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Abstract

This article first gives an overview of the cultural background relevant to beheading, following which it discusses critical interpretations of this *Beowulf* episode. While the article considers the merits of these interpretations, it proposes to interpret Beowulf's act with reference to the narrative's expression of the Cain theme. It suggests that Beowulf's lack of apprehension in relation to Grendel's head as a sign of his victory against Grendel's mother points to his ignorance of its Cainite associations, which is a reason why the defeat of the monsters does not address the weaknesses of the societies Beowulf seeks to protect.

Introduction and Scope

Decapitation and severed heads are central to the narrative in *Beowulf*, as well as to its interpretation. However, Grendel's beheading is more problematic from a narrative viewpoint than has been appreciated. Even where, as I discuss below, its circumstances are in some ways consistent with *Beowulf*'s broader cultural context, this does not fully explain the use of the beheading motif in the poem.

While the protagonist's encounter with Grendel's monstrous mother, the episode in which the beheading occurs, has been discussed by many commentators, fewer have debated why Beowulf should behead the male monster's corpse to display the head at King Hrothgar's hall.¹ Although commentators have given plausible explanations for Beowulf's course of action, the issue merits further consideration, particularly with respect to the meaning behind the placement of this episode within the broader narrative context. I argue that Grendel's head is,

¹ The matter has been discussed, however, albeit at different levels of detail, by R. W. Chambers, 'Beowulf's Fight with Grendel and its Scandinavian Parallels', *English Studies*, 11 (1929), 81–100; Paul Beekman Taylor, 'Beowulf's Second Grendel Fight', *Neophilologische Mitteilungen*, 86 (1985), 62–69; John Edward Damon, 'Desecto Capite Perfidio: Bodily Fragmentation and Reciprocal Violence in Anglo-Saxon England', *Exemplaria*, 13 (2001), 399–432; Frederick M. Biggs, 'Honscioh and Æschere in *Beowulf*', *Neophilologus*, 87 (2003), 635–52; Martin Puhvel, *Cause and Effect in Beowulf: Motivation and Driving Forces behind Words and Deeds* (Oxford: University Press of America, 2005), pp. 56 and 61; Renée Rebecca Trilling, 'Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again', *Parergon*, 24 (2007), 1–20; Dana M. Oswald, 'Wigge under Wætere: Beowulf's Revision of the Fight with Grendel's Mother', *Exemplaria*, 21 (2009), 63–82; Dana M. Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2010); Thijs Porck and Sander

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for the poem's Christian audience, closely associated with Cain and his archetypal fratricide. While Grendel's mother is also associated with Cain, in the course of this article I make an argument for her more specific association with unjustified revenge, which I postulate as a reason for Beowulf's elision of her body in favour of her son's head. In this context, Beowulf's lack of hesitation in making use of Grendel's head as a sign of victory at Heorot, points the poem's Christian audience's attention to his limitations as a pre-Christian character. This article argues that Beowulf has no qualms about the use of Grendel's head as a sign specifically because he is unable to glean its symbolic significance. This article also argues that Beowulf's elision of Grendel's mother's body, attested by the fact that he does not take back to Heorot a sign directly attesting to her death, suggests that he seeks to elide the unjustified revenge that she represents. In so doing, the protagonist does not realise that both monstrous bodies have scripturally-derived significance, which means that his attempt to elide unjustified revenge is futile. This is because in taking Grendel's head to Heorot, Beowulf unwittingly brings to the hall a symbol of fratricide and kin strife. This goes a long way towards explaining, on a conceptual level, why Beowulf, notwithstanding his defeat of the monsters, is unable to redeem the societies he seeks to protect by putting an end to their internecine violence.

Cultural Background

In view of the attention that this article devotes to beheading it is worth emphasising that beheading is by no means unique to *Beowulf*, for it also appears widely in the broader Old English and related literary traditions, and to this extent Grendel's beheading may not require special explanation. Indeed, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and other Old Norse texts, coupled with Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, contain various instances of decapitation.² The contexts for decapitation are diverse, ranging from the prospect of judicial execution in *Jómsvíkinga saga*³ to the beheading of a revenant in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, who is thereby laid to rest once and for all.⁴ Irish archaeological evidence for the medieval period, moreover, points towards judicial practice and warfare as reasons for decapitation in real life.⁵ In an Old English textual context beheading occurs in *Apollonius of Tyre*, where this punishment is meted out to the suitors of King Antiochus's daughter,⁶ and in *Cynewulf's Juliana*, where the protagonist is beheaded at a location identified as a borderland. The identification of the location as a borderland is original to the Old English poem, as it is not to be found in the *Passio S. Iulianae*. This detail may therefore reflect practices related to

