

Earth, Air, Fire, and Water in *Beowulf*

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the intersection of nature and human society in the poem *Beowulf*. Taking an ecocritical approach to the material, I look at previous attempts by other scholars to locate Anglo-Saxon poetry within the ecocritical sphere and build upon their arguments by examining the ways in which the Anglo-Saxons, through the context of *Beowulf*, would have perceived the natural world around them, and how they incorporate it into their daily lives. As my framework, I utilize the four basic elements, earth, air, fire, and water, to examine the way in which the *Beowulf* poet shows how Anglo-Saxon society, and more specifically warrior societies, interact with nature.

For Earth, I examine the Halls in the poem and the ways in which the societies identify the landscapes which surround them in the poem, focusing on how the description of the earth changes depending on the word used, and then focusing on how they use the earth itself to establish their distinct societies.

For Water, I examine the ways in which water acts as a boundary marker between societies, and how they represent a liminal space between different groups of people that is used as not only a connecting road that belongs to no particular group, but also as a testing ground for competitions between societies that is not based on land acquisition.

For the Fens, I synthesize earth and water in order to dissect the role that Grendel and his mother play throughout the poem, since they occupy a vague boundary that crosses both humanity and nature.

Finally, I examine the role fire plays in the poem, not just as a destructive force, but also the way in which the people in these societies utilize fire to survive in the harshness of nature.

Lay Summary

This thesis examines the ways in which the Anglo-Saxons, as seen through the eyes of the *Beowulf* poet, saw and interacted with nature on a daily basis. While some of the events are not realistic, since Beowulf swims for seven days on the sea and he battles monster such as a dragon and Grendel, it is still worthwhile to see how they use natural boundaries and terminology to identify their role in the world. Therefore, this thesis is important in elaborating on the worldview of the environment from the Anglo-Saxon period, and is therefore useful for future scholars to base their work on medieval ecocritical work in a wider context.

Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Grant McColl.

I received advice and commentary from Dr. Gernot Wieland, Dr. Leslie Arnovick, Dr. Robert Rouse, and Dr. Mo Pareles.

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Dedication

To my friends and family.

1 Introduction

In *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon literature in general, nature is portrayed as something not “stable and subordinate to culture” but rather “something active, encroaching, dynamic, hostile to and ultimately destructive of human accomplishment” (R.M. Liuzza 13). While the human societies of Heorot and the Geats specifically claim victory over nature,¹ the poem is ultimately told in an elegiac tone (Tolkien 127) in which society crumbles and Heorot is eventually burned (82-3) and all that remains of Geatish society is a mound built in tribute to Beowulf on a headland to act as a beacon for sailors (2806-8). Although the action in the poem depicts Beowulf conquering formerly hostile spaces that were overrun by the forces of nature, such as Grendel’s mere and the dragon’s lair, nature is not something that either the people in the poem, or the Anglo-Saxons listening to the poem, saw as necessarily bad or antagonistic. While in some cases nature and men can be characterized as being “engage[d] in a costly contest of mutual attrition,” they are also agents for change, and are often both in collaboration and conflict with each other. In other words, humans have a complicated relationship with nature because “[n]ature changes human society” and “[h]uman society changes nature” (Richard Hoffman 13). In this paper I shall explore how the *Beowulf* poet handles the relationship between men and nature, and shall concentrate on the four traditional elements as a way to frame the argument: earth, water, fire, and air.

Aristotle’s characterization of the elements as hot, dry, cold, or wet influenced medieval thinkers and society for centuries. These elements served not only to explain the natural world for classical and medieval thinkers, but also provided an understanding of human emotions with

¹ Grendel, his mother, and the dragon are the primary representatives of nature in the poem, but in my argument I distinguish the relationship between “nature” and “man” in regards to Grendel and his mother to augment their connection to earth and water, and argue that Beowulf’s Dragon is a stronger symbol of nature due to its embodiment of each of the four elements.

the four humours.² The way in which people utilized nature emphasizes their reliance on it to survive in a world that is otherwise apathetic to the struggles of various human societies. In particular, the elements of earth, water, and fire form this basis for their civilization, both physically and symbolically, with each element emphasizing a different aspect of their society. While these elements play important roles throughout the poem, their main attributes can be gleaned from an early passage which sets the tone for the way nature is portrayed in the rest of the poem. The scop at Heorot sings about the creation of the world some time before Grendel's first attack, in which the "æلميhtiga eorðan worh(te)" 'the almighty made the earth' and "wæter bebugeð" 'water encompassed it' and how he created the "sunnan ond monan," 'sun and moon' which were made to be "leoman to leohte landbuendum" 'lamps as a light for earthdwellers' (92-5). This can be compared with the biblical account in Genesis because God first creates light, and then creates the heaven and the earth on the second day. On the third day, He separates the water and the earth to create both land and the sea. On the fourth day, He creates the sun and the moon. This is the same order of the scop's account in the poem, and this similarity is important to note because, in the case of *Beowulf*, the creation of the world is reflective of the importance that each element plays in determining the order of their societies. Earth is the first element introduced by the "Metod" (God), and it forms the foundation of the world, which is highlighted with the hall as a space for warriors to establish their society. Water then surrounds the earth, creating the boundaries of their society that separate kinsman from outsiders. Finally, fire lights their world and brings warmth to it, but it also represents a more dangerous aspect since fire ultimately destroys the lives of men in the funeral pyres and through the dragon's attack by burning away their earthly bodies and all material and physical connection to the "middangeard"

² I will provide a more thorough examination of these humours in the conclusion.

(middle-earth). While Air does play a role in the poem, it is relatively minor compared to the other three elements because it is primarily mentioned in connection with the other elements. As a result, I will examine air more thoroughly in the conclusion to tease out its potential uses and how it interacts with the other elements.

Context and Methodology: Ecocriticism

In Anglo-Saxon studies, the study of ecocriticism is relatively unexplored compared to other medieval disciplines. Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between humans and nature, and how this relationship shapes the idea of “human” itself (Garrard 5). I will argue that in *Beowulf* nature is represented through the traditional elements of earth, fire, and water, and that each of these elements provides order and structure to different societies, and I will also discuss how these elements frame and define nature as an inherent Other in society. Although there is not much ecocritical criticism on *Beowulf*, two scholars have explored some ecocritical views of Anglo-Saxon poetry and provide a good framework for my analysis.

In his essay “Ecopoetry and the Anglo-Saxon Elegy,” Matt Low notes that there has been little effort academically to examine “the natural world beyond its function as setting or symbol.” in medieval scholarship (1). Low makes the argument that in Anglo-Saxon poems such as *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer* nature is portrayed as something to conquer and avoid, unlike the majority of nature poems in the 19th and 20th centuries which revere and romanticize nature. He asserts that Anglo-Saxons preferred human settlements to the harshness of nature, and the poet(s) of the poems emphasized this point because during the Anglo-Saxon period human technological advancement was not looked at with scepticism by people, since they were still struggling to survive in a harsh world, and any technology that could help them was desirable to the harsh and

unforgiving natural settings of the area (16). While in the context of *The Wanderer* this criticism has some merit, in *The Seafarer* the seafarer laments the loss of the material world but also looks forward to exploring his relationship with God on the wastes of the ocean. This view of nature, therefore, is problematic because it ignores all the positive aspects of nature, and does not account for the need that any society has for nature, since nature also provides for society.

Another important work that establishes a starting point for a more rigorous examination of Anglo-Saxon poetry through an ecocritical lens is Alfred K. Siewers essay “Landscape of Conversion.” Siewers establishes a theory of proto-imperialistic conquest in his examination of the alien nature of islands and caves, personified by the Celts and Britons, to the continental experience, the culture of which the invading Anglo-Saxons were part. He equates Grendel and his mother with the local Celtic population (231) and Beowulf and his plunge into the mere as a “paradigm legitimizing Mercian hegemony over the English landscape” (235). Siewers also discusses Bede’s role in establishing this imperial mindset as he represented the Roman Catholic Church, and provided a counter theology to the native Celtic Christianity (203). Siewers then argues that the histories of Guthlac established the new Anglo-Saxon rule over the land as a forceful rejection of the old Celtic population through the metaphor of “devils,” which represent the Celtic people that Guthlac fights to purify his hermitage (220). Siewer’s later work *Strange Beauty* also deals with the alien nature of the insular culture to the encroaching Anglo-Saxons; he states the early Irish insular tradition was reverent of nature and accepting of its more destructive nature, in which the sea acts as an escape for Irish ascetics to contemplate God, much like how the biblical hermits and prophets sought the desert to contemplate God without the interference of civilization (23). He argues, however, that the Anglo-Saxons viewed the sea as hostile, and positioned their culture entirely around the mead halls which served as a “colonial

view of space and time” (133). His argument is problematic, however, because his interpretation of Grendel and his mother as Celtic analogues is not quite true; Grendel and his mother are connected to Cain, and therefore are human, but they are also connected to the race of giants, elves, and other monsters that are part of Germanic mythology. Furthermore, the troll in Grettir’s Saga is more strongly connected to Grendel than any Celtic creature. I will therefore examine Grendel and his mother as a distinct society separate from humanity rather than as an analogue to Celtic pagans due to their connection to humanity and the natural world.

While both of these papers contain some disputable claims, both deal with the human element of colonization of nature and how these societies define themselves against nature. I will argue that while the Anglo-Saxons did not revere nature the same way that later poets would in the English canon, they still saw and interacted with the natural world in ways that would also benefit them, and would help them establish the hegemony of their society. In particular I will examine the effects that the elements have on defining these societies, and how the societies reacted to the various incursions of nature into their world.

I will now provide an outline for each individual chapter, and explain the methodology by which I will explore *Beowulf* through an ecocritical lens.

Chapter 1: Eorðe

Earth is the foundation of the world in the biblical account, and it is also the foundation of human society through the hall. I will examine the ways in which the hall is connected to the earth, and examine how the poet uses the earth and landscape to create the environment that the poem is set in. First I will provide an analysis of the different earth terms in the poem, and how they affect a reading of the poem. I will then provide a brief introduction to the role that the earth and, in particular, trees played in establishing the halls and materials for human society. I will

then examine the cultural role of the hall for differing societies, comparing and contrasting Heorot, Grendel's mere, and the dragon's lair as they each represent different ways that earth is used to highlight how these societies deal with adversity.

Chapter 2: Wæter

I will then examine the role that water plays in *Beowulf* and the larger implications of water as a boundary marker and transitional and liminal area between societies and cultures. In particular, this chapter expands upon Crowley's essay "Living on the ecg" by noting the ways in which water was used by the Anglo-Saxons, and how water influences the structure of their society by defining who is part of their society and who is not. I will also consider the role that water plays in connecting societies, with specific detail in how water shapes the journey of the Geats to and from Denmark, and how Beowulf's swimming match with Breca provides a neutral testing ground for Beowulf to establish his strength and monster slaying credentials. I conclude by examining the other roles that water plays, namely in the funeral for Scyld Scefing and in the dragon's crude funeral in the ocean, which symbolically quenches its fire.

Chapter 3: The Fens

In this chapter I will examine how the combination of earth and water creates the fens, which is an important area in the poem as a limited liminal area which creates a distinct society apart from the typical human developments. I will start by arguing that while Grendel and his mother are considered monsters by human society and are outcasts from the rest of humanity, they are still to an extent human. They occupy the liminal boundary between human and nature, forming their own distinct society in the mere. I will examine why the boundary marker of the fens is

important in defining how this shapes the society of Heorot by questioning the ways that the Danes and Geats react to the more alien society of Grendel and his mother, thereby highlighting the values and boundaries of human society not just through physical means but also through symbolic ones. I will then look at how Beowulf also inhabits this liminal space, and why this characteristic makes him able to slay Grendel and his mother. I will conclude by looking at how the sword that Beowulf finds in the mere is representative of this combination of elements, since it melts and leaves behind the physical remnant of the biblical flood, and how these elements interact with each other to create a separate identity that counters the stereotypical human centered view of nature and society.

Chapter 4: Fyr

Fire is the final element the Metod brings into the world in the creation myth, and it is also the final element that eventually consumes both Heorot and Beowulf. I will begin this chapter by examining the main role that fire plays in shaping the daily activities of society. The people who make up a nation ultimately decide who is fit to share their food and weapons with them. Fire, in its positive aspect, acts as a secondary shaper of society, as it is situated in the middle of their hall, it warms their days and nights, gives them funeral pyres to burn their dead, and it provides the means for humans to make weapons to both defend themselves and deal with any threats to their society. Fire is therefore essential for any society because it is necessary for the survival of a society, but it also represents the greatest danger of all the elements if not controlled properly. In its negative aspect fire can consume and destroy indiscriminately, leaving societies and peoples in ruin. The dragon represents this wild aspect of nature, and I read the dragon's attack

as an inability for humans to completely control nature, and how this lack of control in the world shapes human societies' ability to fight against nature for as long as it can.

A note: while I separate these elements into distinct categories, I mainly do this to emphasize the role that each element plays in defining the societies in the poem. There are many instances where the elements mix, such as earth and fire both being necessary for the hall and water and earth as a symbol for the distinct societies in the poem, such as Grendel, his mother, and for the way Beowulf fits into this paradigm. As a result, I will include an analysis of multiple elements in each chapter when it helps define the main characteristic that element embodies. In this thesis I assign one single element to the dragon, to Grendel and his mother, to weapons et cetera, fully realizing that, for example, the dragon is formed of the earth, breathes fire, and flies in the air; that Grendel and his mother live in water but are formed of earth; and that weapons and treasure are earth that is transformed by the power of fire. I shall concentrate on the element the poet most prominently assigns to each of these rather than on the mixture of elements that can be found in their production, habitation, or inherent nature.

2 Eorðe

2.1 Earth Definition

In *Beowulf*, the term “eorðe,” including compound words, is used by the poet twenty-seven times, not including any synonyms or other words related to these terms. Frederick Klaeber notes that it means both “ground” and “the world we live in” in the poem (p 371), while compound words using “eorð” define either men or halls/homes. Since the term for earth is connected to both men and the halls they inhabit, it can be stated that the earth, as an element, represents human societies in this world, and functions as an analogue for their interaction with other aspects of nature. In the creation myth, God creates the earth first, and it is therefore the earth that is the foundation for society in the poem.³ Earth is also a symbol of stasis, because although Heorot is foreshadowed to burn down as the result of a feud (83-5) and the dragon burns down Beowulf’s hall in his search for the cup (2325-7), the halls and burial mounds of heroes have more lasting presence than any human. Heorot, for example, was built to be an eternal example of the glory and prestige of Hrothgar and the Danes (69-70), and Beowulf’s mound was meant to be used as not only a reminder of Beowulf’s time on Earth, but also as a guide to bring seafarers to safety (2806-8). This idea of a permanent structure to highlight a warrior’s triumphs in life is indicative of the power of earth because it represents, in nature, the best attempt men have to make a mark on the world.

