

*BEOWULF*, SLEEP, AND JUDGMENT DAY

A Thesis

by

GINGER SUZANNE FIELDER HANCHEY

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

May 2008

Major Subject: English

*BEOWULF*, SLEEP, AND JUDGMENT DAY

A Thesis

by

GINGER SUZANNE FIELDER HANCHEY

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Robert Boenig
Committee Members,	Britt Mize
	Leah DeVun
Head of Department,	Jimmie Killingsworth

May 2008

Major Subject: English

## ABSTRACT

*Beowulf*, Sleep, and Judgment Day. (May 2008)

Ginger Suzanne Fielder Hanchey, B.A., Baylor University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Robert Boenig

When warriors fall asleep within Heorot's decorated walls, they initiate a sequence of events that ultimately ends in slaughter and death. This pattern of sleep, attack, and death predictably appears in each of the monster episodes. Humans sleep and fall prey to an otherworld attacker, who eventually receives death as punishment. Interestingly, the roles of the characters are reversed in the dragon scene. Here, the dragon's sleep exposes him to harm at the hands of a human, the thief, whose guilt is transferred to Beowulf. In this way, sleep designates the victims and the attackers, but it also helps the audience predict the judgment that will take place at the end of each episode.

This judgment becomes specifically Christian when contextualized by other Anglo-Saxon accounts of sleep. As in these texts, sleep in *Beowulf* functions as a liminal zone connecting the world of the humans with an Otherworld. The intersection of these worlds in *Beowulf* follows the structural paradigm of the popular "Doomsday motif," in which an angry Christ comes to earth to surprise a sleeping humanity. A study of the verbal and thematic similarities of *Beowulf* and *Christ III* best exemplifies this connection. Other mythographic traditions of Christian judgment within Anglo-

Saxon texts appear throughout *Beowulf*. Motifs of Christ's second coming surround Grendel as he approaches Heorot, and his entrance echoes Christ's harrowing of Hell. The fight in Grendel's mother's lair recalls redemption through water: Beowulf's immersion represents baptism and the hilt of the sword which saves the Danish nation depicts the great Flood. Finally, the dragon's fire and its resulting annihilation of a people, at least indirectly, resounds with apocalyptic undertones.

## DEDICATION

For Dan and for Oliver.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the guidance of my committee chair, Dr. Robert Boenig, and my committee members, Dr. Britt Mize and Dr. Leah DeVun.

I additionally appreciate the support of my parents and parents-in-law, and the encouragement of my siblings.

Finally, I thank my husband Dan for his unending love and help; and my son Oliver, whose own sleep allowed for the writing of this thesis.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	iii
DEDICATION .....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
CHAPTER	
I    INTRODUCTION.....	1
II   SLEEP, STRUCTURE, AND JUSTICE IN <i>BEOWULF</i> .....	6
III  A GENERAL SURVEY OF SLEEP IN ANGLO-SAXON CHRISTIAN TEXTS AND THEIR SOURCES AND ANALOGUES .....	21
IV <i>BEOWULF</i> EPISODES AS REPRESENTATIONS OF CHRISTIAN JUDGMENT .....	36
V    CONCLUSION .....	80
REFERENCES.....	82
VITA.....	87

CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

*Sigon þa to slæpe.*  
Then they fell asleep.  
1251a

*Beowulf* appeals to many readers because of its orientation toward intense action. The hero engages directly with monsters, and the kinetic activity of these battles possesses the page, making the floors resound almost in our own rooms. The numerous details of the fights convey the sense of tension and urgency: mead benches “start from the floor” (*fram sylle abeag*, 775b), swords sing “greedy war-song[s]” (*grædig guðleoð*, 1522a), “sweat well[s] in waves” (*swat yðum weoll*, 2693b). But while *Beowulf* is a poem of action, it is the inactivity of sleep which acts as a catalyst to the action; the fierce activity in *Beowulf* results directly from the non-activity of sleep.

Sleep functions in the poem in a closely defined structural pattern. The poet organizes the poem around three major divisions of conflict: Beowulf’s conflicts between Grendel, his mother, and the dragon. These three major episodes, vivid in their descriptions of activity and brutality, follow a strict structural formula which also includes a specific moment of sleeping. Before Grendel attacks the Danes over the course of twelve winters, or before he attacks the Geats on the fateful night of his death, the men he victimizes first lay down in Heorot and fall to sleep. Only after they

---

This thesis follows the style of *Neophilologus*.



succumb to the mortal need for rest does Grendel approach them with fury and force. The poet makes this non-event an explicitly significant moment, both through the details of the characters' sleeping condition, and through the consistent positioning of sleep within a repeated structural paradigm. Grendel's mother also attacks warriors in their sleep, the slave steals from the dragon as he sleeps, and the dragon delivers revenge on the Geatish people in the night as they sleep. Through its structural placement, sleep limits the interactions of the humans and the three monsters in the poem.

The structure of *Beowulf* does not exist in a vacuum; it is contextualized by other texts. To articulate the role of sleep in *Beowulf*, I examine other texts which involve instances of sleep and which arise from a similar historical context. More specifically, I draw from texts which share the Christian themes present in *Beowulf*. Although *Beowulf* scholars have not agreed upon a specific date of composition, an eighth-century date provides the basis of this research. In his work, *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia*, Sam Newton defends this date. He explains, "Although palaeographic and linguistic considerations provide no clear proof as to its origin, independent orthographic, lexical, and phonological indications permit the hypothesis that *Beowulf* may have been composed in an Anglian kingdom as early as the eighth century."<sup>1</sup> For this project, I examine several other eighth-century texts. Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, completed by 731, provides numerous accounts of sleep. I also refer to Bede's *De Die Judicii* and Felix's *Life of Saint Guthlac*, two other texts

---

<sup>1</sup> 232. Unfortunately, an elaborate discussion of the poem's date of composition is beyond the scope of this paper. For more on this debate, see Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*; and Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*.

reportedly written in the early eighth century.<sup>2</sup> I also look at other texts which likely predate and postdate *Beowulf* to get a sense of the developing concept of sleep in these Christian documents. Accounts of sleep from Gregory's *Dialogi*, a Latin text written in 593, originate in the sixth century or before and likely circulated among learned Christians even earlier than they appear in text. They continued to hold the interest of these Anglo-Saxon Christians, for by the late ninth century, King Alfred had Bishop Werferth translate the *Dialogi* into their vernacular language.<sup>3</sup> For its connection to the Old English poem *Christ III*, which I will discuss shortly, I reach as far back as Prudentius' fourth century Latin *Hymn Before Sleep*. But I also follow the strain beyond *Beowulf*'s eighth-century composition, hoping to include ideas which might have circulated during the *Beowulf* poet's lifetime, but which might not have been preserved in writing until many years later. Among other later texts, I consider the accounts in *Elene*, *Andreas*, and Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*. The common Christian elements in all of these texts and in *Beowulf* finally prompt me to compare the accounts of sleep in these texts to their biblical ancestors.

Sleep figures prominently in *Beowulf* and this other body of texts. Despite its fixed structural positioning, the function of sleep in *Beowulf* appears at first nebulous and non-specific, only hinting at some kind of judgment within each episode; but when interpreted through the very specific uses of sleep as a liminal zone and a marker of guilt in Anglo-Saxon texts, the role of sleep in *Beowulf* comes into focus more clearly. This

---

<sup>2</sup> *De Die Iudicii* has also been attributed to Alcuin. In any case, the text remains an eighth century document. For more, see the translation in Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 208.

<sup>3</sup> Lapidge, *Cambridge Companion*, 255.

liminality and designation of guilt is fully realized in Christian terms in *Christ III*, in which it is manifested in a Doomsday motif. The many verbal and structural echoes in the two works make the application of *Christ III* to *Beowulf* a logical choice. The two may have used a shared source, or they may have drawn from a broader common tradition, or *Christ III* may have drawn directly from *Beowulf*. I reapply the Doomsday motif to the *Beowulf* text in order to reinterpret the non-specific moments of liminality and guilt designation in a specifically Christian, Judgment Day context. By recognizing the parallels between the use of sleep in *Christ III* and these other texts and the use of sleep in *Beowulf*, I am able to define the three major episodes in the poem as individual representations of Christian judgment.

Chapter II explores the specific role of sleep in *Beowulf* as part of a repeated structural pattern used to aid the Old English poet in his composition. This pattern balances activity and sleep and activity and death and resembles the Anglo-Saxon alliterative line. The parallel positions of sleep and death within the poem's larger structural apparatus additionally act as a hermeneutical device and help foreshadow Beowulf's own death at the end of the poem. Sleep also acts as a moral indicator, designating the victim and by contrast the attacker. In this way, too, Beowulf's fate can be interpreted through the poem's use of sleep.

Chapter III provides a brief, general survey of sleep in Anglo-Saxon Christian texts and their Christian sources and analogues. Sleep in these texts acts as a liminal zone between two worlds which can function in three ways. Sleep can convey a soul directly to an otherworld, allow otherworld figures to approach humans, or hold the soul

that floats between earth and an otherworld. These texts also use sleep to indicate moral deficiency.

Chapter IV looks at the three monster episodes as representations of Christian judgment, which is initiated by the sleep of the characters. The prominent place of the Judgment Day theme in Anglo-Saxon literature recommends a Doomsday examination of the text, especially in conjunction with the special affinity between sleep and judgment in other Anglo-Saxon texts. Of particular interest to this investigation is the Old English poem *Christ III*, which, like *Beowulf*, uses sleep as both a liminal zone bridging two worlds and as a marker of guilt. The two poems additionally share the same sequence of events, also called the Doomsday motif, with sleep appearing in the same fixed positions in both, and they contain verbal parallels. A close text-based analysis shows that other Judgment Day motifs abound in the three episodes. Even the very structure of the poem suggests a Doomsday interpretation.

Thus, the roles of sleep in *Beowulf* as a liminal zone uniting two worlds, as a designator of moral apathy, and as a precursor to Christian judgment influence the meaning of the whole poem. Examining the specific instances of sleep in the poem and in other historically and culturally related texts narrows the thousand-plus year divide between the modern reader and the original audience, exposing meaning long forgotten. Like the golden cup exhumed by the runaway slave, lifted from an endless mound of treasure, some small part of the poem resurfaces.

## CHAPTER II

SLEEP, STRUCTURE, AND JUSTICE IN *BEOWULF*

The researches of Milman Parry and Albert Lord established the primacy of formulae in the construction of oral epic as early as the 1950s. According to their research based on Parry's theory, oral epic is more or less recomposed at every performance and contains various formulae which serve as mental signposts to the singer, aiding him in memory and composition.<sup>4</sup> These formulae are most obvious on the linguistic level, where lines and phrases reappear verbatim at various points throughout a poem. But the formulae also operate on the broader level of structure, where a series of objects or events consistently reappear in the same order, creating what Cassidy and Ringler identify as thematic "frames."<sup>5</sup> These frames provide a "skeletal and basically stable narrative pattern" for the poet to follow in the extemporaneous composition of his poem.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Lord, *Singer of Tales*. Parry died before his pupil published their findings. Parry's primary ancient interest was Homeric poetry, but he based his theories on his anthropological research among eastern European cultures who were still "composing" oral epic in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Several scholars, most notably Cassidy and Ringler ("Oral-Formulaic Theory") and Magoun ("Oral-Formulaic Character") have successfully extended the Parry-Lord thesis to *Beowulf*.

<sup>5</sup> Cassidy and Ringler, "Oral-Formulaic Theory," 172. Cf. Magoun, "Oral-Formulaic Character," 191, who even goes so far as to claim that "oral poetry...is composed entirely of formulas."

<sup>6</sup> Cassidy and Ringler, "Oral-Formulaic Theory," 171. Cassidy and Ringler admit that such features do not necessarily distinguish an oral-formulaic poem from a literary poem borrowing oral-formulaic techniques, "Oral-Formulaic Theory," 173. Even so, the repetition of these patterns create and convey important meanings through an emphasis on structure.

In *Beowulf*, these structural patterns often demonstrate a consistency of behavior that provides a medium through which to evaluate the actions and motivations of the poem's characters and their underlying cultural assumptions. Of particular interest in this vein is the activity, or rather inactivity, of sleep that occurs regularly throughout the narrative.<sup>7</sup> While sleep itself can hardly be unexpected, its occurrence is tightly controlled structurally. When it occurs it is one component of a larger structural pattern that usually proceeds as follows: feast, sleep, attack, death.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, in each of the three major episodes (the second attack by Grendel, the attack by his mother, and the attacks on and by the dragon), sleep immediately precedes the primary actions of the poem. This pattern/formula contextualizes the significance of sleep to the poem as a whole and adds emphasis to each particular instance. More specifically, sleep acts as a marker of vulnerability and helps to define the kind of justice that must take place at the end of each episode. In *Beowulf*, then, sleep prompts the action of the poem and functions as a structural and thematic tool to illustrate Anglo-Saxon cultural preoccupations with vulnerability and justice.

Even before the first of the three major episodes, sleep fulfills this structural and thematic role. The poet first describes a particular instance of Grendel's hostility before

---

<sup>7</sup> This primacy of sleep functions almost organically, lending an illusion of "real-time" to the poem. Sleep, natural to humans and almost certainly on the mind of the audience after several hours of oral performance, also proves natural to the progression of the poem. I return to this naturalness of sleep more fully below.

<sup>8</sup> Some scholars such as John A. Nist and Gale R. Owen-Crocker describe structural repetitions as "cyclic," though they do not specifically treat the structural patterns in the three main episodes, *Structure and Texture*, 20, and *Four Funerals*, 239. Owen-Crocker, for instance, discusses the funerals in *Beowulf* and the resulting connections to them throughout the poem.

the arrival of Beowulf and the Geats. Grendel postpones his first attack in the poem – an attack conventionally understood to represent twelve years of attacks on Heorot – until a time “after night [comes]” (*syþðan niht becom*, 115), and “after beer-drinking” (*æfter beorþege*, 117) is over for the Danes. When he does attack, Grendel “[finds] therein the company sleeping after the feast” (*fand þa ðær inne æþelinga gedriht / swefan æfter symble*, 118-119a). The thanes are sleeping, but in contrast, Grendel remains alert (*gearo*, 121b). He immediately “seize[s] thirty thanes in rest” (*on ræste genam / þritig þegna*, 122b-123a). The emphasis here is not simply Grendel’s attack, but the fact that it occurs while the Danes sleep. Just as the bustling activity of the feast yields to the calm of sleep, the activity of the attack leads to the resulting inactivity of death. Sleep then fits into the structure here in two ways: it offers a balance to the foregoing period of activity, and it foreshadows the second period of inactivity, specifically death. This pattern (feasting activity/sleep inactivity/attack activity/death inactivity), sketched preliminarily in this first attack of Grendel, returns in the other sleep episodes within the poem. This brief description then establishes not just Grendel’s ongoing enmity with the Danes. It also establishes a structural pattern that emphasizes a necessary balance of activity and inactivity in the lives of the characters and adumbrates an affinity between sleep and death that recurs throughout the poem.

The structural pattern next appears on the evening of Grendel’s last attack. The Danes and Geats are feasting in Heorot undiscouraged by Grendel’s inevitable visit: “[The thane] pour[s] the clear sweet-drink, . . . the scop [sings] clear-voiced in Heorot, [and] there [is] joy of heroes, unlittle host of Danes and Geats” (*Scencte scir wered. /*

*Scop hwilum sang / hador on Heorote. Þær wæs hæleða dream, / duguð unlytel Dena ond Wedera*, 496-498). Over one hundred lines later, we hear again that “there [is] laughter of heroes, [the] din [makes] a pleasing sound, the words [are] joyous” (*Ðær wæs hælepa hleahtor, hlyn swynsode / word wæron wynsume*, 611-612a). This revelry, with its repeated emphasis on noise, extends all the way to line 644 until “the son of Healfdene wishe[s] to seek evening-rest” (*sunu Healdenes secean wolde / æfenræste*, 645-646b). The noise and activity are necessarily balanced by the warriors’ mortal need for sleep. The Geats lie down and, somewhat surprisingly, “none of them [thinks] that he thence should ever seek home-love again, nation or noble-town, where he was brought-up” (*Nænig heora þohte, þæt he þanon scolde / eft eardlufan æfre gesecean, / folc oþðe freoburh, þær he afeded wæs*, 691-693).<sup>9</sup> Despite this sense of foreboding, they go to sleep (703b),<sup>10</sup> proving that their need for sleep is so great that it overpowers all reason.<sup>11</sup> Again, the poet makes clear that Grendel enters and sees the “kinship-band sleeping all together” (*swefan sibbedriht samod ætgædere*, 729). The human activity of feasting and inactivity of sleeping are significantly followed here by a similar pairing of the activity and inactivity of the monster. Grendel comes for his own feast, a feast on warriors, and in this episode, the poet describes the furious activity of eating:

slat unwearnum,  
bat banlocan,      blod edrum dranc,

<sup>9</sup> The construction *scolde...gesecean* is similar to that of 645 quoted above (*secean wolde*), heightening the irony. The seeking of one thing (sleep) stands directly in the way of the seeking of the other (home and life).

<sup>10</sup> The poet emphasizes the sleeping state of Grendel’s victims: (*slæpendne rinc*, 741a).

<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, the structure of the poem, rather than the psychology of the characters, dictates this rather unrealistic moment, demonstrating again the significant role sleep plays within the poem.



synsnædum swealh; sona hæfde  
 unlyfigendes eal gefeormod,  
 fet on folma. (741b-745a)

He tore without refusal, bit bone-lockers, drank blood in streams,  
 swallowed in huge-morsels; at once he had consumed all of the not-  
 living, feet and hands.<sup>12</sup>

His feasting escalates into the fiercer activity of fighting Beowulf, which in turn results in his own, more permanent sleep. The implied, and later confirmed, death of Grendel closes the first episode.