Stolk, 'Marking Boundaries in *Beowulf*: Æshere's Head, Grendel's Arm and the Dragon's Corpse', *Amsterdamer Beiträge Zur Älteren Germanistik*, 77 (2017), 521–40; Amanda Lehr, 'Sexing the Cannibal in *The Wonders of the East* and *Beowulf*', *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 9 (2018), 179–95; and Teresa Hooper, 'The Missing Women of the *Beowulf* Manuscript', in *New Readings on Women and Early Medieval English Literature and Culture: Cross-Disciplinary Studies in Honour of Helen Damico*, ed. by Helene Scheck and Christine Kozikowski (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), pp. 161–78.

² See Leszek Gardela, 'The Headless Norsemen: Decapitation in Viking Age Scandinavia', in *The Head Motif in Past Societies in a Comparative Perspective*, ed. by Leszek Gardela and Kamil Kajkowski (Bytów: Muzeum Zachodniokaszubskie w Bytowie, 2012), pp. 88–155 (pp. 88 and 91–104).

³ Gardela, p. 88.

⁴ Gardela, p. 99.

⁵ Niamh Carty, '"The Halved Heads": Osteological Evidence for Decapitation in Medieval Ireland', *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 25 (2015), 1–20 (p. 18).

⁶ Rolf H. Bremmer, 'Grendel's Arm and the Law', in *Studies in English Language and Literature: Doubt Wisely*, ed. by M. J. Toswell and E. M. Taylor (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), pp. 121–32 (p. 126).

early medieval English executions.⁷ Severed heads also enjoy prominence in Cotton Vitellius A.xv, the *Beowulf* Manuscript, as attested by the protagonist's decapitation of Holofernes in *Judith*, the Donestre's weeping over the heads of its victims in *Wonders of the East*, as well as Æschere's and Grendel's heads in *Beowulf*.⁸ Even where, on the other hand, written sources for judicial decapitation in England are hard to come by,⁹ archaeological evidence attests to the execution and display of criminals' bodies, as well as to post-mortem decapitation as a sign of a person's deviancy.¹⁰ Moreover, A. Reynolds's study of deviant burial customs in early medieval England suggests that this punishment was mainly meted out to men.¹¹

The circumstances of Beowulf's beheading of Grendel's corpse, and his use of the head as a sign attesting to his victory against Grendel's mother, recall some of these cultural contexts or motifs. Grendel is decapitated post-mortem, in return for his many crimes against the Danes,¹² which beheading may be said to reflect the prevalence of this practice in relation to men in archaeological sources. Moreover, the display of the male monster's head as a sign at Heorot (ll. 1647–54), or, to be more specific, 'tīres tō tǣcne' ('as a sign of glory', l. 1654a), recalls Judith's display of Holofernes's head in lines 171–75 of the biblical poem,¹³ which is ultimately derived from the Vulgate Book of Judith.¹⁴ All the same, the specific place and meaning of Grendel's beheading in *Beowulf* deserves further analysis, particularly with reference to the poem's broader narrative context.

Critical Views of Beowulf's Beheading of Grendel's Corpse

As recent commentary has emphasised, the beheading of Grendel's corpse is preceded, within *Beowulf*, by the beheading of King Hrothgar's retainer Æschere and the display of his head on a cliff, which may be said to mark Grendel's mother's jurisdiction over the *mere*¹⁵ that is her abode.¹⁶ The monstrous mother abducts the man from Heorot (ll. 1296–99a) earlier on in the narrative, as she seeks revenge for Grendel's death at Beowulf's hands. Her motivation is spelt out by King Hrothgar, who identifies Æschere's death as the single act whereby Grendel's mother secures her revenge (ll. 1333b–37a). We are then told of Æschere's beheading as

⁷ See Helen Appleton, 'The Role of Æschere's Head', *The Review of English Studies*, 68.285 (2016), 428–47 (pp. 436–37), who makes reference, *inter alia*, to discussions of this matter by Francis Gummere, John Kemble and Dorothy Whitelock.

