. Guthlac*, *Juliana*, *Elene*, and *The Ruin*.

fate. While *Beowulf* receives the most attention out of all the manuscript pieces, it is clear that it is just one piece in conversation with the other texts. They share not only the theme of purification but the language associated with it. They also borrow from other texts in order to emphasize certain kinds of religious ideas. This borrowing of ritual words is not uncommon in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Judith A. Vaughan-Sterling, in an article titled "The Anglo-Saxon 'Metrical Charms': Poetry as Ritual," comments on the link between poetry and religious rituals:

> Another type of correspondence between Anglo-Saxon magic and poetry has to do with what we may call the 'theory of magic' and of poetry. The basic theoretical tenets uniting the two genres are, I believe, that poetry is not intended to be 'normal' utterance as we speak it daily, and that the magical ritual and incantation are not to be features of everyday experience. (191)

Thus the words used in rituals have to potential to remove us from the routine of our everyday activities, and the words of the manuscript, I argue, work in unison to create a unique, imagined ritual space. They are not rituals themselves, but they make us think of the ritual context in order to emphasize a religious theme.

The Contexts and Common Elements of Purification

Earlier, I suggested that we can identify purification words by context. Often we find among the large variety of words, various terms and phrases that suggest the pure or impure quality of a person or a place. We can further categorize various purification words by examining how often they parallel similar content throughout the texts. There are also seven common elements among the purification words in the *Beowulf*

Manuscript: snakes, consuming human flesh, fire, light, killing, beheading, and fleeing. Many of these common elements derive from Christian and Norse mythologies, and most of the symbols share the same positive or negative values.[48] Some of these elements have positive or negative connotations depending on their context. Fire can be closely associated with the ceaseless flames of hell, but it can also be an image of creation and closeness with the divine. Fire is used as both a tool for punishment and for funerary rites. Another element with both positive and negative connotations is the act of beheading. Christopher and Aschere (Hrothgar's advisor and friend) are both beheaded, the former by the proud King Dagnus and the other by Grendel's mother. These two beheadings are negative: the victims are innocent of any crime. On the other hand, Beowulf beheads both the Grendelkin, and Judith chops off Holofernes' head, all actions which are given sanction explicitly by God. Furthermore, there is no consistently positive symbol throughout the text. Even light, which is often used in a positive sense to describe heaven's splendor, is a trait of some of the monsters' eyes from *Wonders*, and Grendel's eyes shine with an impure flame when he is in the meadhall. The number of negative elements among these purification rituals, words, and symbols reinforces the fact that the manuscript is organized around characters who struggle to defend against the monstrous and clean up after them.

First, snakes are always negative. They are creatures closely associated with punishment and struggle: Adam and Eve encounter the serpent in the Garden of Eden,

[48] Purification is a common theme in Anglo-Saxon literature, and it is always linked to religion. There are some major examples that can be found in the *Exeter Book*, the *Junius Manuscript*, the *Vercelli Book*, and *Bald's Leechbook*. The themes of purification rituals in these texts revolve around snakes, eating, fire, light, killing (especially beheading), and fleeing. The *Beowulf Manuscript* is no exception: warriors enter unholy places with the intention to purify them (*Wonders*, the *Letter of Alexander*, *Beowulf*, *Judith*), all the texts present a monstrous intrusion, the heroes kill the monsters beheading is especially popular in *Christopher*, *Beowulf*, and *Judith*. Fire and burning also have a strong association with hell (*Christopher*, *Wonders*, the *Letter of Alexander*, *Beowulf*). I will return to some of these themes in the conclusion of the dissertation.

Loki is punished by having the venom of a snake drip onto his forehead, and Thor wrestles with the World Serpent while fishing. Snakes are dangerous because of their destructive potential, especially having to do with their *attor* (poison, venom). Snakes and their poison feature prominently in all the texts except for *Christopher*. Also, the serpents in the manuscript come in all different sizes, and the *Wonders* captures some of the variety we see in the manuscript. There are the familiar serpents populating an area near Persia that make the land uninhabitable (18). We do not learn much about them, but we may assume they are poisonous. At the very least, they are unclean, which makes the area so dangerous to humans. The *corsiae* are more extraordinary; they have "micel hornas swa weðeras" [horns as mighty as the rams'], and their power is so great that if anyone "sleað oþþe a æthrineð, þone swylteð he sona [kills or touches it, then he will soon perish] (18). There are snakes whose eyes shine, which is a common trait among the monsters of the manuscript (18), and there are dragons who are 150 feet long (22). The islands south of the Brixontes are also uninhabitable because of the presence of these creatures. There is no doubt, in the narrator's mind, how deadly these creatures are. Haruko Momma, in his article "*Worm*: A Lexical Approach to the *Beowulf* Manuscript," explains the potency of the snake in the manuscript: "The two overtly Christian texts aside, the cultural space of the *Beowulf* Manuscript is a material one where even the conqueror of the entire world or the heroic protector of a glorious people must in the end succumb to poison and die a death that is both ordinary and eternal" (213). The word "poison" in Old English (*attor*) even has a close relationship with the word "snake" (the word *nædre* is another word for "serpent"). Poisonous snakes feature prominently in the *Letter of Alexander*. There are many references to snakes and their poison: some

inhospitable areas where Alexander arrives has them (Caspia, for example) (43), Alexander burns them when they appear at his camp along with scorpions (55), they cannot enter the sacred grove of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon (74-6), and Alexander will die by poison, as revealed in the prophecy (80-2). It is also worth noting here that Beowulf dies by poison as well. Momma elaborates, "It is the 'poison' (*attor*, 2715a) from the dragon's 'bitter tusks' (*biteran bānum*, 2692a), rather than its coking tail, that causes the demise of the hero. The world of *Beowulf* is filled with marvels [...] and yet [Beowulf] dies from a serpentine bite in the end. The poet takes advantage of the polysemy of *wyrm* to heighten this paradox - a paradox that lies at the very heart of *Beowulf*" (210). Thus snakes represent immediate danger, and they are exterminated frequently in the manuscript.

Beowulf, however, has the most references to snakes.[49] They come two different varieties, but they are all related by the term *wyrm*, a broad word which can refer to any serpent from ordinary snakes to fire-breathing dragons. Momma draws a parallel between the *wyrms* in *Beowulf* to the *wyrms* in the *Letter of Alexander*:

> "We may note, however, that *wyrmcynnes fela* "'many species of serpenets') is followed by *sæ-dracan* ('sea dragons') in 1426a and *nicras* ('water monsters') in 1427b. Because both these nouns are accusative like *wyrmcynnes fela*, the sea dragons and the water monsters are, syntactically speaking, either appositive phrases to or a variation on "many species of serpents": if the former, these monsters allow the numerous snakes to

[49] Momma points out just how frequent these references are: "According to the glossary in *Klaeber's Beowulf*, the poem uses the symplex *wyrm* twenty-two times, but none of them pertains to worms [....] We all know that *Beowulf* avoids overtly Christian references, but the little *wyrm* tells us how carefully the poet crafts the pre-Christian world of the poem even at the lexical level" (202).

> share their habitat; if the latter, they are regarded as a sub-species of the snake-kind. This spatial or zoological proximity of the reptilian *wyrmas* to the full-fledged monsters reminds us of the transformation of the shiny-eyed snakes of the *Epistola Alexandri* into fire-spitting creatures in the Old English *Letter of Alexander*" (209).

The first kind of serpent we learn about are the *niceras* (sea-serpents) (421, 574, 844, and 1429). These are the monsters Beowulf faces in his race against Breca. They try to drag the hero down to the bottom of the ocean, much like a later scene in which Grendel's mother pulls Beowulf to the bottom of her mere, which is infested with sea-serpents as well (1501-1512). In a way, these monsters resemble the *wyrms* from *Judith*, which are part of the torments Holofernes faces as he dies; he is sent, literally, to the *wyrmsele* (the snake-hall). Momma comments on the association of snakes with hell: "It seems that hell lies outside the regular ecology of *wyrm*, since worms, snakes, and dragons often appear side by side in the landscape of hell in Old English religious verse" (212). It is obvious, as well, that both the dragons in *Beowulf* as serpent-like. The dragon that Sigemund fights is killed when the hero pierces it with a sword (884-892).[50] The dragon at the end of the story also shares these features. Thus the snake is also a symbol of sheer power and terror. Although contemporary readers have a close association of heroes fighting dragons in medieval literature, the world of the manuscript is populated by all sorts of exotic, but dangerous, snakes. *Beowulf* stands out among the rest of the works because the characters live in a land the audience would have been familiar with, and were in close proximity to, but is portrayed as even more wondrous and dangerous

[50] In a parallel myth, Fafnir, the dragon that Sigurd fights, slithers on the ground, and the hero has to dig a trench and wound him with a sword into his belly. See Jesse L. Byock's *The Saga of the Volsungs* for the full account (63-6).

than the lands of the East. Momma summarizes this view at the end of his article, “It is interesting that insofar as the use of the word *wyrm* is concerned, the Scandinavia of the heroic age imagined by an Anglo-Saxon Christian poet should look even more outlandish than Alexander’s India imagined by a Greek author” (212).

The second feature of this purification theme involves the consuming human flesh. This activity is clearly abhorred by the narrators and the characters in the manuscript. Cannibals and flesh-eaters are immediate targets for purification in the stories, and they appear in each part of the manuscript except for *Judith*. First, St. Christopher comes from a race of dog-headed men called the cynocephali. Although we are missing the first part of the manuscript, we know from the descriptions of the saint in the torture scenes and from the *Old English Martyrology* that Christopher belongs to a group of monsters that ate humans. I elaborated on his appearance in the first chapter, so I will just add here that this particular text is unique among the others because it is Dangus, the antagonist, who is attempting to do the purification; he tries to kill Christopher by beating him, burning him, shooting him with arrows, and finally he successfully beheads him.

Two humanoid creatures consume flesh in *The Wonders of the East*. The hostes, like Christopher and the Grendelkin, are giants and live far from human habitation: “Begeondan Brixonte ðære ea, east þonon beoð men acende lange ond micle, þa habbað fet ond sconcan .xii. fota lange, sidan mid breostum seofan fota lange. Hi beoð sweartes hiwes, ond *Hostes* hy synd nemned. Cuþlice swa hwlycne man swa hi læccað, þonne fretað hi hyne” [Beyond the Brixontes River, from the east, large and mighty men propagate there who have feet and shanks 12 feet long and sides of their chests seven feet

long. They are of a dark hue, and they are called *Hostes*. Truly, whenever they catch some man they devour him] (22). These creatures are called "*men*" in the manuscript, and it is common that the monsters of the manuscript are often described as human. Mittman and Kim, in *Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript*, point out that these creatures belong, in some way, to humanity: "The *Wonders* explores perhaps most fundamentally the category of the familiar, the category 'human.' It must be recalled that many of these beings are described not as monsters, but rather as men" (18). The Donestre is another example; he is introduced as "*man-cyn*" (24) in the manuscript, and his act of devouring people up to their heads is made even more horrible by the knowledge that he belongs to our species. The Donestre, like many of the other monsters in the manuscript, try to take what is most intimate to us: identity. This creature, for example, is able to name its victim and his friends and family: "þonne nemnað hy hyne and his magas cuþra manna naman, ond mid leaslicum wordum hy hine beswicað ond hine gefoð" [Then he identifies him and the other people he knows by name, and with false words he deceives and captures him] (24). Thus this creature is similar to a siren from Greek and Roman mythology, except that the Donestre seems to take no pleasure in the death of his victim for he "sittað ond wepað ofer þam heafde" (24). It is a puzzling moment, but it reveals that this creature's appetite is stronger than his ability to reason; for all his knowledge, the monster's sinister desire for human flesh is what define him. Additionally, the Grendelkin are humanoid creatures, and Mittman draws a parallel between them and the Donestre: "The ambiguity of the Donestre in both text and image finds an echo in the textual description of Grendel in *Beowulf*. The poem tells us that Grendel is 'on weres wæstmum . . . næfne he wæs mara Þone ænig man

oðer.' That is, 'in the form of a man . . . except that he was greater than any other man'" (20). Similarly, Grendel's mother appears as a human, too: "Ðæra oðer wæs,/þæs þe hie gewislicost gewitan meahton,/idese onlicnæs" [The other was in the likeness of a woman according to those who might truly know] (1349-51). All of these creatures' humanity makes them even more dangerous for we can recognize that they are like us, and they flaunt the extremes of human nature violently: they are greedy, wrathful, vengeful, and gluttonous. There is one more human-like creature from *Beowulf* though he is never named. In the digression after Grendel's defeat, the hero is compared to Sigemund the dragon-slayer. This episode refers to the Norse myth of Siegfried killing Fafnir, who started his life as a human, but, due to his greed, became a dragon: "Fafnir became so ill-natured that he set out for the wilds and allowed no one to enjoy the treasure but himself. He has since become the most evil serpent and lies now upon this hoard" (59).[51] Later, after killing the dragon, Siegfried consumes the dragon's heart (66) and gains magical powers. This example draws Beowulf even closer to Grendel; already they share the strength of 30 men in one arm, but the poet explicitly links the hero to a dragon-slayer who eats part of his victim. Thus the monsters are never so far removed from human behavior, and their actions may be considered among the most heinous that others have committed (at least in the world of the manuscript).

Blurton, in her book on medieval cannibal narratives *Cannibalism in High Medieval English Literature*, theorizes that these kinds of stories have an explicitly Christian character. Namely, she finds a link between the sacrament of communion and cannibalism:

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[51] This translation is not my own; it comes from Jesse L. Byock's *The Saga of the Volsungs* (1990).

> Eucharistic theology is a fiercely debated topic throughout the Middle Ages [....] The theorization of the nature and meaning of the eucharist in the period with which this book engages is an important aspect of medieval society's understanding of the discourse of cannibalism, but it is by no means the only aspect. Throughout this period theologians and lay persons alike express concern at the proximity of eucharistic communion to cannibalism (6).

The act of receiving the communion host appears as a cannibalistic act because the priest presents the recipient the "body of Christ." Although this consumption is not, in reality, the eating of flesh, Blurton points out that there is a metaphor for the eucharist as the body of society: "The eucharist, is above, all a somatic image: eating the body of Christ incorporates individuals into that body and, by extension, incorporates them into the Christian community. Even when understood at its most literal, the eucharist nevertheless participates in a wide metaphoric field that indexes the concepts of body, corporate, incorporation, communion, and community" (7). What is notable about the cannibalistic acts in the *Beowulf Manuscript* is the fact that consuming flesh removes the eater from society. The hostes, Donestre, and Grendelkin all live apart from human civilization. In the first two cases, the creatures must be found by their victims; whereas, the Grendelkin are happy to invade human homes to satisfy their appetites and continue their feud against God and his people. There is no denying, however, that this action is considered impure by the narrators of the stories and even the characters themselves. They represent the greatest threat to the destruction of humankind, and, metaphorically, they represent the dissolving of both individual and communal identity.

Strangely enough, the next element, fire, is a more prominent purification image than water is in the *Beowulf Manuscript*. I mentioned above the scene where Wiglaf bathes his lord's wounds with water, all to no avail;[52] otherwise, fire is the tool to rid heroes of their enemies. Dagnus, for example, plans to have Christopher burned alive, Alexander burns the snakes and scorpions that have infested his camp, and Holofernes is cast into hellfire to rid Judith and her people of his threat. These fires are the same in significance as the fires rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah to rid the world of those impure places. Thus fire has the potential to purge, but it also can destroy. In some cases, it makes certain creatures or places inaccessible. The red hens of Lentibelsinea, the Valkyrie-eyed creatures, and the burning mountain, all from *Wonders*, prevent humans from making contact: the creatures burn up instantly and the mountain is perpetually on fire. Fire here represents our inability to assert our control over everything. They represent what is "out-of-bounds" for human experience, and it also adds an otherworldly quality to the places and creatures they are representing. Grendel, for example, has flames in his eyes as he enters Heorot: "him of eagum stod/ligge gelicost leoht unfæger" [in his eyes stood, most like a flame, an impure light] (726-7). While Grendel does not breathe fire like the dragon, some creatures in the manuscript represent a potent threat because of their fire-breathing capabilities. Alexander, in *Letter of Alexander*, encounters some fire-breathing snakes which kill a number of his men (54-5), and the dragon from *Beowulf* shares this quality. He even burns down Beowulf's home (2312-27). These serpents are an immediate threat that must be destroyed. Finally, fire can also represent self-destruction. Dagnus' futile attempts to burn Christopher on a bench that serves as a kind

[52] Another reference to water is negative. In *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, the men in Alexander's army must drink their own urine because the water is too filthy (46).

of mock throne, for example, only serve to foreshadow the saint's eventual victory. Even more telling, Dagnus asks Christopher, once he realizes that the torture is not working, "hu lange dyrstlæcest þu þæt ðu þis folc fram me tyhtest, swa þæt him nis alyfed þæt hi minum godum onsecgen?" [how long do you dare that you will draw the people from me so that it is not permitted for them that they may sacrifice to my gods?] (4). This scene foreshadows Dagnus' eventual conversion, and his torturing of the saint with fire is only self-defeating; he cannot resist God.

In *Beowulf,* fire features prominently as an image of self-destruction. Three fires represent the effects of feuding in the poem: Heorot, Finnsburg, and Beowulf's own home. In the first example, Heorot is a kind of heaven-on-earth: it is referred to as "heal-ærna mæst" (the greatest of dwellings) (78a), but a feud would eventually cause it to burn down: "heaðo-wylma bad,/laðan liges" [it waited for the surging battle, the loathsome flames] (82-3). This detail hangs over the readers as they learn of Beowulf's accomplishments. For all the victory that he brings, eventually, Heorot will be destroyed. Another image of destruction comes in the digression known as the "Tragedy of Hildeburh." A feud between the Jutes and the Danes ends with a Pyrrhic victory for Finn. At the joint funeral that the survivors hold for their dead comrades, the flames foreshadow the fighting that will come: "Guðrinc astah,/wand to wolcnum; wæl-fyra mæst/hlynode for hlawe. Hafelan multon,/ben-geato burston ðonne blod ætspranc,/lað-bite lices; lig ealle forswealg,/gæsta gifrost, þara ðe þær guð fornam/bega folces. Wæs hira blæd scacen" [War-smoke rose winding to the sky; the largest slaughter-fire roared in front of the funeral mound. Heads melted, wound-holes, those hostile bites on the body, burst open, and then blood sprayed out. Fire, the most greedy spirit, swallowed all

of those there, from both peoples, whom war took away. Their spirits were shaken" (1118-24). Instead of fire being the purifying element that helps these souls ascend to the afterlife, the fire is personified as a greedy entity that swallows up everyone regardless of which tribe they have come from. Their feuding does not end after the war; the fire foreshadows the final battle which Hengest instigates. The final image of fire as self-destruction comes when Beowulf's home is destroyed by the dragon. The creature, angry over the loss of a single cup from its hoard, sets fire to Beowulf's kingdom and castle. We should recall the opening of the poem here: Scyld is recognized as a good king, one who essentially robs his enemies and gives their treasure to his friends. The dragon represents the extreme variety of this kind of behavior. Both Grendel and Grendel's mother are greedy; they store up treasure in Heorot and in the mere but are not generous with it (a feature antithetical to the values set out in the prologue of the poem: "lofdædum sceal/in mægþa gehwære man geþeon" [a man may thrive in any tribe through generous deeds] (24-5)). The dragon represents how easily a feud can begin and how destructive its effects can be. Instead of the fires that purge something hateful and harmful, these fires are the gluttonous flames of war, decay, and death.

Moreover, there are other words in *Beowulf* that have symbolic implications that connect to similar words for "fire" and "burning" in the manuscript. A form of *bærnan* [to burn up] is commonly used throughout the poem to indicate the kind of burning that is done at funerals (1116, 2126),[53] when the blade melts from Grendel's blood (1616, 1667), and most often used to refer to the dragon (2272, 2313, 2546, 2548, 2569, 2673, 3041). Fire and death are intimately connected, and there are sequences in *Christopher*,

[53] The first reference here to is to Hnæf's funeral. Though fire is present at almost every funeral in *Beowulf*, *bærnan* does not appear in the other funeral sequences. The second reference is to the inability of Hrothgar's men to burn Aschere's body because Grendel's mother has taken his head. .