The second episode closely follows the structural pattern already established by the poet. Following the death of Grendel, the Danes and Geats are enjoying “the best of feasts” (*symbla cyst*, 1232), until the celebrations again give way to the overwhelming need for sleep. Once more, Hrothgar leads the company and goes to bed (1236-1237b). Warriors prepare the hall for sleeping; “they [clear] bench-planks” (*bençpelu beredon*, 1239a) and soon “[Heorot is] overspread with beds and cushions” (*hit geondbræded wearð / beddum ond bolstrum*, 1239b-40a). The poet again makes explicit reference to their sleep: “then they [fall] to sleep” (*Sigon þa to slæpe*, 1251a). The pairing of activity and inactivity of the warriors yet again foreshadows the activity and inactivity of the monster. This time, Grendel’s mother appears, seizes a thane, and flees to her den,

---

<sup>12</sup> Raymond P. Tripp, Jr. admirably seeks out an elaborate linguistic explanation of Beowulf’s neglected defense of Handscio, concluding that Beowulf must have also been sleeping in the hall at the time. God, rather than Beowulf, must be the *seleward* in line 667 and the *an* left awake in line 705. Aside from the fact that he offers no grammatical evidence to disprove that these phrases might still apply to Beowulf, the ultimate flaw in Tripp’s argument rests in his original aim of relieving the story’s hero of guilt in Handscio’s death. If Tripp claims that God is “the first or formal hall-guard,” he has only created a new hero who fails to protect Handscio, “Archetype Enters History and Goes to Sleep,” 79.

where her intense fight with Beowulf takes place. The battle ends as it did for her son, with her death.

As J. R. R. Tolkien observes, the structure of *Beowulf* is balanced in the same way that an Anglo-Saxon alliterative line is balanced. The alliterative line is composed of “two halves of roughly equivalent phonetic weight, and significant content” and both halves are connected by the same alliterative sound. These halves “are more often rhythmically contrasted than similar,” however.<sup>13</sup> Tolkien argues that the first two-thirds of the poem up to line 2199 thematically contrasts with the last third of the poem, just as the two parts of the basic Anglo-Saxon line present contrast between one another. He says of the poem,

It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death. It is divided in consequence into two opposed portions, different in matter, manner, and length: A from 1 to 2199 (including an exordium of 52 lines); B from 2200 to 3182 (the end). (Ibid., 81)

Tolkien focuses on Beowulf’s role in the poem to define the structural contrast; Beowulf is young in the first half, old in the second, etc. However, this balance can be further identified through the smaller structural changes the poet makes to the final dragon episode.<sup>14</sup> In the first two thirds of the poem, a pattern of feasting, sleeping, activity, and resulting death appears. The design of the dragon episode also exhibits this formula,

---

<sup>13</sup> “The Monsters and the Critics,” *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, 83.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Sisam dislikes Tolkien’s analogy, claiming that the Anglo-Saxon line can withstand objective tests while plot cannot, *Structure*, 21-22. In this instance, thematic structure can be identified and analyzed. Specifically, the points where alterations are made in plot pattern mimic the points where alterations are made in an Anglo-Saxon alliterative line.

only this time the series of events begins with sleep, rather than feasting. And this time, the monster, rather than the warriors, sleeps. Activity follows after he wakes up and retaliates, then engages in battle with Beowulf and Wiglaf. Like Grendel and Grendel's mother, the dragon also dies.<sup>15</sup> The similarity of the patterns cannot be missed, and yet the role-reversal of the humans and monsters in the second half resembles the alteration in the second half of an Anglo-Saxon alliterative line.

The structural patterns, then, present three important features. First, they function in much the same way as oral formulae. Their repetitive nature acts as a mnemonic device for the poet and aids him in composition. Second, the four elements, namely activity, sleep, activity, death, can be divided into two two-part halves, representing to some extent an Anglo-Saxon alliterative line. The feasting and sleep of the first half becomes intensified with the fighting and death of the second, even while both halves resemble one another. Finally, because sleep and death run parallel to one another in this structural paradigm, their meanings become indistinct and sleep ultimately signifies death.

The use of terms for sleep to mean death recurs with some consistency throughout the poem. Beowulf often describes "killing" as "putting to sleep." In his narration of his contest with Breca, he says the sea-monsters "lay dead, having been put to sleep by swords" (*uppe lægon, / sweo[r]dum aswefede*, 566b-567a).<sup>16</sup> A little later, he pledges to defeat Grendel without the use of weapons and says, "I do not wish to put

---

<sup>15</sup> I will discuss Beowulf's death and its structural significance more fully below.

<sup>16</sup> The verbs *aswebban* (567) and *swebban* (679) (put to sleep) are clearly related to the verb *swefan* (to sleep).

[him] to sleep by sword” (*forþan ic hine sweorde swebban nelle*, 679).<sup>17</sup> This euphemism is not limited to Beowulf. The “last survivor” in a digression late in the poem laments the deaths of his companions and complains that even the “polishers sleep” (*feormynd swefað*, 2256b) who would otherwise attend to the equipment of warriors. Likewise, the father who laments his son’s death is reminded every morning that “riders sleep, warriors in the grave” (*ridend swefað,/ hæleð in hoðman*, 2457b-2458a). Even the death of the dragon is described by the word *swefan*. Before dying, Beowulf notes his victory over the dragon and says, “Now the dragon lies dead, sleeps sorely wounded” (*nu se wyrm ligeð,/ swefeð sare wund*, 2745b-2746a). The euphemistic substitution of terms of sleep for terms of death reinforces the structurally implied notion that sleep has a special kinship with death. Sleep is death, but to a lesser degree.

With this in mind, the otherwise insignificant moment when Beowulf sleeps in the hall becomes extremely important. Again, the structure of the poem yields meaning. Not until Beowulf defeats both Grendel and his mother does he succumb to sleep in the high hall. His super-human strength of thirty men is finally subdued by his mortal need for sleep. Indeed, Beowulf seems overcome with weariness: “The Geat, the strong shield warrior, desired without measure to rest very much” (*Geat unigmetes wel, / rofne randwigan restan lyste*, 1792b-1793). So exceptional is the moment that the poet uses two adverbs/qualifiers (*unigmetes* and *wel*) to emphasize Beowulf’s need. This instance of sleep is unique, not only because it is the first time we hear a description of Beowulf

---

<sup>17</sup> Because of Beowulf’s efforts, however, sleep does not always indicate immediate death. Many warriors sleep when Grendel enters the high-hall for the last time, but only Handscio dies.

giving in to his need for sleep, but also because it does not precede any major action. Instead, it completes only the first half of the established pattern. The Danes and Geats feast, Hrothgar again seeks his bed, and, for the first time, Beowulf sleeps in Heorot.<sup>18</sup> Its exceptionality, when read in the context of the other instances of sleep, becomes a kind of hermeneutical key to the poem's meaning. Beowulf's sleep foreshadows his death. As Tolkien reminds us, "defeat is the theme."<sup>19</sup> Beowulf's sleep ends the major action of the first part, just as his death ends the second part. In this way, the poet again creates a pairing, this time connecting the two halves structurally and thematically.

While sleep serves as a structural marker and ultimately represents the coming of death, it also acts as a moral indicator, and it is the key to the justice that unfolds at the conclusion of each episode. More specifically, sleep acts as a marker of vulnerability throughout the poem, while those who trespass against sleeping ones always receive punishment. In each of the three main episodes, sleeping characters fall prey to some sort of crime. The victims' sleeping state is always emphasized. The poet mentions three times in the Grendel episode that Grendel attacks a sleeping warrior (703b, 729, and 741a), and a fourth mention applies to Beowulf, who appears to be sleeping in bed (*on ræste*, 747a). Grendel's mother likewise attacks while the warriors

---

<sup>18</sup> Notice Beowulf's nighttime locations: When Grendel attacks, Beowulf lays awake in Heorot. When Grendel's mother attacks, Beowulf is elsewhere, with no specific claim that he is sleeping: "Beowulf was not there, but another lodging was assigned to the famous Geat after treasure-giving" (*Næs Beowulf ðær, ac wæs oþer in ær geteohhod æfter maþðungife mærum Geate*, 1299b-1301). Beowulf finally sleeps at the end of the first half in Heorot.

<sup>19</sup> "The Monsters and the Critics," 84. See also Judith Garde, who describes Beowulf's death as "an event clearly understood by the poet to be preordained," "Christian and Folkloric Tradition," 339.

sleep, a fact mentioned twice (1279-1280a and 1298b). In the third episode, the dragon sleeps while a thief raids his treasure-hoard. The thief escapes with a gold-decorated, or gold-*guilty* cup: “a hand seized a large cup, decorated/guilty with treasure” (*hond (wæge nam) / (sid,) since fah*, 2216b-2217a). As he does throughout the poem, the poet uses the adjective *fah* here as a pun, leaving his audience to choose from among the various meanings of the word to determine whether the cup is “guilty,” “stained,” “adorned,” or a combination of the three. Just as the thief’s guilt is marked by the treasure he steals, the dragon’s vulnerability is marked by his sleep.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the poet takes three opportunities to explain that the dragon is sleeping (2218, 2287a, and 2295). Later that night, the roles of the monster and the humans are again reversed. The dragon waits for night when the Geats sleep before attacking them with fire.

Sleep not only designates the victim and by extension the attacker, but it also becomes inseparable from the crime, and even intensifies its heinousness. In spite of the fact that the dragon was sleeping (*b(eah) ð(e he) slæpende*, 2218a), the thief still steals from his hoard. The conjunction *peah* suggests that the thief acts contrarily to some implied social code which prohibits crimes against sleeping targets.<sup>21</sup> Repeatedly, the poet weds the crime to the sleeping state of the injured party. The dragon wants to find “the one who treated him sorely in sleep” (*þone þe him on sweofote sare geteode*, 2295). Likewise, before Beowulf severs Grendel’s head from his body, he reminds himself that

---

<sup>20</sup> A similar point has been made by Alvin A. Lee, who suggests that the dragon is created from “the four elements from which all mortal things are composed”: earth, air, fire, and water. The dragon’s mortality, though already established, is emphasized when he participates in the very mortal activity of sleeping, “Symbolic Metaphor,” 154.

<sup>21</sup> Admittedly, *peah* is an emendation from Klaeber, though there is no reason to completely discount its appearance in the original.

Grendel killed and ate fifteen Danes while they were sleeping, a fact twice mentioned (1580-1582). Grendel, his mother, the thief, and the dragon each violate an implied social code. Warriors by definition kill, but they kill according to a social standard—a heroic code which distinguishes them from the monsters. They should not kill kin, for instance, and through the poet’s description of the monsters’ and the thief’s actions we can infer that warriors should not reserve their attacks for nighttime when their opponents are sleeping.<sup>22</sup> The monsters and thief disregard this social code: they not only kill (or in the thief’s case steal), but they kill/steal while their opponents are at their most vulnerable—while they are sleeping.<sup>23</sup> The poet reiterates that the victims are sleeping to emphasize the impropriety of the crimes.

The victims of these crimes, while vulnerable, are not to be considered innocent. In *Beowulf*, sleep is often associated with letting one’s guard down, making the sleeping victim almost complicit in the crime. As Grendel approaches, the poet says the warriors sleep, even when they should guard the hall (703b-704). He adds that it “[is] well-known to men, that the hostile-enemy could not move quickly with them under shadow when God wished [it] not,” (*Þæt wæs yldum cup,/ þæt hie ne moste, þa Metod nolde,/ se*

---

<sup>22</sup> Fratricide and other kin-killing is repeatedly condemned throughout the poem. Beowulf accuses Unferth of killing his brothers and claims he will suffer in hell (587-589a). Before his life expires, Beowulf expresses his relief that he will not be punished by God for killing his kinsmen (2741-2743a). The story of Herebeald and Haethcyn also describes the horrors of kin-killing (2435-2462b). Admittedly, Old English literature does provide examples of warriors attacking victims at night (see, for example, the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), though the *Beowulf* poet’s repeated emphasis on the monstrous attacks on sleeping warriors implies the wrongness of such action.

<sup>23</sup> As they might be expected to do, since the poet consistently describes all four as being outside of society at the time of their crimes.

*synscapa under sceadu bregdan*, 705b-707), suggesting that Grendel's attacks represent the judgment and justice of God.<sup>24</sup> When Grendel's mother attacks, one of her victims "[pays] sorely" for his evening rest (*sare angeald*, 1251b-1252a), just as a guilty party might pay for a crime. And Hrothgar's warnings to Beowulf suggest this level of guilt even more clearly. He describes the temptation of kings to ignore the limitations of their power, and says,

þonne se weard swefeð,  
 sawele hyrde; bið se slæp to fæst,  
 bisgum gebunden, bona swiðe neah,  
 se þe of flanbogan fyrenum sceoteð. ...  
 Hit on endestæf eft gelimpeð,  
 þæt se lichoma læne gedreoseð... (1741b-1744; 1753-1754)

Then the guardian sleeps, the guardian of the soul; the sleep is bound too firm with troubles, the murderer very near...It happens again in the end that the transitory body falls...

Here, sleep is a kind of moral lethargy which ends in physical death. Sleep, like any other kind of crime or moral failing, results in unfortunate consequences. Finally, in the greatly significant scene when Beowulf succumbs to sleep in Heorot, the poet again cunningly unites sleep with guilt: "Then the great-heart rested himself; the hall towered, spacious and gold-guilty; the guest slept inside" (*Reste hine þa rumeheort; reced hliuade*

---

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth M. Liggins also notes the poet's implication that Grendel acts as an agent of God's justice. This, coupled with other repeated associations of sleep with guilt, further implicates the sleeping warriors and the sleeping dragon, "Revenge and Reward," 212. For a more detailed account of God's justice in the poem, see Judith Garde, "Christian and Folkloric Tradition," 325-346.



*/ geap ond goldfah; gæst inne swæf*, 1799-1800).<sup>25</sup> Beowulf yields to sleep and guilt enshrouds him on all sides.

This moral dilemma surrounding sleep again arises from the fact that, in its nature, sleep is closely akin to death. It does not quite equal death, but it functions as a sort of liminal zone in which the sleepers – often consciously, though not always willingly – approach death even as they live. Nonetheless, there is a mortal burden of inactivity reflected in the structural pattern examined above: mortal activity always yields to inactivity. It is the sleeper’s hope that sleep can bear this inevitable burden of inactivity and so substitute for death (much as words for sleep substitute for words of death). Still, there is no guarantee for the sleeper that he can recall his steps from death once he has started down this road. Sleep, then, is a great risk, and the choice to sleep is laden with guilt. The sleeper nevertheless recognizes that it is better than the alternative. The only way to avoid this risk is to rise above the very structure of mortality and the poem itself. Since this is not even an option for Beowulf, each sleeper must complicitly accept the vulnerability of his mortality and close his eyes, even when he knows death may not be far away.<sup>26</sup>

No doubt it is because of this marked vulnerability, the common lot of humanity, that any action against a sleeping character merits punishment. And this punishment, too, follows the structural pattern mentioned earlier: sleep, action, death. In the first episode, the Geats go to sleep in Heorot, Grendel takes the life of one of Beowulf’s

---

<sup>25</sup> Notice that Beowulf goes to sleep shortly after Hrothgar’s admonition against the sleeping soul (1741b-1754).

<sup>26</sup> See also Janet Thormann: “Beowulf fights [the monsters] as a preternaturally powerful but recognizably human warrior,” “Violence,” 66.

thanes, Beowulf retaliates and Grendel is killed. In the second episode, the thanes go to sleep in Heorot, Grendel's mother takes the life of one of Hrothgar's thanes, Beowulf retaliates and Grendel's mother is killed. In the first part of the poem, then, sleep consistently marks the warriors as vulnerable and exposed to attack, while the monsters who violate them in their sleep pay with their lives. As I mentioned earlier, this pattern of structure continues into the second half of the poem, although the poet makes certain alterations, just as the second half of an Anglo-Saxon alliterative line at once demonstrates balance and contrast. The dragon sleeps and is violated, and Beowulf must take the punishment. However, the dragon's attack on the Geats mirrors the other accounts, in that he waits for their sleep to retaliate. Because of this, he, too, must die. In the first two episodes, the humans expose their vulnerability by sleeping and the monsters take advantage of their defenselessness; in the last episode, the dragon and the humans expose their vulnerability by sleeping and each takes advantage of the other's defenselessness.<sup>27</sup> In the first two episodes, Beowulf punishes the monsters; in the last episode, the dragon and Beowulf punish one another. Beowulf's role then, as indicated through references to sleep, is contrasted in the second part of the poem when he is no longer the punisher, alone, but instead also becomes the punished. Beowulf assumes the guilt of the thief and takes punishment for the trespasser's crime.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> While many scholars such as Garde view the dragon as the "villain," his sleep and subsequent victimization depict him instead as the wronged party, and thus he receives justification for his revenge, "Christian and Folkloric Tradition," 336.

<sup>28</sup> The poet suggests Beowulf's guilt in another way. When the dragon burns his home, Beowulf "[thinks] that he bitterly offended the Ruler, Eternal Lord against long-standing law" (*wende se wisa, þæt he Wealdede / ofer ealde riht ecean Dryhtne / bitre gebulge*, 2329-31a).

This turn should not be surprising, however, when the poem is read in the full context of the structural and thematic functions of sleep. Indeed, the *Beowulf* poet makes predictable plot choices based on his intricate patterns of structure. These narrative formulae resemble and function like oral formulae. In the first half of the poem, each episode consists of two pairings of structural elements. The first pairing, activity and sleep, is followed by a second, more extreme form of activity (fighting) and sleep (death). The second half of the poem follows this pattern, but without the first instance of activity. As a result of these repetitions, sleep and death appear in fixed positions in each of the episodic patterns. The location of sleep in these micro-structures also prefigures the poem's larger structure: just as each half of the micro-structure closes with sleep or death, each half of the poem closes with the sleep or death of Beowulf. The relationship between sleep and death is made even more explicit. The term "sleep" can be substituted for "death" (though death is never substituted for sleep), resembling the progression of intensity found in the episodic structural patterns. Finally, sleep is also an indicator of ethical action. While the sleeper himself is not entirely free from fault, he is at least the exposed, vulnerable, and violated party. In turn, the one injuring a sleeping victim commits a crime which can be absolved only through death. Sleep, then, helps determine Beowulf's roles throughout the poem as punisher, punisher, and punished, again recalling the basic structure of an Anglo-Saxon alliterative line. From the smallest structural apparatus of the verse line to the broad structure of the poem as a whole, the *Beowulf* poet strategically positions sleep to produce meaningful thematic results.