The four terms that the poet of *Beowulf* uses to describe the earth are “eorðe” ‘earth’ and “land,” ‘land’, “middangeard” ‘middle-earth’, and “hruse” ‘earth, ground’. All these terms are used to talk about the land and the people that live there, but are used as separate words to

³ As a note, the earth is the element that is most closely linked with fire and water, because the hall is a haven for people, and so it needs both fire and water to operate a functional society.

convey different meanings. The poet uses “eorðe” to describe the entire world, and not just the areas that the people inhabit. For example, when Beowulf grapples with Grendel, Grendel had never “mette middangeardes,/ eorþan sceata on elran men/ mundgripe mara” ‘found a stronger handgrip of any other man of the regions of the earth, of the world’ (751-3). In his sermon Hrothgar mentions that some men are destined for greatness by God, and that God “seleð him on eþle eorþan wynne,” ‘gives to him in his own homeland joy of the earth’ (1730). These two examples demonstrate that when the poet uses “eorðe” he is talking about the entire world; he is not speaking of specific locales, but instead implies that Beowulf is the strongest man on a global scale, and that when a hero earns the favour of God he is afforded all the joys of the world. This global term is important in the poem because it situates the action within a larger context, creating a framework in which the poem can reflect upon these values as inherent in every society. While it most likely does not mean that the poet had knowledge of the world outside of Europe, or even northern Europe, it does emphasize that he had an understanding that the world was larger than what was just in his immediate vicinity.

“Eorðe” is contrasted with the poet's use of “land,” which connects the ground with a certain nation or people, since in Proto-Germanic it originally meant ‘a definite portion of the earth’s surface owned by an individual or home of a nation’ (“Land” Etymology Online). This definition places the use of “land” as relating to the piece of land owned by a certain society, and it is also connected to the modern “landscape,” meaning “an expanse of scenery that can be seen in a single view” (AHD) because it relates this land as something that could be seen by the people, and which they would relate to as their property. While nations could expand beyond what they could visually see, “landscape” is still useful because it indicates that the land in which a people lived was important to them and they projected their linguistic understanding of the

physical features to the area. This helped them between distinguish the differences between societies. For example, the main use of “land” is in connection with the human settlements, namely Heorot and Geatland. When Beowulf and his comrades return home to Geatland, they first see “cuþe næssas ceol up geþrang,/ lyftgeswenced on lande stod” ‘the well known headlands; the ship pressed forward, weather beaten and stood on land’ (1912-3). This small passage indicates the importance the land has for the Geats; it is familiar to them, and when they rest their ship the poet emphasizes their connection to the land, since it is represented in opposition to the sea they had just been travelling on, and is safer to them than the sea. This connection to the earth is echoed earlier in the poem in relation to the land of the Danes when Beowulf swims back from Grendel’s mere and swims “to lande” ‘to land’ (1623), and then Beowulf’s companions carry Grendel’s head back to Heorot along the “cuþe stræte” ‘well-known road’ (1634), which is used to indicate that their familiarity with the land allows them to traverse it easily, especially since it is now rid of the monsters that haunted the area. These two instances highlight how “land” is treated in this section: Beowulf swam up from the bottom of the mere onto familiar territory, and although the trip to the bottom of the mere was related with a menacing tone (1408-16), it is now more recognizable, implying that with the defeat of Grendel’s mother there is nothing more to fear from the area.

The term “middangeard” represents the entire world they live in and implies a transitory space for people. It is used five times in the poem. The first time is during the building of Heorot, when “weorc gebannan/ manigre mægþe geond þisne middangeard/ folcstede frætan” (74-6) ‘ordered work to make beautiful the hall by many nations throughout this middle-earth’. The building of the hall signifies the Danes’ desire to be remembered, and even though they use timber to construct its pillars, their intention is to create something that will differentiate them

from the other societies in the poem, thereby solidifying their legacy in the world. They retain this prestige until Grendel attacks and takes over Heorot for twelve years. It later details Beowulf's role in the world, and why it is important for him to search for glory. When Grendel enters the hall for the last time, he consumes one of Beowulf's warriors, then finds that "onfunde fyrena hyrde/ þæt he ne mette middangeardes,/ eorþan sceata on elran men/ mundgripe maran" (750-3) 'he discovered, that keeper of crime, that he never found of the earth, of the earth's surface, a hand grip more great on another man'. I already mentioned this passage in connection with eorðe, and "middangeard" mainly augments the idea that Beowulf will leave the earth with his name remembered by more people than others due to his prodigious strength. After Beowulf returns with Grendel's head and the hilt of the flood-sword, Hrothgar states that the Danes had "wigge beleac/ manigum mægþa geond þysne middangeard,/ æscum ond ecgum" (1770-1) 'protected with war against many nations throughout this middle-earth, with spear and sword' and that Hrothgar himself "me ænige/ under swegles begong gesacan ne tealde" (1772-3) 'did not consider any adversary under the region of heaven' before Grendel's attack. "Middangeard" here emphasizes how the hall is an important symbol of humanity's time on the earth, since Hrothgar uses it to establish his own glory on the earth before he dies, leaving a lasting legacy for his descendants. Unferth also uses the term when he challenges Beowulf, since he "ne uþe þæt ænig oðer man/ æfre mærdða þon ma middangeardes/ gehedde under heofenum þonne he sylfa" (503-5) 'did not wish that any other man at any other time should heed more glories in middle-earth under heaven than he himself'. Unferth's acknowledgment of glory is connected to his short time on earth, since a warrior only has a short time to make his name remembered by those following, and establish their legacy. The last occurrence of "middangeard" when describing the heroic deeds of Eofor and Wulf, when Hygelac rewards them for their bravery in

combat by giving them land, and “ne ðorfte him ða lean oðwitan/ mon on middangearde, syðð[n] hie ða mærdā geslogon” (2995-6) ‘nor could have good cause to reproach a man on this middle-earth this reward, since they achieved this fame’. Again, this statement of this specific term emphasizes the importance of the brother’s time on earth as warriors, and that their achievements will carry forward to their future generations, since their own time on earth is limited.

“Middangeard,” therefore, is reflective of the nature of earth as a transitory space because it highlights how even though God is mentioned in the poem and there is an indication that one may go to heaven, it is their time on earth that is truly important, and they mention the earth in relation to this glory that they gain to be remembered.

Finally, the poet uses the term “hruse” when he makes direct connections to the earth itself; namely, through the underground areas that are littered throughout. Etymologically, the term is now connected with the modern English “crust,” coming from the French “crouste,” indicating that it is used as a term for the layer of soil in the earth, and what lies below it (“Crust”). The term is used sparingly throughout, and is mainly used in connection with the Last Survivor’s hoard and the Dragon’s lair.

2.2 Earth and Landscape

In other words, both “eorðe” and “land” have a connection to the ground on which we live, but the poet uses them to distinguish between the land of a specific peoples, such as the Danes or the Geats, distinguishes between water and land, and the whole of the earth where all men live. According to Siewers, earth in literature is a construct of both imagination and of reality (6). Earth represented many things to the medieval mind: “Earth to the ancients meant a realm including land and sea, ultimately plant *and* soil, native country *and* the dust of Genesis, from which humans were energized by God’s breath, *pneuma*, in Greek meaning wind and spirit,

as well as breath” (*Earth* 9). He also states that landscape and imagination co-exist since landscape is “a meaningful symbolic overlay of earth” and “thus integrated the contexts of reader and author, while relating them directly to text and environment” (*Earth* 8). This idea of the physicality of the land reflecting the reader and poet’s conception of the land is present in the types of words the poet uses to describe the landscape in the poem. In addition, Margaret Gelling notes that there are also different definitions for specific features in the landscape of *Beowulf*, such as “hlið” (hill) and “hop” (remote, or secret place, and used in “fenhop” (764) and “morhop” (453), both references to Grendel’s mere) which further serve to distinguish how the Anglo-Saxons viewed specific pieces of land, and these additional terms serve further to emphasize how the Anglo-Saxons viewed the earth because it shows how they specifically used certain terms to describe what is ostensibly the same thing: dirt. The land in England at the time was being altered significantly so it changed how the landscape looked.

Kelly Wickham-Crowley states that since water levels were rising in continental Europe, there was less land for Germanic tribes in their native homelands to inhabit; this habitable land that was shrinking in Europe, however, was growing in Britain. This growth in land usage is mainly due to the Anglo-Saxons’ incorporating sites that the Romans did not, such as the fens and marshes, and these previously uninhabited areas shared characteristics with their homelands. Wickham-Crowley asserts that in order to integrate themselves into the new landscape, the Anglo-Saxons would develop specific names for landscape features that they could use as a common language, which both “marked it and made memory a map, transferring man’s vision and judgement to the landscape in words even as the landscape itself took up residence in the mind’s eye” (89). This landscape idea therefore coincides with the idea that land became an important marker for people, which is why *Beowulf* would want his barrow named, as a

permanent reminder for those still living to remember his life. Naming these sites and monuments did not mean that these people were conquering land for the sake of violence, but rather were adapting to their new reality and surroundings, thereby making marginal areas central (Crowley 100). This integration of formerly unused land matches Della Hooke's observation that many of the previous Roman sites and farming areas were swallowed up into the bog and the Anglo-Saxons were forced to find different types of areas to subsist in (171). For *Beowulf* and the societies in the poem, this is a society that functioned similarly to the mainland in terms of food production and land use, and as a result, the Anglo-Saxons incorporated the alien landscape of medieval Britain into their own milieu, and this reality is mirrored in the poem, even though *Beowulf* has a Scandinavian setting. They also used the local materials to construct buildings which provided a base for their societies to flourish.

Although the poem is set in Denmark and Geatland, the landscape is more reminiscent of the Anglo-Saxon landscape, and their buildings reflected the materials that were available to Anglo-Saxons, even though the construction was similar to the mead halls of Scandinavia. Hooke states that in the rural areas of the Anglo-Saxon countryside, most buildings were built with local materials, which in turn would fit them better with the local area aesthetically (105). The areas around the town were often characterized by a wide proliferation of arable fields, and the size of the town was dependent on the size of these fields (Hooke 119). In the early Anglo-Saxon period the introduction of open field agriculture further altered the landscape. The following period was important in fostering a sense of community amongst the people because it allowed some fields to recuperate and remain productive for longer periods, and with this loss of work for individual farmers, it allowed them to come together and work harder on the fields of their neighbours, thereby increasing production to maximize the potential for the harvest. They

also used the fens and meres as a communal space for hunting and gathering other materials they needed for daily life (Hooke 184). While this use of space in Anglo-Saxon England is not apparent in *Beowulf*, it is an interesting exercise to determine how the people of the time would come together and act as a community. *Beowulf* demonstrates this willingness for people to join a larger community in other ways, such as through Beowulf's willingness to aid Hrothgar against Grendel, the use of feasts and marriages to cement alliances, and to provide council to other people. In other words, they use every aspect of the land to foster a sense of community in the poem, and the Anglo-Saxon use of the land reflects another type of community that was important for the survival of their society. Although the land was mainly used for farming and animal husbandry in the Anglo-Saxon period, the Anglo-Saxons' main export and source of valuable income lay in the woods that surrounded them, since they used wood to supply themselves with most basic needs including housing and warmth through fire.

2.3 Trees as Economy

In the Anglo-Saxon period woods and woodlands were a vital part of the economy, and as a result there was not much wilderness, meaning that there were few areas considered off limits since they all provided a major resource for the people living nearby (Hooke 139). Although there is some speculation that woodland regeneration began after the withdrawal of the Romans from the area, there is not much evidence to support this claim other than in some marginal areas and in northern England (Hooke 145). Hooke also notes that the idea of a flourishing island full of forests awaiting the arrival and exploitation of the Anglo-Saxons is false, since there is evidence that in prehistoric Britain, fields populated much of the area in open fields, implying that deforestation was underway even before the Romans came (139). There is also very little evidence that Anglo-Saxons did much to reverse this trend and bring the forests back.

This lack of desire to reforest Britain implies that for the Anglo-Saxons, woodlands were not recognized as important areas of sustainable resources, but were rather an area to exploit and control to further their own needs. This use of the woodlands caused major deforestation, and although kings implemented laws (such as in Wessex, the Laws of Ine) (Hooke 165) to slow down the destruction of woodland, by 1086 England's forested areas constituted only 15% of the land. This land use is demonstrated in *Beowulf* in a few notable ways. First, wood was an important source of material in human society for their buildings, and for funeral pyres. While Grendel's mere and the dragon's lair are both underground caves, Heorot is made of wood. When the Geats embarked from their ship they marched until they "þæt [s]æl timbred/ geatolic ond goldfah ongyton mihton" (they were able to see that high timbered hall, splendid and ornamented with gold) (308-9). The use of the word "timbred" is a past participle for "build" and is also etymologically connected to both buildings in general and buildings made with wood and to trees and woods in general ("Timber"). The foreshadowed burning at Heorot too indicates a wooded structure (82-3). While a stone hall can burn as well, the fires here allude to the total destruction of the hall, emphasizing how the hall is very flammable due to its wooded nature. In the Anglo-Saxon period, the term "leah" was most commonly used for woodland areas around settlements (Hooke 145). Hooke also hypothesizes that this term could also mean "woodland pasture," implying that the area was used as an economic source for the Anglo-Saxons (148). While the areas around Heorot were most likely part of the local economy, the poet never mentions "leah" in relation to the wooded areas. He only uses "wudu" when describing Grendel's mere (1364, 1416) and during the recollection of the Swedish war in which Ongenþeow killed Hæðcyn in a forest (2925).⁴ According to Hooke, the term "wudu" probably

⁴ There are other uses of "wudu" in the poem, but they are all part of compound words that describe an item in

indicated “extensive woodland” in Anglo-Saxon literature (149). This extensive woodland is almost non-existent in the Anglo-Saxon period, and while this further demonstrates the historical period this poem is set in, since there is an abundance of woodland to cull trees from, it also denotes a more nuanced understanding of how nature is portrayed in the poem. Since there is little indication that the lands of the human societies are made mostly of fallow fields and small woodlands in the poem, the woods in this case represent both how nature can aid a society and also how it affects people’s view of it, since it was wilder in nature than the more conventionally used “leah.” In other words, the woods in the poem are not just an economic resource as is indicated by their use in the poem with compound words, but also in the menace that exists at Grendel’s mere, where the trees are “wytrum fæst wæter oferhelmað” ‘held fast over the water’ (1364) and when Hrothgar and his company travel to the mere they find Æschere’s head near the trees that overhang the mere (1414-16). In the poem there are only two mentions of this type of forest, and it is connected with Grendel and his mother, emphasizing the lack of control human societies had over the wilder aspects of nature. Since woods were increasingly scarce in this time period, it could mean that the poet was conveying a sense of mystery and dread to the forests, since they were so rare. This use of wood in the poem is also what helps to construct their halls, and it is an integral part of their society.

