Overlapping Oppositions in *Beowulf*, *Guthlac A*, and the Old English *Physiologus*

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ABSTRACT

Binaries in literature depict people, ideas, and actions that are in opposition to each other: good and evil; life and death; hero and villain. These pairings appear in multiple ways and places throughout much of literary history. During the Anglo-Saxon period, binary opposition was especially important for portraying not only opposition between Christianity and pre-existing religions, but also for illustrating how important concepts like the Anglo-Saxon warband were used to tie old and new ways of thinking together. However, literature in the Middle Ages also shows the presence of slippage—places where oppositional structures or characters show conflicting similarities when they should not—i.e., a hero murders someone in cold blood. In fact, imperfect oppositional binaries abound in medieval texts. However, such moments of slippage may not have always sat well with the Anglo-Saxon people, as in some traditions, certain similarities between symbols of good and evil would conflict with their beliefs. As a result, medieval literary binaries often exhibit multiple layers of slippage as a result of the blending and combining of divergent traditions characteristic of the period. This thesis will examine the layers within such binaries and explore the effect of overlapping and conflicting traditions on pre-existing binaries across multiple instances in Old English literature.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Binaries in literature depict people, ideas, and actions that are in opposition to each other: good and evil; life and death; hero and villain. These pairings appear in multiple ways and places throughout much of literary history. During the Anglo-Saxon period, binary opposition was especially important for portraying not only opposition between Christianity and pre-existing religions, but also for illustrating how important concepts like the *comitatus*—or war band composed of men who have pledged their lives and service to the liege lord—were used to tie old and new ways of thinking together.

However, in most literature, a major problem with binaries is that they rarely represent pure absolutes. Underneath the surface, the oppositions show layers of gray. Literature in the Middle Ages is no exception to this presence of slippage; in fact, imperfect oppositional binaries abound in medieval texts. In addition, binaries found in medieval literature often display double-layered slippage because of the blending and combining of divergent traditions characteristic of the period. While my research does not suggest that the presence of overlapping traditions in Old English literature has been overlooked, few critics have examined the conflicting traditions as influential elements of slippage in binary oppositions. Thus, the following chapters seek to examine layers within varied binaries, exploring the effect of overlapping and conflicting traditions on pre-existing binaries across multiple instances in Old English literature. In doing so, this

study seeks to examine how the Anglo-Saxons may have dealt with moments of slippage between representations of good and evil.

This study examines works from three genres of Anglo-Saxon literature: epic poetry, hagiography, and allegorical poetry. Each chapter focuses on the binary opposition(s) of a primary text from each of those genres as well as the problematic binaries born from the juxtaposition of the overlapping traditions the works draw upon. The binaries analyzed are found in *Beowulf*; *Guthlac A* from the *Exeter Book*; and finally the poems of the Old English *Physiologus*: "The Phoenix," "The Panther," and "The Whale."

The earliest secondary text on *Beowulf* was published in the mid 1800s, making the scope and sheer amount of criticism on this epic poem staggering.[1] The initial work that sparked interest in *Beowulf* was a collection of Old English verse and prose focusing on Old English poetic diction by Christian W. M Grein and Richard P. Wülcker called "The Grein-Wülcker *Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Poesie*," published in three volumes between 1881-98 (Orchard 1). These volumes would later be heavily revised and and republished as a concordance by Albert Cook. A large number of the initial secondary works on this epic poem originate in Germany, more than likely because it was not until 1837 that J. M. Kemble published the first English translation; in 1895, A. J. Wyatt and William Morris published a revised edition that became one of the main English versions used by critics until 1999, when Seamus Heaney released his edition that is still used in several textbooks and Norton Critical Editions to this day.

[1] In *A Critical Companion to Beowulf,* for example, Andy Orchard traces the history of *Beowulf* criticism over multiple topics; his bibliography is forty-two pages long.

Beowulf and other Old English texts such as "The Battle of Maldon" are considered part of the heroic tradition, which thrives on bold speech-making, daring acts of heroism, bravery while facing down unspeakable odds, and, more likely than not, dying for either the liege lord of the *comitatus* or the people the war band is meant to protect. *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England* describes heroic literature as:

> the generic term for a tradition of narrative poetry in ancient, medieval, and modern cultures, which celebrates the mighty deeds of heroes, whose socially determined code of honour is tested in circumstances commonly involving physical risk. The tone is usually restrained, and exaggeration and the marvelous are kept within bounds. (241)

The heroic literary tradition of Anglo-Saxon England inscribes the value of living, fighting, and dying for honor, particularly within the *comitatus* or war band in service to a liege lord. Such values can clash with the values of the Christian ideologies of early Europe, which call for humility, giving credit to God for gifts and victories over evil, and focusing more on the next life and salvation of the spirit than on the glories and physical trials of the flesh.

This clash between the Christian tradition and the heroic tradition is addressed at length in literary criticism on *Beowulf*. Michael Cherniss illustrates one perspective on this clash:

> The predominant early view of the poem saw it as an essentially pagan poem, drawn from pre-Christian materials which once existed without Christian sentiments and allusions. The Christian elements are of the most

> elementary nature and are mere "coloring" added as a pious interpolator. (125-26)

Cherniss is referring to the three waves of *Beowulf* criticism: *Beowulf* as pagan epic; *Beowulf* as Christian poem; and *Beowulf* as a mixture of both, but not solely one or the other. The first wave focused on *Beowulf* as a predominantly pagan epic, due the details within the story of pagan activities, such as sacrifices and funeral pyres. The second stage fervently defended *Beowulf* as a Christian text, arguing that the *Beowulf* poet was more than likely Christian and planted evidence of Christianity throughout the text. To some degree, these two warring perspectives still dominate tradition in *Beowulf* criticism. According to Andy Orchard, however, the older perspective of Beowulf as a "Christian re-working . . . of an originally pagan text is no longer in vogue" (130). It seems some scholars still resurrect the notion now and again, as criticism of Beowulf as a Christian–sometimes even Christ-like figure—still appear from time to time, as in Bruce Mitchell and Fred Robinson's *Two Views of* Beowulf*,* in which Mitchell refutes the Christian elements and Robinson focuses on them (131).

There are critics, however, who believe these two traditions can interact peaceably. John Michael Crafton explains, "Christian poetry in Anglo-Saxon is . . . infused throughout by the heroic idiom. [In] *The Dream of the Rood,* the poet presents the Crucifixion as a physically active and heroic act. . . .it is no surprise that the heroic and epic are used for retelling the lives of saints and the narratives from the Bible" (214). *Beowulf* is a complicated text: while it does have Christian overtones due to the influence of its poet(s), it is also overtly heroic. Thus, Crafton's statement seems reasonable, as the Anglo-Saxons were occasionally able to successfully blend these two traditions together.

However, the use of *The Dream of the Rood* as an example of successful merging of Christian and heroic traditions is perplexing, as the heroic and Christian traditions do not feel balanced in that poem; the biblical version of the whipped and emaciated Christ clashes with the strong, warrior-like Jesus who dutifully steps onto the Cross. This same issue is found in *Beowulf,* as these two traditions have specific codes based on different assumptions, and their overlap causes moments of slippage within the epic poem.

The argument over the influence of tradition becomes especially important in Chapter 2 in the examination of *Beowulf* versus the three monsters he faces. William Witherle Lawrence's Beowulf *and Epic Tradition* grapples with the influence of the Christian and the pagan, particularly with Grendel and his mother, and how that influence casts shades of the monstrous on both fiend and hero and the problematic binary between the two:

> [Grendel is] pagan in origin, beyond a doubt, but Christian and Hebrew tradition have lent [him] new terrors, in connecting [him] with Cain and the devils spawned [from Cain]. It seems doubtful, however, if [he owes] to those traditions [his] half-human shape. In [his] latest guise, [he is] almost to be reckoned as [a bear-demon] . . . and the bear walks like a man. Brute and hero share common characteristics in early times; the ambition of the slayer was to possess qualities as terrible as those of the beasts that he overcame. (161-62)

Lawrence argues that Beowulf had to embody the monstrous characteristics of the demons he fought in order to kill them. Chapter 2 will illustrate his point more clearly, as

it will focus on his acknowledgement of the similarities the hero and villain sometimes must share.[2]

Lawrence's point about the "bear-demon" brings up another long-discussed point in Chapter 2: aside from explaining his evil heritage and the disfiguring descriptor of "ogre" (Bradley 429), the text provides very little physical representation of Grendel (or his mother). Dana M. Oswald suggests that the reason for Grendel's vague physical representation is the author's desire to prey on the too common human anxiety of the unknown; that ambiguity was more terrifying than certainty (71). The world the Anglo-Saxon people inhabited still had liminal areas, such as the oceans, moors, and woods; these areas embodied anxieties that existed far into the late Middle Ages and beyond.

A second major opposition to play a role in *Beowulf* criticism is gender. As discussed in Chapter 2, an often argued distinction between the hero and Grendel's mother is gender. Oswald focuses on the difference in gender, particularly the masculine yet societally acceptable violent actions of Grendel's mother. In conjunction with Oswald's discussion on gender, Thomas Laqueur speculates, "Woman alone seems to have 'gender' since the category itself is defined as an aspect of social relations based on difference between sexes in which the standard has always been male" (22). His argument refers mainly to past uses of gender discussions in the Victorian era, but Joan Cadden implies that the point has implications for the societal and cultural understanding of gender in the Middle Ages:

> the masculine soul [was] active, not easily subdued when roused to anger, generous, studious, and controlled by virtue . . . [and the feminine soul]

[2] Lawrence's seminal text, like much of the twentieth century commentary on *Beowulf*, remains in currency today.

> [was] tender-hearted, envious, easily giving in to passions, intolerant of physical work, bitter, deceitful, and timid. . . . gender in general . . . served as one way of describing both the spiritual and the physical world . . . notions of 'masculine' and 'feminine' projected [the above] set of traits and values. . . . these traits and values, although they constituted a fairly coherent vision of gender, were not rigidly understood and employed. Positive and negative attributions, literal and metaphorical . . . essential and accidental . . . all co-existed in the Middle Ages. (204, 208)

Cadden's explication of gender in the Middle Ages explains the feminine violence that Grendel's mother displays as well as her ability to match Beowulf's strength when she fights him to her death in her underground cave. Cadden's descriptions of the various traits and values considered feminine and masculine reflect on what was socially understood concerning gender beyond the *Beowulf* text and will be examined more fully in Chapter 2.

The idea of gender seems to be a commonly explored issue with *Beowulf*, even before the first waves of feminist theory began appearing in literary criticism. Orchard mentions that "[even] at the turn of the nineteenth century [when literary criticism] was still in its infancy[,] questions were being raised about the roles which (for example) the monsters, Christianity, and women played in the poem" (3). Orchard takes Oswald's discussion of gender a step further and focuses on the varying effect of gender and violence on the audience:

> the "terror" caused by the male and female creatures is just that: the account of the attack by Grendel's mother contains many echoes of that of

> her son, of which it is in effect a perfect miniature . . . [as] Grendel's mother comes and goes in the space of seventeen lines [while] her son took more than 120. (193)

Gender's effect on the audience was oppositional. Men were seen as violent and destructive (i.e., Beowulf and Grendel), regardless of the purpose behind said violence; women were meant to be more like Wealtheow "Hrothgar's queen, came forward, a lady thoughtful in matters of formal courtesy. The beautiful woman…distinguished for the quality of her mind…and being of wise understanding" (427-28). Yet Grendel's mother differs from the Anglo-Saxon feminine social standard and instead follows the more masculine paths of her son and her enemy. As Chapter 2 will further illustrate, her rejection of feminine standards and Beowulf's similar emotions and mental state when facing her causes gender to become a problematic aspect in the binary between Beowulf and Grendel's mother.

As an extension of the Christian literary tradition, hagiography is another genre explored in this thesis. John H. Brinegar defines hagiography simply as "the study of saints and their worship" (277). Hagiography is the chronicling of the lives of saints, their works while alive, and the circumstances of their death. Throughout these events, the subject of the work is meant to spend his or her time worshipping God, striving to be more like Him. As with *Beowulf's* epic tradition, when the hagiographic tradition is overlapped with the brawny heroic tradition, slippage occurs in numerous ways.

The earliest Latin hagiographical work in Anglo-Saxon England is the life of St. Cuthbert, written near the turn of the eighth century. A few decades later, the venerable Bede transformed the life of St. Cuthbert into a lengthy poem, followed closely by a

revised prose version of the hagiographical text. Influenced by Bede's work, the monk Felix was the first to write about St. Guthlac, finishing his *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* around the year 740. The Mercian-based Old English version of Guthlac's tale, *Guthlac A,* was not written until the late ninth to early tenth century. According to the Wiley-Blackwell *Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, "*Guthlac A* appears to be independent of Felix's life, drawing upon the same informants and current stories about the saint" (232) but not a translation of Felix's Latin original. Therefore, the latter is an independent but parallel text for *Guthlac A*.