⁸ Appleton, pp. 428–29.

⁹ See, however, Bremmer, pp. 125–26 for accounts of real-life beheadings in early medieval England.

¹⁰ Appleton, pp. 433 and 435.

¹¹ See Carty, p. 3.

¹² Lines 1575b–90 of *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ed. by R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, 4th edn (London: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 54. Further references to this work will be given parenthetically in the main text. Translations from *Beowulf*, unless otherwise stated, are mine.

¹³ 'Judith', in *The Beowulf Manuscript*, ed. and trans. by R. D. Fulk (London: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 297–323 (p. 310).

¹⁴ See verse 13.19 of 'Judith', in *The Parallel English-Latin Vulgate Bible* (Toronto: Publishing Toronto, 2016), Kindle edition.

¹⁵ In this article I refer to Grendel's mother's abode using the Old English term *mere*, in recognition of the lack of consensus over the type of aquatic environment that this term describes. See Roberta Frank, 'Mere and Sund: Two Sea-Changes in *Beowulf*', in *Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature: Essays in Honour of Stanley B. Greenfield*, ed. by Phyllis Rugg Brown, Georgia Ronan Crampton, and Fred C. Robinson (London: University of Toronto Press, 1986), pp. 153–72 (pp. 154–58) for a discussion of this term and relevant critical views.

¹⁶ See Appleton, p. 429, for a discussion of Æschere's head in relation to early medieval English charters and judicial decapitation. See also Porck and Stolk, pp. 522–27, for a discussion of Grendel's mother's display of Æschere's head as a boundary marker.

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Beowulf and his companions approach Grendel's mother's *mere* for the protagonist to confront the she-monster (ll. 1420b–21). Notwithstanding Grendel's mother's active pursuit of revenge, Frederick Klaeber argued that it is only natural that Beowulf beheads Grendel, whom he identified as the chief of the protagonist's enemies.¹⁷ In contrast, more recent commentary has emphasised the agency and power of Grendel's mother. This makes Klaeber's conclusion seem rather less self-evident. Indeed, as Maria Flavia Godfrey has argued, Grendel's head is an odd symbol of victory given that in this instance the protagonist has only beheaded a corpse.¹⁸

Over the years of *Beowulf* criticism commentators have proposed different explanations for Beowulf's choice. In an article published in 1929 R.W. Chambers argued that Grendel's head is required because it offers narrative closure.¹⁹ This may be considered plausible, given that the monster's death occurs out of the view of the Danes and the poem's audience. Paul Beekman Taylor suggested that Beowulf takes Grendel's head back to Heorot because his intention when setting out to the *mere* is revenge against the male monster, rather than his mother.²⁰ John Edward Damon considered that 'the recovery of Grendel's head ended an exchange between the Grendel-kin and the Danes [...] terminating through enacted ritual the monsters' claim of sovereignty'.²¹ Martin Puhvel contemplated different possibilities, ranging from the provision of proof for Grendel's death²² to an intention to spare Grendel's mother the indignity of the display of her body given that her motivation for attacking Heorot is revenge.²³ Renée Rebecca Trilling, on the other hand, sought an explanation for the beheading of Grendel's corpse in Grendel's mother's otherness, as she argued that the display of the monstrous mother's head would have served as a 'daily reminder of her disruptive power', given that she is 'the horrible Other of social cohesion'.²⁴ Dana M. Oswald considered that Beowulf beheads the male monster as he seeks to give the impression to the Danes that Grendel posed the greatest threat,²⁵ which may be borne out of a sense of shame at fighting a woman, or at the challenge that she posed to him.²⁶ Beowulf's shame at the confrontation with Grendel's mother is also attested by his elision of the details of the fight itself, when he narrates the course of events at the *mere* to King Hrothgar²⁷ and later to King Hygelac.²⁸ Thijs Porck and Sander Stolk also discussed the issue, albeit briefly, in 2017. They argued that Beowulf displays Grendel's head as a token of victory;²⁹ however, their article does not explore the motivations behind the beheading *per se*, as their focus is on Grendel's mother's beheading of *Æschere* and other aspects of the narrative. In 2018 Amanda Lehr, who

¹⁷ See Biggs, p. 640.

¹⁸ Mary Flavia Godfrey, 'Beowulf and Judith: Thematizing Decapitation in Old English Poetry', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 35 (1991), 1–43 (p. 3).

