

INDECENT BODIES: GENDER AND THE MONSTROUS IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH  
LITERATURE

DISSERTATION

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By

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## ABSTRACT

While Old English literature rarely represents sexualized bodies, and just as rarely represents monsters, Middle English literature teems with bodies that are both sexualized and monstrous. In Old English, sexualized bodies appear in overlooked genres like bestiaries or travel narratives—the homes of monsters. Thus, monsters possess some of the only explicitly sexualized forms present in Old English texts. But it is not only the difference between paucity and abundance that marks the change from Old to Middle English monsters; it is also the shift from permanence to mutability. The bodies of Old English monsters are permanent and unchanging; many Middle English monsters, however, are capable of transformation.

In order to study the shift from Old English monsters to those in Middle English, I offer four case studies, two Old English and two Middle English. I begin with a discussion of the desire by Old English writers and readers to erase the sexualized bodies of monsters in *Wonders of the East*. The author and characters in *Beowulf*, too, attempt to erase the monstrous and reproductive body of Grendel's mother from the narrative, a tactic that only results in revealing the failure of human communities. In Middle English, monstrous bodies are trickier; they cannot be so easily erased. Because of their ability to transform, the monstrous bodies in *Mandeville's Travels* either sexually under- or over-

circulate in ways that disrupt proper community and class standards. However, the Middle English romance, *Sir Gowther*, presents a solution to the problem of the monstrous body; through penance, the child of a demon and a noble woman transforms physically and spiritually into a child of God. Most of these texts attempt to dispel the threat of the monster through erasure, be it the literal removal of the monstrous image, the killing of the monster, or the rehabilitation of the monster through religious means. *Mandeville's Travels*, however, reminds us that monsters have infiltrated communities and cannot be easily recognized or erased. Only *Mandeville's Travels*, then, acknowledges that the body and social system in which it exists are no longer stable.

Dedicated to my mother, Linda, my husband, Drew,  
and to my grandparents, who thought  
I would be Miss America or the President

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Monsters, Erasure, and the Trace

Johannes Hartlieb's 1461 portrait of Alexander the Great shows us an unaccustomed version of the Greek leader (as reprinted in Petzoldt and Neubauer 41). This Alexander wears an elaborate three-peaked crown and a well-cut tunic, neither unusual nor inappropriate attire. His nose is decidedly Roman and his eyebrows pinch together in consternation over light eyes that look intelligent. Despite all the signs of royalty and refinement, this Alexander bears two signs of barbarity: slender tusks and an unkempt beard and hair. His clothes tell us of his wealth and political significance, but his crude animal attributes interrupt and contradict this story. Hartlieb portrays Alexander as the violent and uncivilized invader of the East. Just as the lands that he conquered were known as barbarous, so too does Alexander's physical form in this image reflect the perceived qualities of these lands. Contact with the savage lands of the East has changed a once-civil man into a monster as represented by Hartlieb. Though dressed in the proper

attire and still obviously human in his facial features, this Alexander cannot hide his corruption. It peeks through in tousled hair, an untidy beard, and, most strikingly, those intractable tusks.

This fifteenth-century German painting offers a window into my primary subject: the monstrous human body in medieval culture. This image suggests that congress with the dangerous lands of the East visibly contaminates the human body of Alexander—and indeed, in much early medieval literature, the monstrous exists only in distant places like the marvel-filled East. As the image also implies, humans like Alexander desire contact with the monstrous and find its very liminality fascinating and inviting. These two problems are fundamentally related: humans are both fascinated and repelled by monstrous forms. They want to witness strange bodies, but they also wish to control, to circumscribe these bodies. This control is enacted textually and visually through the representation and the erasure of the monstrous body. The text allows both distance and proximity to the monstrous.

Early medieval literature attempts to place the monstrous at a distance from human communities. In such Anglo-Saxon texts as *The Wonders of the East* and *Beowulf* monsters live at a significant remove from humans. This does not mean that no contact between the monster and the human occurs. In both texts, humans interact with monsters—in *Beowulf*, the Grendelkin leave their distant home and invade the human hall, although they never intend to stay; and in *Wonders*, humans inside the text wander unwittingly (and often disastrously) into monsters as they travel through the faraway lands of the East. In Middle English literature, however, monsters are not quite as distant—they exist very near to and occasionally inside of human communities. How did

this change occur? Are monsters suddenly socially acceptable or tamed? No. I argue that monsters in Old English have permanently monstrous bodies that mark them as outsiders to the community, whereas many Middle English monsters have bodies that are capable of transformation. Thus they can appear more or less human, and may live in close proximity to human communities.

While the temporary or permanent nature of monstrous forms differs between Old and Middle English representations, human response to the visibly monstrous is fundamentally unchanged. In each case, the human desire for mastery or control of the monstrous body results in the representation and then the selective erasure of the monstrous form. Erasure might take the form of the literal removal of parts of an image, as when the genitals in the manuscript illustrations are scratched out in *Wonders of the East*. But erasure can also function more subtly, as when a scribe or artist decides to leave out or change unacceptable parts of a narrative in a new version of a text. Moreover, erasure can function narratively, as happens when the monstrous body of a demon's son in *Sir Gowther* is replaced by the body of a child of God. Although methods of erasure differ from Old to Middle English, the desire for erasure remains evident. Indeed, while the transformation of the monstrous body in Middle English is a method of erasure, this method results in an even more frightening prospect. Because the monstrous can become invisible, monsters are capable of infiltrating human communities and passing as human—as is the case in *Mandeville's Travels*. Thus, transformation must be revised to serve as a method for conversion of the monstrous in *Sir Gowther*. Ultimately, however, desire for erasure on the part of the writers, scribes, artists, or viewers is thwarted. When someone attempts to erase the monstrous—from the text or from the body—it becomes

clear to the reader or viewer that the erasure has been attempted. Traces of that which was erased remain, whether it is the blank spot on the page that results from scratching out part of an image or the body of Sir Gowther, which remains, despite the replacement of a holy for a demonic father.

In order to study the shift from Old English monsters to those in Middle English, I offer four case studies, two drawing on Old English texts and two drawing on Middle English texts. In this introduction, I examine critical definitions of and concepts about the monstrous, taking into consideration questions of gender and transformation. Chapter two, “The Indecent Bodies of the *Wonders of the East*,” examines the three manuscript versions of the Anglo-Saxon *Wonders of the East*. In this chapter, I argue that when monstrous bodies are also sexualized, their very appearance actively threatens viewers. *Wonders* is an illustrated catalog (Latin and Old English) of wondrous places and creatures, and its illustrations of the human monsters are surprisingly sexual—seven of the fewer than twenty monsters feature genitals, which are rarely depicted in Anglo-Saxon art. Later viewers, however, have erased the genitals in six of these seven illustrations. This kind of erasure corresponds with the erasure of the eyes of demons, thought to have the power of the “evil eye.” In *Wonders*, the sexualized bodies of monsters act out against viewers and readers of the text in such a threatening way that their bodies must be either erased or revised.

In chapter three, “Dismembering: The Erasure of Grendel’s Mother and the Monstrous Body in *Beowulf*,” I show that the acts of erasure practiced in *Wonders of the East* are also present in the longest Anglo-Saxon poem, *Beowulf*. Although the fight with Grendel is perceived as the more significant of the first two monster fights, that with

Grendel's mother is central to the text both structurally and thematically. Both the poet and the character of Beowulf attempt to erase and revise the story of his fight with Grendel's mother because she very nearly defeats him. More threatening, however, is the fact that her reproductive ability—the seeming ability to autonomously produce Grendels—indicates Beowulf's own reproductive failure. His kingdom is doomed to fail because he, unlike Grendel's mother, cannot provide a son.

Chapter four, "Circulation and Transformation: The Monstrous Feminine in *Mandeville's Travels*," takes as its subject one of the most popular travel narratives of the later medieval period. *Mandeville's Travels* is a text concerned with circulation, both that of the narrator, Sir John, and the circulation of reproductive bodies within the marriage economy of various communities. Of the twenty-seven monsters described in *Mandeville's Travels*, four are transformative: a dragon woman, a reproductive dead body, the self-mutilating Amazons, and the virgins whose bodies conceal serpents. I argue that the ability of these transformative monsters to infiltrate human communities and to interrupt their marital and reproductive practices reveals an anxiety about the permeability of English communities and the proximity of the monstrous to the human.

In chapter five, "Paternity and Monstrosity in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gowther*," I discuss a medieval attempt to dispel the threat of the monstrous body through redemption and salvation. While the threat of the body of the giant of Mont St. Michel from *The Alliterative Morte Arthure* can only be removed by a violent killing that includes castration, Sir Gowther provides an alternative. Through physical mortification and penance, Sir Gowther, a creature of physical excess who is the son of a demon, is



transformed through the power of religious authority into a child of God. Sir Gowther's transformation, thus, presents a solution for anxieties about the disruption of communities and social classes.

### **Monstrosity Defined**

Over halfway through the Middle English travel narrative, *Mandeville's Travels*, the narrator, Sir John Mandeville, defines the term "monster" for his readers: Sir John tells us that "a monster is a þing difformed a3en kynde bothe of man or of best or of ony þing elles & þat is cleped a Monstre" [a monster is a thing deformed against kind, both of man or of beast or of anything else, and that is called a monster] (Cotton 30). In accordance with Sir John's statement, I define monstrosity as a primarily physical category: in order to be monstrous, one must manifest a clear and usually visible physical difference from that which is "normal." Three types of monstrous humans exist: monsters of excess, monsters of lack, and hybrid monsters. Monsters of excess include the giants of Middle English romance, whose bodies are excessively large, excessively hairy, and usually excessively violent. The Sciapods (one-footed men) and Blemmyae (men with no heads and faces in their chests) featured in both *Wonders of the East* and *Mandeville's Travels*, are monsters of lack—they do not have all the body parts expected of normal humans. Finally, monsters of hybridity may be gender hybrids, like the hermaphrodites in *Mandeville* or the huntresses in *Wonders*, but most often they combine animal and human body parts, like the tusked, hooved, and tailed women of *Wonders*, or the horse-footed and fanged men of *Mandeville*.

While physical aberration is the primary attribute of monstrosity, deviant behavior can serve to emphasize or exaggerate monstrosity. Monstrous behaviors help to mark the monster as a cultural as well as a physical other. Some such behaviors include habits of eating, grooming, and dressing, reactions to human approach, relations to human language, and transgressing gender roles. In some cases, physical difference alone identifies one as monstrous, as with monsters for whom only physical descriptions are provided. Some female monsters, in addition to taking on physically male characteristics, such as beards, engage in transgressive gender roles: these women hunt, take revenge, or simply kill men. While these behaviors certainly oppose social norms, they do not make women into monsters unless they are accompanied by a physically different body. Behavior holds the possibility for reform, whereas a monstrous body allows far less possibility of such modification. Women with transgressive behaviors but human bodies could be reformed, as is true of Thryth in *Beowulf*, or even of the Amazons in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. Reform is considerably more problematic, however, when a woman possesses a tail or tusks. Many male giants also transgress gender roles through excess sexuality in addition to their already excessively large bodies. Thus, transgressive behaviors, when linked with aberrant physicality, reinforce human interpretations of the monstrous body.

Whenever medieval scholars study monsters, they turn initially and immediately to Augustine's admonition in book 16 of *De Civitate Dei*:

Verum quisquis uspiam nascitur homo, id est animal rationale mortale, quamlibet nostris inusitatem sensibus gerat corporis formam seu colorem sive motum sive sonum sive qualibet vi, qualibet parte, qualibet qualitate naturam, ex illo uno protoplasto originem ducere nullus fidelium dubitaverit.  
[Yet whoever is born anywhere as a human being, that is, as a rational mortal

creature, however strange he may appear to our senses in bodily form or colour or motion or utterance, or in any faculty, part or quality of his nature whatsoever, let no true believer have any doubt that such an individual is descended from the one man who was first created.] (Green 42-5)

Augustine writes to assure his readers that the races of monsters, at least those that are “rational,” have the potential to be saved, and thus cannot be counted as beasts. If the idea of rationality separates human from animal, monsters occupy a difficult middle ground. Joyce Salisbury notes Thomas Aquinas’s views on the animal versus the human, remarking that animals act according to instinct where humans act according to reason (5). In her book, *The Beast Within*, she elucidates the complicated medieval understandings of animal behavior—and the lengths to which philosophers would go to deny animals’ rationality.<sup>1</sup> Jan Ziolkowski also demonstrates the difficulty of distinguishing human from beast, saying “the line between human and animal in the Middle Ages was at once sharply drawn and porous” (“Literary” 22).<sup>2</sup>

If the line between animal and human was problematic, despite the oft-cited Augustinian injunction concerning rationality, then the divisions among animals, monsters, and humans were considerably more troubling. As Salisbury notes, monsters were largely understood as hybrid creatures, a comment that serves as an “example of the

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<sup>1</sup> Salisbury argues that sharp delineation began to decline after the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Because animals were a way to think about the nature of human identity, this shift required an altered understanding of humanity: “When early Christian thinkers established what they believed to be clear categories that separated animals from humans, they were not only making a theological statement of humanity’s dominance over the natural world, but they were actually defining what it meant to be human...The increasing popularity of the metaphoric linking of humans and animals seems to have opened the possibility for redefining humanity in a way that eliminated the categoric separation of the species” (Salisbury 149).