Secondary criticism of Old English and Anglo-Latin hagiography is also fairly extensive. Source studies and cultural studies make up a major percentage of the analyses of Anglo-Saxon hagiography with particular attention paid to Alfred's translations of some of the older works. Additionally, critics including Elizabeth Robertson and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne have begun a feminist critique of hagiography and the practices of anchoresses in the church. However, while Alfred's translations have sparked many source material analyses of the Old English texts, literary critics have largely left unexamined the life of St. Guthlac independent of other hagiographical texts. As a result, works like Mark C. Amodio's *Anglo-Saxon Literature Handbook* chart the historical aspects of Guthlac's life as a comparison to the events portrayed in the texts. Amodio focuses on Gulthac's lineage and war history, discussing the monk's prior position on the battlefield and familiarity with warfare as depicted in the *Vita*. The lack of attention to St. Guthlac includes a neglect of the problematic moments caused by the overlap of its equally heroic and Christian literary structures.

The overlapping of Christian tradition thus alters and causes slippage with many older literary traditions, the heroic in particular, but also naturalistic texts. The classical *Physiologus* is one such example: a collection of descriptions of often exotic animals later adopted and adapted as a Christian allegorical text. Christian allegorical texts typically use symbolism as a way to prove religious and moral points. The allegorical poems found in the Old English version of the *Physiologus* in the *Exeter Book* are no exception. Carolin Esser-Miles explains that "the textual tradition of the *Physiologus* is a collection of narratives on various animals, plants, and stones combining material derived from a variety of natural historical and folklore traditions with moral interpretations of animal behavior" (279-80). The three poems of the Old English *Physiologus* use animals from medieval bestiaries to symbolize Christian figures and concepts, attempting to combine naturalistic tradition with Christian allegory.

However, the use of the animals in binaries creates problematic depictions as the animals' individual symbolic meanings *outside* of Christian literature are not synonymous with those in the poems. Esser-Miles suggests that the symbolism of these animals from earlier traditions was altered or "interpreted" in favor of Christian "morals." As I will discuss in Chapter 4, the contrasting overlap of the traditions alters the animals' symbolic meanings, causing slippage in the oppositional binaries between them.

My argument will be informed significantly by one of the most important early medieval authors dealing with naturalistic concepts, Isidore of Seville. His *Etymologies* appear to chronicle every possible bit of information available to the Western world prior to the Anglo-Saxon period, and his influence is profound:

> Declared the most learned man of his age, Isidore, archbishop of Seville, shares with Gregory the Great "schoolmaster of the Middle Ages"….His most famous work, *Etymologiae sive origines,* written at the request of King Sisebut, was widely used in medieval education. (Isidore 12)

As archbishop, he had access to thousands of manuscripts and interacted with multiple groups of people from many cultures and countries. Within his work, information concerning twenty subjects, including everything from rhetoric and grammar to war tactics and plant and animal life is laid out and described. Isidore's work contains descriptions for the panther, whale, phoenix, and dragon that contrast with those found in the medieval bestiaries, which seem to glean their information from the Latin version of the *Physiologus*. When his collective descriptions of the animals used in the poems are applied to the *Physiologus,* the overlap and resulting slippage of the Christian allegorical tradition and naturalistic symbolism becomes clear.

Critical analyses of the naturalistic tradition in medieval literature are rare, though the whale seems to have caught more attention than most. As with *Beowulf*, the majority of work on the *Physiologus* appears to have originated in Germany. Albert Cook is one of the first critics to discuss the *Physiologus.* While the work is insightful and interesting, his work is predominantly comparative rather than analytical of binary oppositions found in the *Physiologus.*

The most marked interest in the poems has come from critics interested in source studies who have focused on identifying the scientific name or species described in the *Physiologus* poem. Vicki Ellen Szabo illustrates the ambiguous nature of the allusive Old English whale: "while initially categorized within the *Physiologus* as balena, the same

category as walrus, the whale was combined with the creatures categorized under the entry of aspidochelone, which included the sea turtle" (Szabo). Her description not only helps paint a more distinct picture of the Old English whale in the mind, but it also describes this creature as something overwhelmingly large and almost otherworldy. These concepts suggest that the Anglo-Saxon audience of these poems would have identified this creature as terrifying due to its enormity and ambiguity. Chapter 4 will more fully examine the effect of the overlapping Christian and naturalistic traditions on these animals and the binaries in which they play a part.

As is evident in the discussions thus far, these three traditions–Christian, heroic, and naturalistic—influence binary oppositions between representations of good and evil in Old English literature. Binaries exist within each of these traditions. The Anglo-Saxon audience would have most likely accepted the fact that forces of good could have similarities with forces of evil because of the heroic tradition that permeated their literature and culture. Similarly, binaries exist in naturalistic traditions, as binaries appear in nature between animals—i.e., the elephant and the dragon, which will be discussed in Chapter 4—though these may not be considered good and evil, depending on the culture of the text. Christian literary tradition, however, contains binaries that are meant to be more stark (i.e., good versus evil, angels versus demons.) Therefore, when Christian literary tradition overlaps either of the other two traditions, the binaries can become problematic, given the characteristically stark nature of the binaries between good and evil in Christian tradition. This study will explore the binaries of the Christian heroic epic, heroic hagiography, and Christianized naturalistic allegory in the chosen texts and discuss the problematic influence created by their overlap in the textual binaries.

Chapter 2 examines the binaries between Beowulf and the three villains he faces throughout the text: Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. Given his status as a great warrior and the hero of the tale, Beowulf's relationship to each of the three monsters he faces should exhibit oppositional behavior. However, in accordance with the heroic tradition, Beowulf shows several striking similarities to his antagonists. Binary slippage within the text becomes problematic slippage that results in light of the Christian binary. The chapter ultimately asks several questions: if Beowulf is the hero and the monsters are his adversaries, why does he show many alarming similarities to them? Do these similarities change our perception of the monsters themselves? How does the heroic and Christian overlap aggravate or problematize the pre-existing slippage and how does the overlap alter our understanding of the text?

Chapter 3 will examine the binary between good and evil within the Old English *Guthlac A* text. Because *Guthlac A* is written in Old English, and more importantly, in traditional heroic language, it similarly exhibits struggles between heroic values and the Christian tradition of hagiography. As a result of its Old English heroic foundation, it does not represent a traditional example of hagiography. Therefore, the Latin *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* of Felix will be used as a comparison piece for the binary between Guthlac and the demons. In Felix's *Vita,* Guthlac is depicted in the traditional Christian monastic tradition, as a predominantly calm individual who answers the demons' challenges with prayers or verses. In *Guthlac A*, however, Guthlac and the demons are portrayed in the heroic tradition, particularly through their dialogic speeches. They are also described multiple times as warriors, meaning—in keeping with the heroic tradition—the monk and the demons are considered part of a *comitatus,* and thus part of a war band. The existence

of a war band for both Christian and demonic forces creates an indirect parallel between the soldiers in the *comitatus* and its leaders, which requires a look into the hierarchy of the *comitatus* structure, including analysis of the depiction of the lords or leaders of the war bands, Christ and Satan.[3] Overall, the chapter seeks to answer these questions: if the sides in the binary presented are supposed to be in opposition, why then do they have so many surprisingly similar attributes? How does the overlap of the heroic and the hagiographic cause further slippage between these oppositional characters and why is that additional slippage important to acknowledge?

Chapter 4 discusses the binaries between four specific animals across the three separate poems of the Old English *Physiologus*: the panther, the whale, the dragon, and the phoenix. The panther and the phoenix are intended to represent Christ and Christ's sacrifice, respectively, while the whale and the dragon represent Satan. The binaries created by these symbols of good and evil show major areas of slippage because of the animals used. This slippage is not simply because of similarities found between oppositional animals within the poems, but also from the lack of binaries between these animals in nature. By examining the actions and descriptions of these animals drawn from the poems as well as the late classical bestiaries and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, the fourth chapter seeks to answer the following questions: how do the binaries between the animals' historical symbolism and the binaries presented in the poems connect? Do their naturalistic binaries or lack thereof cause further slippage within

[3] Peter Dendle's *Satan Unbound*, which takes a deep look into the different examples of the fallen angel's appearances in different forms and genres of literature, particularly hagiography. He extensively examines saints' lives and their depictions of Satan, making comparisons to multiple narrative examples of Satan's appearance in hagiographic literature. I'll examine the intricacies and connection between Dendle's text and the discussion of hagiographic versus heroic traditions in Chapter 3.

the Christian allegorical tradition they represent? Why is this additional slippage from overlapping traditions significant?

Ultimately, the conclusion will consider the questions posed throughout each chapter and evaluate the results within and across each set of texts and their respective binaries. There, I will consider whether the slippage in the oppositions found in *Beowulf* resonates with those found in the story of Guthlac or the Old English *Physiologus*, or how Christianized animal symbolism compares to the depictions of Guthlac and his demons in *Guthlac A* as a way of illustrating that, when evaluating the slippage in binaries of good and evil in Anglo-Saxon literature, the traditions structuring the text should be considered as well.

Chapter II

MONSTERS OF MEN: BINARIES IN *BEOWULF*

Beowulf is arguably one of the most well-known works in literary history. It is famous for both the larger-than-life hero and the villains he faces, creating a seemingly black and white contrast between the good of Beowulf and the evil of the monsters. However, on closer inspection, the binaries created between these forces are problematic at best, as the hero shows striking similarities to the monsters he is sent to destroy. It is rare to find a hero-villain binary that does *not* show some slippage, particularly in Old English literature; Peter David illustrates why the binary oppositions between heroes and villains all but require the problematic aspects:

> Heroes and villains share a curious bond: without the villain, the heroes have absolutely nothing to do with their time. The hero is defined by the challenges he must overcome, and the villain presents those challenges. Perversely the villain almost assumes a "heroic" role since–more often than not–he's the one with the aggressive goal. He's the one who wants to accomplish something. The hero needs the villain far more than the villain needs the hero. (36)

While David is referring to characters within a comic book universe, wherein heroes and their arch-nemeses are often close reflections of each other, the ideas presented can apply to Anglo-Saxon literature, in which heroes and villains square off in epic bouts of skill and cunning.

Beowulf was known for his skill in battle prior to the Grendel incident. However, his fame and glory as a warrior did not begin until he challenged Grendel. On a smaller scale, what do warriors do when enemies are not attacking borders or during times of peace? In short, not much. Warriors who live to fight for glory and with honor are purposeless unless there is a conflict. The villains create that conflict, suggesting that the three monsters Beowulf fights are therefore necessary to Beowulf's growth and sustainment as a warrior.

Grendel and Beowulf, one of the oldest binaries in English literature, represent the clashing of good and evil. Grendel exemplifies the characteristics of what is now considered a classic monster: an evil, grotesque being who lurks in the shadows. In opposition, Beowulf, much in the likeness of Old Norse heroes, embodies aspects that a traditional western hero should: strong, well spoken, devoted to the lord of his realm, and determined to extinguish evil in order to defend the people. These differences in character stem in part from the pre-existing binary found within the heroic literary tradition. Heroic texts, such as *Beowulf, The Battle of Maldon*, and even earlier texts such as *The Odyssey,* have specific elements that help define them as "heroic." These aspects include the journey of a hero, whether that be throughout his life, to his death, or simply on an adventure during which he is required to grow and return changed in some way, as well as bold speech-making against enemies both human and otherwise. Due to the necessity for growth in the heroic figure, it is common for the hero to share characteristics with the evil he must face; the evil is a reflection of what lies within himself and it must be conquered in order for him to grow. Religious texts, on the other hand, prefer to illustrate

a cleaner division between forces of good and evil as a way of proving moral points, i.e., angels and demons, sinners and the saved, Christ and Satan.

The pairing of characters of good and evil within the work begins with similarities between Beowulf and Grendel's introductions in the tale. Grendel's first appearance occurs during his initial attack on Heorot, Hrothgar's mead-hall. The first word used to describe him in the S. A. J. Bradley translation is "obdurate," stubborn in wrongdoings or hardened in feelings (413). From the start, Grendel's implacable personality is presented, and his actions thereafter are a physical demonstration of his lack of compassion, including the fact that he attacks Heorot simply due to his revulsion at the happiness emanating from the hall, as he "suffered tormentedly for a time because each single day he heard the loud noise of happiness in the hall" (413-14). Interestingly, Grendel's character is described before his name is given. This ordering of identification makes Grendel immediately monstrous by showing his hardened attitude towards humans and denying him a name. Shortly after, his name and domain are revealed; he is called the "notorious prowler of the marches, who patrolled moors, swamp, and impassable wasteland" (414), further adding to the grim image of this "unblest creature" who dwells on the fringes of land (414). These pieces of information—identification of name and home—are necessary for determining to whom Grendel is loyal. The final aspect of Grendel's persona is defined by his lineage: he is of the "stock of Cain" (414), as all beings horrible and gruesome apparently sprung from Cain upon his exile after he murdered his brother, Abel.

The poet portrays Grendel as an inhuman, unholy being who lives in the most foreboding places in the area, though his physical appearance is never described in any

detail. Dana M. Oswald suggests that Grendel's description is purposefully left undeveloped: "The fact is… readers cannot put together a coherent picture of Grendel. . . . By 'never drawing' Grendel in the text, the poet emphasizes Grendel's monstrosity not his humanity" (71), thereby preying on the audience's innate fear of the unknown. Grendel's character is further proven by his actions, namely the attacks on Heorot. The attacks themselves are violent: Grendel "snatched thirty thanes . . . [and] went journeying back homewards, seeking his lairs with feast of carrion" (*Beowulf* 414). He attacks only "when night had come" (414); these actions shrouded in darkness build on the idea of Grendel as monstrous, as he takes on the role of a Danish bogeyman that only strikes at night. These nightly attacks continue "for a space of twelve years" (415), compounding the image of Grendel as pitiless and stubborn.