¹⁹ Chambers, p. 87.

²⁰ See Beekman Taylor, pp. 66–67; and footnote 35 in Evelyn Reynolds, 'Beowulf's Poetics of Absorption: Beowulf's Poetics of Absorption: Narrative Syntax and the Illusion of Stability in the Fight with Grendel's Mother', *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 31 (2015), 43–64 (p. 62).

²¹ Damon, pp. 430–31.

²² Puhvel, p. 56.

²³ Puhvel, p. 61.

²⁴ Trilling, p. 18.

²⁵ Oswald, 'Wigge under Wætere: Beowulf's Revision of the Fight with Grendel's Mother', p. 74.

²⁶ Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*, p. 100.

²⁷ Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*, p. 106.

²⁸ Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*, p. 109.

²⁹ Porck and Stolk, p. 529.

interpreted the text to the effect that Beowulf beheads both monsters, suggested that the narrative conflates the two monstrous bodies.³⁰ Teresa Hooper, in 2019, interpreted Beowulf's action in terms of the requirement of the blood feud to exchange male bodies.³¹ While most of the points raised by these scholars are potentially valid, particularly as the narrative allows for exploration of Beowulf's motivations and actions at different levels, I hereby argue for an additional interpretative layer with reference to the Cain theme and Grendel's mother's revenge. However, before I move on to discuss this additional interpretative layer, I note that the explanations provided by Trilling and Oswald for Beowulf's actions, which draw, *inter alia*, on Grendel's mother's otherness and the elision of her body, find particular support in the sequence of events in the narrative. As I already indicated above in my brief description of Oswald's views, the protagonist not only elides the monstrous mother's body, but also her story. On the other hand, he goes on to give King Hygelac a full account, complete with additional narrative details, of his fight against Grendel.³² Beowulf's recounting of the monster fights therefore reflects his choice of Grendel's head as a sign of his victory at the *mere*, which entails concealment, or elision, of Grendel's mother's body.

Those critical explanations that rely exclusively on Grendel's mother's gender identity or on narrative closure, or that question Beowulf's intention to seek revenge against her, are not altogether satisfactory even where they may partially account for what goes on in the narrative. It cannot quite be argued that Beowulf elides Grendel's mother's body only because she is a woman, as the poem portrays her gender identity ambiguously notwithstanding her maternal role. As highlighted by Trilling, after all, Grendel's mother is masculinised in lines 1260 and 1392b–94b, and she is described as a 's inigne secg' ('sinful man') by King Hrothgar in line 1379a.³³ Hence, while it cannot be ruled out that Beowulf may have been represented carrying off Grendel's head on account of a requirement to exchange male bodies, this explanation is only partially satisfactory. The same may be said of narrative closure as an explanation for Beowulf's actions. Beowulf is already known to have defeated Grendel at King Hrothgar's hall, as attested by the display of the monster's severed arm in lines 983b–90. Hence, even where Grendel escapes Beowulf's clutches to head back to the *mere* from Heorot, he does so only after he is mortally wounded, as also affirmed by the narratorial statement that hell receives his heathen soul (ll. 850–52). This sequence of events also casts doubt on the notion that the bodies of the two monsters are conflated by the respective beheadings. Moreover, Grendel's mother's beheading takes place during her confrontation with Beowulf,³⁴ as opposed to the post-mortem beheading of her son, and it is clear that her head is not used as a sign of victory by Beowulf. Also, the context provided by Beowulf's words in lines 1390–94 suggests that he seeks revenge against Grendel's mother, whom he identifies by the masculine pronoun:

Ārīs, rīces weard, uton h̄raþe fēran,
 Grendles māgan gang scēawīgan.
 iċ hit þē gēhāte, nō hē on helm losaþ,

³⁰ Lehr, p. 191.

³¹ Hooper, p. 177.

³² See Seth Lerer, 'Grendel's Glove', *ELH*, 61 (1994), 721–51, and Andrew M. Pfrenger, 'Grendel's *Glof*: Beowulf Line 2085 Reconsidered', *Philological Quarterly*, 87 (2008), 209–35 for discussions of such details.

³³ Trilling, pp. 14–15.

