Inconceivable Beasts:
The *Wonders of the East*
in the *Beowulf* Manuscript

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Inconceivable Beasts:
The *Wonders of the East* in the *Beowulf* Manuscript

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To Christina von Nolcken and Suzanne Lewis:
Thank you for teaching and inspiring us.

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> *Wonders of the East*, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv, fol. 1v–9v, ©The British Library Board, All Rights Reserved

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1. Introduction:
Cum Picturis Prodigiosorum[1]

*The world is filled with things we do not see, even though they
are right in front of us.*
—James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back,* 54.

A great deal of attention, scholarly and popular, has been focused, quite justifiably, on the *Beowulf* poem, so much that the codex in which it is bound has come to be called the *Beowulf* Manuscript. In this study, however, we focus not on the great *Beowulf,* but rather on the lone text in the Beowulf manuscript "cum picturis prodigiosorum"[2] [with images of marvelous things], the Old English *Wonders of the East.* Unlike the folios bearing the *Beowulf* poem, and indeed the rest of the codex, the pages of the *Wonders of the East* contain images: strange, dark, burned, flaked, torn images, imperfectly framed images, images whose aggressive involvement with text asks us to consider carefully the ways in which we read and understand texts, images, and their interactions.

The *Wonders* is not unique among Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in its insistence on multiple modes of reading and representation. On the contrary, its late Anglo-Saxon context produced many manuscripts rich in text-image interactions—the Old English Illustrated Hexateuch, the Junius 11 manuscript of Old English poetry, and the Cotton Troper, just to name a few. In Junius 11 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11), for example, on page 3 a sequence of five scenes presents

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[1] An early version of a section of this chapter appeared as "Inconceivable Beasts: The *Wonders of the East* in the *Beowulf* Manuscript," in *Conference Proceedings for the Fourth Global Conference on Monsters and the Monstrous, Dark Reflections, Monstrous Reflections: Essays on the Monster in Culture*, ed. Sorcha Ní Fhlainn (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press E-Book, 2008).

[2] Richard James, in his seventeenth-century table of contents for the codex, conflates the *Wonders of the East* with the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* which follows it, but notes that part of the *Letter* (the part that is the *Wonders of the East*) appears "cum picturis prodigiosorum." James's table of contents is reproduced and discussed by Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 73–79. We discuss the table of contents and the manuscript context in greater depth in Chapter 8, "Whate'er the Fury of the Flames has spar'd."

Fig. 1.1: The Fall, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11, p. 3, by permission of The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

the fall of Lucifer, moving from the topmost image of Lucifer crowned, through the shaping of rebellion, to God's assertion of control in the image of God with three spears in his right arm (Fig. 1.1). Although the fourth and fifth registers are not clearly delineated from each other, it appears as if the fourth depicts the fall of Lucifer, and the final scene is of Lucifer bound to the upper and lower canines of the mouth of hell. Textual notes, here above and to the right, provide what seem to be interpretive guideposts. Above the topmost register, "Hu se engyl ongon ofermod wesan" [How the angel began to be proud]; between the second and third, "Her se hælend gesce[op] helle heom to wite" [Here the savior created hell as a punishment for them]. Such notes occur with a number of the images early in this manuscript.[3] These textual notes, often with their repeated formula "*her* x did y," seem to be attempts to provide the viewer with a means of locating the sequences of images both spatially and temporally within the narrative, and spatially and temporally on the page: the textual notes, by identifying the images with respect to the narrative, also indicate, for example, whether the image's narrative sequence should be read top to bottom, and left to right, or bottom to top, and right to left. As Benjamin Withers has argued recently, such spatial orientation on the page and across pages also constructs a relationship that the viewer and reader take toward the page, and thus positions the viewer and reader, in his own time and space, in the very embodied act of apprehension through viewing and reading.[4]

It is thus all the more provocative, then, that on page 3 of Junius 11, in the space which divides the third register (before the fall) from the fourth and fifth (during and after the fall), there is another textual note, a note which proclaims its significance and intentionality by its unusually large, clear, mostly capital letters, but also by its placement not in the blank space near the image, but within the frame that separates image sequences; this textual note, however, remains bafflingly fragmentary: the textual note reads simply "Her se" [Here the . . .].

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[3] On page 7, for example, the text explains, "Her he todalde dæg wið nihte" [Here he divided day from night]; on page 9, at the top, inside the upper frame, "Her godes englas astigan of heouen into paradisum" [Here God's angels ascended from heaven into paradise]; to the left, "Her drihten gescop adames wif euam" [Here the lord formed Adam's wife Eve]; to the right, "Her drihten gewearp sclep on adam and genam him an rib of þa sidan and gescop his wif of þam ribbe" [Here the lord cast sleep on Adam and drew a rib from his side and created his wife from that rib].

[4] Benjamin C. Withers, *The Illustrated Old English Hexateuch, Cotton Claudius B. iv: The Frontier of Seeing and Reading in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: The British Library and the University of Toronto Press, 2007), esp. 286–93: "Rather than merely allegorize or mythologize the experience of the manuscript as a kind of landscape, it is possible to trace the ways that the landscape of the book naturalizes itself as it creates or reinforces the status of the reader and the way he conceives of his own position as a reading subject" (286).

Here, in this series, is what might be a representation of the first point in Christian cosmic history of clear and spatialized differentiation between good and evil, heaven and hell, angels and devils. Yet what Peter Dendle has argued with respect to narrative treatments of the devil in Anglo-Saxon literature perhaps may apply here to the intersection of textual and visual representation. Dendle argues that "[t]o examine the contours of the demonic, it is helpful to form as clear an idea of its boundaries in narrative space as possible," but that "spatial cues" are strikingly absent in Anglo-Saxon narratives involving the Christian devil.[5] For Dendle, then, these moments of "gaps and silence" where spatial delineation might be expected "become critical focal points of analytic attention . . . because their very open-enedness denies the possibility of a single visualization of the scene, and because at such moments the demonic can be seen at its most elusive—and thus, potentially, at its most suggestive and fertile."[6]

While Dendle is concerned here with the demonic, other elements both central and threatening to cosmological and representational orders may become visible, "suggestive and fertile," less in moments of coherent depiction than in gaps, blurrings, redundancies, inconsistencies, and conflicts *within* texts and images and *between* texts and images. The text-image interactions on page 3 of Junius 11, and the many others like it, thus also provide particularly rich contexts for approaching, or engaging with, the *Wonders of the East*, explicitly concerned as it is with representing the monstrous, the unimaginable, the inconceivable, and thus with establishing and examining those differences which are fundamental to the human experience, and to the representations of that experience. Thus far, however, this version of the *Wonders of the East* has been neither the subject of a single book-length study nor discussed at length in interaction with the many other textual-visual manuscripts and artifacts with which it shares such concerns. In this study, we focus our attention upon this one manuscript, and its particular iteration of the period's interest not only in the monstrous but also in the related explorations of the generation of meaning through the interaction of the visual and the verbal. While it is not our goal to fit the *Wonders* neatly into an established timeline of art history, and while we focus on this one manuscript, we do not understand this manuscript to exist in any way independently of its many medieval and contemporary contexts. Our focus on this single manuscript version of the *Wonders of the East*, that is, is intended not to exclude or minimize the significance of its interactions with other texts and artifacts but rather to allow for sustained examination of a knot of concerns with difference—difference fundamental to conceptions of humanness, gender, embodiment, and nation, but also to language, and to the processes of representation and reading—, concerns congruent with those of other Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and artifacts but also

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[5] Peter Dendle, *Satan Unbound: The Devil in Old English Narrative Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 5.