Wonders, the *Letter of Alexander*, and *Judith* to match. In the first text, Dagnus attempts to burn Christopher alive on a kind of mock throne. He ultimately fails, but his attempt to burn his enemy shows the extent to which he wants to be rid of the monster that has come to his kingdom; his previous attempt to kill the beast has failed, and he becomes increasingly desperate. Christopher also asks God to turn his body into a holy relic that will not only heal people but also protect the area he is buried in from fire (8). These traits of fire as a desperate last resort for eliminating something and as a destructive force persist in the other texts as well. In *Wonders*. The ren hens of Lentibelsinea *forbærnað* [burn up] if anyone touches them (16); they are inaccessible, just as many of the other wonders are. There is also a mountain that is completely on fire, which no one may travel to (30). This mountain is the image that ends the *Wonders*, and it is perhaps characteristic of many of the places and the creatures in this strange travelogue: they are impossible to control and inhabit. Another burning image comes in the *Letter of Alexander* where the army *forburnon* [sets fire] to the many creatures that have come to attack his army at night (54). Similar to Dagnus, Alexander is desperate, and the constant attacks on his troop has made him and his men weary of traveling through India. Additionally, the word *forbærnan* appears in *Beowulf* when the Danish men explain and lament to Beowulf that they cannot bury Aschere because Grendel's mother has taken his body (2126). In the funeral scenes, fire is often a positive image because it is the means by which a person's body comes into contact with the divine. The image of smoke climbing into heaven at Beowulf's funeral is a reminder of this positive property of fire. In this scene, however, the inability to burn Aschere's body is negative for it denies him the proper funeral rites. Finally, Holofernes is cast into the hell-fire in *Judith*. The image of fire here is overtly

negative and has religious connotations. The fire that consumes his soul is meant as a punishment for his wicked behavior on earth.

Light also plays a similar role that fire does. Images of fire and light can be both positive and negative. They can be used for destroying dangerous enemies, unclean creatures, and threats. Fire has a sinister association, as evidenced by the many serpents I listed above. The light from fire can also indicate something supernatural, whether that be divine light or the fires of hell. On one hand, it a common descriptor of heaven and goodness. For example, when Beowulf defeats Grendel's mother, a light appears in the hall, and Judith is referred to as a *beorhtan* (radiant) woman throughout the poem. Both these images suggest that the characters are pure and have divine sanction. Light can also be a symbol for the supernatural. In the *Letter of Alexander*, the Trees of the Sun and the Moon gain their power from light. Alexander, when he sees how tall the trees are, supposes that the plants get plenty of water, but the protector of the grove informs him that "þonne þæt *eclypsis* wære, þæt is þonne ðæs sunnan asprungnis oðþe þære monan, þæt ðe halgan triow swiðe weopen ond mid micel sare instyred wæron, forþon hie ondreadon þæt hie hiora godmægne sceoldon beon benumene" [when an eclipse occurred, which is when the sun or the moon fail to shine, the holy trees suddenly would weep and wail with great sorrow because they feared that they should be deprived of their divine power] (74-6). The word *godmægne* indicates that these trees have divine power, and the guardian takes special care to keep the grove pure because of its *godcundan* (divine) (74, 80) nature. While the these divine trees derive their power from the sun, there are other places that appear supernatural because of how they are lit up. *Wonders* ends with such an image: there is a mountain populated by *swearte men* (dark men)

where no human can visit because the place is *byrnende* (burning) (30). Grendel's mother's mere shares a similar quality at night; a *fyr on flode* (fire on the water) burns (1366a). It is not surprising that these latter two places should appear in this manner for brightly lit places signify the otherworldly, and fire is a common indicator of hell. In fact, in *A Descent into Hell*, the gates at the entrance of the underworld shine brightly: "Geseah he helle duru hædre scinan" [He saw the gates of hell shining intensely] (53). Finally, Grendel's eyes shine, and other monsters in *Wonders* share this quality, too. Mittman and Kim point out this fact in *Inconceivable Beasts*, "The poet does tell us that 'from his eyes shone forth a most ugly light,' a common monstrous trope" (21). This trait emphasizes their outlandish qualities and reinforces the fact that they do not belong among humans in civilization. Even the funeral fires which are kindled for Beowulf at the end of the poem suggest that he no longer belongs to this world. Fire moves him from the realm of the living to the realm of myth for in the last lines of the poem, he is praised as leader who has had all of the best virtues: "cwædon þæt he wære wyruld-cyninga/manna mildust ond mon-ðwærust,/léodum líðost ond lof-geornost" [They said that he was, of all the kings of the world, the mildest of men and the kindest, gentlest to his people and most eager for praise] (3180-2). He becomes what Scyld has been in the beginning of the poem: a model king, worthy of praise, but no longer belonging to this world. Thus fire can rest on both sides of the spectrum: the impure and hellish on one end and the pure and heavenly on the other.

Killing is, of course, the major purification ritual in the manuscript. It is done for religious reasons and very rarely does it happen for some mere practical purpose. Here I am going to speak broadly and include many of the words for "killing" to show that there

is some variety in vocabulary, but the sense of pitting good against evil remains the same. In *Christopher,* there are three words used for killing, but the sense is always the same: *forweorðe* [perish] (6), *acweald* [killed] (8), and *sleged* [slayed] (8). None of these words carry a particular connotation, but Dagnus does tell Christopher that he will destroy the monster completely: "þin nama of þys gemynde ond of þyssum life adilgod, ond þu scealt wesan ealra bysen þara þe ðurh þe on ðinne god gelyfað" [your name will be obliterated from existence and from memory, and you shall be an example for all who through you believe in your god] (4). All the other words should be read through this lens: Dagnus intends to completely purify his kingdom of Christopher and his false god. Most characters do not discuss death in such extreme measures before they attack, but there is a parallel moment when the Trees of the Sun and the Moon reveal that Alexander will *swyltst* [die] *mid atre* [from poison] (80) and that his mother will *gewiteð of weorulde* [depart from this world] in a particularly ignoble fashion: she will be left unburied for wild animals to consume (80). We are never given a reason why Alexander's mother is to be humiliated in such a fashion, but Alexander's death is very likely a result of his pride.

Nevertheless, there is a large variety among the words and there are few obvious groupings that we can make. This fact should be obvious because the scribes were not changing the words of texts that are separated by hundreds of years in terms of their composition. For example, *cwaelde* appears in *Wonders* when Alexander destroys the filthy giantesses (28), it is used in the *Letter of Alexander* when the trees tell Alexander that he will die of poison *nallas mid iserne acweald* [not killed with a sword] as he has thought he would (80), and it occurs in *Beowulf* as *cwaelm* when Cain is referred to as having killed Abel (107) and *acwealde* when Grendel's mother kills Aschere (2121).

Among these words there is no clear connection other than the purification themes I have been discussing. Some words seem to have a relationship to feuding, especially in *Beowulf*. *Slog* [slay] (108) and *sloh* (1581) are used when Grendel kills Danes in their sleep. *Banan* [killer] (587) refers to Unferth, who is a killer of his family, and it reappears when the pact between Finn and Hengst is made; they are instructed not to mention the fact that they follow their king's killer (1102). *Bona* appears when Hrothgar warns that when a man feels pride a killer comes for him (1743) and when Beowulf says that in feuds his hands, not his sword, were the *bona* [killer] (2506). None of these words strictly means "feuding," and I do not want to imply that they are the only words associated with feuds in the poem. Rather, they help expose a certain way that *Beowulf* is unique among the other manuscript texts. While every text addresses the purification and management of the monstrous, *Beowulf* alone addresses the devastating impacts feuding can cause a society. One way that the poem links the monstrous and feuding is through vocabulary. Along with the examples I cited above, the words *morðbeala* [slaughter] (136, 277), in reference to Grendel; *morðre* (892), in reference to the dragon perishing "in slaughter;" and *morþorbealo* (1079), in reference to Hildeburh, who can see the slaughter of her kinsmen in the Finnsburg episode. Perhaps the largest set of words that make an overlap between killing monsters and feuding is the set of words that use *wæl* [slaughter] as a prefix: *wæl*, [54] *wældeað*,[55] *wælræse*,[56] *wælbedde*,[57] *wæle*,[58] *wælbende*,[59]

[54] If Beowulf should fall in the slaughter (635).
[55] The slaughtering that afflicts the Danes (695).
[56] Beowulf *gefælsod* [purifies] (825) the *wælræse* (824) [slaughter-storm].
[57] Beowulf has Grendel in a bed of slaughter (964).
[58] The feud between Finn and Hnæf causes much slaughter (1113).
[59] Hygd makes slaughter-bonds (restraints) for those who look at her (1936).

wælgæst,[60] *wælfæhða*,[61] *wælfyre*,[62] *wællseaxe*,[63] *wælbleate*,[64] *wælræs*,[65] and *wælfylla*.[66] In *Beowulf*, there is a clear combination of monster and monstrous, and the "monstrous individual" can be seen reflected in Dagnus, Alexander, and Holofernes throughout the manuscript as well.

Moreover, beheading is a particularly common way that characters or monsters are killed in the manuscript. Dagnus is finally able to succeed in killing Christopher by having him beheaded, the Donestre leaves the heads of his victims after he eats them, Aschere's head is left over by Grendel's mother and is left at the entrance to her mere, both Grendel and his mother are beheaded by Beowulf, and Judith beheads Holofernes. Perhaps this action is closely associated with the loss of identity. In some way, a terrible crime has been committed, and the values of the Anglo-Saxon society are at stake. Christopher's beheading is a direct attack on Christianity, the Donestre captures people through deceit and false testimony, Grendel's mother reignites a feud (she is performing what is typically a man's action), Beowulf purges Heorot and the mere by beheading the Grendelkin (creatures opposed to God and society), and Holofernes' beheading is a result of his gluttonous and violent behavior toward Judith and toward God's chosen people, the Israelites.

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[60] Grendel is a slaughter-spirit (1995).
[61] In reference to the slaughter-feuds which Freawaru's marriage to the son of Froda will end (2028).
[62] The dragon spits slaughter-fire (2582).
[63] A slaughter-sword that Beowulf uses to kill the dragon (2703). This is same weapon as the *seax* that Grendel's mother uses (1545).
[64] Beowulf's wound is slaughter-wretched or "deadly," "fatal" (2725).
[65] The slaughter-rush (a deadly attack) between the Swedes and the Geats is recalled (2947).
[66] The Geat woman laments the slaughter-feasts (abundance of slain, slaying) to come (3154).

Fleeing is always a negative image in the manuscript. It is perhaps a symbol of the fleeing from God's grace (Satan, Adam, and Cain all flee from God in *Genesis*[67]). The only word used for "fleeing" throughout the texts is some form of *fleogan*. In many instances, monsters flee from men. Grendel tries to flee from Beowulf and ultimately succeeds, but leaves his arm behind (542, 755, 764, 820, 1003, 1264). In *Wonders*, there is a region called Ciconia where 20 foot tall, tricolored people with manes and mouths as big as fans reside. If they see people they *fleoþ* (flee) and sweat blood. Though the narrator identifies them as humans, they are monstrous at the very least. Also in *Wonders*, the *Homodubii fleoþ* if they see any people). In the east, there are giants with ears like fans, and if they see people they grab their ears in their hands and *fleoþ* so quickly that it looks like they are flying (24). In the *Letter of Alexander*, Alexander tries to capture and examine the tribe of hairy humanoids, who are nine feet tall, naked, and ate large fish from the water. When he attempts to get them they *flugon* [to flee, to fly] (66). The cynocephali also flee from Alexander as he pushes further into the east (66). What is clear about these example is the fact that the monsters are chased out in an attempt to reassert control over the areas they inhabit. The human characters want to purge these places because the presence of the monsters in intolerable or even dangerous. By itself, *fleogan* does not carry any meaning of purification, but in the context of the other words and images in the manuscript, it shares a thematic trend: what to do with the presence of the monstrous. In some cases, however, humans flee from some danger, and this action has a much stronger religious connotation. In *Beowulf*, a slave flees from his master (2224), which leads him to steal a cup from the dragon's lair, which then leads to the

[67] See Daniel Anlezark's *Old Testament Narratives*.

destruction of Beowulf's kingdom. Similarly, Beowulf's companions abandon him, which leads to his death (2846b-2891b). Finally, Holofernes' army flees after they learn of their leader's death by the hands of Judith and of the incoming army of the Israelites (318).[68] All of these examples have to do with the loss of a lord, an action which has many obvious negative associations in Anglo-Saxon England. Of course, sinners such as Cain are lordless and cast out, a clear parallel to Grendel and the men who betray Beowulf, but politically, a lord is the leader of his people. The beginning of *Beowulf* is a testament to the power an individual can have to unite a people and allow them to prosper. Scyld, the legendary king, referred to in the beginning of the poem, is a great benefit to his tribe: he provides for them and subdues their enemies. Once Beowulf dies, he can no longer provide for his people nor protect them from the incoming invasion. Similarly, Holofernes cannot protect his people from the Israelites. The slave and his stealing of the cup show just how much damage a lordless person can do; they act out of ignorance and bring destruction. Thus fleeing can be a potent symbol in the manuscript, and its connection to purification is more obvious when it is combined with the other elements I discussed above. This action has much to do with killing because the humans always attempt to manage the unclean element in their society, and if they cannot kill whatever threat is there, it is only because the monsters have fled in an attempt at self-preservation. When the humans flee, it is an act of cowardice. Like Beowulf asserts about Unferth, those who flee or hide from monsters are of no help to their fellows.

There is also a variety of purification words and rituals that do not fit with any of the themes listed above. As they texts have different authors and were composed across

[68] I cited the page number here from Fulk's *The Beowulf Manuscript*. The passage I am referring to begins at line 285 and ends at 323.

different time periods, it is not surprising that there are some elements that do not match. One such ritual involves Christopher's blood. Dagnus is blinded by the arrows he commands to be shot at Christopher, and the saint informs him that he will be *gehæled* (healed) of his blindness if he mixes blood and the soil on which he is martyred (8). The word *gehæl* appears again when Christopher implores God to heal people who come visit his body. Finally, when Dagnus is healed, he *ontynde* (recovered) (10). These words do not appear again in the manuscript, but they are clearly an important purification moment in the *Christopher* text. Another unique purification element has to do with speaking and telling the truth. The word *el-reordegan* means "foreign speakers," but it has the connotation of being a barbarian and an untrustworthy person. In *Wonders,* near the lakes of the sun and the moon, there are barbaric speakers with barbaric kings, who are said to be the *wyrstan* (worst) people (22-4), in *Letter of Alexander,* Alexander kills the barbaric-speaking people who attack his army (58), and Alexander remarks in a side note to Aristotle that King Porus is a barbaric-speaking king (62). Untrustworthiness is a major concern in these passages, and, in *Wonders*, the Donestre, who live on an island in the Red Sea, who seemingly know everything, trick people with *leaslicum* (false or vain) words, call them by name, then eat them. They clutch their victim's head and weep (24). Obviously, these monsters fit into the themes of beheading and cannibalism, but they also slightly overlap with the concern about false speech in *Wonders* and *Letter of Alexander*. Next, there is a reference to purity that has to do with sexual activity. The bishop of the sacred grove of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon informs Alexander that if he and his men are *clæne* (clean) (as Fulk translates "undefiled by intimacy with women") then they may enter the *godcundan* (sacred) and *halgan* (holy) area (74). These latter two words are

repeated frequently throughout this section of the text, but they do not appear in other sections of the manuscript in the same context as they do here. The last example comes from *Judith*. Holofernes' men get so drunk they are incapable of anything, and there are many words associated with their drunkenness: *medu-gal* (flown with wine, excited with mead), *swiman* (swimming in the head, dizziness, giddiness), *oferdrencte* (to overdrench, to give a person too much to drink), *win-sad* (wine-sated, being full of wine), *atolan* (dire, horrendous creature, foul or loathsome thing), *unsyfra* (impure, unclean, foul), *womfull* (full of filth), and *fula* (foul, dirty, impure, rotting) (302-6). Clearly, this theme is important to the story, and the author uses a large variety of words to suggest just how impure everyone else is in contrast to Judith, but these words do not find their way significantly into the other parts of the manuscript.

The Meanings of the Word "Purify"

In Modern English, the word "purify" comes with religious associations, but even the connotations of the words "clean," "cleanse," and "heal" suggest spiritual activity. In Old English, the same concept applies, and if you search for "purification" or "cleansing" words in the *Bosworth Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, many results appear: *abywan*, *clǽnsian*, *fælsian*, *feormian*, *fleotan*, *hluttrian*, *merian*, and *seóþan*. Each of these words is appropriate for a different context, but the large list points to the variety of meanings Old English could employ when referencing this concept. The *Beowulf Manuscript*, similarly, has a large variety of words for its purification theme and features. There are two reasons for the wide variety of purification words in the manuscript. First, the manuscript is composed of many texts from vastly different time periods. These texts changed over the course of time, and by the time Scribe A and Scribe B began to copy

and curate these texts, the stories had already been altered from their original forms, whatever they were. Leonard Neidorf, in his recent book, *The Transmission of Beowulf: Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior*, he argues that the scribes did not change the content of the text, just the spellings. The scribes, he notes, were rather faithful copyists of the original texts: "The evidence suggests, contrary to recent theoretical scholarship, that scribes painstakingly preserved the poems structural features" (149). He bases this assertion partly on the scribal activity within the manuscript but also the activity of other scribes working in this period: "The corpus of parallel texts therefore indicates that it would be a grave error to begin one's study of any old English poem with a priori assumption that the scribes substantially recomposed it during its transmission" (151). The scribes did, however, make mistakes in their transmission of these texts, and their mistakes have to do with the fact that these works, especially *Beowulf*, were not composed in their own time:

> Nowhere in the manuscript is there evidence that the scribes rejected words of authorial origin and replaced them with graphically dissimilar words of their own [....] Errors in the extant manuscript of *Beowulf* thus reflect the difficulties experienced by scribes transmitting a work composed long before they were born. Such errors are not signs of creative intervention. (153-154)

Neidorf offers a considerable amount of information about the scribes from a linguistic and historical point-of-view, but he underestimates the scribes creative contribution, which is the curation of the manuscript pieces. He dismisses the scribes' creative input entirely: "Reading isolated words rather than continuous texts, these

scribes paid little attention to the sense or meter of what they copied. Their job was to modernize and Saxonize the orthography of the text, not to discern its formal qualities or interpret its deeper meaning" (157). He argues later in the text that the manuscript was not changed for an audience contemporaneous with the scribes:

"*Beowulf* was not adapted or recontextualized for its eleventh-century audience. To the contrary, *Beowulf* was transmitted with minimal interference, with the result that it still retains the structural characteristics it possessed when it was first committed to parchment in Mercia around the year 700" (160). He bases this assumption not just on his analysis of the scribal behavior but on the fact that *Beowulf* does not reflect the historical reality of the eleventh-century Anglo-Saxons: "An interpretation of *Beowulf* reliant upon a nuanced understanding of its language and a deep grasp of its constituent heroic-legendary traditions is an interpretation belonging to the period of its composition, not the period of its reception. Such an interpretation appears to have become a historical impossibility by the eleventh century" (161). While I agree that an eleventh-century audience reading *Beowulf* would not have immediately recognized their own culture in the heroic ethos of the poem, it seems to me that if the scribes did not have any understanding of the content of texts then the theme of purification is an extraordinary coincidence. Furthermore, it does not follow that just because the scribes edited spellings and did not change the meanings of the word that they did not understand the texts. Consider a similar argument. Imagine you are walking through the Islamic Art galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Just looking at the art itself, you would not conclude that the curators merely cleaned and preserved the pieces but had no understanding of the materials they were collecting. The same assumption should not be made about the

scribes working on the texts in the *Beowulf Manuscript* because, first, it is not necessary that if the scribes did not change the words' meanings then they did not understand the text, and, second, the presence of the many patterns and themes running throughout the work suggests the opposite is true. In fact, a number of contemporary Anglo-Saxon scholars have found the manuscript to be linked by common themes. For Blurton, the acts of cannibalism in the first three parts of the manuscript have a political significance: "I argue that the first three texts in the manuscript figure the presence of cannibals in newly colonized spaces as an obstruction to political expansion; these cannibals signify the resistance to expansion and colonization" (10). Kathryn Powell also sees a political connection among the works of the manuscript, but argues that all the text contain this theme, not just the first three: "I would like to suggest that this new basis for the compilation may have been an interest in rulers and rulership, particularly in the ethical conflicts that arise in their interactions with foreign peoples as those rulers defend and expand their kingdoms" (10).[69] Other scholars focus on the number of monsters that appear in the texts. I have already cited R.D. Fulk in my last chapter, but his comments bear repeating: "Why these particular texts were collected in one book is not plain, but one influential explanation that has been offered is that the manuscript is devoted to narratives about monsters" (x). What these monsters signify has been open to much debate. Orchard links the manuscript by an interest in the dangers of pride, a theme that is present in many medieval texts: "That other medieval authors, albeit much later in the period, recognized similar literary potential for merging the physical and psychological worlds of men and monsters, and of pride and prodigies, in their own texts, can be

[69] For more about Powell's interpretation, see her article "Meditating on Men and Monsters: A Reconsideration of the Thematic Unity of the 'Beowulf' Manuscript" (2006).

demonstrated still further, by assessing the way in which the tale of a later Germanic monster-slayer is told [the *Saga of Grettir the Strong*" (139). But Orchard also recognizes the potential for the heroes to act in monstrous ways. Thus the manuscript, in his view, is not just a collection of monster stories or even a bestiary; rather, it is an exploration of the way in which humans and monsters can act similarly. He uses the example of Alexander's pride as an illustration of this theory: "The way that Alexander [...] can be depicted as a monstrous figure of pride, a monster-slayer who, in Christian eyes, is every bit as outlandish and inhumane as the creatures he fights, is surely instructive in considering *Beowulf* in the context of the manuscript which contains it" (139). We can easily apply this concept to Dagnus, Beowulf, and Holofernes, who are all figures who act in monstrous ways because of their pride.[70] Finally, Mittman and Kim see the potential for self-discovery in the encounters with the monsters in the manuscript. The monsters, they point out, are human in some way, and the monsters' proximity to us is a major theme: "The *Wonders* explores perhaps most fundamentally the category of the familiar, the category 'human.' It must be recalled that many of these beings are described not as monsters, but rather as men" (18). While their joint work on the *Wonders* section of the manuscript is the focus of their book *Inconceivable Beasts*, they identify this trend as being a broader phenomenon during the Middle Ages:

> In most cases, however, medieval treatments of the monstrous, while they focus on the capacity of the monster to signify, to point away from itself to a meaning that is elsewhere, at the same time recognize the treatises on the monstrous as, in most instances, not fictive but actual, not imaginary but

[70] See Orchard's chapter "The Alexander-Legend" from his book *Pride and Prodigies*.