³⁴ See Biggs, p. 639, who interprets ll. 1563–68a to the effect that Beowulf beheads Grendel's mother with his sword in the course of their confrontation. Lines 1566–68a read: 'þæt hire wið halse heard grāpode, | bānhringas bræc; bil eal ðurhwōd | fægne flæschoman' ('that struck her neck hard, broke her bone rings; the blade went all the way through her fated flesh'). Godfrey, p. 3, and Lehr, p. 191, also argue that Beowulf beheads Grendel's mother.

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nē on foldan fæþm nē on fyrġenholt
nē on ġyfenes grund, gā þær hē wille.

Arise, guardian of the kingdom, let us quickly venture to find Grendel's kin's path. I hereby pledge to you that he will find no protection, neither in the bosom of the earth, nor in a mountain wood, nor in the bottom of the sea; go wherever he will.

In the light of these considerations, Beowulf's beheading of Grendel's corpse mainly attests to the elision of Grendel's mother's body by the protagonist. This course of action may be explained in the light of this monster's otherness, as suggested by Trilling, or with reference to Beowulf's shame at the confrontation with Grendel's mother, as indicated by Oswald. I hereby postulate an alternative explanation, one that complements, rather than supplants, these critical views.

An Alternative Explanation for Beowulf's Beheading of Grendel's Corpse I: General Considerations

The sequence of events I discussed above suggests that reader or listener knows that Grendel is fated to die, even in the absence of a sign besides the severed arm. Moreover, it is questionable that the Danes require conclusive proof of Grendel's death, for this monster's fate is never questioned. Rather, King Hrothgar concludes, on the evidence of the monster's severed arm (ll. 925–31a), that Grendel has been decisively defeated: 'þurh drihtnes miht dæd gefremede' ('he [Beowulf] did the deed through God's might', l. 940). Therefore, the demands of the logic of the narrative do not appear to offer fully satisfactory, but rather only partial, explanations for Beowulf's beheading of Grendel's corpse and the display of his head at Heorot. I would argue that this is the case even where the male monster is the Danes' main antagonist, for he persecuted them for twelve years (ll. 146b–49a). While it may be argued that this is reason enough to produce conclusive evidence of the male monster's death even where it is not, strictly speaking, required, it would have to be borne in mind that Beowulf fails to produce any direct physical evidence of Grendel's mother's demise. This is odd in a context where there are no witnesses to Beowulf's victory over the monstrous mother, for no one accompanies him into the *mere* (ll. 1492–95a). The only externally verifiable evidence that something has taken place at the *mere* is the blood in the water, which is initially mistaken for Beowulf's (ll. 1591a–608a). While it could be argued that the characters would have reinterpreted this as evidence of Grendel's mother's death, given that Beowulf survives, it is to be recalled that the protagonist also beheads Grendel's body, which would likewise account for the bloodied water. It is also not clear whether the blood that melts away the blade of the sword (ll. 1605b–11) with which Beowulf kills the female monster (ll. 1563–69) and beheads the male monster's corpse (ll. 1584b–90)³⁵ is Grendel's or Grendel's mother's. Even in the absence of verifiable physical evidence of Grendel's mother's death, however, Beowulf takes

³⁵ The sword hilt is discussed by several commentators, at several levels of detail, including, *inter alia*, Stephen C. Bandy, 'Cain, Grendel, and the Giants of *Beowulf*', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 9 (1973), 235–49; Seth Lerer, 'Hrothgar's Hilt and the Reader in *Beowulf*', in *The Postmodern Beowulf: A Critical Casebook*, ed. by Eileen A. Joy and Mary K. Ramsey (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2006), pp. 587–628 (first publ. in *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon England* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), pp. 158–94); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants, Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 20; Richard North, *The Origins of Beowulf: from Vergil to Wiglaf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006),

back with him to Heorot the male monster's head and the hilt of the said sword (ll. 1612–15a). Beowulf therefore fails to produce a clear and unequivocal sign of Grendel's mother's death even where, in terms of the logic of the narrative, this would be desirable. As I indicated earlier, this elision of Grendel's mother's body is particularly interesting as it is flanked by the protagonist's elision of her story. I hereby propose to interpret this course of events in the light of the poem's references to scripture and Grendel's mother's association with unjustified revenge.

I argued, earlier in this article, that Grendel is associated with Cain and his fratricide.³⁶ This emerges clearly in lines 102–08:

wæs se grimma gæst Grendel hāten,
 mære mearcstapa, sē þe mōras hēold,
 fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard
 wonsæli wer weardode hwīle,
 siþðan him scyppend forscrifen hāfde
 in Cāines cynne — þone cwealm ġewreac
 eðe drihten, þæs þe hē Ābel slōg.