CHAPTER III  
 A GENERAL SURVEY OF SLEEP  
 IN ANGLO-SAXON CHRISTIAN TEXTS  
 AND THEIR SOURCES AND ANALOGUES

Before the great conflicts of the poem take place, someone falls asleep, blanketed by the carelessness of rest, in that moment unaware of the harm that will come to him by the hands of a character from a different world. Surely the poet's consistent use of sleep suggests its significance to the poem's structure and meaning. To appreciate fully its role in the poem, however, we must understand the ways in which sleep is used elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon literature. Texts from the period suggest two significant functions of sleep. First, sleep has the potential to connect human beings to an otherworld—a non-earthly spiritual realm inhabited by non-human figures and sometimes by humans who have passed into an afterlife.<sup>29</sup> In this way, sleep serves as some type of liminal zone. In some texts, sleep directly conveys the soul from Earth to the otherworld. More frequently, an otherworld figure contacts a human through sleep, a state resembling both life and death, this world and the otherworld. In still other cases, the soul that leaves the body before Judgment Day—and consequently before Christ welcomes the righteous into their eternal paradise or sends the doomed to their eternal punishment—is said to “sleep,” lingering between the two worlds. Whatever the liminal function, sleep provides an intermediary state between this world and the otherworld.

---

<sup>29</sup> For a broader overview of intermediary zones and modes of transportation between two worlds, see Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 56.

Second, sleep frequently serves as a metaphor for spiritual lethargy, an idea Anglo-Saxons inherited from the Bible. Seen either as a conduit between this life and the next or as an indicator of moral apathy, sleep for the Anglo-Saxon has an implication for the soul and its eventual placement in the Christian otherworld.

In a number of Anglo-Saxon texts, sleep acts as a liminal zone which transfers the soul immediately to an otherworld. This idea of sleep can be found in the Old English poem *Andreas*. While Andrew and his thanes sleep, God's angels ferry their souls directly to heaven. Their sleep allows God to bring them into his glorious realm where he can offer them rest and the ministrations of angels. When they wake up, they find themselves back on earth and ready for the difficult task at hand.<sup>30</sup> While this otherworld exchange comes unexpectedly for Andrew and his comrades, many figures understand sleep's potential to transport them to a spiritual realm. Cædmon's death is a good example. Bede says, "He made himself ready to enter into the other life...He laid his head on the bolster, and falling a little in slumber so ended his life in silence" (*vita alterius ingressui paravit...reclinavit caput ad cervical, modicumque obdormiens, ita cum silentio vitam finivit*).<sup>31</sup> Cædmon senses his sleep will release his soul and convey it to God's celestial kingdom. As in other similar accounts, sleep is the vehicle that transports his soul to the otherworld.

---

<sup>30</sup> Brooks, *Andreas and the Fates of the Apostles*, 27-9, lines 822-891. For a translation, see Kennedy, *Early English Poetry*, 143-5. Leofric's experience, recounted in an eleventh century text, is illustrative of this enduring tradition. Leofric enters a state of "half sleep" before crossing over a bridge into heaven. Gatch, "Perceptions of Eternity," *Cambridge*, 203.

<sup>31</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastica*, bk. 4, ch. 24.

More often in Anglo-Saxon literature, otherworld figures move through the corridor of sleep to approach mankind. The characters and their motives vary, but the role of sleep as the means by which they contact humanity remains consistent. The vulnerable situation that humanity necessarily enters into as it sleeps can be equally perilous at the hands Satan, God, or one of their emissaries. The speaker of Prudentius' *Hymn Before Sleep* dreads a visitation by Satan during his sleep, so he meditates on God's power to control the mind even in sleep. Nevertheless, the speaker still seems consumed with doubt at the end; he closes the poem by shooing away Satan before falling asleep, thus reclaiming the responsibility to evade Satan as his own.<sup>32</sup> In another story included in the *Dialogi*, Satan visits men who fall to sleep in a particular house, inspiring terror with mysterious animal sounds. Unlike Prudentius' speaker, one particular visitor by the name of Datius has no fear of Satan, and instead ridicules him when he appears to Datius through his sleep.<sup>33</sup> In a similar account, Guthlac also awakes to evil sounds, but instead of finding Satan, he understands the noise to come from many demons who come to him in his sleep.<sup>34</sup>

While Satan and other demonic characters make their way into man's consciousness through sleep, Anglo-Saxon stories more commonly describe God or his messengers using sleep to contact humankind. These visitations span a broad range of purposes. Many times God addresses the concerns of his people through their sleep.

---

<sup>32</sup> Slavitt, "Hymn Before Sleep," *Hymns of Prudentius*, 24-7.

<sup>33</sup> Gregory, *Dialogi*, bk. 3, ch. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Niles, "Pagan Survivals and Popular Belief," *Cambridge*, 134-5. For a partial translation of Felix of Crowland's *The Life of Saint Guthlac*, see Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 109-12.

Bede describes Sebbi, a king consumed with fear who worries that he will somehow defile himself before he dies and sin against God. God shows mercy on Sebbi and sends three figures to him in his sleep who assure him that he will die without guilt.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, in the Old English poem *Elene* a heavenly being contacts a human through sleep. A bright messenger appears to Constantine as he sleeps, oppressed with fear and surrounded by warring nations. The glowing being comforts him with the unlikely news that his kingdom will survive the attack.<sup>36</sup> God delivers his news through sleep. Several other accounts make this choice seem even more explicit. God passes over opportunities to communicate with waking supplicants, choosing instead to address their concerns through sleep. God remains silent while one monk prays to be taken from Earth, even though his supplications are so fervent and his mind so humbled that he believes his prayers alone will convey him to Heaven. Instead of engaging with Anthony during his prayer, God waits until he sleeps to tell him his request will be granted in a short time.<sup>37</sup> God responds in an indirect way; rather than answer the monk's prayer in the moment of his supplication, he waits for the monk's sleep. In another account related by Bede, God's response in sleep is even further removed from the request. A man named Egbert asks God to heal his sickness, and he stays awake vigilantly praying, so God's messenger appears to a fellow monk who sleeps. Even as Egbert prays, God tells the sleeping monk that Egbert will recover.<sup>38</sup> These examples are interesting because they

---

<sup>35</sup> *Ecclesiastica*, bk. 4, ch. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Kennedy, "St. Helena Finds the True Cross (*Elene*)," *Early English Christian Poetry*, 179-214.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory, *Dialogi*, bk. 4 ch. 47.

<sup>38</sup> *Ecclesiastica*, bk. 3, ch. 27.

show a deliberate prioritization of sleep as God's method of communication with humankind.

In addition to addressing concerns through sleep, God also uses sleep to summon his people into service on his behalf. There can be no more familiar example than Cædmon's call. A heavenly being visits Cædmon in his sleep and demands that he sing. During the interaction, Cædmon somehow receives the ability to compose songs, which he continues to do for the rest of his holy life. Interestingly, the subject matter of his first song is God's creation of heaven and earth, the two worlds which converge with his sleep.<sup>39</sup> Finally, God also sends messengers to his people in their sleep to punish them. The apostle Peter appears to Laurentius and scourges him severely for planning to abandon England and his mission to convert the heathens there. The next morning Laurentius shows the king the stripes on his back and the marks persuade the king to lead his people in the worship of Christ.<sup>40</sup> Laurentius's sleep, like that of so many others in Anglo-Saxon accounts, welcomes an otherworld figure who comes unexpectedly, if not unbidden.

While Anglo-Saxons embrace this conception of sleep, it does not originate with them. Biblical examples suggest that sleep is seen as a liminal zone throughout Christian history. In the book of Genesis, notable here especially because the *Beowulf* poet alludes to it as a source, God repeatedly speaks to sleeping persons. The story of God's promise to Jacob particularly illustrates sleep as a gateway between two worlds.

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., bk. 4, ch. 24.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., bk. 2, ch. 6. Compare the violence of this account with the non-violence of the sleep encounters involving Satan and evil demons.



After fleeing from his brother Esau, Jacob sleeps one night with his head resting on a rock. He sees angels ascending and descending on a ladder as God stands next to him and promises him protection, countless offspring, and the land on which he sleeps. Jacob awakes and acknowledges that he has seen the “gate of heaven” (28:10-17).<sup>41</sup> His sleep acts as a door separating heaven and Earth. God speaks through sleep many other times throughout the Old and New Testaments. In the stories surrounding Jesus’ birth, God repeatedly protects the young Christ by communicating with people through their sleep. He sends four different messages to Joseph as he sleeps. An angel first appears to him in the night to tell him to take Mary as his wife (Mt 1:20-4).<sup>42</sup> After Jesus is born, an angel appears to him in his sleep and tells him to flee to Egypt with his wife and child, thus saving Jesus from the fate of all the other two-year-olds in Bethlehem who King Herod has slaughtered (Mt 2:13-18). In this account, Matthew underscores Joseph’s sleeping condition. The angel’s first words to Joseph are, “Get up” (Mt 2:13),

---

<sup>41</sup> All quotations from the Bible are taken from the New Revised Standard Version. The Vulgate was most likely the most accessible version of the Bible at the time of the composition of *Beowulf* and the other texts discussed here. The first English translation, the Douay-Rheims (DR) version of the late sixteenth century, was a direct translation of the Latin text. When the Vulgate (and DR) diverge somewhat from the NRSV text, I make note of what both of these other texts say, and explain why I have selected the version I have.

<sup>42</sup> In a parallel story which immediately precedes the story of Christ’s birth in the gospel of Luke, God’s messenger tells Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth will bear a son, though this event is also miraculous because of Elizabeth’s advanced age. While the messenger does not appear to Zechariah in his sleep, the account is interesting because Zechariah is very much in a liminal zone at the time of the encounter. When the angel of the Lord appears to him, Zechariah is fulfilling his priestly duty by offering incense in the holy sanctuary of the Lord, a space so sacred that only one priest is allowed to enter it for an important occasion (Lk 1:8-24; 57-80). Read alongside Joseph’s experience, sleep becomes a sacred space reserved for the special meeting of the spiritual world and the earthly world.

and immediately following the encounter, Matthew relates, “Then Joseph got up” (Mt 2:14). The same formula appears in the account of Joseph’s third sleep encounter. After Joseph and his family have been living in Egypt according to God’s instruction, an angel visits Joseph in his sleep and tells him to return with Mary and Jesus to Israel. The angel again opens his address by telling Joseph to “Get up,” and directly after the encounter Matthew again notes, “Then Joseph got up” (Mt 2:20-21). The account emphasizes God’s choice to communicate to Joseph through his sleep. For a fourth time, Joseph receives a message from God in his sleep, this time a warning to avoid Judea where Herod’s son rules (Mt 2:22). Sleep clearly plays a particular role in these accounts, as it does throughout Scripture. It opens a channel of communication between the spiritual world and the earthly one, a function which survives and flourishes in Anglo-Saxon literature.

The *Beowulf* poet draws from this tradition and uses sleep as the means by which otherworld characters approach and accost mankind, or in the case of the runaway slave, sleep is the means by which a human approaches an otherworld figure. The liminal nature of sleep allows characters from two distinct worlds to meet and interact. As with other Anglo-Saxon texts, these interactions are not always contained within the sleeping state of the human or otherworld figure. Demons visit Darius and Guthlac through their sleep, but the frightening sounds they make are only heard after the sleepers awake. Similarly, a heavenly messenger appears to Constantine in his sleep; however, he

“start[s] from [his] slumber” to listen to the message the otherworld figure delivers.<sup>43</sup>

He sees the being both in his sleep and out of his sleep. The description of Laurentius’s experience is less clear; the account specifies that an otherworld figure appears to him in his sleep but does not specify whether Laurentius awakes during the event. Either way, Laurentius bears the physical proof of his encounter; the stripes on his back persuade the heathen king to accept Christianity on the day following Laurentius’s otherworld visit. Cædmon remains asleep for the duration of his sleep encounter, and receives the ability to compose songs for the rest of his life.

In the same way, otherworld characters in *Beowulf* visit humans through their sleep, leaving behind tangible evidence of their visit which survives beyond the encounter itself. Grendel’s murders affect the Danes in a very real and permanent way, even if they do only happen while the Danes sleep. Their deaths, and eventually Grendel’s arm, are left over from the sleep encounters when the sun appears the next day. Grendel’s mother moves into men’s consciousness through their sleep but leaves visible tracks on the ground which the Danes and Geats follow the next morning. The dragon impatiently waits for night and the accompanying sleep of men before flying into their world, but the buildings he destroys lay in ruins after they wake up. Like Laurentius, the Geats bear the physical proof of their punishment, the punishment that takes place after they fall asleep. Sleep allows the encounter to occur.

While the majority of examples of sleep in Anglo-Saxon texts acts as a liminal zone allowing an otherworld figure to contact humanity, these texts also describe sleep

---

<sup>43</sup> Kennedy, “St. Helena Finds the True Cross (*Elene*),” *Early English Christian Poetry*, 181.

as an intermediary state for the soul that neither goes immediately to the spiritual world after death, nor remains in the earthly world. Sleep houses a soul neither earthbound nor yet transferred to the afterlife. Ælfric's *Seven Sleepers*, perhaps the work which gives sleep the most prominence in all of Old English literature, uses sleep in this way.<sup>44</sup>

Ælfric describes the preservation of seven righteous men who avoid violent deaths through a long sleep—a sleep which lasts 372 years. The seven men seem to share a collective sleep; their sleep experiences are exactly the same and entirely governed by God. God ordains both the moment they fall asleep and the moment they awake. Ælfric first explains: “But God the Almighty Creator...ordained...that they should sleep thus” and “ordered that none of them should feel how they fell asleep” (*Ac god ælmihtig scyppend...bebead þæt hi swa slepon...gedihte þæt heora nan gefelan ne mihte hu hi gewurdon on slæpe*, 251-8). Later, he again emphasizes God's control over their sleep by explaining that they awake not of their own accord, but by God's fiat alone: “God willed that the holy company should be awaked” (*god wolde þæt seo halige geferræden aweht beon sceolde*, 427-8). After falling asleep but before waking from it, their souls hover between this world and the next. Ælfric describes the ambiguous setting of their souls: “None of them knew where their souls rested” (*ne nan nyste hwær heora sawla reston*, 258). Their sleep prevents a consciousness of place and time and even of God's protection. It transports them to an entirely new world; a future world with unrecognizable forms of money and a new religious orientation.<sup>45</sup> Their awakening to this world both foreshadows and parallels the resurrection of the souls of the deceased at

---

<sup>44</sup> *Lives of Saints*, 488-541.

<sup>45</sup> lines 566-615; lines 516-20.

Judgment Day. Ælfric recognizes this and contemplates God's powers of resurrection even before the sleepers return to their earthly lives. Along with the awakening of the sleepers, he also anticipates the moment when "all the dead men shall hear in their graves the voice of the Son of Man, and they all shall revive" (*ealle deade menn on heora byrgenum mannes bearnes stefne gehyrað and hi ealle acuciað*, 383-5). He again makes a deliberate connection between the revival of the sleepers and the resurrection of the dead at Judgment Day:

And He then, our Saviour--...He Who by His power waketh from death the seared bones...He Himself extraordinarily, by His own deed, awaked them, those seven Saints who slept in the cave, from sleep...

*And he ða ure hælend...se þe mid his anwealde ða forsearedon ban wecð of deaðe...he sylf synderlice mid his agenre dæde as seofon halgan þe on ðam scræfe slepon he hi awehte ða of ðam slæpe...* (429-34)

Like the dead awaiting judgment, the souls of the seven sleepers rest in a cocoon of sleep until their resurrection.

While the *Seven Sleepers* uses sleep as a major plot device, other Anglo-Saxon texts simply refer to sleep as the condition of the soul after death and before Judgment Day. Caesarius of Arles' *Sermon 57* describes Doomsday in detail, and begins by explaining that "after humanity has been wakened," each soul will be weighed by a severe judge.<sup>46</sup> *Andreas* similarly describes the souls of the dead. The Lord commands Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to "stand up straight away from their deep sleep" and

---

<sup>46</sup> Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 105.

proclaim his kingship to the world before taking their permanent place in heaven.<sup>47</sup> In the *Diologi*, a monk brings a man back to life and as the dead man's soul rejoins his body, the man stirs as though waking from a heavy sleep.<sup>48</sup> Though the text does not explicitly say his soul sleeps, his conscious state as he returns to life like from "a deep sleep" suggests that his soul had neither been fully realized in his body nor in some afterlife; he has no awareness of either place. In this way, the text describes his soul as though it were asleep during the interim period.<sup>49</sup>

Again, the tradition that these examples embody likely begins with scripture. Biblical sleep at times describes a soul hovering between life and death, between the earthly world and the afterlife. Some biblical examples depict the revival of a dead person who returns to continue a life on Earth, and resemble Ælfric's seven sleepers or the man from the *Diologi*. Luke describes the lamentations of a community for a little girl who is dead, but when Jesus arrives, he explains that she is not dead but rather sleeping. In spite of everyone's bitter laughter and disbelief, Jesus commands the girl to get up, at which time "her spirit returned" and she lives (8:40-56). In other accounts, man comes out of sleep not to return to life on Earth, but to enter the eternal afterlife. Daniel, for example, foretells, "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (12:2). Certainly, the examples from *Sermon 57* and *Andreas* echo this concept. Righteous

---

<sup>47</sup> Kennedy, *Early English Christian Poetry*, 142-3. Admittedly, the poem implies that the patriarchs enjoy the prizes of heaven during their "sleep," for they wake up to briefly proclaim the gospel before returning to their joyous afterlife.