2.4 Halls

The hall is an integral part of every society in the poem because it is used to frame how these societies act and helps form their purpose. John Hill examines Roxana Waterson’s discussion of what constitutes a society based on a single house and applies it to the societies of

human society. For example, “sæ-wudu” is a ship, “gomen-wudu” is a harp, and “bæl-wudu” is wood for a funeral pyre. This emphasizes the importance that trees had in Anglo-Saxon society, and how they provided a net positive to society when tamed.

Beowulf. He claims that in these societies halls act as “centres of kin organization” and are the sites for important meetings and ceremonies. They also typically use “house imagery” to “express aspects of kinship and marriage” (159). Hill then states that some of these aspects are present in *Beowulf*, but the poem is missing some pieces. For example, he notes that in Old English there are no words for kinship that are related to “house,” but the concept of the “banhus” (bone house) and armour acts as an analog for “sibbedriht,” or the protectors of the house protecting the hall like armour protects the “bone house” (159). Frank Battaglia also notes that these early lords of the Anglo-Saxon people were “rulers of people, not territories” (67). The halls they ruled from were often at the center of their settlements and were, as a result, the center of their new civilization (Battaglia note 77). He then states that in the early Anglo-Saxon period a new vocabulary was created to accommodate this new hall system and these social identities were connected with these new vocabulary words (67). Battaglia’s theory of the evolution of hall culture is important here because it denotes a more central role for the ruler in a single location, one where his warriors can aid him more readily. Although Grendel’s mere is a type of anti-hall, and the dragon co-opts a former treasure hoard, their spaces are also entirely earth-based structures, since they are made of rock and are located within the earth. The human halls, exemplified by Heorot, are made of wood, and therefore occupy a different space, one which is created to be the central location for a society, and reflects the type of wilderness or forests around the area, since the halls were constructed with local materials.

Heorot is the main representative for the hall in the poem for human society as a gathering place that their society can then thrive in and work together to create a working society.

⁵ Heorot itself is described as “geatolic ond goldfah” ‘splendid and ornamented with gold’ (308); the poet further describes it as a wonder of men: “þæt wæs foremærost foldbuendum/ receda under roderum, on þæm se rica bad;/ lixte se leoma ofer landa fela” ‘It was very famous to men, of all the halls under heaven, on which a powerful man was seated; the light shone over many lands’ (309-11). This light that it casts could be the gold on the building reflecting the sun’s rays, but it is more indicative of the importance of the hall in the poem. It is here that men have established their society and, as it is a beacon of humanity, it compels Grendel to attack it for their singing of the praise of God (88-90). The road leading to Heorot also indicates its prestige among men. When Beowulf and his troop approach Heorot, “[s]træt wæs stanfah” (the street was paved) and that “stig wisode/ gumum ætgædere” ‘the path guided the men together’ (320-1). This sort of path is important to note because it is the men’s crafting of the earth into something more suitable for them to walk on that denotes the importance of the hall in their society. In other words, these paved roads and decorated halls all signify the same thing: men used the earth to establish their community, and they crafted it in such a way that it would transcend the base materials they used to make it, thereby creating their own unique take on both nature and humanity. The other two primary halls in the poem, Grendel’s mere and the dragon’s lair, also illuminate some of the ways the poet uses earth to portray how societies flourished, but I will withhold an examination of Grendel’s mere until my chapter on the fens since the mere is a combination of earth and water. Since the dragon’s lair is an abode made of stone, however, I will discuss its importance next.

⁵ Although there are other halls in the poem, such as Beowulf’s hall, Finn’s hall, Heremod’s society, etc. I will mainly examine Heorot as the main contributor for a description of human society because it is given the most in depth description in the poem, and best represents the values of these societies.

The most striking aspect of the dragon's lair is that, unlike Grendel's mere which represents a separate society of outcasts, it was once the treasure hoard for a nation of men. After relating how the thief stole the cup from the hoard, the poet relates the creation of this treasure hoard:

Þær wæs swylcra fela
in ðam eorðse(le) ærgestreona,
swa hy on geardagum gumena nathwylc,
eormenlafe æþelan cynnes,
þanchycgende þær gehydde,
deore maðmas. Ealle hie deað fornam
ærran mælum, ond s(e) an ða gen
leoda duguðe, se ðær lengest hwearf,
weard winegeomor, (*wen*)de þæs yl(c)an,
þæt he lytel fæc longgestreona
brucan moste. Beorh eall gearo
wunode on wonge wæteryðum neah,
niwe be næsse, nearocræftum fæst;
þær on inn(a)n bær eorlgestreona
hringa hyrde h(o)rdwyrðne dæl,
fættan goldes... (2231-46)

[There were many such treasures in the earth-hall, for in days of yore a certain man had carefully hidden the precious treasures there, the huge legacy of a noble race. Death took them all at earlier times, and the one of the nation of people still survived, who moved there the longest, a guardian mourning his friends, thought of this same thing, that he would only be allowed to enjoy the old treasure for a small space of time. A barrow was near the waves of the sea, newly built beside the bluffs, made difficult of access; there the guardian of rings carried within a great deal of warriors' riches worthy of being hoarded, of gleaming gold...]

This last survivor also notes that since his nation is no longer in existence, he is returning the treasures to the earth from which these warriors had previously taken (2248-9). These actions by the last survivor are interesting because they highlight his acknowledgement of where the gold came from and what it is used for. Since he has lost his nation and companions, there is no reason to retain the materials of the earth. This desire to construct a barrow to contain the treasures of a fallen society echoes the desire of Beowulf to have a mound built in his honour

(2807) since they are both concerned with how their lives will be remembered by future generations. His kinsmen load the gold from the dragon's lair and "forleton eorla gestreon eorðan healdan,/ gold on greote, þær hit nu gen lifað,/ eldum swa unnyt swa hyt (æro)r wæs" (3166-8) 'they left the warriors' treasure to the earth to hold, gold in the earth, where it now still lives, as useless to men as it was before'. While Beowulf's name is still known today, it is due to his adventures in the epic rather than any land that was credited to him. In other words, gold can serve a society when it is active because it acts as the currency of honour, but when the society ends, the gold becomes useless, and is instead a reminder of the vanity of men, who seek riches instead of glory, or instead of the peace of God's will, and is a part of the material nature of earth, something that men cannot take with them in the next life. This commentary on the uselessness of gold is accentuated in the description of the dragon's lair when the dragon makes its home there. In the poem it was the nature of the dragon to "gesecean sceall/ (hea)r(h on) hrusan, 'go to a heathen temple on the ground', where he "hæðan gold/ warað wintrum frod" (2275-7) 'guarded heathen gold, old in winters'. The fact that this lair is the resting place of a treasure hoard from a destroyed nation is important to note because if the dragon is a force of nature, and represents nature in all its forms,⁶ then this taking of the hall is symbolic of the encroachment of nature on human civilization. The dragon takes the lair and co-opts its treasures to the point that the survivors of the Geats are willing to let it lie in the earth with their dead lord, commenting on its uselessness. This also highlights Richard Hoffman's theory that man and nature were in eternal contestation with each other (13), since while Beowulf ends the dragon's reign of terror, he has to sacrifice his life to do it. As a last note on the Last survivor and the dragon's lair, the lair is covered in gold left by the Last Survivor, which is connected to the earth due to the nature of

⁶ I will expand on this further in Chapter 4 and the Conclusion.

gold itself. Gold, which comes from the earth, is only valuable to men after smelting it and creating material goods that they use as jewellery or currency. Gold is therefore only useful to human societies when it is used in conjunction with fire. In the case of the Last Survivor, gold can be seen as returning to the earth from whence it came, but the dragon, an embodiment of fire, inhabits the lair and becomes its owner. The dragon's ability to breathe fire does not directly relate to the importance of gold within the lair, but is actually an indication of the dragon's multifaceted nature. When describing the dragon, the poet mentions it twice as an "eorðdraca" or "earth-dragon" since it lives in the lair in the earth.⁷ This could indicate that the dragon, as a creature of the earth, is best suited to sit on the gold because it is a manifestation of both earth and fire, which is what gold itself is. Therefore, the dragon inhabits this area because of its elemental connections, and is better suited than any human ruler.

If the earth provides the foundation for the world, and is the area which men inhabit and construct their societies, then the next addition to the Metod's creation is water, which provided a way that these societies could separate and establish the boundaries of who fits within their society and who does not.

⁷ The poet first mentions this term on line 2712, in which he describes the wound that the "earth-dragon" inflicted upon Beowulf. The second occurrence is on line 2825, in which the poet refers to the defeated dragon in contrast with the dying Beowulf, who is dying on the ground. The first instance could foreshadow Beowulf's last resting place since although he is consumed in a funeral pyre, a barrow is constructed to honour him, a mound similar to the one the Last Survivor made to honour his fallen comrades, thereby contrasting the dragon and Beowulf. The second instance further highlights this connection by connecting both dying figures to figures tied to the ground. The dragon could fly and so is literally able to transcend the earth, but Beowulf is metaphorically bound to the earth since his fate is uncertain.

3 *Wæter*

3.1 *Water Definition*

Next to earth, water is the most recognizable and prevalent element in *Beowulf*. It permeates the poem since Beowulf and his comrades sail over the sea when they come to Heorot, Beowulf's monster-slaying credentials are laid out in the open ocean with the "niceras" (water monsters), and he spends a good portion of a day swimming to confront Grendel's mother. Water in the poem provides different societies with a variety of uses; water separates many, but not all, of the societies in the poem, and provides a boundary marker that helps establish their individual hegemony; it is also a means of establishing the heroic credentials that Beowulf needs to conquer both Grendel and later his mother by diving into the mere and confronting them in their lair; finally, water also represents how these societies used the sea as travel and how this travel affected their relations with each other⁸. Water therefore provides a distinct boundary that marks the area of Grendel's mere from Hrothgar's society, and it highlights not only the difference in values between their societies, but also in the liminality of Grendel and his mother they have at the same time a human aspect and also represent a different form of life to humans as a combination of earth and water. Water also provides a transitional point for people in the poem while they are searching for glory, since the sea is the main feature of Beowulf and Breca's swimming contest, and is also the natural feature that Beowulf travels over in multiple adventures to fight other peoples, whether they be the monsters in the mere or the more human foes such as the Frisians. Water is also used by the Anglo-Saxons as an escape from civilization to contemplate God, using the sea and the fens as an analogue for the desert in earlier Christian tradition (Siewers *Strange Beauty* 15), as seen in the use of the sea in *The Seafarer* and in

⁸ Like, for example, how Scyld Scefing used the sea to travel and conquer other lands.

Guthlac's Lives, although its use in the case of *Beowulf* differs since Beowulf uses it to gain something from solitude, in this case, glory. Water, while separating societies, also connects friendly societies, as in the example of Beowulf's voyage to aid Hrothgar's troubles with Grendel, and is therefore a more nuanced and full view of travel in this period.

3.2 Water as Boundary Marker

The societies in *Beowulf* are defined not just by who inhabits the hall, but also by where their influence reaches across the lands. The boundaries that a society creates either through manmade constructions, such as a wall, or a natural setting, such as a river or a mountain, mark the area in which distinct societies can practice their beliefs and where they can implement their legal system to protect their people. These boundaries are sometimes human made locales, but more often they are determined by the natural landscape of the area that separates two different societies. In particular, Hooke states that water sources, such as rivers and creeks, were often used as boundary markers in Anglo-Saxon England because they were "obvious features in the landscape," and they were "conclusive boundary marker[s] the correctness of which would not be questioned" (80). While rivers are never mentioned in *Beowulf* as boundary markers, the idea that water can provide a concrete boundary between societies, as is evidenced by not only the Swedes and Geats being separated by a "sæ," (2380) but also the fact that water separates the Geats and the Frisians by the "sioleða" (water, sea) (2367) and with the Danes by the "swanrade" (the swan road) (200); Grendel and his mother are also separated from other human societies by the waters of the mere. This determination of a boundary is important to note because it highlights a critical aspect of these societies' values: that the need for boundaries is essential and that water, as a vital part of any working society, provides a good boundary marker for different

societies. While water does provide a distinct boundary marker, it is also subject to mutability and is not a static boundary marker.

Water, with its ebbs and tides, with its constant flow, and with its eventual evaporation into gas emphasizes an important aspect of water: it is mutable and not static. This mutability provides societies with the opportunity, or possibly the misfortune, of change, and the ability to adapt to new conditions. Wickham-Crowley notes that one of the reasons the Anglo-Saxons may have immigrated to Britain during the middle of fifth century is because of the rising sea levels in continental Europe, which diminished the amount of land around their ancestral homeland. This in turn caused them to look to Britain, where they discovered “vast fens, islands, and a reshaped coastline” (86-7). Crowley then later states that water “gives us a variable that suggests permeable, dynamic boundaries,” which he theorized was one reason Alfred the Great was so successful against the Danish invasion, since he utilized the mutability of the fens to slowly re-establish Anglo-Saxon hegemony in Wessex and Mercia (105-6). These mutable boundaries also offer a liminal space in which people can interact without stepping completely outside the bounds of their society. This land and water dichotomy is important in the poem to give a more concrete establishment of boundaries between societies since, especially in the case of the sea, water often overlaps onto the land, and so creates a luminal space in which earth and water share the same space. While water is the main elemental source in Grendel’s mere and the sea, the mere represents a combination of both earth and water, and so offers a different reading on the use of the elements in the poem and I will deal with it separately in another chapter. In this case, water by itself is mainly represented by the sea.

3.3 Water as Liminal Space

The sea in Anglo-Saxon society occupied a liminal space for people in Anglo-Saxon society to contemplate God and to travel to new and unknown lands.⁹ Charlotte Ball states that the sea in *Beowulf* is born out of chaos, and that it is both “the medium for travel and communication” but is also “volatile and filled with monsters” which are integral parts of the nature of the sea (“Monstrous Landscapes”). This reading of the sea is important in *Beowulf* because it indicates the importance the sea holds for defining the boundaries of any society. It is both a connector and a separator, and it is defended by monsters that hinder free movement throughout the waters, although her claims that the sea is a product of chaos may be a little overstated since the only true dangers within the poem are the sea monsters Beowulf fights during his swimming match with Breca. In other words, the sea is an area where water acts as a primal force of nature, one in which men are capable of travelling over but are incapable of conquering entirely, unlike on the earth where they create their kingdoms and societies. They are only capable of fashioning ships to help propel them across the waters and have to find other ways to travel it, Beowulf and Breca’s example notwithstanding.¹⁰

⁹ While there is no direct reference to characters in *Beowulf* traveling to the sea in order to contemplate God, Beowulf does go there in order to test himself, both in the swimming match and in the Frisian episode. While he is not directly communicating with the divine, he is in solitude on the sea and uses it to further enhance his own abilities and myth by becoming stronger and, in the first case, prove he is capable of slaying Grendel, and in the second, prove his ability to defeat his enemies and maintain his honor, both qualities necessary in a king.