The cruel ghost/guest was called Grendel, notorious boundary walker; he held moors, fens and stronghold, the dwelling of the foolish kin; miserable man, who for a while dwelt there, since the Maker judged him Cain's kinsman — he exiled that killer, the eternal Lord, for he killed Abel.

This biblical figure is also associated with Grendel's mother in lines 1258b–63a:

[...] Grendles mōdor,
 ides āglæcwīf yrmþe ġemunde,
 sē þe wætereġesan wunian scolde,
 cealde strēmas, siþðan Cāin³⁷ wearð
 tō ecġbanan āngan brēþer,
 fæderenmæġe.

p. 68; James Paz, 'Eschere's Head, Grendel's Mother and the Sword that isn't a Sword: Unreadable Things in *Beowulf*', *Exemplaria*, 25 (2013), 231–51; Sara Frances Burdorff, 'Re-reading Grendel's Mother: *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charms', *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 45 (2014), 91–103; Dennis Cronan, 'Hroðgar and the Gylden Hilt in *Beowulf*', *Traditio*, 72 (2017), 109–32; and, Matthew Scribner, 'Signs, Interpretation, and Exclusion in *Beowulf*', in *Darkness, Depression, and Descent in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Ruth Wehlau (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2019), pp. 117–32.

³⁶ *Beowulf*'s rendition of the Cain myth, and the connection between this myth and the Grendelkin and other monsters, has been explored, *inter alia*, by: Niilo Peltola, 'Grendel's Descent from Cain Reconsidered', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 73 (1972), 284–91; Ruth Mellinkoff, 'Cain's Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*: Part I, Noachic Tradition', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 8 (1979), 143–62; Thalia Phillis Feldman, 'Grendel and Cain's Descendants', *Literary Onomastics Studies*, 8 (1981), 71–87; Ruth Mellinkoff, 'Cain's Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*: Part II, Post-Diluvian Survival', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 9 (1981), 183–97; Chris Bishop, 'Þyrs, ent, eoten, gigans: Anglo-Saxon Ontologies of Giant', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 107 (2006), 259–70; James Phillips, 'In the Company of Predators: Beowulf and the Monstrous Descendants of Cain', *Angelaki Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 13 (2008), 41–52; and Leonard Neidorf, 'Cain, Cam, Jutes, Giants, and the Textual Criticism of *Beowulf*', *Studies in Philology*, 112 (2015), 599–632.

³⁷ The manuscript original reads *camp* (struggle), however the narrative context suggests that an emendation to *Cain* is required. This is not only in view of the reference to fratricide but also given that the metre requires a disyllabic term like *Cain* rather than the monosyllabic *camp*. See Leonard Neidorf, 'Cain, Cam, Jutes, Giants, and the Textual Criticism of *Beowulf*', p. 606.

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Grendel's mother, lady, warrior-woman,³⁸ recalled the misery; she had to dwell in the water-horror, cold streams, since Cain became his brother's, his own father's kinsman's, blade-bane.

These two passages attest to the archetypal nature of Cain's fratricide, which notion may be traced back to Augustine, who argued that this act is reflected in historical (or pseudo-historical) narratives, such as Romulus's killing of his brother Remus.³⁹ In an early medieval English context a similar interpretation of Cain's fratricide is evident in *Maxims I*, where this act is represented as the source of all social conflict and disorder.⁴⁰ The representation of an extra-biblical tree of evil that springs as a result of Cain's fratricide in *Genesis A*, which tree harms humankind to the present day,⁴¹ further affirms the archetypal interpretation of Cain's fratricide in an early medieval English context. On broadly similar lines, *Beowulf* posits the biblical fratricide as explanation and precedent for the Grendelkin's existence and malice. This suggests that *Beowulf's* Christian audience is likely to have perceived the two monsters as Cainite creatures, and the sign that is Grendel's head as one evoking Cain and his fratricide. Therefore, *Beowulf* brings back to Heorot not only a sign of his victory, the validity of which is questionable in view of its redundancy, but also one that recalls Cainite conflict.