<sup>48</sup> Gregory, bk. 3, ch. 17.

<sup>49</sup> For more about medieval Christian and other religious views on the soul that hovers between two worlds, see Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, pp. 52-3.

souls like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will awake and look forward to entering Paradise, while the unrighteous will awake to an everlasting hell. Sleep and judgment are more directly related in these examples; humanity's sleep precedes some form of Christian judgment, and in some doctrines it precedes Judgment Day, itself. Whether the soul awakens on Doomsday or returns from sleep to its former existence on Earth only to fall back into a later state of sleep, this period of sleep inevitably ends with the judgment of the soul.

The *Beowulf* poet makes use of this tradition as well. The characters' sleeping state allows for not just any ordinary convergence of worlds: in *Beowulf*, it allows for a metaphorical interpretation of the ultimate meeting of two worlds—Judgment Day. The Anglo-Saxon understanding of sleep as a predicate of judgment or Judgment Day appears in *Beowulf* through the repetition of a structural pattern: sleep is followed by an otherworld encounter reminiscent of Christian ideas about judgment.<sup>50</sup>

Certainly the liminal functions of sleep carry inherent spiritual implications for the soul. Visitations from an evil figure or from a messenger of God impact the sleeper's spiritual condition, and, of course, the sleeper's arrival or imminent arrival in a spiritual realm has great significance for the soul. The liminal use of sleep, then, has a close connection with another function of sleep in Anglo-Saxon texts; along with the bridging of two worlds, sleep also indicates moral lethargy. This sort of sleep often appears in lists: lists of sins to abjure and, closely related, lists of worldly vices which no

---

<sup>50</sup> This idea is developed in ch. 4.

longer exist in the heavenly otherworld. Bede's *De Die Judicii* includes sleep in his list of the evils of this world:

Then this world's injurious pleasures will cease: drunkenness, banquets, laughter, wantonness, jesting, fierce desire, clinging lust, wicked passion, idle sleep, heavy torpor, and lazy sloth. (Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 211)<sup>51</sup>

Bede ranks sleep with the worst of vices. Interestingly, he emphasizes its depravity by including two other evils akin to sleep: torpor and sloth. He goes on to promise the righteous a life "in the kingdom of heaven where no night exists...[and] no...sleep."<sup>52</sup> Sleep and its intrinsic immorality have no place in the perfect state. This popular idea makes its way into numerous other texts which enumerate evils excluded from heaven.<sup>53</sup>

In other accounts, sleep marks the guilt of a character, helping listeners or readers interpret moral roles. The sleep of Holofernes in the Old English poem *Judith* provides Judith with an opportunity to behead him and thus weaken the Assyrian army. It also suggests Holofernes's arrogance and self-assurance. He is so overconfident that he falls asleep in the company of the Hebrew woman who has most reason to kill him. The poet underscores the perverseness of his sleep; while the Assyrians struggle in their battle with the Israelites, the Assyrian warriors believe Holofernes is still sleeping and for a long while they refuse to

---

<sup>51</sup> See also Pseudo-Bede's *A Collection*, which cautions against sloth and laziness, Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 107.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, *Christ III*, Gollancz, *The Exeter Book, Part I: Poems I-VIII*, 54-103, and one of its sources, Caesarius of Arles' *Sermon 58*, Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 103.



wake him.<sup>54</sup> His evil crimes and his sleep both invite his murder, and afterwards his sleep and his death are confused.<sup>55</sup> This association between sleep, moral depravity, and death as punishment appears as early as Scripture. Among other examples, Christ repeatedly warns that he will come like a thief in the night to surprise sleeping people with judgment.<sup>56</sup> In Scripture and in Anglo-Saxon literature, then, sleep marks guilt, and punishment ensues. The *Beowulf* poet consistently uses this pattern of sleep and punishment.<sup>57</sup>

Sleep in Anglo-Saxon Christian stories regularly acts as an intermediary setting, connecting the earthly world with an other spiritual world. Whether otherworld beings contact humans in their sleep or humans slip through their unconsciousness to a different world, the liminal nature of sleep allows the interaction of humankind and otherworld figures. In *Beowulf*, sleep serves as just such a portal between worlds. The major action of the poem takes place only through the sleep of humankind or an otherworld figure. Grendel and his mother appear only as the thanes sleep, and, conversely, the runaway slave gains access to the dragon's realm through the dragon's sleep. At the end of the poem, the dragon waits for the Geats' sleep before delivering his fiery revenge. The *Beowulf* poet continues the Anglo-Saxon tradition of using sleep to bridge the world of humankind and another realm. Sleep is also a kind of static liminal zone frequently associated with Judgment Day; it holds the soul of the dead awaiting judgment and

---

<sup>54</sup> Godden, "Biblical Literature: the Old Testament," *Cambridge*, 220-1.

<sup>55</sup> I discuss the kinship between sleep and death more fully in ch. 2.

<sup>56</sup> See ch. 4.

<sup>57</sup> See ch. 2.

placement in the afterlife. The following chapter explores how the liminal use of sleep permits this close association between sleep and Judgment Day to emerge in *Beowulf*.

CHAPTER IV  
*BEOWULF* EPISODES AS REPRESENTATIONS  
 OF CHRISTIAN JUDGMENT

Sleep makes possible the three major episodes in *Beowulf* by allowing for the three major sources of conflict; humans and otherworld characters can meet in the liminal setting that sleep provides. These conflicts are more than clearly defined battles between good humans and evil monsters, however. Like much of Old English literature, they demonstrate a complexity of moral thought that resists one definitive interpretation. During Beowulf's fight with the dragon, the two share a common name; the poet describes both with the nominative plural form of *aglæca*, or "monster" (2592a), confusing the moral roles of the characters. Beowulf, himself, describes the faded distinction between himself and Grendel's mother during their fight. He tells Hygelac, "There a hand was common for us for a while" (*Ðær unc hwile wæs hand gemæne*, 2137). As they grapple, they become one entity, the lines between good and evil blurred.<sup>58</sup> Even Grendel's mother's grief complicates the morality of Beowulf's actions. Another literary strategy of the poet which confuses the moral actions of the characters and which has not received attention, though it merits much, is the poet's placement of each of the three major conflicts within the Christian context of the Last Judgment. References to Christ's final Judgment in the poem help provide a context through which an Anglo-Saxon Christian audience can understand the at times ambiguous moral actions

---

<sup>58</sup> The above examples were first introduced to me in a *Beowulf* seminar by Robert Boenig.

of the characters. Indeed, the *Beowulf* poet frequently draws from the Christian tradition of Judgment Day to create three separate but connected stories swollen with imagery of the Last Judgment and reflecting the poet's own moral sophistication.

That the poet would borrow from this tradition is no surprise; scholars widely acknowledge the Judgment Day theme as a favorite among Old English writers. In their work *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry*, Allen and Calder conclude, "The vision of the Last Judgment permeates all medieval literature."<sup>59</sup> Scholars often credit Pope Gregory the Great for at least some of this eschatological interest.<sup>60</sup> Gregory and other patristic writers advanced a belief that they and their contemporaries were living in the last age, and Judgment Day loomed imminently before them. Interestingly, Gregory also advocated the practice of applying Christian meanings to pagan institutions in an effort to make Christianity more palatable to pagan cultures.<sup>61</sup> Influence, however, sometimes worked in the other direction. As Boenig suggests, pre-Christian Germanic cultures had their own well-developed mythologies concerning an End of the World, requiring evangelically-minded Christians to overlay their own stories on these existing myths. In this way the pagan expectation of the End of the World fostered a Christian interest in eschatological matters.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> 85.

<sup>60</sup> See, for instance, Boenig, *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality*, 30, and Gatch, "Eschatology in the Anonymous Old English Homilies," 145.

<sup>61</sup> See Bede, *Ecclesiastica*, bk. 1, ch. 30.

<sup>62</sup> Boenig, *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality*, 30-1. See also Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 44-5, and Caie, *Judgment Day Theme*, 71-6. Earl credits pagan mythology for the "dark Christian vision" that becomes Anglo-Saxon Christian eschatology. Pagan mythology promotes a "dark" and "negative" apocalypse that seeps into the Christian ideal. Caie gives visual examples of the influence of pre-Christian myths on Christian beliefs:

Anglo-Saxons expressed their Doomsday interest in a number of ways.

Countless homilies and poems deal with the issue explicitly. Christ's judgment on the day of his return permeates entire collections of homilies such as the *Blickling Book* and the *Vercelli Book*.<sup>63</sup> *Blickling Homily X* exhorts the audience to "acknowledge and zealously perceive that the end of this world is very near."<sup>64</sup> *Vercelli Homily II* describes Judgment Day in great detail:

Beloved people, the events of the great Day of Judgment will be terrible and fearful for all creation. On that day the flashing lightning will burn up blood-stained middle earth...And the true Judge then will judge all people, all according to their own works. (Ibid., 88-9)

As Gatch recognizes, Old English homilies almost always use Judgment Day as motivation for repentance.<sup>65</sup> Like many of the homilies, Old English poems also make Doomsday their focus. The speaker of *Judgment Day II* admits, "Grievously I dread the Great Judgment.../ When the Almighty King shall divide mankind / Assigning His

---

"Christian artists drew heathen, apocalyptic devices on crosses, the best example being the tenth-century Gosforth Cross which depicts a figure with a horn, who could be Heimdallr, a woman beside a bound man, who is most likely Sigyn tending the bound Loki, and men and monsters fighting, as depicted in the designs on the jewellery of the Sutton Hoo find, many of which also appear apocalyptic in motif," 73-4.

<sup>63</sup> Admittedly, some of the Old English texts discussed in this section may have appeared after *Beowulf*. As mentioned earlier, however, interest in an End of the World thrived in a pre-Christian world; any Old English text about Judgment Day, whether composed before or after *Beowulf*, is part of a continuing line of thought that flourished during this period.

<sup>64</sup> Boenig, *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality*, 61.

<sup>65</sup> "Eschatology in the Anonymous Old English Homilies," 145.

judgment by His secret might.”<sup>66</sup> The Judgment Day topos was strong enough to inspire numerous descriptions in homiletic and poetic forms.<sup>67</sup>

In fact, the Doomsday theme is so prevalent that many Old English authors integrate it into works not primarily about Judgment Day. *Blickling Homily XIII* is a good example. While the homily’s formal purpose is to observe the Assumption of Mary, the homilist imposes eschatological concerns onto Mary’s Hymn. Gatch explains:

The Lucan canticle has been transformed from a hymn about the history of salvation to a prayer concerned with ‘the future and eternity’... Specific references to the Judgment and the Kingdom have been intruded in the adaptation of Luke 1:52-53. (*Eschatology in the Old English Homilies*, 128-9)

The homilist grafts eschatological issues onto this otherwise judgment-free hymn, proving the popularity and ubiquity of the topic. Old English homilists interpreted scripture and Church tradition with Judgment Day in mind, allowing Doomsday to influence their understanding of otherwise Doomsday-free texts.<sup>68</sup> This approach applied not only to those studying church doctrine; Old English writers also found Judgment Day issues in non-religious texts. Boenig offers a fine example. *The Phoenix*, an Old English poem drawing on Lactations’ Latin *De Ave Phoenix* and on St. Ambrose’s *Hexameron*, strays unexpectedly from its sources and describes Judgment Day for approximately one-seventh of the poem’s length. The *Phoenix*-poet begins his

---

<sup>66</sup> Kennedy, *Early English Christian Poetry*, 259.

<sup>67</sup> As Boenig puts it, the “presence [of Judgment] in [the poet’s] mind—and I think in the mind of Anglo-Saxon writers in general—is always ready to ignite a poem or a sermon into Judgment Day,” *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality*, 36.

<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Gatch notes that “Old English churchmen tended to see eschatological implications in almost every portion of the Christian tradition,” “Eschatology in the Anonymous Old English Homilies,” 129.

account of Judgment Day after mentioning that the Phoenix's paradise will not burn with fire. The poem draws from Lactanius, but omits Lactanius's description of the mythological Phaethon's chariot setting the sky on fire. The Old English poet retains the image of fire, however—an image commonly understood as a sign of Doomsday—and uses it as a point of entry into a lengthy description of Judgment Day. This is an unexpected direction for the poem to take, as it frustrates the cyclical time of the poem (birth and re-birth of the Phoenix) by introducing a linear time frame (all of time leading up to the End, the Last Judgment). Despite the difficulties it creates in the poem's time scheme, the poet regards it as a choice worth making because of the importance given to the Judgment Day theme. The digression also shows the poet's eagerness to respond to a non-judgment text in Judgment Day terms.<sup>69</sup> The *Phoenix*-poet, like the *Vercelli* homilist, the *Blickling* homilist and so many other Anglo-Saxon writers, finds Judgment Day in whatever text is at hand.

Surely this keen expectation, not for Christ's return alone, but also for hints about the return in texts of all kinds, suggests that the Anglo-Saxon audience of *Beowulf* would have recognized many details of the three major episodes as indicators of judgment. After all, theirs was a society built around the expectation of Christ's second coming, and one which also inherited a pagan expectation of an End of the World. The idea captivated them so much so that judgment stands alone as the main theme of countless homilies and poems, and when Old English texts do not entirely focus on Doomsday, they often include it as an auxiliary subject. For the *Beowulf* poet to interweave

---

<sup>69</sup> Boenig, *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality*, 32-6.

Judgment Day references in his poem, and for his audience to understand them readily as such, would have been a likely scenario.

The opening of the Old English *Christ III*, a poem describing Christ's Second Coming and Judgment, thematically resembles the major plotlines in *Beowulf* so closely that the connection between the two is impossible to ignore:

Ðonne mid fere fold-buende  
 se micla dæg mehtan dryhtnes  
 æt midre niht mægne bihlæmeð  
 scire gesceafte swa oft sceaða fæcne  
 þeof þrist-lice þe on þystre fareð  
 on sweartre niht sorg-lease hæleð  
 semninga for-fehð slæpe gebundne  
 eorlas ungearwe yfles genægeð.

(ll. 867-74)<sup>70</sup>

Then with sudden calamity for earth-dwellers the great day of the mighty Lord at midnight will surprise with might the bright creation, as often the treacherous robber, bold thief, who travels in shadows, in the dark night, suddenly seizes carefree heroes sound asleep, accosts unready men with evil.<sup>71</sup>

Just as Grendel and his mother surprise the Danes and the Geats in the night while they sleep and just as the dragon surprises the Geats in the night while they sleep, the Lord will surprise humankind with his Judgment. The metaphor of Christ coming like a thief in the night and surprising a sleeping humanity serves as a paradigm for the *Beowulf* poet's main plots. In each of the three *Beowulf* episodes, an attacker surprises sleeping humans, catching them unaware and unprepared in the middle of the night.

---

<sup>70</sup> All passages of text quoted from Gollancz, *The Exeter Book, Part I*, 54-103.

<sup>71</sup> Translation from Gatch, "Perceptions of Eternity," 194.



The idea of the Lord coming like a thief at night to surprise and to judge a sleeping humanity originates in Scripture.<sup>72</sup> Christ, himself, describes the Second Coming as a bridegroom arriving in the middle of the night and surprising bridesmaids who sleep rather than make sure they have enough oil for their lamps during their wait for his return. He concludes the parable with a warning to “keep awake” (Mt 25:1-13).<sup>73</sup> Again, Christ describes the Day of Judgment as sudden and he describes humanity’s unpreparedness for it as sleep. The coming will happen so abruptly that two people will be working in a field or grinding mill and in an instant only one will be left. Although the people he depicts actively perform daily tasks like preparing food, Christ metaphorically describes those left as sleeping and once more advises his listeners to “keep awake” (Mt 24:36-44).<sup>74</sup> Frequently within Scripture, Christ’s unexpected Second Coming is compared to a thief attacking sleeping victims in the night. Christ says, “See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake...” (Rv 16:15).<sup>75</sup> The metaphor was so familiar to the early church that Paul writes to the Thessalonians: “For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the

---

<sup>72</sup> Calder and Allen stress that the influence of scripture on *Christ III* “must not be undervalued,” *Sources and Analogues*, 85. See also Hill, “The Eschatology of the Old English *Christ III*,” 677, and Caie, *Judgment Day Theme*, 174.

<sup>73</sup> See also Lk 12:35-40 and Mk 13:32-37. The Vulgate here gives “*Vigilate*”, which can refer either to mere watchfulness or wakeful watchfulness. The Douay-Rheims renders it simply as “watch ye.” The context of the parable unmistakably dictates a component of wakefulness to the *vigilate*, though, which is why I have maintained the NRSV translation. The same verb reappears in many of the passages that follow. I regularly follow the NRSV in maintaining the component of wakefulness, while the Douay regularly translates all forms of the verb with forms of “watch.”

<sup>74</sup> As in Mt 25:13, the Vulgate again has *vigilate*.

<sup>75</sup> See also Mt 24:42-44; Lk 12:39-40; and 2 Pt 3:10. The Vulgate gives *Beatus qui vigilat*, which the DR translates as “Blessed is he that watcheth.”

night” (1 Thes 5:2). He reminds them of what they already know and reasons, “So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake...” (1 Thes 5:6).<sup>76</sup> As early as the newly established Church, the great fear of Christians was succumbing to a moral sleep, only to have Christ awaken them at the end of the world, after their chance at redemption had passed.