¹⁰ The notion of travelling on water for spiritual purposes is explored in other Anglo-Saxon poetry as well. In both *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* the sea is the place to which these two exiles migrate when they are forced to leave the company of the hall. In the case of *The Wanderer*, the poem is mainly a rumination on the narrator’s despair at having lost his lord and hall, and that he has cast himself out to sea and is lamenting the transient nature of the world. Matt Low asserts that the environment in this poem is an indication not just of the metaphorical suffering of the narrator, but rather an indication of the harsh physical reality that many Anglo-Saxons endured in this period (8). He states that the hall is a place of comfort and belonging, which contrasts the later romantic notion of nature as an escape from modernity is the more virtuous path, whereas here it is a path which leads to misery and pain, and in which nature is forever outside of man’s control, and therefore men in these poems prefer the safety of civilization to the harsh and unknown aspect of nature (11, 16). While this claim holds some truth in *The Wanderer*, it falls short when examining *The Seafarer*. Although the Seafarer is another solitary wanderer lamenting the loss of his lord and hall, he, unlike the Wanderer who turns to despair about the transient nature of the world, looks to God and the sea

3.4 Ships on the Water

Although the sea presents some supernatural terrors, it also has beneficial traits that are not just disorderly. Hugh Macginnis states that the sea is an “ever-present feature of the setting” in *Beowulf*, and that the sea exists as a “fact of communication and of separation, and as a symbol of the unknown” (124). Since the sea is not owned by anyone, and only has boundaries marking nations connected with the land they are on, it offers a neutral area which societies can use to travel and interact with other societies, whether it is benevolent such as Beowulf’s trip to Heorot or malignant in the case of the Geatish attack on the Frisians. This allows different societies to operate because it creates both trading partners and a natural barrier that requires a time and effort to circumvent to attack. While in most cases societies still attacked each other, the sea does offer a natural boundary that makes it more difficult to carry out feuds with other nations because it could be argued that to wage war on land one only has to traverse their natural settings, such as the ground. Although earth also presents dangerous travelling conditions, such as taking a route through mountains, the sea is not only alien to people in the sense that societies are not able to live comfortably on the sea, but also that in order for people to travel on it they have to fashion additional equipment, such as ships, to do so. It is on this sea which the Anglo-Saxon elegies give a more vivid example of what the sea represents, and in this case the sea is

as a way to escape the material world and contemplate the eternal world of heaven (58-66)¹⁰. This desire to acknowledge a force that is more important than human society is important because the sea exists outside the boundaries of the society and offers an area for men to do this. Within the confines of their hall, men are comfortable and are able to live in society away from wild nature, but for men who wish to escape this life and devote themselves as hermits then the sea represent a traditional desert like monasticism and offers a solitary place to contemplate God. The sea, therefore, can provide a testing ground for men to combat their own insecurities and failures, since it allows them the space to contemplate these thoughts without being influenced by other people. Both of these poems therefore embody both the beneficial and negative aspects of water and it is carried over into *Beowulf* in the form of the use of ships to establish friendly trade, and in Beowulf and Breca’s swimming contest as a neutral testing ground to test their strength, in which Beowulf also rids the waters of the whale menace.

both a dangerous, unknown aspect of nature and it is a place that men can escape from the physical world and use it to contemplate a higher goal.

Since the areas around Northern Germany and Scandinavia are surrounded by water, distinct societies mainly communicated with each other by ship. Whether this connection is for diplomatic relations or to wage war, it is an official voyage by a society to increase its social standing among other societies and to trade with other civilizations. If the sea is the ultimate liminal area between civilizations, then ships represent the connection between sea and land, with ships being made out of material harvested from the earth (trees) and being used to ford a way to other societies. For example, when Beowulf decides to go to Heorot, he “het him yðlidan/ godne gegyrwan” ‘ordered a good ship to be made ready for him’ (198-199). He makes the explicit order to craft a ship for his voyage. This order is important to note because Beowulf’s voyage to Heorot is an official one; he needs to make his intentions clear about what he intends to do, and so has the boat ordered specially to take him on the sea. Although Beowulf has the boat ordered, there is no indication within the poem of the importance of the vessel. There is no description of the ship, stating how many people it can carry, how big it is, how strong it is, etc; it merely states that Beowulf desired a good one. This is most likely because the ship has one exclusive purpose: to carry Beowulf and his men across the sea to fulfill their oaths.¹¹ The boat in this episode, therefore, is merely a convenient form of travel, albeit one that connects their societies together. This therefore connects the society of the Geats with the Danes because it literally puts something earth made into the water, thereby establishing the connection between the two societies based on the earth.

¹¹ This may be due to the fact that there is no more danger in the sea since Beowulf had previously slain the water monsters plaguing the channel, since he was able to slay them and made it so that they "syðþan na/ymb brontne ford brimliðende/ lade ne letton (then never hindered seafarers in their passage across the high waterways) (567-569).

Ships act as important diplomatic tools among the societies in the poem. When Beowulf first arrives in Denmark, he is greeted by Hrothgar's coast guard, who, when he sees Beowulf and his companions, understands that "þis is hold weorod/ frean Scyldinga" (290-1) 'this [band] is friendly to the lord of the Danes' and allows them to approach Heorot with their "wæpen ond gewædu" (292) 'weapons and armour'. He then proceeds to order his men to guard the ship while Beowulf and his company are at Heorot (293-8). This honour that the sea guard gives to Beowulf is important to note because it demonstrates the lengths these societies go to in order to protect neighbouring nations' diplomatic vessels. When the Geats are ready to leave Heorot, loaded with treasures from Hrothgar, Beowulf gives the guard who watched over their ship a "bunden golde/ swurd" 'a sword bound with gold' (1900-1901). This gesture is important because the sword also acts as a diplomatic tool, and is given to the coast guard as proof of their friendship; since the coast guard protected their ships, the Geats repay him with a valuable heirloom that will honour his own role in the event. The diplomatic nature of ships is also apparent when the sons of Othhere flee the Swedish kingdom, they travel to Geatland "ofer sæ" 'across the sea' (2380). The Danes also sailed away from the Frisian coast "on sælade" 'on sea lanes' during the Finnsmark episode after the slaughter of Finn (1157-1159), and Scyld Scefing both came to Denmark in a ship as a child (44-46) and he departed Denmark in his funeral ship (48-50). All of these passages indicate a similar role for ships, which are as a diplomatic envoy designed either for peace or war, and the sea that separates them highlights their importance because it is an area that is not controlled by any one nation, but is rather a shared space of danger among the inhabitants of the world. These ships provide the means by which they are able to travel on the "hronrad" 'whale road' (10), which as a kenning suggests that for men to cross water they must use the earth and its materials to do so, since it connects the sea to the

more earthly concept of a road, while acknowledging the inhabitants of the sea, the whales. This kenning also suggests that any piece of land that humans cross, whether it is covered in soil or in water, needs to be physically connected to some form of the earth. Other than Grendel and his mother, the only two characters capable of crossing the sea without the use of materials made from the earth are Beowulf and Breca, and it is this ability which allows Beowulf to challenge and defeat the monsters. Since Beowulf needs to prove his ability to slay water monsters, he relates the episode after being confronted by Unferth in which he and Breca engage in a swimming match to test their individual strength, outside of the confines of their societies.

3.5 Swimming on the Water

The incredible swimming feat¹² that Beowulf and Breca undertake represents how the sea acts as a neutral space between differing societies and tribes. This contest is important to note in regards to the sea and sea travel because it is an inherently individual achievement; ships are used by a society to connect it to other societies, whereas the swimming match only tests the strength and honour of the competing members of their respective nations. The swimming match, however, is an individual pursuit, one which was widespread among the Germanic tribes both in literary and historical documents (Wentersdorf 144-145). Martin Puhvel also asserts that a sport as “elemental and as cherished by athletes and heroes” as swimming is common in many areas of the world, especially among “sea-girt or lake-rich nations and tribes” (56). Although Beowulf and Breca use the swimming match to test their strength against one another, in the context of the poem the competition is not viewed as a heroic feat by itself; it is only through Beowulf’s

¹² In his paper “Beowulf’s Adventures with Breca,” Karl Wentersdorf asserts that Beowulf and Breca most likely used ships for the competition as it is physically impossible to swim in the open ocean with full war gear. While this argument could strengthen my claims about the use of ships in the poem, it is flawed because it accuses the swimming episode as being unrealistic in a poem about dragons and giants, and swords that melt and hurls at the bottom of a mere, which are arguably more fantastic than the ability to swim long distances.

slaying of the “niceras” (water monsters) that he is able to use this competition as proof of his ability to swim to the depths of the mere.

The swimming competition foreshadows Beowulf’s conflict with Grendel’s mother. When Beowulf is first attacked by the “merelifa” (sea fish) his mail shirt “helpe gefremede” ‘did help’ (549-551) and protected him, much like how in his plunge into Grendel’s mere “sædeor monig/ hildetuxum heresyrcan bræc” ‘many sea beasts attempted to break the shirt of mail with battle tusks’ (1501-1511). The merelifa also “to grunde teah/ fah feondscaða” ‘the hostile dire foe drew [him] to the bottom,’ (553-554) which foreshadows Beowulf’s encounter in the mere, where “[b]ær þa seo brimwyl[f], þa heo to botme com,/ hringa þengel to hofe sinum” ‘the she-wolf of the lake carried the prince of rings when he came to the bottom to her court’ (1506-1507). These two encounters are metaphorical indications of the danger that the sea possess, and Beowulf proves he is able to master some of the element here. Beowulf’s time in the sea establishes him as a hero in two ways: first, it gives him the necessary credentials he needs to battle Grendel and his mother, who are both water monsters, and his demonstration of his mastery in the water. Second, he establishes himself as a warrior capable of ruling his kingdom as a good king later in his life. After he kills the merelifa in the ocean, he claims that these monsters “syðþan na/ ymb brontne ford brimliðende/ lade ne letton” ‘then never hindered seafarers in their passage across the high waterway’ (567-569) While it is unclear whether these monsters never bothered humanity on the waters in the whole area again, or on this specific waterway, Beowulf is claiming that he made the liminal space of the sea safer for other societies to travel on, weather withstanding. His skills as a swimmer also aid him in furthering the glory of the Geatish nation later when “Biowulf com/ sylfes cræft, sundnytte dreah;/ hæfde him on earme (ealre) þritig/ hildegeatwa þa he to holme (þron)g” ‘Beowulf came back by his own skill,

performed an act of swimming; he had in his arms thirty war-equipments in all that he pressed forward to home' (2359-2362) after the failed attack on the Frisians. This act solidified his position within Geatish society because he brought glory back in the form of loot despite losing both his king and the raid. In other words, although he is personally victorious in the raid on the Frisians, Beowulf brings back the gear for the king to distribute, thereby pledging his allegiance to the new king. This also means that it is Beowulf's individual victories, and his selflessness in distributing this wealth earned from these victories, that later makes him such a good king.

Therefore, on the sea between different human societies, this liminal space affords people the ability to test their strength in preparation for greater deeds, even if it is a frivolous competition, such as the swimming match, since it helped establish Beowulf's strength in a different way. It also serves as a warning to Beowulf to become a better king by not making boasts that do not directly benefit society. It is here that Beowulf is tied with Scyld Scefing, whose funeral represents an important difference with the other funerals in the poem, as it is a funeral of water and not fire.

3.6 Water Funeral

Funerals in Germanic pagan times were often carried out through fire and sacrifice. John Niles describes the three funerals in *Beowulf* as having similarities with older Roman and Arabic accounts of Germanic funerals, although the poet may have downplayed some of the less savoury aspects of the funeral such as human sacrifice in order to better integrate it into a Christian society. He also states that these funerals often ended in a pyre to the fallen lord (Niles "Pagan" 128). Scyld Scefing's funeral is the only funeral in the poem which does not have any fire that consumes his body on a pyre; he is instead pushed out to sea. After Scyld dies, he is carried out by his warriors to a boat loaded with treasures. They cast his boat out to sea and

“leton holm beran,/ geafon on garsecg” (48-9) ‘let the sea carry him, carried out on water’. Scyld is shipped off to sea loaded with “madma mænigo” ‘many treasures’ (41) and his ship which would “on flodes æht feor gewitan” ‘go far on the sea’s power’ (42). Although Scyld was revered as a great king, he is not burnt at the pyre like Beowulf to remind his people of his reign (2804-2808). Scyld’s ship is also compared to the ship he came on as a child, in which although Scyld was found "feasceaft" ‘destitute’ (7) on his arrival in Denmark, he leaves Denmark the same way he came: by ship, although his ship is now loaded with treasures (43-46). This water funeral then represents the character of Scyld: he was an outsider, and even though he established a lasting legacy and dynasty, he was pushed off to sea by his followers in the same way that he arrived, implying that Scyld is going back to whence he came: the sea. Scyld's time at sea demonstrates the importance of the sea because, even though Scyld could only survive because he washed ashore and was raised on land, he still traveled over the ocean to become part of Danish society and is now left again to the sea. This interpretation then contradicts Low’s argument that nature and the sea are wild and that people would want to stay at the hall because it shows how the sea also serves their society, because it highlights the relationship that people have with the sea and how this water serves them. The water, however, is also tangentially connected with the land, since it does sometimes cover the land in floods, restricting movement, or rescinds and brings more land for people to use, and so the liminal space is clear.

4 Paet Fen

4.1 The Fens as Liminal Space

If the earth is the area on which men can flourish and live, and water is a liminal area that men cannot inhabit and need to traverse with materials from the earth, then what does this say about the people who inhabit both the earth and water realms? In *Beowulf*, this combination of earth and water demonstrates how the Other society of Grendel and his mother operates. Although they are described as water monsters, Grendel and his mother are still part of humanity because they are descended from the Kin of Cain, and also operate within their own society based on their own values and rules. Beowulf is one of two humans in the poem who is capable of traversing water without the use of a ship, and so it is he that is capable of combating Grendel and his mother, since his strength allows him to also occupy the space between both earth and water. All of this indicates that when combined, two elements can create societies which function separately from the earthly societies of men, and that these elements can create more fantastic creatures, ones which are able to transcend the common man and achieve great things. Since earth and water represent the conflict in Grendel's mere, I will begin with an examination of how the fenlands operated within Anglo-Saxon society.