While *Beowulf's* Cain passages set the two monsters within a scriptural framework, the course of events leading to Æschere's abduction and beheading suggests that Grendel's mother also has a close association with the theme of revenge. *Beowulf's* confrontation of her, after all, is instigated by her attack on King Hrothgar's hall, while the monstrous mother's attack on Heorot, in turn, is the result of Grendel's death at the hands of the protagonist. This narrative sequence, then, is one of the most prominent explorations in *Beowulf* of how violence and revenge are ubiquitous in the societies portrayed in the poem, its representativeness shown by the violent revenge that characterises the digressions.⁴² Grendel's mother therefore functions as an externalisation of internecine violence, in particular as the outcome of revenge that besets the societies portrayed in the poem.⁴³ While Grendel may also be seen as an external manifestation of social ills, it is interesting that the protagonist does not perceive the need to conceal, or elide, his body or his story. Unlike his monstrous mother Grendel is not motivated by revenge for a killing and, in the absence of the scriptural references accessible to reader or listener alone, he may be seen by the other characters as representative of unprovoked and gratuitous bestial violence alone. Therefore, *Beowulf's* lack of apprehension at Grendel's head as a sign stems from his failure to understand that it connotes Cainite conflict, which understanding may only be gleaned from the monster's aforementioned scriptural

³⁸ The translation of the epithet 'ides āglæcwīf' is by Christine Alfano, 'The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother', *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 23 (1992), 1–16 (p. 12).

³⁹ See Charles D. Wright, 'The Blood of Abel and the Branches of Sin: *Genesis A*, *Maxims I* and Aldhelm's *Carmen de virginitate*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 25 (1996), 7–19 (p. 10).

⁴⁰ See Wright, p. 12, for a discussion of the archetypal nature of Cain's fratricide in *Maxims I*.

⁴¹ See lines 982b–1001 of *Genesis A: A New Edition*, rev. edn by A. N. Doane (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013), p. 165.

⁴² See Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, 'Values and Ethics in Heroic Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 101–19 (p. 106) for a discussion of revenge in the digressions. See also M. Wendy Hannequin, 'We've Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel's Mother', *English Studies*, 89 (2008), 503–23 (pp. 505–06), who argues that Grendel's mother's revenge is atypical of the poem's other female characters.

⁴³ See Paul Acker, 'Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*', *PMLA*, 121 (2006), 702–16 (p. 703).

associations.⁴⁴ This means that Beowulf's decision to take to Heorot Grendel's head is based on his limited pre-Christian perspective, which prevents him from seeing that the negativity that inheres to Grendel's head as a sign is no less than that which attaches to Grendel's mother's body, which he elides.

While Beowulf is unaware of the Cainite significance of Grendel's head, which means that he may well associate this monster with unprovoked bestial violence, he evidently knows of the monstrous mother's thirst for revenge. Indeed, King Hrothgar explicitly associates Grendel's mother with revenge in lines 1333b–37a, which form part of a speech addressed to Beowulf himself:

[...] Hēo þa fæhðe wræc
þē þū gýstran niht Grendel cwealdest
þurh hæstne hād heardum clammum,
forþan hē to lange lēode mīne
wanode and wyrde.

She wrought vengeance last night since you killed Grendel violently in your hard clutches,
as for a long time he diminished and destroyed my people.

Beowulf is also demonstrably aware of the intricacies and social realities of revenge, including its destructiveness. This transpires on his return home from Denmark, when he laments King Hrothgar's decision to marry off his daughter Freawaru in an attempt to make peace with the Heathobards. Indeed, the protagonist predicts the failure of the marriage on account of Danish provocation and Heathobard thirst for revenge (ll. 2024b–69a). It is therefore reasonable to suppose that Beowulf is in a position to see Grendel's mother as an unflattering mirror of the social order (or disorder) portrayed, *inter alia*, in the poem's digressions, particularly where the son she seeks to avenge is a murderer who has not paid compensation for his crimes (ll. 154b–63) and where, therefore, her act of revenge is unjustified.⁴⁵ In the light of these considerations Grendel's mother's head would have constituted, from the protagonist's viewpoint, an awkward or uncanny sign of victory. This brings me back to the explanations offered by Trilling and Oswald for Beowulf's beheading of the male monster and the attempted elision of his mother.