This particular idea of Judgment Day, codified within early Christian Church tradition, appears throughout Anglo-Saxon eschatological writings so regularly that it acts as a leitmotif.<sup>77</sup> *Christ III* and some of its sources in particular use the Doomsday motif in their descriptions of Judgment Day. In his seminal study *The Christ of Cynewulf*, Albert S. Cook separates the first eight lines of *Christ III*, quoted earlier, and defines them as the “Doomsday motive.”<sup>78</sup> He additionally recognizes a Latin alphabetic hymn quoted in Bede’s *De Arte Metrica* as a source for *Christ III*, and draws attention to the Doomsday motif in the Latin work:

Apparebit repentina dies magna Domini,  
fur obscura velut nocte improvisos occupans.

(Cook, *The Christ of Cynewulf*, 171, lines 1-2)

Suddenly the Lord’s great day will appear, like a thief attacking the  
unready on a dark night: on the fearful Day of Judgment.

---

<sup>76</sup> Again from the Vulgate, “*vigilemus*.” Here the component of wakefulness is undeniable since it is paired with the warning not to fall asleep (*non dormiamus*). Even so, the DR still gives “let us watch.”

<sup>77</sup> Hill also recognizes the “Christ as thief surprising a sleeping humanity” leitmotif. Hill places it at the beginning of a common order of Judgment Day motifs: “Thus in most early medieval descriptions of the Last Judgement (as for example in the alphabetic hymn which Cook suggested as a source for *Christ III*), the sequence of events is relatively straightforward. Christ will come like a thief in the night; then the trumpets will resound, the dead will awaken, and the sheep will be separated from the goats,” “Further Notes on the Eschatology of the Old English *Christ III*,” 691.

<sup>78</sup> 170, 172, 175.

(Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 94)

The hymn's Doomsday motif closely follows the biblical example—Christ comes like a thief in the night on Judgment Day. Although “sleeping” is not specifically mentioned here, it can be inferred that the “unready” are sleeping during the “dark night.”

The Doomsday motif appears in another source for *Christ III*, Ephraem Syrus's *The Day of Judgment*.<sup>79</sup>

For our days and months and years pass away like sleep or the evening shadows, and the fearful, glorious coming of the Lord will be here in a moment. (Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 86)

In this instance, the author creatively strays from the expected repetition of the motif but uses the elements to make a unique statement about Judgment Day. Christ is not a thief, but he does appear suddenly and inspires fear. More notably, Ephraem extends the traditional understanding of humans sleeping at the moment of Christ's coming. Instead, all of life becomes a sleep that precedes the Judgment of God. The author goes on to explain that “all earthly things are transitory, all perish, all vanish.”<sup>80</sup> Life is a dream that vanishes instantly when Judgment Day arrives. In the Doomsday motif in Ephraem Syrus's *The Day of Judgment*, sleep metaphorically represents life and ushers in Judgment Day.<sup>81</sup>

*Beowulf* and *Christ III* poem and its sources echo the scriptural metaphor of Christ coming as a thief in the night to surprise sleeping, unready people. As the

---

<sup>79</sup> For an account of the rather complicated history of Ephraem Syrus' *The Day of Judgment*, see Calder and Allen, *Source and Analogues*, 85-6.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>81</sup> Sleep as a precursor of Judgment Day is a pattern which appears in the Doomsday motif throughout Anglo-Saxon literature.

*Beowulf* poet presents it, the metaphor complicates our understanding of the characters involved. Within this paradigm, the expected moral roles of the characters seem to be turned upside-down. Christ the savior becomes Christ the destroyer, the wily thief, the enemy of creation. Grendel, whom the poet explicitly describes as an “enemy in Hell” (*feond on helle*, 101b) and “evil creature” (*with unhælo*, 120b), plays the part of the apocalyptic Judge.<sup>82</sup> He can no longer be characterized by his actions alone, for in the Doomsday motif, Christ also “evilly assaulteth men unprepared” (*Christ III*, 874). Within this model, Grendel’s evil is an extension of the Lord’s judgment. Rather than attacking innocent men, Grendel and the Christ-thief bring judgment upon morally deficient sleepers.

*Beowulf* and the Doomsday motif in *Christ III* have a connection that surpasses even their more obvious thematic parallels. They share verbal resemblances that suggest the two poets were familiar with a common idea of Judgment Day. Two lines particularly demonstrate a similarity of thought. The *Beowulf* poet describes the Danes: as Grendel approaches, they are “sleeping after the feast. They [know] not sorrow” (*swefan æfter symble sorge ne cuðon*, 119). He balances sleep in the first half line with an absence of sorrow in the second. The Doomsday motif in *Christ III* similarly describes “careless mortals bound in sleep”<sup>83</sup> (*semninga for-fehð slæpe gebundne*, 873) with sleep and carelessness weighing equally on either side of the caesura. The *Beowulf*

---

<sup>82</sup> However, *unhælo* can also be translated as “unlucky,” an interpretation not entirely inappropriate, as the term comes after the poet explains that Grendel is born a descendent of Cain.

<sup>83</sup> As opposed to the above section where I use the Gatch translation, for the purposes of this discussion I will be using the Gollancz translation, *Exeter Book: Part I*, 54-103.

and *Christ III* poets often use identical words to express parallel themes. “[Grendel] inhabit[s] Heorot in dark nights” (*Heorot eardode...swearum nihtum*, 166b, 167b), while Christ returns to Earth “in the swart night” (*on swartre niht*, 872a). The *Beowulf* poet uses the dative plural of *swart niht* as the background in which Grendel makes his appearances, and the *Christ III* poet uses the dative singular of the same phrase for the background in which a thief-like Christ appears. Additionally, Grendel, or “he who in darkness wait[s]” (*se þe in þystrum bad*, 87b), and the thief/Christ “that prowls in the dark” (*þe on þystre fareð*, 871b) both maneuver in darkness—*þystru*—before surprising earth-dwellers.<sup>84</sup> The *Beowulf* and *Christ III* poets also create a common sense of sudden attack, using the same word, “suddenly” (*semninga*, 644, 1767b; 873), to illustrate this threat.

Finally, both poems juxtapose creation with a destroying intruder. Heorot’s creation (67b-82b) inspires the scop’s creation, a song about God’s creation (89b-98), which awakens Grendel’s wrath (86-89a). Grendel surprises sleeping men in the middle of the dark night (99-134b). Likewise, Christ intrudes upon and attacks “earth’s habitants” (*fold-buende*, 867b) as well as “the bright creation” (*scire gesceafte*, 870a). Grendel similarly destroys creation: the creation of music, of happiness, and the sanctity

---

<sup>84</sup> The *Christ III* poet uses *fold-buende* to describe those visited by Christ’s second coming (867). Although the *Beowulf* poet does not use *fold-buend* to describe the specific victims of the monsters, he does use a form of *fold-buend* three times in the poem: twice to describe witnesses of the monsters (1355, 2274) and once to describe witnesses of Heorot’s majesty (309). The *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* only accounts for a total of eighteen appearances of the word.

and inviolability of the created hall itself, along with the lives of Heorot's inhabitants.<sup>85</sup>

Later in *Beowulf*, the poet describes the dragon's attack as one on both humankind and its creations. He tries to scorch every living being (2314b-15) and additionally destroys the Geats' creations, including Beowulf's own home (2828; 2333-5). Both poets make it clear; the surprise attacks in *Beowulf* and *Christ III* are not only intended for humans, but also for the creation that sustains them.

This commonality goes beyond coincidence, especially when considered along with the numerous other verbal and thematic similarities within the two poems. The parallels suggest that both poets draw from a familiar eschatological tradition. This is significant when we consider *Beowulf* because it provides an accurate idea of the way in which the *Beowulf* audience understood the poem and its characters. The poem provides a different meaning when read in its eschatological context than apart from it.

Old English writers demonstrate a fascination with Judgment Day that pervades all types of Anglo-Saxon literature. Homilists and poets alike present various

---

<sup>85</sup> The Danes abandon Heorot and its comforts, including celebrations with music, in order to avoid Grendel's attacks. See lines 134b-142a and also line 89 which immediately follows the scop's song of creation: "So the warriors lived happily in mirths until [Grendel's attacks]" (*Swa ða drihtguman dreamum lifdon / eadliglice oð ðæt...*). Compare to the Isaiac apocalyptic account: "The mirth of the timbrels is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled. No longer do they drink wine with singing..." (24:8-9). Also compare to the eternal damnation in *Judgment Day II*:

All solace shall vanish, nor shall aught avail  
 To furnish defence from that fearful plight.  
 No glimpse shall be seen there of any gladness...  
 Drunkenness and Feasting shall take flight,  
 Laughter and Play shall depart together (Kennedy, *Early English Christian Poetry*, 259-267)

interpretations of Doomsday, devoting whole works to the topic or discussing it within texts on other subjects. Still other works include allusions to Judgment Day, drawing upon the rich tradition which began developing as long ago as the Old Testament itself. These allusions often refer to signs and events that Anglo-Saxons believed would precede and accompany Judgment Day.<sup>86</sup> Because of their almost canonized status and their frequent appearance, Anglo-Saxon audiences would have recognized the eschatological value of these allusions which modern readers often pass over.<sup>87</sup> Monica Brzezinski recognizes apocalyptic allusions in *The Dream of the Rood* and makes a compelling case for a Doomsday reading of the last lines in the poem, though the lines only offer allusions to Judgment Day without any explicit mention of the Last Judgment. Although *Christ III* overtly depicts Doomsday and *The Dream of the Rood* does not, Brzezinski draws parallels between the two which indirectly also apply to *Beowulf*. She points out that both include a description of sleeping men surprised by the Last Judgment, and both conclude with “a scene of the Last Judgment which contains no actual description of judging.”<sup>88</sup> The affinities between the two lead her to believe that

---

<sup>86</sup> Caie distinguishes between patristic and some medieval vernacular works, which simply provide a codified list of the Doomsday signs, and most Old English poems and homilies, which allude to these signs and create new signs, rather than reproduce a list, *Judgment Day Theme*, 235.

<sup>87</sup> Caie emphasizes the “gap” between an Anglo-Saxon audience’s understanding of certain words and motifs and a modern audience’s understanding of these same elements: “The vocabulary [of the Anglo-Saxon poet]...did not consist of ‘intellectually delimited words’; rather, the word-symbols could be ‘nuclei of meaning, symbols of integrated experience, aggregates of traditional association’ which must have evoked associations in the audience difficult for us to appreciate today,” *Judgment Day Theme*, 231.

<sup>88</sup> Brzezinski, “The Harrowing of Hell,” 259.

*The Dream of the Rood* addresses Judgment Day, though not explicitly like *Christ III*.<sup>89</sup> Likewise, allusions to Judgment Day in *Beowulf* earn it a place among Anglo-Saxon works which somehow describe Doomsday.

In poetry that does not deal explicitly with Judgment Day but nevertheless includes common Judgment Day motifs, the allusions perform several different functions. First, the Judgment Day tradition provides Anglo-Saxon poets with readily available images. The Anglo-Saxon composition process allowed writers to draw from ready-made phrases that circulated within their communities, and the popularity of the Judgment Day theme only increased as authors borrowed its language and imagery.<sup>90</sup> Second, the allusions provide an immediate source of terror. As common as the Judgment Day topic was, Old English authors could rely on their audience's awareness and fear of it. For the *Beowulf* poet, achieving a level of horror was an undeniable aim, and referring to Doomsday was a convenient way to elicit terror from his audience.<sup>91</sup> Third, the allusions allow a story to be intentionally ambiguous, yielding a number of meanings. Malcolm Godden describes this intentional ambiguity, this "multi-valency" as characteristic of Old English literature and Old English approaches to interpreting scripture.<sup>92</sup> As mentioned earlier, the *Beowulf* poet shows a penchant for providing rich

---

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 252-265.

<sup>90</sup> Caie explains the usefulness of leitmotifs for the Anglo-Saxon's composition process: "The Old English poet was greatly aided...by the poetic formulas, symbolic metaphors and associative words which make up his 'word-hoard,'" *Judgment Day Theme*, 230. For a more detailed discussion of the Anglo-Saxon composition process and oral formulaic theory, see Chapter II.

<sup>91</sup> For a discussion of the "all-important element of *terror* at Doomsday," see Caie, *Judgment Day Theme*, 171-2.

<sup>92</sup>"Biblical Literature: the Old Testament," 217.



depth of meaning, and his use of Judgment Day motifs certainly complicates an understanding of his characters and their actions.

In *Beowulf*, Judgment Day motifs do not appear haphazardly scattered throughout the poem. Instead, the poet delivers them in a controlled and deliberate way. Significantly, sleep introduces these concentrated allusions to Judgment Day. This use of sleep is consistent with other Anglo-Saxon texts which use sleep as a liminal zone to transition between matters of the earth and matters of the spiritual world. *The Dream of the Rood* is a good example. The poet contemplates the power of the Cross to transform his earthly life into one fit for Heaven only after placing his reflections within a dream setting:

Hwæt! Ic swefna cyst secgan wylle,  
Hwæt me gemætte to midre nihte,  
Syðþan reordberend reste wunedon!

(Krapp, *The Vercelli Book*, 61, lines 1-3)

Listen, I'll tell the loveliest of dreams,  
What I dreamt in the dark of night  
After reason-bearers lay at rest.

(Boenig, *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality*, 259-263, lines 1-3)

His sleep initiates him into a spiritual plane. The sleep in *Beowulf* plays a dual role: like the liminal sleep in *The Dream of the Rood*, it ushers in spiritual concerns (in *Beowulf*, these take the form of Judgment Day motifs), but it also indicates moral lethargy like the Doomsday motif in *Christ III*. Of course, this moral lethargy makes Judgment Day necessary, and mention of one accompanies mention of the other. For *Beowulf*, then, sleep is particularly significant, signaling to the audience in multiple ways that something from the spiritual realm approaches, and we should be ready.

When Grendel attacks the Danes over twelve long winters, he always surprises them while they sleep, when they should be on guard (703b-704). The resemblance of his manner of attack to Christ's descent in the popular Doomsday motif has already been established. But other descriptions of Grendel also echo common Judgment Day motifs and even liken him to the great Judge who comes at Doomsday.<sup>93</sup> The details of Grendel's surroundings as he approaches Heorot, his entrance into the building, and his own emotional state are highly significant and reflect other biblical and Anglo-Saxon accounts dealing with judgment and Christ's Second Coming.

As Grendel approaches Heorot, he "advance[s] under clouds" (*wod under wolcnum*, 714a). In biblical tradition, patristic works, and Old English texts, clouds often accompany themes of disobedience and judgment. This motif appears repeatedly in scripture. In New Testament accounts of the end, Christ and his heavenly host often appear in clouds.<sup>94</sup> The speaker of 1 Thessalonians anticipates the great meeting of Christ and humanity. He says, "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever." In Revelation, John also envisions heavenly beings coming to earth enveloped by cloud: "And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud...his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire."<sup>95</sup> While

---

<sup>93</sup> Old English accounts rarely depict judging or a weighing of deeds; instead, they often portray punishment and tormenting purification. For a detailed discussion of the absence of judging in Old English literature, see Caie, *Judgment Day Theme*, 163-4, and Brzezinski, "Harrowing of Hell," 258-9. Grendel's violence fits the model of a punishing Judge.

<sup>94</sup> 1 Thes 4:17.

<sup>95</sup> Rv 10:1.

these versions have a majestic, even victorious aspect, Old Testament accounts involving clouds harbor darker and more frightening connotations. According to the Old Testament, the day of the Lord will be “a day of clouds and thick darkness” (Zep 1:15; Jl 2:2).<sup>96</sup> Clouds will cover the sun before justice is accomplished (Ez 32:7).<sup>97</sup> Old English poets frequently borrow this biblical motif. The Old English poem *Genesis* uses clouds to represent the sinfulness of mankind. Caie explains:

In Genesis 212-4 Paradise is described...as having pleasant streams, but with *Nalles wolcnu ða giet...wann mid winde* ‘No clouds yet, dark with the wind’ to spoil the scene. The clouds and wind, therefore, appear to be the direct result of man’s sin, and symbolize man’s unwillingness or inability because of sin to see and contemplate divine matters. (*Judgment Day Theme*, 129)

Here, clouds are a product of humanity’s own culpability, and they hover between the earthly and spiritual realms occluding humanity’s access to God. Elsewhere in Old English poetry, clouds represent God’s judgment and punishment. The poem *Exodus* describes a tent-like cloud “somehow related to the pillars of cloud and fire...which threaten[s the Hebrews] with punishment if they disobey Moses...[The] cloud and the

---

<sup>96</sup> In DR, the translator gives “a day of clouds and whirlwind,” translating *dies nebulae et turbinis* (Zeph) and *dies nubis et turbinis* (Jl) respectively. The presence of the clouds remains unchanged.

<sup>97</sup> Caie points out that the Old English poems *Christ II* and *The Dream of the Rood* both employ this image, and he suggests the event reflects “the withdrawal of God’s power from the world (e.g., 1584), as also occurs at the Crucifixion (*DrR* 53),” *Judgment Day Theme*, 129. Though these Old English poems use the biblical image, they are not using it in its original apocalyptic context. Still, these Old English poets associate clouds with mankind’s sin, an association present in the original biblical examples.

pillars seem almost to become emblematic of God himself, as...stern judge.”<sup>98</sup>

Throughout Old English literature, then, clouds represent God’s judgment. In *Beowulf*, the cloud that covers Grendel connects him to a tradition of judgment, but exactly what this judgment is and whom it is for is less clear. The cloud over Grendel could indicate his own guilt, or conversely, it could signify his authority to bring judgment on the Danes.<sup>99</sup> What is not unclear is the use of the cloud motif to bring new layers of meaning to the poet’s story—meanings which remind the audience of a familiar judgment tradition.

Grendel is again associated with Christ the Judge only seven lines later. When Grendel arrives at Heorot for the final time, his entrance into the building recalls the common Anglo-Saxon motif of Christ’s entrance through the gates of hell:<sup>100</sup>

Duru sona onarn  
 Fyrbendum fæst,    syþðan he hire folmum (æthr)an;  
 Onbræd þa bealohdig,    ða (he ge)bolgen wæs,  
 Recedes muþan.        (721b-4a)

The door soon gave way, firm with firebands, as soon as he touched it with hands. When the evil one swung open the mouth of the hall, then he was enraged.