Beowulf is introduced into the poem in a pattern similar to that of Grendel. First, he is identified as Hygelac's thane, the leader of Hygelac's younger branch of the *comitatus*, or war band. "Thane" is a position of honor and trust, demonstrating Beowulf's connection to his king. In addition, the Geat's physical prowess is described: "He, Beowulf, was in strength the sturdiest of humankind at that time in this mortal existence, nobly born and of a physique beyond the ordinary" (416). These two points of identification already set up the binary between Beowulf and Grendel, as Beowulf is named, is in service to a king, and is described as physically formidable, while Grendel is named, serves no one, and remains physically ambiguous.

The poet does not reveal more about Beowulf's identity until the hero introduces himself to the guard at the cliffs outside Hrothgar's kingdom: "'We are by extraction out of the Geatish people and the companions of Hygelac, sharers of his hearth. My father

was . . . a nobly born man of foremost rank called Ecgtheow'" (418). This introduction highlights many of the crucial points of identity that were expected to be shared upon self-introduction during the Middle Ages. First, Beowulf's tribe is named: the Geats. Then he mentions that he and his companions are hearth-sharers of Hygelac, which means that Beowulf and his crew are not only strong warriors, but also trusted associates of a king. Finally, Beowulf mentions his lineage, revealing that he is the son of a renowned warrior. These three aspects shed light on why Beowulf is there, but also help to differentiate him from Grendel.

By this point, Beowulf and Grendel are paired in a binary of hero and villain. Grendel is the malevolent fiend killing people under the cover of darkness for twelve years while Beowulf is the strong warrior come to stop the terrorism and uphold his duty as Hygelac's thane and the leader of his *comitatus*. The two characters are also identified differently physically. Grendel is initially called a "being" (413), without shape, purpose, or even a sex, while Beowulf is identified first as a "thane," meaning he is one of the highest ranking warriors in Hygelac's war band, and then as a "man" (416). They seem to be opposites, despite the parallel manner of their introductions. Nonetheless, the information provided for both characters follows a similar pattern: tribe, reputation, lord. Grendel is from the stock of Cain (tribe) and is known for being consumed with unexplainable rage and hatred, and for doing horrible things (reputation). However, Grendel has no lord, which is another way of separating him from Beowulf. The exclusion of a lord renders Grendel a murderer, as his violent actions are not in service to or at the behest of a lord, nor are they to protect the people under that lord's rule. Beowulf, on the other hand, is a Geat (tribe) and son of a well-known warrior (reputation)

who is in service to Hygelac (lord). The inclusion of Hygelac as his liege lord means that Beowulf's actions, though also violent, are sanctioned and part of his act of service to that lord.

From their introductions in the poem, the binary between Beowulf and Grendel is largely depicted as a classic pairing of good versus evil. However, once their fight within Heorot begins, the gray areas emerge and cracks begin to form in this pairing's façade. Hrothgar holds a feast in Beowulf's honor before the big fight. As everyone goes off to bed, Beowulf talks about how he plans to fight Grendel:

> "I do not reckon myself inferior in my prowess in physical feats of combat any more than Grendel does himself. . . . I do not want to kill him . . . by means of the sword, although I perfectly well could. He does not understand the good of exchanging sword-blow for sword-blow . . . even though he is renowned for his malicious acts of aggression. Instead we shall both of us forgo the sword tonight." (429)

Beowulf declares that he will fight Grendel without sword and shield because Grendel does not understand honor: Grendel "does not understand the good of exchanging sword-blow for sword-blow" (429). In the heroic tradition, matching an opponent's level of preparedness for battle was common and seen as a reflection of honor. Grendel's actions of striking at night when Hrothgar's men were asleep and unprepared is deceitful and lacking honor. However, Beowulf is not without honor and pledges to fight the monster without armor or weapon. The difference in matters of honor further separates these two characters in the binary.

The slippage, however, begins with their very nature. Grendel attacks Heorot because he dislikes the festivities and revelry going on in the hall; Beowulf takes on Grendel because he is Hygelac's thane. One is responding to his own emotion; the other is acting out of duty. Yet their methods of attack are excessively and comparably violent, illustrated by their fight in Heorot. Upon his final entrance to Hrothgar's mead-hall, Grendel's motives and attitude are described:

> [Grendel] was in frenzied mood, obsessed with violence he swung open the entrance to the [mead-hall]. . . . [Grendel] did not intend to delay, but as a start he hastily grabbed a sleeping soldier, tore him apart without any trouble, chewed his joints, drank the blood out of his veins and gulped him down in gobbets. (431)

The scene is ghastly as Grendel consumes "even [the] hands and feet" of the soldier he grabs (431). While the fiend's propensity for violence is not a surprise, the gory detail of this moment would seemingly be difficult to match. However, Beowulf's retaliation is equally gruesome:

> Hygelac's kinsman [Beowulf] restrain[ed] [Grendel] by means of his hands. The terrible monster suffered a bodily wound—in his shoulder a great lesion become conspicuous. The sinews were snapping apart, his joints were bursting.…The proof [of the battle] was plain to see, when the brave warrior hung up the hand, the arm, and the shoulder—the whole grasp of Grendel was there, complete—beneath the broad roof. (433)

Beowulf *literally* tears off Grendel's entire shoulder. While it should be noted that they were fighting hand-to-hand and therefore Beowulf could not hack the appendage off,

only a violent mind—a mind as accustomed to violence as the mind of the monster he disfigures—would even consider that option during a fight.

Another major similarity resides in their strength. As was noted earlier, Beowulf's strength is "beyond the ordinary" (416): Hrothgar has heard that Beowulf has "the potent strength of thirty men in his hand-grip" (421). That kind of might is *extraordinary* for a human. However, during their battle in Heorot:

> With his claw, the fiend clutched at [Beowulf]–he, with astute presence of mind, quickly grabbed hold of [the claw] and braced himself against the arm. Straightaway, that master of violent deeds [Grendel] discovered that nowhere in the world, nowhere on the plains of the earth, had he met in any other man a greater hand-grip. . . . [Beowulf] the man who was in strength the sturdiest of people at that time in this mortal existence, held him fast. (431-32)

For Beowulf to possess the strength of thirty men in his grip is extraordinary; but to be able to grapple with a being like Grendel by matching his strength is monstrous. This reality of the hero's strength being equivalent to that of the creature he is fighting is a common trend in heroic epics, yet it stands as a moment of slippage between the son of Ecgtheow and the stock of Cain.

The final area of slippage between Beowulf and Grendel resides in their fathers, or in Grendel's case, his sire: both are offspring of exiles. Grendel is from the stock of Cain. In Genesis, Cain was exiled from the kingdom of man after murdering his brother and was doomed to roam the fringes of the world forever (4:14). Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, was a warrior who had aided Hrothgar in the past. When Beowulf first arrives,

Hrothgar realizes "[he] knew [Beowulf] when [Beowulf] was a boy. His father was called Ecgtheow, to whom Hrethel of the Geats gave his only daughter to in marriage" (421). Later, Hrothtgar explains how he and Ecgtheow are acquainted:

> "Your father precipitated an extremely serious feud. He became responsible for the hand-to-hand killing of Heatholaf of the Wylfings, after that his own people were unable to look after him, for fear of war. From there he made an approach across the waves' surge to the Danish people, the honourable Scyldings.…I governed the Danish people [at that time]. . . . I settled the feud by a payment: I sent ancient treasures to the Wylfings over the ocean ridge and [Ecgtheow] swore me oaths." (423-24)

Beowulf's father was exiled when he could not pay the *wergild*–or "man-price," a set amount of money usually demanded by the family of the slain–the Wylfings demanded for the death of Heatholaf. The fact that both hero and villain are descendants of men who were exiled for killing adds yet another interesting moment of slippage between them.

While Beowulf's similarities are arguably strongest to Grendel of the three monsters he faces, the slippage does not end with the prowler of the swamp. After his defeat, Grendel returns to the moors and dies from his wound. Hrothgar begins to rebuild Heorot and celebrates the defeat of Grendel by holding another feast in Beowulf's honor. However, shortly after, Grendel's mother comes to avenge her son's death. The poet then introduces Grendel's mother similarly to both her son and Beowulf, with a few exceptions. Like her son, she is identified as a descendant of Cain, a tenant of the moors and swamps, one without lord or king. Like her son, she is identified first by a label; she

is defined as a mother and then as a "woman, [a] female monster" (445). The difference from Grendel is the fact that her label is her name; it identifies her and defines her simultaneously, whereas Grendel is simply defined first, then given a proper name. Thus, she is further bereft from the proper means of identification, separating her from Beowulf as well.

Of the binaries presented by Beowulf and the three monsters he fights, the binary presented by Grendel's mother and Beowulf is different in the sense that they are permanently separated by the gender barrier. The question of her gender and how that affects her character is something to be considered. Her identification as female is strange in the sense that, while her body may be feminine, her actions are reflective of the cultural masculine. This identification is unavoidable, however. Unlike Grendel's, his mother's actions—and the brutality and ferocity behind them—are potentially justifiable. Her son has just been killed. As his only remaining kin, she is within her familial rights to avenge her fallen child, regardless of her gender. Nonetheless, her actions take on a masculine quality as she seeks to kill her son's murderer.

Then what does the poet mean when describing Grendel's mother's actions as "*her* violence, the violence of a woman in battle" (445)? Thomas Laqueur states, "woman alone seems to have 'gender' since the category itself is defined as an aspect of social relations based on difference between sexes in which the standard has always been male" (22). Dana Oswald builds on Laquer's statement, suggesting that "female monsters . . . routinely take on male physical properties and adopt corresponding aspects of masculine gender" (354). The disparity between Grendel's mother's actions and her established

gender via the identifiers of female, mother, and woman demonstrates the conflict in verifying her gender in opposition to the male hero.

There is no question that people of the Middle Ages perceived oppositions in the roles and characteristics of men and women. Joan Cadden, for example, identifies oppositional characteristics of the male and female soul:

> the masculine soul as active, not easily subdued when roused to anger, generous, studious, and controlled by virtue . . . [and the feminine soul] as tender-hearted, envious, easily giving in to passions, intolerant of physical work, bitter, deceitful, and timid. (204)

The hero himself fits the masculine model *almost* to the letter, though the idea of his being studious is not wholly determinable by the poem alone. Grendel's mother, however, illustrates the gray cloud of gender enveloping her, as the characteristics that she embodies demonstrate that she is not controlled by her society. She is stereotypically *feminine* as she "easily [gives] in to passions," which assumedly means she is quick to have outbursts of emotion; "bitter" because her son has just been slain by Beowulf; and finally "deceitful" as she not only attacks under the cover of darkness, but only attacks one man in order to lure Beowulf out of Heorot and into her lair. However, she is stereotypically *masculine* in the sense that she is "not easily subdued when roused to anger," as in their fight in their lair, Beowulf has to resort to hand-to-hand grappling in order to hold her off until he discovers the giant sword. Though men were seen as violent and destructive, i.e., Beowulf and Grendel, while women were meant to be more like Wealtheow, Hrothgar's queen, Grendel's mother breaks these rules and instead follows the more masculine paths of her son and her enemy as "the attack by Grendel's mother

contains many echoes of [Grendel's]" (Orchard 193). Because of her divergence from the feminine standards, her display of both masculine and feminine qualities uncovers the beginning layers of slippage between Beowulf and Grendel's mother.

The water hag's similarities to Beowulf grow through the concentration of her rage as she attacks Heorot and goes after a nobleman who was "most loved by Hrothgar" (446). She goes with the intent to strike hard and leave quickly, whereas her son charged in and ate as many people as he could every night. In this sense, she shows a similarity to Beowulf, who waited in the dark and focused his attacks on Grendel.

As with the similarities between Beowulf and Grendel, violence is a crucial similarity Beowulf shares with Grendel's mother. After he follows her to her lair, Beowulf wades into the water, only to be pulled under by Grendel's mother. Once in her underwater lair, Beowulf realizes that his sword, Hrunting, does not inflict any damage on her. His reaction is interesting:

> Even then he was single of purpose, nor did he lose courage . . . [he was] angered [and] tossed aside the [sword] and trusted to his strength and the main force of hand-to-hand wrestling. . . . So the leader of the warfaring Geats, who had no compunction in the feud, grabbed Grendel's mother in the shoulder, ruthless in the struggle, for he was now enraged to bursting. (452)

Grendel's mother is described as "rapacious" (or avaricious) and "desperate in mood," the latter mentioned twice (445), meaning that she is vicious in nature. However, the second use of "desperate in mood" is used during the battle with Beowulf in the cavern (452). This mood mirrors Beowulf's violent shift in attitude during the fight. As stated

above, upon realizing that Hrunting is useless, Beowulf becomes enraged and lacks "compunction," meaning he is without guilt or anxiety over the morality of his actions. The two combatants, therefore, become linked in more than just a need for vengeance; during the fight, they are also devoid of all morality and constraint, making them both monstrous and inhuman, thus further indicating slippage between them.