[6] Dendle, *Satan Unbound*, 6.

articulated, we will argue, with an especial force in this particular text, in these particular images, and in the slippages and interactions among them.

Backgrounds and Motives

The *Wonders of the East* is a compendium of marvelous creatures, places, and plants based on classical, patristic, and early medieval texts by the likes of Herodotus, Pliny, Solinus, and Isidore of Seville. Two slightly later manuscripts containing the *Marvels of the East* (the title applied to Latin versions of the text), one with text solely Latin (Bodley 614) and one in both Latin and Old English (Tiberius B.v), have received more attention than the Vitellius *Wonders*. The images in these versions are more firmly penned, with bolder, more distinct outlines, more obvious skill. While we will refer to both of these later versions, in this study, as we consider, for example, why, in the critical reception of the *Wonders/Marvels* tradition but also in the scholarship on the *Beowulf* manuscript itself, this version of the *Wonders of the East* has been so consistently elided, we will focus our attention on how *this* text and *these* images work within the tradition of the discourse of the monstrous, and within their own manuscript context.

As a means of introduction, we will first briefly set the *Wonders* in its context—indistinct though that does remain—and then we will begin to consider the work that it does. As we examine its representations of monsters and wonders, we will also consider the ways in which the *Wonders* may encourage us to think about monstrosity and its relationship to the construction of knowledge.

In short, *Beowulf* and the *Wonders,* along with an Old English *Passion of St. Christopher*, the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle,* and *Judith*, are bound together in the Nowell Codex, a portion of the work now identified by its Cottonian shelfmark of London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv. The manuscript is controversial in its dating and provenance, but there is some consensus that it was most likely produced between 975 and 1025.[7] The location for the manuscript's production is rather more uncertain, and we cannot say much more than that it is surely English. In his commentary in the Early English Manuscripts in

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[7] Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 2, follows David Dumville, "*Beowulf* Come Lately: Some Notes on the Palaeography of the Nowell Codex," *Archiv* 225 (1988): 49–63, here 63, in giving 997–1016. For more on the dating, see among other sources Elżbieta Temple, *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles: Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts 900–1066* (London: Harvey Miller, 1976), 72, no. 52; Colin Chase, *The Dating of Beowulf* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981); Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*; Audrey Meaney, "Scyld Scefing and the Dating of *Beowulf*—Again," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 7 (1989): 7–40; Michael Lapidge, "The Archetype of Beowulf," *Anglo-Saxon England* 29 (2000): 5–41.

Facsimile volume of the Nowell Codex, for example, Kemp Malone notes, "We have no record of the earlier history of the MS but the handwriting enables us to date its making in the late 10th or early 11th century or, for convenience, *circa* A.D. 1000."[8] Although Malone does not speculate about the precise location of the manuscript's production, many hypotheses have been suggested, especially for the composition of *Beowulf*. These hypotheses have been tabulated by Robert E. Bjork and Anita Obermeier, who write that "scholars have tried to specify provenance (Denmark, Germany, Anglia, Wessex), most preferring Northumbria or Mercia," before ultimately concluding that "dating and locating the poem [are] impossible tasks."[9] Bjork and Obermeier deal briefly with the historiography of efforts toward dating and provenance through manuscript studies, again finding little consensus.[10]

With regard to the audience, there is also little we can say with certainty about who read the works of the codex,[11] though we might well make plausible suggestions about how it was read. Certainly, it was read by a literate individual, which in this period would indicate a cleric or aristocrat.[12] Given that some of its texts are, as Andy Orchard has described them, "ostensibly secular," and others are "those in which explicitly religious themes predominate," it is difficult to assign the compendium to one audience or the other.[13] As several authors have argued, the lines dividing lay and monastic audiences are often not as stark as they

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[8] Kemp Malone, *The Nowell Codex (British Museum Cotton Vitellius A. XV, Second Manuscript),* Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 12 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1963), 119.

[9] Robert E. Bjork and Anita Obermeier, "Date, Provenance, Author, Audiences," in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 13–34, here 13, 18.

[10] Bjork and Obermeier, "Date, Provenance," 23–24. They conclude (33), "Although we can discern a general trend in scholarship from early to late dating, from favoring northern to entertaining southern provenance . . . reasoning . . . is based largely on probability, not on established fact. Until new facts surface, all we can say with assurance when asked when, where, by whom, and for whom the poem was composed is that we are not sure."

[11] Kenneth Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 95–96, argues, "The two hands indicate that it was the undertaking of a community, not of an individual who made a copy for his own use. Their ill-matched styles, the poor capitals, the childish draughtsmanship of the illustrations to *Wonders*, and the modest format are evidence that the book was not produced as a present for some great man, whether an ecclesiastic or a lay patron."

[12] George Hardin Brown, "The Dynamics of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 77, no. 1 (1995): 109–42.

[13] Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 4.

have been made out to be:[14] aristocratic readers read religious texts, and monks not only copied but also read works we would often think of as secular. The *Wonders* itself does, however, give an indication of how at least this section of the manuscript was meant to be read. The small images demand close-up inspection, visual interaction, and suggest that this was a work likely to be read or at least examined by an individual, rather than read aloud to an assembled group.

If the small images draw the viewer to the object, contracting the space between them, the pages themselves also explore the contraction of defining spaces and the interpenetration of modes of representation. This active engagement between text and image in the *Wonders* is at least in part what prompted our transdisciplinary collaboration on this project. Of course the same interactivity may also explain the hesitancy of some scholars to deal with a work that so resolutely crosses the boundaries of contemporary disciplines like literary criticism and art history. In this work, in which frameless images butt up against texts, even wrap themselves around words, while letters of the text merge with the edges of images, the interrelations between the images and texts are so thorough that word and image cannot be extricated from one another. This is not to say that word and image always or necessarily convey congruent or even similar meanings. These images are not "illustrations" of the text; nor is the text a series of ekphrases or captions. As W. J. T. Mitchell writes of "ekphrastic indifference," "no amount of description . . . adds up to a depiction."[15] These two processes make meaning in ways that are neither fully separate nor entirely overlapping: we argue that it is not the uniqueness but the explicitness of this tension in the *Wonders* that generates much of its force.