<sup>2</sup> See both “Literary Genre and Animal Symbolism” in *Animals and the Symbolic in Medieval Art and Literature* and his monograph, *Talking Animals: Medieval Latin Beast Poetry*. Other studies also examine the relationship between humans and animals, including Jeffrey Cohen’s *Medieval Identity Machines*, which theorizes the intimate relationships, for example, between horse and rider. Susan Crane, too, has recently spoken of the nature of animals through a study of the hunt, and particularly dogs’ behavior in the hunt as intermediate between human and prey (talks given at The Ohio State University Center for Medieval Studies Lecture Series, February 2005, and at the 80<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Medieval Academy of America, March 2005).

growth of the idea (and fear) of the blurring of the lines between animal and human” (145). Monsters are particularly difficult to categorize, Augustine acknowledges, because their appearances can be misleading; this difficulty is exacerbated when monsters are animal-human hybrids. The inclusion of animal parts on a recognizably human form, however, seems not to have led to a monster being classified as an animal. Indeed, the Anglo-Saxon listing of monsters, *Liber Monstrorum*, carefully divides its monsters into three categories: monstrous men, monstrous beasts, and monstrous serpents. It seems that monstrous humans are not to be identified as animals.

According to Augustine’s definition as well as to the divisions of *Liber Monstrorum*, humans who possess animal parts are not classified as animals, but, as monsters, and by virtue of their animal parts, they are also not entirely human. According to John Block Friedman in *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* monstrous humans were not conceived of as truly human: “it was not possible to grant full and equal humanity to an alien race...As long as the definition of ‘man’ was based upon a Western model, the monstrous races could only be assigned a subordinate place in the Chain of Being” (196). Thus, for most medieval thinkers and writers, humanoid and rational monsters had the possibility of salvation as Augustine claimed,<sup>3</sup> but they existed somewhere between human and animal in the spiritual and social hierarchy.

If monsters are not beasts, and are not (quite) human, then what purpose do they serve for the human imagination? Most scholars argue that monsters help humans define

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of a hierarchy of salvation, see Greta Austin’s article “Marvelous Peoples or Marvelous Races? Race and the Anglo-Saxon *Wonders of the East*” in *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles*, discussed at greater length in chapter two.

themselves.<sup>4</sup> In “Man-Eating Monsters and Ants as Big as Dogs,” Susan Kim builds from the work of Bruno Roy to clearly articulate this philosophy:

As Bruno Roy explains using Isidore as an example, monster catalogues can reassure their readers. Roy follows Augustine in his argument that the depiction of monsters is an articulation of the fear of the loss of corporal integrity. As they provide a normalizing context for aberrant human births, monsters demonstrate what can happen to the human body—what can come off, what can be unnaturally added on. But with the same gesture the catalogue reassures: the articulation of the fear of disintegration allows that fear to be put to rest, because as the monstrosities define the norm, they confirm it, and thus quiet the fear of its dissolution. (40)

The monster, according to these definitions, reminds the human of what it means to be human—they may threaten the human body, but they also reassure its inherent cohesion. Moreover, monsters serve as sources of fascination. In their exploration of the idea of “wonder” from the medieval period to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park identify monsters as a source for the human experience of “wonder”: “monsters elicited wonder at its most iridescent, linked sometimes to horror, sometimes to pleasure,

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Lesley Kordecki argues that “Animals in discourse for the most part show the shaping of human subjectivity, and the lost monsters of the mediaeval text demonstrate what we do not want to be, but perhaps, as in Marie’s fable, we realize we are not so far removed from the after all” (36-7). For studies of medieval monstrosity, see Cohen, “Monster Theory” in his collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture and Of Giants*; Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*; Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*; Tolkien, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics”; Bruno Roy, “En Marge du Monde Connu: Les Races de Monstres” in *Aspects de la Marginalité au Moyen Age*; Rosemarie Thompson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*; Rudolf Wittkower, “Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters”; *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, edited by Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills; Caroline Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*; David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*; *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe*, edited by K.E. Olsen and L.A.J.R. Houwen; Alixe Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts*; Lisa Verner, *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages*; Naomi Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm; Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, edited by Timothy Jones and David Sprunger; and *Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Laura Knoppers and Joan Landes. Other studies of monstrosity, particularly those related to film, are Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*; Margrit Schildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*; Michael William Saunders, *Imps of the Perverse: Gay Monsters in Film; Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of Women*, edited by Kathleen Lant and Theresa Thompson; Harry Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*; and *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, edited by Gill Kirkup *et al.*

and sometimes to repugnance” (20). Alternately, for Andy Orchard monsters are simply a foil for troubling pagan heroes,<sup>5</sup> while most other scholars focus on the larger cultural work performed by the category of the monstrous.

The cultural work of the monstrous is at once general and contingent. As most monsters inspire both disgust and attraction, so too they depend on a specific cultural context for their affect. Thus, Kim can generally argue that “monsters are located at the extreme margins of the known world because they mark off the boundaries of human norms” (40). But as Daston and Park point out, particularly in reference to Gervase of Tilbury: “The wonders were overwhelmingly topographical in nature; that is to say, they were linked to particular places...and often to particular topographical features, such as caves and springs, rocks and lakes...Such wonders were, in other words, particular, localized, and concrete” (24). Therefore, if a literary work positions a monster in a certain geographical location, the audience would have a matrix of cultural understandings about that location with which to interpret the specific monster. This idea of specificity informs my use of the case study; by examining specific monsters as they function within specific texts, I can apply generalized notions of the monstrous and provide a more nuanced understanding of these general understandings of the category of monstrosity.

John Block Friedman’s *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (1981) serves as a foundational text for the study of monsters. He begins by claiming that

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<sup>5</sup> Orchard’s book is far more concerned with the men who fight monsters than with the monsters themselves—the “pride” rather than the “prodigies.” Although he spends a significant amount of time citing and describing the many monsters in and around the *Beowulf*-manuscript, never does he define the category of the monstrous. Instead, his final claim is that “The heathen warriors and monster-slayers, such as Hercules, Alexander, Beowulf, and Grettir, have themselves become monsters in Christian eyes” (169).

he only uses the term “monstrous” “because that is their most common description in the Middle Ages” (1). He alternately uses the phrases “fabulous races men” and “Plinian races.” He claims:

But many of these people were not monstrous at all. They simply differed in physical appearance and social practices from the person describing them; some were physically unusual but not anomalous, such as the Pygmies and Giants; and some were truly fabulous, such as the Blemmyae or men with their faces on their chests. Even the most bizarre, however, were not supernatural or infernal creatures, but varieties of men, whose chief distinction from the men of Europe was one of geography. (1)

However, in this statement Friedman conflates the Plinian races with the monstrous—a conflation that seems strange because he carefully distinguishes Pliny’s discussion of animals from his discussion of monstrous humans.<sup>6</sup> Although Pliny discusses many beasts in his *Natural History*, Friedman does not claim them as a part of the Plinian races, and yet he conflates races with varying social practices with races that are clearly marked by a physical difference. While these groups with aberrant social practices were certainly of interest to readers, they are not necessarily called “monsters” in medieval texts. They do appear in texts like *Wonders of the East* and *Mandeville’s Travels*, but in neither case are they referred to as monsters—they are “wonders” or “marvels” or “races of men.” Most striking is the fact that Friedman himself does not discuss any group at length that is not physically marked. Indeed, his chapter entitled “The Human Status of the Monstrous Races” examines only the Blemmyae, the Cynecephali, and the Pygmies (178-9). These three groups are clearly physically marked as monstrous: the Blemmyae are monsters of lack who do not have heads and have faces in their chests; the Cynecephali are hybrids of men and dogs; and the Pygmies are monsters of excess who, in addition to their black

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<sup>6</sup> Friedman is at pains to distinguish the human monstrous from beasts, denoting monsters as below humans on the hierarchical scale, but above beasts (183).

skin, are excessively small (in opposition to giants, who, as creatures of excess, are excessively large). Friedman makes encompassing claims about all of the Plinian races, some of which do not bear the physical markers of monstrosity, based only upon those races marked as physically monstrous. He states that “For [Aristotelian thinkers] it was not possible to grant full and equal humanity to an alien race” (196), largely because they were believed to have only a “shadow of reason” (196) as well as being “deformed by sin” (196). While he initially suggests that the Plinian races are not all *really* monstrous, Friedman’s discussions focus almost exclusively on those creatures whose bodies are significantly physically different.

One of the most important and comprehensive general definitions of the monster appears in Jeffrey Cohen’s introductory article to the collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Cohen acknowledges that he violates “two of the sacred dicta of recent cultural study: the compulsion to historical specificity and the insistence that all knowledge (and hence all cartographies of that knowledge) is local” (3). The goal of his essay is to establish a set of seven “breakable postulates” that will help us to understand “cultures through the monsters they bear” (4). Cohen’s postulates are “The Monster’s Body is a Cultural Body,” “The Monster Always Escapes,” “The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis,” “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference,” “The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible,” “Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire,” and finally, “The Monster Stands at the Threshold of Becoming.” He claims that “the monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy” (4); significant in this definition is Cohen’s emphasis on the fact of the body. He differentiates the monster from the human by examining the body of the monster through



the lens of Jacques Derrida's category of *differance* (4). Most terrifying about the monster is the human inability to pin it down, to understand and "dissect" it, just as Beowulf fails to pin down Grendel (who can only be understood through parts of his dead body—his arm and his head). This inability allows monsters to reappear throughout literature, defined always by the specific social climate of the work in which they appear. To use Cohen's example, the vampire can represent "the foreign count's transgressive but compelling sexuality" for a nineteenth century audience, or anxiety about the AIDS crisis in twentieth century America (5).

Cohen argues that the monster always manages to escape because its body cannot be easily categorized or understood—"the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (6). Because monsters contest cultural categories of "normality," they help to rewrite cultural understanding. Simultaneously, however, Cohen states that the monster "prevents mobility, delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies can move," under threat of those creatures that serve as "border patrol" (12). It is the monster's identity as a "lawbreaker" that makes it so attractive to human audiences; in literature and film, monsters safely enact "our fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion" (17). Each of these functions, however, serves a single purpose according to Cohen: "They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression. They ask us why we have created them" (20). According to this definition, then, monsters are inherently physical, and through their bodies (which have been created by humans), they force us to reconsider our own constructed and embodied cultural categories.

### **Always Already: Erasure and the Trace**

Cohen's discussion of the monstrous relies heavily on the terms of linguistic philosophy and critical theory. In his monograph, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, he posits that the monster precedes man—in particular that the British monster precedes the British man. He refers to Geoffrey of Monmouth's story about the origins of the naming of the British Isles (Albion), recounting the arrival of the exiled daughters of a nameless Greek king, including the eldest, Albina, to an uninhabited island. The sisters are visited by and copulate with the devil, resulting in the birth of a tribe of giants, who rule "the land for eight hundred years, until the arrival of Aeneas's great-grandson, who imposes on their primal chaos a new world order" (49). These giants, he argues, are foundational to British identity, and particularly to British masculinity. The sisters, who are exiled because they plot to kill their unwanted husbands, then, provide a transgressive feminine origin from whom spring the giants that precede the masculine order. British masculinity, based on descent from Rome, always opposes the giant, and yet defines itself from this opposition. The giant also serves simultaneously as enjoyment and prohibition—pleasure and violence, allowing humans the satisfaction of fascination, and yet attacking them. Cohen uses the term *jouissance* to understand these seemingly opposed positions: *jouissance* "can be as easily sadistic, masochistic, and obscene as wholesome and delightful; and in relation of enjoyment to the monster's simultaneous presence both within and outside human identity" (xiii). Therefore the giant both opposes and enables British masculinity.

Cohen's valuable discussion of the giant as a subset of the monstrous addresses only questions of masculinity—a limitation this work sets out to remedy. While quite

often human masculinities are challenged through the lens of the monstrous, the bodies that enact these challenges are not only the bodies of male monsters but also of female monsters. Barbara Creed, in her study of horror films, claims, “the reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience” (3). These horrifying bodies, though, do share a common marker—sexualized identity. Those monsters against whom humans set themselves most fiercely are monsters who are explicitly gendered and sexualized. I argue that this reaction is spurred by anxiety less about transgressive sexuality than about reproduction. Thus monsters whose bodies bear signs of human-like gender identity and reproductive capability are those monsters that spur the most remarkable acts of erasure. This is certainly the case in *Wonders*, where the only parts of illustrations that are scratched out are genitals on humanoid bodies. Similarly, in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, it is the overtly and violently sexualized giant of Mont St. Michel who is removed by Arthur from the landscape. A body that is capable of reproducing itself is considerably more dangerous than a body that attacks, but can simply be killed off by the appropriate warrior. This is most clearly the case in *Beowulf*, where Grendel is fairly easily dispatched with by the hero, but his actively reproductive and sexually aggressive mother proves a bigger challenge. Those monsters that seek to replicate themselves and in their reproduction mimic human practices are the most threatening of all. Not only do these transgressive bodies attempt to remove human bodies by physical violence, these monsters also seek to replace the human through monstrous reproduction.

As I have noted above, Cohen uses the terms of psychoanalytic theory to understand monstrous identity; for him, the monster is foundational in England, and both

precedes and exceeds humanity. In his essay “Monster Culture,” Cohen’s second postulate is “The Monster Always Escapes,” but perhaps a better formulation might be “the monster always returns.” Escaping implies only the present circumstance, but returning requires that there be a prior incarnation. If the monster returns, then it has never *really* been absent. This study seeks to elucidate the nature of monstrous presence and the myth of monstrous absence. I argue that the sexualized monster never really disappears from the text after it has been removed or erased; instead the monster haunts the remainder of the text as a trace. The monstrous body is a body that is always already present. Its existence is prior to the humans who seek it out—just as Grendel precedes Hrothgar, thus it is “already.” Similarly, no matter how stridently the characters, authors, or readers of a text try to remove the monster from its pages, the monster “always” remains. Its remains serve as a trace of the monster. For example, when a viewer scratches out portions of the images from *Wonders of the East*, it is obvious to later viewers that something has been removed. This visible attempt at removal is a clear trace of that which has been effaced.