The binaries of Beowulf and Grendel/Grendel's mother show signs of slippage and demonstrate the hero's multiple similarities to the monsters he is trying to kill. The dragon, the third and final monster Beowulf faces, is no exception, but, as with the previous examples, the differences should be considered first. For most of their Western existence, dragons have symbolized evil and power. European rulers adopted the dragon as the sigil for their houses and decoration for their coats of arms as a way of demonstrating the might of their family name. In this sense, the dragon is similar to the lion. However, the dragon's symbolic evil has always cast a dark shadow on its representation of power. The dragon's main association with evil stems from its biblical use as a physical manifestation of the Devil. Revelations 12 states: "and another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth" (12:3-4a). Dragons are also typically associated with serpents, like the one that was behind Eve's temptation and humankind's eventual banishment from Eden. Overall, dragons were seen as malevolent, long-living, treasure-hoarding beasts of cunning that sleep the ages away on beds of gold and jewels until some unlucky soul happens across one and rouses the beast. These qualities are a great contrast to Beowulf,

who generally seems the epitome of the heroic and God-fearing character, making the Geat the truest opposition to a devilish *wyrm*.

As with the first two monsters, the dragon is not physically described at his introduction. This lack of physical description is one of the constant differences between Beowulf and his foes. In regard to the dragon, William Witherle Lawrence suggests that the omission of physical details results because "the dragon was so well known on Germanic soil that the poet of *Beowulf* did not even give him a name. His kind was so common" (204) that there was no need to describe what a dragon looked like. But his personality—his purpose even—is discussed briefly before his first action is seen:

> The pleasure of that hoard an ancient twilight enemy found standing open…the naked evil dragon who flies by night, enveloped in fire. Him the land's inhabitants greatly dread. He is impelled to seek out the hoard in the earth where, ripe in years, he will keep guard over heathen gold, and will be not a whit the better for it. For three hundred years, this enemy of the people, grown excessively cunning, thus kept this particular hoarding-place in the earth–until a lone man angered him in his heart. (471)

The "evil" dragon watches over the "heathen" hoard, emphasizing the demonic or at least non-Christian aspects of this foe. Even the phrase "enemy of the people" is reminiscent of Satan.

Beowulf's re-entrance is not dissimilar to his previous introduction, but instead of restating where he is from, the poet simply implies that Beowulf has grown wiser in his time as king: "[Beowulf] ruled it well for fifty years—by then he was a wise old king, the aged guardian of his native land" (469). He is still known for his heroic deeds and still

seems capable of performing some, though it seems most of his feats are merely stories by this point. Now he is in his seventies, possibly close to eighty years old. His time on the battlefield should be over and he should be sending in his own *comitatus* to fight the dragon, or at least to aid him in slaying it. Yet when the dragon attacks, Beowulf insists on challenging the dragon alone. The choice to fight without his *comitatus* demonstrates a divergence from the heroic code and the usurping of wisdom by pride.

It is here that the binary slippage between Beowulf and the dragon begins. First, time has apparently touched and changed both dragon and king. The dragon has been guarding the treasure for "three hundred years…[growing] excessively cunning" as he slept (471). Cunning means "crafty" in the use of special resources, such as skills or *knowledge*, in achieving one's ends. Therefore, while it is deceptive, cunning *is* a form of wisdom. Both Beowulf and the dragon have grown wiser from their time spent resting on their thrones.

A second comparison is their vanity. The dragon destroys a village because one man stole a cup: "[the dragon] wanted to find the man who had done him an injury in his sleep" (471). This action over a single piece from a cavern full of riches seems more ego than anything else, as the thief slipped in and out of his cavern without the dragon noticing. Beowulf has a similar reaction when he decides to take on the dragon by himself. Beowulf's ego has always seemed to equal his dedication to honor. After throwing away his sword and choosing to trust his strength against Grendel's mother, he muses that "a man must act so, when he means to gain long-lasting fame in the fight: he will not be obsessed with survival" (452). Before he leaves for the fight with the dragon, he explains that either he will kill the dragon in single combat or he will die attempting to

live up to his reputation. A few lines later, the poet remarks that Beowulf's decision to rely on the "strength of a single man… such an undertaking is not that of a coward" (478). While the latter is true, it is not the undertaking of a humble man, either, as Beowulf's continued *ofermod* or overconfidence sets him down a path that ultimately leads to his death. To attack a dragon in single combat at the age of seventy or eighty is suicide: the narrator even mentions that Beowulf needed the help of his shield merely to get to his feet prior to walking up to the dragon's lair. His pride has been wounded just as much as the dragon's, and this act, like the dragon's, is ultimately one of revenge: "the warrior-king planned revenge upon [the dragon]" for the burning of his kingdom (473).

The third similarity is in their attitude during the battle. Beowulf and the dragon are described with the exact same phrase in the translation: "swollen with fury": "the keeper of the burial mound was swollen with fury" (472) and "now he [Beowulf] was swollen with fury, the prince of the Weder-Geats let loose a cry" (478). As with the fight with Grendel's mother, this overlap illustrates slippage between Beowulf and the dragon, as the hero should not have the same mentality as the villain.

The final point of similarity between these two resides in the gold. The dragon has slept for years on the hoard that he eventually dies trying to defend and preserve. However, the dragon never utilized or capitalized on the wealth he slept on. Similarly, when Beowulf dies, his pyre is filled with as much of the gold from the dragon's lair as possible, as part of the funeral custom; it is burned along with him, sending him to his eternal sleep upon a mountain of gold as the dragon had slept most of his life. The only difference in the gold management is their motive: dragons are normally seen as greedy and protective of their hoards. Beowulf, however, "was not avaricious after gold; rather,

he had lately revealed his liberality as its owner" (492). Beowulf was a good, generous king who wished that the riches found in the cavern be used to help those in his kingdom, especially should he fall to the dragon. Thus, while the misuse of the gold they acquired serves as a point of slippage, as their respective motives regarding the wealth demonstrates a slight exception on Beowulf's behalf.

The heroic-religious opposition is also apparent between these two adversaries. Beowulf is still the heroic figure plunging forward in fatal arrogance against the dragon, but his image is ringed with Christian undertones. Before heading into battle, Beowulf is mindful of God: "The wise man imagined that in breach of ancient law he had severely provoked God the ruler, the everlasting Lord" (472). However, this acknowledgment of God is problematized by the fact that Beowulf is technically pagan; the poet expresses the penalty for paganism before Beowulf's introduction into the poem:

> Calamity will befall him who, because of cruel affliction, is impelled to thrust his soul into the fire's embrace, to hope neither for easement nor for there to be any change at all. Well shall it be for him who upon his death-day is permitted to seek the Lord and to supplicate for refuge in the embraces of the Father. (*Beowulf* 416)

This passage foreshadows Beowulf's ultimate fate, as he is consumed in the funeral pyre after he is fatally wounded by the dragon. So Beowulf demonstrates both heroic and Christian traits in his final moment. By comparison, the dragon is both a mythical and biblical beast. Dragons are found in many heroic texts as the opponent in the final confrontation for the hero to test his mettle against. In the Bible, however, the dragon is

the beast most often used to symbolize Satan. Thus the heroic-religious binary overlap finalizes the opposition between these two characters.

So what do the similarities between Beowulf and the monsters he faces ultimately indicate about the hero's character? Do these moments of slippage shift the overall perception of the villains he faces? The key to these binaries and the slippage seen in most of them stem from several things: characters' motives; the connection between the hero(es) and the villain(s); the perspective given within the story; the hero needing the villain in order to define himself; and the hero mirroring the villain in order to overcome him.

In texts embodying the heroic warrior code, motive is particularly important. Under the code, moral qualities like honor and self-sacrifice are day-to-day reasons for existence. This code also makes it easy to distinguish the good from the bad, as the bad will more than likely not act honorably. Such is evident in another Old English text*, The Battle of Maldon*. When Byrhtnoth and his men stand opposite the Viking invaders on the riverbank, we know which character is good and which evil or at least villainous: Byrhtnoth and his men are warning the invaders to leave because they are fighting in the name of their king, but just as importantly, they are willing to sacrifice themselves to defend their land from the invaders. Even though Byrhtnoth and his warriors fall in the end, they lived, fought, and died by the code, and are therefore idolized for their efforts.

The same can be seen in *Beowulf*. In all three fights, Beowulf insists on fighting fairly, even though the monsters are the instigators. When considering *motive*, however, there are areas of slippage, as technically Grendel's mother is avenging the death of her son and the dragon is responding to the theft of some of his property. The dragon seems

to be reacting to wounded vanity, while Grendel's mother is, by all accounts, within her rights to avenge the death of Grendel. However, like her son, she chooses to attack in the dark of night, showing she is without honor, as is her singular assault when she draws Beowulf out so she may trap him in her underwater lair. It is these discrepancies in motive and action that separate the hero from his foes, even as he is surprisingly like them.

Finally, against the dragon, Beowulf would prefer to fight the beast as he had fought Grendel, but he cannot because of the threat of the dragon's flame: "'I would not wish to carry a sword as weapon against the reptile if I knew how, otherwise, I could to my renown wrestle with the monster, as once I did with Grendel; but here I anticipate the heat of fierce fire and venomous breath'" (477). Beowulf would not have survived far into his fights with these three monsters without the traits he shares with them, suggesting the necessity of the heroic to emulate the monstrous.

As discussed above, many of the similarities Beowulf shares with the monsters come from his attitude or mindset in battle, his strength or means of defeating the fiends, and even how he is introduced into the poem. He differs from them in his origin or lineage and in his reputation. However, because they seem more alike than disparate, the matter of perspective—of the author and audience—should be considered. Do these variances help to define who is the hero and who the villain? Lawrence touches on these ideas:

> [Grendel is] pagan in origin, beyond a doubt, but Christian and Hebrew tradition have lent [him] new terrors, in connecting [him] with Cain and the devils spawned [from Cain]. . . . Brute and hero share common

> characteristics in early times; the ambition of the slayer was to possess qualities as terrible as those of the beasts that he overcame. (161-62)

The hero and villains share battle mentality, violence, prideful outbursts, and strength. However, these similarities and the perspective of these characters are a result of the heroic tradition and only seem problematic from the perspective of the Christian symbols for good and evil.

Though the *Beowulf* poet's identity remains unknown to this day, it is apparent via the allusion to and use of biblical references concerning good and evil that the poet was writing and living during a time when Christianity was the norm. The poet writes Beowulf as a member of a *comitatus* in the heroic tradition, with many elements of idealized good, yet utilizes Beowulf's final movement towards death as a moment to highlight the Christian tradition of salvation over the heroic concept of glorious death in battle for the hero: "It was no easy departure this, that Ecgtheow's famed son was about to relinquish the plain of earth: he was going to acquiesce in taking up an abode elsewhere [Heaven]: in such a manner every man ought to resign his borrowed days of life" (479). The poet is illustrating dying and accepting Heaven as a new "abode" superior to simply dying in battle to be burned and lost. The poet depicts the monsters uniformly as agents of evil: the dragon is described as an enemy of the people guarding gold, while Grendel and Grendel's mother are from the stock of Cain, representing the unknown, cursed outliers that feed on violence, in both the heroic and Christian traditions.

The examples of good and evil demonstrate the poet's shrewdness in choosing the lineage and driving forces behind the characters in *Beowulf*. Audiences in the Middle

Ages would be able to identify with Beowulf because of his faith and his honor. The villains–Grendel and his mother in particular—are from Cain's stock. The audience would understand who Cain was and what he did, thereby tainting all of those who descend from him. The dragon would have been understood as a villain from other literary sources of dragons as well as references in the Bible. No matter the similarities that Grendel, his mother, and even the dragon share with Beowulf, the perspective enforced by their heritage and ideological tradition keep them separated as villain and hero.

The binaries presented throughout the *Beowulf* text illustrate a strikingly common theme throughout Old English literature: good and evil, while being opposites, are sides of the same coin and therefore possess similarities that cannot be denied. Beowulf, as the force of good that must stand against the darkness embodied by the villains within the tale, decides to match their strength in order to defeat them, as is common in the heroic tradition. The slippage between these characters occurs as a conflict between the heroic tradition and the religious, with the latter universally overthrowing evil at the hands of good, as is seen in the Bible with the defeat of Satan at the hands of Christ. Because of this dual set of binaries, the lines between the heroic Beowulf and his adversaries and the traditional Christian need for good to triumph wholly over evil are blurred. Similar blurring occurs as the heroic meets hagiography, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter III

SAINTLY SLIPPAGE: *GUTHLAC A* AND THE HEROIC SAINT

Part of a long and inherited tradition**,** hagiography is the chronicling of saints' lives, their works while alive, and the circumstances of their death. Throughout these events, the saints spend their time worshipping God in an attempt to emulate Him. Within the Old English tradition, these stories occasionally illustrate the struggles of the religious saints' lives through the heroic tradition. While dealing with similar overlap, the traditions in this genre of text are inverted from that of *Beowulf*: where a heroic tale is told through the perspective of a Christian author in *Beowulf*, in *Guthlac A*, the Christian tradition is overlaid with the heroic. In some ways, such an overlap makes sense, as the saints were seen as part of the Lord's army and were meant to stand against the demons sent to tempt them from their humble lives of worship. The heroic tradition was not just a literary tradition, but also a worldview. The blending of these two traditions is therefore entirely natural. However, such an overlap of binaries can cause a strain on the religious aspects of the text, resulting in slippage as the heroic meets the hagiographic. This opposition is illustrated especially well in the story of St. Guthlac, found in the Old English texts *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B,* as well as in *Vita Sancti Guthlaci,* the Latin version chronicled by the monk Felix. In all three versions, Guthlac is a monk who chooses to live out his days in isolation while battling a host of demons. The conflict created between Guthlac, the striving saint, and the demons hell-bent on dissuading him from his faith stands as a seemingly strong example of the Christian binary tradition of

good and evil. However, due to the overlap of the heroic tradition and hagiography, binary slippage occurs across these categories.