> as real the representations of the stars and the reckoning of dates with which, as in Cotton Tiberius B.v, they are sometimes bound. (12)

A Curated Text: Purification Reimagined

While all these theories get at something important about the manuscript, they do not go far enough. I propose, instead, that the scribes placed the texts together as a reimagining of the instances of purification that take place throughout the text. There are five kinds of purification "events" that take place throughout the manuscript: the encounter with the monstrous, the disposing of the monstrous, a trip to an unclean place, God granting victory over the monstrous, and the gaining of wisdom from the purification experience.

The first purification event has to do with the presence of the monstrous. In each text, some group is threatened by the sight and power of some outside. Christopher is a unique example, of course, because he is the only monster that is also a protagonist, but his appearance is enough to frighten Dagnus into action. *Wonders* is a visual buffet of monsters, strange animals, and monstrous humanoids. The appearance of some of these creatures is hideous, but some are actually threatening to humans; Alexander, for example, kills the filthy, troll-women out of fear of their uncleanliness. Later, Alexander plays a central role as purifier in the *Letter of Alexander*, especially when he encounters the many snakes that threaten to poison his entire army. Beowulf's encounters with the Grendelkin and the dragon are among the most famous monster encounters in the manuscript, and their immediate threat is in their extreme power. Grendel snatches thirty men in one hand on his first night in Heorot, Grendel's mother flees with Aschere and leaves his head at the entrance to her mere, and the dragon burns down much of

Beowulf's kingdom, including his own home. Finally, Judith confronts the monstrous Holofernes in his own tent, ready to dispatch him once he becomes too drunk. The presence of monsters always constitutes a threat in the manuscript. Furthermore, these monsters are threatening for two reasons. First, they are like humans and are often described as people with exaggerated features. Earlier, I cited Mittman and Kim, who point out that these creatures have human qualities (18). This description applies not just to *Wonders*, but to other places in the manuscript: "The ambiguity of the Donestre in both text and image finds an echo in the textual description of Grendel in *Beowulf*. The poem tells us that Grendel is 'on weres wæstmum . . . næfne he wæs mara Þone ænig man oðer.' That is, 'in the form of a man . . . except that he was greater than any other man'" (20). The second threat these monsters pose is their desire to consume people. Blurton elaborates on this anxiety about cannibalism: "The cannibal not only dismembers the human body, but blurs it outlines, with the too literal incorporation of one body into another. It is, however, precisely this metaphoric range - of incorporation, of the annihilation of the body and thus identity - that lends cannibalism its utility as a metaphor for representing the dissolution of political as well as fleshy bodies" (8). While it is true that the *Letter of Alexander* and *Judith* do not contain cannibals, the threats from the monstrous have the potential for catastrophe: Alexander could lose his entire army, and Judith could witness the destruction of her people.

The second purification event stems from the first - the monstrous must be eliminated. Thus Dagnus seeks to kill Christopher, many of the wonders burn up or flee at the sight of humans, Alexander destroys the snakes and the guides who have tried to kill him and his men, Beowulf wrestles with the Grendelkin and fights the dragon, and

Judith beheads Holofernes. In *Wonders*, the words *fleoþ* (flee), *forbærnaþ* (burn up), *gefylde* (killed) are used in reference to the creatures coming in contact with humans. In *Beowulf*, the word *fælsian* is used when he fights all the monsters. Notice that these words fit into the major themes among the purification words: fleeing, fire, and killing. In the *Letter of Alexander* and *Judith*, the words *el-reordgan* (barbarians) and *hæþenan* (heathens) are used repeatedly, exposing just how much of a threat the outsiders are.

The third purification event is found in *Wonders*, the *Letter of Alexander*, *Beowulf*, and *Judith*, and it involves a trip to an unclean place. First, many of these places are uninhabitable because of their barrenness and because of the presence of dangerous monsters. In *Wonders* and the *Letter of Alexander*, there is a distinct association between these places and pride; Alexander cannot tame what is beyond his control though he tries. In *Wonders* many beasts are incapabale of being caught, killed, or even conceived of.[71] Nevertheless, these wild areas are unclean, and a common archetype in the manuscript is the outside traveling to this new, dangerous place. *Wonders* is the most obvious example of this pattern because the entire text is just a travelogue and catalogue of many strange places with equally disturbing monsters. The *Letter of Alexander* does much of the same, but the king's trip to the *terra incognitae* of India is a particularly harrowing episode in which the army is under constant threat, and the weather is completely unpredictable. Beowulf must travel to the Grendelkin's mere and the dragon's barrow. I already spoke about the use of the word *fælsian* [to purge] and its significance, but I mention it again here to show that the hero's expectation is to purify these places from the monsters. Similarly, in *Judith*, the heroine goes into Holofernes' camp in order to kill him.

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[71] Mittman and Kim translate *ungefrægelicu* as "inconceivable," a term that shows just how strange these monsters are in *Wonders*. See the chapter "Introduction: Conceiving the Inconceivable" pp. 1-25.

Holofernes and his men are particularly unclean, and their excessive drinking and feasting is compared to a swimmer drowning in the water. In the last two examples, the unclean places represent the opposite values of the heroes. The Grendelkin are feuding monsters, are at odds against God, and prevent the distribution of treasure. The dragon could be considered a symbol for the devil, but more likely he is a sign of destruction and pride. After his cup is stolen, he flies into a rage and attacks Beowulf's kingdom mercilessly. The places they occupy are also dangerous and unclean. The mere is strange, the surface of the water burns at night, and it is infested with monsters. Hrothgar even relates a story about a hart who, being chased by dogs, approaches the mere and chooses to die on the bank than jump into the water (1968a-1372b). The dragon's barrow is also a grim place because it is literally a grave; the treasure has been left behind by a warrior who has lost all his companions. Furthermore, it is revealed that the treasure is cursed at the end of the poem: "Næs he gold-hwæte, gearwor hæfde agendes est ær gesceawod" [He previously expected the owner's consent entirely, not a curse of gold-greed] (3074a-75b).[72] Unlike the various places we visit in *Wonders* and Alexander visits in the *Letter of Alexander*, these places carry symbolic meaning. They are not simply unclean because people cannot live there or get to them; rather, they are unclean and represent a threat to society. They are places where the opposite values of the characters' societies thrive; they are lawless and Godless. Because we are missing the beginning of *Christopher*, it is difficult to assess whether or not this archetype applies to the saint's story. Though if we

[72] This line is difficult to render literally. *Goldhwæte* literally means "greedy for gold," but the context of the line is clear: Beowulf previously expected God's favor and did not receive it. The Bosworth-Toller offers a more literal translation of the final part of the line: "he had never before seen more clearly the Lord's munificence, i.e. he had never had such good fortune as had befallen him in the acquisition of the dragon's hoard." Fulk's translation influence mine; he gives the line more context: "He had not by any means expected a curse on gold, rather the owner's favor" (289).

think about the tale generally, a saint travels into a kingdom that is not Christian with the intention of converting people. Christopher travels to an unchristian place, but that does not exactly make it impure. Alexander, for example, travels to the grove of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon, and he describes the place very positively. That area is itself sacred and free from wantonness, violence, and snakes. Without being able to read the beginning of the Christopher story, we cannot know for sure if this kind of archetype applies to it.

The fourth event is the moment when God grants victory to the hero, and this element is present in *Christopher*, *Beowulf*, and *Judith*. This archetype is perhaps the easiest to recognize because God explicitly gives the three characters permission to purify. In the first text, Christopher asks God to make his body a religious token that can perform miracles. His new power will be able to help him cure the sick and prevent fires. The first recipient of Christopher's favor is none other than his persecutor Dagnus. Dagnus is cured, both literally and figuratively, of his blindness and becomes a Christian. Next, in Beowulf's fights with the Grendelkin, God grants the hero victory. To further show his assent, a light appears from heaven in both Grendel's mother's mere and Hrothgar's meadhall after they both have been purified. Beowulf does not receive God's favor when he fights the dragon because his decision to fight is motivated by pride. Finally, Judith receives God's blessing to kill Holofernes, and her favor with God is echoed in the victory of her people over the Assyrians at the end of the poem.

Finally, the gaining of wisdom from the purification experience is the last purification event. Every text shares this element, but wisdom is received in many different ways. First, this wisdom comes only after the purification is done. In each

instance, the character who receives this wisdom has been made pure or has purified some place already. Often, the wisdom comes as a warning against pride. In *Christopher*, Dagnus receives wisdom after he is cured. His blindness and his pride are gone, and he gives a speech praising God and issues an order to convert his kingdom to Christianity. A similar religious episode occurs in *Judith* when the heroine addresses her people and reveals Holofernes' head. She encourages them to fight against the Assyrians, and she gives her people the knowledge that God is on their side. Holofernes died because of his pride in celebrating a victory before he has even won and in his monstrous actions toward Judith. The next set of texts have scenes where characters receive wisdom of their own mortality. In the *Letter of Alexander,* Alexander enters in the sacred grove with permission from the guardian because he and his men are pure: they are free from a woman's touch and the enter the area naked. Alexander learns of his own mortality from the divine trees; he will die from poison. According to Orchard, Alexander was known as a figure of pride in Anglo-Saxon England,[73] and his early death is a direct result of behavior. His reflection on this knowledge is an indicator of his hubris: he laments that he has not able to achieve more glory in his short life than he has been able to already (80-2). Finally, in *Beowulf,* Hrothgar gives a speech to Beowulf where he explicitly warns him against pride and tells him that all men are fated to die in some way or another. In these two texts, young men win fame and fortune from their heroic accomplishments, but they also come of age in that they learn their current prowess cannot last forever. Similar to Alexander, Beowulf is a figure of pride. The narrator notes in the final lines of the poem that Beowulf has been *lof-geornost* [eager for praise] (3182]. There are both

[73] See "The Alexander-Legend in Anglo-Saxon England" pp. 116-40.

positive and negative connotations to this word. In one sense, it is a desire for praise that stems from good deeds. The *Bosworth-Toller* points out, however, that the word has a negative connotation as well: "ostentatious, boastful." Certainly the latter interpretation has credibility because Hrothgar specifically warns Beowulf against pride, and, like Alexander, he dies from poison. Last, *Wonders* is an odd example among the other texts because there is no central character. The entire text itself can be taken as a kind of warning about what resides in faraway lands. Perhaps it itself is an extended warning against pride in assuming we can know and easily categorize the world. The creatures are *ungefrægelicu* [inconceivable], and the places where they reside are dangerous and often uninhabitable. Part of the allure of these regions, however, is the valuable minerals and spices that can be found there. Obviously, they are not obtained without substantial risk. Nevertheless, the text is informative in some way, yet it is an outlier in regards to this particular archetype I have been discussing. There is such a strong connection among the other texts between purification and wisdom, and *Wonders* does provide some knowledge, but it is knowledge gained from observing unclean places and monsters.

Conclusion

While some scholars have argued that the *Beowulf Manuscript* has been organized around a theme of monsters and the monstrous, it is more accurate to say that is a selectively curated piece involving purification rituals. Rituals have the potential to take us "beyond ourselves," and the words used in conjunction with the encounters with monsters are an important part of that process, undoubtedly. These words are signals that we should be thinking about these scenes in a religious context. Far from being merely entertaining, the monsters represent an impurity that must be somehow managed. Dennis

Todd, in an article for the Norton Critical edition of *Gulliver's Travels* makes an important point about encounters with foreign creatures that is also true of the encounters with the creatures in the *Beowulf Manuscript*: "The blurring of boundaries and collapsing of identities is at the heart of monstrosity [....] monsters make us experience a dispersion of identity. They are liminal creatures, straddling boundaries we wish to keep distinct and separate, blurring distinctions, haunting us with the possibility that the categories themselves are ambiguous, permeable" (410). Monsters force the characters and the readers to reflect upon their own identities and think about what makes them similar or different. Todd continues, "Monsters answer to suspicions we may have about our own identities of our everyday lives. They point to a hidden shape of the self we may intuit or fear lies hidden beneath the convenient fictions of our quotidian identities [....] And out of this play of sameness and difference, this dissolving of identity, our encounters with monsters offer us knowledge of what we really are beneath our quotidian identities" (411). But it is the action of dealing with the monsters and the monstrous that unites all the pieces of the manuscript. The desire to purge the monstrous is at the heart of this set of texts, and, just like Gulliver, the characters gain or reaffirm some knowledge about themselves in the process: "But such knowledge is horrifying and painful self-knowledge, a recognition of the self that causes our illusory identities to melt away. Hence our horror, our need for distance, our desire to manage, as Gulliver does, the sight of monsters" (411). In these texts, monsters and humans come into contact with one another, and the protagonists immediately distinguish themselves from these obscene creatures. These two groups may hold completely different sets of values, but they share a common element:

mortality. The process of encountering the monstrous in the *Beowulf Manuscript* is the process of learning about death.

At the center of *Beowulf* is a purification ritual. Beowulf, seeking revenge for Hrothgar's friend and advisor Aschere, arrives at the Grendelkin's mere. The surface of the lake burns at night, it is infested with serpentine monsters, and it is such a reviled place that even a deer who is chased by hounds chooses to be torn apart by them than have to wade in the waters. The hero arrives to settle a feud, and his enemy is a monster who is antithetical to all Anglo-Saxon values: he is fatherless, solitary, and disrupt Hrothgar's ring-giving.[74] Grendel's mother is another offender in the eyes of the Geats; she wages war in retaliation for the death of her son. In fact, the narrator even refers to her using the male pronoun *he* instead of *heo*, which I elaborated on in the previous chapter. God grants Beowulf victory, namely, when the hero catches sight of an ancient sword that is capable of killing the troll. A light appears in the underwater lair after her defeat, and he beheads Grendel's corpse and carries the head back as proof of his victory. He has *fælsod* (purified) both Heorot and this hellish monster hideout. While this scene is essential in interpreting *Beowulf*, its common elements are echoed throughout the entire manuscript. This scene is not the true center of the *Beowulf Manuscript*, but it is representative of an instance of purification that is repeated over and over by characters who encounter monsters. The scribes carefully chose these texts to belong to the manuscript because together they are in conversation about what is clean and unclean. They are also all in unanimous agreement about how to "manage" (to quote Todd again)

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[74] Mittman and Kim elaborate: "The monstrous stranger, Grendel, for example, can be read in his spectacular failure to integrate himself into society at least in part as an instantiation of the problem of his fatherlessness, his lack of clear and immediate paternal origin. The wonders for the most part do have named points of origin, but these are so vague and contradictory that they merely highlight the groundless nature of these liminal beings, thereby heightening the anxiety associated with them" (195-6).

the monstrous: it must be exterminated. Despite the variety of the words in the manuscript for “purification,” the close relationship among these words based on context is undeniable. The scribes noted this connection and organized around it; thus they kept the original texts relatively unaltered and acted instead as curators. The changes to the manuscript text merely make the, often archaic and regional vocabulary and spellings more palatable for their readers. The scribes interpreted these various texts and ordered them around these anxieties about the “other,” and the encounter with the monstrous in each text is an attempt to highlight the ritual purification that each protagonist is involved with.

CHAPTER 3: PURIFICATION, PRIDE, AND DEATH

The purification rituals of the *Beowulf Manuscript* highlight the vice of pride and the inevitability of death. Though purification can offer both literal and supernatural healing in just one of the manuscript stories, *Christopher*, more often people, places, and monsters are signifiers of some danger. Often, the narrators present some impure thing which must be dealt with. The most obvious examples are Beowulf's fights with the Grendelkin and the dragon. Yet the attempts to purify a place can be complicated. Christopher, for example, is a dog-headed monster who preaches a foreign religion in the land of King Dagnus. Clearly, the king wants to be rid of this creature, but it is Dagnus who is ultimately healed, both literally and figuratively, for he is a symbol of pride in rejecting the Christian faith. Moreover, Alexander is a symbol of pride in the *Letter of Alexander*, and his journeys to the East prove disastrous for his men. Ultimately, he learns of his own mortality and the suddenness of his death in a supernatural grove with talking trees. What is notable about the Alexander narratives, both the former text and the *Wonders*, is the fact that so many places are identified as pure or impure, habitable or uninhabitable, and civilized or uncivilized. In the impure places, areas with fire, snakes, poison, and monsters, the risk of death is high, and they serve as warnings that there are boundaries humans cannot reasonably cross. Despite these risks, Alexander plunges further into the unknown. The pure places, by contrast, are often upheld by sacred rituals. There is usually some guardian who protects these places from defilement, and this characteristic can also be applied to *Beowulf*, where the hero serves as a guard over Heorot and, later, his own kingdom. While in *Wonders* and the *Letter of Alexander* these places are maintained by the careful watch of some priest, in *Christopher, Beowulf,* and

Judith, some monster or monstrous individual must be killed in order to protect and cleanse some area. Finally, after these purification "events," some knowledge is gained, and in every text, pride and death are closely related themes. Dagnus comes to accept Christopher's religion through experiencing a miracle, and his pride is overcome by the power the saint has in his death. In *Wonders* and the *Letter of Alexander*, the impure places serve as a reminder the excessive pride of Alexander in trying to control what is beyond his power, and he realizes his own fate will be ignoble and inevitable. Beowulf cleanses Hrothgar's meadhall and receives a sermon from home, which warns him against pride and reminds him of the inevitably of death, a scene which is similar to Alexander's conversation with the trees in the sacred grove. Beowulf eventually ignores this advice and fights a dragon in his old age and dies. He relates to Wiglaf, his remaining loyal companion, that the wisdom of all age cannot protect against bitter loss. *Judith* is the outlier among the texts because no wisdom in gained from the heroine's killing of the filthy Holofernes. Yet the way she kills him, through beheading, connects the poem to the other ritualistic ways in which characters try to exterminate the monstrous.