In using the terms “always already” and “trace,” I borrow from the work of Derrida, although he does not serve as a central theorist in this study. He uses the phrase always already in reference to language and the failure of representation, as in the existence of the thing before and beyond the language we construct to name it.<sup>7</sup> According to Derrida, because the thing always precedes our language for it, language is always fundamentally fractured and faulty in its attempts at representation. I borrow Derrida’s terms not to question the intrinsically deconstructive nature of language, but as

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<sup>7</sup> See Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences,” from *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. Also, see *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak, especially chapter two.

an attempt to capture the problems inherent in representation, and particularly in representing the monstrous. The rupture between the thing and our representation of that thing invokes the idea of the present absence. Absence and presence are always in play, Derrida suggests. While the reality of the thing cannot be expressed by language, its presence is suggested at the same time its absence is reaffirmed: “Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around” (“Structure” 93). In order to capture the nature of the present absence, Derrida introduces the concept of the trace.

The trace occupies the territory between past and present—it physically marks the space of absence. In Derrida’s own language, “The trace is the difference which opens appearance and signification” (*Grammatology* 119). The trace, then, occurs between the thing itself and the act of representation. It is what is left over after the thing is gone; as David Arnason argues, “We may now define *trace* as the sign left by the absent thing, after it has passed on the scene of its former presence” (5). For Derrida, the trace marks an historical space, an origin that can never be understood, or that has probably never existed. This notion can help us to understand the position of the monstrous. Cohen claims that the monstrous is that which precedes man and defines man—the monstrous is foundational to British masculinity. The monster can serve as a kind of origin. But the human attempt to understand and control monstrosity through representation can never reproduce this originary identity; instead, efforts at reproduction and ultimately erasure of the monstrous result in a trace. The trace of the monster in the text declares its presence through its absence, and proclaims the impossibility both of representation and erasure.

Although Derrida investigates the term erasure, my use of the term is informed primarily by Michael Camille's "Obscenity under Erasure: Censorship in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts." For Derrida, *every* sign has undergone erasure and so all language is intrinsically incomplete. For Camille, erasure is an act of will undertaken purposefully by a viewer of a text: "works of art become victims of an attack that seeks to destroy all or parts of them" (139). He cites Mary Caputi, who, in her discussion of obscenity, says the obscene is "the violation of boundaries, the exceeding of subconsciously consensual limits" (5, qtd in Camille 139). The erasure, then, seeks to delimit the violation of these boundaries, to reinstate the boundaries. But Camille argues that the job of the art historian is to look not only at what is pictured, "but also to what has been obfuscated, effaced, and rejected as overstepping the bounds of what it is permissible to picture" (139). Rough and passionate iconoclasm is not the only method of erasure; rather, he remarks on the "deliberation" with which some acts of erasure are performed (140).<sup>8</sup> He claims, "picturing things that should not be seen has resulted in a performative response, which makes them subsequently unseeable" (141). Prime objects for this kind of response are the "facial and the sexual" (140). Faces were often erased because of "the power of the face to behold," which is linked with the "evil eye" (141). Indeed, Camille notes the power of images to act on observers, recounting multiple injunctions to pregnant women *not* to look at bestiaries, particularly "dog-headed apes or monkeys" (143), which might result in the women giving birth to similarly deformed children. Thus demons and monsters, especially their faces, are often erased from

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<sup>8</sup> Another possible method of erasure is idolatry and devotion. Images are sometimes rubbed off of a page through years of being kissed in adoration (Camille 141).

manuscripts (144).<sup>9</sup> Sexual erasures, often the removal of genitals, are also traditionally linked to the “evil eye” (146), although Camille suggests that these erasures might also result from “prudery and looking at what should not be seen, the sexual organs” (146).

Erasure, however, does not necessarily serve as a destructive or diminishing act, but can construct a different kind of knowledge: “We tend to associate creation with construction not destruction, but the selective obliteration of parts of an image surely constitutes not merely editing and expurgation, as with a text, but an embodied response” (140). Camille points out that erasure creates a new possibility for understanding—in fact, he implicitly invokes the idea of the trace: “for once you rub something away, you tend to draw attention to what was there before the obfuscation...erasures can tell us a great deal about what kinds of images were considered powerful and dangerous” (146). The blank spot left behind by the erasure then acts as a trace of not only what was there before, but also of the embodied response of an earlier viewer. Therefore, when a monster is not only represented but erased, we can see, through the trace of the monster, that which was most threatening to human viewers or readers. While Camille often breaks these responses into the demonic or the sexual, I have found that erasures most often occur when the categories are combined, when the object of erasure is not only monstrous but sexualized. The impetus for the erasure, then, can be combined as well; it is not just the obscene body that inspires the erasure, but the dangerous *and* obscene body. If an image of a dog-headed monkey might cause a monstrous birth, a sexualized monster—a two-headed man with an erect phallus—could be far more dangerous.

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<sup>9</sup> This is notably not the case with *Wonders*, as I shall discuss in chapter two.

## **Bridging the Gap: Old English to Middle English**

Old and Middle English literature are not the same thing. They present different languages, different concerns, different dilemmas. However, the periods are not completely unconnected.<sup>10</sup> Generalizations about the distinctions abound—as we can see in the facetious title of Hugh Magennis’ recent article, “No Sex Please, We’re Anglo-Saxons.” While it is true that sex and sexuality are much more difficult to locate in the corpus of Old English literature than in Middle English literature, they are not entirely absent. Similarly, while the body seems often to be of less concern in Anglo-Saxon literature as opposed to Middle English, it *does* matter. The bodies of saints are just as tortured in Old English as in Middle English, and characters within the texts do lead importantly embodied lives. While Old English does not provide us with an infinite number of aggressive and outspoken women like the Wife of Bath, it does provide some, including the fascinating and dangerous Thryth who causes men to literally lose their heads, and the rhetorically powerful Judith. Despite general assumptions to the contrary, questions of gender, sex, and the body are evident in Old English literature, as they are in Middle English literature, although not to the same extent or with the same frequency.

The difficulty in locating sexed and gendered bodies has been of significant concern in recent Anglo-Saxon scholarship. While Clare Lees and Gillian Overing performed a study of women’s absences in their 2001 *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, not all scholarship evacuates women from their bodies. Indeed, recent texts like Benjamin Withers and Jonathan Wilcox’s 2003

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<sup>10</sup> David Wallace, in *Premodern Places*, argues for a shift away from categories of “medieval” and “Renaissance,” to avoid “the peculiar eddying forcefields” (11) of these terms. Although he studies later medieval texts, he claims that Anglo-Saxon England is just as relevant to his topic, recognizing that it is “further removed from us in time and language, hence more difficult to retrieve” (11).



collection *Naked Before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo-Saxon England* and Carol Pasternack and Lisa Weston's 2005 *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England* explore questions of gender, sex, and embodiedness in remarkable ways. The contributors in these books look at a number of texts, from the riddles to the law codes, from Aldhelm to sculpture and tapestry. But they seem to draw a stark division between Old English and Middle English visions of sex and the body. Although we have begun to acknowledge the presence and significance of the body in Anglo-Saxon literature, few scholars have connected discussion of the body in Old English literature with the body in Middle English literature. Clearly, sexuality and the body are more prevalent foci in the later literature, but notions of the body did not suddenly and completely change at some arbitrary date dividing the two periods. Certain genres and topics that exist in both periods can help to link what are often perceived as irreparably disparate representations of the body. I use the trope of the monster not only to draw forth those hesitant gendered and sexed Anglo-Saxon bodies, but to connect them to bodies that inhabit Middle English literature. What I have found is that although Middle English literature appears to be more willing to feature sexed and gendered bodies, it is just as anxious to remove or revise monstrous bodies that figure sex and gender, particularly when they imply reproductive capacity.

Of course, attempts at removal work in different ways for Old English and Middle English literature. Monstrous bodies in Old English are permanent, unchanging, and located at a significant distance from human communities. Thus, in Old English literature, monsters are born and not made. To be a monster is to possess permanently a physical body that differs significantly from the norm: the monster's identity is defined

by the monstrous form. There can be no hope for inclusion or acceptance by the community because the body marks one as inherently liminal, which quite often (although not always) means dangerous or evil. Indeed, when the monster threatens this distance by getting too close to the community, it is removed. The threat of Old English monstrosity can only be removed by death in the case of Grendel and his Mother, or by artistic or narrative erasure in the case of *Wonders of the East*. The monstrous body must either remain remote from human society or it must be removed through death or dismemberment, be it literal or figurative. And yet, the trace of the monster remains within the text and on the page, despite the attempt to erase it. For example, although Beowulf has rid the Danes of Grendel and his Mother, Beowulf's repetition of the story as well as of fighting monsters invokes them again and again.

In Middle English, however, monsters are capable of changes both spiritual and physical. In an account of his travels, Sir John Mandeville claims that a dragon kissed by the right man can be transformed into a lovely maiden. Similarly, the monsters that inhabit romances, like the half-demon dog-like Sir Gowther, can be redeemed through penance to such a degree that not only their physical appearance, but their paternity can change. In Middle English texts, the body is no longer the primary indicator of identity: instead of revealing monstrosity, the transformative body can conceal it in dangerous ways. The subject of transformation is gaining new popularity in the field of medieval studies. Caroline Walker Bynum's recent text *Metamorphosis and Identity* serves as a touchstone text for the field. In this text, Bynum argues for two formulations of change: metamorphosis and hybridity. Metamorphosis is what she calls "replacement change," where something literally becomes something else. Hybridity, however, is visible

multiplicity, where something has the parts of more than one creature: her example concerns the werewolf, which is hybrid in that it is part man and part wolf (29-30). Building from Bynum's categories, I claim that these two are not independent of one another, but that hybridity also defines metamorphosis. That is, when a creature transforms from one thing into another, the transformed creature *becomes* hybrid—the former identity is never entirely abandoned and replaced by the new identity. I argue that the metamorphic monster is always in some way hybrid. The body that may seem to be human never really is entirely human after its transformation. The monstrous form is always implicated in bodies which can or which have taken on monstrous attributes of excess, lack, or hybridity. So although these transformed monsters may seem to be human, they are in fact only *passing* as human.

Transformation, while seeming to rid the monstrous body of its monstrosity, is actual a far more dangerous proposition. Transformation renders monstrosity no less physical, but instead invisible to the viewer. Even in the most positive of transformations, a trace of monster is left behind; the erasure of the monstrous is always already incomplete. The danger of transformation, of course, is that the hybrid creature is rendered invisible to the larger community—the once-monstrous body presents a myth of unity that the reader recognizes as essentially untrustworthy. Ultimately, then, erasure in its many forms is revealed to be unsuccessful. Through the presence of the trace—be it a blank space in an illustration or Beowulf's retellings of the fight in the mere—the monster is never truly removed from the text. While transformation seems like a solution to the problem of the monstrous body, that solution too is marked by traces of the prior body. The monster never departs.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Indecent Bodies of the *Wonders of the East*

#### **The Monstrous in Medieval Literature**

The man stares out from inside the frame of a picture. His hands clutch the right and left sides of the frame, and his feet—5 toes on each plus a dog-like dew-claw—balance him on the base of the frame. He has well-defined calves and thighs and strong shoulders. Just below his shoulders, however, are his ears. He has no head, but bears all of his facial features—eyes, nose, mouth, and even eyebrows—in his chest. He is completely naked in this image, but his genitals are partially obscured by a darkened spot on the page. Who is he? What is the meaning behind his strange physical formation? All that the text, written just above the picture, reveals about this figure is that there is an island “on þam beoð menn akende butan heafdum, þa habbaþ on heora breostum heora eagan 7 muð. Hi syndan eahta fota lange 7 eahta fota brade” [on which are born men without heads, who have their eyes and mouth in their chests. They are eight feet long and eight feet wide] (Orchard 192). He is clearly monstrous—his form is neither exactly animal nor exactly human. But we learn nothing about his behavior, his habits; we do not even know if he is aggressive. How can an audience understand or interpret this bizarre body?

Bodies in medieval culture *do* matter. The body was implicated in the formation of human, and particularly spiritual, identity. As Carolyn Walker Bynum argues in “Why All the Fuss about the Body,” “throughout the Middle Ages theorists who dealt with eschatology tended to talk of the person not as soul but as soul and body” (20), and further that “the doctrine that the same body we possess on earth will rise at the end of time and be united to our soul was part of Christian creeds from the early third century on” (21). Medieval identity thus could be defined by a negotiation between the body and the spirit. Yet it is the appearance of the monstrous body, not behavior, that defines identity for monstrous humans in Anglo-Saxon literature. By comparing the three Anglo-Saxon manuscript versions of *Wonders*, both in the relation between the text and image in each manuscript, and the images of the same monster in all three manuscripts, I have found a pattern of erasure and revision linked to bodies that are both monstrous and sexualized. The literal acts of erasure—sometimes scribal, sometimes readerly—that occur among these three manuscripts demonstrate the dangerous potential of monstrous bodies. It is the acts of erasure that suggest the centrality of the physical body to the construction of monstrous identity: if the monster’s body can be erased, then the threat of monstrosity is removed. Finally, the function of the sexualized bodies of monsters can only be understood by locating them in the context of Anglo-Saxon literature, a literature that itself almost completely erases sexual bodies. By studying these texts in their manuscript and literary contexts, we can better understand the function of the fascinating and horrifying bodies of the monstrous, and also the ways the sexualized body contributes to the shaping of Anglo-Saxon identity.