Unlike *Guthlac A,* which focuses primarily on the conflict between Guthlac and the demons, Felix's *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* (hereafter referred to as the *Vita*) is the full account of Guthlac's life, including the events found in *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B*. Felix's text differs from these other two texts, however, as it chronicles everything: Guthlac's early life as a warrior, his transition into the church then to a hermit monk, his trials at the hands of Satan and demons, the miracles he performs, and his death and sanctification. This vision of Guthlac's life also depicts the hermit similarly to Saul (later Paul) of the New Testament, who began his life as a violent man but turned to Christ, later becoming one of the greatest and most renowned men of God after the Crucifixion. Because of the *Vita*'s faithfulness to the hagiographic tradition, the binary between Guthlac and the demons represents the stark opposition often demanded by the Christian tradition.

As an extension of the Christian tradition, hagiography is meant to portray the more characteristically black and white binaries found in the Bible: saint and sinner, angel and demon, Christ and Satan. The saints' lives were meant to be chronicled as examples of great faith to other followers of Christ. In contrast, the binaries found in *Guthlac A,* the Old English text, are not necessarily true to the hagiographical tradition. The binary slippage found in *Guthlac A* stems from the overlap of the hagiographic tradition with the heroic tradition commonly found in Old English texts. Guthlac's actions mirror the actions and traits of a heroic figure; the descriptions of Guthlac as a warrior and the language in his retorts to the demons both resemble the heroic tradition found in works such as *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf* more than hagiographic

Christian literature. Indeed, Guthlac's prideful speech and war-like actions compared to those of the demons suggest binary slippage in the Old English text, as neither element is reflective of the hagiographic tradition. Comparison of Felix's more traditionally hagiographical *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* to the Old English *Guthlac A* places these binaries in stark opposition.

According to Mark Amodio, "Guthlac is a historical figure who was born into a noble Mercian family sometime in the late seventh century . . . [who] spent several years as a soldier fighting the British along the Mercian borders" (212). After reflecting upon the unfortunate ends of his ancestors, he converted to Christianity and "entered the monastery at Repton" (213). Two years later, Guthlac decided to follow in the steps of olden-day monks and became a hermit in the Lincolnshire fens. His experiences as a hermit are chronicled in the beginning of the Felix text and dramatized in the *Guthlac A* text.

In the *Vita*, Felix reveals that Guthlac's name "consist[s] of two individual words, namely 'Guth' and 'lac,' which in the elegant Latin tongue is 'belli munus' (the reward of war)" (79), since Guthlac's war against the vices of sin and temptation made him stronger in faith and spirit in the Lord. When the devils appear, his strength and fervor are said to have come from God. He is described as "distinguished in appearance, chaste of body, handsome in face, devout in mind, and attractive to look at" (85). In his introduction in *Guthlac A,* however, the monk is described as a warrior for God, giving the impression of someone stalwart in his faith: "a blessed warrior, tough in resistance. Zealously, he equipped himself with spiritual weapons and vestments and first raised up the Cross of Christ" (254). In addition, Guthlac is plainly said to be "good" (254). Guthlac's actions

and motives often demonstrate courage and bravery as would be expected from a "soldier of glory" (257): "'My heart is neither frightened nor faint'" (257). His status as a spiritual warrior starts the slippage between the heroic and religious traditions. While he does not physically assault the demons who torture him, his appearance, actions, and descriptions all portray him as a warrior akin to Beowulf and Byrhtnoth from *The Battle of Maldon*, reflecting the heroic as much as the hagiographic.

As they are in opposition, the demons are initially portrayed as dissimilar to Guthlac. In *Guthlac* A, they are said to be "fearsome being[s]" (255) filled with "malice" (254). The other descriptions given in the two Guthlac texts depict their actions and motives against Guthlac and his cause. While the monk is described as brave and warrior-like, the demons are portrayed as cowardly as they continuously come "seeking through the darkness of the nights" (258), thereby renouncing honor just as Grendel did in *Beowulf*.

The evidence from both texts above suggests that the binary opposition between Guthlac and his tormentors should be fairly straightforward: Guthlac, the pious and warlike monk, the epitome of good; and the demons, the embodiment of malevolence sent to tempt him away from salvation. However, as closer examination will reveal, Guthlac has a surprising number of similarities to the demons in the *Guthlac A* text, predominantly in his diction and the tone of his speeches in response to the demons as well as in their shared descriptions.

In both Felix's *Vita* and *Guthlac A*, the hermit monk is tortured by a host of demons to test his devotion to God. In *Guthlac A,* Guthlac's torment is at the hands of a group of demons led by a "spokesman" called "Many" (256). The demons are not

allowed to physically harm Guthlac nor fracture his soul from his body (kill him), but they are allowed to hound him incessantly and do so in the form of blatant accusations and temptations. It is through these critical speeches that the first signs of slippage appear. In their first interaction, in which Many and his entourage are identified by name, the demons address Guthlac:

> "Often within the ambit of the ocean (the devil's realm) we have observed peoples' dispositions and the bombast of headstrong men who have persevered with life amid vicissitude (the whims of Fate). Not in a single man throughout the earth have we met with greater arrogance." (256)

While this demonic accusation of haughtiness to a holy man is not surprising, Guthlac's tone in his speeches throughout much of the text, as identified by the demons, resounds with a condescending note. His responses to Many's torments mainly reflect his faith. However, there are moments when the heroic tradition's influence on Guthlac's character make him more epic heroic that hagiographic.

In his third speech in *Guthlac A*, for example, Guthlac retorts: "'Though, being malignant, you may assail my fleshly veneer with fire's turbulence and with greedy flame, you will never budge me from these words as long as my wit shall serve me'" (259). Guthlac refers to his body as his "fleshly veneer," or coating over his soul. The word *veneer* is translated from the Old English word *flæschoman*, which means "home of the flesh" or "body." His admission reflects the Christian understanding of the body as simply flesh that houses the soul. However, when this admission of flesh is combined with the heroic tradition of boasting, the moment is unflattering to Guthlac as it paints him as almost prideful, effectively negating the Christian humility required of a monk. In

addition, Guthlac says, "'you will never budge me from these words as long as my wit shall serve me'" (259). *His* wit. In every other instance throughout the text wherein Guthlac declares his resolve against the demons, he gives glory and praise to God for his strength and the solidity of his spirit; here, however, he suggests that his own intelligence is the driving force behind his victory over the demons thus far. This almost boastful praise of his body and mind reflects the heroic tradition, problematizing Guthlac as a hagiographical figure.

Another example of Guthlac's apparent pride overcoming his piety comes in his last response to Many's assaults. In *Guthlac A*, the demons drag him to a "portal of hell where, after death's agony, doomed spirits of the sinful first seek entry into that hideous dwelling-place, into the precipitous abysses down beneath the ground" (263). The demons torture him in Hell—though the length of time is not stated–and accuse him of damnation for his alleged sins prior to his conversion. The climax of his response borders on boastful spite:

> "You, being perversely-minded, imagined and desired that you should become like the Creator in glory. It turned out the worse for you when the Ruler angrily plunged you into that dark torture.. . .Now and forever, it will always be so, that you have the burning welter of damnation, and no blessings at all." (265)

Considering the torment Guthlac has endured throughout the text, it seems fair for him to throw a barb back at his tormentors. However, his tone and choice of words resemble jeering mockery as opposed to a humble servant patiently resisting another torturous act.

These examples reflect the slippage between the two traditions represented in the *Guthlac A* text. As was clear with Beowulf in Chapter 2, arrogance and overconfidence are typical—almost necessary—in a warrior of the heroic tradition. As Guthlac is described numerous times as a warrior, the speech making and tinges of pride seem fitting. Yet once again, when considered alongside the fact that Guthlac is in isolation in order to be closer to God and emulate Christ, this seemingly boastful display contradicts the resigned and calm approach a monk might be called upon to take in situations such as these.

Guthlac's responses are some of the more decisive differences between the Old English and Latin texts, perhaps because the Latin life follows hagiographic tradition and is less centered in the *comitatus*. In the *Vita,* Guthlac's responses to the demons and their torments rarely last more than two sentences and are typically in the form of a prayer or passage of scripture. The only exception shows Guthlac essentially calling the demons out: "'Woe unto you, you sons of darkness, seed of Cain, you are but dust and ashes. If it is in your power to deliver me into these tortures, lo! I am ready; so why utter these empty threats from your lying throats?'" (Felix 107).

In *Guthlac A*, however, instead of suggesting that he is greater than the demons because of his successes in this conflict, Guthlac's accentuation of the demons' loss of community and happiness because of *their* arrogance seems ironic due to the superior tone of his words:

> "You [demons] are utterly estranged; guilt remains upon you. You cannot pray to the Lord for salvation nor in humility seek for grace. . . .There, lamenting [in the house of hell], you shall endure death…affliction

> without end [while] I shall have the bliss of pleasures among the angels in the sublime kingdom of the heavens…[in] company and community." (261, 266)

In *Guthlac A*, the shift in the tenor of his proclamations during the third attack and the boastful nature of his final response to the demons beg the question: is this "saintly warrior" (262) truly as humble as he claims to be? While these shifts in no way suggest that Guthlac is any more evil than Beowulf was, the slippage created by the arrogance in Guthlac's words does suggest an uncharacteristic equality of the good and evil sides of the binary.

Beyond his arrogant speeches, the other major similarity between Guthlac and the demons in *A* is in their relationships to the tradition of a war band. The *comitatus* tradition embodies the system that most lords and their retainers followed during the Anglo-Saxon period. The lord or king would have a group of warriors who fought in his name and, in return, these soldiers would receive glory and wealth. The trope of the *comitatus* permeated Anglo-Saxon society and therefore its literature.

As previously mentioned, Guthlac is described as a warrior and a soldier on numerous occasions in both texts. The characterization is not entirely metaphoric. The *Vita* chronicles Guthlac's time as a soldier in his youth: "a noble desire for command burned in his young breast [and] he remembered the valiant deeds of heroes of old, and as though awaking from sleep, he changed his disposition and gathering bands of followers took up arms" (Felix 81). In addition, when he later lays down his physical weapons and takes up the word of God, the monk is said to have donned the armor of God: "to be a soldier of the true God . . . [he girded] himself with . . . the shield of faith, the breastplate

of hope, the helmet of chastity, the bow of patience, the arrows of psalmody, making himself strong for the fight" (91). In contrast, the demons are referred to in *Vita* as "horrible troops" (101) and "innumerable squadrons" (105) of evil spirit*s,* and in *Guthlac A,* they are referred to as the "ancient adversaries" (253) and "God's opponents" (255) on multiple occasions. Both descriptions suggest that the demons are in opposition to God and in a war band of their own, with Satan being the obvious liege lord of their *comitatus*. This unusual notion of Satan and by extension Christ as leaders of a medieval *comitatus* prompts the question of whether the binary slippage found between the soldiers in the *comitatus* is merely between them, or whether the conflicting parallels extend to the beings commanding them.

Due to Christ's and Satan's lack of presence in Guthlac's tale, such an idea can only be tested on a parallel Old English text, *Christ and Satan*, in which similar images and overlaps can be found. Aptly named, this text depicts the lamenting of Lucifer, turned Satan upon his banishment into Hell, and the fallen angels' anger and frustration at following his lead. The manuscript also describes Christ's Harrowing of Hell after his Crucifixion and Satan's reaction to Christ's presence in Hell. In *Christ and Satan,* Jesus' position as the Lord of the Heavenly *comitatus* is clear. Just before Christ's Harrowing of Hell, the souls of the damned "panic-stricken with terror . . . complained aloud 'This [attack] is hard to withstand . . . a soldier with a battalion . . . has come . . . the Prince of angels . . . .Now by the strength of his glory, he will utterly overthrow our tortures'" (95-96). Jesus emancipates his fallen warriors from their plight in Hell and, in exchange for their servitude and praise, he accepts them back into his eternal band. Later in the same

text, Christ is referred to as "the high Father, the King in his stronghold . . . the Helm of mortals and the Heavenly Judge and Author of the angels" (102).