<sup>98</sup> Godden, “Biblical Literature: the Old Testament,” *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, 218.

<sup>99</sup> Godden discusses the cloud motif in the poem *Exodus* to make his larger point that Old English poets delight in creating multiple, even paradoxical meanings in a text. The *Exodus* cloud guides and protects the Hebrews, but it also reminds them of God’s all-knowing presence and His readiness to punish them, *ibid.*, 217-8. Extended to *Beowulf*, this argument helps explain the paradoxes in the poem.

<sup>100</sup> Calder and Allen note the pervasiveness of this motif: “The motif of the Harrowing of Hell occurs in many...Old English poems. If one accepted all the instances supposed by the exegetes, the following list could be considerably expanded: *Christ and Satan*, *The Dream of the Rood* (Entry V), *Christ I, II, III* (Entries VII, VIII, IX) *Guthlac B* (Entry X), and *Judgment Day II* (Entry XXI),” *Sources and Analogues*, 85.

The poet could easily have omitted these lines from the poem; the narrative would be coherent without them. Grendel would arrive at the hall, and if these lines were omitted, he would then step onto Heorot's shining floor (720-1a; 725). Instead, the poet inserts a vivid description of the doors of Heorot almost magically giving way to Grendel's desire for them to be opened. While the description certainly affirms the audience's belief in Grendel's strength, it also locates him once again in a larger context dealing with Christ's justice and judgment, for the account resembles other descriptions of Christ's Harrowing of Hell. Like Grendel's entrance into Heorot, these accounts pay particular attention to hell's doors and Christ's power to overcome them. In *Blickling Homily VII*, the homilist says, "It happened, on account of the coming of the Kingdom of the Lord, that all the iron bolts of hell's lock were smashed at once."<sup>101</sup> The immediacy suggested by the adverbial clause "at once" is also present in *Beowulf*. Heorot's firebands give way "as soon as he touched [the door]" (722). The Old English poem *The Harrowing of Hell* likewise gives a focused account of Christ's power to break through the bonds of hell, opening its locked doors. The poet says Christ

forbreca *ond* forbygan þære burge þrym  
 onginnan reafian reust ealra cyninga  
 ne rohte he to þære hilde helmberendra  
 ne he byrnwigend to þam burggeatum  
 lædan ne wolde ac þa locu feollan  
 clustor of þam ceastrum cyning in oprad

would break down and lay low the walls of hell,  
 would begin to dismantle the strength of that fortress.  
 At that battle He did not require warriors,

---

<sup>101</sup> Kelly, "Easter Day," *The Blickling Homilies*, 61. *Blickling Homily VII* further remarks that Christ "completely smashed the gates of hell with their bronze bolts," 59.

nor would he lead armed men to the fortress-gates, but the bolts and bars  
fell away from those forts, and the King rode in.

(Mackie, *The Exeter Book: Part II*, 174-5, lines 35-40)<sup>102</sup>

Again, the image of bolts and bars failing in their purpose and succumbing to a supernatural power connects *Beowulf* with this popular tradition. The *Harrowing* poet goes on to say that John “saw the doors of hell shine clearly, / which before had long been locked / and enveloped in darkness” (*geseah...helle duru hædre scinan / þa þe longe ær bilocen wæron / beþeahhte mid þystre*, 53-5a). The image of light flooding through the opening also appears in *Beowulf*. When Grendel throws open Heorot’s doors, he steps on the “shining floor” (725a).<sup>103</sup> Here, it seems the light that illuminates the floor comes from Grendel’s own person as he steps through the doorway.

That Grendel exudes light is yet another indication of his association with Christ the Harrower/Judge. In the second part of *The Gospel of Nicodemus* or *Christ’s Descent into Hell*, a source for the Old English poem *The Harrowing of Hell*, Christ “pours a divinely brilliant and dazzling light over those blinded by the darkness of their sins.”<sup>104</sup> Just as Grendel’s light comes to awake sleeping, non-seeing men as they lay in a literal darkness, Christ’s light disturbs sinners.

---

<sup>102</sup> Although *Beowulf* receives no help from his fellow Geats in defeating Grendel, he still recruits them and leads them to the Danes to fight Grendel. Grendel arrives at the gates of Heorot alone.

<sup>103</sup> Other interpretations for this line exist. The poet often uses *fag* duplicitously to describe the hall visually (i.e. shining, decorated, bloodstained) and morally (i.e. guilty). In this instance, it makes sense that the floor would be shining with the light that comes from Grendel’s eyes; the description of the light immediately follows the description of the floor.

<sup>104</sup> Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 182; Caie, *Old English Poem Judgment Day II*, 90.

Outside of the harrowing of hell tradition, apocalyptic literature also describes light emanating from the Judge. *Christ III* describes:

suþan eastan sunnan leoma  
 cymeð of scyppende scynan leohtor  
 þonne hit men mægen modum ahyegan  
 beorhte blican...

a sun-beam from south-east shall come  
 from the Creator, shining more brilliantly  
 than men may ween of in their minds,  
 and gleaming brightly...

(Gollancz, *Exeter Book: Part I*, 56-7, lines 900-3a)

Similarly, the *Judgment Day II* poet says the Judge will come “shining in light,” (*sigelbeorht*, 117) although people will greatly fear him.<sup>105</sup> Grendel’s illuminating and fear-inspiring presence reflects a common depiction of Christ when he comes to judge mankind.

This common depiction further portrays Christ as furious and ready to mete out punishment, a portrayal also extended to Grendel. After the doors to Heorot give way to Grendel’s superhuman powers, the poet tells us: “then he was enraged” (*ða (he)bolgen wæs*, 723b). Immediately his fury is reiterated: “...angry he went” (*eode yrremod*, 726a). He is the aggressor, the initiator, and as far as the audience knows, the Danes have never injured him. Nevertheless, what he sees after he opens the doors infuriates him. The poet shifts the audience’s focus from Grendel’s outward appearance to Grendel’s own visual focus:

Geseah he in recede rinca manige,  
 swefan sibbedriht samod ætgædere,  
 magorinca heap. (728-730a)

---

<sup>105</sup> Kennedy, *Early English Christian Poetry*, 262.

He saw in the hall many of warriors, band of kinsmen sleeping all together, multitude of young warriors.

The poet describes Grendel almost as a judge, a character enraged by the sleeping warriors and ready to mete out justice. Grendel's state of mind reflects Christ's anger in apocalyptic accounts. Isaiah warns, "See, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it," (13:9).<sup>106</sup> Gregory, in *Moralia or an Exposition of Job*, tries to reconcile Christ's goodness with the fierceness that he will display on Judgment Day.<sup>107</sup> Christ is "the most furious of all kings" (*reþust ealra cyninga*, 36b) in *The Harrowing of Hell*.<sup>108</sup> The *Beowulf* poet uses the same word, *reþe*, to describe Grendel during his first attack on Heorot (122a). In fact, the *Beowulf* poet's own description of God resembles his portrayal of Grendel: "...Watching in fierce anger, enraged, he awaited the result of the battles" (...*he wæccende wrapum on andan / bad bolgenmod beadwa gepinges*, 708-9). The poet uses forms of the same word, *belgan*, to express that God and Grendel are enraged (709a; 723b). In between these two occurrences of the same word, almost connecting the two, the poet makes a particularly ambiguous statement and says, "[Grendel] bore the anger of God" (*Godes yrre bæþ*, 711b). Whether Grendel is the

---

<sup>106</sup> This passage gives a description of the Lord's violence that makes even Grendel's deeds seem mild: "Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered, and their wives ravished" (13:16).

<sup>107</sup> Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 96.

<sup>108</sup> Passages of text quoted from Mackie, *The Exeter Book: Part II*, 172-181. Translation mine.



recipient or the bearer of God's anger, the poet does not specify.<sup>109</sup> In any case, Grendel's wrath at the time of his attacks on the sleeping thanes matches an ideal of Christ descending angrily on a sinning world. Both deliver judgment through their anger.

Conversely, the Danes are often characterized as the object of God's—or through apocalyptic associations, Grendel's—judgment. When the poet first describes their tribulations at the hand of Grendel, he characterizes them as heathens and describes them offering sacrifices and praying to false gods at heathen temples (175-8a). He makes it clear that they have no relationship with the true God:

	Metod hie ne cuþon,
dæda Demend,	ne wiston hie Drihten God,
ne hie huru heofena Helm herian ne cuþon,	
wuldres Waldend.	Wa bið þæm ðe sceal
þurh sliðne nið	sawle bescufan
in fyres fæþm,	frofre ne wenan,
wiht gewendan!	(180b-6a)

God they knew not, Judge of Deeds, they knew not Lord God, they knew not, however, to praise the Protector of the heavens, Ruler of the heaven. Woe shall be to him who through dangerous violence shoves his soul in arms of fire, of solace not to think, not in any way to change!

The poet describes God as the “Judge of Deeds” shortly after describing the Danes’ heathen practices, suggesting their own unfaithfulness invites Grendel’s visitations upon them. Immediately after recognizing their separateness from God, the poet explains, “Thus the care continually afflicted the son of Healfdene” (*Swa ða mælcare maga Healfdenes singala seað*, 189-90a). The adverbial transition “thus” (*swa*) connects the

---

<sup>109</sup> This point has been made before, and was first presented to me by Robert Boenig in a graduate seminar.

Danes' heathen existence to their relentless afflictions under Grendel's power, explaining why they are persecuted. They know not the Judge of Deeds, but he exists apart from their awareness of him; his judgment comes upon them in the form of Grendel. Grendel's attacks are even called the "greatest of night-evils" (*nihtbealwa mæst*, 193b). The poet's use of the superlative "greatest" (*mæst*) brings to mind *the* great night-evil—the Last Judgment. And again, their unpreparedness and their sleep implicate them and foretell of the impending judgment that must take place. This judgment takes place at the hands of Grendel, a character made rich with meaning and moral significance, at once evil and like God. The poet imbues Grendel with apocalyptic associations, and, significantly, Grendel and his otherworld qualities materialize only after men fall asleep.

While the poet does not develop Grendel's mother with all of the same judgment day motifs that he associates with Grendel, he does carry over ideas of judgment and Doomsday into this next major episode, using this theme to inspire fear in his audience and to prepare audience members for the judgment that ultimately takes place in the poem. Certainly, the attack by Grendel's mother on the sleeping men echoes not only Grendel's attacks but also the Doomsday motif that appears throughout Scripture, patristic writings, and Anglo-Saxon literature. According to this model, Grendel's mother becomes the Christ-thief, though the poet does not develop this metaphor as extensively as he does earlier with Grendel. The attack seems almost to be a dramatic enactment of 1 Thessalonians 5:3: "When they say, 'There is peace and security,'" then

sudden destruction will come upon them...and there will be no escape!” The attack by Grendel’s mother follows the attack by Grendel the way that 1 Thessalonians 5:3 follows 1 Thessalonians 5:2, which warns that the apocalypse will come like a thief in the night. The poet creates a false sense of security in the Danes and Geats and in the audience, making Grendel’s mother’s attack all the more surprising and horrific. He creates peace and security so that Grendel’s mother can come like Christ on Judgment Day with sudden destruction.

Unlike her son, Grendel’s mother is not further likened to the great Judge on Judgment Day; however, the poet does include judgment motifs throughout the portion of the poem in which she appears. Her dwelling place, for instance, recalls other descriptions of hell.<sup>110</sup> Klaeber explains: “The moors and wastes, mists and darkness, the cliffs, the bottomless deep (cp. 1366f.), the loathsome *wyrmas* (1430) can all be traced in early accounts of hell, including [Anglo-Saxon] Religious literature.”<sup>111</sup> In addition, the fire-light burning at the bottom of the watery mere, like other descriptions of burning water from Christian and non-Christian traditions, represents Hell.<sup>112</sup> Klaeber and others additionally point out the remarkable similarities between the description of Grendel’s mother’s lair in *Beowulf* and the description of Hell in the Blickling homily for Michaelmas, No. XVI.<sup>113</sup> Beowulf and Grendel’s mother fight within a hellish

---

<sup>110</sup> Though this description does not stem from Judgment Day accounts, hell is a place of eternal punishment after judgment, and thus hell and judgment cannot be divorced.

<sup>111</sup> *Beowulf*, ad 1357.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* ad 1365-6a. Klaeber credits E. Becker for making this point.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* Klaeber posits the two must use a common source. See also Gatch, “Eschatology in the Anonymous Old English Homilies,” 127-8, and Gatch, *The Eschatology of the Anglo-Saxon Homilists*, 65.

environment, and it is the sleep of the thanes which makes this interaction possible.

Their sleep allows for Grendel's mother to cross over into the human realm, provoking

Beowulf to follow her into her own hellish world. The hellish setting is significant.

Beowulf's descent into Grendel's and his mother's lair is like Christ's descent into Hell.

Furthermore, the means of his descent brings to mind the sacrament of baptism.

Interestingly, Old English authors often emphasize the relationship between Christ's

descent into Hell and baptism. Anglo-Saxons also interpreted baptismal waters as

symbolic of flood waters sent by God to punish the world and purge it of its sins.<sup>114</sup> In

this scene, the poet likens the water to the great Flood. He emphasizes the power of the

water grammatically. He conjugates "welling-water" (*brimwylm*, 1494b), a kenning

which could easily describe flood waters, in the nominative case, and "warrior"

(*hilderince*, 1495a) in the dative. The welling-water takes control of the warrior, just as

welling floods take control of the fate of humankind. The poet also calls the water "the

region of floods" (*floda begong*, 1497b) and uses the term *flod* or a variant of the term

multiple times (1361, 1366, 1422, 1497, 1689). To confirm this idea, the hilt of the

sword used to kill Grendel's mother—the only weapon capable of the task—is engraved

with the story of the Flood. Just as the Flood is the instrument of punishment and

purification, so too is the engraved sword which puts an end to Grendel's race. In short,

the Flood, like hell, signifies punishment, and Beowulf's immersion into the water and

the sword he uses to kill Grendel's mother evoke these biblical ideas of judgment and

retribution.

---

<sup>114</sup> Caie, *Judgment Day Theme*, 96.

The water, reminiscent of the great Flood and baptismal waters, contains other judgment motifs in its description. “A race of serpents, strange sea-snakes” (*wyrmcynnnes fela, sellice sædracan*, 1425a-6b) tear at Beowulf’s body with “battle-tusks” (*hildetuxum*, 1511a) and recall the hell-worms that “with fiery teeth...tear at your bones” described by Bede in *De Die Judicii*.<sup>115</sup> Additionally, the bloody quality of the water resembles other depictions of nature tainted with blood at Judgment Day. Throughout the scene, the poet repeatedly emphasizes the bloodiness of the water. When Beowulf and the other thanes reach Grendel’s mother’s lair, they see a “flood well[ing] with blood...with hot blood” (*flod blode weol*, 1422a; *hatan heolfre*, 1423a). After Beowulf cuts off Grendel’s head, the thanes above see “water bloodstained with blood” (*brim blode fah*, 1594a), and as they leave the shore for Heorot, the “water [grows] stagnate,” but is still “bloodstained with slaughter-blood” (*lagu drusade*, 1630b; *wældreore fag*, 1631b).<sup>116</sup> The poet’s emphasis on the image suggests its importance. The combination of blood and some natural element, particularly water, appears frequently throughout biblical, patristic, and Old-English apocalyptic literature. Revelation 8:9 foretells of a third of the sea turning to blood, and in the same chapter, hail mixed with blood falls to earth (8:7). In the Pseudo-Bede’s *De quindecim signis*, a

---

<sup>115</sup> Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 211.

<sup>116</sup> The poet’s skillful balance is at work here. The poet describes Æshere’s head, then bloody water, and later he depicts Grendel’s head, then bloody water. While Æshere’s head symbolizes all the anxieties of the people, Grendel’s head symbolizes their relief; The source of the blood in no way diminishes the suggestive imagery that the poet creates. However, that Grendel’s body, lifeless because of a gaping wound at his shoulder, would have enough blood left in it to rise to the surface and make the waters turbid is highly improbable. Apparently, the poet places more importance on creating the image itself than in creating a realistic portrayal of events. See also 2138. Blood wells as he fights with Grendel’s mother, but before he kills her.

bloody dew covers grass and trees before the Day of Judgment.<sup>117</sup> *The Apocalypse of Thomas* warns that “springs will turn to blood” and the sky will rain blood (242).

Bloody clouds and rain also appear in *Blickling Homily VII*.<sup>118</sup> The bloody water where Beowulf once and for all time defeats Grendel’s race resembles the bloody water in other apocalyptic accounts. Once again the poet creatively borrows from a long tradition of apocalyptic motifs. He consistently uses these Judgment Day motifs to create a setting where Beowulf and Grendel’s mother fight. The setting brings with it undertones of judgment which permeate the entire scene, suggesting to the audience that some kind of judgment takes place during the episode, and preparing the audience for more acute judgment comparisons later in the poem.

Judgment Day motifs appear throughout *Beowulf* and help build up to the climactic conclusion of the poem. Grendel shares qualities with the great Judge of Doomsday and his mother’s surroundings bring to mind images of judgment which would be familiar to an Anglo-Saxon audience. Apocalyptic motifs are no less prevalent in the final portion of the poem. The Doomsday motif again serves as a basic outline for the plot of this section, except while both Grendel and his mother fit the Christ-as-thief model, it is a human who steals from the sleeping monster in the last part of the poem. Interestingly, the motif is preserved, but with a role-reversal of the characters. But besides the Doomsday motif, other elements in the episode contribute to the Judgment

---

<sup>117</sup> Caie points out that the *De quindecim signis* was “the most influential form of the Signs of Doom in the medieval period.” For a translation of the work, see Caie, *Judgment Day Theme*, 240-1.