Religion and Healing

There is an obvious connection between religion and healing in the manuscript. There are two examples where characters resort to supernatural charms to restore themselves. First, Dagnus is healed of blindness caused by a wound to his eye. In his attempts to kill Christopher, he becomes injured by the very same punishment that he hoped to inflict on the saint. In a scene that is particularly cinematic, the king orders his men to shoot Christopher full of arrows. These arrows then stop midair, and when Dagnus rushes to berate his victim, they spin around and fly into the eyes of the king. In

his mercy, Christopher offers to heal the unfortunate man: the ritual involves mixing the saint's blood, the soil on which he is to be martyred, and reciting a prayer that affirms Dagnus' newfound belief in the Christian God. Miraculously, he is cured: "Ond hraðe on ðære ylcan tide his eagan wæron ontynde, ond gesihþe he onfeng, ond he cigde micelre stemne, ond he cwæð beforan eallum þam folc, 'Wuldorfæst ys ond micel Cristenra manna God, þæs wuldor-geworces nane mennisce searwa ofercuman ne magon'" [And immediately at that very time his eyes recovered, and his vision returned, and he cried with a mighty voice, and he said before all the people: 'Wonderful and mighty is the God of the Christian people, whose wonderous work cannot be overcome by any man's stratagem] (10). Additionally, Dagnus' mind is healed of its pride. Blindness and sight are metaphors for understanding, and this particular tale shares an archetypal formula with the myth of Oedipus, another king blinded by his pride. The dramatic irony of Oedipus' interaction with Tierasius heightens this connection between sight and knowledge: Oedipus can see with his eyes when his understanding is blind, but after he receives the dreadful knowledge of his past, he becomes blind but can see the truth. In a similar moment of irony, Dagnus torturing of Christopher causes his own torture, his insistence on rooting out Christianity leads to his kingdom's acceptance of the new religion, and his blindness leads him to his belief. Thus blindness has both a positive and negative characteristic. Moreover, the very monster he is trying to kill is a source of his own salvation and purification. In a Christlike manner, through Christopher's death, the sinner is saved. Though speculative, we may infer another connection between Dagnus and Christopher in terms of purification and belief. The saint comes from a race of *cynocephali*, dog-headed monsters who eat human flesh. Though we are missing the first

section of the *Christopher* story, the *Old English Martyrology* fills us in on the details: God cures one of the race of these monsters, who becomes a preacher and martyr for the Christian faith.[75] Presumably, the beginning of the manuscript outlines this part of the story. As I mentioned previously, the descriptions of Christopher that we do have in the manuscript clearly identify him as a monster. If it is the case that the beginning of the story started with Christopher's conversion then we may add another instance of purification to the list. It would be especially relevant given that Dagnus is cured in both body and mind, and Christopher becomes cured of his ignorance, and his body becomes becomes a powerful purification tool. In a final request to God, the saint implores the Lord to make his burial site a holy place: it protects the surrounding area from fires, heals the sick, and grants wishes to those who pray there. He prays,

> [I]c þin þeow nu on þysse tide þe bidde gearwa, hyt unne þætte on swa hwylcre stowe swa mines lic-hama ænig dæl sy, ne sy þær ne wædl ne fyres broga. Ond gif þær neah syn untrume men and hig cumon to þinum þam halgan temple, ond hig ðær gebiddon to þe of ealre heortan, ond for þinum naman hi ciggen minne naman, gehæl þu þone, Drihten, fram swa hwylcere untrumnesse swa hie forhæfde. (8)

[I, your servant now, at this time am prepared to ask you, grant it that in whichever place any part of my body is, there shall be no want nor fire there. And if there are infirm people there, and they come to your holy temple, and they pray with all of their hearts, and in your name they invoke my name, heal them, Lord, from whatever infirmity they are afflicted with.]

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[75] I quoted from this section of the *Martyrology* in the first chapter.

Thus, like Dagnus, his body becomes a religious symbol of purity, cleansed of earthly imperfections and imbalances. Their monstrous natures are especially cleansed.

There is another attempt at healing in the manuscript. At the end of *Beowulf*, the titular hero is wounded by the dragon's venomous bite. Wiglaf, Beowulf's faithful companion, attempts to wash out the wound with water that he gathers in his helmet: "Hyne þa mid handa heoro-dreorigne,/ þeoden mærne, þegn ungemete till,/wine-dryhten his wætere gelafede/hilde sædne ond his helm onspeon" [Then with his hands, blood-stained, the good companion bathed his renowned lord, wearied by battle, with water and unfastened his helmet], "He ða mid þam maðmum mærne þioden,/dryhten sinne driorigne fand/ealdres æt ende; he hine eft ongon/wæteres weorpan, oð þæt wordes ord/breost-hord þurhbræc" [He then found his lord, the renowned prince, with the treasures, at the end of his life. He began again to sprinkle him with water until the beginning of words broke through his thought-hoard] (2720a-2724b, 2788a-92a). This attempt to purify the master's wound are futile; God has not granted the hero a final victory. Yet, similar to the Dagus story, pride and death are major themes that are present in this scene. Beowulf is an example of pride; he is a king who, in his old age, does not heed Hrothgar's words or example. He fights the dragon with a small group of retainers nearby instead of gathering an army to defeat it; he trusts too much in his former fighting prowess. Unlike Dagnus, whose pride dissipates in a healing moment, Beowulf's pride leads him to his death. The image of the water though is a significant symbol because in the entire manuscript, fire proves to be the more useful purification tool than water. In fact, water is often a source of uncleanliness: the pool that attracts the various snakes and scorpions that pester Alexander's camp, the swimming match between Beowulf and Brecca ends with a

monster fight in the sea, and Grendel's mother's mere is infested with horrible creatures. Only the legendary king, Scyld, is sent off to the water in a kind of apoetheosis that is unparalleled in the rest of the text. In fact, in stark contrast to the fires that take Beowulf's soul up to heaven at the end of the poem, the exact center of *Beowulf* is his trip to the haunted mere, which is a kind of descent into the underworld. There the values of medieval English society are turned upside down: the mother is more powerful than the son, the treasure is hoarded and never distributed, and creatures are at odds with God.

The second example of purification and healing has to do with Grendel. Grendel has a charm on him that protects him from weapons, which is part of the reason why he is so successful on his night raids on Heorot (798-805). Nevertheless, Grendel's pride is a source of his downfall, and Beowulf purifies, literally *fælsian* (432), the hall with God's blessing. Never before, the narrator of the poem explains, has Grendel met a man as strong as Beowulf, and his night in Heorot with Beowulf is the worst he has ever experienced: "næfre he on aldor-dagum ær ne siþðan/heardran hæle, heal-ðegnas fand" [He never in the days before nor since found harder fortune or harder hall-thanes] (718a-719b). Interestingly enough, we can draw a comparison between Beowulf and the monster just as we can draw a parallel between Dagnus and Christopher. Both Beowulf and Grendel have the strength of 30 men in one hand grip (Hrothgar affirms this fact about the hero when he first hears of him in his hall, and Grendel grabs 30 men on his first night in Heorot). Also, their pride leads them to overestimate their strength. Beowulf, before he fights the dragon, recalls the many victories he has won, and Grendel, before his final night in Heorot, recalls how easy it is for him rip apart men and devour them and how often he has accomplished this wicked deed: "Þa his mod ahlog;/mynt þæt

he gedælde, ær þon dæg cwome,/atol aglæca anra gehwylces/lif wið lic" [Then his laughed in his mind; before the day came, the terrible monster intended to sever the life from the body of each of them] (730b-733a). Also, Beowulf, when he fights Grendel's mother, finds himself in a similar situation to Grendel on his last visit to Heorot. Grendel enters the mead hall, unaware that he is being watched, and he is suddenly grabbed by Beowulf with a strength that overwhelms him. Similarly, Beowulf, when he enters Grendel's mother's lair, is unaware that she is watching him, and he is overtaken by her. She grabs him and drags him down to her hellish, underwater cave and overcomes him in wrestling. Ultimately, Beowulf is able to prevail in both these encounters through God's help, but these parallels show the close relationship between monstrous pride and actual monsters.

Burning and Purity

While pride is the theme involving the actions of the characters, fire often reminds the readers of death. Fire, as I mentioned above, is more often the symbol of purification than water is, but often fire has a supernatural connotation to it in the manuscript. The phoenix from *Wonders* is an example of this kind of quality. The bird, associated with the east through its nest of cinnamon, regenerates itself through flame: "On þære yclan stowe byð oðer fugel-cynn *fenix* hatte, þa habbað cambas on heafde swa pawan, ond hyre nest þætte hi wyrcaþ of ðam deor-weorðestan wyrt-gemangum þe man cinnamomum hateð. Ond of his æðme æfter þusend gearum he fyr onæleð ond þonne geong upp of þam yselum eft ariseþ" [In the same place is a kind of bird called the phoenix, which has crests on its head like a peacock, and their nest that they build is made of the most valuable spices which man calls cinnamon. And after a thousand years, he kindles a fire

from his breath and rises again from the ashes young] (29-31). This creature, who is the subject of another Anglo-Saxon poem bearing the same name, *Phoenix*, is associated with Christ. Its unique ability to raise itself from death makes it the best representation for the passion and resurrection of Jesus. In this way, fire and death have a close relationship, especially in *Beowulf*. Often, for example, we have funeral pyres that represent a character's ability to ascend to heaven. Beowulf's funeral is most characteristic of this trend. In fact, the narrator specifically mentions that Beowulf's soul is taken up to the heavens through the flames of the fire:

> Þæt wæs þam gomelan gingæste word
> breost-gehygdum, ær he bæl cure,
> hate heaðo-wylmas; him of hræðre gewat
> sawol secean soðfæstra dom. (2817a-2820b)

[That was the old man's last speech from the thoughts of his heart before he gave himself to the pyre, the hot flames; his soul departed from his breast going to righteous judgement.]

His funeral is not just an opportunity for heavenly ascent; it is a moment of bitter realization for his people: death and destruction approach them all (3005b-3027b, 3137a-55b). The funeral flames spark feuds as well. The flames of Handscio's and Aschere's pyres (2120-2128) spark a desire in Beowulf and Hrothgar to revenge themselves on Beowulf's mother. In the Finn digression, the bodies even explode in the flames, which foreshadow the terrible destruction to come:

> Guð-rec astah,
> wand to wolcnum; wæl-fyra mæst

hlynode for hlawe. Hafelan multon,

ban-geato burston ðonne blod ætspranc,

lað-bite lices; lig ealle forswealg,

gæsta gifrost, þara ðe þær guð fornam

bega folces. Wæs hira blæd scacen. (1118b-24b)

[War-smoke rose, curled to the skies; the most immense of funeral fires roared by the burial mound. Heads melted, wounds burst open, and blood gushed, the hateful bites of the body; fire, the greediest spirit, swallowed all, both of those peoples who war carried off. Their glory passed away.]

Thus, like blindness, fire is both a positively and negatively charged symbol. On one hand, it purifies the soul to ascend to a heavenly realm. On the other, it is sign of destruction and doom.

Fire is also used aggressively to destroy enemies. Dagnus, for example, attempts to kill Christopher by burning him on a mock throne, which does not prove effective. Heather Blurton, in *Cannibalism in High Medieval English Literature* elaborates, "The tortures of Christopher's martyrdom are symbolically royal: he is seated on a burning chair and crowned with a burning helmet that is suggestive of a crown" (44). In another instance, Alexander burns the snakes and scorpions that attack his army at night. He explains, "[W]e þa mid scyldum us scyldan, ond eac mid long-sceaftum sperum hie slogan ond cwealdon, monige eac in fyre forburnon" [We then protected ourselves with shields, and also we slashed and killed them with long-shafted spears, we also burned many in fire] (54). As I mentioned in my previous chapter, the various attempts to purify sacred places are ultimately futile. Dagnus' attempts to kill Christopher end in his own

conversion, and Alexander, despite his colonizing efforts, will die before he can return home. What is striking about the use of fire in these two examples is its political connotations. Dagnus uses fire to try to rid himself of a potential threat to his power. The mock throne he makes from a bench, as Blurton points out, heightens the dramatic irony of the scene. Christopher, through God, has all the power, despite Dagnus' attempts to render him helpless. Additionally, Alexander uses fire as a colonizing tool. Fire is the symbol of civilization, and he uses it to burn the beasts that attack his army. Similar to the former king, he experiences a reversal of fortune: the Trees of the Sun and the Moon reveal his untimely demise will occur soon. The fire that is supposed to protect and eradicate the threats the power is only temporary. Nevertheless, fire is one of the most prevalent images in the manuscript, and it serves as a remind of death, whether positively or negatively.

Poison and Impurity

One image in the manuscript reminds us of death and is always negative: poison is impure and deadly. There are no instances of anyone recovering from poison in the manuscript, especially when that poison emanates from serpents. Though Alexander attempts to rid his army of various threats, giant snakes appear and begin to attack the army with their poisonous breath: "Wæs þæra wyrma oroð ond eþung swiðe deað-berende ond æterne, ond for hiora þæm wol-beorendan oroðe monige men swulton" [The breath and exhalations of those serpents were death-bearing and poisonous, and because of their plague-bringing breath many men died] (54)**.** There is a parallel here with *Beowulf*. The dragon that attacks Geatland at the end of the poem is poisonous as well. In fact, both Beowulf and Alexander die by poison. The Trees of the Sun and the Moon

reveal this fact to the young king when he visits their sacred grove (80). Similarly, Beowulf suffers and dies from a venomous bite (2688-2693, 2711-9). Once again, we are reminded of the inevitability of death and the futility in trying to resist it. Wiglaf, for example, in a desperate moment, tries to wash out his lord's wound, but it is of no avail. The men with Alexander weep when they hear his fortune, but their tears cannot change his fate. Moreover, we can connect Alexander and Beowulf by their pride. Andy Orchard notices this link and explains that for the Anglo-Saxons, Alexander was a figure of excessive pride, which makes him more monster than man: "The way that Alexander [...] can be depicted as a monstrous figure of pride, a monster-slayer who, in Christian eyes, is every bit as outlandish and inhumane as the creatures he fights, is surely instructive in considering *Beowulf* in the context of the manuscript which contains it" (139). Perhaps calling Alexander "outlandish" is a bit strong, but certainly the trees' revelation at the end of the *Letter of Alexander* is shocking because he endures so much throughout the text. Beowulf also endures many hardships. We do not expect such a powerful figure to die from poison, an ignoble way to perish. Metaphorically, we might consider pride to be a kind of poison, or at the very least a spiritual imbalance that makes a person susceptible to danger. Hrothgar, in fact, warns Beowulf against such complacency, which I will discuss at the end of this chapter.

Poison is also characteristic of the unknown and otherworldly. What is unfamiliar is dangerous in the manuscript. The poisonous, white mist, for example, in the *Letter of Alexander*, comes from a lake and kills Alexander's men. He is helpless to resist (57). In another example, Beowulf, upon inspecting Grendel's dead body, chops off the creature's head as proof of his victory, and the monster's poisonous blood melts the sword. This

trait of Grendel's is mentioned three times in the manuscript (1606-11, 1614-7, 1666-8), and it foreshadows Beowulf's fight with the dragon, who will poison the hero. These images of poisonous liquids and vapors are just reminders of the dangers of the outside world. The confrontation between men and monsters and the journeys into unknown lands are primarily expressions of anxiety about foreign people and creatures, beasts with the distorted bodies of men, and flesh-eaters, who prey upon the weak and unsuspecting. Mittman and Kim have a useful comment in this regard:

> The outside was indeed, for the Anglo-Saxons, a place of frightening chaos and excess. And yet, when viewed from a distance [...] the chaos tends to cohere into a unified albeit certainly monstrous body which we might compare with the normative body politic of England. Just as the individual could compare his 'normal' body to the chaotic bodies of the individual wonders, so too, on the macro scale, a "normal" society could compare its body to this monstrous collective." (149)[76]

While they see a parallel between the monsters and English identity at the time of the manuscript's composition, we can just think about poison archetypally; it represents the threat of that which is out-of-bounds, and that which comes from outside that can ruin us within. It is impure, but in the *Beowulf Manuscript*, it cannot be stopped.

Light and Purity

Not all images in the manuscript are impure. Light comes in both the *Letter of Alexander* and *Beowulf* sections to mark the presence of the divine in a positive way. In

[76] Sarah Foot's article "The Making of *Angelcynn*: English Identity Before the Norman Conquest" (2002) is also useful in this context. Part of being "English" in the Anglo-Saxon Age was accepting that there were many foreigners who mingled with the various peoples of England. The island was always a place where many cultures met, often in hostility.

contrast to the emphasis on pride and death, the light symbolizes power, victory, and God's acceptance. Ultimately, the light proves to be impermanent as well for it does not consistently cast its favor on Alexander and Beowulf. First, the trees of the sun and the moon get their power from the light. Alexander wonders how the trees have grown so tall, and the bishop informs him that the grove is sacred: no rain falls, no serpents enter, and the light from the sun and moon gives the trees their power. Thus they fear the eclipse: "Eac þonne he sægde se bisceop þonne þæt *eclypsis* wære, þæt is þonne ðæs sunnan asprungnis oðþe þære monan, þæt ðe halgan triow swiðe weopan [...] forþon hie ondredon þæt hie hiora godmægne sceoldon beon benumene" [Then the bishop also said that when there is an eclipse, that is when the sun overcomes the moon, that the holy trees immediately weep [...] because they dread that they will be deprived of their divine power] (74-6). The eclipse reminds us that not all power lasts forever, and it foreshadows Alexander's eventual realization that his power will soon fade away, too. Light appears in three important moments in the *Beowulf* section as well. Beowulf says light will come after Grendel is defeated (603-6), a light appears in the underwater lair after Grendel's mother is defeated (1570-2), and a light overtakes the darkness after Hrothgar's speech in the transition to morning (1799-1803). Contrast these scenes with the Grendelkin, who thrive in the darkness (86-90, 115-6, 164-9, 646-51, 702-7), and the dark clouds that cover up their lair as Beowulf exits it (1630-1). The image of light has obvious religious implications. God shows his favor in Beowulf by shining light down from heaven. Notice that the light does not appear in the dragon sequence because the hero has not received divine sanction to fight the dragon in the way that he does. His pride affects his judgment.

Light is another symbol of purity, and the darkness represents those at odds with God's plan.

Impure People and Places

Certain impure actions hasten death, and heroes are quick to purify a place with unclean people or monstrous individuals. The troll women from the *Wonders* are described as being unclean and filthy, for which reason Alexander kills them. The narrator elaborates, "Of hyra unclennesse hie gefylde wæron from þæm miclan macedoniscan Alexandre" [Because of their impurity they were killed by the mighty Macedonian Alexander] (28). There is no indication that these women were prideful; rather, their presence is enough to warrant immediate eradication. This action is unusual for the *Wonders* and *The Letter of Alexander*. While monsters (and one monstrous individual) are killed in *Christopher*, *Beowulf*, and *Judith*, the other two texts are not preoccupied with purifying places. Instead they contrast the balance between clean and unclean. While the East is a land of great riches, especially in spices, jewels, and gold, according to the two stories, there are limitless dangers: monsters that consume humans, giant snakes and bugs, and overwhelmingly large and terrifying creatures. What is singular about the incident with the troll women is the fact that they are immediately identified as a potential threat and gotten rid of. Yet there are four examples of other places whose inhabitants are not exterminated despite the threat they pose and the inhospitibility of the land they live in. Some lands, for example, are unfruitful because of their population of snakes: Persia is filled with serpents (19), the islands south of the

Brixontes are populated with dragons (23)[77], and the *terra incognitae* of India is a place of boiling sands, is poor in water and moisture, and is infested with snakes (43). Alexander only kills snakes when they attack his army, especially when they breathe poisonous vapor. In another part of the *terra incognitae,* at the island city in the river, two hundred of Alexander's army are eaten by giant water monsters. Alexander throws in the guides as punishment (51), but he does not kill the monsters. The fact that the unclean trolls are women may provide a motive for Alexander's actions. I will explore this element in the next chapter, but it is enough here to recognize that at least one land full of creatures is purified, while other places are noted for being inhospitable.

Often the lands the monsters inhabit are desolate and not fruitful. Grendel, for example, roams the marshes and fens (100-5, 1357-1361, 1361-1379, 1402-1441), and the dragon lives in a grave, which is surrounded by a wasteland:

> hat ond hreoh-mod hlæw oft ymbbehwearf
> ealne utanweardne; ne ðær ænig mon
> on þam westenne — hwæðre wiges gefeh,
> beadwe weorces; hwilum on beorh æthwearf,
> sinc-fæt sohte; he þæt sona onfand,
> ðæt hæfde gumena sum goldes gefandod,
> heah-gestreona. (2296a-2302a)

[Hot and fierce-minded it went all around outside the barrow often; there was not any man in the waste lands — it rejoiced at potential warfare, the acts of battle; it turned over

[77] The narrator of the *Wonders* indicates that this land is hard to travel to because of the dragons, but we may assume it is unfruitful as well because snakes always seem to occupy unfruitful places in the manuscript.

the barrow, sought the precious cup; it soon found that some man had perused the gold, the rich treasures.]

Moreover, some of these lands do not seem to have any signs of life. At the end of *Wonders*, there is a flaming mountain that no one can inhabit (31); we could compare this image with the ending of *Beowulf* where the kingdom is being burned down by the dragon (2312-2323). In the *Letter of Alexander*, the *terra incognitae* has many desolate places. I described some of these above, but another example (without monsters) is the first river the army comes across: the water is too bitter to drink, and some men begin to drink their own urine as a result of their extreme thirst: "[H]wilum hie ele byrgdon ond on þon þone grimman þurst celdon. Sume men ðonne of hiora scome þa wætan for þæm nyde þigdon" [At times they tasted oil and in that way quelled their intense thirst. Because of their desperation, some men resorted to the urine from their body] (46). Finally, the area beyond King Porus' kingdom is infertile and uninhabitable, and even the the seas are too dark to navigate (63-5). One night, Alexander's army experiences snow and fire in one evening: "Hwæþere us þær wæs anes þinges eþnes, þæt se snaw ðær leng ne wunede þonne ane tide. Ða sona wæs æfter þon swiðe sweart wolcen ond genip, ond þa eac cwoman of þæm sweartan wolcne byrnende fyr" [However, we were fortunate in one way, that the snow did not remain there longer than an hour. Very soon after that there quickly came dark clouds and mist, and then from each of the dark clouds came burning fire] (68). These places all illustrate the harsh extremities of the world, and the pride of Alexander who dares to lead his men there. If anything highlights the young conqueror's pride, it is the pitiful tales of his men dying in all sorts of horrific manners

and their occupation of places that are impure and out of balance with the necessities of human life.