The art history of these images has been rather limited. Elżbieta Temple, one of the few art historians to touch on these images, refers to them as "rather rough and incompetent," though she acknowledges that they are "not without their own fascination."[16] Kenneth Sisam refers to what he sees as "the childish draughtsmanship of the illustrations."[17] Orchard does not comment directly upon these images, though he does contrast them with the later British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.v

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[14] Benjamin Withers, *The Illustrated Old English Hexateuch*, 178–79. See also Patrick Wormald, "Anglo-Saxon Society and Its Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1–22; Hugh Magennis, "Audience(s) Reception, Literacy," in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 84–101; and Simon Keynes, "Royal Government and the Written Word in Late Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 226–57.

[15] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 10–11.

[16] Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts 900–1066*, 72, no. 52.

[17] Sisam, *Studies*, 95–96.

Marvels of the East, which he says contains a "further (and much finer) set of illustrations" than Vitellius does.[18] Likewise, the recension of the text of Vitellius has been elided in favor of the slightly longer version found in Tiberius. Paul Gibb, for example, finds the Vitellius text to be, of all the *Wonders* texts, "by far the most problematic," with "omissions" which "create hopelessly nonsensical passages."[19] E. V. Gordon finds the text "greatly inferior to that in MS Cotton Tiberius."[20] Andrew Scheil writes that the "*Wonders of the East* and *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle* are examples of poor Old English translations of Latin texts, rife with errors and clumsy syntax."[21] Sisam similarly privileges the Latin of other versions of the text, and describes this manuscript's English text as guilty of "perversions" that the slightly later Tiberius "avoids or tries to avoid."[22]

Even recent studies of the *Wonders* and the context of the *Beowulf* manuscript take a surprisingly uncomfortable position on the version of the *Wonders* that actually appears in the *Beowulf* manuscript. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, for example, in the opening chapter of his study *Of Giants*, turns his critical attention briefly to the *Wonders* and justifies the move with the argument that the *Wonders* is, after all, "bound in monstrous affiliation" with *Beowulf*.[23] But Cohen directs his insightful reading immediately to an image not from the *Beowulf* manuscript,

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[18] Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 20. Tiberius B.v, the second in date of three illustrated versions of this text, has been dated by Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, 104, no. 87, to the second quarter of the eleventh century. Martin K. Foys, *Virtually Anglo-Saxon: Old Media, New Media, and Early Medieval Studies in the Late Age of Print* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 113, dates the manuscript to around 1050; it is likely from Christ Church, Canterbury, or perhaps Winchester. The third *Wonders* text is Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 614. C. M. Kauffman, *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles: Romanesque Manuscripts, 1066–1190* (London: Harvey Miller, 1975), 77, no. 38, dates this to 1120–1140. In his recent dissertation, Alun Ford, "The 'Wonders Of The East' in its Contexts: A Critical Examination of London, British Library, Cotton Mss Vitellius A.xv and Tiberius B.v, and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms Bodley 614" (Ph.D. diss., University of Manchester, 2009), chap. 3, locates it at the Abbey of St. Martin, Battle, where it could have been copied from the Tiberius manuscript, which was sent there in the 1150s.

[19] Paul Allen Gibb, "*Wonders of the East*: A Critical Edition and Commentary" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1977), 3.

[20] E. V. Gordon, "Old English Studies," *The Year's Work in English Studies* 5 (1924): 66–77, here 67.

[21] Andrew P. Scheil, "Bodies and Boundaries: Studies in the Construction of Social Identity in Selected Late Anglo-Saxon Prose Texts" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1996), 12.

[22] Sisam, *Studies*, 81.

[23] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1.

but from the later Tiberius version of the *Marvels of the East* (Color Plate 5), an image quite different from the image in Vitellius (fol. 6v).[24]

While we are not interested in arguing that this manuscript is evidence of technically superior artistry, we do wish to take up a resonance between the contents of the manuscript, in particular of this version of the *Wonders of the East*, and the terms of the reception of both text and images as "debased,"[25] "problematic,"[26] and guilty of "perversions."[27] When even critical examinations which have the *Beowulf* manuscript as their primary focus turn away from this text and these images — by dismissing them as inferior, by eliding them, by simply substituting sections from the related texts or inserting "missing" pieces within scholarly brackets — we are fairly certain that there must be something in them — albeit something "debased" or "perverted" — that calls for our attention.

All three extant medieval versions of the *Wonders* are illustrated, and all of the illustrations are characterized by an aggressive interaction between the images and their frames. As John Block Friedman has noted, following Otto Pächt, figures such as the Tiberius Blemmye do not merely stand on their frames or reach outwards, but grasp the edges of the frame as if to thrust themselves outside of it.[28] But if all versions of the *Wonders* are characterized by such aggressiveness with respect to the frames, the Vitellius *Wonders* pushes at its limits. Unlike the analogues, the Vitellius *Wonders* contains a number of images which are only partially framed, with the spaces of text and image touching or vulnerable to contact — as on *Wonders* folio 2r, where we find the images of the Burning Hens, who set fire to anyone who touches them, and the mangy creatures who set their own bodies on fire in frames closed on the right but open on the side of the text which explicates the dangers of contact. Furthermore, some of its images are frameless altogether, and integrate the spaces of text, image, and margin: images like that of the Ant-Dogs on folio 4r penetrate not only what might be the blank spaces of the margin, but also the spaces of the text itself; and, especially given that at the very least locations for images were likely delineated before the text was written in, texts intrude upon the spaces of the images, with letters, like the "y" beneath the image on fol. 8r, brushing against or pushing into and echoed within the images.

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[24] Note that, given the several conflicting foliations for the manuscript as a whole, we have chosen to number the *Wonders* in simple sequence, beginning with the first folio containing the text. A chart correlating the major foliation systems used is in Chapter 2.

[25] Sisam, *Studies*, 78.

[26] Gibb, "*Wonders of the East*," 3.

[27] Sisam, *Studies*, 81.

[28] John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 153, and Otto Pächt, *The Rise of Pictorial Narrative in Twelfth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 27.