4.2 Fens in Anglo-Saxon Society

Although Grendel's mere is a fantastical locale, it also represents the role that marshes played in Anglo-Saxon England. According to Hooke, the Anglo-Saxons did not inhabit the marshlands as intensely as the Romans did. This is most likely due to either a "simpler farming economy" in Anglo-Saxon society, or a change in the makeup of the fens due to changing sea and river floods, which increased the amount of peat that swallowed up old Roman sites, and therefore arable land was lost and turned into fens (171). The fens remained largely uninhabited

and underutilized until the 17th century when the English began to extensively reclaim the land (Hooke 173). Although the fens were not exploited as farmland, they did provide important resources to Anglo-Saxon communities, such as hunting grounds or summer pastures, and they also acted as the spiritual retreat for monks seeking solace from the world and men (Hooke 170, 184). This lack of human development on the fenlands characterizes them as an isolated area in Anglo-Saxon England which was closer to a sort of communal area for surrounding villages to use as fit their needs, but the changing landscape of the encroaching peat prevented any permanent establishment to be built there, with the exception of abbeys or hermitages. Since the fens were isolated they were most likely also the hiding places of robbers and other outcasts from society, since they did not belong to any specific locale, but were instead separated along charter boundaries (Hooke 184). The description of Grendel's mere in *Beowulf* highlights the isolation of the fens and marshlands, and depicts the fenlands as a desolate wasteland only inhabited by monsters and other outcasts from human society. Their hall is indicative of the Grendelkin earth and water nature because it has aspects of both elements, and Beowulf is only able to conquer them by mastering both elements.

4.3 Fen as Hall

Although the society and lair that Grendel and his mother occupy differs from Heorot and other human societies, it still bears similarities to typical hall culture. When Beowulf first enters the mere, the hall looms before him:

Da se eorl ongeat
þæt he [in] niðsele nathwylcum wæs,
þær him nænig wæter wihte ne scepede,
ne him for hrofsele hrinan ne mehte
færgripe flodes; fyrleoht geseah,
blacne leoman beorhte scinan.

[Then the warrior saw he was in a certain battle hall, where no water in any way at all injured him, the sudden grip of the flood could not touch him because of the roofed hall; he saw firelight, a brilliant light shining brightly.] (1512-7)

The hall here shows that there is an element of Earth under the water. The poet notes that it is a hall, and that it has a roof, and it is also a shelter from water since there is a fire in it. These elements demonstrate that even though the hall may only be a cave, and not a wooded hall like the rest of the societies in the poem, it is still representative of the Earth, albeit one that is closer to the primordial Earth rather than the manmade structures of the wooden halls. The fact that it is only accessible by water and surrounded by it adds to this sense of seclusion and otherworldliness, since it takes Beowulf the better part of a day to swim to the hall (1495). Beowulf also picks up the sword “on searwum” ‘in the armoury’ (1557) of the hall and finds Grendel “on ræste...licgan” ‘lying at rest’ (1585-6) after the battle at Heorot. This passage suggests that the mere is a distinct society within itself that has a strong hall culture based around it.¹³ Although Hrothgar states that both the mere “nis...heoru stow” (1372) (is not...a safe place), this hall also presents a sense of safety not only for Grendel and his mother, but also for Beowulf. Although Grendel and his mother are water monsters, capable of swimming great distances, and Beowulf demonstrates his prowess in the water, being immersed in water is still not safe for any of them. They need a place of refuge to get away from water, which suggests that the hall is a

¹³ Battaglia theorizes that there has been an evolution of halls that started with the worship of water and the sacrifice of materials in the water practiced by early Germanic tribes. They then transitioned over to the hall during the pagan period and, after the conversion of the mainland Germanic tribes to Christianity, a further evolution of the hall acting as a religious center and church occurred (47-50). Battaglia then equates this with *Beowulf* by stating that Grendel represents that old style of Pagan worship since he lives in a mere and “marks his bog retreats,” a pagan activity. He also states that the hanging of Grendel’s arm in Heorot is reminiscent of the old “Othinic” rituals (65). This hypothesis is problematic for a few reasons. First, Grendel is described as a man and as part of the kin of Cain, already equating him with a Christian background. In the poem there is no mention of pagan worship other than some Danes who revived the practice after Grendel’s incursion (175-8). Also, while the hanging of Grendel’s arm may have been an artefact from a Germanic pagan past, it is more symbolic of conquering the fear of the unknown, since Grendel only attacked at night and was not fully described throughout the poem. His arm therefore is visible, and Grendel is no longer as terrifying as he once was.

necessary protection against water. There is also a suggestion that Grendel and his mother are hoarding treasure: when Beowulf finishes cutting off Grendel's head, he notices the rest of the treasure in the room; he "Ne nom...in þæm wicum, Weder-Geata leod,/ maðmæhta ma, þeh he þær monige geseah" 'did not take more treasure in this place, the leader of the Weather-Geats, though he saw much there' (1612-3). Beowulf's decision to not take any treasure is important in both a symbolic and physical way. The only treasures he wanted to take back were the magical sword that melted after slaying Grendel, and he takes the trophy of Grendel's head. These treasures meant more to Beowulf because they represented the material nature of the earth; the sword helped him defeat Grendel's mother, and it was also made to conquer the monsters of the flood, so by killing the supernatural being with a weapon made of two elements (earth and fire), he was able to counteract a being of water and earth, and so Grendel's head acts as further proof that he had eliminated the original threat to Heorot once and for all, thereby solidifying his status in Hrothgar's kingdom. The other treasures of the mere were only earthly goods otherwise, ones that Hrothgar warns Beowulf against in his speech about the sword, and Beowulf shows his skills as a good king by ignoring their allure. Although Hrothgar warns him of the dangers of the material world, this sort of honour was important for these societies. In other words, the treasure in Grendel's lair, although it is part of the hall's economy and honour system, held no appeal for Beowulf because he did not conquer this society for gold and wealth; he conquered the society of the mere to fulfill his oath and to bring glory to himself so he would be remembered after his death. Therefore, the mere here acts as a hall because it is laden with the same materials as other halls, but it also presents the same danger of earthly goods, and so makes a fitting space for outcasts to hoard their wealth.

The description of Grendel's mere highlights the importance that the place has in establishing Grendel and his mother as natural parts of their world. Hrothgar's description of the mere is replete with earth and water imagery. Hrothgar states that Grendel and his mother

...dygel lond
warigeað, wulfhleoþu, windige næssas,
frecne fengelad, ðær fyrgenstream
under næssa genipu niþer gewiteð
flod under foldan. Nis þæt feor heonon
milgearnearces þæt se mere standeð;
ofer þæm hongiað hrinde bearwas,
wudu wyrtum fæst wæter oferhelmað.
Þær mæg nihta gehwæm niðwundor seon,
fyr on flode. No þæs frod leofað
gumena bearna þæt þone grund wite. (1357-67)

[...guarded the hidden land, retreat of wolves, the windy bluffs, the dangerous passage across a fen, where a mountain stream under the bluff mists went down, water under earth. That is not far from here by a measure of miles where the mere stands; over them hang woods covered with frost that, wood with firm roots, overshadows the water. There on each of nights one can see a fearful wonder, fire on water. There is no man wise enough to know the ground of the mere.]

While Margaret Gelling argues that the mere is not an actual locale, since it has characteristics of both an inland lake and of the ocean, since the "windige næssas" are "more suggestive of formations along the seacoast than they are of inland hills," and that it is rather a symbol for the menace that Grendel and his mother represent (116-7), the physical features of the mere are all located within our world, despite the difference in geographical locations. This boundary between the mere and the rest of the world, therefore, while not adhering to the physical features of a typical inland lake, symbolizes the difference between the society of man and the society of Grendel and his mother. Their physical landscape reflects the nature they inhabit, which is both earth and water. This idea of a separate society is also apparent in the types of things that make their lair more like a hall, which is shown symbolically under the lake. Therefore the boundary

created by the waters implies that the inhabitants are not merely evil monsters bent on destroying the lands of men, but are rather owners of the land and have their own moral code within the land. The strange nature of the mere is further accentuated in the poem when the hart, running from hounds, would rather confront its pursuers than brave the murky waters, since the water was associated with menace and evil (1368-72), which highlights the fact that water can be both beneficial and menacing in the proper context. This distinct natural area can only be crossed by another figure that inhabits both the earth and water: Beowulf.

4.4 Grendel and his Mother

Grendel and Grendel's mother occupy the liminal space between man and nature. Firstly, they are descendants of Cain, the son of Adam and Eve (107). Although the poet relates Grendel and his mother to the other "untydras" 'evil offspring' of Cain (111) such as the "eotenas ond ylfe ond orrneas, swylce gig(an)tas" 'the giants and elves and orcs, and also of the giants' (112-3) they are still part of the race of men, albeit separated from the rest of mankind by God's decree. Grendel and his mother are also connected to nature and water by the etymology of their names. Klaeber notes two possible interpretations for the origin of Grendel's name, among others: as either "*Grendel < *grandil-, from *grand 'sand,' 'bottom (ground) of a body of water,'*" or as a "*deformation of dialectal drindle or dringle 'trickle,' 'small trickling stream.'*" (pg 468). Although there are other interpretations of Grendel's name, including the word "grindan" from Old English meaning to "grind" (pg 467) it is important to note that in this case, both Grendel and his mother occupy a den located at the bottom of a mere, and need to swim to land every time they interact with men. This implies that his name from "grandil" could suggest his association with the mere, since he does not live in the water but rather a cavern above the water level, since he metaphorically is the earth (ie hall and human society) at the bottom of a

body of water. Andy Orchard states that Grendel is “certainly ‘the wicked destroyer’, but he is also both ‘the destroyer of men and the ‘man-shaped destroyer’” since of all the monsters it is he who is given the most human traits (30-1). Grendel and his mother also inhabit the animal realm by having “lupine features” that distinguish them further as both men and animals (Orchard 75). In other words, this distinction adds to my claim that Grendel and his mother are both human and represent the natural world because they inhabit both the earth, which I stated earlier is the habitation of men, and the water which men only use as a venue for transportation, and only live on temporarily through ships. Imagery of water, however, pervades the battle in the hall. For example, Beowulf first needs to descend to the lair by swimming for the better part of a day, and he discovers the sword with the image of the flood imprinted on it (1690); also, when he slays Grendel’s mother, her blood also cleanses the mere, a liquid form of victory, and the sword used to slay her melts, creating more water imagery. This co-habitation of both land and water stems from Grendel and his mother’s description as “mearcstapa,” which Klaeber translates as “wanderer in the wasteland,” but more is more accurately translated as “border crosser” (pg 411): “Mearc” means border and “stapa” comes from “steppan” which means to stride or march. This discrepancy of terms is important to note because it implies a more ambiguous relationship to both the men at Heorot and nature itself. Grendel and his mother are not merely monsters who infringe on the rights of man; they form their own separate society, since they belong to a specific race of men that, although offshoots of evil through Cain, still operate under their own codes of morality and ethics. Hrothgar notes that Grendel’s mother has “þa fæhðe wræc/ þe þu gystran niht Grendel cwealdest” ‘avenged the feud/ when you killed Grendel yesterday night’ (1333-4) since she “wolde hyre mæg wrecan” ‘wished to avenge her kinsman’ (1339). She also offers Beowulf a perverse version of the sort of hospitality that is expected in a hall like Heorot

(Alvin Lee 186). In other words, when Grendel and his mother cross over into Heorot, they are literally leaving the bounds of their own world, a world in which they have their own form of nature and their own form of society, and they venture into human society, or the civilized world. Their mere is defined by the watery boundary, which is lent its supernatural mystique when the Danes and Geats visit the mere to confront Grendel's mother.

4.5 Beowulf as Supernatural Force

If the combination of earth and water is a representation of a different type of nature in the world, then Beowulf also inhabits this liminal world.¹⁴ Beowulf's swimming prowess marks him against other people in the story, since he is not only able to survive on the water for an extended period of time, he is able to do so fully equipped with armour and is able to battle "merfixa" 'water monsters' at the same time. He is also able to plunge to incredible depths to achieve his goals (563-564, 1495-1496). Beowulf is also unnaturally strong, since Hrothgar notes that "he þritiges/ manna mægen-cræft on his mundgripe/ heaþorof hæbbe" 'he, brave in battle, had the strength of thirty men in his hand' (379-381) and he also later carried thirty pieces of armour from slain enemies across the water (2359-2362). He is also protected by God during his fight with Grendel's mother, implying a certain favour that other men do not have (1553). I have dealt with the swimming match between Beowulf and Breca in an earlier chapter, but in this case it is important to note Beowulf's own liminality in this world due to his strength and ability in the water. The boundary between these two societies is so strong that it can only be crossed by another supernatural being with some similarities to the monster, which makes him able to confront Grendel and his mother within their own den. This allows Beowulf to challenge the

¹⁴ And, to a lesser extent, Breca.

mere, since he is the only one capable of crossing the boundary into the mere, and challenge the opposing society on the other side.

4.6 The Flood Sword as Manifestation of Earth, Water, and Fire

The sword that Beowulf finds in the mere is an important indicator in how water is treated as both a boundary and as a symbol of nature in determining societal boundaries. The engravings on the sword tell the story of the great flood, which destroyed the giants through water (1688-92). This reference to the biblical flood, in which God cleanses the earth of evil and impurity with water and leaves Noah and his sons to rebuild from the flooded world, suggests that it is God's will that decides who may live in His world. In the mythology of *Beowulf*, however, it was meant to wipe out the race of giants who were descended from Cain, but it was unable to completely destroy all those monsters. This flood would cleanse the earth of all monsters, thereby using water to destroy the space which most men and animals used to create their societies. Since Grendel and his mother are water-monsters, they could survive the flood and still establish their own society within the confines of the same hostile waters, the remnants of the flood, which destroyed life on earth in the first place. In other words, this indicates that since Grendel and his mother embody both water and earth, they were able to survive the flood, a force of water, and were able to lead raids upon the Danes, who only inhabited the realm of earth. Grendel himself "Heorot eardode" (inhabited Heorot) (166), implying that he was able to take away this land from the Danes through force. Earth and water here combine to create a disparate space in which each element can only be overcome by something that embodies its same nature; this is also apparent with fire, where swords, a combination of earth and fire, cannot hurt Grendel and his mother and Beowulf must sacrifice himself to defeat the dragon, a manifestation of fire.