Moreover, there are a number of individuals whose pride and impurity go hand in hand. Grendel is a prime example: he is descended from Cain (99-105), eats flesh (120-5, 730-4, 740-5), and rules Heorot at night in defiance of everything just (145-7). He is also an enemy against God, and it is clear his actions are not divinely approved. God limits Grendel to control of Heorot only in the darkness, and he is not allowed to approach Hrothgar's throne. God also gives Beowulf help in killing Grendel, and he also assists in the killing of Grendel's mother. This kind of spiritual imperfection and ghastly behavior can also be seen in Unferth, another character closely associated with Cain. After Unferth challenges Beowulf's reputation, the hero reveals that Unferth has killed his own kinsmen and will suffer in hell for it: "þeah þu þine broðrum to banan wurde,/heafod-mægum; þæs þu in helle scealt/werhðo dreogan" [though you became a killer to your brothers, those close kinsmen; because of that you will suffer damnation in hell] (587a-589b). In a similar fashion, the narrator of *Judith* explicitly says that Holofernes' soul will go to hell once he dies. He ends up in the *wyrmsele* (snake-hall, hell). Holofernes is also a figure of pride, but he and his men are are described as "filthy" and "impure" because of their excessive drinking and feasting. Holofernes, additionally, is a figure of lust, and he intends to rape Judith in his tent . Similar to the death of the Grendelkin, God sanctions this king's death, and it is Judith who remains pure and untouched throughout the entire episode. Unlike the impure places that I described above, there is an explicit spiritual dimension to impure individuals: they are gluttonous, killers, and are at odds with God. Thus impurity can come in a number of forms in the manuscript. In one sense

it is physical and dangerous; on the other hand, it is an indicator of how bad a monster (or person's) soul is.

Places of Purity

Not surprisingly, *Wonders* and the *Letter of Alexander* have the most places of fruitfulness and purity in the manuscript. Both these sections cover more geographical ground (even if most of it is imaginary) than the other texts. Some lands, in contrast to the impure and infertile regions with monsters, are plentiful and wondrous. In the Golden Vineyard of the Rising Sun, grapes are 150 feet across and produce jewels (26)**.** The tallest mountain in Babylon also produces jewels (26), and the realm of the *Catini* has hospitable kings who rule over lands where trees grow precious stones (28). Alexander approves of this land for its kings' gift-giving: "Se Macedonisca Alexander, þa he him to com, þa wæs he wundriende hyra menniscnesse, ne wolde he hi cwellan ne him nan lað don" [The Macedonian Alexander, when he came to them, was taken back by their humanity, and he would not kill nor do harm to them] (28). The region of Caspia is similar; Alexander marvels at the land's fruitfulness (41), and in the area before the sacred grove of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon, he recounts how the people live in plenty (73, 79). In direct contrast to the inhospitable wastelands I described above, these places remind the readers why Alexander traveled so far into the East. The promise of riches, wealth, and fame are common temptations and motivational incentives for explorers and rulers alike. His reaching these lands show how successful he is, and his achievement is considerable when we recall all the hardships he faces getting there. These locations represent the payoff of ambitious behavior.

There are, however, other purified places that have a more religious quality. First, the Lakes of the Sun and the Moon, found in the *Wonders* section, bear a similarity to the sacred tree grove of the *Letter of Alexander* text. The lakes have supernatural qualities, and the trees around the lakes produce precious oil: "On þisse stowe beoð treow-cyn þa beoð lawern-beame ond ele-treowum onlice. Of þæm treowum balzamum se deor-weorðesta ele bið acenned" [In this place is a kind of tree which is similar to laurel and olive trees. From these trees balsam, the most precious oil is produced] (24). Furthermore, the island of the sacred temples to Jove and the Sun has a guardian who maintains the sites. This priest cares for the temples and tends to the bishop of that region who lives austerely - he only eats oysters: "[H]e ða hofa gehealdeð ond begymeþ ond setl *Quietus* þæs stillestan bisceopes, se nænine oþerne mete ne þige buton sæ-ostrum, ond be þam he lifede" [He preserves and cares for the temple and the seat Quiet of the most still bishop, who consumes no other meat except sea-oysters, and by those he lives] (26)**.** These two holy sites are combined into one in the *Letter of Alexander* - the grove of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon is a divine place with trees that can see into the future and speak to people. The guardian keeps the grove pure from women and violence. Interestingly, Alexander does not purify the land. He comes as a conqueror, but it is his appearance at the mysterious grove is marked by an attempt to conform to the giant bishop's request that the men who enter the sacred area go in naked and that they "beoð clæne from wif-gehrine" or "are clean from female contact" (74). In this scene, Alexander and his men are the ones who need to be cleansed in order to enter a sacred area. Thus there is a certain anxiety that characters express about their contact with the Others. Often these feelings cause one of the parties to attack the other. When Grendel

hears the *scop* sing about creation, it is just as hateful to him as it is for Dagnus to hear Christopher's preaching. The sight of Grendel entering the hall is hateful to Beowulf in the same way Grendel's mother's sight of Beowulf entering her mere is hateful to her. Part of the reason why the sight of monsters is so negative in the manuscript stems from the obvious defilement they bring to sacred areas. The sole exception is the *Christopher* text where this situation is reversed. It is the monster who brings purity to an area without Christianity. The monster is the humbler of the proud, and he dies so that healing can occur. This same pattern repeats at the end of *Beowulf*. The hero, now "monstrous" in some way because of his pride (similar to Dagnus, Alexander, and Holofernes, who all overestimate their strength) dies in an attempt to save his people.

Ritual and Purity

The impurity that Grendel brings to Heorot is not a kind of physical defilement; his actions and his animosity with God are impure. This kind of impurity is, broadly, of a spiritual variety. Dagnus' blindness is an example of this kind of ailment: his bodily injury is a reflection of his spiritual state. In the previous examples, places and people could be considered impure for a variety of reasons. They serve to highlight the essential themes of the texts, as I have argued, which are the dangers of pride and the inevitability of death. These rituals below all are actions done for and approved by God (or some deity). Although Dagnus' healing fits well into this category of ritual purification, it is the sole example in the manuscript of someone being healed of some imperfections. Other rituals are much more prevalent: ritual upkeep, ritual giving, ritual killing, and ritual transformation of place.

First, there are moments of ritual upkeep that appear throughout the manuscript. In both *Wonders* and *The Letter of Alexander*, there are holy men who guard sacred sites in order to maintain their purity. The island of the sacred temples to Jove and the Sun, for example, has a priest who maintains the site and eats only oysters, a sign of his sacrifice and commitment to the gods (27). The sacred grove of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon is another example: the bishop instructs Alexander and his men to only enter the special area naked and only if they are free of a woman's touch and have no intent to kill (75-7). The special emphasis on both physical and spiritual purity is obvious. While Dagnus' purification is of a single person, these examples from the texts dealing with the East have much more to do with place. The island and the grove are pre-Christian, and the narrator is surprisingly silent about the detriments of worshipping other gods. In *Beowulf*, after Grendel visits Heorot for the first time, the Danes worship at pagan shrines in hopes of getting rid of the monster. This action is specifically condemned; the Danes, the narrator explains, did not yet know Christ, and they are suffering for it (170a-88b). Once Beowulf comes, he purifies the hall with God's assent, and in this sense Heorot is *fælsod*. It is also worth noting that Beowulf's elders consult omens before his departure, but this action is not condemned (202a-204b). This detail is another reminder that the scribes curated the texts of the manuscript because they saw certain themes represented in various moments throughout all the texts. Not every detail will correspond neatly as the scribes did not change the texts for content. These attempts at upkeep are not singular events, however. Alexander enters the sacred grove multiple times, and Beowulf fights to keep people safe from monsters three times. The emphasis on this ritual is on continued action, not a singular moment of purification.

Another important ritual involves gift-giving. One of the most characteristic actions of the Anglo-Saxons, both historically and in their literature, is the giving of gifts, especially prized rings. A king was commonly known as a "gold-friend" or "ring-giver" [consider the word *goldwine* [gold-friend] from *The Wanderer* (37)]. Hrothgar, for example, creates Heorot as a place to dispense gifts, for which he receives divine approval (64a-85b). God specifically approves this action ("swylc him God sealde" [such as God granted him] (72b)), and it is worth noting that the antagonists in many parts of the manuscript are hoarders, who refuse to share their wealth. Certainly the Grendelkin and the dragon are exemplars, but in the *Wonders* some monsters, like the giant ants of Gorgoneus region, guard precious gold (21), and the only way to get it is by stealing it. Holofernes is another extreme; he and his men enjoy feasting and giving to the point of excess. He is *modig* [noble spirit, high-minded, noble-minded], but here meant in a more negative sense as in "proud" or "overbearing," *medu-gal* [flown with wine, excited with mead] (26), and his men are *drencte* [to plunge under, to immerse, drown] (29). Holofernes' men are drowned, figuratively, in wine; they are *swiman* [swimming in the head, dizziness, giddiness] and *oferdrencte* [to overdrench, to give a person too much to drink] (30-1). Holofernes intends to spread his *widle* [filth, pollution] (59) and defile Judith.[78] Thus when Judith presents Holofernes' head to her people, it is a kind of gift-giving act, which is approved by God; she is giving them their freedom from foreign rule. It is also worth noting that Judith is given Holofernes' sword and armor at the end of poem; the Israelites are involved in a reciprocal act of gift-giving. This reciprocity is not isolated in the manuscript, for Beowulf presents Hygelac with the gifts he has received

[78] All these definitions are taken from the *Bosworth-Toller* online dictionary.

from Hrothgar. Finally, King Porus is celebrated by Alexander for his extravagant gift-giving; in fact, he approves of many different kinds of gift-giving, including the offering of women, throughout the *Letter of Alexander*. The most fruitful lands in both this text and the *Wonders* are full of rich possessions, and the act of giving is portrayed as virtuous behavior. In *Beowulf*, the ending of the prologue sums up this attitude the best: "lof-dædum sceal/in mægþa gehwære man geþeon" [by generous deeds a man may thrive in any tribe] (24b-25b). The standard for justice, then, is hurting your enemies and helping your friends.

Next, ritual killing is a positive action in the manuscript, and it has close associations with purification and healing. In *Leechcraft: Early English Charms, Plantlore, and Healing*, Stephen Pollington explains the connection between healing and sacrifice:

> It is possible that the sense 'medicine, cure' derives from the meaning (iii) 'gift, sacrifice' where originally the healer would actually be making an offering to the deities in exchange for good health. The ceremonial of offering sacrifices was probably accompanied by ritual dancing or processional movements (Old English *bigang*). This would fit in neatly with various common Germanic votary practices which encouraged the making of offerings to the gods at particular times to ensure continued continued favor or drive off bad luck. (43)

The act of healing should be understood metaphorically when we interpret the manuscript. Dagnus, for example, attempts to kill Christopher in order to protect his own gods (4). His desire to kill the dog-headed saint in even more elaborate ways each time he

fails is a kind of ritual. At first, Christopher is beaten with iron rods, then he is tied to a mock throne and burned, next he is tied to a tree and shot at with arrows, and finally he is beheaded. This final attempt at death proves successful only after Christopher offers his body to God as a potential healing charm for sick people who make a pilgrimage to his burial site. But the act of beheading itself occurs many times in the manuscript.

Beowulf kills Grendel's mother by beheading her. His previous attempts to wrestle her and strike her with his sword prove futile; she is too strong. He finds an ancient blade on the wall of her cave, and with God's help, he manages to cut off her head (62b-77a). Beowulf later beheads the corpse of Grendel and brings the giant appendage back to Heorot as proof of his deed. Grendel's mother also is involved in beheading. Opposite of Judith's action, Grendel's mother kills Aschere, Hrothgar's best friend and most trusted advisor, and leaves his head at the entrance to her mere. Later, Beowulf and his men find it there: "Æscheres/on þam holm-clife hafelan metton" [They met Aschere's head on the water-cliff] (1420b-1b) . Unlike Holofernes, Aschere is not an example of overweening pride and drunkenness, and Hrothgar is genuinely hurt when he finds his friend dead. Grendel's mother also attacks in the night and kills without God's blessing. Judith's killing of Holofernes is the opposite. The narrator describes her as *ælf-scinu* [shining like an elf] and is *halige* [holy] and *blac-hleor* [fair] (298, 302, 306), and she kills with God's permission. Furthermore, she bags Holofernes' head in the bag that her attendant has brought along to carry her kosher food (122-31, 171-6). Heather Blurton comments on this scene:

> Judith carries Holofernes' severed head in the same bag she uses to carry her food to the Assyrian camp. Heide Estes suggests that the replacement

> of ritually prepared food with a bloody head represents "a meal that cannot be digested." That it might represent a meal at all is suggestive in this context figuring as it would, a Judith who threatens an invading tyrant with dismemberment and, symbolically at least, cannibalism. (45)

At the end of this poem, Judith is given Holofernes' treasures and weapons from the men of the army (331-40). Moreover, there is a comparison to be made between Judith and Grendel, just as Judith and Grendel's mother appear as opposites. Judith carries her kosher food in a bag to the feast, which she later uses to carry out the head. Grendel, Beowulf relates to Hygelac, has carried a bag of dragon skins that he uses to stuff Hrothgar's men inside for later consumption:

> Glof hangode
> sid ond syllic, searo-bendum fæst;
> sio wæs orðoncum eall gegyrwed
> deofles cræftum ond dracan fellum.
> He mec þær on innan unsynnigne,
> dior dæd-fruma gedon wolde
> manigra sumne. (2085b-2091a)

[The glove hung, big and strange, securced by a clever clasp; it was ingeniously crafted by a devil's skill and dragon skins. He, that fierce perpetrator of crimes, would have me, a guiltless one, in there, one of many.]

These striking parallels exhibit the contrast between killing for a ritually pure purpose and killing for selfish and greedy reasons.

Finally, there is the transformation of places from impure to pure. The most clear examples come from *Beowulf*. Each place that involves a fight with a monster becomes purified in some manner. First Heorot and Grendel's mother's lair receive light from the heavens after both the Grendelkin have been killed. When Beowulf defeats the mother in the cave, a light miraculously appears. In a similar manner, the morning after Heorot is finally free from threat, a light shines from heaven in the hall. This kind of image is archetypal and has some dramatic effect, but the implications are clear: these places are cleansed. After both fight scenes, Beowulf specifically has *fælsod* [purified] the area. We might also consider the *Wonders* and *Letter of Alexander* sections to share in this trend. As Alexander moves through the East, his intention is to civilize what is wild and unclean. But the transition from impure to pure is not as evident in these two texts as it is in *Beowulf*. Perhaps the most radical transformation is the dragon's barrow, which is reshaped into the hero's burial mound. As I previously discussed, the barrow is literally a grave and is described as a "waste." The impurity of the place comes from the dragon: the presence of serpents is an indicator of impurity in the manuscript. They are venomous, make the areas they live in unfruitful, and have close associations with hell. Serpents are one of the most common monsters in the manuscript, and they are a constant threat throughout the texts in one way or another. But the transition from the dragon's "waste" to Beowulf's lavish burial mound does not require so much effort. Pollington explains that Germanic cultures had the perception that graves indicated a space where the dead and the living were connected: "Burial mounds were the resting places of the dead who, in some heathen traditions, continued their existence on another plane within the mound, and in this sense the mounds were liminal territory between this world and

next" (53). For the dead hero, the Geats display the dragon's treasure and put it back in the mound with Beowulf's body, build a funeral pyre, ride horses around the mound, and remember his deeds and lament their grim fate without him (3156-3182). As the pyre burns, "Heofon rece swealg" [Heaven swallows the smoke] (3155b). Thus the connection between the realm of the living and the dead is realized through this ritualistic burial process, and the dangerous dragon's barrow is transformed into a new grave which is purified by the presence of Beowulf's body and the actions of the Geats. The mound can easily be seen by people at sea (3157), which suggests that the Geats are to have a new association with this place. The narrator introduces the area as a place where a mistreated slave goes to hide from his masters (2221a-2231a), but now it is a place that is openly seen by all and invites the viewer to remember the noble king.

What is Gained?

A ritual's main characteristic is the fact that it takes us out of the ordinary, everyday experiences of life, and we gain something from this new experience. The act of purifying, in the manuscript, is a representation of ritualistic behavior. There is a sense that each of these places and people I have outlined above are not merely unclean, uninhabitable, or sick; rather, their uncleanliness presents some threat to the values of society. This link between the physical and the spiritual is common in Medieval literature, and Alaric Hall, in *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, elaborates on this connection:

> That a healer might want not only to identify an external source for a patients' illness, but to identify a yet more fundamental cause in a social transgression by his or her client should not surprise us. Such processes

> not only added plausibility to the healer's aetiogoly of an ailment, but tied healing practices into the wider negotiation and upholding of social norms. Medieval saints' lives are replete with depictions of saints beginning healing by identifying a hidden moral transgression. (117)

Christopher, Alexander, Beowulf, and Judith are all healers of some sort, and their actions are attempts to physically get rid of impure people or monsters but also to eliminate a larger spiritual threat that those things pose to their society. After the various purification events take place, some wisdom about the dangers of pride and the inevitably of death is gained. This trait is especially evident in *Christopher*, the *Letter of Alexander*, and *Beowulf*.

First, in *Christopher*, knowledge of God comes through various miracles that the saint is able to perform. His blood heals Dagnus, but his body will also be used as a holy item for future healing. Once Dagnus regains his sight, he proclaims that he has gained knowledge of God's existence and power: "[I]c nu soðlice wat þæt nan eorðlic anweald ne nan gebrosnodlic nys noht, buton his anes" [I now truly know that an earthly or impermanent dominion is nought, except his alone] (10). Through the purification process, then, Dagnus becomes aware of his own pride and foolishness and decrees that his kingdom should convert to Christianity. The text itself also becomes a reminder for the readers' and the scribes' own benefits; the last sentence is a direct quotation from Christopher who implores God to give the writer and the reader an eternal reward: "Drihten min God, syle gode mede þam þe mine þrowunga awrite, ond þa ecean edlean þam þe hie mid tearum ræde" [My Lord God, give a good reward to whoever writes about my passion, and give eternal reward to those who read it with tears] (12). This line

serves as a reminder that the readers should think of their own mortality and the way they live their lives. The saint's life serves as a warning against pride and is an encouragement to believe in God.

Additionally, a warning about pride and death occurs at the end of the *Letter of Alexander*. Once the king learns of his fate, he weeps to know that he will die without returning home and that his mother will suffer an ignoble death. Alexander, through his conquests, hopes to achieve a kind of immortality. In this process, however, he loses his life. Because of his pride, he gains knowledge of his own mortality. Yet this knowledge also comes at a moment when he and his men are also at their most pure; in order to enter the sacred grove, they must meet the bishop's guidelines of cleanliness. Thus it is in this sacred place that this special knowledge is attained. In a similar fashion, Beowulf receives the same message from Hrothgar in the newly purified Heorot. After the mead hall has been completely cleansed, Hrothgar gives the hero some advice. This passage has become known as "Hrothgar's Sermon," and in it, he explains to Beowulf that everyone is doomed to die (1724b-84b). Death can come through old age, sickness, or through violence. Furthermore, the king recognizes the potential in Beowulf, and he encourages him not to become too proud but to remain essentially stoic about his life's accomplishments. Beowulf explicitly ignores this advice, and in his old age, he fights the dragon. The narrator indicates that he decides to fight it with a small group of loyal retainers instead of amassing an army, which would be the safer and more sure way of securing victory. Beowulf eventually overcomes the dragon, but he is mortally wounded by its venom. As Hrothgar spoke to Beowulf after his fights with the Grendelkin, Beowulf speaks to Wiglaf, his only faithful companion, about the inability of the wisdom

of old age to help bitter loss: (2426a-2462b). Just like Alexander, Beowulf gains knowledge about pride and death in a purified space, and he also passes on this knowledge to a younger successor after he purifies the barrow from the dragon. What is different about these two accounts is the act of killing to gain some cleansing effect. While Alexander is expressly forbidden to kill or make any kind of sacrifice in the sacred grove, despite his intentions to make an offering to the gods, Beowulf is encouraged to kill in order to cleanse Heorot.