As Michael Camille has argued for later manuscript traditions, the transgressive play in the margins of manuscripts—all those well-endowed sciapods and defecating monkeys—remains play as long as it is confined to the *margins* of even very straight texts.[29] The Vitellius *Wonders*, however, does not allow for that separate space of play, of *safe* transgression. The two-headed snake on folio 2v, for example, traverses the page, the flames from its mouths making contact with the very text that both declares its proximity to the "ungefrægelicu deor," unheard-of, inconceivable beasts, and describes the spectacularly dangerous consequences of any desire for contact with these beasts. More provocatively still, we can consider the astonishing Ant-Dogs of folio 4r. In contrast to the Tiberius version's neatly framed and tidily narrative illustrations of the same figures,[30] here the illustration is frameless. The text tells us that these are "æmetan swa micle swa hundas," ants as big as dogs, which mine gold. If a man is brave enough to steal that gold, he is to take a camel stallion, mare, and foal. He ties up the foal on one side of the river, and then takes the stallion and mare to the other, where the ants are mining the gold. He then leaves the stallion to be attacked by the ants, loads up the gold on the mare, and rides the mare back across the river—"They travel over the river so quickly that people imagine that they are flying" (fol. 3v–4r). But the illustration, however, here does not merely gesture towards the textual space. Nor even, as in the case of the two-headed serpent, are there tiny points of contact between the descenders of the text and the tongues of the image. Here the final word of the text for this episode, "fleogan," is almost surrounded by an image of the body of an Ant-Dog, a nugget of gold still in his mouth.[31] If the narrative of the text suggests successful plunder and flight from the encounter with the beasts, the active integration of textual and visual space disallows that suggestion: the text "flies" not away from the image of the creature, but directly into its body; the image seizes the text within the monstrous body as the Ant-Dog grasps the nugget of gold in its mouth.

Of course, such image-text interactions are not without analogues. We might look, for example, at the Old English Illustrated Hexateuch's image of the Battle of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis 14. In this image, a king holds his

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[29] "Gothic marginal art flourished from the late twelfth to the late fourteenth century by virtue of the absolute hegemony of the system it sought to subvert. Once that system was seriously questioned, art collapsed inwards, to create a more literal and myopic dead-centre, taking with it edges and all": Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 160.

[30] London, Cotton Tiberius B.v, fol. 80v.

[31] For further discussion of this concept, see Susan M. Kim, "Man-Eating Monsters and Ants as Big as Dogs," in *Animals and the Symbolic in Medieval Art and Literature,* ed. L. A. J. R. Houwen, Mediaevalia Groningana 20 (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1997), 39–51.

sword aloft, piercing the frame and the text above, which deftly divides to avoid the thrust. To the right, a soldier emerges through the frame, such that his spear thrusts through the text—in this case dividing the "burgun" of "burgun Sodoma & Gomorra"[32] [the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah], so that the text-image interaction mirrors the violent battle largely contained within the frame, below. In the image-text interaction of the Vitellius *Wonders*, however, the interaction does not mirror but rather reverses the narrative, and without coherent explanation for such reversal within the episode itself. Rather, the overlapping spaces of text and image in the Ant-Dog episode present simultaneous but contradictory narrative trajectories.

And the spaces of text and image in Vitellius are not the only spaces in such negotiation: as the small and blurry images demand close-up attention from the viewer they also demand interaction, participation from the viewer/reader who must move his body into unusual proximity to the manuscript itself, and look at it, not only listen to it as it is read by another. Furthermore, although we can examine, for example, the Tiberius illustrations in sequence before or after reading the text, or in juxtaposition to the text, we encounter the Vitellius text and image often with a simultaneity which can threaten many modern modes of apprehending text and image meaningfully.

As Massimo Leone has argued recently, both reading texts and reading images require a semiotics of space.[33] That is, as we apprehend the verbal text, we must move through a linear succession of letters and spaces. As we approach the visual text, although the clear linearity of the verbal text is lost, still, apprehending the image requires an understanding of, in his terms, "what is where"[34]—what is above, below, left or right, and so on. Yet for Leone, too, despite the similar reliance on spatial location, a "fundamental aporia" occurs with "the passage from word to image"[35] or vice versa, as the image loses its non-linearity, and the word must move from its linear association with time to the non-linear mapping of space. In the case of the Vitellius *Wonders*, such an aporia is certainly captured in the uneasy movements between text and image, but it is perhaps even more palpable in those moments of collision, like that of the Ant-Dog episode, where we can *see* the image blocking the linear progression of the text, even reversing the semantic force of the text, the image spreading around the text, yet also in turn pushed by it. When we are asked to read both image and text not in sequence but

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[32] C. R. Dodwell and Peter Clemoes, *The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch (British Museum Cotton Claudius B.iv),* Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 18 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1974), 24v.

[33] Massimo Leone, "Words, Images, and Knots," in *Reading Images and Seeing Words*, ed. Alan English and Rosalind Silvester (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 82–106.

[34] Leone, "Words, Images, and Knots," 84.

[35] Leone, "Words, Images, and Knots," 84.

at once, we are asked to occupy, as it were, multiple dimensions, in none of which we can securely orient ourselves.[36]

But it is not only in these obvious moments of collision that we find such a balking of the ways in which we read meaningfully. The interaction, indeed interpenetration, of text and image, here, allows us to reevaluate some of our basic assumptions regarding the representations of all of these creatures, which have so often been given the simple — perhaps simplistic — appellation of "monster." We might begin with one of the tensions between modern and medieval conceptions of the monstrous: the very different status of the monstrous in terms of the truth value of its representations. In its modern definitions, a literal "monster" (in contrast to the frequent metaphorical use of the term to refer to particularly depraved people) is that which is horrible but *does not actually exist*, in contrast to alarming but real creatures like the frilled shark or oarfish. Modern representations, that is, tend to emphasize the fictive, the imaginary status of the monstrous. The OED tells us, for example, that a monster is "an imaginary animal (such as the sphinx, minotaur, or the heraldic griffin, wyvern, etc.) having a body either partly brute and partly human, or compounded from elements of two or more animal forms."[37] In most cases, however, authors of 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 as the representations of the stars and the reckoning of dates with which, as in Cotton Tiberius B.v, they are sometimes bound.[38] If we wish to take into account the truth value of representations of the monstrous, we must revise what might appear as assumptions about the rationality of these representations and the distance between modern and medieval readings of them. As David Stannard argues in respect to the Puritan period:

> We do well to remember that the [pre-modern] world . . . was a rational world, in many ways more rational than our own. It is true that this was a world of witches and demons, and of a just and terrible God who made his

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[36] Indeed, the essential disorientation engendered by the *Wonders* will be central to our discussion in Chapter 7.

[37] *The Compact Edition of the OED*, 1843.