In the Metod's creation monsters such as the elves, orcneas, and giants do not have a specific place since He created the flood to destroy them, yet Grendel and his mother occupy that strange space of being both men and monsters, and as a result they still inhabited a place on that earth. The flood that the Metod brought down was unable to kill all the monsters, and so Beowulf acts as His instrument in finishing off those who were meant to be destroyed by the flood. After reaching the mere, a "Geata leod" (man of the Geats) shoots one of the "sædracan" (sea-snakes) (1426) which surge up to greet the intruders, and kills it. The men stand in awe, and "sceawedon / gryrelicne gist" (looked at the terrible guest) (1440-1441) after bringing it to shore, implying that they saw a monster since it was not something common to them. This action by the lone Geat foreshadows the destruction that Beowulf will bring to the inhabitants of the mere, by cleansing the mere of its evil by washing away the blood of monsters. When Grendel's mother accosts him for invading her territory, Beowulf is beset by "sædeor monig" (many sea-beasts) which "hildetuxum heresyrcan bræc" (tore the shirt of mail with battle tusks) (1510-1511). These "sædeor" are the guardians of the monsters' territory and Beowulf kills one, and manages to avoid injury when they attacked him while he was in the grasp of Grendel's mother. Beowulf's actions suggest that he is able to battle through these monsters with relative ease because he is following God's will and is eliminating the society in the mere to prevent it from attacking and endangering the society of men in the future.¹⁵ In his battle with Grendel's mother Beowulf is only saved from her talons through his mail shirt and by "halig God" (1553). It is through God's will that Beowulf is able to glimpse the sword of the flood in the lair and was able to strike Grendel's mother, so hard that it "banhringas bræc" (broke her vertebra) and the "sweord wæs

¹⁵ Although the Mere is within the Danish boundaries and Beowulf himself is a Geat, in this case as an instrument of God he is acting on behalf of all mankind of the earth, rather than for one society, and clears the world of the dangerous monsters which inhabit it.

swatig" (sword was bloody) (1567, 1569) after the fight. When Grendel's mother loses her blood this symbolizes the loss of domain over her society; her life waters are lost and cleanse the mere of her evil (1620). The blood from Grendel's mother that surges to the surface is mistaken for Beowulf's, yet it symbolizes the change in the mere's territory. By physically removing Grendel's mother and cleansing the mere of her evil through her blood, which symbolizes a substitute for water, along with Grendel's head, Beowulf is able to eliminate the society of Grendel and his mother and eliminate their threat from the mere for human society and for the Metod. The mythical flood was supposed to destroy the monsters and render their communities and halls obsolete, and it is only through Beowulf's intervention that the act is finally completed. Water acts as the cleanser and Grendel's mother's blood serves to symbolize the victory of human society over the liminal society of Grendel and his mother.

The fens therefore occupy the space between earth and water, and so create a new distinct boundary that carries a different society from the other societies in the poem. These different societies, however, are unified by the last remaining element in the creation myth: fire, and it is fire that has the most potential to destroy a society.

5 Fyr

5.1 Fire Definition

In *Beowulf*, while each element has its own set of dangers, it is fire that ultimately destroys these human societies, both in Denmark (through the destruction of Heorot) and in Geatland (through the fires of Beowulf's pyre). In the poem, fire exemplifies the wildest aspect of nature because, unlike earth and water, there is no human that fully embodies this element, as Beowulf does with earth and water. In other words, fire in the poem is essentially uncontrolled, and while human society is able to tame it to an extent, since they do not in any way embody its nature, fire is the most dangerous and lethal of all elements. It is also the element, however, that humans arguably need the most to establish their civilizations, since while they need earth and water to survive as well, fire allows them to expand their environment due to its ability to cook food and provide light and warmth in the dark and cold and to create weapons and use armour to protect themselves against the dangers of the outside world.

According to biologist Richard Wrangham, fire is an integral part of human development and is necessary for every endeavour humans have taken over the millennia, since he theorizes that cooked food helped develop the human brain to its current level. He states that no society on earth has been found that did not subsist to an extent on fire, whether they lived by the ocean, in a tropical rain forest, or on a frozen arctic plain (Adler web). Fire is the element that most clearly establishes the difference between humans and animals because humans have harnessed it to help them build their societies and to let them travel further and live in more inhospitable climates, and although water, air, and earth have the potential to level human settlements, fire is the most dangerous since it is needed in all aspects of life and is always one step away from loss of control.

5.2 Fire and Trauma

According to Jeffrey Cohen and Stephanie Trigg, fire exists as both a companion to humans and as a detriment, depending on its use. Fire is “[l]ife sustaining and perilous, alliance-seeking and diffident, fire is complicated, ambivalent, contradictory” (Cohen and Trigg 85).

While human societies may use and try to control fire, it is an element that cannot be completely contained because its nature is to consume raw materials around it and it is not bound by the rules of human society. While earth and water are also elements in nature, they are easier to control since the earth and its materials can be crafted and shaped to better control their society and water can be contained in barrels or other implements such as dikes. Fire, however, is hard to contain in its raw form, and while manmade devices such as fire pits and hearths can provide a degree of protection, the nature of fire is to spurt; its form does not stay in one place and it has a tendency to consume.

Cohen and Trigg state that the elemental nature of fire can do many things. Fire “burns, creating and destroying, composing and challenging, transforming and instituting” (91) all materials around it, whether in the physical world through the destruction of homes and landscape, or through the realm of mental capacity, in which it creates a realm of trauma and pain that exist in human memory. Fire, therefore, alters humanity’s precarious relationship with nature, alternating between benign benefactor and destructive host, because even though water can damage human settlements through floods and the earth can ruin the land through earthquakes, it is fire that humans need the most to survive through the cold nights and to light their way through darkness, and it is also the easiest element in nature to lose control of. Fire exists in two forms within the poem: that which is domesticated by man, and that which exists

through nature. When fire is mentioned in the poem, it often carries with it the capacity for destruction, whether it is through the flames of the dragon, or through the use of forged steel, fire is used by men and nature as a way to cleanse the land and start anew.

5.3 Fire and Hall Culture

Fire is integral to human civilization. Cohen and Trigg assert that with fire people could start establishing halls and homes that helped radiate warmth and keep away the darkness. They also state that fire dictates most human activity and chores because it is light and warmth which allow people to see and perform their daily tasks necessary for survival (83-4). Fire in this sense encompasses not only the fires that are lit with fuels such as wood, but also the fires created by the sun, since it is also a source of light and warmth. The kenning “*rodores candel*” (1572) ‘heaven’s candle’ emphasizes this similarity because it is connected to the burning of a candle, which necessarily needs fire to burn. Although the Anglo-Saxons did not understand the sun as a burning ball of rock millions of miles from earth, they still connected it with burning and fire. This establishes how fire is used in the poem by men: it is a source of comfort and their domestication of fire allows them to perform their daily tasks in relative safety. The word “*leoma*” is also used multiple times to mean fire, and this is most important in the creation myth when the scop uses “*leoma*” to highlight the light of the sun and moon (94-5). Although the light from the sun and moon is unattainable to men, it does provide them with light for their daily lives.

Fire in the halls represents the ways in which the societies in *Beowulf* use nature to augment their own needs. Fire requires another two of the four elements to survive: oxygen (air) and fuel (earth). These three elements create the light that is needed to heat the hall and to cook

their food and to light the darkness, and without any of them the fire will extinguish.¹⁶ The position of the hearth in the feasting hall is critical in understanding how fire was used in the hall; the hearth is placed in a central location in most Anglo-Saxon halls, (Niles *Hall* 40), and while this exact location is not clear in *Beowulf*, it does indicate that Beowulf uses the hearth as a centerpiece for his speech about defeating Grendel, as he “on heo[r]ðe gestod” ‘stood on the hearth’ (404). The hearth is most likely centrally located because it also represents the hierarchical order of the society in the poem. Hrothgar is in the middle close to the hearth, and the closer a warrior is to him, the more important he is to the court. While Beowulf may have been invited to speak from the hearth, it is more likely that it is a symbol of the services Beowulf will perform for Hrothgar, and so he has the widest audience in which to express his views. The fact that it is a fire he stands near is important, because it reflects how the hall orders society: fire acts as the centerpiece because the daily lives every human being is centered to some degree around fire, and even though this is not a mundane activity such as cooking or keeping warmth, it still symbolizes the importance of being near the flame, since that is where the lord of the hall sits. This location in the hall is normally reserved for warriors who pledge fealty to a king with mead (Brown 5), and they are in turn called “heorðgeneat” ‘hearth companions’, or better known as retainers (Klaeber 395).

The hearth is a critical part of hall culture and life, so when people make their oaths, they do so in the light of the fire as a way to connect the warmth of companionship with the element of fire. This is most clearly illustrated with the term “heorðgeneat” since it directly relates the relationship between a lord and his men with the hearth that warms their mead halls, further establishing the connection between the physical warmth of the fire and the warmth of the

¹⁶ While there is no mention of cooking the poem, other than the feast foods, it is important to note that fire is used as an important resource in all human societies, indicating its relevance in their lives.

relationship between the retainers and their lord. In the poem, the term “heorðgeneat” appears five times, and four of those times connects the term to Beowulf himself, whether in his service to Hygelac (261), or in reference to his own companions and retainers during his time as king in Geatland (2180, 2418, 3179), while the final instance of the word is referenced to Hrothgar’s retainers (1580). The first instance of the term, “Higelacas heorðgeneatas,” ‘Hygelac’s retainers’ connects Beowulf to the Geats, and establishes where his loyalties lie. Although Beowulf performs a vital service to the Danes, and Hrothgar wants to adopt him as a son, he is connected to his hearth in Geatland, and so will return to his homeland where he is connected to the fire there. The next term also solidifies Beowulf’s morality and valor, as he is said to have never “druncne slog/ heorðgeneatas” ‘slew drunken hearth-companions’ (2179-80). This indicates that since they are connected to the fire through their oaths, Beowulf either never killed his companions in anger while drinking, or never killed those he had drunk with, implying the sacred nature of the oaths made in the presence of fire. Beowulf then speaks to his “heorðgeneatum” as a final farewell to his men before his encounter with the dragon (2417-24). This use of the hearth-companions is ironic because Beowulf has taken them with him on this journey to aid him in his battle with the dragon, but they run and hide when the fight begins (2596-99). By abandoning their lord in his time of need, these hearth-companions also abandon their vows to serve him, and so they symbolically lose their status as “heorðgeneatas” because the fire of their service to their lord is extinguished by their act of cowardice. The last mention of hearth-companions in connection to Beowulf’s own people is at the end of the poem when Beowulf’s body is burning. Beowulf’s “heorðgeneatas” mourn his death since he was “mildest ond monðwærust” ‘friendliest and gentlest’ of all kings (3178-81). Here the retainers are grieving for Beowulf’s death, but it was their cowardice which in part brought it about, or at least

showed that they were not capable of defending their homeland from the forewarned Swedes. This then highlights the importance of keeping trust with the lord, and how trust is first created around the hearth, and here it ironically references their disloyalty to their lord in his time of need, since they are still connected through the sacred fire ritual. The lone reference to Hrothgar's "heorðgeneatas" is made when Beowulf seeks to avenge the deaths of the Danes when he cuts off Grendel's head in his lair (1580-1583). In this case, Beowulf's desire reflects his current loyalties, which is to Hrothgar, since he promised to end Grendel and his mother for good, and so he is avenging those who have fallen before him. In other words, all of the instances of "heorðgeneat" in the poem reflect this complex relationship between the lord and his retainers, and why they are held together through fire, since it is fire that heats them and creates the bond, so it is fire that symbolically destroys them in the end.

This firelight is also seen in Grendel's mere, since when Beowulf first enters Grendel's hall, he "fyrleoht geseah,/ blacne leoman beorhte scinan" 'saw firelight, a brilliant light shining brightly' (1516-7). This is further echoed when Beowulf encounters the dragon in its lair, and he sees that "wæs þære burnan wælm/ heaðohyrum hat" 'there was a flooding of steam, hot with deadly fire' (2546-7) coming out of the lair. In these other two locations it is important to note that although both Grendel's mere and the dragon's lair are, in their own ways, halls, they are natural halls rather than the man-made hall of Heorot. The fire in these two cases, then, emphasizes these locations as halls. In Grendel's mere, the first thing Beowulf sees is the fire, implying that this is a legitimate society with its own hall. This further adds to Alvin Lee's theory that the fight in the mere is a parody of the hospitality offered in Heorot (186). The dragon's lair is consumed with fire, and represents how fire can overtake a hall if not monitored properly. In other words, no society, whether human or natural, can survive without fire and this

is demonstrated by the central importance of the hearth in the hall. A society's control of fire allows it to survive in nature, and this manipulation of fire extends to the forges used to create weapons and armour, in which a smith's ability to forge worthy weapons and armour is based on his ability to control fire to his will. This skill also allows a society to defend themselves and attack others and, in the case of the various societies in *Beowulf*, thereby gain recognition and glory for themselves and to provide safety to their communities by eliminating any external threats.

5.4 Swords as Embodiment of Fire

The importance of fire to the societies in *Beowulf* extends beyond the act of asserting one's daily chores around it. It is also fire which gives men the power to conquer and defend territory, and gives them the opportunity to prove their worth on the battlefield and gain glory for themselves. Fire in this instance is used by men in forging steel, and when the poet describes warriors he portrays them with the arms and armour they bear. When Beowulf and his companions sail to Denmark to offer their services to Hrothgar, they are carrying "beorhte frætwe" and "guðsearo geatolic" (214-15) 'glorious weapons and splendid armour'. After they land on Danish shores and are granted safe passage to Heorot by the border guard, they approach the hall with "eoforlic scionon/ ofer hleober[g]an gehroden golde,/ fah ond fyrheard" 'figures of boars shone over the cheek guards decorated with gold, shining and hardened by fire' (303-5). These pieces of armour and weapons are bright, shining with light, indicating not only the skill of the smith but the inherent beauty of the materials. In other words, they use these tools to augment their skills in battle and to have physical proof of their victory. Both the gold bands that ring givers award to warriors successful in combat and the swords those warriors used to bring themselves glory were made through the manipulation of fire. It is a symbolic nod to man's

control over the natural world and the ways in which they take something which intrinsically has no value, like gold, and turn it into a work of art, and it is the combination of two elements, earth with fire, that helps to create this human creation, and which brings it into a human art form rather than as a natural phenomenon.

The frequent naming of the swords in the poem denotes their elemental origins. Swords are often labelled as something bright or flashing, such as a “beadoleoma” ‘battle-light or flashing sword’ (1523) and a “hildeleoma” ‘battle-light’ (1143). This reference to light is similar to the kenning of “rodores candel” because they both give of light and warmth, both features of fire. While a cold sword may not give off light, it was at one point heated by a smith to mould the weapon. These weapons of fire are effective for these societies because it gives them the means to defend themselves and to establish their society. This shining light seems to emphasize the glory and splendour of these weapons, yet when the poet uses these terms in the poem it is often in a negative connotation. When dealing with their enemies, whether they are monsters or other men, however, these swords often fail and it is because of their fire nature that they have a negative outcome on a battle, whether it is in the case of Hrunting being unable to cut Grendel’s mother (1523-4) because Grendel’s mother is a creature of water, and since swords cannot cut through water, it cannot hurt Grendel’s mother, or in the case of Hengest when he used the sword given to him to slay Finn and the Frisians, despite their pact of non-violence (1096-1100) because even though the sword is successful in killing enemies, it is used negatively because it ends the pact and causes more problems for both groups. Although swords are used to slaughter the Frisians in the Finnsburg episode, hinting morbidly that swords were indeed effective, Allan Lee notes that “[t]he scene on which this sword shines its light is not one of joy-filled life returning in the spring to the order of creation” (61). This emphasizes the point that although

swords could be used to protect their families, they also had a destructive purpose that could consume people, much in the same way fire later does in both the funeral of Hnaef and in Beowulf's funeral. Beowulf defeats the Dragon through a combination of his "wællseaxe" and Wiglaf uses his sword to weaken it further, leading to the final victory against the dragon. This use of weapons then reflects how the nature of the sword, a combination of earth and fire, is able to overcome a being of fire, but Beowulf's Dragon is also defeated through the prowess of the man who also embodies those elemental powers that are reflected in the other monsters in the poem. With Grendel and his mother, it is only with a magical sword which is a symbol of the flood and therefore water, which is capable of slaying monsters and achieving victory in battle, and it is only this weapon which is both victorious and shines with a bright light (1570). This water blade therefore symbolizes water and its power to overcome the two monsters that embody the essence of water, and so it is able to harm it through magical means.