As is clear from the man with his face in his chest, monstrosity depends upon and communicates itself through the monstrous form of the body. Monstrosity in medieval texts is defined primarily by the blurring of such categories as animal and human, man and woman. Monstrosity is characteristically manifested in two ways: either through physical appearance alone, or through appearance linked with transgressive behavior. Moreover, monstrosity in Old English literature is an irredeemable state; monsters cannot change their behaviors and suddenly become acceptable within human society. For instance, if *Beowulf's* Grendel one day stopped eating people and knocked politely on the hall door, he could not be accepted into human society because of his monstrous and excessive physical form. Monstrosity is located primarily in the physical body and only secondarily in transgressive actions; permanently monstrous bodies make changes in monstrous behavior ultimately insignificant. This chapter, then, focuses on the visible embodied monstrous: physical manifestations of monstrosity in which appearance is central and departs significantly from human appearance. Thus monsters may have bestial body parts, such as the women whose bodies feature boar's tusks and camel's feet, or they may simply have an excess or lack of normal human body parts, in the case of the men without heads, whose faces are instead located in their chests. In some instances, these non-human features are coupled with forms of monstrous behavior, including habits of eating, grooming, dressing, and speech, as well as gendered behaviors, like women performing the male task of hunting. These habits are not permanent in the way that possession of a tail or a tusk is permanent, nor do all monsters exhibit such behaviors. In some cases, appearance alone is enough to condemn monsters in the eyes of humans.

Monstrous action only emphasizes monstrosity that is already located in a transgressive body, because actions can be finite and temporary, where bodies are fixed and permanent.<sup>11</sup>

The Old English texts that exhibit monstrous human bodies inhabit only a few locations. For instance, the *Beowulf* manuscript, Cotton Vitellius A.xv., is rife with monsters. It contains the longest Old English poem, *Beowulf*, whose monsters Grendel and Grendel's mother I shall discuss in chapter three, but it also contains *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle* and *Wonders of the East*. These two texts come to Old English from Greek and Latin tradition, and both concern a traveler's report of the foreign and "barbarian" East.<sup>12</sup> In their respective tours of the East, both texts expose the native monsters for the reader's or viewer's edification. *Alexander's Letter* is built around the epistolary premise of the traveler's report back to his teacher, Aristotle, about his experiences as he conquers foreign lands, but *Wonders* offers no explicit narrative structure. Instead, in the style of a bestiary, it shows readers through both prose

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<sup>11</sup> I use the term permanent here to suggest that the basic forms of the monstrous body are unchanging: for instance, the possession of a tail is what makes a particular body monstrous, and the tail will always remain.

<sup>12</sup> We have no direct source, but *Wonders* derives primarily from a Latin text called *The Letter of Pharasmanes [or Fermes] to Hadrian on the Wonders of the East*, or in another incarnation, *Epistola Premonis regis ad Traianum imperatorem* (McGurk 88, James 9, 34). James dates the former source text from between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, though the manuscript he locates it in comes from the 9<sup>th</sup> century (10). Orchard also offers an excellent overview of the sources (22-26). This source text fits into, and borrows from, an enormously popular Latin and Greek tradition of monsters, but the Anglo-Saxon *Wonders* completely "discard[s] all the personal touches in Fermes, the prologue, the epilogue, and the passages where he speaks in the first person" (James 25). McGurk claims "the *Marvels* texts and picture cycle are enmeshed in a complex textual and pictorial tradition which has been indicated above. It is likely that a Rheims model lay behind, perhaps directly behind, the Tiberius *Marvels*, but at what stage in the transmission of the Latin text in England the Old English version was added and what was the relationship of the vernacular Tiberius text to that in the *Beowulf*-manuscript are difficult to determine. There were two picture cycles of the *Marvels* in England" (107-8). *Wonders* itself acts as a source for the *Liber Monstrorum*, Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia*, and *de Monstris et Belluis* (McGurk claims the first two on 88, James claims the last two on 10).

descriptions and illustrations thirty-seven different wondrous sights, including strange animals, exotic landscapes, foreign communities, and humans with monstrous bodies.

The Vitellius manuscript contains only one of three extant versions of *Wonders of the East*. This travel narrative/bestiary exists in manuscripts that I will hereafter call Vitellius, Tiberius, and Bodley.<sup>13</sup> Many of the monstrous human bodies of *Wonders* are presented differently in each of these three versions; indeed, most of these differences occur when the monsters possess clearly sexually identified bodies. In the illustrations, parts of these monsters' bodies may be erased or revised. These changes are often noticeable only after the viewer compares the three manuscript illustrations of the same monster. Similarly, the written description might be revised through the illustrator's manipulation of its details. Examination of these moments of disjuncture among the three manuscripts reveals anxieties about not only the monstrous forms that they depict, but about the human sexual body and identity.

### **Manuscripts: Word and Image in Tiberius, Bodley, and Vitellius**

*The Wonders of the East* is included in three manuscripts, Tiberius, Bodley, and Vitellius. In each of these manuscripts, the written descriptions of the "wonders" are accompanied by illustrations. While there is very little variation in the content of the written texts in the three manuscripts, the illustrations do vary. Upon opening a

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<sup>13</sup> The three manuscripts are Cotton Vitellius A.xv., dated approximately at the year 1000, Cotton Tiberius B.v., from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and Bodley 614, from the 12<sup>th</sup> century (James 1). The following editions have been invaluable, though citations come primarily from Andy Orchard's edition: P. McGurk, D. Dumville, and M. Godden, *An Eleventh Century Anglo-Saxon Miscellany* (Copenhagen, 1983); Montague Rhodes James, *Marvels of the East: A Full Reproduction of the Three Known Copies, with Introduction and Notes by Montague Rhodes James* (Oxford, 1929); Stanley Rypins, ed., *Three Old English Prose Texts in MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv*, EETS o.s. 161 (London, 1924); Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1995); and Kevin Kiernan, *The Electronic Beowulf*.



manuscript of the *Wonders of the East*, one is not immediately struck by the Latin and/or Old English writing, but by the pictures that accompany the text.<sup>14</sup> Illustrations have primacy in this text. Pictures tell us what the writing describes: wondrous creatures and strange places. We know before we read a word that the beings presented in the manuscript are anomalies, bodies of interest that cannot be seen in the everyday world of the Anglo-Saxon viewer. Through pictures alone, a viewer of the manuscript can make a journey through these strange lands, whether or not he is able to read the words that accompany the images. The same description of the “wonder” is transcribed just above the image in both Latin and Old English in Tiberius.<sup>15</sup> The relationships between the written text and image are most often clear, although at times the text might provide a detail that is in no way accounted for in the image, or the image might represent something that is present nowhere in the writing. While the relationship between text and image is significant for this study, the pictures are primary, in part because they are so arresting for the viewer, but also because they exhibit the most obvious displays of erasure.

The priority of the pictures is also reflected in the composition of the manuscript page, and in their relationships to one another. In Tiberius, the page is a planned and structured space. P. McGurk tells us that the text was written after green initials were drawn to guide the text; the drawing and framing of pictures followed the writing, but all

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<sup>14</sup> I use Tiberius here as an example of the material experience of the text. The Tiberius version is particularly compelling because its descriptions are written in both Latin and in Old English, while Vitellius uses only Old English, and Bodley, only Latin.

<sup>15</sup> The three-part structure also suggests access to multiple audiences: those who cannot read either Latin or the vernacular, those who possess knowledge of only Old English, but not Latin, and finally, those well-educated enough to know both Latin and Old English. The non-literate viewer would certainly be aware of the language on the page, although ignorant of its content, just as the English-only reader could only wonder about the accompanying Latin text. Only the very educated could understand the text in its totality.

this structure was “guided by underdrawings [of the frames and pictures] done at an earlier stage” (34). Although plenty of space is allotted for each picture, the scribe occasionally struggles to fit both Latin and Old English descriptions in the space preceding them.<sup>16</sup> Often the illustrations on a page opening complement one another, as we see on folio 81v, where the monster on the left-hand side bends to the left, and the monster on the right mirrors his posture, bending right. These relationships between images can help us to see them as being sometimes in conversation with one another. Such artistic correspondences ask readers to recognize the similar characteristics of the monsters. For instance, early in the text (folio 80r), we see a creature with hair flowing to his ankles, who is thick, stocky, and clearly male. Many pages later (85r), we encounter a woman with hair flowing smoothly to her ankles in a similar pose. Though the descriptions of these monsters might not compel readers to compare them, the similarities of representation do. Thus, the structure of the text and the relationship of such images as these can yield important information: a reader must reconsider the long-haired male, an anomaly among male monsters in the text, when he views the long-haired woman, who is one of only three females in *Wonders*. Despite his stocky build, the man’s body seems effeminate in a way it might not have if the woman’s picture had not followed his. Her long hair also seems to be more than a marker of femininity, and seems to implicate her in his kind of excess—because he is a monster whose excessive consumption is troubling to the reader, we might wonder if she possesses the same consuming nature. Therefore, it is only by considering these images in their complete manuscript context that we can appropriately interpret them.

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<sup>16</sup> McGurk comments that this happens in 78v and 85r (31).

The cues for reading within the texts are not the only important elements to determine meaning; the relationship between the three extant manuscripts also affects understanding. It is difficult to determine the pattern of descent of the three manuscripts; none seems to be directly copied from one of the others. Bodley offers a structure very similar to that of Tiberius, already discussed. Making space for illustrations in Bodley also seems to have been a priority; in fact, outside the text of *Wonders*, the reader finds empty frames that were meant for further illustrations, or that can be accounted for by scribal miscalculation. The text, Latin only, precedes the images consistently, and large, colored capital letters also adorn the beginning of the description of each wonder. Because of the similarities between the images in Tiberius and Bodley, it is clear that both scribes followed similar, if not identical, exemplars (McGurk 87). The Bodley scribe seems to have been more bound by a reliance on the exemplar, as is evidenced in tiny pinholes around the simple lines of most illustrated bodies, which were used to guide the artist's hand, whereas the Tiberius artist seems to have been more skilled, and to have taken more artistic license, as his illustrations are more detailed, and he uses color much more consistently. The Bodley artist rarely colors the bodies of his human monsters, though often dogs or ants or camels are colored in reds or browns. The frames of the illustrations are occasionally colored, as are the backgrounds of most images.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>17</sup> Three exceptions to the uncolored human monstrous body exist. These three all feature the same coloring of the human-monster form—pale green. The first is a representative of a people who are called “Hostes” (folio 40v). The Latin text tells us that they are big and tall and also that they are of a black color, “colore nigro” (Orchard 177). Moreover, they eat humans, as we see depicted in the illustration. The monster bends over a human victim. The second group, although not described as man-eaters, is also described as black. We are simply told that there is a mountain where there are black people, “homines nigri” (181), and that no other people can approach because this mountain is aflame. The illustration does not reflect the flaming mountain, but does show two men above the waist, their lower bodies concealed by a hill (folio 47r). The frame and background are entirely uncolored, but the bodies of these two men are pale green. It seems that this green skin is meant to depict dark skin color. Nowhere else in the text is a race

blank bodies of the monsters stand out from their frames, in a way that seems to have been intended by the artist, rather than as the result of his inability to complete the illustrations fully.

The Tiberius and Bodley artists seem to have followed a similar exemplar with a reasonable degree of artistic ability, Tiberius being more sophisticated than Bodley. However, the artist of Vitellius seems to have followed a completely different exemplar, utilizing a somewhat alarming lack of skill.<sup>18</sup> The illustrations are not clearly ordered, and at times it is difficult to determine which picture is meant to accompany which description.<sup>19</sup> On some pages, the art intermingles with the text, completely unframed, while at other times, monsters engage with frames that are meant to contain them. Color is used intermittently, though it rarely seems conducive to interpreting the image.

Kenneth Sisam dismisses the artistry, saying “bad draughtmanship gives many of them a

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of people described as having black skin. The third illustration that features pale green monstrous human bodies does not discuss skin color. This picture reflects the story of Jamnes and Mambres (folio 48r). The dead Jamnes warned his brother against the use of his magic books, which have landed Jamnes in hell where there is great heat and eternal punishment. Neither Jamnes, Mambres, nor the large demon who consumes tortured bodies are colored, but two smaller demons who float around the bodies in torment are shaded this pale green. Sarah L. Higley, in “The Wanton Hand: Reading and Reaching into Grammars and Bodies in Old English Riddle 12,” claims that medieval people seem to have held biases “against swarthy images, [which are] often given to the demons who appear in medieval illuminations as tormentors of the white-faced Christ” (30). She continues, “*Sweart* in Old English carries powerfully negative connotations; for instance, in Christ III it is the demons that are black, the angels that are white” (35), which is further supported by the Bosworth-Toller Dictionary’s definition of the adverb *swearte* as “darkly, dismally, evilly” (35). In *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*, Jeffrey Burton Russell states: “Blackness and darkness are almost always associated with evil, in opposition to the association of whiteness and light with good. This is true even in black Africa...so that negative perceptions of blackness are more causes of, than caused by, racism” (64-5). Gay Byron, in *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, similarly claims that in patristic discourse, “[*melas* (blackness) as an indication of evil] was not necessarily a reference to actual Blacks or Ethiopians, even though these peoples may have been the inspiration for such discourses. Discourses about the Black One and blackness symbolized threats to the respective communities to whom these writings were addressed” (76). I do not argue that the skin color of the first two groups of people makes them monstrous (they seem to have many other problematic qualities), but that they are associated with the demonic in this manuscript cannot be denied.

<sup>18</sup> McGurk comments that the Vitellius probably comes from a Latin exemplar that is older and different from those of Tiberius and Bodley, and that its illustrations may have come from a different cycle (87).