[38] As just one example, Isidore, in *Etymologies* 11.3, discusses portents (*portentum*) and omens (*monstrum*) in their capacity to signify: "The term 'portent' (*portentum*) is said to be derived from foreshadowing (*portendere*), that is, from 'showing beforehand' (*praeostendere*). 'Signs' because they seem to show (*ostendere*) a future event . . . But omens (*monstrum*) derive their name from admonition (*monitus*), because in giving a sign they indicate (*demonstrare*) something, or else because they instantly show (*monstrare*) what may appear . . .": *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof, with Muriel Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 244.

presence known in the slightest acts of nature. But this was the given real-
ity about which most of the decisions and actions of the age, throughout the
entire Western world, revolved. [39]

Taking into account the truth value of these representations without dismissing
the motives for their transmission as irrational or superstitious, however, requires
attention to both the question of what constituted the reality of the monstrous
and the problem of how that reality could be represented.

Our first glance at the *Wonders* reveals, as always, what we expect to see: horri-
ble beings made, like Frankenstein's Monster, by sewing together bits and pieces of
other creatures — the legs of a bird, the body of sheep, the ears of an ass (fol. 5r). Or,
perhaps more luridly, the body of a horse conjoined without transition to the torso
of a man (fol. 5v). The text, similarly, presents the Lertice: "They have ass's ears and
sheep's wool and bird's feet" (fol. 5v). But some of the textual descriptions of won-
ders, like that of the Onocentaur, suggest not literal but metaphoric hybridity. The
Onocentaurs, we read, "have human shapes up to the navel and below that they
are like an ass" (fol. 5v). It is easy to imagine the Onocentaur as a literal hybrid: an
Onocentaur, or Ass-Centaur, is a creature with the upper parts of a man and the
lower parts of an ass. But the text maintains quite clearly that this creature, this
Homodubii, has the *shape* of a human above and is *like* an ass below. Rather than a
literal hybrid of two distinct beings joined together to produce a monster, we have
a creature not made of the parts of any other being, but rather, having parts that
look like those belonging to known creatures.

This distinction is important in at least two respects. First, it means that at
least some of the creatures in the *Wonders* are not literally hybrids, as many of
them have so often been called: their apparent hybridity is the consequence of
metaphorical thinking. Second, it means that they are no more and no less likely
to exist, no more and no less plausible and conceivable than those members of
the *Wonders* that we often skip past on account of their familiarity — the camels
(fol. 4v), for example, or the gentle, oyster-eating bishop (fol. 7v). Indeed, a camel
would have been no more familiar in Anglo-Saxon England than an Onocen-
taur, and both would have been known only through the Bible, hagiographies,
geographies, encyclopedias, and travelers' tales, like this text and like the *Letter
of Alexander*, bound with it, which recounts the two thousand camels the con-
queror has in his retinue.

While these creatures are all in some way "wondrous" or "marvelous," they
cannot simply be labeled "monsters" or species of monsters and then safely filed
away, for at least two reasons. The first is that we have to remember the truth-
value of these descriptions for the Anglo-Saxon audience. These creatures are
"wondrous" in the sense that they are "ungefrægelicu" — literally un-heard-of,

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[39] David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
1977), 69.

unknown, even inconceivable, but not imaginary: they exist. The second is that because they are "ungefrægelicu" we know them only the way that we can know things we have never seen, touched, or been torn apart by: we know them *only* through text and image. Hence it is no surprise that so many medieval—and contemporary—commentators take up the etymological association of "monster" with "monstrare," to show, to demonstrate, and "read" the monster as itself a sign, or even a representation of the sign.[40] Yet, as we have been arguing, the creatures of the Vitellius *Wonders* also *resist* such readings, and often instead seem to serve as representations of the limits of the means by which we signify, as they ask us, again and again, to locate ourselves in those moments when our strategies for reading meaningfully are confounded.

As Bruno Roy has suggested, the monster catalogs may be conceived of as a strategy for naming what can go wrong with the human body or the animal world, and, by so naming those abnormalities, for reassuring readers of their own "normality," and the resilience of that "normality" in God's creation.[41] But the Vitellius *Wonders* suggests that even this process of naming is already destabilized: even on the most explicit level, these monsters are *described* as "ungefrægelicu"; even after they are named, they remain "inconceivable," or "unheardof." Even without this sort of lexical play, we can see an anxiety about the process of naming throughout the Vitellius text, as the Latin monster names are translated into English. This translation was presumably effected in order to render the names and creatures more knowable, and yet the translations often only reiterate their opacity: the Homodubii, for example, are re-presented as "twimen" (fol. 6r)—double men or doubtful men in both English and Latin, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, but made all the more double and doubtful by the fact that the term is used, and with no explanation, to describe more than one monster in the text.

But, as we have been arguing, the text of this manuscript can never be resolved into any matter of text alone. Kenneth Sisam asks why an illustrator "so incompetent" would venture to create the images of this manuscript at all unless

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[40] These passages are widely cited. See, for example, Cohen, *Of Giants*, xiv; Lisa Verner, *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2–5; and Tom Tyler, "Deviants, Donestre, and Debauchees: Here be Monsters," *Culture, Theory & Critique* 49, no. 2 (2008): 113–31, here 113, 120.

[41] "Isidore a donc identifié et catalogué tous les danger qui menaçaient l'intégrité du corps humain. Sa classification représent un effort de l'homme occidental ouest-européen pour se confirmer dans sa normalité point par point avec la difformité des races imaginaires": Bruno Roy, "En marge du monde connu: les races de monstres," in *Aspects de la Marginalité au Moyen Age*, ed. G.-H. Allard et al. (Montreal: L'Aurore, 1974), 70–81, here 76.

he were simply copying from an illustrated exemplar.[42] But certainly an incompetent illustrator—if indeed he is such—need not copy the illustrations in his exemplar. We propose instead that this illustrator created these images, whether he was copying them or not, because the images *matter* to this text—and in fact all three early medieval English versions of the *Marvels* are illustrated. As Donald Scragg notes, "This is a text, then, which ought not to be read without reference to the illustrations, and it is therefore unfortunate that the most widely available editions are of the text alone."[43] But we also cannot think about *these* images as *simply* illustrations of the plot of the textual episodes. That might be one way to read the related manuscripts, but, as we have been arguing, this manuscript does not allow for such a safe containment. We suggest instead that the Vitellius *Wonders* is guilty of "perversion" in the sense that it requires us to read its monstrous texts and images *differently*. In doing so, if we are not going to dismiss this *Wonders* or otherwise turn away from it, we have to acknowledge our own dislocations, our own fear and puzzlement, but also our own recognition that something real *is* there, just beyond what we know how to understand.

Art-Historian-Eating Monsters:
A Note on the Reception of the Images of the Vitellius
Wonders of the East

J. R. R. Tolkien famously writes of *Beowulf's* monsters that they "are not an inexplicable blunder of taste; they are essential, fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas of the poem, which give it its lofty tone and high seriousness."[44] Just so, we argue, the loose style of the images of the Vitellius *Wonders of the East* is no "inexplicable blunder of taste," but rather an essential aspect of the work itself.