Grendel and his mother both represent water, while the dragon is a personification of fire. In both the fight against Grendel and the later fight against his mother, swords crafted by men are unable to harm them. This suggests that water extinguishes fire, and fire is unable to quench the dangers of water. When Beowulf grapples with Grendel in Heorot, Beowulf's thanes attempt to simultaneously attack Grendel with their swords. They discover, however, that their swords are ineffective against Grendel's flesh because he "sigewæpnum forsworen hæfde,/ ecga gehwylcre" (804-805) (had made useless by a spell of every sword, victory weapons). This indicates that Grendel not only went to great lengths to prevent any damage against himself, but he, as a creature of water, is immune to the effects of fire, which is represented in this case by the swords. He was surprised to find someone who could challenge him physically after he grabbed Beowulf in his bed to find "þæt he ne mette middangeardes,/ eorþan sceata on elran men/ mundgripe

maran” (751-753) (that he never found of earth, of the earth’s surface on another man a hand grip more great) and he “on mode wearð/ forht on ferhðe” (753-754) (became in his heart afraid).

Beowulf’s strength then comes from his own liminal nature as a creature of both earth and water, like Grendel and his mother, rather than any sort of external fire source crafted to aid him in battle. Grendel’s mother also thwarts an attack from Hrunting, in which Beowulf found that

se beadoleoma bitan nolde,
aldre sceðþan, ac seo ecg geswac
ðeodne æt þearfe; ðolode ær fela
hondgemota, helm oft gescær,
fægæs fyrdræg!; ða wæs forma sið
deorum madme þæt his dom alæg. (1523-28)

[the battle light could not bite, injure life, but the edge failed the chief in his need; in earlier times it endured many hard meetings, helmet often cut through, war garment of a fated one; then was the first time for the dear treasure that its glory failed]

While Beowulf does slay Grendel’s mother with a sword, it is important to note that the sword of the flood is supernatural and more symbolic of God’s plan to flood the earth and to rid it of giants (1688-92). Hrunting, however, is a sword forged by men and which saw success in combat against other men. It is when it is used by Beowulf, a water and earth figure himself, against Grendel’s mother that it fails him. While in Grendel’s case swords do not work because he put a spell on them, there is no indication that Grendel’s mother used the same sort of spell. It is more likely that as a creature of earth and water that lives in a cave underwater she is impervious to flames. In other words, Grendel’s mother’s nature as a water monster prevents a weapon of fire from harming her, since water extinguishes flame as it does when the men pitch the dragon into the ocean, symbolically quenching its fire (3131-2). It is up to Beowulf, who after throwing the sword away in anger, “strenges getruwode,/ mundgripe mægenes. (1533-4) ‘trusted in his own strength, in his handgrip of might’. This failure of man-made swords during the fights with

Grendel and his mother highlight an important point about fire and the tools made from it: not only is it ineffectual against the monsters due to their nature as water monsters, and in Grendel's case his ability to cast spells, it also shows how the elements interact with each other in nature, with water quenching fire, and in this case a nation is unable to defend itself with swords except against other humans. In other words, swords are only effective against other people, and in nature, you cannot literally cut water or earth and harm it in any tangible manner, and since Grendel and his mother are both earth and water creatures, they cannot be injured by fire alone, rendering fire useless in this case. It is these conflicts with other societies that cause the most harm, since in the case of Heorot, the Geats, and the Frisians, their societies fell not due to any natural source, but rather to the man-made feuds that plagued them for years.

5.5 The Funeral Pyres

As a narrative element in an anthropocentric view, fire represents what Cohen and Trigg establish as trauma existing within human memory, in that the memory of fire serves as a reminder of the events that led to the trauma in question. For these societies, funerals conducted through fire are important because they not only show a proper send-off for their warriors, but they are also reminders that this world is temporary, and the burning of the fire symbolizes their passing. In *Beowulf*, this is established through the depiction of the aftermath of such events: funerals. These include Scyld Scefing's funeral, the funeral after the battle of Finnsburg, and Beowulf's funeral. With the exception of Scyld Scefing's funeral, these funerals are all conducted through a funeral pyre in which the dead are burned. Although Scyld's funeral caused mourning and sadness for his followers, since after he was put out to sea "him wæs geomor sefa,/ murnende mod" (49-50) 'their spirits were sad, their minds saddened', it is also connected with the start of the Danish royal line that continues with Hrothgar, because the poet goes on to

explain the success of Beow and his children (53-85) and so is not connected with the same type of trauma that fire creates in the other funerals. Therefore, fire of the pyres symbolizes the trauma that their death has on their society, and is a reminder of the pain that their deaths caused.

The funeral at the end of the battle of Finnsburg encapsulates the dangers of warring with other clans or kinsmen. After the initial conflict between Hildeburh's brother and Finn claimed the life of both Hnaef and her son, Hengest and Finn "getruwedon on twa healfa/ fæste frioðwære" 'confirmed a fixed compact of peace between the two sides' and Finn declared that the Danes would be allowed to stay with the Frisians for the winter and that they would honour their war dead (1095-1106). With this peace brokered, a funeral pyre was made ready for the fallen in combat:

Ad wæs geæfned ond icge gold
ahæfen of horde; Here-Scyldinga
betst beadorinca wæs on bæl gearu.
Æt þæm ade wæs eþgesyne
swatfah syrce, swyn eal gylden,
eofer irenheard, æþeling manig
wundum awyrdded; sume on wæle crungon. (1107-13)

[A fire was made ready and (much) gold was extracted from the hoard; the best of warriors of the Scyldings were prepared on the pyre. Near them a bloodstained shirt of mail was easily visible on the pyre, the image of a boar all golden, an iron hard helmet with the figure of a boar, many princes injured with wounds; some fell on the battlefield.]

This first part of the funeral passage further elaborates on the importance that arms and armour and gold have in this society. Their material possessions are described in lavish detail by the poet, and the loss of this equipment further highlights the individuality that weapons carried with their owners. The fact that they are consumed with the flames as well indicates their connection to how the land is protected. By losing these weapons and armour the men also lose the tools and companions which they not only used to defend themselves, but also used to forge their current

society. While they can create more weapons and armour the symbolic value of the arms of their lord and fellow companions is lost, and so is their society weakened with this loss. The connection of weapons to their owners cannot be understated, and so when those weapons are also placed on the pyre they are symbolically destroying their ability to defend themselves. The main trauma of the event, however, is associated with the lives lost in combat. This is illustrated with Hildeburh's reaction to her son's and her brother's cremation:

Het ða Hildeburh æt Hnæfes ade
hire selfre sunu sweoloðe befæsten,
eame on eaxle. Ides gnornode,
geomrode giddum. Guðrec astah,
wand to wolcnum; wælfyra mæst
hlynode for hlawe. Hafelan multon,
bengeato burston ðonne blod ætspranc,
laðbite lices; lig ealle forswalg,
gæsta gifrost, þara ðe þær guð fornam
bega folces. Wæs hira blæd scacen. (1107-1124)

[Then Hildeburh ordered her own son to the pyre flames near Hnaef, to his uncle on his shoulder. The woman mourned, lamented with songs. The smoke arose, flew to the clouds; The greatest of funeral pyres roared from the mound. The heads melted, wound openings burst when blood flowed out, wounds of the body; flame swallowed all, a ravenous fire, all those destroyed by war from both nations. Their glory was gone.]

All that is left of her brother and son are their bodies, which are consumed by flames and the gory details of their passing is noted. What all of this means is that for Hildeburh there is no glory in the combat that just ended; only death and the memories of those fallen. Even though they are kinsmen, Hnaef and Hildeburh's son are killed in the fighting. The seemingly short amount of time that the poet allots to the construction of the pyre and for the burning itself demonstrates the nature of memory in the fire. Gale Owen-Crocker states that “[c]learly time is contracted in the account” since after the “lingering gaze at the mail coats and helmets at the beginning of the passage...hardly any adjectives prolong the action, only the emotive *selfre* (her

own son) [sic]” (54). While a lot of detailed attention is paid to the loss of arms, the material goods almost seemingly go up in flames easily as opposed to the human remains which the poet relates in gory detail. Fire in this case is ambivalent and distant. It allows the mourners to watch their loved ones depart the earth, yet they are forced to watch as their bodies are consumed by fire and, according to the poet, “multon.” This emphasis on the bodily decay in the fire highlights these societies’ main purpose: to foment the rise and cultivation of excellent warriors. With the deaths of their loved ones, and the frailty of the human body on display, it highlights the importance of training warriors properly because they are so fragile in death that with strong bodies they can live longer if they are given the chance. Hildeburh lets out a wailing cry for her lost kin, and it is this cry which invokes the memory for the fallen; fire consumes the bodies in such a way that their mortality is laid bare, and they are reduced to nothing but ashes. Even though fire consumes it does leave more than just ashes as a physical reminder in collective memory, and although in the case of Hnaef’s and Hildeburh’s son’s pyre there is no physical remnant which symbolized their lives, a funeral can be completed with the construction of a barrow to honour the fallen hero.

Beowulf’s funeral plays a similar role as the Finnsburg funeral. When Beowulf’s body goes up in flames, a lone Geatish woman cries out in anguish for the death of her lord (3150). This cry echoes the lament of the whole Geatish people, since their society is doomed. The fire here indicates that they are burning away the remnants of their most victorious period, and that after Beowulf’s passing, the Geatish kingdom will fall to external forces due to their loss of strength. In other words, the fire burns away Beowulf’s body, which itself was a symbol of the strength of his nation, since he was able to single-handedly take care of any issue in his kingdom and is the one to defeat the last threat to his reign, the dragon, which itself burns him with fire

and eventually kills him with its poison. The burial mound that Beowulf requests be constructed is an important geographical indication of the memory that remains after Beowulf's death. It was supposed to be "wegliðendum wide gesyne" (3158) (visible far and wide to seafarers) and serve as a reminder to his people of his life (2805). This physical memory of Beowulf's legacy is almost understated; his most important valuables are lit up in the pyre along with him and the only thing remaining is a barrow on the head cliff. In this case Beowulf's death and cremation serve as a reminder to the Geatish people that they will not survive without the care of their lord. Although Beowulf's deeds were well known throughout the world of *Beowulf*, his glory is also transient, even in the memories of his kinsmen since they are doomed to die out at the hands of the Swedes. Although Beowulf's story will come down to later generations, his people will ultimately die, so even though other peoples can read and know about Beowulf, his own society will not survive to see the future either. Although its loss will take much longer than a pyre due to it being of earth nature rather than fire, even the barrow will erode over time and be forgotten. The fire and its lasting memories only remain within the written word of the poem. Although the poem is Anglo-Saxon and uses Old English terms for the English landscape, the setting is still in Scandinavia, and this story has therefore remained in the collective memory of those people who migrated from that region ever since, which supports the claim that fire, even though fire itself is transitory, can remain within the collective memory of a people for a long time. Although the funeral pyres affect these nations by providing a memory of a past trauma, fire in its most elemental, wild form is far more destructive than the loss of members of these nations.

5.6 Dragons and Fire

Dragons are mentioned several times throughout *Beowulf* in varying forms. There are the "sædracan" (1426) that inhabit Grendel's mere, the "wurm" mentioned in the scop's retelling of

Sigemund's exploits, and the dragon that Beowulf fights during the last section of the poem. Beowulf's dragon and Sigemund's dragon are aberrations within Germanic mythology. Alan Brown notes that although the model for the European dragon is typically depicted as fire breathing, the first instance of fire breathing dragons in European culture is mentioned in *Beowulf* (439). This discrepancy is important to note because the dragons' use of fire is indicative of their connection to nature. While Grendel and his mother were both outcasts from the human race as the kin of Cain, the dragon is not affiliated with humanity in any way, other than its love of gold. Even though one thing that sets humans apart from animals is their manipulation of fire, the dragon, although it also controls fire, does so as part of its physiology, rather than as an external manipulation of fire. What this means is that humans have to manipulate fire, and need to use wood (earth) to create flames, whereas the dragon internally creates them as part of its physical being. In this case then, Beowulf's dragon is a part of nature because it is able to use fire naturally, unlike humans who have to manipulate it to create it. When fire is used as a verb in narrative, it "burn[s], transmute[s], frustrate[s], or intensify[s]" (Jane Bennet 107). As such, the descriptions of both the dragon and Sigemund's dragon exemplify fire and the importance of it.

Sigemund's dragon is given only a short description by the poet. The scop begins by mentioning that the dragon is a "hordes hyrde" (887) 'keeper of the hoard' and that when Sigemund kills him, his sword "þurhwod/ wrætlicne wyrm" (890-1) 'penetrated the ornamental or splendid wyrm', and that the "wurm hat gemealt" (897) 'the hot worm melted'. These three minor descriptions illuminate a lot about the dragon's role and purpose in this world. His role as a "hordes hyrde" indicates that the dragon is like Beowulf's dragon in that it guards wealth buried under the ground by former heroes. He therefore partly symbolizes the lust for gold that

the poet describes as “swa unnyt swa hyt (æro)r wæs” (3268) ‘as useless as it previously was’. While this attribute could connect it to humanity, Margaret Goldsmith notes that although the dragon slain by Siegfried, Fafnir, was once a man, the scop does not add this same nuance to Sigemund’s dragon (129). This indicates that the dragon is, therefore, more like an animal than a man. When Sigemund pierces the “wætlicne wyrm” the description of its skin also brings attention to the nature of the dragon in mythology. The sense is that the dragon is splendid, or ornamented, and therefore its scales could be glittering. But its light bearing qualities invoke the nature of fire as an element necessary to the preservation of a home life, since the dragon presumably made its lair on a hoard and this is its hall. These descriptions culminate with the death of the dragon: it melts. The adjectival modifier “hat” indicates that the dragon was hot, presumably from flames. The fact that it also melts can be attributed to its nature as a fire beast. In other words, Sigemund’s dragon personifies the nature of fire within nature; it keeps its home safe and warm from intruders, and when Sigemund finally destroys it, it melts away from the fire it once generated. Encapsulated within that description is the nature of fire itself. It is capable of burning and destroying, but also nurturing and creating. Beowulf’s dragon also shares some of these attributes, but utilizes its fire to ignite the countryside with its rage.