<sup>19</sup> Unlike Tiberius and Bodley, Vitellius’ text preceded its pictures, and “limited space left for the artist can explain the simplicity or omission [of illustrations]” (McGurk 97).

ludicrous effect” (78), just as M.R. James remarks that the images are “often, undesignedly, comic in a high degree” (51) Paul Gibb, however, thinks the lack of skill with which the images are drawn is part of the artist’s intent to inspire certain reactions in his audience (5). Alternately, Susan Kim admits the artist’s crudeness, but argues that the illustrations are meaningful because they “consistently push at the transgressive relationship between text and image, and between image and viewer which are suggested in the other manuscripts of *Wonder of the East*” (170-1). Value judgments on the artist’s ability, however qualified, yield little useful interpretive information. That an artist is unskillful does not mean that he lacks control over what he chooses to include or exclude—he may just do so with less aesthetic ability. We cannot entirely dismiss images that provide fascinating interpretive clues simply because the artist demonstrates less ability—an audience would have seen these images and used them to help understand the text, regardless of the quality of the illustration. Whether intentionally bad or not, these images participate in a conversation about troubling bodies that are only more intriguing for their lack of narrative clarity.

Although the arrangement of bodies in the illustrations of *Wonders* can help readers to understand them and the relationships between them, the organization of the wonders follows neither a conventional narratological nor a logical order. Wondrous animals, wondrous places, and wondrous people are all equally apt to appear at the beginning, middle, and end of *Wonders*. It is difficult to resist the urge to totalize the experience of the text, and to constitute it in some unifying structure, but the text resists this impulse. This resistance to order and hierarchy also makes allegorical readings of the bodies and text as a whole troublesome. Greta Austin argues that:

the illustrations and text suggest that the *Wonders* views Eastern peoples not with distaste but, rather, with curiosity and an interest in hierarchical order. The *Wonders* has an arrangement different from other related texts. The anonymous compiler re-arranged the order of the texts and images so that the marvels begin with animals, progress to humans with bestial characteristics, and end with humans who enjoy cooked food, clothing, and political organization. (28)

While it is true that the text lists seven beasts before it names its first group of human monsters, almost as many beasts are interspersed throughout the remainder of *Wonders*.<sup>20</sup> This seems like a significant disruption to a hierarchy of animal to human. Similarly, the final humans in the manuscript are hardly the most civilized: the text ends with the story of the damned Jamnes and his warning to his brother Mambres. These brothers are part of a textual tradition (Mambres inadvertently summons Jamnes' spirit by opening his magic books), and it is fairly obvious that they are of a civilized community that does, as Austin says, eat cooked food, wear clothes, and exist within a political organization. However, the final illustration of the manuscript in *Tiberius* reveals Jamnes in hell, which is filled with naked bodies and the uncivilized consumption of the bodies by the devil.<sup>21</sup> Austin herself acknowledges this group of people as the last of five moments of "inconsistency" in her hierarchy (33), a significant problem in itself. In a text that depicts only 37 marvels<sup>22</sup> arranged in hierarchical order, five inconsistencies and a decline in the humanity of the final seven wonders suggests a troubled system.

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<sup>20</sup> Six other groups of monstrous animals follow in the manuscript, the gold-digging ants (section 9), the *Lertices* (14), the dragons (16), the *Catini* (28), the *Gryphon* (34), and the *Phoenix* (35).

<sup>21</sup> Only *Tiberius* ends with this passage and illustration, but even the second to last humans in this and the last in Bodley and Vitellius do not seem particularly civilized; they are black people, *swearte menn*, who are completely isolated because they live on a fiery mountain, "seo dun byð eall byrnende" (Orchard 202). We are given no idea of their social structure, or their eating habits. *Tiberius* illustrates them as wearing clothing only below the waist, so they are clothed, but they look nothing like the civilized men of the manuscript. In the description, they are designated by skin color alone, a color that also sets them apart from the assumed narrator of the *Wonders* and certainly from Anglo Saxon audiences.

<sup>22</sup> Actually, *Tiberius* is the only manuscript with 37 wonders listed. Vitellius does not have the final five of the *Tiberius* manuscript, including vineyards, the gryphon, the phoenix, the black inhabitants of the fiery

Austin's argument grows from Augustine's claims about the origins of the monstrous human races in *De civitate Dei*. In Book XVI, Augustine says

Verum quisquis uspiam nascitur homo, id est animal rationale mortale, quamlibet nostris inusitatem sensibus gerat corporis formam seu colorem sive motum sive sonum sive qualibet vi, qualibet parte, qualibet qualitate naturam, ex illo uno protoplasto originem ducere nullus fidelium dubitaverit" [Yet whoever is born anywhere as a human being, that is, as a rational mortal creature, however strange he may appear to our senses in bodily form or colour or motion or utterance, or in any faculty, part or quality of his nature whatsoever, let no true believer have any doubt that such an individual is descended from the one man who was first created.] (Green 42-45)

Austin wants to see Augustine's order reflected in *Wonders*, claiming the purpose of the hierarchy is to "represent, in pictures as in words, the order and diversity of those to whom God offers his salvific grace. The *Wonders* implicitly takes a theological position: that the various peoples of the East were descended from Adam and could be saved" (43-4). This works in a way similar to God's location in the hierarchy as preeminent to the angels. However, I argue that *Wonders* cannot be a text about the possibility of salvation for the races of monstrous men, "genera hominum monstrosa" (Green, XVI. 40) in a Christian sense. In this text there is no mention of God or of salvation, only a threat of hell for Mambres in the final entry. Austin unconvincingly claims that the Jamnes-Mambres section, an apocryphal fragment present in only Tiberius and Bodley, provides "a Christianizing gloss to a text that was originally pagan" (45). Whether or not the transcribers, artists, and viewers of the text understood that these monstrous humans could be saved, the fact remains that none of them are. This is not a text about conversion, or even really about the threat posed by the pagan to the Christian. *Wonders*

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mountain, and Jamnes and Mambres. The Bodley manuscript has 12 more marvels than Tiberius, of which Andy Orchard says "all but two of which wonders derive directly from Isidore's *Etymologiae*" (22). These two not from Isidore, both Orchard and James note, derive from popular tradition and even Germanic lore (22, 62).

is a text about the experience of the strangely fascinating, simultaneously dangerous and attractive bodies of the monstrous. These bodies represent social practices and identities that are embedded in the body.

*Wonders* allows readers to understand the variety of God's creation, according to the Augustinian principle, but it also opens these monstrous bodies to multiple interpretations. As is evident in the various ways artists choose to depict the monsters in Tiberius, Vitellius, and Bodley, the same words do not always result in the same image. Vitellius nearly always challenges the Tiberius/Bodley representation of a particular monstrous body by presenting it in a completely different way. This type of incongruity is not the only one present in the texts. The language of a description and its illustration do not always agree exactly. The details drawn by the artist are not necessarily present in the scribe's verbal description. While this may seem like simple artistic elaboration, patterns of erasure or revision in a text suggest reactions to the dangers implicit in these monstrous bodies. Tiberius, for instance, depicts genitals on several of its monsters, although the text says nothing about these features, and neither Vitellius nor Bodley reflect these details. We can glean significant information about reactions to monstrosity by examining closely acts of erasure and revision that occur within the manuscripts in three ways: the way that the images of a manuscript relate to the other images in the same manuscript; the way the image of the same monster in each text relates to the images in the other manuscripts; and finally, the ways the image relates to the language of its description.



## **Identity: Action, Appearance, and Affect**

Particularly in Old English literature, there is little explicit and non-instructive<sup>23</sup> material that reveals Anglo-Saxon attitudes toward sex, gender, and sexuality. Given this paucity, scholars must look to representations of bodies. Because monsters, especially in *Wonders*, have such explicitly drawn bodies, they are an obvious subject of study.

Monstrosity can communicate cultural anxieties about gender and sexuality, as well.

Monstrous gender both disrupts and reifies the social hierarchy—that is, monsters reveal and enforce the standards for appropriate human appearance and behavior, as Jeffrey

Jerome Cohen argues in his essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”:

The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself. (12)

He continues, “the monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture” (13). However, the monster works

simultaneously through fear and desire, as Cohen claims:

the same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint...we distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair. (16-17)

I term these conflicting responses to the monstrous as the monstrous affect. Thus we have three terms in play: the monstrous appearance, or the form through which the monstrous

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<sup>23</sup> Such texts as the penitentials often give very specific accounts of sexual behaviors, but these are listed in order to assign penance and correct behaviors. While these texts can offer very interesting insight into sexual behaviors, the purpose of a penitential is practical and instructive; while they do provide revealing descriptions, this is not their only purpose. What penitentials and the like can offer is quite different from what we can learn from secular texts like *Wonders*, even though both texts ask readers to think about sin and the body. What is explicit there is implicit here—indeed, texts like *Wonders* reveal a very different vision of the body, one that is defined most by the fact of the body and not its behaviors.

body transgresses the norms of the human body; the monstrous action, those actions that reaffirm the monster's identity outside of the normal realms of the human; and the monstrous affect, which includes not only the effect that the experience of the monstrous has upon the human viewer, but the actions that this effect inspires viewers to take.

The complex relations among action, appearance, and affect are evident in the bodies of the *Wonders of the East*. An investigation of the illustrations that depict bodies that are both monstrous and explicitly gendered in each of the three manuscripts yields important information about Anglo-Saxon bodies. How we understand these bodies is affected by our experience of the relationship between text and image. It is this intersection that exposes not only a range of anxieties about sex and gender, but also demonstrates how monstrous appearance, when sexualized, functions aggressively to invoke the monstrous affect.

The monsters in Old English literature are not monstrous because of their actions, but because of their bodies.<sup>24</sup> Actions can be temporary, and offenders have the possibility to repent and change. However, a monstrous body is permanent, and in Anglo-Saxon literature, is incapable of change. Monstrous action, therefore, is only supplementary to the monstrous physical form. Monstrous appearance, particularly when

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<sup>24</sup> Implicitly, Augustine claims that identity is constructed through action alone; the body is ultimately inconsequential. *Verum quisquis uspiam nascitur homo, id est animal rationale mortale, quamlibet nostris inusitatem sensibus gerat corporis formam seu colorem sive motum sive sonum sive qualibet vi, qualibet parte, qualibet qualitate naturam, ex illo uno protoplasto originem ducere nullus fidelium dubitaverit* [Yet whoever is born anywhere as a human being, that is, as a rational mortal creature, however strange he may appear to our senses in bodily form or colour or motion or utterance, or in any faculty, part of quality of his nature whatsoever, let no true believer have any doubt that such an individual is descended from the one man who was first created.] (Green 42-45) In effect, one is only monstrous if one performs monstrous deeds. Augustine's teaching informs Anglo-Saxon understandings of the world, but these are not hegemonic. Indeed, *Wonders* stands as an example of the contrary. In this text, very few actions are ascribed to monstrous bodies, yet they are clearly monstrous. Even more so, these monstrous bodies, which only rarely display any kind of action, inspire the monstrous affect in human viewers, so much so that artists and viewers alike act out against these bodies through attempts to erase their most disturbing aspects.

it is presented in a sexualized manner, is not passive. Sexualized monstrous appearance in *Wonders of the East* functions actively, inspiring the monstrous affect in witnesses including readers and viewers. Monstrous bodies reveal the principal significance of the body's appearance to identity. The erasure of these bodies reveals an active response to the monstrous appearance: through the possession and exhibition of sexual parts, monsters act out against the reader, and through erasure, readers and redactors react against them. Because the monstrous body acts as a nexus of cultural anxieties about human bodies, any action against monstrous sexuality suggests a similar response to human bodies that reveal an explicit sexuality. Therefore, monstrous identity is not constructed solely in an Augustinian mode—that is, through its actions—but rather through the permanent nature of the body. Further, to possess a sexualized body is to require censure and erasure for monsters. If this is true for the monstrous human form, then might it not be true for those bodies that are not monstrous? Human identity in Anglo-Saxon literature may perhaps be said to derive not simply from the actions performed by people or the decisions that they make, but more essentially, from the bodies they possess.

### **Three Types of Erasure**

In a recent survey of Anglo-Saxon art, Karen Rose Mathews claims that “From a time period spanning three centuries, approximately sixteen images were identified which represented nude figures with genitalia” (146).<sup>25</sup> From *Wonders*, only the body of the

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<sup>25</sup> Mathews herself states “this survey does not claim to be exhaustive as it is based on analysis of images available in published sources” (146). Whether or not she has found every single appearance of genitalia in

*Donestre* is included in this list. In my study of the three manuscripts, I have found seven sexually explicit figures, five of which feature genitals. I argue that acts of erasure, that is, attempts to delete portions of a monstrous body either through language or art, have rendered these once-virile images impotent. Artists sometimes pose the creature so as to conceal the groin. In other cases, it seems that a phallus is either hinted at through faint lines, or it has been drawn and erased by either the same artist or a later viewer (this is only true in the Tiberius manuscript). Whereas Tiberius features monsters with genitals, which, as we will see, may or may not have been scratched out or erased, Bodley simply leaves these areas completely vacant or poses its creatures in concealing positions. Vitellius addresses the problem of the naked and explicitly sexed body most often by covering it in clothing, although the artist does depict the *Donestre*'s genitals (folio 83v). The shifts between these pictures reveal an instability in transmission. These monsters' bodies were apparently troubling for the artists who drew them, and, in the case of Tiberius, for the readers who saw and censored them. What is never pictured in the first place in Bodley and Vitellius has been removed from the images in Tiberius. The reactions of the artists and viewers to sexually explicit bodies can help us to understand the ways sexuality and sexual bodies help to define identity.