These images are *ugly*, we have been told. They are *vague*, nearly as illegible as their texts. None comes close to detailed biological illustrations of the sort that first became popular during the observation-focused Enlightenment. The flea, for example, from Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* of 1665 shows us every detail, every hair, every body segment (Fig. 1.2). Even when we compare it with modern photographs, we can see that Hooke's image is quite accurate. This creature, magnified thousands of times on the page, is rendered monstrous, though the

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[42] "Unless he found them in his original, a scribe so incompetent in drawing would hardly have ventured on illustrations": Sisam, *Studies*, 78.

[43] Donald Scragg, "Secular Prose," in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Pulsiano and Treharne, 268–80, here 272.

[44] J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936): 245–95, reprinted in *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, ed. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 5–48, here 19.
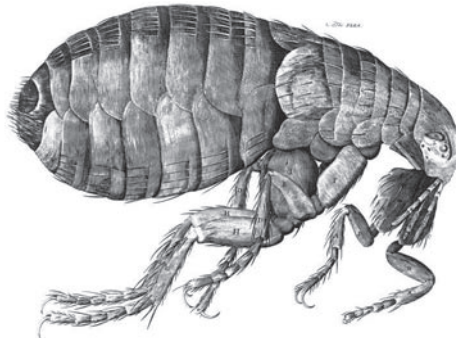
Fig. 1.2: Flea, Robert Hooke's *Micrographia: or, Some physiological descriptions of minute bodies made by magnifying glasses, with observations and inquiries thereupon*, 1st ed. (London: Jo. Marten and Ja. Allestry, 1665), table 34

scale reminds us of the flea's tiny size. And yet, for all the disgust it might evoke, it is unquestionably a part of our world, something with which Hooke's seventeenth-century contemporaries would have been all too intimately familiar.

Yet, as Susan Stewart notes, the magnified images of the *Micrographia* are "a display of a world not necessarily known through the senses, or lived experience."[45] While fleas were omnipresent in seventeenth-century Europe, few observers would have seen them as anything more than revolting specks. From this perspective, the flea, like the creatures of the *Wonders*, is represented without reference to the present or the observable. The creatures of the *Wonders*, like the Blemmyes, are not housecats or warhorses or wild boars. Rather, they are vaguely known beings, firmly believed in but never personally observed, never even glimpsed fleetingly. They are not like the "elves and orcs," mentioned in *Beowulf* and in medical texts and charms, in that the latter were believed to dwell within the forests and fens of England itself.[46] The wonders of the East are by definition geographically remote. On medieval maps, including the Hereford, Psalter, and Ebstorf Maps, the monstrous races are confined to the other side of the world.[47]

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[45] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 44.

[46] R. D. Fulk, Robert Bjork, and John Niles, eds., *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 6–7, lines 112–113.

[47] For the Hereford Map, see Scott Westrem, *The Hereford Map* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001). For many others, including those listed here, see Leonid Chekin, *Northern Eurasia in Medieval Cartography* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006). This phenomenon is less clearly present in the map closest in time and place to the *Wonders*. The Cotton Map, bound with the Tiberius *Marvels*, has far fewer marvels and monsters, but most of those it does have are in the far North, including Gog and Magog and the "griphorum gens." The Cynocephali and Ethiopians are in the more typical southern locus. For more on this, see Foys, *Virtually Anglo-Saxon*, 149.

According to the *Wonders,* the Cynocephali live in Egypt. The Two-Faced Men bear their children in India. They are, by definition, almost impossibly remote, relegated to the almost mythical "East."

The text of the *Wonders* presents brief reports of the name, size, location and, on occasion, habits of the creatures. For the Blemmye, for example, we read in total: "Then there are other islands south from the Brixontes on which exist [people] without heads. They have their eyes and mouth on their breasts. They are eight feet tall and eight feet broad" (fol. 5r–v). Since the reader will never see a Blemmye, nor even travel to its purported home, "south from the Brixontes" River, this brief text and the image by which it is accompanied cannot be made sharper, more precise, without significant imaginative engagement.

These creatures are, in their basic composition, liminal beings. They often confound vital categories. The dog-headed Cynocephali, for example, are human, unquestionably, but bear "horses' manes and boars' tusks and dogs' heads" (fol. 3r). In his composition, the Cynocephalus is not merely part man, part animal. He is part human, part herbivore, part carnivore, part rooting omnivore, even. He is part wild beast — hunted for sport — part domesticated working beast, and part pet, as well as part hunter, part farmer, part domesticator. The Cynocephalus's position between several categories renders him more frightening than any simple giant. He is, among other things, a participant in the "abject," as Julia Kristeva has described it, that which, in part because it cannot be wholly disavowed, "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[48]

Curiously, unlike many of the creatures in the two later *Wonders* manuscripts — including even his own descendants in related manuscripts — the Cynocephalus here is clothed. Nakedness might easily be understood to stand in for savagery, for lack of civilization, for the animal in this being. But here, rather than depicting him as a naked beast, the illuminator presents the fire-breathing, boar-tusked, dog-headed monster as regally attired in flowing robes. He even provides what may be intended to represent a golden shoulder-clasp, similar to the one familiar to us from the royal burial at Sutton Hoo.[49] A closer look reveals

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[48] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4. For a book-length study of the figure of the Cynocephalus, see David Gordon White, *Myths of the Dog-Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[49] "Sutton Hoo was a very high-ranking and specialised cemetery. It could be termed 'royal' in so far as that word can be given precision in seventh-century England: it is the cemetery of an aristocracy (implied by its wealth), which was dynastic (implied by the suite of cremations in bronze bowls), which claimed a regional supremacy (implied by the symbolic apparatus in Mound I), and international recognition (implied by the exotic objects). The cemetery lay in the territory of the East Angles, since Rendlesham (to the north) and Ipswich and Felixstowe (to the south) all relate to that province. Since the

that this figure is not only wearing the robes of authority. He carries the traditional emblems of royalty as well. In his right hand, he bears a scepter. In his left hand, swathed in the folds of his red cloak—a color still redolent of imperial connections—he bears the ultimate symbol of dominion over the world: an orb. This is the same symbol we see in the hand of all manner of medieval kings and emperors from Charlemagne to Otto III to Harold Godwinson, as he appears on the Bayeux Tapestry. In fact, with his frontal presentation, his orb, his scepter, his tri-layered, tri-colored series of garments, exposed hose, and splayed feet shod in fashionable, dark, pointy shoes, the Cynocephalus has rather more in common with Harold than might be expected. Indeed, by bearing this emblem, the Cynocephalus shares common ground with Christ himself, as depicted on the Psalter Map (see Color Plate 9) and elsewhere. This attention to the clothing and ornamentation suggests that the image is one not of pure alterity. In fact, it reminds us that such pure alterity is never possible. The monstrosity of the Cynocephalus is monstrous civility, indeed, perhaps monstrous kingship. As it evokes the familiar, even the sacred, the image thus also implicates the contexts in which and methods by which we come to know and recognize the sacred and the familiar.