Conclusion

Purification and purity in the manuscript has both a physical and spiritual dimension. While there is no set formula that each text follows, they all share similar warnings about the excesses of pride and the immediacy of death. The various people and places in the stories are pure or impure to heighten the dramatic intensity of the protagonist's actions. In some way, in each text, characters must respond to the presence of some impure intrusion on their personal spaces. Through these experiences of killing monsters or monstrous individuals, there is a specific linguistic link to concepts of purity and impurity (as I outlined more extensively in the last chapter). But it is also clear from the content of the manuscript that this struggle between clean and unclean is never-ending. We might consider what Beowulf and Judith do as a kind of ritual maintenance similar to the guardians of the sacred spaces in *Wonders* and the *Letter of Alexander*. What is shared among the texts are similar patterns of behavior and similar attitudes about what counts as impure and purifying activity. The impure places of the manuscript are filled with snakes, hostile creatures, poison, and fire, while the impure individuals are excessively proud and often consume human flesh. By contrast, the purifying acts have to

do with killing, especially beheading, and some attainment of wisdom. Through the act of cleansing or being cleansed, Dagnus, Alexander, and Beowulf all gain some essential knowledge.

CHAPTER 4: GENDER, PURITY, AND REASSESSING THE "PEACE-WEAVER"

In the previous chapters, I have made the case that the *Beowulf Manuscript* is organized around a particular theme of purification. There are rituals, images, and words that link the manuscript by notions of cleanliness and uncleanliness. A major concern of the manuscript is how to manage what is impure. If we interpret the manuscript in this way, we can reassess the gender roles in the poem.[79] In this chapter, I will examine the way gender and purification are presented in the manuscript. "Gender" is a tricky word to define, especially in the context of a medieval society and a medieval manuscript dealing with monsters. When I refer to gender in this chapter, I am referring to the roles that men and women traditionally played in Anglo-Saxon society. Men played a more active role in society: they provided for others through hunting and warfare. Women played a more passive role: they took care of the children, the home, and were possessions in themselves to be bought or sold by their fathers.[80] First, there are episodes where women are explicitly linked with uncleanliness. In both the *Wonders* and the *Letter of Alexander*, unclean women must be purged and sex with a women makes a character ineligible to enter a sacred space. Some of these unclean women are monstrous, but one is a human, Alexander's mother, who dies a humiliating death and is left to be devoured by animals and birds. In another episode, the guardian of the grove of the Trees of the Sun and the

[79] There is a considerable about of literature about gender roles in *Beowulf*. It is not a focus of this chapter to summarize the history of this particular subject; however, Alexandra Hennessey Olsen has a chapter in *A Beowulf Handbook* that covers the history of gender studies research into the poem and a discussion of the "peace-weaver," which I will allude to in this chapter. See "Gender Roles" pp. 311-25. See Jane Chance's *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* for a broader analysis on the complex role women play in Anglo-Saxon literature as a whole.

[80] Consider a passage from *Maxims II* or *Cotton Gnomes* that outlines the roles men and women play: "Geongne æþeling sceolan gode gesiðas/byldan to beaduwe and to beahgife" [Good companions should encourage a young prince to warmaking and to ring-giving] (14-5); "Ides sceal dyrne cræfte,/fæmne hire freond gesecean, gif heo nelle on folce geþeon,/þæt hi man beagum gebicge" [A woman shall seek out her lover through deceitful means if she does not wish to thrive among her people in that someone might buy her with rings] (43-5).

Moon says that no man may enter the sacred area if he is not clean from a woman's touch. On the other hand, there are women who act like men and must have their behavior corrected or be entirely eliminated. Grendel's mother and Queen Fremu both act as aggressors, in stark contrast to Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen who tries to keep the peace in his mead hall. While the former is eliminated, Fremu is reformed by her husband and adopts a more traditional role that women in Anglo-Saxon literature sometimes play: a generous hostess. Contrary to these negative representations of women is Judith, who certainly acts in an aggressive manner but is vindicated by her explicit permission from God to behead Holofernes and save her people. Finally, gender is sometimes ambiguously presented. Grendel's mother, for example, is referred to by male pronouns in her fight against Beowulf. Additionally, two creatures from the *Wonders* have beards that give them an ambiguous gender: the huntresses who live by a mountain and hunt wild game and the Blemmye who have their heads stuck in their chests. The theme of purification can be found running through all these examples for some creatures are labeled as clean or unclean, and, in other instances, the unorthodox is eliminated.

Unclean Women

There are three sets of women who are either identified as unclean and killed or are killed in a purposefully humiliating and impure way. The uncleanliness of these women does not come from their gender but their associations with animals. In *Wonders*, there are giant women with unusual characteristics: "Đonne syndan oþere wif þa habbað eoferes tuxas ond feax oð helan side, ond oxan tægl on lendunum. Þa wif syndon þryttyne fota lange, ond hyra lic bið on marmor-stanes hiwnesse, ond hy habbað olfendan fet ond eoseles teð" [There are other women who have the tusks of a boar and hair as far down as

their heels, and an ox tail on the rears. These women are 13 feet long, and their bodies are the hue of marble, and they have the feet of a camel and the teeth of a donkey] (26-8). Alexander kills these creatures because of their *unclennesse* [uncleanness], and their make-up of various beasts of burden does not lend them a positive association. Perhaps even, in the eyes of the author, they are not kosher because of their cleft feet. Nevertheless, their inability to be neatly categorized or catalogued provokes anxiety. Alexander is unable to capture them alive, and this inability for them to be controlled and kept makes them permanent outsiders in the eyes of Alexander, a civilization-builder. Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim argue in their book *Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript* that the monsters often have an unfamiliar and alien quality: "Certainly, the wonders are created to evoke otherness, perhaps even otherness experienced as contempt [....] We are apprehensive of them, but at the same time, in reading and viewing them [...] we also attempt to apprehend them" (84). These giantesses are among the most hybrid of creatures that Alexander meets in either *Wonders* or the *Letter of Alexander*, and they are the only creatures that are hunted specifically for their uncleanness. While some creatures avoid human contact by fleeing or disappearing in a sudden burst of flames, others actively eat humans, and a few guard precious commodities, these women inspire Alexander to act immediately.

A parallel scene occurs in the next text, where Alexander encounters a group of hairy men and women who he is not able to capture: "Ða gesawe we þær ruge wif-men ond wæpned-men; wæron hie swa ruwe ond swa gehære swa wildeor. Wæron hie nigon fota uplonge, ond hie wæron þa men nacod, ond hie næniges hrægles ne gimdom" [Then we saw hairy women and men; they were as rough and as shaggy as wild animals. They

were nine feet uplong, and the creatures were naked, and they did not have any regard for clothes] (66). These creatures share a number of characteristics with the other set of monsters: they are giant, they are compared to animals, and they *flugon* [fled] when Alexander tries to get near them. These latter creatures are not killed, however, because they are classified by the Indians living in the region. They are called *ictifafonas* (Fulk translates this word as "fish-fauns"), and they eat what they catch from the water and drink the same water afterward (66). Alexander does make a point to list these creatures as both male and female, which is unusual. Most of the creatures from both *Wonders* and the *Letter of Alexander* are not specifically gendered, and these two examples are unique for this quality and the fact that they are closely associated with animals. There is another example of a defiled woman: Alexander's mother Olimphias will die a humiliating death, and her corpse will be eaten by wild animals and birds; by contrast, his sisters will avoid this fate: "Ðin modor gewiteð of weorulde þurh scondlicne deað ond unarlicne, ond heo ligeð unbebyrged in wege fuglum to mete ond wildeorum. Þine sweostor beoð longe gesæliges lifes" [Your mother will depart from the world through a shameful and disgraceful death, and she will lie unburied in the road as food for birds and wild animals. Your sisters will have blessed, long lives] (80). We are never given a reason why this woman will experience such a sudden and harsh fate, but once again the association with wild animals suggests that this theme of purification is also present here. Her punishment is her death and the defilement of her corpse by having animals consume it. Alexander's sisters somehow avoid this fate, and their lives will be *gesæliges* [blessed] instead. We may consider this contrast between mother and daughters, defiled and blessed, as a kind of motif throughout the manuscript. Dagnus and Christopher are opposites in this way, as

are Grendel and Beowulf and, in the last text, Judith and Holofernes. Characters are paired with their moral opposites, and the impure one of each set dies.

Finally, there are a few references to sexual intercourse that are both positive and negative. First, in *Wonders*, in the land of *catini*, the generous kings give visitors a woman before they depart: "Gif hwilc mon him to cymð, þonne gifað hy him wif ær hy hine onweg læten" [If any man comes to them, then they gift him with a woman before they allow him to go] (28). The narrator explains that Alexander was impressed by these people and did not harm them. Later, however, the bishop who guards the sacred grove of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon will not allow anyone who has been with a woman to enter the area: "Gif þine geferan beoð clæne from wif-gehrine, þonne moton hie gongan in þone godcundan bearo" [If your traveling companions are clean from contact with women, then they may go in the divine grove] (74). Unlike the unclean sets of women I discussed above, the bishop is only concerned about whether or not the men have had sex before they enter the grove. Fulk, in his translation of this line, renders *wif-gehrine* as "intimacy with women" (75), which gets closer to the meaning of the bishop's warning. We are not told why the men must abstain in this manner, but they also have to follow a strict set of rules in the grove: they must enter naked, they must not make sacrifices, and they must not cry when they hear Alexander will die soon (74-80). These two examples of references to sex are unique in the manuscript, for all the other main characters do not have or pursue relationships. Most likely, the scene in the grove is a parallel to the island of the Sun and the Moon from *Wonders*. In that area, there is a priest who keeps watch over the temples with a bishop who eats only oysters (26). These various ways of living involve abstaining from pleasure, and, in that sense, we may say that there is a concern

for cleanliness not because the women are filthy but because abstinence is supposed to demonstrate a clean disposition. It is worth noting, however, that intercourse is linked in a special way to women in that they are the objects to be attained and acted upon in a sexual way. Women do not seek out sex in these texts; the men seek it from them.

The Women Who Act As Men

Uncleanliness does not originate in gender in the manuscript; instead, it is through some association with something impure or improper that marks it as being wrong. We can apply this line of thinking to the way that some women act violently in the texts. In three cases, women act in ways that are aggressive and feud-invoking; each woman, however, is dealt with in a different way. Grendel's mother is killed and her mere is *gefælsod* [purified] (1620), Fremu has her behavior corrected, and Judith is celebrated by her people for helping them win victory over Holofernes' army. Each characters breaks from the mold of a literary archetype of the "peace-weaver," an individual of noble stature who seeks to settle feuds and end violence.[81] Megan Cavell, in her recent article "Formulaic FriÞuwebban: Reexamining Peace-Weaving in the Light of Old English Poetics," has two important insights about peace-weavers. First she discusses the concept linguistically and compares the root of the word to its other uses in Anglo-Saxon poetry:

> Looking closer at the formula in which *friþuwebba/e* appears can also provide us with useful new insights into the Old English understanding of

[81] The concept of a *friþuwebbe* [peaceweaver] is complicated because too often scholars have assigned women this role, when it is not clear that this term specifically refers to just women in Old English. There are three useful articles that offer new critical perspectives that capture a more nuanced view of this literary archetype: Megan Cavell's "Formulaic FriÞuwebban: Reexamining Peace-Weaving in the Light of Old English Poetics" (2015), Robert Morey's "Beowulf's Androgynous Heroism" (1996), and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen's "Gender Roles" from *A Beowulf Handbook* (1997). There is a considerable amount of material about *friþuwebbe* and gender, and I am not going to synthesize that information here.

> peace-weaving. The above discussion has so far concentrated on the second element, but the first is equally important. According to the DOE, the adjective *fæle* means, "of people / angels / God: faithful, trusty; also, more generally: kind, beloved, pleasant." The dictionary also notes that it appears "in specific alliterative collocations: *fæle friþuscealc* / *friþuweard* / *friþuwebba* / *friþuwebbe* 'faithful minister of peace / guardian of peace / peace-weaver.'" Here, and in all other instances in which *fæle* crops up—notably almost entirely in poetry and specifically in psalms—the context relates to a figure who protects or creates peace. (367)

At its core, a peace-weaver is acting in a morally appropriate way, but the definition does not include how the peace is to be kept. In fact, many characters perform this function in different ways. Hrothgar's queen Wealtheow is often cited as an example of a peace-weaver. She fills drinks for the men, and, more importantly, she obtains a promise from Beowulf to rid Heorot of Grendel.[82] Beowulf himself is also a kind of peace-weaver for he actually kills the Grendelkin and purifies the mead hall.[83] Cavell also notes that gender is not implied by the stem *fæle*, and it is doubtful that we should inherently think of the peace-weaver as strictly female: "Furthermore, as noted above and demonstrated below, gender plays a minor role in the literary context of the formulaic *friþuwebban*, the descriptions of which are much more concerned with emphasizing high status and moral superiority" (358). In order to emphasize her point, she analyzes this concept in reference to another female character Elene from a poem by Cynewulf:

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[82] See Olsen for a more in-depth reading of this section (1997).
[83] See Morey for a continuation this discussion (1996).

> However, the term does not imply that the attempted construction of peace is inherently linked to women. Indeed, Cynewulf's epilogue to *Elene* demonstrates a clear association between weaving and poetic composition, but no one has tried to argue that the act of composing poetry in Anglo-Saxon England and its literature was predominantly a female role. And so, while the critical model of the peace-weaver has led to many interesting readings of women in Anglo-Saxon literature and culture, when it comes to examining the *friþuwebban* in their formulaic context, gender should not be our sole focus. (363)

In the following two examples, I will show how the role of peace-weaver is challenged not because a woman is performing this action but because these characters have done something morally objectionable.

In previous chapters, I discussed Grendel's mother's association with various impurities. She lives isolated from society in a lake which catches on fire at night and is infested with various serpentine monsters. Beowulf's descent into her lair is essentially a kind of descent into hell.[84] Her impurity does not stem from the fact that she is female; rather, she, like her son, feuds with Hrothgar. Her impurity is a result of her behavior, not her gender. First, she is closely associated with hell, and her dwelling in this environment gives her the same kind of quality that we see in *Wonders* and the *Letter of Alexander*: those monsters that live in the harshest conditions are dangerous. Geoffrey Russom, in

[84] Hrothgar's description of the mere closely resembles a description of hell from one of the Blickling Homilies. See Orchard's *Pride and Prodigies* for more information. Geoffrey Russom, in "At the Center of *Beowulf*," also gives an overview of these hellish features of the mere pp. 229-33.

his article "At the Center of *Beowulf*,"[85] explains that characters who exhibit immoral behavior sometimes have an association with the underworld in Anglo-Saxon literature:

> A cosmic background comes sharply into focus when Beowulf vows to take vengeance for the killing of Æschere [....] Hrothgar's description of the territory inhabited by the Grendel kin [is]: "They occupy a secret land, wolf-slopes, windy headlands and a dangerous track of fens where the ocean goes down beneath the earth under the darkness of the headlands" (1357b-1361a). Whatever their ultimate source, the headlands of hell are well-known to Old English poets. When the sinful Holofernes dies in *Judith*, we are told that "his spirit passed beyond under the dark headland" (112b113a). (233)

Certainly, Holofernes is another impure character: he actively tries to defile Judith, and his soul is sent to the "snake-hall" (hell). There is another important feature that links *Judith* and *Beowulf* in this manner. Both heroes receive divine sanction before they kill:

> Beowulf's peril in the second fight is hardly surprising, however, if it takes place in hell, an environment to which Grendel's mother is presumably better adapted. From this perspective, the poet's description of the struggle seems quite apt: "Then the son of Ecgtheow, champion of the Geats, would have journeyed to his destruction under the wide foundation of the earth, had not his war-byrnie, the hard war-net, given him help — and had not holy God determined who would win the battle" (1550a-1554a). (235)

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[85] This article appears as a chapter in the book *Myth in Early Northwest Europe* (2007).

Later, I will discuss Judith's divine sanction from God, but Grendel's mother clearly represents the completely opposite values of a peace-weaver, but it is her hellishness and her antagonism against God that make her a symbol of impurity. It is not wonder that Beowulf is said to have *gefælsod* [purified] the mere (1620), and a light appears from heaven, reaffirming his divine connection (1570-2). While the characters find fault with Grendel's mother for her assault on Heorot and her killing of Aschere, none of them condemn the fact that she is a woman, specifically, performing these actions. The focus is on the murders themselves, not her gender. The closest we get to an assessment of her gender comes from Hrothgar, who says that she is in the *idese onlicnæs* [likeness of a woman] (1351). Much more relevant is Hrothgar's description of where she is from (which I quoted above from Russom's translation), and her surroundings tell the readers all they need to know about her hellish habits.

The next example is Offa's queen Fremu, who, prior to meeting her husband, commits terrible crimes against her people. She attacks any man who dares to look at her:

> Mod-þryðo wæg
> Fremu, folces cwen, firen' ondrysne;
> nænig þæt dorste deor geneþan
> swæsra gesiða, nefne sin-frea,
> þæt hire an dæges eagum starede
> ac him wæl-bende weotode tealde
> hand-gewriþene; hraþe seoþðan wæs
> æfter mund-gripe mece geþinged,
> þæt hit sceaden-mæl scyran moste,

> cwealm-bealu cyðan. Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw
> idese to efnanne, þeah ðe hio ænlicu sy,
> þætte freoðu-webbe feores onsæce
> æfter lige-torne leofne mannan. (1931b–43b)

[The people's queen Fremu adopted a violent-minded way, committed terrible crimes. There were not any of her close attendants brave enough who would dare to go by day to look her in the eyes, except her lord, for he would find deadly hand-restraints decreed for him. Immediately after, a sword with a marked hand-grip was selected that might discharge this order and make known the evil deed. That is not a very queenly practice for a noble lady to perform even if she is an incomparable beauty, that a peace-weaver should seek the life of a dear man after feigned anger.]

Fremu's actions are, of course, monstrous, and we might compare her to Holofernes. While he seeks to defile Judith, the queen desires to destroy any man who might look at her. Cavell draws another important parallel, and it has to do with the binding of arms as a punishment. She compares this scene to Beowulf's fight against Grendel:

> Given that the only slaughter to have taken place in Heorot is that of Grendel killing the Danish warriors (and, of course, one Geat), it stands to reason that Beowulf's binding of the monster is intended as a punishment for such actions—that is, this is not simply a description of a battlefield, in whose violence both opponents are equally implicated. Thus, when Fremu attempts to make use of similarly skillful, handcrafted bonds without legitimate cause, the act is depicted as an unconditionally negative one—indeed, one that emphasizes the ironic context of this particular peace-

> weaver. Since a peace-weaver is someone who acts toward the construction of peace through diplomacy, we can assume that the poet is commenting that while Fremu should be *constructive*, she is constrictive instead. As a woman whose status places her in the ideal position to become a diplomat, Fremu's resistance to the taking on of this role and her actions, which directly contradict the role, are criticized. (370)

Her connection of these two scenes reveals that even though Beowulf performs this action earlier in the poem, Fremu's binding of men's arms is "without legitimate cause." Her actions are unjust and of unclear motive. Cavell offers two possibilities—her gender and her noble status: "Fremu's perceived role and her actions may stem not only from her gender but also from her high rank. Indeed, the poet comments that her action is not a *cwenlic þeaw*, a *queenly* custom; he does not say it is not a womanly custom" (372). It is not clear that we should read Fremu's intentions as simply the concern of being gazed at sexually or the concern of a proud person acting in a haughty way. Nevertheless, her behavior is *onhohsnode* [detested] by Hemming's kin (1944).[86] Soon after she marries Offa, she becomes a benevolent queen:

> ðær hio syððan well
> in gum-stole, god mære,
> lif-gesceafta lifigende braec,
> hiold heah-lufan wið hæleþa brego,
> ealles mon-cynnes mine gefræge
> þone selestan bi sæm tweonum,

[86] Both Cavell and Fulk translate this word as "put an end to" and "put a check to," respectively. I think this captures the sense of the scene: these kinsmen put a stop to her behavior. I kept the more literal rendering "abominate, detest" offered by the *Bosworth-Toller*.

eormen-cynnes. (1951b-1957a)

[Afterwards she did well on the throne there, her good deeds widely known, living the life fated for her, she held a high-love for the leader of the warriors, the best of all mankind, of the human race, I have heard, between the seas.]

The emphasis in this passages is not on Freawu's gender but on her behavior. Furthermore, this type of generosity is not specifically limited to women. In the prologue of the poem, the narrator explains that good deeds are admired everywhere: "lofdædum sceal/in mægþa gehwære man geþeon" [by good deeds anyone may prosper among people everywhere] (24-5). Beowulf is also said to have been "manna mildust ond mon-ðwærust/leodum liðost" [the mildest of men and most gentle, the most gracious to his people] (3181-2). Clearly, these traits can belong to kings as well as queens. Furthermore, Freawu is the only one of a few examples of someone who exhibits monstrous behavior and is corrected. Dagnus, similarly, acts in an immoral way when he tortures Christopher and attempts to kill him. Dagnus, like Freawu, has a complete change in character, and while the impetus to change between these two is not the same, the both exhibit a kind of behavior and attitude that stems from pride, which is either punished or corrected in the manuscript.