Three different kinds of erasure seem to be at work in the conjunction of the three manuscripts that feature *Wonders*. The first type is erasure I term "never-drawing." In erasures of this kind, one manuscript features sexually explicit bodies, but one or both of the others never draw these bodies as sexually explicit in the first place. The second type of erasure is a more literal kind, which I call "removing." In this second type, parts of

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manuscript illumination, the larger point, that few images of sexually and genitally explicit bodies exist, remains clear.

images are literally excised by the scribe or a later viewer.<sup>26</sup> The final type of erasure I refer to as “revising.” In acts of revision, the artist does not excise certain parts, but rather relocates details of the image or changes them so that the effect or message of the image shifts. While the second type, removal, is most commonly known as erasure, never drawing and revision also function as analogous acts of erasure. Michael Camille says of acts of excision:

It is my argument that we must examine such cases not so much as acts of vandalism but as acts of representation. We tend to associate creation with construction, not destruction, but the selective obliteration of parts of an image surely constitutes not merely editing and expurgation, as with a text, but an embodied response. (140)

Just as excision works as a kind of creation, so too do the other types of erasure represent the “embodied response” of a viewer.

Erasure is a common enough occurrence in medieval manuscripts.<sup>27</sup> Erasures, specifically the purposeful scratching out of a part of an illustration, Camille tells us, “can tell us a great deal about what kinds of images were considered powerful and dangerous” (146). One of the most commonly excised parts of an image is the face or the eyes, for these body parts are linked with the ‘evil eye.’ Camille tells us “Christians were also fearful of the effects of the evil eye. Someone was clearly so afraid of the eye of the

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<sup>26</sup> While it is impossible to determine who performed these acts of erasure, it seems unlikely that the person who performed the literal excisions would be the scribe. Michael Camille makes a general argument that most acts of erasure take place late in the Middle Ages. “It is my contention that such excision happened at the very end of the Middle Ages, during the fifteenth century, and I would date most of the erasures of sexual images to this period and not before...It is in the fifteenth century that we can see the beginnings of prurience in representing the sexual act and its intentional obfuscation, not by later readers, but by the artists themselves” (Camille 151). The evidence of multiple kinds of erasure offered in this chapter, however, disputes Camille’s reasoning. It seems that artists before the 15<sup>th</sup> century, specifically the artists of Vitellius and Bodley do themselves conceal sexually explicit bodies. We might read this evidence in reverse, that only one artist rebelled against his exemplar and drew in genitalia, but the fact that Vitellius reveals the *Donestre*’s genitals suggests that the exemplar probably did depict genitalia in at least this one case.

<sup>27</sup> Camille claims that the images most often erased were demonic and/or sexual (144).

devil...in a twelfth century scene of Adam and Eve that he carefully cut out just the parchment face of the tempter” (141-2). As he further claims,

Medieval images acted forcefully upon their viewers. The reasons for this are partly linked to medieval theories of vision itself, which gave an active role to the eye in the process of perception. Vision entailed the eye actually taking an imprint of the thing seen...vision was a far more active and dangerous sense than it is for us today. (143)

Thus a demon gazing out from a page was considered a literal threat to the viewer’s safety, and by rubbing out his face, the danger was nullified. But if a viewer cuts off the active gaze by scratching out the part that does the gazing, what can we make of the erasure of genitals? By this logic, genitals, especially male genitalia, must also be active rather than passive. They reveal a potential for action that is not only nascent but forthcoming in the body. Just as a reader removes the threat of the evil eye, so does he respond with action to the sexualized appearance of the monstrous body.

### **Never Drawing**

The first type of erasure that is obvious in *Wonders of the East* includes what has never been drawn. In such cases, the agent—that is, the artist or writer—chooses not to include these sexually explicit or explanatory details in the first place, and the viewer—that is, the viewer of the image or the reader of the writing—without knowing the other manuscripts, would never recognize what was missing. We can see this in two particular places, one primarily textual, and the other, primarily visual. The first occurs in the description of the men with two faces on one head. The reader learns that not only do these people actually reproduce, but that to do so, “farað hi on scipum to Indium, 7 þær

hyra gecynd on weorold bringað” [they travel in ships to India and they bring their offspring into the world there] (Orchard 192). This is repeated in all three manuscripts. But upon consideration of the *Fermes* source, we learn that this language has been either badly misinterpreted, or, as I argue, willfully changed. James says, “In *Marvels* this is strangely obscured: ‘suis manibus transferunter’ is corrupted out of ‘in anibus caeli transformantur’” (27). Essentially, rather than changing into storks and flying across the sea to hatch their children, the two-faced people in the Anglo-Saxon version build and board ships and travel across the sea to give birth to their children. This act of revision reinforces my claim that Anglo-Saxon artists and scribes did not depict monstrous bodies capable of change. The scribe, at some point in transmission, has simply written out significant details. The stork men, in *Wonders*, then, are metaphorically “never drawn,” and thus readers’ understandings of these monsters’ identities and practices of reproduction are absolutely changed.

The second example of this particular practice of erasure is represented through the most sexually potent body in *Wonders*. The *donestre*, shown in a three-part action illustration, is revealed as completely naked and, in Tiberius, anatomically correct (folio 83v). In the first part of the Tiberius frame, he is drawn with a lion-like head and bright red testicles and penis. Cohen, in a discussion of this frame, even categorizes this monster as having a “hypermasculine body” in comparison to the weak “ill proportioned” form of the traveler (*Of Monsters* 2). This unabashedly male monster is shown in conversation with a civilized man, who is fully dressed and neatly coiffed. The written description tells us that these creatures know all human languages, “hig cunnon eall mennisc gereord” (Orchard 196), and that they speak to any passerby in his own language, calling out his

name and the names of people he knows, and ‘[deceiving] him with dishonest words’ “næmnað hi hine 7 his magas cuðra manna naman, 7 mid leaslicum wordum hine beswicað” (196). These actions are reflected in the first part of the picture, while in the second, to the right side of the frame, we see the monster’s attack, where he seizes the traveler, and then afterwards consumes him, all except for his head “him onfoð, 7 þænne æfter þan hi hine fretað ealne butan his heafde” (196). Finally, in the bottom left corner of the frame, we see the distraught monster, hands on either side of his own face, weeping, just as we are told, then he sits and weeps over the head, “þonne sittað 7 wepað ofer ðam heafde” (196). The written description of this monster accurately narrates the events of the illustration for the reader. In the frame of the Tiberius, nothing has been edited out, although something not represented in the language of the description is present in the illustration: the red phallus. We might expect such an obvious representation of a sexual body to be erased, but here it not only remains, but is highlighted. This monster, in his strange body, is perhaps so bad that there is little to be gained by erasure. He is, through the rest of the illustration, clearly dangerous to humans.

Aside from the genitals, the illustration does the best it can to follow the bizarre physical description written into the text, a goal that is certainly challenging. We are told that the *donestre* ‘have grown like soothsayers from the head to the navel, and the other part is like a man’s body,’ “syndon geweaxene swa frihteras fram ðan heafde oð ðone nafelan, 7 se oðer dæl byð mannes gelic” (196). The term *frihteras* as a description of the non-human part of this monster is bizarre. No other occurrence of this word can be found in the corpus of the *Dictionary of Old English*. In fact, the only form of this word that appears in the corpus is *frihtrung*, which appears twice in Latin-Old English glossaries as



the equivalent of *Ariolatus*, divine; foretell, prophesy; use divination (*DOE Online*). The Latin description which precedes the Old English in Tiberius, however, uses the word *diuini*, meaning ‘of the gods,’ or, also soothsayer.<sup>28</sup> What exactly does a soothsayer look like, and are we to assume, then, that the soothsayer is less than human? The Tiberius artist depicts his departure from the human as “leonine” (Cohen 2). He has a wild mane, and in the second and third parts of the picture, an extended snout, though in the first his face looks far more human. In this first part, a reader might identify his more human appearance with the monster’s use of human language; in this part of the picture he clearly uses this language to create a bond of trust and identification and thus lure in travelers. It is also only in this part of the illustration that the phallus is visible. We might even be tempted to link these human qualities, the sexualized body and the possession of language. After all, the monster only seems bestial in the second part of the illustration; in the first and third parts, he exhibits human behaviors, speaking, weeping, and (seemingly) feeling regret. His facility with all languages is certainly an impressive and humanizing ability, but ultimately it is in the service of bestial appetite. Similarly, the genitals, not bestial<sup>29</sup> but human, take on qualities of the monstrous in their excessive visibility in both size and color. If the viewer is to think of this monster as more human when he makes use of human language, then that humanity is also challenged by this possession of the plainly visible, and distressingly red, penis. The appearance of the body is clear: this creature is obviously monstrous. The monster’s aggressively naked and

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<sup>28</sup> Orchard notes that the Vitellius form is *frifteras*, a word that has no notation in the *Dictionary of Old English*, and Rypins notes possibilities for *frifteras*, *frefteras*, and *frehteras* (61). James’ only comment is an exclamation point following the word *divine*: “men called ‘donestre,’ i.e. divine (!)” (56), denoting the inexplicable nature of this description.

<sup>29</sup> Some might be tempted to associate the phallus with base animal behavior and thus to regard it as a symptom of the animal rather than the human. Such readings are out of context here, as the penis appears to be a clearly human appendage—nothing like that of an animal in illustration.

monstrous body should be a warning to the traveler of his menace. His horrible actions, as depicted in both description and illustration, only serve to highlight the terror of the body.

The Tiberius artist does not enact the erasure of “never drawing” in this image, but the Bodley artist performs just this kind of erasure. Neither the leonine look nor the red penis is visible in the Bodley manuscript (folio 43r). Instead, the figure has a clearly human head draped with a head-covering, although his head is much larger than the visitor’s. Despite being naked and placed in a revealing pose, the body is not depicted as possessing a penis. Thus, although excess remains a marker of this creature’s monstrosity, it is not an explicitly sexual excess. The same is not true of the Vitellius illustration. Here the soothsayer appears to have taken on the appearance of a dog, instead of a lion (103v). The artist does choose to depict a penis and testicles, although here it is depicted as a strange triangular shape below the bent arm and between the thighs, and is not as conspicuous as the red coloring and clear shape in Tiberius. Only Bodley, in the case of this illustration, refuses to draw the genitals. Because both Tiberius and Vitellius offer explicitly sexual illustrations, it seems unlikely that the scribes added the genitals of their own volition. Because they are present in both illustrations, it seems more likely that the exemplar featured a sexually explicit monster, and the artist of the later manuscript, Bodley, refused to draw it.

Both Tiberius and Vitellius, then, offer a sexually potent monster. Susan Kim remarks, “In the Tiberius illustration, the genitalia are emphatically clear, not only clearly marked, but also red...The Vitellius illustration, moreover, pairs the monster with a female figure unmentioned by the text, thus providing a context of sexual difference to

underscore the exposure of the clearly male monster race” (163). Kim claims that in this odd illustration, the woman on the right side of the frame is moving to pull up her skirt, simultaneously concealing and revealing her clearest mark of sexual difference (164).<sup>30</sup> While I agree with Kim that this figure is female, according to the length of her tunic and her head-covering, I remain unconvinced about the movement she attributes to the woman. The woman does seem to be holding her skirt with both hands, but her right foot seems to be touching the ground, while her left foot is raised. Rather than performing a lascivious show-and-tell that distinguishes the male from the female, it seems to me that this woman is depicted in the act of running from this monster. After all, he stands on her right side, waving what is clearly a human leg in the air, thus scaring her off. Although this image does not depict the monster’s actions in a three-part narrative, it does seem to represent action as well as appearance. The opposition then is not between the monster’s unconcealed genitals and the woman’s soon-to-be revealed nether half; instead, the opposition here is between the appearance of the sexually potent and consuming monster, and the response of the weak and frightened human victim. That the visitor is female does help to point out the sex of the monster as male, particularly because this is the only sexually explicit image in Vitellius. Thus, the artists of Tiberius and Vitellius both choose to depict an overtly sexualized body, while the Bodley artist seems to have consciously excluded any reference to an obvious sexuality.

Despite the fact that almost all of the human monsters of *Wonders* are naked, we only see genitals depicted clearly in this instance. In most cases, the artist has carefully posed the figures so that we cannot see, as is the case with the Tiberius representative of

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<sup>30</sup> Of this illustration, James only says, “on r. full face, a person with masses of long hair, and some drapery” (56). He assigns no clear gender or action.

the *Hostes*, who bends modestly over a tiny clothed man he is clearly about to consume (folio 81v and Orchard 192). Like the *Donestre*, the *Hostes* eat humans, but they are not depicted as excessively gendered. The actions of the monsters, as provided through their written descriptions, do not make any clear allowances for why certain monsters are endowed with genitals while others are not. It is the fact of the body, not the monstrous actions undertaken by these creatures, that makes them monstrous. In Tiberius, not all monsters are given sexual dimensions, but several are; in Vitellius, only one, the *donestre*, is drawn sexually, while in Bodley, every monster is completely neutered. The Vitellius artist, despite a lack of skill, at least conceals the groin area of most monsters with clothing; the Bodley artist makes it obvious in the completely naked, and completely revealed bodies of his monsters that they have no sexual dimension. This is the clearest signal of the erasure of “never drawing” that occurs in *Wonders*.