An Alternative Explanation for Beowulf's Beheading of Grendel's Corpse II: Conclusions

While Trilling and Oswald provided plausible explanations for Beowulf's attempted elision of Grendel's mother, they did not discuss this aspect of the narrative with reference to the dramatic irony at the protagonist's expense that is built on the aforementioned biblical references. This is what this article does. In this respect, this article adds a new interpretative layer to existing critical work. Dramatic irony in the narrative stems from Beowulf's exchange of Grendel's mother's body as a negative sign associated, *inter alia*, with revenge, with another sign that is ultimately as negative, but that is not understood by the protagonist. The fact

⁴⁴ The characters' ignorance of the true identity of the monsters was highlighted, *inter alia*, by Fred C. Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), p. 10.

⁴⁵ One of the functions of early medieval law codes was to distinguish between licit and illicit acts of revenge. See John D. Niles, 'The Myth of the Feud in Anglo-Saxon England', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 114 (2015), 163–200 (p. 165).

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that Grendel's mother is also associated with Cain is a secondary consideration; the point is that the use of one sign instead of the other does not do away with negative associations, including negative associations that relate directly to the Danish hall. As I already indicated, in carrying off Grendel's head as a sign of his victory Beowulf unwittingly brings back to Heorot a sign of Cainite fratricide and kin-strife. Inasmuch as revenge relates specifically to Grendel's mother and the societies portrayed in the poem's digressions, fratricide closely relates to the two monsters through the Cainite connection, as I already observed, and specifically to King Hrothgar's hall. This is attested by Beowulf's accusation of fratricide levelled against Unferth (ll. 587–88a), a prominent member of King Hrothgar's retinue, before his confrontation of Grendel. Unferth also recalls Grendel — and Cain — in his envy, in that he would have no other man's glory outshine his own (ll. 503–05).⁴⁶ It is also worth noting that fratricide is mentioned in the opening of Beowulf's speech ahead of his confrontation of the dragon, in the Geatish part of the narrative, when he tells of Herebeald's death at the hands of his brother Hæthcyn (ll. 2435–40). Even where this killing is ostensibly represented as an accident, the circumstances are suspicious, as Hæthcyn assumes the kingship upon his father Hrethel's death.⁴⁷ Hugh Magennis argued, in his commentary on this episode, that it 'bears a Cain-like weight of unatonable guilt'.⁴⁸ Moreover, Herebeald's tragic death is placed within a scenario of conflict, at the head of a speech that also tells of the Geats' numerous confrontations with the Scylfings (ll. 2472–89) and King Hygelac's disastrous Frisian campaign (ll. 2490–509). Here again, therefore, the sins associated with the monsters are reflected in the societies represented elsewhere in the narrative. I contend that the biblically-related theme of fratricide conveyed at these two distinct points contributes to the narrative's tragic dimension. These episodes, in particular Herebeald's death, suggest that Beowulf is unable to address the weaknesses, or internal threats, that beset the societies he seeks to protect, even where he rids them of their monstrous antagonists. His failure to glean the meaning behind Grendel's head as a sign, which also conveys the theme of fratricide through its Cainite associations, may well explain why this is the case. This theme, indeed, is in no way less indicative of the weaknesses of the societies represented in the poem than the unjustified revenge that Beowulf seeks to elide through his concealment and dismissal of Grendel's mother's body and narrative. Therefore, Beowulf only trades a symbol that may be associated, and that he appears to associate, with revenge, for another that appears to him not to reflect the failings of the society he seeks to protect. The fact that reader or listener knows that both signs are Cainite, and therefore equally damning, may well point to the dire predicament of pre-Christian characters, in that they 'lack the divine help they need to redeem space'⁴⁹ and, it could be added, society itself.

⁴⁶ Over the years of *Beowulf* criticism commentators have expressed very different views in relation to Unferth, ranging all the way from his representation as cowardly or ludicrous, to a brave and prominent warrior. See Leonard Neidorf, 'Unferth's Ambiguity and the Trivialization of Germanic Legend', *Neophilologus*, 101 (2017), 439–54 (pp. 445–46) for an overview of such critical views. What counts for the present purposes, however, is that fratricide and envy recall the archetypal Cain theme.

⁴⁷ Michael R. Kightley, 'The Brothers of *Beowulf*: Fraternal Tensions and the Reticent Style', *ELH*, 83 (2016), 407–29 (p. 414).

⁴⁸ Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 80.

⁴⁹ Nicole Guenther Discenza, *Inhabited Spaces: Anglo-Saxon Constructions of Place* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2017), p. 153.