<sup>118</sup> Kelly, 64-5.

Day theme that runs throughout the poem. For instance, the dragon itself is an apocalyptic figure in the Bible and in pagan Germanic myth. The *Beowulf* dragon, like the one described in Revelation 12:1-17, can be identified with Satan, or, as Earl points out, it can be viewed as a more neutral figure like the apocalyptic beast which kills Thor in Germanic legend.<sup>119</sup> More importantly, however, the destruction he causes by fire mirrors apocalyptic accounts.

In Christian apocalyptic tradition, the Lord's judgment takes the form of fire. References to Christ's fiery judgment abound in scripture. Fire precedes the Judge as a sign that the End of the World approaches (Ez 38:22; Acts 2:19; Rv 8). When the Lord descends, flames accompany him (2 Thes 1:7-8). His anger and wrath on that day are likened to heat and take the physical form of fire (Na 1:6; Is 66:15), which acts both as an agent of punishment and as the means through which he judges humanity (1 Cor 3:13; Mal 4:1). Finally, his wrathful flames consume the entire earth, destroying creation (Zep 1:18; 2 Pt 3:5-7; Is 29:6).

Fire as one of the great signs and events of Judgment Day originates in Scripture, and continues to help define the Christian apocalypse in later patristic, Irish, and Old

---

<sup>119</sup> The *Vercelli* homilist also recognizes the dragon's role during the apocalypse, Boenig, "Vercelli Homily II," *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality*, 89. The *Beowulf* poet ambiguates the role of the dragon; while the biblical dragon represents Satan, the dragon in *Beowulf* is wronged, and then—like the Doomsday Judge—wrecks apocalyptic havoc on the Geatish nation. Like *Beowulf*'s dragon, the Germanic serpent also loses his life in the fight. Earl explains the confusing moral nature of *Beowulf*'s dragon, and adds that his Germanic predecessor "has no moral weight at all, since the Germanic apocalypse is not a judgment upon man but only an inevitability." The dragon's Christian predecessor found in Revelation, however, embodies evil. Earl finally concludes that the poet "gives us nothing but a web of associations in which the dragon's meaning can be caught," *Thinking About Beowulf*, 76.

English works. The pseudo-Bede *De quindecim signis* describes the earth burning immediately before Doomsday. Fire punishes the wicked in Bede's *Day of Judgment*, and the *Apocalypse of Thomas* depicts flames and fire devouring the earth.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, the Irish *Fifteen Tokens of Doomsday* describes the whole world enveloped in fiery flames.<sup>121</sup> Almost all of the Old English apocalyptic homilies and poems include fire in their varying accounts of Doomsday.

Fire and the coming of the Lord become almost synonymous in Anglo-Saxon apocalyptic accounts. Boenig offers an example discussed earlier in this chapter. As the *Phoenix* poet draws material from his classical source, he suddenly digresses into a description of Judgment Day at the point when his source mentions fire. The association between fire and Doomsday is so strong that the one compels him to discuss the other, at the expense of frustrating the poem's cyclical time.<sup>122</sup> Old English poets and homilists rarely describe the apocalypse without also depicting the destructive fires that accompany it. The description in *Judgment Day II* is just one example:

Ufenan eall þis eac byð gefylled  
 eal uplic lyft ættrenum lige;  
 færð fyr ofer eall. Ne byð þær nan foresteal,  
 ne him man na ne mæg miht forwyran.  
 Ealr þæt us þincð æmtig eahgemearces  
 under roderes ryne, readum lige  
 bið emnes mid þy eal gefylled.  
 Donne fyren lig blaweðs and braslað,  
 read and reðet, ræsct and efesteð,  
 hu he synfullum susle gefremmeu.  
 Ne se wrecendav brynew wile forbugan  
 oððe ænigum þær are gefremman,

<sup>120</sup> Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 210; Caie, *Judgment Day Theme*, 241-2.

<sup>121</sup> Caie, *Judgment Day Theme*, 244.

<sup>122</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality*, 34-6.



buton he horwum sy her afeormadx  
 and þonne þider cume þearle aclænsad.  
 Þonne fela mægða, folca unrim,  
 heora sinnigan breost swiðlice beatað  
 forhte mid fyste for fyrenlustum.

(Caie, *Old English Poem Judgment Day II*, 92, lines 145-61)

Besides all this the heavens on high  
 Shall be wholly filled with poisonous fire.  
 It shall rush over all nor shall there be rescue...  
 All that to the eye seems endless and boundless  
 Neath the circling sky shall alike be filled  
 With red fire. The blazing flame  
 Shall blow and crackle, cruel and red;  
 It shall hurtle and surge for the scourging of sinners.  
 The avenging blaze shall never forbear,  
 Nor then grant mercy to any man,  
 Except on earth he be purged of evil  
 And come to judgment thoroughly cleansed.

(Kennedy, *Early English Christian Poetry*, 262-3, lines 145-61)

In most Old English accounts, fire and the Lord are both such prominent components of Judgment Day that the two become intertwined. Fire accompanies the Lord, but it also becomes the tangible embodiment of his anger, his judgment, and his punishment. As such, it becomes an extension of the Lord himself. The dragon and his fire are similarly inseparable. His fury, like the Lord's on Doomsday, takes the form of a physical heat as he becomes "hot and fierce-minded" (*hat ond hreohmod*, 2296a). He travels accompanied by his own flame (2308b) and dispenses his judgment and punishment (2305-6a) on the Geats by destroying the people and their surroundings with fire (2312-

22a).<sup>123</sup> Indeed, the association alone between the dragon and fire, and the Lord and fire, influences the audience's understanding of the dragon.<sup>124</sup>

Although the patristic and Old English descriptions of these fires are never exactly the same—some include fire only as a precursor of judgment, some give full accounts of raging fires destroying the world, etc.—they all share a common feature. These descriptions of fire are closely associated with the wrongdoing of humankind, the coming of the Lord, his wrath, and his subsequent destruction of creation.

The dragon's fire in *Beowulf* functions in much the same way. Like Christ on Judgment Day, the dragon uses fire to punish humankind for its wrongdoing. Just as humanity's trespasses call into being the Doomsday fires in apocalyptic literature, so too does the slave's guilty act result in the fiery vengeance of the dragon. Even the dragon equates the theft of the cup with his ensuing flames (2305). Before the dragon carries out his judgment on the Geats, the aftermath of the thief's action takes on an almost post-lapsarian quality. In between the slave's trespassing and the dragon's waking, the poet

---

<sup>123</sup> The very sequence of this description follows the pattern in Judgment Day accounts. For more on early medieval Judgment Day sequences, see Hill, "Further Notes on the Eschatology of the Old English *Christ III*," 691.

<sup>124</sup> The dragon resembles the Lord on Judgment Day in another way. Old English works often refer to Christ as a guardian (*weard*). The *Judgment Day I* poet, for example, calls the Lord "light's guardian [who] sends fire over all the face of the earth," Boenig, *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality*, 237. The *Christ III* poet also describes the Lord as guardian (*weard*, 1527) in conjunction with his fiery punishment (1520, 1523), Gollancz, *Exeter Book: Part I*, 94. The *Beowulf* poet applies this term to the dragon on multiple occasions, characterizing him as a guardian doling out fiery punishment. See, for instance, ll. 2413, 2524, 2580, 2841, 3060, and 3066. Admittedly, the term guardian (*weard*) is not reserved solely for Christ or the Judge on Doomsday, and can be used more broadly. However, the concept of the Doomsday judge as guardian and as a destroyer-by-fire seems closely connected to the dragon as guardian and destroyer-by-fire.

emphasizes the loss incurred. “The hoard of treasures [is] diminished” (*onboren beaga hord*, 2284a), implying that an earlier state of perfection is lessened by the man’s misdeed. Like the forbidden fruit, the cup brings forbidden knowledge. The slave’s lord “look[s] at the ancient work of men for the first time” (*sceawode fira fyrngeweorc forman siðe*, 2285b-6). His eyes are opened to a treasure that has always, at least during his lifetime, existed. The adverbial phrase *forman siðe* suggests a shift in time takes place, an idea emphasized again when the poet says, “Then the hoard was explored” (*Ða wæs hord rasod*, 2283b). The dragon’s anger will stem not only from the loss of the cup, but also from the fact that from that moment on, the mound is known to men. The adverb *ða*, like the sins of Adam and the *Beowulf* slave, breaks time in two parts, separating a period of innocence and peace from a period of knowledge and retribution.<sup>125</sup> The spoiling of the dragon’s ideal world and the knowledge that humankind receives from one man’s transgression—so similar to the account of the fall of man in Genesis—must end as the biblical account does, with destructive flames that mark the end of a people. The one injustice demands complete annihilation.

The fire which initiates the destruction of a people erupts within a Judgment Day paradigm. As in the other two episodes, the Doomsday motif governs this episode and reminds the audience of the final coming of the Lord. However, the dragon episode combines two different models of the Doomsday motif. In the first, the dragon sleeps and a thief comes and steals from his hoard. Interestingly, the poet resists characterizing

---

<sup>125</sup> See Genesis 3. Other elements of this passage resemble the Genesis account. While Adam and Eve both distance themselves from their action and deny full responsibility, the *Beowulf* poet similarly distances the thief from the wrongness of his action (2223-5).

the man who takes the dragon's cup pejoratively. On the contrary, he provides a substantial amount of background information to elicit compassion for the man from his audience. The poet at first calls him a "slave" (*þeow*, 2223b)—a passive figure who receives harm, rather than an aggressive figure who inflicts harm.<sup>126</sup> The poet emphatically defends the slave's actions, first by denying his choice in the matter: "He broke into the dragon-hoard not at all of his own accord, with his own will" (*Nealles mid gewældum wyrmhord abræc, / sylfes willum*, 2221-2a). He then repeatedly describes the duress of the slave. He steals "on account of sore-stress" (*ac for þreanedlan*, 2223a); he is "needy" (*þearfa*, 2225a); he "fled hate-swings" (*heteswengeas fleah*, 2224b). Significantly, the poet only calls him a thief in conjunction with the dragon's sleep: "He was sleeping, deceived by the cunning of the thief" (*slæpende besyre(d wur)de þeofes cræfte* 2218-9a). The poet mentions the dragon's sleep and the thief at the same time, uniting the images to evoke a single idea—Christ coming as a thief to surprise sleeping people on Judgment Day. He recognizes the two as part of one Judgment Day tradition, and despite his efforts to excuse the man's actions, he uses the label to direct his audience to this eschatological way of thinking.

The poet again uses the Doomsday motif when he sends the dragon to attack the Geats during the night. While they are not explicitly described as sleeping, the poet makes it clear that the dragon waits for day to pass before descending upon them with violence, even though waiting is very difficult for him (2302b-7). Both encounters with

---

<sup>126</sup> The manuscript only shows the thorn-*þ*; some other editions suppose some other word, but many agree with Klaeber and use *þeow*. In any case, the poet describes the man in the custody "of someone" (*nathwylces*, 2223b) receiving blows. For more on this missing word, see Klaeber's footnote to line 2223.

the dragon—the thief stealing his cup and his revenge on the Geats—take place within the Doomsday paradigm. The structure surrounding the dragon’s fire, then, creates an environment already conducive to Judgment Day interpretations.

Ultimately, though, his destruction of creation makes him most like the great Judge at the end of the world. The image of the dragon flying through the air spewing flames from his mouth and igniting the air, land, and water seems to be a creative response to Anglo-Saxon Judgment Day descriptions of the Lord returning to Earth, destroying creation with flames. The *Alphabetic Hymn* which Bede quotes in his *De Arte Metrica* foretells of Christ coming “like a thief attacking the unready on a dark night,” as mentioned earlier, but it also provides another image of the Lord destroying creation which could just as easily describe the dragon during his raid on the Geats: “Before the face of the just Judge will go the fire’s flame, devouring the sky, the earth and the waves of the deep sea: on the fearful Day of Judgment.”<sup>127</sup> The concrete image of the Judge pouring fire from his mouth is not so different from the one proffered in *Beowulf*. In fact, many apocalyptic versions depict fire or destruction originating from the Lord’s own person, or even more specifically, from his mouth. This idea is certainly present in Bede’s *The Day of Judgment*, when the “fire-belching river” strikes out at men, torturing them for their wrongdoings.<sup>128</sup> The Lord issues flames of fire as if, or even non-metaphorically, from his mouth. Even in biblical apocalyptic accounts, Christ destroys the enemy with the breath of his mouth (2 Thes 2.8).<sup>129</sup> From the dragon’s

---

<sup>127</sup> Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 94.

<sup>128</sup> Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 210.

<sup>129</sup> In the Vulgate, *spiritu oris sui*, which DR translates as “with the spirit of his mouth.”

mouth, fire scorches each of the three main elements of creation mentioned in the *Alphabetic Hymn* and other apocalyptic works: he flies through the air spewing hot flames (2308, 2312, 2315a), burns the land (2334b), and destroys the water-shore (2334a). The *Beowulf* poet transfers the image of Christ spewing fire from his mouth to a non-Christ otherworld figure, and consequently creates an image heated with issues of judgment and retribution. These Judgment Day associations create in his audience a mood of fear, much like Old English Judgment Day literature aims to do. Furthermore, they suggest to the audience the role each character must play as the story unfolds.<sup>130</sup>

While the picture of the dragon sending out fire from his mouth certainly resembles other apocalyptic representations, so too do the other details of the dragon's vengeance resemble the vengeance of the Judge on Doomsday. When the poet begins describing the dragon's attack, he emphasizes the far-reaching devastation of the dragon's flames. Like Christ on Judgment Day, he has no mercy for any living thing (2314b-5).<sup>131</sup> Instead, he directs his punishment toward the entire Geatish nation (22318-9a). He "encircle[s]" (*befangen*, 2321b) them "in flame and fire" (*bæle ond bronde*, 2322). The poet's use of the past participle *befangen* provides a visual depiction of how completely within the dragon's power the Geatish people are.<sup>132</sup> The dragon

---

<sup>130</sup> This idea is discussed more specifically in ch. 2.

<sup>131</sup> See, for example, *Judgment Day II*: "The avenging blaze shall never forbear, nor then grant mercy to any man, except on earth he be purged of evil..." Kennedy, *Early English Christian Poetry*, 263, and its source, Bede's *The Day of Judgment*: "Then avenging heat will not care to spare anyone, unless he comes there cleansed of every stain," Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues*, 210.

<sup>132</sup> This idea appears elsewhere in Old English apocalyptic literature. The *Judgment Day II* poet describes fire blazing beneath the "circling sky," again alluding to the

makes his vengeance known to man “near and far” (*nean ond feorran*, 231b), the adverbial phrase suggesting the vastness of his power. These descriptions conform to traditional Judgment Day representations and depict the otherworld figure coming in fire to destroy creation on a mass scale.

Interestingly, after the poet establishes the expansive and all-encompassing destruction of the dragon’s fire, he shifts his description from a broad sense of devastation to one particular point of devastation—Beowulf’s hall. The hall—the Geats’ own creation—becomes a microcosmic representation of the great creation, and its destruction is symbolic of the End of the World. The poet associates Beowulf’s dwelling with God’s creation on several occasions. When the dragon begins his attack, he directs fire toward the “bright dwelling” (*beorht hofu*, 2313a). Not uncommonly in Old English literature, *beorht* or a synonym describes the creation of God. Christ in *Judgment Day I*, for example, burns the “bright creation,” and in *Christ III*, he surprises the bright creation (*scire gescafte*, 870) with violence.<sup>133</sup> The pairing of the adjective *beorht* with the Geats’ foremost creation evokes the more familiar combination of *beorht* or a synonym and another word signifying God’s creation. The poet also associates Beowulf’s hall with Hrothgar’s hall, and thus indirectly with God’s creation. He not only uses *beorht* to describe Beowulf’s hall, but he also uses it to describe Heorot (997, 1177). He lauds Beowulf’s hall as the “best of buildings” (*bolda selest*, 2326a), an echo of the titles “best of halls” (*husa selest*, 146a) and “greatest of buildings” (*healærna*

---

inescapable containment of earth-dwellers on Judgment Day, Kennedy, *Early English Christian Poetry*, 263.

<sup>133</sup> Boenig, *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality*, 236; Gollancz, *Exeter Book: Part I*, 54-5.

*mæst*, 78a) which he earlier assigns to Heorot.<sup>134</sup> While Heorot is for a time made useless by Grendel's attacks, its ultimate destruction, the poet informs his audience, will come from the hateful flames of a burning fire (82b-3a). Here, the poet's own proclivity for revealing the future in advance seems not to stop with the burning of Heorot, but instead extends all the way through time to the burning of Beowulf's home.<sup>135</sup> The repeated and almost interchangeable descriptions of Heorot and Beowulf's hall make them into one ideal. The *Beowulf* poet not only weaves Heorot's creation and God's creation together with the scop's celebratory lay; he also eventually works Beowulf's hall into the pattern. The hall is the center of life, whether in the Danish community or the Geatish one, and its destruction by fire represents the End of the World.<sup>136</sup>

In the final episode of the poem, Beowulf and the Geatish people meet their defeat through fiery flames which in every way resemble the flames of the Apocalypse.<sup>137</sup> As the most pervasive motif of Old English apocalyptic literature, the poet's use of fire as the means by which a hero and a nation are destroyed has great significance and certainly would have affected his audience's understanding of the

---

<sup>134</sup> The use of the superlative in each of these three examples is ironic. In the first two instances, the poet praises the halls as he laments their obliteration or ineffectiveness. In the last instance, he foretells of the hall's destruction shortly after praising it (81b-3a).

<sup>135</sup> While the statement about Heorot's burning may seem abrupt and undeveloped, the poet eventually satisfies the curiosity he implants in his audience by developing a visual image of another burning hall and the accompanying fear it creates.

<sup>136</sup> For more on the hall as creation, see Helterman, "Beowulf: The Archetype Enters History," 6.