## **Removal**

The second type of erasure I shall discuss, removal, is the most traditionally recognized as erasure. Someone, most likely a later viewer, literally scratches or rubs out a part of an illustration, as I have argued above, because of the power that the image holds. Camille claims that:

There are countless places in medieval manuscripts where images have been obliterated far more purposefully, in a negative reaction. These sites of censure have an obvious relation to a notion of the obscene. Clearly they have offended someone. Picturing things that should not be seen has resulted in a performative response, which makes them subsequently unseeable. (141)

This kind of erasure takes place only in the Tiberius manuscript, and in two general scenarios. First, the genitals of four different male monsters in the manuscript are erased,

and second, the breasts of a masculine woman, one of only two monstrous women in the manuscript, are excised. In most of these cases, the monstrous appearance of the creature depicted is of primary importance; only in the case of the masculine women is action of any type depicted.

In the Tiberius illustration of the *conopoena*, or half-dog (folio 80r), the red splotch on his leg seems to be a later addition meant to conceal a penis, which is seen neither in Bodley nor Vitellius. In Tiberius, the *conopoena* stands beside a tree, eating a leaf. This rather calm image is meant to depict an aggressive monster who breathes fire: “heora oruð byð swylce fyres lig” [their breath is like a fiery flame] (Orchard 188), something we do not see in the illustration. We do see the hybrid body, made up of parts of various animals, as we are told “Hi habbað horses mana 7 eoferes tucxas 7 hunda heafda” [they have horses’ manes and boars’ tusks and dogs’ heads] (188). The description seems fairly straightforward, and the pictures, for the most part, reflect it accurately. In Tiberius, this very human figure is naked. He reaches across his body towards a tree, so the arm mostly conceals his pectoral muscles, but a navel is clearly drawn. He has a short mane of hair, but is bald between horse-like ears, which rise alertly from his head. We see two tiny black horns, set in front of the ears, that are slightly smaller than the single tusk visible coming from his lower lip, but are the same size as the tiny row of pointed black teeth in his mouth. As compared to this strange head, the body is quite human, with expressive hands that mirror the eloquence of his human-like eyes and eyebrow. The background of the picture is a bright orange, and most of the coloring is done in very neat strokes. However, over his genitals is a strange red smudge that might be overlooked as a brush mistake from the orange background, but that is an

attempt at concealment. His calm demeanor as he eats cannot be conceived of as threatening. The problem of this body is its physical monstrosity. But if we see the body taking no action, why the need to act out against its evil ‘other’ eye by erasing (or, in this case, covering) it? The sexual organ here seems to embody a threat, as is doubly reflected in the kind of erasure that takes place in the other manuscripts’ depiction of the *conopoena*.

Both Bodley and Vitellius never draw the genitals, rather than having them erased.<sup>31</sup> The Bodley artist poses the figure in exactly the same way as Tiberius, so that we should see the genitals, but this area is obviously blank (folio 38v). Moreover, he has neither horns, teeth, nor tusks. He simply looks far less exotic and far less threatening. Vitellius offers a very different picture, in which this very strange body is not only clothed, but seemingly richly garbed, with a red cape, blue tunic, and even shoes (100r). We can see one tusk and two horse ears, with a strange third ear coming from the back of the head. In some ways, the bestial features are even more striking in the context of the clothed body. After considering the other two manuscripts, the smudge on the groin in Tiberius seems significant, and upon closer inspection, the viewer notices it is an entirely different color than the background. This mark is no mistake. With careful consideration, one notices two round smudges at the junction of the thighs and one longer smudge that hangs between the legs. Six or seven small red lines extend above the round smudges onto the flesh-color of the pelvis. The *conopoena* has a penis and testicles, and though it is not so clear as that of the *donestre*, both are this same striking shade of red. That suggests a similarity between these two monstrous men, although their actions are quite

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<sup>31</sup> I do not suggest a causal relationship among the manuscripts, but rather that the similar exemplar likely witnessed by the artists probably depicted genitals, and that they chose not to depict them.

different. Whereas the *donestre* are a direct threat to humans, we only know what the *conopoena* can do; we never see or hear of him using his fiery breath against a human victim. In all three manuscripts, the artist or the viewer attempts to remove the threat of this body by erasure of its sexual features.

The man with two faces, as he is presented in Tiberius (81r), also bears another kind of erasure. In addition to the scribe deleting his ability to turn into a stork, discussed in the previous section, his genitals are removed in the illustration. Where the *conopoena*'s genitals are covered with red paint, his seem to be scratched out, noticeable in the white splotch against the pink background and his pale skin. He is totally naked and posed in a profile walking position, with his audience-side right leg crossed over his left, which could easily explain a lack of visible genitals. In this case, though, a light brown spot remains on his lower belly that seems to have denoted pubic hair and a white blotch that points outward from the junction of his legs in a vague erection. In Bodley, the figure is posed to conceal the groin (40r), while in Vitellius, he is clothed in a tunic that covers him to the knee (101v); once again, only Tiberius figures him as a sexual being. He does not eat humans or breathe fire, but he is, like many of the monstrous people in this text, unusually tall, "fiftyne fote lange" [fifteen feet tall] (Orchard 190), and his body is described as being white, *hwit*. In terms of appearance, he is also a creature of excess in that he has not one but two faces on a single head: "tu neb on ahum heafde" (190). His appearance is clearly monstrous, but what about his action? He does not have fiery breath or a penchant for human flesh, true. More bizarre is the direct relation of his phallus to his relation with human civilization. The reader learns that not only do these people actually reproduce but that, to do so, "farað hi on scipum to Indeum,

7 þær hyra gecynd on weorold bringað” [they travel in ships to India and they bring their offspring into the world there] (192). To no other monster in this text is ascribed so explicitly the power of reproduction, although the formulation of “there are born there people with...” is not uncommon. Moreover, that reproduction is linked to powers of civilized people—the ability not only to travel, but to construct ships capable of a reasonably extended journey. Not only do these people possess abilities of human civilized culture, but they have the very real possibility of entering into these communities. This is all the more striking because of the Anglo-Saxon emendation of the source material, which makes this monster more rather than less human. The threat of these monsters is thus not in their violence against humans, but in the potential of their bodies to *act* in a human manner. What makes them monstrous, then, is not their civilized actions, but their physically aberrant bodies.<sup>32</sup>

A similar kind of erasure seems to have occurred in the Tiberius illustration of the three-colored men with lions’ heads (folio 81v). Here, the line from belly to thigh near the groin is marked out below the belly button, although very faint traces of a pale red knob remain. In Bodley, again, the body is posed in such a way as to conceal the groin (40v). The Vitellius artist, probably because of lack of ability rather than a desire to feminize the figure, depicts him with exaggerated breasts (102r). His physical description is far more frightening than the men with two heads—they are born with skin of three colors, “þreosellices hiwes,” manes like lions’ heads, “gemona swa leona heafdo,” and are twenty feet tall “twentiges fota lange,” with a mouth shaped like a fan, “fann”

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<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting that these are the only creatures whose act of reproduction is explicitly related, and that they are not animal-human hybrids, but monsters of human excess.



(Orchard 192).<sup>33</sup> However, we are told that they are shy; if anyone sees or follows them, “feorriað hi 7 fleoð 7 blode þæt hi swætað” [they take flight and flee, and sweat blood] (192). Again, the monstrosity here is based almost completely in the appearance and form of the hybrid body; the only act attributed to them is their flight from “anyone” who sees them. Thus it is the appearance of the monstrous sexual body creates the affect and thus the erasure of the genitals. The monster’s action, flight from the humans, is simply not threatening enough to require self-preservation through erasure on the part of the viewer, in Tiberius, or the artist, in Vitellius and Bodley.

The final monster who possesses an erased phallus is one of the most famous: the men with eyes and mouths in their chests, “þa habbað on heora breostum heora eagan 7 muð” (Orchard 192), identified by Greta Austin, following Michael Friedman, as a *Blemmyae* (34). His pose is the same in all the illustrations, but in Bodley his groin is blank (folio 41r), and in Vitellius, he is clothed below the waist (102v). In Tiberius, it seems that he does have something on his groin—the pubic hair is clear, but a strange blotch obscures what might be a penis (82r). Even through the blotch, a viewer can vaguely see its outlines. These men may be without heads, “butan heafdum,” but they are excessive in both height and width, being eight feet tall and eight feet wide, “eahta fota lange 7 eahta fota brade” (Orchard 192). We are told nothing of their behavior. The only key to the behavior of these monsters is in the visual representation. In both Bodley and Tiberius, this man curls his fingers around the right and left sides of the frame while standing on it, rather than on the background with which he is provided, “literally

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<sup>33</sup> James notes another case of corruption in the Anglo-Saxon from the *Fermes* source. “F. has ‘bestiae colore simile equorum,’ M. of ‘homines tripertito colore’” (77). This change seems far less significant than the case of the stork-men.

stepping out of it into the real world of the spectator” (Broderick 35). As Austin suggests, “the violation of the frame suggests that the man is too large, perhaps even too ‘real,’ to be contained by the frame. The *blemmya* exists in a space very close to the reader. The frame is used here as a common denominator between reader and marvel. It collapses much of the distance between reader and headless man and, perhaps, between East and West” (34). The *blemmya* is uncomfortably close to the reader, and although we know of no actions these monstrous humans make, their appearance here perhaps can communicate the real problem with the monstrous body. His aggression in stepping out of his environment, onto the page, and out towards the viewer communicates a real danger to the onlooker. Thus the unknown viewer, in Tiberius, removes his genitals, as he has with the other three monsters, and the artists of Vitellius and Bodley never draw him as a sexual threat at all. By removing the genitals, the viewers who perform the erasure attempt to remove the potent sexual threat of the monstrous body.

We might be tempted to think that the removal of genitals from these monsters has only to do with modesty and a sense of propriety, and this may certainly be a part of the impetus. Camille seems to think this might be the case in general for acts of erasure, in his discussion of the removed genitals in a picture of an idol:

Here it is not the face that has been removed, but the ‘other face,’ for the word *fascinum* was sometimes used to describe the phallus. The genitals were traditionally deployed as apotropaic signs in medieval art, to ward off the evil eye...Has someone removed the genitals not so much from fear of the dangerous evil eye but from prudery and looking at what should not be seen, the sexual organs? (146)

While this kind of prudery does seem to be habitual in Anglo-Saxon culture, such an argument can be quite easily disputed. In Tiberius, not all of the genitals are erased. In

fact, probably the most obvious, and the most threatening to humans of all the monsters, the *Donestre*, retains his not only excessive, but his red penis and testicles. If a prudish reader intervened in the text and erased all the genitals that offended his polite sensibilities, then why leave this all-too-obvious example? I argue that the *donestre*, the human-language-speaking, cannibal possessor of the red genitals, is such an obvious threat through both appearance and actions that the reader cannot erase his threat by removing his genitals. The picture depicts his monstrous action; this is not true in any of the other cases of genital erasure in Tiberius.

Yet another example of removal in Tiberius involves a sexualized body, but this time it involves the form of a monstrous woman. An immediate kind of erasure is understandable only to those viewers who are also able to read the text. Upon looking at the illustration of the first woman in Tiberius, the viewer of the picture alone has no way of knowing that she is indeed female (folio 85r). The figure, most singularly, has a beard, dark and unkempt like the chin/shoulder-length hair on its head. Furthermore, although the figure is only half-clothed, sheathed by something with a head still attached, the naked chest is completely unmarked, having neither breasts nor nipples.<sup>34</sup> The fact that this creature is actually clothed, according to both the picture and the prose description, reflects a mark of civilization not seen in most of the monsters, who are completely naked. Still, the skin worn is not only that of a horse, but it has clearly not been thoroughly processed into finished clothing: the horse's head remains visibly attached and the hem is rough and uneven. The clothing clearly does not subscribe to any sort of

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<sup>34</sup> Most, although not all, of the naked male figures in Tiberius are drawn with detail lines on their naked chests meant to show ribs, pectoral muscles, nipples, and belly-buttons. The woman's chest shows no marking at all. It is impossible to tell in the British Library's slides that I have viewed if this is an act of erasure by a later viewer or if the breasts were never drawn at all.

appropriate social norms for women, established by the civilized and fully covered women in the manuscript.<sup>35</sup> This monstrous human stands in a mountainous region, and feeds two beasts on leashes. In Tiberius, it is only through the prose description that a reader learns that she is, indeed, a woman, and part of a group of women with the same attributes: “Ymb þa stowe beoð wif akenned” [around those places women are born] (Orchard 198). Perhaps the shock of the relation of the male image to the female description was even intended to call attention to her monstrosity. Even though the text tells us that these women have beards, *beardas*, that fall down onto their chests, “swa side oð heora breast,” it does not mention that they might be breastless.<sup>36</sup> The image here features a clear erasure of this woman’s chest, one that might be avoided if she were but fully clothed. If it is the artist who performs this erasure, making it a “never drawn” rather than a “removed” erasure, then the naked chest could only make more obvious the neutering of the figure.

Just as these women, in the text, are said to combine both masculine and feminine qualities, in being bearded women, so are their described actions an amalgamation of traditionally male and female activities. We learn that they make their tunics from horse’s hide: “horses hyda hi habbað him to hrægle gedon,” suggesting the feminine labor of

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<sup>35</sup> In *Wonders* in Tiberius, there is only one human woman, to be discussed later, who is being given as a gift. She is modestly clothed in a gown that covers her to the feet, and a head-covering that conceals her hair. Women, however, are also drawn in other parts of the manuscript for other texts, and these women are dressed in much the same way. There are no unclothed human women in this manuscript.