John Michael Crafton notes that in *Christ and Satan*, Christ's introduction follows the same formula as that of a heroic figure: "Typical of heroic verse, the description of the hero often begins with the response of those who are about to meet the hero in battle" (216). In *Christ and Satan,* at Christ's entrance into Hell, the demons complain that "'It is the Son of the Ruler himself, the Lord of the angels. He means to lead the souls up and away from here, and we forever afterwards shall suffer humiliation for that act of his wrath'" (96). *Christ and Satan* depicts Christ as the leader of the *comitatus* in Heaven, and, therefore, the leader of the band that protects Guthlac during his trials in the fens. This heavenly *comitatus* is alluded to fairly regularly in the Guthlac texts, given the fact that the angels are all constantly either being sent to Guthlac's side or giving praise to their Lord while helping the monk. Guthlac's constant descriptors of warrior, soldier, and servant to God also hint at the fact that Guthlac is in Heaven's war band.

In *Christ and Satan,* Satan is depicted as a prolific monologist who intensely laments both the failure of his plan to overthrow God and his ultimate banishment from Heaven. He rants for several lines about the conditions he must now face as the Lord of Hell. His devils, the angels who believed him and followed him during his rebellion, continuously lash out at him for his failure as lord as it now has cursed them to remain in Hell for eternity: "'to you alone, it seemed you had control of everything, in heaven and of earth—that you are the holy God, the Creator himself. . . .You in your glory, and we angels with you, believed you owned the world, and governance over all things'" (*Christ and Satan* 89). These words from the members of his *comitatus* depict Satan's first action

as its leader during his rebellion in Heaven and therefore acknowledge Satan's position as their liege lord. "The leader of the fiends" (89) admits that he "once had authority over the whole of heaven" (90), meaning that he once was a figure of authority, which is perhaps why the angels who followed him did so as willingly as they did. Mark C. Amodio mentions that, here, Satan "[sounds] like an exiled warrior" (172). All of this evidence paints Satan as a leader or lord of the demonic *comitatus*.

However, the lamenting, almost pitiable portrayal of Satan seems odd if he is the master of Hell. Peter Dendle notes that in general hagiographical authors were never sure how to handle a presence "who should be unequivocally bound in hell . . . yet pose[s] a problem . . . to humankind" (40), while Old English hagiographical writers tended to "avoid degrading the devil or hagiographical demon, sometimes departing substantially from their sources to do so" (41). Perhaps old English hagiographical authors were not sure how to deal with Satan's presence; they could not give him so much attention that he seemed as important as Christ, but nor could they leave him out completely as the existence and spiritual threat of Hell was too great to ignore. Nonetheless, to view Christ and Satan as competing lords of rival war bands is potentially problematic, as in the oppositional structures in the Christian tradition, Satan could not be placed on a level comparable to Christ's. But in *Guthlac A*, both command battalions of otherworldly beings, reign over a particular domain, and give back to their warriors what is due to them, as is custom in a *comitatus*. These similarities transfer to the soldiers serving them, such as Guthlac and the demons of *Guthlac A*, as the warriors are supposed to mirror the traits of their leaders.

The distinctly and surprisingly equivalent depictions of Christ and Satan in the *Christ and Satan* text thus make sense in heroic, if not hagiographical terms. Like Satan, Christ is referred to as a leader and a king in a stronghold with a battalion behind him. He even gives a heroic speech, damning Satan for all eternity: "'Be off with you, cursed being, Satan himself, into the pit of punishment. Certain torment is ready for your reception, not the kingdom of God. But I promise you . . . that you shall not offer hope to the inhabitants of hell, but rather you may tell them of the greatest of disappointments'" (*Christ and Satan* 104). Both of these characters' illustrations thus problematize the typical religious binary as the Old English texts depict them both as heroic figures instead of epitomes of good and evil.

It is unsurprising that, in the Guthlac texts, the demons would parallel and resemble the conduct of their liege lord in works such as *Christ and Satan*. The same is also true for Guthlac, as he is a faithful representation of his liege lord in re-enacting, as much as *humanly* possible, two primary moments in Christ's life: his temptation at the hands of Satan and the Harrowing of Hell. In the *Vita,* Guthlac's first moment of temptation and testing is at the hands of Satan himself in the same way the Devil tried to demoralize Christ in the desert—via despair:

> While the ancient foe of the human race, like a lion roaring through the spaces of the limitless sky, was ever varying his foul demonic might and pondering anew fresh designs . . . testing all his wicked powers, with crafty mind he shot, as from a bow fully drawn, a poisoned arrow of despair with all his might so that it stuck fast in the very centre of the mind of the soldier of Christ. (Felix 97)

This mirroring of Christ's temptation is also present in *Guthlac A*. Though the length of Guthlac's torment in the fens is not stated, it is reasonable to say it went on for several days at least, as the passage of time is depicted by the recurring appearance of Many's war band: "seeking through the darkness of the *nights* whether [Guthlac's] delight in the place was dwindling" (258). Guthlac seemingly withstands multiple temptations and torments over the passage of time, serving as a lesser version of Christ resisting temptation for the forty days at the hands of Satan in the wilderness.

The second example of Guthlac's similarity to Christ is the Harrowing of Hell. The demons in both versions attempt to torture Guthlac in Hell, but in both instances, the monk is saved by heavenly intervention. In *Guthlac A*, Guthlac's experience in Hell is reflected during his agonizing moment in the portal:

> [The demons] terrorized him and mercilessly provided him strife, horror, and injury and a rough passage, as is the practice of devils when they want to subvert through sins and treacherous ploys the souls of those steadfast in truth. Cruel-hearted, they tormented God's warrior in his mind and strenuously vowed that he must enter into the grim horror and being condemned go down to the denizens of hell and there in shackles suffer burning. The wretched monsters wanted by these hurtful statements to bring into despair the soldier of the ordaining Lord. (263)

Needless to say, Guthlac does not return from this torturous event with a mind for guiding "tenants of hell" (97) up into Heaven. However, the description of his imprisonment parallels that of Christ's three-day entrapment in Hell following the Crucifixion in *Christ and Satan*: "Three days ago the Saviour's vassal came home to

hell–he is now secure in shackles, cursed with punishments" (97). Guthlac's time in Hell demonstrates his commitment to his liege lord, as he withstands grievances similar to Christ's while in Hell. All in all, Guthlac's position as a warrior for God resonates in his effort to emulate Christ in his remaining years on Earth.

The binaries between Guthlac and the demons, as well as between Christ and Satan, are thus problematized by the overlap of the heroic and religious traditions. The Latin *Vita* generally depicts a humble monk who answers with prayers and verses. This version is more faithful to the hagiographic tradition in its portrayal of Guthlac. In opposition, the almost boastful nature of Guthlac's retorts to the demons only exists in the Old English *Guthlac A*. His actions are natural in a heroic tradition which favors the *comitatus*-centric lifestyle of the Anglo-Saxons. Therefore, the unusual variations found in *Guthlac A* are a result of the blended traditions, causing a level of slippage that permeates the text.

On the surface, Guthlac's tale resembles the majority of hagiographical works: a person seeking to emulate Christ in life as well as death exiles him- or herself in order to block out the world and must survive the torment and temptations of demons in order to be considered a saint. However, the tone of Guthlac's speech in *Guthlac A* combined with his periodic lack of humility are questionable when the similarities between him and the demons are considered. All belong to rival war bands and liege lords. These parallels and resulting slippage are a product of the imperfect overlaps of the heroic and religious traditions found within *Guthlac A* and *Christ and Satan.* Guthlac and Christ, as well as the demons and Satan, are all described in heroic terms: soldiers, warriors, lords and kings. Yet they are all characters stemming from a religious tradition that demands that

they be portrayed as polar opposites. Thus, as seen with Beowulf and his monsters, the lines between good and evil are blurred when religious and heroic traditions of literature overlap. Similar slippage occurs as the Christian tradition overlaps with naturalistic tradition, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter IV

BEASTLY BINARIES: ANIMAL SYMBOLISM IN OLD ENGLISH POETRY

The use of animals as allegorical tools is common in much of the Old English corpus, but particularly in poems such as "The Phoenix," "The Panther," and "The Whale." These texts, found within the *Exeter Book*, allegorize animals from the *Physiologus* as moral symbols. The phoenix represents rebirth of the human spirit and body through Christ and Christ's resurrection; the panther represents Christ himself; and the dragon—which appears in "The Panther"— and the whale both represent the Devil. Thus the animals within the poems create binaries of good and evil. However, as in earlier chapters, the binaries are problematic. Despite their opposing traits, all of the animals have several similarities to one of their antitheses. Such moments of slippage relate to oppositions found (or alternately, *not* found) in nature as they are overlapped by those found in the religious meanings assigned these animals as symbols of Christ and Satan. The existence of this slippage is curious and calls into consideration why the poets who wrote these poems would have chosen these particular animals to oppose, as well as why they would include descriptions and characteristics of similarity between symbols of good and evil.

The three poems explicated in this chapter are often called "the Old English *Physiologus*." The *Physiologus* itself is an assortment of beast stories that originally appeared in early Greek works as collections of short, naturalistic allegorical tales that use animals as moral symbols. The *Physiologus* and other bestiaries, which continued this

tradition of animals as moral symbols, were translated into many different languages, including Latin; thus poets and potentially the audiences of the Middle Ages had access to them. The use of animals as representations of Christian figures and concepts was thus not an uncommon medieval phenomenon.

In Western culture, the phoenix has often represented resurrection, renewal, and even immortality. There is no physical description of the phoenix in the Old English *Physiologus* poem; rather the poem focuses on the setting for the regeneration and the process of the phoenix's fiery death. The poem first describes the island in which the phoenix lives as similar to Eden. In the second section, the phoenix is introduced and is said to be "filled / with a fervent desire to exchange / old age for youth, to renew its life" ("The Phoenix" 55-57a). In order to do so, the creature builds a nest using flowers and branches from the most beautiful trees on the island. Once the nest is constructed, the bird roosts while waiting for the nest to catch fire under the "scorching sun of summertime" (71). The bird roasts alive on its self-established funeral pyre, leaving only ashes behind. In these ashes, an "apple's likeness is to be found" (91) (which can be deduced as an egg), and from it an "eaglet" (95) grows until it matures into the majestic bird it was at the beginning.

Because of the cyclical nature of its regeneration, the phoenix has been used to symbolize the resurrection of Christ as well as the renewal of the human spirit through the acceptance of the Holy Spirit. It is unclear whether the phoenix's resurrection involves the three-day span expected in christological symbolism. However, this omission may be because the phoenix represents the *idea* of resurrection and purification,

not necessarily Christ himself. That iconography is left to the subject of the next poem in the *Exeter Book*: the panther.

In its poem, the panther is described as "a fair creature, wondrously garbed / in every colour" ("The Panther" 19b-20a) and is the only animal used directly to represent Christ in the Old English *Physiologus*:

> [The panther] has a special character, /
> modest and meek /
> [after the feast] the mighty warrior slumbers for three nights; /
> . . . Then the powerful one, endowed with splendour, /
> swiftly rises on the third day. ("The Panther" 27-28a, 35, 37-38)

He has sweetly scented breath that draws all people to him, uniting them in harmony:

> a perfume issues /
> from [the beast's mouth], more pleasing, /
> sweet and strong, than any flower or forest blossom /
> . . . Then from royal lodges and fortresses /
> and towns, many a band of men /
> . . . hurry along earth's paths in company; /
> even the beasts do the same and, /
> . . . head towards the fragrance. ("The Panther" 41b-43, 45-46, 48-50)

The panther's personality, the three-day time span of its slumber, and its ability to draw men and animals from all corners and walks of creation parallel characteristics of Christ in the New Testament.

The panther as a Christ symbol is an area of potential slippage in these poems, however. This slippage is made apparent in the description of the panther's fur. In the Old English text, the fur is described as "wondrously garbed / in every colour" ("The Panther" 19b-20a). In Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, a text that permeated Anglo-Saxon thought throughout the period, provides additional detail: "this beast [the panther] is covered in tiny little circles like eyes in the tawny yellow [of its fur]; there are two varieties [of spots]: black and white" (12. 2. 6). In many respects, this description resembles a leopard more than a panther, and although the medieval peoples were probably unaware, leopards and panthers are actually the same species. What they could have observed, however, was the visual similarity between both animals. Such similarity could have proven problematic for the use of the panther as a Christ symbol. According to Beryl Rowland, the leopard's symbolic heritage is the absolute opposite of a holy symbol. The leopard is described as a "destroyer and as a thoroughly evil beast . . . [the result of an] adulterous and unnatural union–it [is] a cross between a lion or lioness and a pard" (the medieval term for a cheetah) (116). In addition, "the leopard symbolize[s] the sinner… in exegetical and homiletic literature" (116). Moreover, because of its spots, the leopard is seen as duplicitous in nature, with the spots representing the different facets and urges of a sinful soul. This symbolic meaning of a spotted coat littered with sin was well-known throughout the Middle Ages. The visual and physical resemblance between the two creatures raises the question of why a panther would be selected a Christ symbol, given its close similarities to a leopard, with its associated symbolism.

In the Old English poem, the panther is the mortal enemy of the dragon, who is described as the "author of evil…the aged fiend," a deliberate allusion to the biblical

Devil ("The Panther" 54). Of the four animals discussed in this chapter, the dragon is the only one without its own poem, and its description is that just quoted. Although there are very few lines dedicated to its description, much can be surmised about its symbolic characteristics. First, if the panther is Christ, then the dragon must be the Devil, or at the very least, evil. In addition, the dragon's symbolic history in the Middle Ages is rich and well understood, as dragons were usually considered villainous or at least antagonistic towards heroic characters in medieval literature, such as in *Beowulf*. Moreover, in Christian symbolism, the dragon is generally associated with the Devil or the apocalyptic beasts in Revelations.