<sup>137</sup> Admittedly, Beowulf ultimately dies when the dragon bites his neck, but the dragon's fiery revenge lures Beowulf to the dragon's lair and then renders him defenseless, enabling the final attack of the dragon.



poem. The audience's familiarity with the motif and its close association with the end of the world would have given meaning to the poem lost to modern readers.

The placement of this thoroughly apocalyptic scene at the end of the poem is consistent with Old English works that often conclude with eschatological themes. Even works otherwise unrelated to the Doomsday subject often close with Doomsday additions. Kennedy offers the *Elene* as one example.<sup>138</sup> Although the poem focuses on Constantine the Great and his mother, it concludes with a scene of Doomsday replete with the blazing flames of judgment. As the original audience would have understood, however, the final episode of *Beowulf* is not a solitary epilogue introducing the Judgment Day theme. Instead, the poet carefully inserts this theme into each of the three major parts of the poem. Additionally, he couples the destruction at the end of his work with the accounts of creation at the beginning.

The poet buttresses the episode's eschatological importance with other references to time which appear earlier in the poem. The entire poem points toward a future doom, and the poet frequently caps off various stories by foretelling the inevitable destruction that awaits.<sup>139</sup> Berger and Leicester explain:

The poem looks ahead in time at threatening possibilities in existing arrangements: the possibility of enmity between Geats and Danes, Hrothgar's premonition that he will not see Beowulf again, the long account of the Danes and Heatho-Bards which occupies nearly a third of Beowulf's report to Hygelac. (Ibid.)

---

<sup>138</sup> *Early English Christian Poetry*, 177, 251. See also Roy Aycock, "An Anomaly in *Christ III*," 67.

<sup>139</sup> Berger and Leicester, "The Limits of Heroism in *Beowulf*," 68.

The poet unnecessarily tells of Heorot's destruction by fire, Danish family strife, and other future catastrophes, all of which prefigure the Geats' inevitable decimation.<sup>140</sup>

More significant than these frequent and separate instances of foreshadowings, however, is the poem's skeletal structure. The narrative courses through time, beginning with creation itself and eventually drying out with the hot flames that end Beowulf and, indirectly, his entire nation. The great scene of destruction which ends the poem complements the campaign of creation accounts at the beginning. The poem opens with an account of the beginning of the Danish community, tracing its genesis to one source from which all its subsequent greatness ensues: Scyld Scefing. Scyld appears out of the sea, a foundling destined to localize a new community of people. His birth from the chaotic waters begins the formation of a new world.<sup>141</sup> He arrives with no possessions or even a history, but the treasures amassed atop him at his funeral suggest the development not only of his life, but also of the society he engenders.<sup>142</sup> Thus, time for Scyld, for the Danes, and for the created poem begins with his emergence from the unstructured sea.

The poet continues developing the creation theme, again underscoring the social construction of the Danish people. Scyld's descendant, Hrothgar, oversees the creation

---

<sup>140</sup> Halverson also briefly acknowledges the poem's course to a complete doom, "The World of *Beowulf*," 603.

<sup>141</sup> Throughout history, civilizations have viewed water as a symbol for a chaotic, inchoate world. In *Beowulf*, the poet allows the Danish scop to sing a Christian account of Creation, complete with a description of God forming the plain from waters which surround it (93). Scyld's emergence from this formlessness would undoubtedly remind the *Beowulf* audience of the story of Creation. For more, see Helterman, "*Beowulf*: The Archetype Enters History," 5, 9.

<sup>142</sup> For more on Scyld's mysterious origins and subsequent achievements, see Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 72.

of Heorot, fortifying the Danish community. From it, Hrothgar rules his public, “distribut[ing] everything” (*eall gedælan*, 71b) as though God himself. As God creates with the word, so, too, does Hrothgar.<sup>143</sup> He “create[s] the name Heorot for it” (*scop him Heort naman*, 78b), demonstrating the “power” (*geweald*, 79a) of his speech.<sup>144</sup> The hall is a physical representation of the king’s power over words, over people, and over the elements themselves. It represents order—the order of physical elements which compose it, and the order of the Danish society. As a creation, it stands in opposition to the chaos from which all things originate.<sup>145</sup> The poet’s audience undoubtedly made the connection between the creation of Heorot and God’s creation of the universe. The scop in the narrative certainly associates the two: to celebrate the hall’s creation, he sings of God’s formation of the universe. The numerous references to creation culminate in this explicit account of the beginning.

Anglo-Saxons often strategically pair descriptions of Creation and Judgment Day in apocalyptic works. Lee posits that Old English narratives which look back to a former time frequently answer this nostalgia with a corresponding description of a future apocalypse (146). *Beowulf*’s heroic setting *in geardagum* certainly sets up the apocalyptic ending of the poem.<sup>146</sup> Barbara C. Raw notes a number of Old English

---

<sup>143</sup> Bjork, “Speech as Gift in *Beowulf*,” 998.

<sup>144</sup> Note the poet’s choice of the verb *scyppan*, to create. Helterman points out that the poet uses a derivative of the verb *scyppan* three times in his twenty-line description of Heorot’s creation, “*Beowulf*: The Archetype Enters History,” 6-7.

<sup>145</sup> Grendel’s and his mother’s raids return the community to its chaotic beginnings. Thus, *Beowulf*’s restoration of the hall to its intended purpose is a creative act in itself, Helterman, “*Beowulf*: The Archetype Enters History,” 5-8.

<sup>146</sup> Lee disagrees that *Beowulf* falls into this category, claiming that time itself is not brought to an end with the completion of the poem, as it is in other apocalyptic works,

works which pair a reference to Creation with a complementary reference to Judgment Day. *The Dream of the Rood*, for example, presents the apocalyptic tree of life which stands in contrast to an Edenic tree. *Christ and Satan* similarly reminds its audience of the world's finite existence, with its creation at one end of time and its destruction at the other. Raw further notes that "these two time sequences were seen as strictly parallel to each other" (228-32).<sup>147</sup>

Interestingly, the *Beowulf* poet aligns his own artistic beginning with the beginning of the biblical text, just as he closes his poem in the manner that the biblical text closes—with an apocalyptic account. His use of the creation and destruction theme is not simply a coupling of the ideas somewhere in his text, but rather a close imitation of biblical structure.<sup>148</sup> The poem's affinity with the biblical design has at least two significant results. First, seen in the context of the biblical design, the poet makes the poem's apocalyptic elements more accessible to his audience. If the opening is a barrage of references to Creation, the audience can reasonably expect the close to resemble the world's destruction as described at the end of the Bible. As audience members wait for the end of the poem, they anticipate this ending, and the poet feeds their expectation with

---

"Symbolic Metaphor and the Design of *Beowulf*," 149. As other scholars like Earl attest, however, the Geatish nation represents the end of the world—history and time will end for this nation once and for all as it will for the rest of Creation, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 46.

<sup>147</sup> See also Aycock, who briefly discusses the appearance of apocalyptic material at the end of a work: "Various doctrines of eschatology are repeated, reshaped, reworked—sometimes as a whole poem, sometimes as a companion to accounts of Creation and the beginning of things, sometimes as a separate, formal epilogue," "An Anomaly in *Christ III*," 67.

<sup>148</sup> The *Beowulf* poem, like the book of Genesis, immediately gives an account of the beginning of things, and quickly follows with a lineage resembling the one in Genesis 5.

references to Judgment Day as a means of heightening the dramatic effect of each of the three episodes. The true ending of the poem, with its fiery imagery, Beowulf's death, and the inevitable destruction of the Geatish people, is finally unmistakable. The Bible's most basic structure, then, serves not only as a frame for the poem, but also as an indicator of the plot's outcome and a means whereby the poet can create dramatic suspense. Second, the poet circumscribes his creation with echoes of the biblical story of Creation and its destruction as an expression of his own conscious or subconscious anxieties about the duration of his own creation. The beginning of God's world ends with destruction; so, too, does the beginning of the poem necessarily result in its completion. The subject matter of the poem, then, appears self-referential. Especially as an oral tale, the poem only exists as it is told, leaving no tangible evidence of its existence at all. As with God's created world, nothing comes before the beginning, and nothing follows the completion. The purpose of the Anglo-Saxon hero in the poem is also the preoccupation of the poet: to achieve fame (*dom*), to last.<sup>149</sup>

The creation and destruction framework of the poem naturally lends an apocalyptic element to the work. When interpreted along the many other Judgment Day references throughout the poem—the affinities the poem has with *Christ III*, the similarities between Grendel and the apocalyptic Judge in Anglo-Saxon accounts, the judgment-related images in Grendel's mother's environment, the apocalyptic fire of the dragon—the framework gains even more apocalyptic significance. Finally, the eschatological opening and close contain within them other structural patterns which

---

<sup>149</sup> Ironically, both do. The poet's own creation survives, and with it, so do the exploits of the hero, Beowulf. In the poet's larger cosmic view, however, they will not.

recall Judgment Day and help to define the judgment which takes place in each major episode.

CHAPTER V  
CONCLUSION

Sleep functions as a structural and a thematic tool for the *Beowulf* poet. Its specific and repeated placement before the trials of the poem suggest its importance to the poem as a whole. Structurally, it operates as part of a larger formula which the poet uses as a compositional aid. This paradigm is highly artistic, however, and its own structural makeup parallels both the poem's broader structural paradigm and its smaller line structure. The episodic formula consists of two pairings of activity and inactivity: feasting, sleeping, fighting, death. The activity/inactivity of the second pair recalls the activity/inactivity of the first, but to a more intense degree. This alteration between the first and second part of the formula parallels the alteration made to the second half of an Anglo-Saxon alliterative line. Similarly, the poem's complete structure is divided into two parts by a period of fifty years, and like the episodic formula, the second part of the poem resembles, but is distinct from, the first.

The consistent placement of sleep also influences the poem thematically. The reliability of sleep within this episodic formula acts as a compass with which a *Beowulf* audience can gauge the outcome of events and the fate of the episode's characters. Those who fall asleep also fall prey to victimization, and, consequently, those who victimize receive the ultimate form of justice, death.

This justice becomes specifically Christian when interpreted alongside the Anglo-Saxon conception of sleep as a liminal zone between worlds, and as a fixture of

Judgment Day descriptions. Like other accounts of sleep in Anglo-Saxon texts, the sleep encounters in *Beowulf* always involve conflicts between humanity and an otherworld figure. The liminal nature of sleep acts like a passageway between two worlds, enabling otherworld figures and humans to interact. These interactions resemble Anglo-Saxon representations of Judgment Day, in which sleep again enables characters from two worlds to meet: humanity falls to sleep, and Christ comes with anger and punishment, ending creation once and for all. This sequence of events, called the “Doomsday motif,” particularly resembles the structural formula bracing each major episode in *Beowulf*; sleep invites an attack.

Like the function of sleep within a Doomsday motif, the sleep in *Beowulf* introduces images and ideas of judgment. Each major episode resembles Christian judgment in its own way. Details of Grendel’s attacks recall descriptions of Christ the Judge—both come with fury and light as humanity sleeps—and Christ the Harrower of Hell. Grendel’s mother’s lair, with its mists, *wyrmas*, and endless depths, recalls hell, itself. The water and the sword which kills her create an association between this scene and the great Flood, the predecessor of Doomsday. The fire and decimation of the final episode dramatizes Doomsday in a new way. As the end of the poem, this apocalyptic episode balances the creation accounts at the beginning of the poem. Just as Eve is born from the sleep of Adam and with her all of humanity, so too will humanity end with sleep and the inevitable coming of the Judge.



## REFERENCES

- Aycock, Roy. "An Anomaly in *Christ III*." *American Notes and Queries* 11 (1973): 67-8.
- Bede. *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. Loeb edition. Ed. G. P. Goold. Trans. J. E. King. 2 vols. 1930. Reprint, London: William Heinemann, 1976.
- Bjork, Robert E. "Speech as Gift in *Beowulf*." *Speculum* 69, no. 4 (October 1994): 993-1022.
- Boenig, Robert. *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality: Selected Writings*. Classics of Western Spirituality 100. New York: Paulist Press, 2000. (*Blickling Homily X, The Dream of the Rood, Vercelli Homily II*)
- Brzezinski, Monica. "The Harrowing of Hell, the Last Judgment, and The Dream of the Rood." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 89, no. 3 (1988): 252-65.
- Caie, Graham D. *The Judgment Day Theme in Old English Poetry*. Publications of the Department of English: University of Copenhagen 2. Copenhagen: Nova, 1976.
- . *The Old English Poem Judgment Day II: a Critical Edition with Editions of De Die Iudicii and the Hatton 113 Homily Be Domes Dæge*. Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 1999. Netlibrary. (*Judgment Day II*)
- Calder, Daniel G., and Michael J. B. Allen. *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry: The Major Latin Texts in Translation*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1976. (*De Die Iudicii, Life of Saint Guthlac*)
- Cassidy, Frederic G. and Richard N. Ringler. "Oral-Formulaic Theory." in *Beowulf*:

- The Donaldson Translation, Backgrounds and Sources Criticism.* Ed. Joseph F. Tusso. New York: Norton, 1975.
- Cook, Albert S. *The Christ of Cynewulf: A Poem in Three Parts.* The Albion Series. Boston: Ginn and Company, 1900.
- “Cynewulf and Cyneheard.” in *Introduction to Old English.* Ed. Peter S. Baker. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.
- Earl, James W. *Thinking About Beowulf.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.
- Garde, Judith. “Christian and Folkloric Tradition in *Bewoulf*: Death and the Dragon Episode.” *Literature & Theology: An International Journal of Theory, Criticism and Culture* 11, no. 4 (1997): 325-46.
- Gatch, Milton McC. “Eschatology in the Anonymous Old English Homilies.” *Traditio: Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought and Religion* 21 (1965): 117-65.
- . *The Eschatology of the Anglo-Saxon Homilists.* 1963. A facsimile of the dissertation. Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 1994.
- . “Perceptions of Eternity.” in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature.* Eds. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 2004.
- Godden, Malcolm. “Biblical Literature: the Old Testament.” in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature.* Eds. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 2004.
- Gollancz, Israel, Ed. *The Exeter Book, Part I: Poems I-VIII.* Early English Text Society

104. London: Oxford University Press, 1893-1934. Reprint, Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus, 1988.
- Gregory the Great. *Dialogues*. Early Church Fathers, 2004. [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/gregory\\_00\\_dialogues\\_eintro.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/gregory_00_dialogues_eintro.htm).
- Halverson, John. "The World of *Beowulf*." *ELH* 36, no. 4 (December 1969): 593-608.
- Helteman, Jeffrey. "Beowulf: The Archetype Enters History." *ELH* 35, no. 1 (March 1968): 1-20.
- Hill, Thomas D. "Further Notes on the Eschatology of the Old English 'Christ III'." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971): 691-8.
- "Notes on the Eschatology of the Old English 'Christ III'." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 70 (1969): 672-9.
- Kelly, Richard J., Ed. *The Blickling Homilies*. New York: Continuum, 2003. (*Blickling Homily VII: Easter Day*)
- Kennedy, Charles W., Ed. *Early English Christian Poetry*. London: Hollis and Carter, 1952. (*Andreas, Christ III, Elene, Judgment Day II*)
- Kiernan, Kevin. *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1981.
- Klaeber, Friedrich, Ed. *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Co., 1950.
- Lapidge, Michael. "The Saintly Life in Anglo-Saxon England." in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*. Eds. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

- Lee, Alvin A. "Symbolic Metaphor and the Design of *Beowulf*." in *Beowulf: The Donaldson Translation, Backgrounds and Sources Criticism*. Ed. Joseph F. Tuso. New York: Norton, 1975.
- Liggins, Elisabeth M. "Revenge and Reward as Recurrent Motives in *Beowulf*." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 74 (1973): 193-213.
- Lord, Albert. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960.
- Mackie, W. S., Ed. *The Exeter Book Part II: Poems IX-XXXII*. Early English Text Society 104. London: Oxford University Press, 1893-1934. Reprint, Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus, 1987.
- Magoun, Jr., Francis P. "The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry." in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*. Ed. Lewis E. Nicholson, 189-221. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963.
- Niles, John D. "Pagan Survivals and Popular Belief." in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*. Eds. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge, 126-141. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 2004.
- Nist, John A. *The Structure and Texture of Beowulf*. Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Press, 1970.
- Owen-Crocker, Gale R. *The Four Funerals in Beowulf and the Structure of the Poem*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Sisam, Kenneth. *The Structure of Beowulf*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1965.
- Skeat, Walter W., Ed. *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*. 2 vols. Early English Text Society 57, 59. London: Oxford University Press, 1881-1900, reprinted 1966. (*The Seven Sleepers*)

- Slavitt, David R., Trans. "Hymn Before Sleep." in *Hymns of Prudentius*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. 24-7.
- Thormann, Janet. "Beowulf and the Enjoyment of Violence." *Literature and Psychology* 43, no. 1-2 (1997): 65-76.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*. Ed. Lewis E. Nicholson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963.
- Tripp, Jr., Raymond P. "The Archetype Enters History and Goes to Sleep: What Beowulf Does in Heorot." in *In Geardagum II: Essays on Old and Middle English Language and Literature*. Eds. Loren Charles Gruber and Dean Loganbill. Corrected Edition, Winter 1978. ed. Denver, CO: Society for New Language Study, 1978.
- Whitelock, Dorothy. *The Audience of Beowulf*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1958.
- Zaleski, Carol. *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

## VITA

Ginger Suzanne Fielder Hanchey received her Bachelor of Arts degree in professional writing from Baylor University in 2002. She entered the graduate program in English at Texas A&M University in 2006. Her research interests include Anglo-Saxon and religious literature. She plans to continue her studies in the English Ph.D. program at Baylor University.

Ms. Hanchey may be reached at 16 Sherwood, Dayton, TX 77535. Her email is [ghanchey@tamu.edu](mailto:ghanchey@tamu.edu).