Judith is an odd example if we are considering not only the peace-weaver but also who does the killing of monsters. She is best known for her beheading of Holofernes, at its surface, hardly the act of someone trying to keep the peace, and she is a woman, which makes her unique among the monster-slayers in the manuscript. Judith, however, is praised throughout the poem bearing her name, and she comes to win not only the love of her people but Holofernes' war-garments as well (these are given to her as a gift). *Judith*

shares themes in common with other Old English works, and Megan E. Hartman, in her article "A Drawn-Out Beheading: Style, Theme, and Hypermetricity in the Old English Judith," demonstrates how both the content of the story and the themes the poem shares with other Old English works help emphasize the inherent goodness of the heroine. These themes are: a moral contrast between the hero and the antagonist, a reversal of fortunes, and God's essential role in these events:

> The story allows the poet to emphasize three main themes that are ubiquitous in Old English literature. The first is moral contrast—in this case the contrast between the two extremes represented by Judith and Holofernes. The poet seems to be especially concerned with this contrast, for he adapts his source, which casts Judith as a noble but scheming character, to characterize Judith as wholly innocent and without design. Because the poet further connects Judith directly to God and Holofernes to the devil, the contrast between the two characters is absolute. The second theme, related to the first, is the reversal of fortunes. The whole poem ultimately relates the story of the complete reversal of the Hebrews' status from an oppressed people to victorious conquerors, together with the reversal of the Assyrians' status from a ruling army to defeated corpses. Third and most importantly, the poem illustrates the theme of God's governing role over these events and the tale as a whole. (432-3)

Hartman also points out that the poem uses a certain kind of meter, called hypermeter, in a unique way. In certain sections of the work, the poet emphasizes how her violent actions are justified because they come from a direct order from God. This fact is

especially significant in the case of Judith because she is a woman, and, typically, women do not take such aggressive roles in Anglo-Saxon literature: “This moment is important because it shows the faith of Judith and the power of God. It is especially important in this poem because it shows the central role God plays in Judith’s deed. As a woman in an Anglo-Saxon poem, Judith would not normally take such an aggressive role, wielding a sword and killing a man herself” (434). Nevertheless, Judith is a purifier in that she destroys the filth, namely Holofernes, and the threat it poses to her people. In this vein, she is similar to Beowulf, who catches the invader (Grendel) in the midst of his invasion and destroys him. While the poet emphasizes that Judith is blessed and radiant, her gender is also not discussed or assessed. Similar to Grendel’s mother and Freawu, her behavior is scrutinized and judged, but the fact that these three are women does not factor in to whether or no they are acting appropriately or inappropriately.

Thus while the role of the peace-weaver is complex and is often associated with women, in particular, the relative cleanness or uncleanness of these three characters has to do with what they are doing not who they are. We can find parallel behaviors in the men’s actions in the manuscript, which suggests that these cases are not isolated. The manuscript often revolves around the theme of proper or improper action, especially in terms of pride. Dagnus, Beowulf, Alexander, and Holofernes are all punished for their haughtiness, but their actions do not differ so much from Grendel’s mother’s, Freawu’s, or Judith’s. Beowulf kills in revenge, just as Grendel’s mother has done for the loss of her son. Alexander kills the female giantesses for the way they look, just as Freawu kills men for gazing upon her. Finally, Dagnus and Beowulf both behead monsters they perceive as threats, and Judith does the same for Holofernes. These actions all must be contextualized

before the can be assessed positively or negatively, but the role of gender has very little to do with the rightness or wrongness of these actions.

Ambiguity of Gender and Humanity

While the scribes were interested in purification, they did not choose texts that merely told the same story repeatedly. The *Beowulf Manuscript* complicates the idea of what counts as purity and who does the purifying by often switching the roles of characters in unexpected ways. Thus Christopher, the hero of the first text, is himself a monster, but he is obviously holy and supported by God. He, in fact, prays to God and has his prayers answered. Judith is another anomaly: she is a woman who saves her people from a monstrous individual. Any reader of the manuscript should be shocked by this sudden reversal — one of the three main antagonists in *Beowulf* is a woman who beheads an important nobleman in Hrothgar's court (Aschere). Perhaps the two most confusing elements of the manuscript are the complex representations of gender and of humanity. Mittman and Kim point out that the *Wonders* often tries to evoke "otherness," but this statement can also be applied to the rest of the manuscript: "Certainly, the wonders are created to evoke otherness, perhaps even otherness experienced as contempt [....] We are apprehensive of them, but at the same time, in reading and viewing them [...] we also attempt to apprehend them" (84). Later, they elaborate that this ambiguity poses a kind of threat: "The most foundational threat of the *Wonders* lies in their confusion of categorical boundaries" (133). Earlier, I discussed the threat posed by the giantesses who are composed of many different types of animals — Alexander kills them for their uncleanness and inability to be categorized. The three creatures I plan to discuss below all complicate the boundaries of gender through their behavior and appearances.

In *Wonders*, there is a mountainous region inhabited by huntresses who resemble men. These women have beards, horsehide clothing, and wild animals that act as hunting dogs for them. The narrator describes them briefly:

> Ymb þas stowe beoð wif acenned þa habbað beardas swa side oð hyra breost, ond horses hyda hy habbað him to hrægle gedon. Þa syndan hunticgean swiðast nemde, ond fore hundum tigras ond leon ond loxas þæt hy fedað, þæt syndon þa cenestan deor, ond ealra þara wildeora cyn þe on þære dune acende beoð, mid heora scinlace þæt hy gehuntiaþ. (26)

[About this area are women born who have beards as far down as their breasts, and they have put to use horse hides for their garments. They are most often called huntresses, and they raise tigers, lions, and lynxes, those that are the fiercest of wild animals, as hunting dogs, and with their sorcery they hunt all those kinds of wild species which breed on the mountain.]

Earlier, I suggested that the female giantesses who Alexander kills are unclean because of their association with animals. Certainly, there is an implication here that these women's association with wild creatures makes them wild in turn. They use animals which are meant to be hunted in order to do the hunting. We are only told that they hunt the *wildeora cyn* [kinds of wild species, or kin of wild animals] on the mountain, but it is possible they stalk even more wild creatures than the ones they have domesticated. Also, their donning of animal skin for clothes is not unique in the manuscript. In fact, when Alexander meets the bishop and his people outside the grove of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon, they are dressed *mid panthera fellum ond tigriscum* [in the skin of panthers and of tigers] (72). This trait most certainly emphasizes their wild nature, but it is not just

their appearance that is judged, their behavior marks them out as outlandish. The huntresses act like men, quite literally for they even have beards, in that they hunt and tame animals, activities traditionally associated with men. These women are essentially the Amazonians of the *Wonders*, and their crossing of gender boundaries makes them a curiosity but also potentially dangerous. They are stronger than typical hunters because they can control lions, tigers, and lynxes, and they have no problem hunting wild creatures that live out in this wondrous area. There is a certain way that they appear non-threatening, however, and that is due to the fact that they are *nemde* [named, known]. They are catalogued and thus somehow able to be understood but not completely. They also are able to hunt *mid heora scinlace* [with their sorcery], which suggests that they have some magical properties. *Scinlace* is a tricky word to translate here. R.D. Fulk renders the line in such a way to suggest that the huntresses use some kind of camouflage while hunting: "[W]ith their illusion they hunt the species of all the wild animals that propagate on that mountain" (27). But *scinlace* can also mean "magic," "necromancy," or "sorcery." Thus they cannot seem to be fully comprehended for their ability to hunt is supernatural in quality, and their appearance and behavior suggests that they play both male and female gender roles. The narrator never tells us that there are men living on the mountain with them.

A second creature that pushes the boundaries of gender is the Blemmye, which is also found in *Wonders*. Curiously enough, the narrator barely gives us any information about them:

> Þonne syndon oþere ealond suð from Brixonte, on þon beoð men acende buton heafdum, þa habbað on hyra breostum heora eagan ond muð. Hy

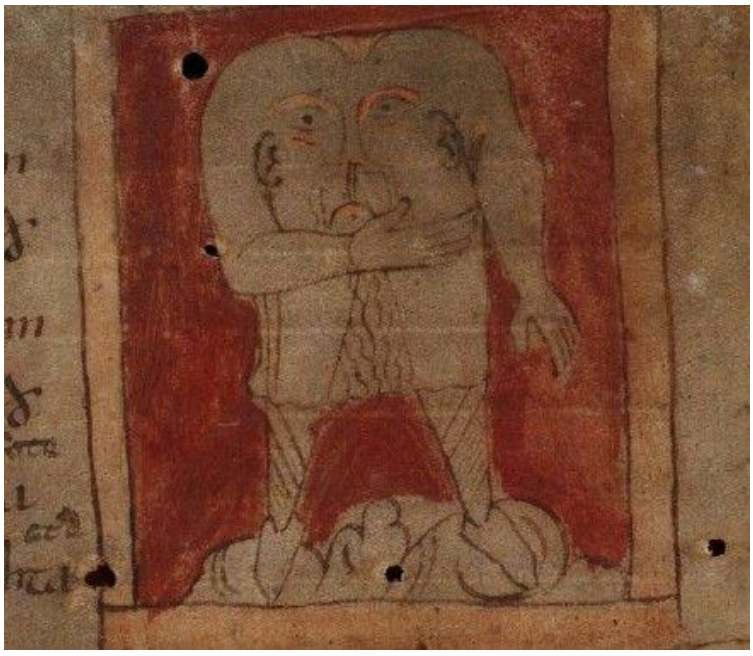
> seondon eahta fota lange ond eahta fota brade. Ðar beoð dracen cende þa beoð on lenge hundteontige fot-mæla lange ond fiftiges; hy beoð greate swa stænene sweras micle. For þara dracena micelnesse ne mæg nan man na yþelice on þæt land gefaran. (22)

[There are other islands south of the Brixonte River, on which there are men who propagate there without heads, who have their eyes and their mouths in their chests. They are eight feet tall and eight feet broad. There are dragons that beget there which are 150 feet long; they are great and as hard as mighty stone. Because of the great number of the dragons no man may go easily to that land.]

They are particularly perplexing because they are missing their heads; instead, their faces are in their chests. Once again, through their association with a certain place, we learn how dangerous these creatures can be: they live among dragons. I have already noted in previous chapters the ways the manuscript seeks to combine serpents with hostile environments and how they are the most common impure monsters we find throughout the texts. Here, the blemmye live among these serpents in a place which humans have difficulty getting to. This trait connects them to Grendel's mother who also lives among serpentine creatures in her mere. This parallel is no coincidence: the most uninhabitable and dangerous places in the manuscript are populated by snakes, and hell is even referred to as the *wyrmsele* in *Judith*, as I discussed before. Snakes are a potent threat, and the blemmye are similarly dangerous because of their association with them. Another threat of the blemmye comes from the picture that illustrates what the monster looks like. Figure 1 (see below) is the image that accompanies this section in the *Beowulf*

Manuscript, and Figure 2 is the picture of the *Wonders*. Mittman and Kim note that the creature expresses an ambiguous gender through its stance:

> The body of the Blemmye, with its facial features concealing the breasts, its suggested yet elided genitals, its inverted image of the beard and/or pubic triangle, disables any reading of sexual distinction. But we might also rephrase: the body of the Blemmye does not simply disable us, as readers, in our ability to identify it as male or female; it also represents its disabling power *as* disabling of the legibility of sexual distinction, just as many of the wonders likewise call into question the legibility of the boundaries dividing humanity from its Others. (119)



Moreover, Grendel's mother and the Blemmye share similar traits: they have an ambiguous gender, their homes make them vulnerable, and they employ a dominating gaze. All these traits are meant to unnerve the reader, and we may conclude that the two are another example of creatures that provoke anxiety because of their "otherness." As Mittman and Kim have argued, and as I have suggested before, the goal of the *Wonders* is

to unnerve us, and we may apply this feeling to the rest of the *Beowulf Manuscript*. Grendel's mother and the Blemmye expose the fragility of human identity and introduce us to the parts of the external world that cannot be classified. Mittman and Kim elaborate: "[T]he Blemmye's both/and/neither/nor genitals thus may function as both an acknowledgement of desire in the viewing of these wonders, but also a reminder that such desire - to 'touch' [...] but also to 'grasp'' or comprehend [...] is dangerous to the bodies of wonders and viewers alike" (136).

Both creatures are male and female at the same time. Figure 2 is threatening by the way it moves out of its frame, and it is naked - prominently exposing its female bottom. Yet this creature is not clearly feminine as it seems that the Anglo-Saxons saw breasts as a more clear sign of the female gender.[87] Figure 1, however, is equally ambiguous. Unlike Figure 2, the Figure 1 is seemingly clothed and has a guarded stance (an arm across its chest). There is also a triangle near its genital region which may indicate a beard or pubic hair. Mittman and Kim elaborate: "The body of the Blemmye, with its facial features concealing the breasts, its suggested yet elided genitals, its inverted image of the beard and/or pubic triangle, disables any reading of sexual distinction" (119). Thus this particular wonder is a good representation of the ambiguously gendered creatures in the entire manuscript. They are so outlandish that they are inconceivable: we cannot classify them from our limited perspective; however, even when we have multiple images of the Blemmye from different artists, the unclear gender is a significant trait of this mutant. Much like the Blemmye, Grendel's mother cannot be entirely classified as female, but, unlike the creature from the *Wonders*, there is no

[87] Consider the scene representing the temptation in the Garden of Eden from the Junius manuscript where Eve is clearly marked as a female by her naked breasts. Mittman and Kim have a longer discussion of the representation of women in Anglo-Saxon art in their essay "Monstrous Genitals: Naked or Nude?"

accompanying image of the mother in the manuscript. Instead the poet refers to her using male pronouns (1496), and her quest for revenge is characteristic of the types of feuds that we expect the men are usually preoccupied with:

> Sona þæt onfunde se ðe floda begong
> heoro-gifre beheold hund missera
> grim ond grædig, þæt þær gumena sum
> ælwihta eard ufan cunnode.
> Grap þa togeanes, guðrinc gefeng
> atolan clommum. (1497a-1502a)

[At once he (Grendel's mother) perceived that, he who was fiercely ravenous and guarded the region of the waters for 50 years, some man was probing the alien creatures' abode from above. He grabbed him then, seized the battle-warrior with terrible claws.][88] Yet gender roles are constantly challenged in *Beowulf* just as they are in the *Wonders*: "In general, the men in *Beowulf* both act and speak, while the women use speech acts that influence male action, but these gender roles can overlap and dovetail. There are women who play a normally male role and men who play a normally female role" (324).[89] In one sense, she is described in the ways that are typically feminine: she is a mother and in the form of a woman, but she is also linked to Beowulf in a number of significant ways. First, she comes to Heorot to avenge the death of her son. Second, she gazes at Beowulf before she drags him down into her underwater lair. Finally, she wrestles and overpowers him.

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[88] *The Cambridge Old English Reader* has an excellent series of footnotes on this section of the poem, and I drew from it for my translation.

[89] Alexandra Hennessey Olsen's article "Gender Roles" from *A Beowulf Handbook* is especially useful here. She outlines a number of ways in which the women in the poem are just as active as the men. This fact plays an important part of the discussion because the question of gender is actively challenged by the texts of the manuscript.

These scenes are the complete reversal of Beowulf's encounter with Grendel. Beowulf waits in anticipation of Grendel, he secretly gazes at the creature and captures him in an arm grip, and he overpowers the monster. Moreover, both characters are threatening and vulnerable. Each has a powerful gaze (Beowulf in Heorot, the mother in her mere), excessive strength, some resistance to weapons, and the desire for revenge. They also inhabit dangerous places, encounter another who has equal strength, and are hunted. Just as the Blemmye stares threateningly at us from the page, both characters from *Beowulf* stare with threatening intentions.

Another shared characteristic of Figure 1 and Figure 2 is their dual nature as both threatening and vulnerable. One obvious example is the threatening landscape beneath the creatures' legs. Rock formations are protruding upward in both images. In Figure 1, there is a single rock protrusion that is just about in line with the triangle below its arm. Both Mittman and Kim read these images of the rocks as threatening: "Returning to the rock formation at the Blemmye's feet, especially if we read the figure as female, the formation may seem, rising between her legs, as a sexual threat. That is, as even the landscape of this manuscript can be sexualized and perhaps threatening, this figure is both dangerous and *vulnerable*" (115). Yet there is also another way this creature is vulnerable — the organs of the appetite, the eyes and the mouth, in particular, are now lowered to the same level as the heart, the seat of reason as the Anglo-Saxons understood it.[90] The symbol is clear: the creature has no distinction between appetite and reason. We might recall Polyphemus from the *Odyssey* in this context. Here is a creature who is driven by his desire to dominate and consume; he does not respect the code of honor

[90] See M.R. Godden's "Anglo-Saxons on the Mind" (2002) for a longer discussion.

associated with being a good host to guests. The Blemmye is at the perfect height to consume a person's heart, and its ambiguous gender and shape makes it threatening. Yet its confusion of the appetite and the mind, its nakedness or ambiguous dress, and its residence in a seemingly threatening landscape make it a vulnerable creature as well. There is a further confusion if we think about the Donestre in this context. The creature weeps over the head of his victim instead of over the heart, the seat of reason, and perhaps this is his mistake — he is caught up in appearances and consumes the person, mind and soul, and leaves the head, which is useless:

> Đonne is sum ea-lond in þære Readan Sæ, þær is man-cyn þæt is mid us Donestre nemned, þa syndon gewaexene swa frihteras fram þam heafde oð ðone nafolan, ond se oðer dæl bið mennisce onlic, ond hy cunnon eall mennisce gereord. Þonne hy fremdes cynnes mannan gesceoð, þonne nemnað hy hyne ond his magas cuþra manna naman, ond mid leaslicum wordum hy hine beswicað one hine gefoð, ond æfter þan hy hine fretað ealne buton þon heafde ond þonne sittað ond wepað ofer þam heafde. (24)

[There is some island on the Red Sea where there are men who, among us, are named Donestre, who are shaped as soothsayers from the head to the navel, and the other part is like a man, and they know all men's languages. When it happens that they spot some man, they name him and name the other people he knows, and with false words they deceive him and capture him, and after that they consume all but the head and then sit and weep over the head.]

Finally, the Blemmye's stare is a representation of its power and threatening status. While many of the wonders seem to be staring back at us, the Blemmye is one of

the few that stands facing us and stares directly back with both its eyes. The stare is confrontational: "It is the direct, confrontational stare of the Blemmye that draws our attention [...] and thereby reveals this dangerous threat which is present throughout the *Wonders*; we are imperiled by these disjointed eyes, which in turn gaze back at us, ever alert, unchanging, unblinking" (133). Part of the creature's power is to reach out of the text, so to speak, and attract our attention. It is unclassifiable, but it unnerves us because it calls attention to itself. This characteristic causes us to reflect on the nature of our encounters with the monstrous. We sympathize with the dog-headed Christopher, we look at the pictures of the creatures from the *Wonders*, and we become intrigued by Alexander's march east. The authors invite us to think about these creatures' motivations and perspectives. Part of that process is to force us to contemplate what these "inconceivable beasts" actually are. The use of paradox in these texts is intentional, and it is common that groups often define themselves through contrast with another. But the scribes force us to confront that fact that the distinction between "us" and "them" is not as clear cut as we may think. This fact is especially true of Anglo-Saxon England, a place of many different peoples with varying cultures, languages, and beliefs.

Gender is not the only category that the monsters in the *Beowulf Manuscript* confuse and complicate. One of the most obvious features of the monsters is their human qualities. They are rarely mere beasts, and they interact with the humans who seek them out or who are made targets. Mittman and Kim begin their book with a comment about the creatures in *Wonders* that we can apply to many of the monsters throughout the texts: "The *Wonders* explores perhaps most fundamentally the category of the familiar, the category 'human.' It must be recalled that many of these beings are described not as

monsters, but rather as men" (18). This same trait can be applied to the creatures from every text. For example, St. Christopher is a humanoid creature with a dog's head, the Donestre and the Blemmye are two examples of the Wonders with at least the form of a human body from the neck down, Alexander encounters the *ictifafonas* (66) who are giant and hairy men and women, and the Grendelkin are described by Hrothgar as at least having the form of a man and a woman. Not only do they share physical forms, they have similar motivations. For example, Grendel's mother seeks revenge for the death of her son just as a retainer would seek to avenge his lord. Notably, these creatures exist within the context of the human society and thought. Their appearances are framed by various kinds of Christian, social, and political terms. Christopher is a monster-martyr, the giant women with tusks are killed for their uncleanliness, Alexander brings his army into a land of inconceivable beasts in order to rule the world, and Beowulf seeks to settle the feud the Grendelkin have with Heorot. We might be tempted to interpret these monsters as allegorical or symbolic, and I do not wish to abandon this kind of reading entirely, but even though these creatures have human qualities, these traits make them more realistic to a medieval reader.[91] These monsters can be better understood by their links to the humans who encounter them.