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. While the text for the Cynocephalus gives us no indication of human category, simply stating that "there are born half-dogs," the image, as we have suggested, in its emphasis on elaborate clothing and ornamentation, renders the creature also human, male, regal, and perhaps even associated with the divine. In contrast, however, a number of other creatures are explicitly described within the text as "people." The text for the creatures with two faces reads: "Ðær beoð cende *men* hy beoð fiftyne fota lange ⁊ hy habbað hwit lic 7 twa neb on anum heafde" (fol. 4v).[50] That is, "There are born *people* that are fifteen feet tall and they have a white body and two faces on one head." Indeed, even the Donestre, himself—perhaps the most fearsome occupant of the *Wonders*—is described as "*moncyn* þæt is mid us donestre nemned" (fol. 6v).[51] That is, "a *race of people* that is, among us, called Donestre."

This *person*, the Donestre, is described in rather unclear terms: "grown like soothsayers from the head to the navel, and the other part is like a human" (fol. 6v). It is unclear to us how a soothsayer ought to appear, or why this soothsayerness seems to be included as a non-human element in the text. The very term at

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earliest kings of East Anglia are recorded to have died in the late sixth century, the Sutton Hoo cemetery was initiated at, or just before, the local adoption of kingship itself": Martin Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 134–36.

   [50] Emphasis added.

   [51] Emphasis added.

play for "soothsayer," however, bears scrutiny. It has generally been transcribed and interpreted as *fri[h]teras*, though it is written as *frifteras*, a word which does not appear as such in the *Dictionary of the Old English Corpus*.[52] This spelling could, of course, be a mistake on the part of the scribe of the manuscript, or a *hapax legomenon*, referring to the unfamiliar creature illustrated in the manuscript—the illumination shows an odd creature, whose appearance and relation to humans appears at first glance perhaps more anatine than carnivorous. However, based on the content of the text and image, it seems as possible that the word might be an unknown derivative of *frettan*, meaning "to consume," or *frettol*, meaning "gluttonous," as a corruption of *frihteras*.[53] These concepts are all integral to the nature of the Donestre, who, we are told, lure their victims in by calling out "the names of familiar men and with false words they seduce him and seize him and after that they eat him, all except the head. And then they sit and weep over that head."[54] While Tom Tyler argues via Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge* that we cannot speculate on the Donestre's psychology, which cannot be known,[55] for Jeffrey Jerome Cohen the Donestre thus instigates a kind of transubstantiation, with the Donestre literally though only partially incorporating the human figure, and, in the end of the episode, recognizing "the fragility of autonomous selfhood, how much of the world it excludes in its panic to remain selfsame, singular, stable."[56] Nicholas Howe in similar terms argues that the Donestre's partial consumption of the traveller represents the "residue" of the East, what cannot be consumed or "naturalized."[57] For Howe, the residue of elsewhere cannot be naturalized because, for the reader, the context in which it exists can never be fully represented: "some of its facts or lore remains incompletely assimilated because lacking in narrative context."[58] The textual depiction of the Donestre presents, that is, at once an effort to know, to integrate, to naturalize, and an insistence that knowledge is partial, integration is never fully possible, the unknown and unknowable remains. In Howe's account, the impossibility of integration is generically motivated. The *Wonders* texts are not coherent narratives

[52] Mary Olson, *Fair and Varied Forms: Visual Textuality in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 141, transcribes as "fri[h]teras." Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 196, and Gibb, "Wonders of the East," 93, n. 20:2, see it as we do, "frifteras." Search performed at *The Dictionary of the Old English Corpus*, ed. Antonette di Paolo Healey, updated 11 February 2005 <http://quod.lib.umich.edu.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/o/oec/> accessed June 2009.

[53] Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898).

[54] Tiberius, fol. 83r–v, Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies,* 196.

[55] Tyler, "Deviants," 128.

[56] Cohen, *Of Giants*, 2–4.

[57] Nicholas Howe, *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Cultural Geography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 173.

[58] Howe, *Writing the Map,* 173.

but excerpts, compiled not in a narrative progression but through a loose process of association. As Howe argues, "The reader is left with pieces that relate to each other and yet is given no way to reconcile their differences or resolve them into a whole or otherwise live with them."[59] Reading the image and text with and against each other, however, while it certainly does not "resolve them into a whole," perhaps suggests motivation for the insistence on the remainder, the unknowable, in this episode.

The ambiguity of the image, which resists scrutiny, is crucial to its effectiveness. In the early Middle Ages, verisimilitude in painted imagery was neither particularly possible nor particularly desired, although of course late medieval painters would push toward it. The enigmatic nature of the images invites the viewer to use his or her own imagination to create a more vivid and personally frightful image than any one still, frozen, clearly delineated painting is likely to be. The Donestre in the each of the images of the two later manuscripts is far more clearly defined than in the Vitellius. The lines in these images are sharper and drawn with a heavier, blacker ink. Indeed, these images are also more complete narrations, containing the whole of the story from the initial conversation to the consumption (here, all at once, dramatic and violent, though perhaps not containing the element of psychological torture in Vitellius, where the victim appears quite alive while the Donestre holds her foot aloft), to the final, poignant weeping of the Donestre over the head of his victim. The colors in Tiberius (see Color Plate 5) and, even more so, in Bodley are cheery and bright. The figures are fully legible, even easy to read, and pointedly contained within their leaden frames. The Donestre and his victim in the Vitellius image, in contrast, have no landscapes on which to stand within a clearly separate world. Rather, they are like an inverse of images of holy figures, such as the images of the prophets Daniel and Amos from a contemporary textile stole found in St. Cuthbert's coffin.[60] There, the threads of pure gold serve to glorify the holy men, and also to place them in heaven. In contrast, the Donestre and his victim appear against unmitigated crimson. In the context of the gory narrative, the background seems to intensify the violence only partly contained within its frame.

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 Þonne ænig man oðer."[61] That is, "in the form of a man . . . except that he was greater than any other man." This is, in a way, his most sustained physical description. We know Grendel not by his face but by the trail of blood he leaves behind. In his dramatic fight scene, in the

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[59] Howe, *Writing the Map*, 173.

[60] A good color image can be found in G. Baldwin Brown and Mrs. Archibald Christie, "S. Cuthbert's Stole and Maniple at Durham," *Burlington Magazine* 23, no. 121 (April 1913): 2.