Whenever Beowulf’s dragon is mentioned, whether it is in combat or sleeping on its hoard of gold, fire is always mentioned in some way. The dragon is one who “byrnende biorgas seceð” (2272) ‘sought burning barrows’, and who “nihtes fleogeð/ fyre befangen” (2273-4) ‘flew by night enveloped with fire’. The commentary for the fourth edition of Klaeber also states that in line 2272 “se ðe byrnende biorgas seceð” is more accurately translated as ‘he who, burning, seeks out barrows,’ implying that the dragon was enveloped in flames rather than a dragon who seeks out burnt burial mounds (p 240). The dragon, who is “hat ond hreohmod” (2296) ‘hot and

fierce' seeks out the thief of his cup and wishes to repay the debt with "lige" (2305) 'fire'. When the dragon attacks the Geats, it "ongan spiwan gledum" (2312) 'began to spew with fires' the surrounding landscape. At the end of the day, his vengeance was just beginning: "Hæfde landwara lige befangen,/ bæle ond bronde beorges getruwode,/ wiges ond wealles him seo wen ge Leah" (2321-3) 'He had surrounded with fire the people of the land, with fire and burning; he trusted in the cliff, of battle and walls; the expectation deceived him'. The dragon even managed to burn Beowulf's house to the ground (2326-7). With this introduction of the dragon, the imagery of fire pervades the whole episode. Christine Rauer notes that the dragon personifies four distinct characteristics which are very unusual outside of *Beowulf*, with fire being its most prominent characteristic. She states that fire pervades the whole episode so much that it seems more like Beowulf is fighting with the elements of fire and heat alone rather than against a dragon (33). While these elements are not the only factors behind the dragon's personality, they do serve to embody it. The dragon is constantly wreathed in flames and Beowulf is forced to carry a specially crafted shield of metal with him into battle for the first time due to the dangers of its fire.

While the dragon does manifest some human characteristics, such as its apparent love for gold (which itself is made from fire), its overwhelmingly dominant characteristic establishes it as a creature of nature, especially of fire. It is this instance which separates the dragon from the rest of humanity; it is an animal that protects its territory from the encroachment of man, and like a mother bear in search of her cubs, it protects its lands from any thief or intruder. Raymond Tripp argues that the last survivor, who established the hoard after his kinsmen were wiped out, actually changes into the dragon and guards the hoard as a symbol for the greed for gold that men seek in life. Tripp states that in lines 2270-2, the "Hordwynne fond/ eald uhtsceaða opene

standan/ se ðe....” which he states is normally translated as “The hoard-joy found the old dawn-harmer standing open, He who...,” is an incident in which the poet seems to introduce the dragon as an animal, which is the analysis critics have deduced for years. He states that this proposition is not in accordance with the rest of the poem, which is a “homiletic pattern which humanizes the antagonist, independently of other narrative details” (91). Tripp links this humanity of the dragon with terms like “bearn hrusan” ‘child of the earth’, implying that it literally means a “man of the earth” (93-4), and he also claims that the poet states that the last survivor died, but modern critics have a biological concept of death whereas the *Beowulf* poet had a more open view of death, one which included the possibility of “revenants” (94). While Tripp’s argument is layered with a linguistic interpretation of the text, there is no direct indication that the dragon is a human. Both Grendel and his mother are described as belonging to the kin of Cain, and so why the poet would neglect to mention that the dragon is a descendant of some former king is odd. Also, the fight with Beowulf at the end would lose some of its thematic content. While Beowulf is old and not able to fight as well as before, his preparations for this fight are far more rigorous than for the previous two fights. This serves to highlight the increasing danger of each fight, and the changing battle plans that Beowulf must adopt in order to defeat each enemy. In other words, the dragon is not a human because it is a representation of nature through its ability to breathe fire, and by its unyielding attitude towards its treasure and against those that steal it. The dragon was washed away by water, which is also indicative of this fact. The dragon, however, as an embodiment of nature, is also capable of complete destruction, and so embodies the knowledge that change in the world is inevitable, and that it can come unexpectedly and destroy whole societies.

The dragon in the poem, more so than Grendel or his mother, represents the force of change in the world. It uses fire to radically alter the landscape and to eliminate the last hero of the Geats. During its rampages, the dragon is often consumed with battle rage, and uses heat and fire to convey its anger: when Beowulf confronts the dragon, he “stearcheort styrnde” (2552) ‘shouted stouthearted’ and the dragon responds to the voice of a man. Then, “[f]rom ærest cwom,/ oruð aglæcean ut of stane,/ hat hildeswat; hruse dynede” (2556-8) ‘The breath of the formidable one came first out of the rock, the hot hostile vapor; the earth resounded’. When they meet again, the dragon’s heart “æðme weoll” (2593) ‘seethed with breath’. When the dragon attacks for a third time, it makes a final attempt on Beowulf’s life:

Þa wæs Þeodsceaða Þriddan siðe,
 Frecne fyrdraca fæhða gemyndig,
 Ræse on ðone rofan, Þa him rum ageald,
 Hat ond heaðogrim... (2688-91)

[That enemy of the people for a third time, the terrible fire dragon mindful of feuds,
 rushed the brave one, when he had the opportunity, hot and fierce...]

These three events all signify how the dragon’s rage and hate for mankind is connected with its fire. The dragon lays sleeping until the thief comes and steals its cup, in which the dragon then “wolde...lige forgyldan/ drincfæt dyre” (2305-6) ‘wished to repay with fire the beloved cup’. It is this act of theft which ignites the dragon’s flames, and brings an end to Beowulf’s reign. In each case the dragon is already breathing heavy and hot air when it attacks, and Beowulf responds with his own fiery rage. Alan Lee states that the language used in *Beowulf* is “animal language,” and that it is more connected with feeling rather than reasoning (87). He attributes its characteristics to more than just burning: he states that fire is the “gæsta gifrost” (1123) ‘the greediest of guests’ since it consumes all the bodies and war gear left to burn during the funeral at the battle of Finnsburg, and that it is also linked to human rage and hatred, as in the allusion to

the burning of Heorot in which fire is “heaðowylmas...laðan liges” (82-3) ‘the battle surging of hostile flames’. This battle rage also encompasses numerous objects in the poem, including Hrunting which attempts to strike down Grendel’s mother using a “greedy war-lay” to incite victory (1521-2). Rage and fire connect to depict the dragon as an agent of change within the poem. Its fiery rage at the thought of losing some of its treasure precipitates the end for Beowulf and later the Geats, and it also emphasizes the seeming pointlessness of all the material wealth it guarded. This drastic change from peace to war is indicative of the nature of fire; it consumes and acts almost as a will of its own. The material wealth lost to the dragon is reclaimed to be placed alongside Beowulf on his funeral pyre.

For the nations of man, therefore, fire in nature is the most dangerous element of all. It can consume indiscriminately, and since their halls are made from wood, and their wealth is made of gold and steel, they are susceptible to burning flames, as is personified in Beowulf’s dragon. In the final section of my essay, I will ruminate on the ways that the dragon is further connected to nature through the use of all four elements, and I will also provide some more material for why air was not included in the essay, but also why air may have been important to the poem.

6 Conclusion

The elements in *Beowulf* present a nuanced portrait of how nature interacts with the human societies in the poem. Although some of the instances provide more broad strokes, in general this ecocritical reading can illuminate a new understanding of the poem. For example, although the poet notes that Grendel had cast a spell so he would be impervious to swords, it is the addition of his role as a water monster that prevents swords from damaging him, since swords are made with fire and since one of Grendel's elements in the poem is water, and since swords cannot cut water, they cannot damage Grendel. Men can also only traverse the sea, an otherwise impassable obstacle, by symbolically traveling on earth on the water, which is represented by the ships. This connection of mankind to the earth is important for an understanding of how men fit into this world because it shows that, with a few notable exceptions, men need the earth to live on this world, and it is only through their connection to and mastery over the earth that they are able to travel through spaces that would be otherwise hostile to men. It also adds an element of foreshadowing to the story, since the dragon, as an embodiment of fire, ultimately kills Beowulf, although he does not do it through his flames, this event foreshadows Beowulf's funeral, in which the flames of the pyre remove Beowulf from this world. While the three elements of earth, fire, and water all add their own individual twist to the poem, altering the way in which humans create their nations and establish their role in the world, air is only tangentially connected to the other three and does not have a narrative voice of its own. I will finish this essay by examining the ways in which air interacts with the other elements in the poem, and how this may affect a reading of the poem.

Air, as an individual element in *Beowulf*, only appears twice as "lyft," or "air/sky;" it also appears in four other instances as a compound word. As a raw element this makes it the least

used in the poem. In the first instance it is used in relation to a description of the mere, when the “wind styreþ/ lað gewidru, oð þæt lyft ðrysmað” ‘the wind stirs up the hostile weather, until the sky chokes’ (1374-5). The second use of the word occurs after Beowulf has succumbed to his wounds at the hands of the dragon and the poet ruminates on the death of the dragon: “[n]alles æfter lyfte lacende hwearf/ middelnihum” ‘never again did it fly through the air and appear in the middle of the night’ (2832-3). These two instances are important to note because they add air as a hostile component to the other elements. In the first case, it highlights the alien nature of the mere and how dangerous it is, and in the second it references the dragon’s ability to fly, a dangerous skill to have against a group of people who cannot defend attacks as well from the air as they can from the ground. While this represents a negative aspect of the element, a positive aspect can be gleaned from the other indication of the word “lyft”: that of the sky, which is also where heaven is located. While there is no clear indication in the poem that heaven exists in the sky, there are a few hints that point at this reading. First, the sun is equated with the sky and heaven, since it is named “rodores candel,” (heaven’s candle) (1572), implying that it exists in the area that heaven also resides. When Beowulf’s pyre goes up in flames, heaven “rece swealg” ‘swallowed the smoke’ (3155). This use of heaven connects air with fire, and so provides a positive connotation because the flames are providing warmth, and possibly Beowulf’s ashes are floating towards heaven, where his final resting place may be. This idea of air being connected to heaven is corroborated by John Hill who theorizes that the connection of the Metod as a glorious and shining being may have been a carryover from Tyr in Germanic paganism, who was originally a sky god (67-9). This means that the Metod could have ruled from the sky, spreading his glory throughout the world, since the sky encompasses all the earth. While these instances of air are few, they illuminate a potential way in which air acts, as a secondary mover of the other

elements, since it is often used in conjunction with the other elements to describe the landscape of the poem.

Air is also often used in conjunction with the other elements to further augment the atmosphere of the locations. This is especially notable in the description of the mere and in how the ships are used to travel over the waters. When Beowulf and his companions travel to Denmark, they “[g]ewitan þa ofer wægholm winde gefysed” ‘departed then over the sea impelled by the wind’ (217) and this event is mirrored when they travel back to Geatland, “no þær wegflotan wind ofer yðum/ siðes getwæfde” ‘where no wind prevented the ship of its trip over the waves’ (1907). These two instances of water travel are important to note because although men need the ships, analogues to the earth, to travel over the water, their way is made easier due to the nature of the wind. In the second instance, the mention of the wind as not driving them off course indicates that they rely on other sources of energy to power their ways across a hostile space, although if the wind was working against them or non-existent, then they could always row, which is why it is not as strong of a reference to the other elements in the poem. The other time that the poet uses wind extensively is when he mentions some of the landscapes around bodies of water. In Beowulf’s journey to and from Denmark, he lands, in both nations, on “windige næssas,” ‘the windy bluffs’ (1358) and when, after slaying the merefixa, Beowulf comes ashore in the land of the Lapps and sees the “windig wealles” ‘windy walls’ (572). Both of these instances reference earth that is close to the sea, creating an ominous feeling, although in the first instance it is to create a sense of dread when related to Grendel’s mere, and in the other instance as a landmark that Beowulf noticed after he landed ashore. The other instance of “windig” appears in relation to the “windige reste” (2456) hall of Herebeald’s court, this sense of wind as an ominous force accentuates air’s role in creating an oppressive atmosphere in the

poem. While these instances of air are important, it is maybe the role of air in defining one aspect of Beowulf's dragon that provides the most ominous notion of all: the dragon is capable of flight.

The dragon in this poem, although I argue that it is an embodiment of fire, also represents the wild harshness of nature because it is connected with all four elements in its description. The poet calls him a "lyftfloga" 'air-flier' (2315), an "eorðdraca" 'earth-dragon' and as being enveloped in flames (2274), and equates its death with water (3132). These qualifiers point to an interesting aspect of the dragon: it is so dangerous, and is able to kill Beowulf because, unlike Grendel and his mother, it is able to attack Beowulf in the two areas that he lacks strength: in the air and through fire. While Beowulf, as a man, is connected to the earth and his strength is multiplied by his prowess in water, he is unable to fly or use the air to his personal advantage, and can only use swords, which are connected to fire, in relatively non-trivial matters, such as during the swimming match and the battle with the Frisians. What all of this suggests is that when pitted against nature, Beowulf is only able to counter it rather than conquer it. As a result, the dragon therefore ultimately symbolizes the role that nature plays in the poem because although the dragon itself is an embodiment of destruction, its relationship with men and human societies is such that it represents a different point of view of reality, and that when men confront it, they are incapable of completely conquering it, because even when their greatest hero, in this case Beowulf, fights against nature, he is only capable of subduing it at the cost of his own life, and his people fall without his might to protect them. This permanence of life is also reflected in the dragon's nature because the dragon completes its role in nature when it is pitched into the sea by Beowulf's men as a symbolic gesture to quench its fire, completing the cycle of life with death. This tangential connection with water shows that when it is rolled into the sea, it implies that the dragon, while a representative of nature, is still subject to its laws and boundaries, and so

as a creature of fire it is still vulnerable to the hostile space of the sea, in the same way that humans are also susceptible to the laws of nature.

Catherine Clarke asserts that the common critical argument for nature in Old English literature is that it “does not represent nature as pleasant or delightful” (38). While she does go on to mention the importance of the influence that pastoral poetry had on Old English literature as a positive effect, it is the poet’s own description of nature which is what shows how nature is treated, since it is often not a nice pastoral scene but rather an epic standing of immense depth, whether it is on the open ocean, in the depths of the mere, or merely by the blustery cliffs of the land. This idea of nature then might be further elaborated on with an examination of how Aristotle’s characterizations of the elements could influence an ecocritical reading of the poem. For instance, there could be a connection between the four humours in medieval medicine with the four elements in nature, since each humour had its own element associated with it. Blood was associated with the air and sanguinity; yellow bile was associated with fire and a choleric temperament; black bile was associated with the earth and melancholy; and finally phlegm was associated with water and a phlegmatic temperament. While it would be a stretch to suggest that these four humours characterize each of the primary characters in the poem (Beowulf as blood, the dragon as yellow bile, Grendel as black bile, and Grendel’s mother as phlegm,) their temperaments roughly align with each humour, although, like the elements in the poem, they overlap in a lot of cases. In conclusion, the elements in *Beowulf* represent a more nuanced view of nature in both the poem and in Anglo-Saxon literature in general, in that while nature was not perceived as entirely positive, it was also not entirely negative, and this idea has not been explored in this field, and this exploration could potentially provide us with some valuable insights for how the Anglo-Saxons viewed nature in the future.

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