Finally, and what is the *Beowulf Manuscript*'s most defining feature, the texts all cause anxiety about the Other, whether it be a foreigner or a monster. In each section of

[91] Mittman and Kim also point out in their introduction that "In most cases, however, medieval treatments of the monstrous, while they focus on the capacity of the monster to signify, to point away from itself to a meaning that is elsewhere, at the same time recognize the treatises on the monstrous as, in most instances, not fictive but actual, not imaginary but as real the representations of the stars and the reckoning of dates with which, as in Cotton Tiberius B.v, they are sometimes bound" (12).

the manuscript there is an attempt at ritual cleansing,[92] the characters are both threatening and vulnerable, flesh is consumed or the consuming of flesh is alluded to, and decapitation is prevalent. These themes are most evident in *Beowulf* and *The Wonders of the East*. Beowulf arrives in Heorot to kill Grendel, and he pursues Grendel's mother to her haunted mere. In the *Wonders* some creatures avoid all human contact, others burn up at the sight of people, and Alexander kills some for the uncleanliness. Yet, the author of the fragment of *St. Christopher* reveals that King Dagnus wishes to rid his land of Christians and the dog-headed Christopher. After numerous, elaborate attempts to kill the saint, he is finally done away with. Alexander also does his share of killing monsters and ridding himself of untrustworthy guides. This anxiety, however, about the "other" does not come from gender. Throughout the manuscript, there is a concern for cataloguing and naming, and the behavior of various people and monsters is judged either clean or unclean, blessed or sinful, pure or defiled. In a chapter from *The Beowulf Reader* called "The Women of *Beowulf*," Gillian R. Overing comments that *Beowulf* is a poem overwhelmingly concerned with masculine values:

> *Beowulf* is also an overwhelmingly masculine poem; it could be seen as a chronicle of male desire, a tale of men dying. In the masculine economy of the poem desire expresses itself as desire for the other, as a continual process of subjugation and appropriation of the other. The code of vengeance and the heroic choice demand above all a *resolution* of opposing elements; a decision must always be made. (220)

[92] An article "Beowulf and Germanic Exorcism" by Gustav Hübener (1935) and a more recently written chapter in the book *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* by Andy Orchard (1995) are both helpful in analyzing how ritual cleansing was an important theme for the Anglo-Saxon and Norse societies of the middle ages.

The overwhelming number of examples of women who are killed or corrected has nothing to do with their gender; rather, their behavior and associations with unclean creatures is what makes them targets for purification. I assert this argument because the women who suffer these consequences have male counterparts who also suffer the same. Moreover, women can be the ones doing the purifying, as is the case with Judith. Some women are simply left alone; for example, the huntresses from the *Wonders* simply go on hunting — they are named or categorized and no Alexander or Beowulf feels the need to purge the mountain of their presence. The anxiety invoked by the "other" in the manuscript is a fear of impurity and defilement. Monsters and monstrous individuals cross boundaries, infect human settlements, kill, flee, and refuse to be part of civilization. They heroes of the manuscript simply seek to keep their surrounding areas clean, both literally and figuratively, and the wisdom they gain often warns them of the dangers of pride and the reality of their own impermanence.

CONCLUSION

Throughout these chapters, I have argued that the *Beowulf Manuscript* is a unified piece of literature. Though the scribes working on this manuscript did not compose the five texts that comprise the codex, they specifically chose them to be bound together. Thus they acted as curators and interpreters of the stories. There is an undeniable theme that runs throughout the manuscript, and it is the purification of the monstrous. There is evidence for this theme the choice of subject matter, language, and recurring images and events in the texts. In Chapter 1, I examined the ways the stories are about an encounter with the monstrous. The monsters are the Others, diametrically opposed to the values of the characters. Also, in each text, there is a some attempt to destroy them. While other scholars have noted the importance of the presence of the monsters in each text, it is the attempt to kill them that makes the manuscript unique and connected by a common theme. The stories are also bound together linguistically; they share words with similar connotations. In Chapter 2, I compared the ways that the purification theme is expressed. While there is considerable variety among these words, and the texts often do not share the various words associated with cleanliness and uncleanliness, their shades of meaning are strikingly similar. There are common elements that can be found among various sets of words: snakes, consuming human flesh, fire, light, killing, beheading, and fleeing. Additionally, these words are found when various "purification events" are performed. The characters encounter the monstrous, kill it, travel to unclean places, receive divine favor, and gain wisdom from their experiences. Linking the manuscript by this theme of purification also helps illustrate how the other major themes are developed. In Chapter 3, I examined how purification is relevant in our discussions of pride and death throughout

the texts. Purification is presented as a highly ritualized action, and it has associations with healing, the gaining of knowledge, and dying. Only one character is healed in the manuscript, and he is Dagnus, who recovers from blindness. But many of the characters attempt to clean and purify various places from monsters. Performing this ritual results in some wisdom that is passed down to them. Often, this advice is a warning against the consequences of pride. Death, especially by fire, is another major element of these rituals. Of course, a monster must be killed in order for a place to be made pure, but other characters gain access to heaven by being burned on a funeral pyre. Finally, in Chapter 4, I considered how gender plays a large role in the purification process. Judith is the lone example of a "pure" woman who is able to help her people by beheading the monstrous Holofernes. On the other hand, women in the manuscript are punished for their filth and their indecent behavior. Grendel's mother is so monstrous that she is barely recognizable as female; the narrator refers to her using male pronouns.

Ritual Archetypes in Other Anglo-Saxon Texts

Though it may be tempting to try to link these purification rituals in the *Beowulf Manuscript* to actual historical Anglo-Saxon rituals of cleansing, Vaughan-Sterling, commenting on the connection between *Beowulf* and the *Metrical Charms*, explains that these images are part of a tradition of belief in the supernatural:

> Anglo-Saxon magic and poetry, as collateral products of the same culture, share certain assumptions and beliefs. One of the most obvious of these [...] is the shared belief in the supernatural. Monsters, witches, and other preternatural creatures appear, or are referred to, in both ritual texts and poetry. The part of Grendel and the *nicors* [from *Beowulf*], for example, is

> taken over in the *Charms* by omnipresent evil spirits, who plague man. (188)

Thus the purification rituals in the manuscript belong to a long line of literary and mythic archetypes. Although they could represent a real desire to cleanse and purify, these rituals are purely imaginative. There is no evidence to suggest that any of these purification events, which I outlined above, actually took place in a historical context. On the other hand, we might consider that these imagined rituals have their basis in actual religious practices, but they were elaborated on and changed in the manuscript stories to fit the worldview of the times of the writers. Using the funeral at the end of *Beowulf* as an example, Thomas D. Hill, in his article "Beowulf's Roman Rites: Roman Ritual and Germanic Tradition," argues that there may have been an historical basis for certain events in the poem, but they were obviously changed by the poet:

> "In imagining the funeral such a hero might receive, the poet turned to traditional accounts of old funerals [...] and invented a suitable funeral for Beowulf based on earlier models, but presumably adapted for this particular context in this particular poem. One can only speculate, but it would seem likely that the poet suppressed or toned down any specifically pagan elements that were part of his model." (334-5)

Using this funeral as an example, we can see that some of the elements of the ending of the poem have strong parallels to actual rituals. Hill points out that the cremation, the destruction of the weapons and spoils of war on the pyre, and the lament are all strongly based in Roman burial rites for important warriors (326-9). In fact, he finds the poem and the historical practices so similar that he concludes there must be a link between the two:

"The parallels between Beowulf's funeral and the tradition of Roman military funerals are, however, so striking and extensive that they are best explained by the continuity of tradition between the late Roman and early Germanic world. Such continuity is hardly very surprising - the Anglo-Saxon world owed much to Roman precedent" (329).

Not every ritual event in the poem, however, will have such connections to the real world. While fire and funerary rites are commonly shared practices among many cultures and are represented widely throughout world literature, events such as encountering the monstrous have no real historical basis; these rituals belong to the world of the imagination. Yet there may be a way in which this ritual event may have been perceived by medieval peoples to have happened. This perception can be attributed to the assigning and visiting of sacred spaces. Part of the goal of the protagonists in the manuscript is to purify and create sacred spaces. For example, the ground Christopher dies on becomes part of a cure for Dagnus' blindness (both literally and figuratively), Alexander learns of his mortality in the sacred grove of the trees of the sun and the moon, Grendel's mother's lair is filled with light after her death, likewise the dragon's barrow becomes a funeral monument to commemorate Beowulf's life, and Heorot is cleansed and becomes a place where treasure-giving and wisdom is dispersed. Just as these places become, or are, pure, which offer cures, wisdom, and sanctuary, people designated many sacred spaces in Anglo-Saxon England. In her book *Liturgy, Architecture, and Sacred Places in Anglo-Saxon England*, Helen Gittos identifies one such example in the site of Mildrith's stone. Mildrith escaped many trials and tribulations, but she arrives home so pure that her feet, upon touching a large stone where her ship is docked, miraculously make an imprint when she first steps foot on land. Gittos explains, "The story of

Mildrith's footprints is, in part, about how a holy place came into being. It is an unusually detailed description of the incremental transformation of a natural place into an architectural setting for the liturgy" (21). While the actual place of Mildrith's landing remains unknown, the surrounding area was a place where miracles occurred, people were cured of illnesses, and a church was set up (19-28). What is significant about this place, Gittos argues, is the fact that it is a shared ritualistic space where people could create their own meaning about what it means for them and their society: "However, it is one of the qualities of a holy place such as Mildrith's stone that it can bear a range of interpretation [....] It is one of the features of a holy place that it permits at least an illusion of some degree of shared experience and common ground for people whose interpretation of it may differ in nature and sophistication" (28-9). This quality is precisely what the imaged sacred places of the manuscript have. Each spot is a space set apart from everyday life, it has been cleansed and potentially offers a cure, and it is a place where meaning is to be found. Using Heorot as an example, we can find that after Beowulf kills Grendel the stories that are sung by Hrothgar's singer are different in nature than the stories that are told after the hero defeats the troll's mother. Heorot becomes a place of learning not just for Beowulf but for the readers of the poem. Sacred spaces are meant to make us reflect on life and think about who we are and what our society is in different ways. In this sense, the sacred spaces in the manuscript offer a similar value as real sacred spaces do and have done.

The ritual words, themselves, however, are clear indicators of what is happening thematically in the poem. Some words, like *fælsian*, have a narrow meaning and were probably not used in everyday speech. In the endnote to line 825 of the *Klaeber Beowulf*,

the editors indicate that *fælsian* has a religious connotation: “The hero’s stated intention to ‘cleanse’ Heorot [...] has been precisely fulfilled. The verb [...] sometimes carries specifically religious overtones [...], as would suit the context of a demon-haunted hall or, later, a demon-haunted mere” (164). I outlined above how Ristuccia links *fælsian* to *lustrare*, and how it has a very narrow range of meaning. Yet, many of the purification words are common to Anglo-Saxon literature, and given how words such as “clean” and “cleanse,” which have been in our language since the Anglo-Saxon period, have such a common currency and have a wide range of meanings, we might imagine that these words were used for both ritual and everyday purposes in medieval England. For example, Vaughan-Sterling proposes that part of the connection between the real world and the imaginary world of poetry has to do with the warrior ethos that characterized much of the Anglo-Saxon period: “But the most clearcut evidence of cultural confluences in Anglo-Saxon poetry and ritual magic can be found in these elements traceable to life in a warrior society - the imagery and vocabulary of war which run throughout the charms” (190). Thus the words are another link between the poem and history. From the examples and rites, sacred spaces, and ritual words, we can conclude that purification is a complex concept in the manuscript, just as it was in Anglo-Saxon England. There is no easy way to link the exact practices of the protagonists of the stories to real life events, and that should not be the point of reading the manuscript. The stories are imaginative spaces where real world concerns are expressed, and the scribes, noticing these themes in the manuscript pieces, arranged the works to highlight this theme of purification. Their goal was clearly not to represent the purification practices of their own time. That task would have been impossible considering that all these texts, mostly unchanged from the form

the scribes found them in, were composed in different time periods. The composition date of *Beowulf* alone is potentially removed by hundreds of years from the time the scribes copied it into the *Beowulf Manuscript*. Yet, their goal of arranging these texts because of this particular theme, expressed in similar ways using different words, is evident.

Why Purification?

To know why purification was a theme these scribes chose is an impossible task. Some arguments, such as Powell's and Blurton's, rely on historical circumstance. Perhaps this theme was of interest in turbulent times, and the scribes were thinking about what it is to be English at a time when Danish influence in England was at its highest. The scribes could have been thinking about the horrors of the Viking invasions and expressing a desire to purify the land from non-Christian attackers. The historical arguments are not too convincing because they do not rely on solid fact; rather, they take advantage of circumstance and try to fit the manuscript into an historical framework, which may not have even applied to the scribes. The fact that we cannot date the manuscript or *Beowulf* with any certainty also poses a problem for these kinds of historical readings. Neidorf's assertion that the audience of the *Beowulf Manuscript* would not have been (or been able to relate to) the world of the original audience of the *Beowulf* poem is especially important here. On the other hand, Orchard tries to link the manuscript in a more literary way. He finds the theme of pride to be especially relevant, but there are other reasons the scribes could have gathered these stories for the manuscript. They could have collected these pieces for cataloguing purposes, created the work for some nobleman with an interest in monster tales, made the manuscript to commemorate the building of some church, or just have curated these parts for pure

enjoyment. Once again, it is difficult to know the true intentions of the scribes without knowing anything about them.

Mittman, in his book *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England*, suggests that the frequency of monster images and stories in Anglo-Saxon maps, art, and literature points to a larger trend of these people: trying to define and settle on their own identity. He argues that there is a trend among certain groups to identify themselves in contrast to an "Other": "Many cultural groups have sought to define themselves through 'an ongoing process of *dependent* differentiation,' establishing themselves in relation to their Others, but for the Anglo-Saxons, this 'definition by means of difference' was particularly crucial" (5). Contemporary countries employ this strategy all the time; consider how American values are set against the ideology of communist or fascists in popular movies and television. These enemies are the typical bogeymen in many war films and historical dramas. They highlight what is so different about one group so that the other may seek to define themselves against it. Mittman explains that the root cause of this attitude, for the Anglo-Saxons, had to do with their geographical location, which was far removed from Rome: "Geographical location and biological habitat impacted the perceived degree of civilization of the inhabitants. For the Anglo-Saxons, as for many other cultures, self-definition was deeply embedded in geographical location" (16).

This analysis, however, is only one piece of the puzzle. The *Beowulf Manuscript* indeed has a concern with geography and monstrosity, but the main theme is not identifying a sense of self against the presence of monsters but coming to that sense of identity by purifying the monstrous. To highlight this difference, consider an example from *Gulliver's Travels*. When Gulliver arrives in Brobdingnag, the land of the giants, he

is firmly in the realm of the monstrous. His encounters with these people often disgust him because they have exaggerated human features, which lead him to make observations about his own culture. In an early encounter with these giants, Gulliver witnesses a baby being breastfed by a nurse. When he sees the woman's breast and nipple, the sight horrifies him because "[i]t stood prominent six Foot, and could not be less than sixteen in circumference. The Nipple was about half the Bigness of my Head, and the Hew both of that and the Dug so varied with Spots, Pimples and Freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseous" (77). From this sight, Gulliver has a reflection about his own society: "This made me reflect on the fair Skins of our *English* Ladies, who appear so beautiful to us, only because they are of our own size, and their Defects not to be seen through a Magnifying Glass, where we find by Experiment the smoothest and whitest of Skins look rough and coarse, and ill coloured" (77). Part of the humor, of course, is the fact that Gulliver is so quick to point out how his insight about beauty can be applied to women but not himself. If Gulliver were to look at his own skin under a lens, he would see the same gross patterns. Yet this experience with the monstrous causes him to gain some wisdom about the perception of beauty in society. In the *Beowulf Manuscript*, however, it is not just the sight of monsters that produces knowledge but the purification of them. Once again, this theme is most prominent in *Beowulf*, and to use a famous example, Beowulf returns from his fight with Grendel's mother, cuts off Grendel's head, and presents it as a trophy to Hrothgar. Beheading is one of the major purification events in the manuscript, and the sight of the monster's head produces horror in its onlookers: "þa wæs be feaxe on flet boren/Grendles heafod, þær guman druncon,/egeslic for eorlum and þære idese mid,/wlite-seon wrætlic; weras on sawon" [Then Grendel's head was paraded

into the hall by its hair where the warriors drank. It was a terrible sight, a wondrous spectacle, to the noblemen and the women there with them; the men stared at it] (1647-1650). After this moment, when Hrothgar realizes the threat from the Grendelkin is over, he gives his famous "sermon" where he advises Beowulf to never be too proud and reminds him of his own mortality, advice the hero will ignore at the end of the poem. The word *boran* here is important because it signals that Grendel's head is not just casually carried into the hall; instead, I translated the word as "paraded" because one of the connotations of the word, according to the *Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, is to "*bear* or *carry a sacrifice*."[93] There is a religious connotation to this passage, and it is the fact that the threat has been *fælsode* (purified) that Hrothgar is finally able to produce some words of wisdom for the young warrior. Later in the poem, when the narrator recounts Beowulf's triumphs before the dragon fight, he explicitly states that Beowulf has ritually cleansed Heorot: "He Hróþgáres [...] sele fælsode" [He purified Hrothgar's hall] (2351-2). The various monster sightings do not produce any insights throughout the manuscript. In fact, the characters easily recognize their threat and attempt to destroy these creatures. It is after the moment of purification that reflection begins.

One suggestion I propose is the scribes organized the manuscript around the purification theme because it reflected a certain attitude the Anglo-Saxons had about life. The narrators of many Old English poems agree that all life on earth must some day come to an end. Even hard fought victories will be lost to the progress of time or eventual feuding. The narrator from "The Wanderer" expresses this view succinctly: "Ongietan sceal gleaw hæle hu gæstlic bið,/þonne ealre þisse worulde wela weste

[93] http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/finder/3/beran

stondeð,/[....]/Weorniað þa win-salo, waldend licgað/dreame bidrorene, duguþ eal gecrong,/wlonc bi wealle [A clear-sighted man must perceive how terrible it will be when all the wealth of this world stands uninhabited …. The wine-halls wear out, the lords lie without joy, the multitude has died proud by the wall] (73-80). This sense of loss pervades the manuscript. In *Christopher*, the saint loses his life, and Dagnus' religious beliefs are discarded in favor of the new Christian ones. In *Wonders,* animals burn up and flee, never to be seen again by people. In the *Letter of Alexander,* Alexander learns of his own mortality and his inability to return home to see his family. In *Beowulf,* Heorot will burn down because of a feud, and Beowulf's kingdom will be destroyed by raiders, his people carried off as slaves or killed. In *Judith*, Holofernes' great army dissipates once its leader has been beheaded. These events from the manuscript remind us that this world is transitory and peace cannot last for long. Yet there is wisdom to be gained from loss. The narrator of "The Wanderer" famously informs us: "Her bið feoh læne, her bið freond læne,/her bið mon læne, her bið mæg læne,/eal þis eorþan gesteal idel weorþeð!/Swa cwæð snottor on mode, gesæt him sundor æt rune" [Here money is not enduring, here friends are not enduring, here man is not enduring, here kinsmen are not enduring. All this frame of the world will become empty] (108-11). The *Beowulf Manuscript* reminds us that this world is far from perfect, and it belongs alongside a long list of works that take the subject of humanity's continual need to purify what is around us as its theme. Bjork, in his introduction to the volume *Old English Shorter Poems, Volume II: Wisdom and Lyric*, notes that there is knowledge to be gained from loss: "In *The Wanderer* [....] [b]y systematically listing all the good things in life that he has lost in exile, the speaker comes to realize that earthly things have no meaning. Earthly goods will not last, social

custom will not last, gnomic wisdom will not last, poetry will not last. Nothing in the world, whether we perceive it as good or as bad, can withstand time" (xxiii). The various attempts to purify sacred places are ultimately futile - Alexander's kingdom will fall apart, Heorot will burn, Finnsburg burns after a feud is reignited, Beowulf's home burns, his people are left to die, and the Israelites, for all their glory in the Old Testament, will be replaced by the Christians. Victory is short-lived in the manuscript, and this sense of mortality is an essential component of the *Beowulf Manuscript* and of Anglo-Saxon literature in general. Perhaps the theme of purification highlights how an important ritual function can also fail the test of permanence.

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Drew University	Madison, NJ	Doctor of Letters	May 2018