[61] *Beowulf*, 164–165.

Hall, we have a large number of terms for Grendel, but they are more attributive than descriptive. He is a "miscreant," a "foe," a "wicked ravager" who "bore God's wrath."[62] He is even described as a "warrior," and thereby elevated to the status of Beowulf and his comrades—or at least made into a worthy adversary for them.[63]

But still, none of this tells us what he actually *looks* like. The poet does tell us that "from his eyes shone forth a most ugly light," a common monstrous trope to be dealt with in Chapter 8.[64] The poem also informs us that Grendel is "greater than any other man," and in the next passage Grendel is called an *eoten*, a giant.[65] After bursting apart the door, "firm with forged bars," he proceeds to grab a man—a whole man—and tear him up and eat him:

> Nor did the fierce assailant delay, but he quickly seized at the first opportunity a sleeping warrior. He tore unrestrainedly, he bit the muscle, he drained blood from veins, and swallowed the sinful morsels. Immediately, he had consumed *all of the lifeless man, feet and hands*.[66]

Surely, Grendel is large, larger than a man, but he is still small enough to fit within Heorot, and small enough to lock hands with Beowulf who is, while larger and stronger than average, still a mortal man. Grendel thus cannot be a hundred feet tall, or fifty or even twenty, for that matter. And yet, he can not only pick up a warrior and tear him to pieces, but also eat every last bit and drop of this warrior, so the poet tells us. The point is that either the rules of nature do not apply to Grendel or he is not consistent from one moment to the next. These two possibilities may be one in the same, and both are, in our view, not an error on the part of the poet, but rather, instantiations of the spirit of the monstrous.

Grendel could have been clearly and precisely described, as Heorot is, and as Beowulf's arms and armor are. This is not a poem lacking in ekphrasis. But perhaps Grendel was sharper for having been left more vague. The more details for a creature, the more carefully described or drawn in, the more it becomes a product of the author or artist's imagination and less a product of our own. In this manner, both the *Beowulf* poem and the images and texts of the Vitellius *Wonders of the East* require us to fill in the particulars: at the same time, however, they both model and resist exactly the processes by which we do so. They stand in marked contrast to the *Micrographia*'s flea, rendered in every minute detail. Like any good horror film director, their creators knew that the most effective moments were those in which the creatures were mere shadows, fleeting

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[62] *Beowulf*, 707–712.
[63] *Beowulf*, 720.
[64] *Beowulf*, 726–727.
[65] *Beowulf*, 761.
[66] *Beowulf*, 739–745. Emphasis added.

glimpses on the screen rather than clearly lit men in rubber suits. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes that "the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through *process* and *movement*, never through dissection-table analysis."[67] How does an illuminator, as opposed to a poet or filmmaker, render process and movement in order to create images that resist our precise scrutiny? When we are able turn our spotlights on them, how can these creatures remain in the shadows? If the texts and images of the Vitellius *Wonders* frustrate us, if the images seem to swim on the page, if they overflow their bounds, if the text elides difference even as it proclaims it, to this we would reply, "Why would we expect anything else?" The invitation to imagine what we cannot know is also an invitation to recognize our implication in the violence and limitations of the processes by which we come to know, to represent, to view and to read.

The Chronological Gap

Allen J. Frantzen writes of *Beowulf,* "Our obsession with the need for a pure, complete origin in *Beowulf* has inspired criticism to focus on the unities and achievements of the text rather than its gaps and fissures."[68] As we explore the significance of the vagueness and incompletion, the leaking and openness of these texts and images, we wish to remain attentive to the interaction of our critical desires and the texts and images, as well as the gaps between what we claim as readers/viewers and what the *Wonders* in its Anglo-Saxon context might have required. The problems of situating contemporary readings with respect to chronologically distant texts have been discussed at length by others: here we will comment on them only briefly. We will here follow a number of studies in medieval texts and images by making use of a broad range of theoretical approaches. As Frantzen writes regarding his usage of Foucault, White, McGann, Said, and others:

> By borrowing their insights I leave myself open to charges of eclecticism. However, since critical texts are as susceptible to interpretation as any others, I make no apology for treating these authors as they treat others — that is, for acknowledging both general and particular debts, and adapting what I have understood from their writing and research to my own purpose.[69]

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[67] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Preface: In a Time of Monsters," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), x. Emphasis added.

[68] Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Languages, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 181.

[69] Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, xv.

We are not aiming to produce a perfect—as in complete and final—analysis of the *Wonders*, as we do not believe such a thing to be possible or even desirable. Rather, like Frantzen, we acknowledge that our work is "incomplete—that is, subjective, transitory, and historically interested."[70] We view the manuscript, by necessity, from our historical moment and through our eyes, even as we also work to imagine or reconstruct those of its Anglo-Saxon audience.

Our collaboration on this project has rendered our work hybridized from the outset, and our use of multiple theoretical approaches reflects both our different disciplinary assumptions and our interest in examining points of congruity and tension between those disciplinary perspectives. Clare A. Lees and Gillian Over-ing articulate similar issues with care: "Our argument claims the space between the literary and the historical,"—we would say, between the literary and the *art* historical—"with all its attendant critical problems." They continue:

> We do not expect to be historical enough for historians or literary enough for the literary scholars. We accept the drawbacks of hybridization, believ-ing that the peculiar syncretism of the Anglo-Saxon period necessitates a flexible and varied critical stance. As Anglo-Saxonists interested in criti-cal theory, we share the double bind of all similarly minded students of the past; we negotiate dialectically the difference of the past with the available critical apparatus of the present, but we do so maintaining a respect for his-torical difference and its own sites of critical resistance.[71]

In viewing and reading the *Wonders*, readers grapple with dislocation; no potential audience can easily either identify or dis-identify with its distant and unknown beings, its "ungefrægelicu deor". Our temporal dislocation from a period that is itself often considered "dour and alien and threatening"[72] is analogous—though not identical—to the geographical dislocation of the Anglo-Saxon reader from these threatening wonders in the distant, imagined East: absolute, unalterable, but also, and by that same difference, sometimes surprisingly unstable and open to points of contact, familiarity, and recognition.

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[70] Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 112. At 99, he argues for the imperative use of criti-cal theory in Anglo-Saxon studies: "Those who teach medieval literatures, Old English in particular, will have to reach out to the new language—really many languages—of contemporary criticism." Frantzen (113) further argues: "I see many reasons to show that old and new not only can but must work together, not in a new synthesis in which the dif-ferences are neutralized, but in a new acknowledgement of difference and divergence."

[71] Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 10.

[72] Robert F. Yeager, "Some Turning Points in the Teaching of Old English in America," *Old English Newsletter* 13 (1980): 9–20, here 12.