Interestingly enough, "The Panther" is the only work in which the dragon is considered the mortal enemy of the panther, as a representative of Christ or otherwise. More commonly the dragon is paired with the elephant, as the fire-breathing serpent is the only beast strong enough to kill an elephant. In Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, the dragon "hides near the pathways where the elephants usually walk. He ties their legs in knots and kills them by suffocation" (12. 4. 3) Considering that both the dragon and its equivalent, the serpent, are Satanic representations in the Bible, the alteration of the dragon's antithesis in the Old English *Physiologus* from elephant to panther is interesting. The more common pairing of the elephant (which is not used to represent Christ) and the dragon suggests the presence of reassigned binaries not normally found in naturalistic relationships.

While the "The Panther" poem depicts the dragon as the antithesis of the panther and is one of two representations of evil within the *Physiologus*, the other example of evil

in the *Exeter* poems, the whale, is described as an instigator with innately malicious intent. In its poem, the whale, or *Fastitocalon*, is described:

> [the] floater of the ocean streams… /
>
> [who] resembles some rugged rock /
>
> or the greatest mass of seaweed /
>
> beset by sandbanks, lying near the shore, /
>
> so that seafarers think they have sighted an island. ("The Whale" 7, 8-11)

While these descriptions suggest the enormity of this animal, the whale's appearance is still vague**.** There are many different medieval depictions of *Fastitocalon*, but too few of them are wholly complete and fewer agree with any other. Vicki Ellen Szabo discusses the ambiguous categorization of the whale: "while initially categorized within the *Physiologus* as balena, the same category as walrus, the whale was combined with the creatures categorized under the entry of aspidochelone, which included the sea turtle" (Szabo).

The closest possible portrayal of the whale may be the description of the creature, Leviathan, in the Old Testament. In Job, chapter 41, during His second test of Job, God asks a series of questions referring to the actions of a creature called Leviathan; some of these questions give hints as to the sea-beast's appearance:

> "I want to emphasize Leviathan's limbs and its enormous strength and graceful form. Who can strip off its hide and who can penetrate its double layer of armor? Who can pry open its jaws? For its teeth are terrible! Its scales are like rows of shields tightly sealed together. . . .When it sneezes

> it flashes light! Its eyes are like the red of dawn. Lightning gapes from its mouth, flames of fire flash out."

However, the descriptions of the Leviathan before and during the Middle Ages are likewise ambiguous. The Leviathan may not have always or ever been intended as a whale.

All ambiguity aside, it is fair to suggest that sailors in the Middle Ages would have caught glimpses of whales during their travels, as whales have long existed on Earth. Archaeology also demonstrates that people in the Middle Ages made items out of whalebone. [insert reference to Franks Casket from Wiley Blackwell] Whales beaching themselves on the shore, moreover, is not a recent phenomenon. So when people of the Middle Ages describe an enormous water creature in the Old English *Physiologus*, it is more than likely that the creature described is a whale.

It may have been obvious to most learned audiences in the Middle Ages why all these animals were chosen as opposing symbols. But to more modern audiences, the reasoning is not as transparent. Moreover, particularly when the religious iconography is set aside, the symbolic meanings of these animals can make these relationships problematic. Outside of these poems, none of these animals is seen in opposition to one another, in nature or in naturalistic tradition. Depictions in Isidore and in the Old English *Physiologus* suggest the reinterpretation and alteration of these animals' natural and naturalistic symbolic meanings in the context of Christian morality; they are, as Carolin Esser-Miles suggests, "moral interpretations of animal behavior" (280).

In their poems, the panther and the whale both use the scent of their breath to draw others to them. In the Old English *Physiologus*, the panther's breath is described as "enticing":

> That was a sweet fragrance, enticing /
> and fair throughout the whole world. /
> Then righteous men from every region, /
> every corner and quarter of the earth, /
> hurried in their hundreds towards that scent. ("The Panther" 60-64)

To entice something is to tempt it, usually by offering something that is desirable or alluring, a characteristic often linked with devilish figures. This notion of the panther's breath being used deceptively or with ulterior motives is not a new thought. Rowland notes that the panther was originally thought to use "[its breath] to lure other animals to their destruction" (131). In its poem, the whale's breath is described thus:

> [when it opens its mouth] a pleasant scent streams out, /
> and fish of all sorts are seduced by it: /
> they quickly swim to the source of the scent /
> and all crowded in, a thoughtless throng. ("The Whale" 51-54)

The whale's breath is described as "sweet" and "seductive" and the panther's breath is "sweet" and "enticing." This close linguistic paralle is problematic, as these two animals should be in stark opposition as symbols of Christ and Satan.

The similarity between Christ's symbolic breath (the panther's) and the Devil's symbolic breath (the whale's) is startling, to say the least. In "The Whale," the end result of the whale's luring breath is the closing of his jaws and the swallowing of the fish. The

fate of the panther's "prey" is unstated, as upon the arrival of men and beasts, the poem switches into a discussion of how the panther is representative of Christ. Considering the illustrative detail of the rest of the panther's life, the omission of the end of the sweetly scented journey is unusual. When the naturalistic aspects are considered alongside Christian symbolism, it is easy to surmise that a panther—a carnivorous predator—would have then eaten whatever followed that scent. Hence, the panther's representation of the Savior of Mankind does not match with the natural behavior of this animal, as Jesus did not draw people to him to die and be eaten, but instead to be saved.

Scent and death further intertwine in the phoenix's poem, especially as the nest becomes the bird's funeral pyre. When its time has come, the phoenix "[picks] and plucks the sweetest-scented flowers / and forest blossoms for its nest" and builds it in a "high tree" ("The Phoenix" 58-59, 65b):

> When the sky's jewel, /
> the scorching sun in summertime, /
> shines after the shadows of night, starts on its course /
> and looks across the world, the house of the phoenix /
> swelters under the glowing sky. /
> The plants grow warm, [and] the pleasant dwelling /
> emits a fair fragrance. The bird is burnt /
> with its nest in the fire's fierce embrace. (71-77)

In all three of these poems, death follows sweet scents: two of breath and one of dwelling. This similarity between the end result of three of the animals is striking, as two

represent Christ and one Satan, once again demonstrating slippage in oppositions between good and evil.

Another commonality shared across all four animals is their domains. While the phoenix and whale are not connected in a direct binary, they are united in having similar territories. The island of the phoenix is a "paradise." It is said to be without a single mountain or even a hill: "the plain / is inviolate, utterly perfect" and "in their writings wise men say / that fair field is twelve fathoms / higher than any of the mountains [known]" ("The Phoenix" 18b-19a, 27-29). However, "fathoms" is a measurement of *depth*, not height, and a few lines later, the poet describes the immeasurable depth of the waters enveloping the island: "when in far-off times the fathomless water / whelmed the whole world" (39-40a). This description presents a paradox, as the island is said to reside *above* any mountains in the area, yet its "height" is depicted with a measurement used for depth. While this could be a way of illustrating that this island's location is truly incomprehensible, it also appears to suggest that the phoenix's "island" is actually below sea level in some sense, based on the setting for the phoenix's only actions in the poem.

The plausibility of an island below sea level is less significant in an allegorical poem. If so, the phoenix's immersion could simply be a metaphor for baptism or cleansing before its death. If this island were submerged somehow, that would mean that the phoenix's dwelling resides within the depths of the whale's domain, Hell. As such, the phoenix's domain parallels that of the whale, just as the panther's breath mirrors the whale's breath. Both instances are examples of slippage: symbols of good and evil should not have close similarities in Christian literary tradition.

The similarity of domain continues between the panther and the dragon. In its poem, the panther "has for his home, and holds as his domain / the mountain caves," ("The Panther 11b-12a). Within these caves, the panther sleeps for three days after its meal as it "retires to his resting-place after the feast, / a remote corner in the mountain caves" thereby cementing its symbolic equation with Christ (33-34). In the same poem, the dragon's domain is "the bottomless pit," which can only be understood as Hell (55). However, according to Isidore, "[the dragon] is said to be often drawn out of its den [or cave] into the air" (12. 4. 4), and dragons are mostly cave-dwellers, as in *Beowulf*, discussed in Chapter Two. Thus, a similar domicile is assigned both panther and dragon.

Such overlaps across oppositions beg the question: why were these specific animals chosen as oppositional figures and what can be discerned from those choices? The panther and dragon in particular seem to be an odd pair, as they are not enemies in nature. The whale is the natural enemy of fish and humans, namely sailors, considering its supposed propensity to wait until sailors landed on its back then plunge into the water to kill them. Why would it be a symbol for evil set in opposition to other animals despite no natural enmity? In addition, the phoenix and dragon are both mythological beasts, existing only in stories. The natural evidence and mythology behind these four distinct animals are also odd in that *none* of these animals meets another outside of these poems.

One potential connection that may explain their linkage could be each animal's representation of the four elements in nature: the panther as earth; the phoenix as air; the whale as water; and the dragon as fire. Another possible connection is the presence of these animals in the Bible. The panther's opposite, the leopard makes an indirect appearance in several books in the Old Testament. In Song of Solomon, one of the lovers

is beckoned away from the "lion's den, and the mountains of the leopards" (Song of Solomon 4:8) as a way of retreating from the dangerous environments into the shelter of the lover's arms. The prophet Jeremiah explains how certain cities will be destroyed: "Wherefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them, and a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them, a leopard shall watch over their cities: every one that goeth out thence shall be torn in pieces: because their transgressions are many, and their backslidings [sinful actions] [have] increased" (Jeremiah 5:6) In these books, the leopard is depicted as deceitful and cunning, stalking its prey, as well as part of a foreboding, dangerous setting.

The whale, as well as the "Leviathan," appears several times in the Bible. The description of the Leviathan from Job depicts an enormous, frightening creature that dwells in the depths of the ocean. In Ezekiel 32:2, the whale is used to describe the Pharaoh of Egypt, God's enemy:

> "Son of man, take up a lamentation for Pharaoh king of Egypt, and say unto him, Thou art like a young lion of the nations, and thou art as a whale in the seas: and thou camest forth with thy rivers, and troubledst the waters with thy feet, and fouledst their rivers."

The most famous biblical mention of "whale" is in Jonah, in which the sea-beast is portrayed as a terrifying and larger-than-life animal, capable of and willing to swallow a man whole. In each biblical instance, the giant creature is something to be slain or defeated.[4] The only exception to this villainous presence is in Psalms, where the Leviathan is described as a creature who plays or frolics in the sea, a testament to God's

[4] Jonah's experience with a whale is sometimes seen as a pseudo Harrowing of Hell, as Jonah was within the belly of the beast for three days and nights, just as Christ was in Hell post-Crucifixion. Regardless, the whale that swallowed Jonah is still seen as something foreboding and death-dealing, as Jonah should have died within the giant fish, but survived by God's hand.

power.

The dragon makes its most famous appearance in Revelations. In Revelations 12, a description of the events of the Apocalypse, John witnesses the fight between a pregnant woman and a dragon. The woman is about to give birth to a baby, and the "red dragon" comes to devour the baby upon its birth:

> And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars . . . and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. **. . .** the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. (12:1-4)

The dragon's antagonism towards the child suggests it represents the Devil.

The phoenix does not appear in the Bible in any physical form. The closest possible parallels for it can be found in the same passage as the dragon's fight with the pregnant woman in Revelations 12. The woman is said to be "clothed with the sun" (12:1), which corresponds with the phoenix's fiery plumage at death. However, the more probable correlation is to the island the phoenix inhabits. The woman flees "out into the wilderness," and the phoenix's island is also described as "the wilderness" ("The Phoenix" 64). While the phoenix's connection to biblical passages is tenuous at best, and the panther's opposite appears in the Bible, rather than the panther, the other two animals have a presence in biblical texts that resembles their *Physiologus* descriptions. It is possible that the biblical allusions to these animals could have invested them with allegorical significance and led to their being grouped among symbols of good and evil.

The similarities among these epitomes of good and evil create fractures in the binaries they inhabit. The parallels between the domains and physical characteristics of symbols of Christ and Satan—the breath of the panther and the whale, for example—cause slippage, as symbols of good and evil share strikingly similar traits. In essence, the overlapping traditions of naturalistic and Christian allegory create a layer of problematic oppositions. As in the previous chapters, the overlapping of traditions and resulting broken binaries resembles closely instances discussed in both Chapters 2 and 3. It is to a comparison of these overlaps that I will now turn.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

Heroic, naturalistic, and religious traditions were predominant trends in Anglo-Saxon literature. The heroic tradition mirrored the Anglo-Saxon social structure and permeated their literature; the naturalistic literature continued on as a residual and inherited tradition from classical learning; and the religious tradition was both inherited and transformed with the growth of Christianity. However, the codes of these three traditions could conflict as easily as they could blend. Parallels between forces of good and evil in Old English binary oppositions are fairly common, as well as double layers of slippage between representations of good and evil, because of the resulting overlap of conflicting traditions.

The purpose of this study has been to examine such binaries and to determine the amount of influence the overlapping traditions have on those binaries. In Chapter 2, the binaries between Beowulf and his adversaries show resemblances that blur the lines between hero and villain. Beowulf parallels Grendel as they are introduced into the poem in similar as well as significantly different ways. However, the slippage between these two characters comes from their similarities. As the hero, Beowulf would generally not be expected to show a comparably violent nature or to share familial similarities with a villainous creature like Grendel. He also shared Grendel's strength; however, the Anglo-Saxon people would more than likely been comfortable with this parallel, as Beowulf was a warrior. The same can be seen with Grendel's mother and the dragon. Beowulf's

strength, desire for vengeance, and mental state during battle are equivalent to both of these characters. The slippage occurs as these latter similarities to Beowulf, the hero, result in significant resemblances to the monsters he faces. These moments of slippage are intensified by the overlap of the heroic and Christian traditions. In *Beowulf*, the heroic tradition favors the inherited forms from older texts, such as heroic speech making. However, the *Beowulf* poet was more than likely Christian and incorporated aspects of the Christian tradition into the text as well, such as two of the villains being descendants of the biblical figure Cain. The conflicts between overlapping traditions increase the amount of slippage found among Beowulf and his foes.

In Chapter 3, the monk Guthlac and the demons should likewise be set in a stark binary opposition of good and evil, as Guthlac is a monk attempting to reach sainthood and the demons are servants are Satan. However, because the heroic tradition is used as part of the foundation for *Guthlac A*, the binary between monk and demons develops slippage. In his own right, Guthlac shows slippage as a result of the overlap of the heroic and Christian tradition, as he is a monk who speaks—and occasionally boasts—like a warrior, when he should be more forgiving and serene. Instead, he responds to the demons' taunts with mockery and borderline prideful speech that seems unfitting for a monk. In addition, Guthlac and the demons are all called warriors and soldiers multiple times in the text, configuring both sides into the militant code of the Anglo-Saxon lifestyle, the *comitatus*. Therefore, the binary between good and evil, which should have remained fairly stark as a Christian binary, is riddled with slippage.

Chapter 4 deals with the binaries created between the animals in the allegorical poems of the Old English *Physiologus*. In the three poems, the panther, the whale, the

phoenix, and the dragon all symbolize Christian representations of good or evil and therefore create binaries, as forces of good are generally expected to be starkly oppositional to forces of evil. However, slippage shows in these binaries on multiple levels, and the majority of those levels are a result of the conflicting overlap of the Christian and naturalistic traditions. First, the alteration of the animals' naturalistic symbolism in favor of Christian allegory problematizes the foundational meaning to which the animals were initially attached. For example, the panther is used to symbolize Christ in the Old English *Physiologus* poems. However, as a derivative of the leopard, which symbolizes sin and treachery, the panther's historical naturalistic symbolism is antithetical to a Christ-figure.

The second area of slippage is found in the similarities between animals symbolizing Christ and Satan. For instance, the panther is used to symbolize Christ and the whale symbolizes Satan. Therefore, the two animals should not have overlapping traits. However, both animals use sweetly scented breath to draw creatures to them; the whale eats those it draws in, while the panther's final act after it releases its breath is left out. Thus, Christian allegory uses the panther's breath to draw people to Christ, while the naturalistic tradition would assume the panther ate the animals that followed its breath, hinting at its further similarity to the whale. Finally, the binary between the Christ figures and the Satanic figures shows slippage in their domiciles or environments. The phoenix—which represents resurrection—and the whale both appear to dwell below sea level, while the panther and the dragon both dwell in caves. While it is not unusual for the poems to mention the domains of the animals, the similarity of territory between good and evil symbols is noteworthy.

The findings for this study further demonstrate moments of similarity between the slippage found across these three genres and the traditions that structure the Old English texts. The main connection between all three chapters and across the examples of slippage is the prevalence of Christian tradition in all of the texts. What is interesting is how the heroic and naturalistic traditions interact with the Christian tradition, as well as how the occasional resulting conflict influences the conflict in the binaries of the texts. In *Beowulf*, the similarities between Beowulf and the monsters are already present, as it was common in the heroic tradition for the hero and villain to be equals in some respects. However, the inclusion of the Christian tradition aggravates the heroic binaries, as the heroic binaries are overlapped with starker Christian binaries that require the hero and villains to be strictly oppositional. In *Guthlac A*, the heroic is the overlapping tradition, as hagiography is a form of Christian literary work. Even though the same Christian traditions are being used, the resulting slippage found in an Old English hagiographical text as opposed to a more traditional, Latin version (Felix's *Vita*) is striking. The heroic Old English text depicts Guthlac as similar to Beowulf, as the monk makes lengthy speeches in the tradition of Old English heroes. However, this portrayal of a pious monk as almost prideful illustrates the problematic overlay of the heroic on the Christian, as the heroic tradition is comfortable with parallels between oppositional forces while Christian tradition is not. Finally, in the Old English *Physiologus* poems, the Christian tradition and naturalistic tradition cause slippage in the binaries not simply from overlapping, but from alteration or shifting of symbolism. The animal binaries in the naturalistic tradition, while oppositional, represent a natural balance. The same could be said for Christian binaries as well; where there is good, there is usually evil. However, when the symbolic meaning

and natural binaries of animals are altered in favor of another tradition's moral construct, the binaries lose their balance, as the animals carry their past symbolic history with them and slippage is created; the Christian tradition is the complicating factor.

The binaries and the slippage formed from heroic-Christian overlap, Christian-heroic overlap, and naturalistic-Christian overlap may say a lot about the Anglo-Saxon people. From the binaries they use in their literature, they appear to have been comfortable with blurred lines between oppositional characters. Anglo-Saxon culture was syncretic—meaning that it was accustomed to attempting reconciliation between different and opposing principles and practices—and by the time these texts were written, they had already used and long adapted the heroic, naturalistic, and religious practices their ancestors had inherited from divergent sources: Germanic, classical, and Christian influences. The Anglo-Saxons has thus tried on multiple occasions to merge these traditions, as is seen in the heroic and Christian "The Dream of the Rood," "Caedmon's Hymn," the retelling of religious tales such as *Exodus* and *Judith*, and, of course, for all three traditions, the texts used in this study. However, as discussed in this thesis, the Anglo-Saxons' attempts at reconciling these traditions were not always seamless; in the overlap of these inherited traditions, slippage resulted.

From the binary examples in the texts examined for this thesis, there also appear to be a few trends that result from apparent awareness of and attempts to reconcile such slippage within the texts. In *Beowulf*, the poet demonstrates different levels of discomfort with the similarities between the hero and his foes. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 2, the Anglo-Saxons took note of where a person haled from and the bloodline he or she carried. Therefore, Beowulf and the monsters are constantly divided by consciousness of

both their lineages (son of Ecgtheow versus stock of Cain) and their side of the binary (the mighty warrior versus the water-hag or ogre). Even the way Hrothgar remembers Beowulf is via his father. But Beowulf's father is a major point of slippage between Beowulf and Grendel, because like Cain, Ecgtheow was an exile. This connection of both hero and villain to exiled father-figures would have probably given an Anglo-Saxon pause. Thus Hrothgar explains at length the nature of Ecgtheow's exile. The king describes how Beowulf's father was originally exiled for the killing of Heatholaf, a member of his own warband. However, Hrothgar explains that he adopted Ecgtheow into *his comitatus* and eventually paid the *wergild* on Ecgtheow's behalf, thereby restoring Ecgtheow to his native warband. This redemptive moment clarifies why Beowulf comes to Hrothgar's aid as the Geat owes him a debt. Hrothgar's account of Ecgtheow's exile may well be an example of the poet's gesture in differentiating the exile of Beowulf's father as opposed to Cain's. Similar discomfort may have extended to the shared violent attitudes among Beowulf and his foes, as well as the fact that Beowulf as well as his opponents were all equally pagan.

In describing the similarities between Grendel/Grendel's mother and Beowulf, particularly the equally violent attitudes of all three, the poet does not appear to stifle any parallels. However, the poet does offer, perhaps by way of apology, continued praiseworthy references to Beowulf, as well as demeaning, monstrous renaming moments to the villains. For example, when Beowulf grapples with Grendel in Heorot, the poet describes the fight in great detail. After instances where Beowulf is equated to Grendel, the poet includes a small phrase to remind the audience that Grendel is in fact the evil character:

> with his claw, [Grendel] clutched at him—[Beowulf], with astute presence of mind quickly grabbed hold of [Grendel's claw] and braced himself against the arm. Straightaway that master of violent deeds [Grendel] discovered that nowhere in the world . . . had he in any other man a greater handgrip . . . this present experience of [Grendel's] was not such as he had encountered before in all the days of his life. . . . *God's adversary* [howled] a terrible war-chant a song of victory lost, hell's prisoner moaning over his wound. The man who was in strength the sturdiest of people at that time in this mortal existence, held him fast. (*Beowulf* 431, 432, emphasis added)

The poet thus compares Beowulf and Grendel, demonstrating their similar levels of strength and later violence. Perhaps, to counter the fact that Beowulf is matching Grendel grip for grip, the poet adds identifying and apologetic phrases:

> Then that *worthy man*, *Hygelac's kinsman*, bore in mind his speech of that evening. He stood upright and grappled with [Grendel]. His fingers were at the cracking point. The *ogre* was edging his way outwards, the *noble warrior* kept moving forward step-by-step. . . . Beowulf, *shelterer of earls*, was not willing on any account to release the murderous intruder alive for he did not reckon that the days of his life were to anyone's advantage. (*Beowulf* 431, 432, emphasis added)

The emphasized phrases and names remind the audience who is the villain and who is the hero. The same is seen in his fight against Grendel's mother, as in the lines: "Then the *virtuous* man recognized the damned creature of the deep, the brawny water-hag"

(*Beowulf* 451, emphasis added). These additions appear to be signs of awareness of slippage and the Anglo-Saxon poet's attempts to deal with it.

While Grendel and Grendel's mother are set up as stark oppositions to Beowulf and are described in ways such as "God's adversary" (*Beowulf* 432), the Beowulf-dragon binary is less oppositional and produces more slippage. As God's adversaries, Grendel and Grendel's mother are demonized, yet Hrothgar and his people are just as pagan. In the first half of the tale, the poet seemingly apologizes for Beowulf and Hrothgar's paganism:

> On occasions they offered homage to idols at pagan shrines and prayed aloud that the slayer of souls might afford them help against their collective sufferings. Such, the optimism of heathens, had become their practice—they recalled things infernal to mind; they did not acknowledge the ordaining Lord. (*Beowulf* 416)

However, in the fight against the dragon, the parallels between Beowulf and the dragon are ignored until they accentuate the Christian undertones. Both characters are equally violent and dominated by a desire for plunder and revenge. Ultimately they share the same fate, as they lie on the beach side by side, in a very direct parallel, for what are supposed to be oppositional characters:

> Lifeless on the sand . . . they found him, the one who in former times would give them rings . . . the warrior-king, prince of the Weder-Geats, [had] perished by an awful death. . . . But first they had seen there a more extraordinary creature, a loathsome reptile lying opposite [Beowulf] there on the open ground. (*Beowulf* 491)

Such a parallel emphasizes the meaningless of a life lived for glory. Therefore, instead of characterizing Beowulf's behavior differently from the dragon's, the poet seems to use the slippage of a hero's and a monster's similarities to forward a religious message.

This potential acknowledgement of problematic issues within binaries also carry over to the Old English *Physiologus* poems. In the context of "The Panther" and "The Whale," for example, the reader's attention appears to be diverted away from potentials areas of slippage. The fate of the victims of the whale's sweetly scented breath is clearly defined, as they meet their destruction. However, the fate of those attracted to the panther's sweetly scented breath is left ambiguous. In fact, at the moment where their fate would appear in the text, the poem immediately shifts to the reminder of the panther's Christ symbolism:

> [men] hurry along earth's paths in company; /
> even the beasts do the same and, /
> …head towards fragrance. /
> So does the Lord God, giver of joys, /
> show kindness to all creatures /
> and all men, excepting only the dragon. ("The Panther 48-53)

Both *Beowulf* and the poems of the Old English *Physiologus* thus demonstrate what appears to be the poets' discomfort with moments of slippage regarding symbols of good and evil.

Unlike the other texts, *Guthlac A* shows no signs of uneasiness or apology. This indifference may stem from some of the areas in which the Anglo-Saxons seemed most comfortable blurring the lines. As one of the main points of conflict between Guthlac and

the demons, Guthlac's inclination to react to his tormentors' taunts with drawn out speeches is reflective of the heroic, as has been previously discussed. Thus, despite the Christian genre in which *Guthlac A* is cast, the poet did not seem to mind that a pious monk was giving prideful and occasionally jeering speeches to his enemies. More than likely, this indifference may have derived from the heroic tradition, as the speeches are natural to that tradition and that tradition was reflective of their lifestyle and cultural customs.

This study has sought to discuss the overlapping binaries of the Old English literary tradition and to touch on what they could potentially reveal about the Anglo-Saxon people and their attempts to reconcile divergent traditions. The binary slippage of the examined texts shows that the Anglo-Saxon poet excused, celebrated, and conveniently ignored and dismissed similarities between forces of good and evil. The overlap of the traditions resulted in conflict that resounded beyond the binaries of the texts, thus showing that even though traditions may be inherited, they do not always get along.

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