<sup>36</sup> Allen Frantzen, in his discussion of bearded women saints in *Before the Closet*, states, “the breast is the marker of the female, the beard of the male” (76). In the case of Galla from Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues*, Frantzen argues that her beard grows because she is so chaste: her “unfulfilled sexual nature increases her bodily heat; this is a mannish quality and it takes the form of a beard” (77). Interestingly, Frantzen identifies her as a creature of excess: “the excess of Galla’s feminine nature, denied the release of intercourse with a man, produced a beard, both a sign of manly identity and of womanly disgrace” (77).

making clothing.<sup>37</sup> Their skill as huntresses is emphasized by their reputation to the surrounding peoples, as we are told that they are called, and thus have a reputation for being, great huntresses, “*ƿa syndon huntigystran swiðe genemde.*”<sup>38</sup> The masculine and feminine are once again contrasted when we read that “*fore hundum tigras 7 leopardos þæt hi fedað þæt synda ða kenestan deor. 7 ealra ðæra wildeora kynn, 7 ealra ðæra wildeora kynn, þæra þe on þære dune akenda beoð, þæt gehuntigað*” [instead of dogs, they bring up tigers and leopards, that are the fiercest beasts, and they hunt all kinds of wild beasts that are born on the mountain]. While these women enact the medieval male skill of the hunt and thus the kill, they also have the ability to *fedan*, which carries the meaning of “to feed” but also to “nourish, sustain, foster, bring up” and even “bear, bring forth, produce” (Bosworth-Toller). It seems reasonably clear that these women are not giving birth to the tigers and leopards, but they do more than simply feed them—they nurture and raise them. Even though medieval men probably raised their hunting dogs in the way these women raise their tigers, the use of a word that is so bound to women’s work is striking in this context. These women take on masculine habits and carry them to excess, in that they work with animals far fiercer and hunt animals far more exotic than those pursued by most medieval men. The stereotypically feminine ability to raise or nurture young is not erased. These women seem to distort all things civilized, especially in terms of the hunt: women replace men, beasts replace dogs, horses are used as clothing instead of mounts. However, these women are not monstrous simply because they disrupt

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<sup>37</sup> The images in Tiberius and Bodley images show us that their tanning and sewing skills leave much to be desired, as the heads are still attached to their skirts and the hems appear uneven and unfinished.

<sup>38</sup> Neither the word *huntigystran*, nor any other form of it, appears anywhere else in the corpus of Old English, including glosses in Latin dictionaries, according to the *Dictionary of Old English*. These women are the only actual huntresses featured in all of Old English literature, a fact that should emphasize both their singularity and their transgressiveness. The word mimics their state of being, because it imposes the feminine ending on a masculine word, just as masculinity is imposed on a female body.

those traditions. They are frightening less because of their monstrous actions (usurping masculine work), than because of the place from which this work grows: their monstrous appearance (usurping masculine physical features). As the descriptions and images of these women attest, the anonymous narrator, and even the artists, cannot seem to determine where feminine qualities end and masculine ones begin; they are inextricable. The threat of these women is in their ability to bear the identities of both men and women. Thus their actions follow the precedents set forth by their bodies; their actions only logically follow from their appearances.

In the other manuscripts, the artists do not seem troubled by the dual nature of these women's bodies. The illustration in Bodley shows a bearded figure posed in almost the same posture as in Tiberius, but her chest is not blank (folio 44v). Instead, she has exaggerated breasts and nipples, accentuating her female attributes in relation to her masculine features and beard. Either the Tiberius artist, who seemed to have no problem depicting male genitals, chose to leave this chest blank to emphasize the masculinity, but not the femininity of this monstrous woman, or the blank chest is a result of a later erasure.<sup>39</sup> If we accept the former, then we must wonder at this artist's decision to cut the feminine qualities rather than depicting a creature with both male and female attributes. The Vitellius artist too draws a figure that combines masculine and feminine features. Here we see a traditionally dressed woman, in a long and modest robe, who also wears a beard (105v).<sup>40</sup> Like the Bodley figure, she is clearly a woman, as is indicated by her

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<sup>39</sup> Although I have not been able to examine this image in the manuscript itself, I suspect that the breasts of the figure have been literally scratched out by a later viewer, as is suggested by the chest markings on most other bare-chested male monsters.

<sup>40</sup> The Vitellius illustrations are drawn with much less skill and detail than the Tiberius and Bodley illustrations. It is occasionally difficult to understand what they are meant to depict. Here the robed woman

dress, if not by naked breasts. Even though this artist depicts her as far more civilized because clothed, he does not hesitate to give her both masculine and feminine attributes. Rather, he seems to play with the irony of her proper female dress and her beard, one of the only parts of her that remains unconcealed by clothing. Although in Vitellius and Bodley both male and female attributes are illustrated, in Tiberius, these women are not permitted sexual duality, but bear the markers only of the male, and none of the female. Like the men with erased genitals, here a potentially dangerous body, a body that has such an active monstrous appearance, is censored and controlled. But this time, the censoring takes place not in the “never drawing” in Vitellius and Bodley, but in the removal by either a later viewer or artist in Tiberius.

While readers can attribute transgressive actions to these women, it is not their behavior, but their hybrid bodies that are revealed to be monstrous. Like the *donestre*, the hunting women are drawn in conjunction with their monstrous actions. Their hunting, raising of beasts, and identity as a community of women separate from and not reliant upon men is evident in each of these pictures. They do not dress or act as befits proper women, but these are merely symptoms of a bodily monstrosity. Their bodies may not be constituted from animal parts, but they are still hybrid creatures. The danger of these women is that they carry both masculine and feminine attributes. The erasure of any evidence of femininity in the Tiberius illustration reveals to readers the danger of these bodies. The breasts here function like the erased genitals of the male monsters; once they are erased, the dangerous acting out of the monstrous and potent body is curtailed. The

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holds out a bizarre figure eight shaped object that, with the interpretive help of the other manuscripts, might be food. An animal crawls up the side of the frame, right beside this object, suggesting it might be one of her beasts.

genitals and the breasts are sexualized body parts that reveal a possibility of reproduction that is all too similar to human reproduction. These monstrous human bodies presume too much; their sexualized embodiment inspires the monstrous affect, which demands erasure.

## **Revising**

The final figure I will discuss is the second of only two monstrous women present in *Wonders of the East*. A viewer can easily determine the sex of this creature upon looking at her image in Tiberius (folio 85r), unlike the huntress. She is an appealing, and decidedly more feminine figure, but her monstrosity is clearly written on her body by the presence of tusk, tail, and hooves. Rather than facing the viewer, she stands in a sort of profile. Her lower body turns to the right edge of her frame, while her shoulders are squared to the viewer, and her face is shown in a three-quarters' view.<sup>41</sup> The artist seems to be at pains to simultaneously conceal and reveal this body, as is implicit in its odd twisting. Though the woman's chest faces us, she crosses her arms across it, curling her fingers around locks of hair on either side of her torso. The hair cascades over her rotated hips, flowing around her exposed buttocks, and between the cross of her legs. Her pubic region is shielded both by her posture of right leg striding across left, and by her hair. Her hair snakes down, in at least six different sections, to her hooves. The tail that protrudes from her posterior also brushes her ankles. While this body in itself is fascinating to observe, her face is equally strange. The features on it are far more delicate than those of

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<sup>41</sup> Knock, contributor and co-editor of the McGurk text, claims that in the Tiberius manuscript, only *Wonders* uses "three-quarters' views" (37).



the huntress. The three-quarters' view reveals two small, hooded eyes with slender eyebrows arched above. Her nose is just a tiny bit crooked, although still small, and her chin is pointed. Her hair is tucked behind one small ear. The face is certainly lovely compared to the huntress's, but her monstrosity is revealed here in the single dainty tusk that curves from her lower lip up unto her cheek.<sup>42</sup> The whiteness of her body is emphasized by the very dark background of the hill on which she stands and the slightly less dark background of the open sky behind her. While such background is not unusual, the depth of the color highlights her form.

This woman does not seem to be threatening, except that her body is compromised by animal parts. To the non-literate viewer, she does not act out any threat; in fact, the only actions we can attribute to this picture are the covering of the body, the grasping of hair, and walking. The viewer is meant to assume a monstrosity based completely in the animal-human hybridity of the body, especially in comparison with the wholly human body of the huntress.<sup>43</sup> The image in Bodley is very similar to the Tiberius, also featuring the three perspectives: three-quarters' view of the face, square positioning of the torso, and profile of the lower extremities, including a tail that seems to come through the skin at the spine (folio 45r). The only major difference here is the erasure of the top of her lip, which excises the tusk. This is a particularly striking moment, as it is the only act of erasure obvious in the Bodley manuscript. The act of erasure here is doubly ironic, because it erases a protrusion, like the genitals of the male monsters in Tiberius, but in this image, her tail, a far more phallic object than the tusk,

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<sup>42</sup> There seems to be a sort of scratch or erasure where we should see her second tusk in the three-quarters' view.

<sup>43</sup> I mean "wholly human" here in that she is not an animal-human hybrid, not that she is not a monster. She is, as discussed above, a male-female hybrid.

might have been chosen for erasure. The tusk is also not clearly visible in the Vitellius illustration, though darkened areas around the face make it difficult to determine if the tusk might not have been relocated (folio 105v). She stands with one arm across her chest, the other holding a short staff. Her hair conceals nothing, but is wavy rather than sleek, and reaches her hooves. This body is overtly female, with exaggerated body parts. Her lips are extremely full, and perhaps even red, unlike any other figure in that manuscript. Her breasts are bulbous and reach down to the split of her legs, all of her sexual parts thus seeming to incorporate one another.

The text offers a judgment against this troubling body, something it refuses to do in any other description. The sexualized combination of animal and human parts results in a body so offensive that it must be exterminated. We are told that Alexander the Great kills these women because of their “unclennesse” or possibly “*micelnesse*,” either their uncleanness or their greatness, their excess, and furthermore, because they are “æwisce on lichoman 7 unweorðe” [offensive and disgusting in body] (200). Just what about these women’s bodies is so terrifying that they must be eliminated? These bodies do not simply possess monstrous appearance, although the text offers no clear monstrous action that could inspire such a response. Their bodies imply a kind of action that is far more transgressive than just exceeding human norms. This action is communicated through the possession of a tail, but even more explicitly through the rupture between the artists’ rendering of the tail and the writers’ words describing it.

Like the hunting women with their beards, the tusked women's bodies take on a masculine physical signifier: their tails.<sup>44</sup> The reader is told that “ða habbað eoferes tuxas 7 feax oð helan side, 7 on lendum oxan tægl. Þa wif syndon ðreotyne fota lange 7 heora lic bið on marmorstanes hwitnyse. 7 hi habbað olfenda fet 7 eoferes teð” [They have boar's tusks and hair down to their heels, and ox-tails on their loins. These women are 13 feet tall and their bodies are in the whiteness of marble, and they have camel's feet and boar's teeth] (Orchard 200). While this is mainly a list of supplementary parts taken from various animals and applied to the body of a woman, it is not the bestial nature of the woman's body that represents active embodiment. Instead, this active appearance is revealed in the relationship between the physiological term *lendenu*, given as the location of the tail, and the illuminations of this figure, which reveal artists seemingly anxious about this feature. The revision here is not removal but relocation: the text tells us that the ox-tail comes not from the posterior, but from the loins, in Old English, *lendenu* and in Latin, *lumbi*.

Both the Clark-Hall and the Bosworth-Toller Old English dictionaries define *lendenu* as “loins.” *A Thesaurus of Old English* similarly defines *lendenu* as “loins” (53), but the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* defines *lumbus* as “the part of the body about the hips, the loins; the seat of sexual excitement” (1049). Although this is a reasonably common term in Latin, it occurs rarely in Old English and is, moreover, an odd word to find in this sort of travel narrative. No other such narrative uses this particular word—indeed, no other Old English fiction employs it. *Lendenu*, in a search of the University of Toronto *Dictionary of Old English Online Corpus*, appears primarily in religious texts: Ælfric's

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<sup>44</sup> The equivalent of tail in Latin is “caudas,” a term that can also be used as a euphemism for the phallus (Oxford Latin Dictionary).

homilies, a few passages of Scripture, and one saint's life. It appears only twice in law codes, but is used repeatedly in medical texts. While these medical texts can give us a certain amount of help in understanding the word, in other ways they simply compound the problem. But the medical texts certainly do not help us to clarify precisely what "loins" are.<sup>45</sup>

In most of Ælfric's homilies, the Old English word *lendenu* is linked with the Latin *renes*, the kidneys (OLD 1614), as well as with *lumbi*. Ælfric uses the word *lendenu* in four homilies, two pastoral letters (Wulfstan and Sigefyrth), and glosses it in his grammar as *renes*. Despite this gloss, he translates *lumbi* as *lendenu* in two of the four homilies, both in the second series of the Catholic Homilies: the second part of the Mid-Lent homily, and Common of Virgins. In the former, *lendenu* occurs in a paraphrase of Ephesians 6:14: "Standað eornostlice mid begyrdum lendenum on soðfæstnysse and ymscrydde mid rihtwisnysse byrnan and nymað þæs geleafan scyld and þæs hihtes helm and þæs halgan gastes swurd. Þæt is godes word" [They stand earnestly with loins girded in truth and clothed with the corslet of righteousness and take the shield of belief and the helm of hope and the sword of the Holy Ghost. That is God's word] ([2.1] 469). Here we see the first evidence of loins being girded as an exercise of truth and virtue. *Lumbos* is

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<sup>45</sup> The medical texts that use this term are Leechbooks I and II, usually in a listing of various body parts. The references in Leechbook I [appendix 16.4 and 5] only imply the proximity of the loins to the thighs: "Wið lendenece and wið þeona sare" [For loin-ache and for the ache of the thighs] (423). More extended passages in Leechbook II [20.4] list loin-pain in the company of liver, spleen, womb, and bladder problems: "lifer wærc, miltes sar, micgean forhæfednes, wambe ablawung, lendenwærc, sond 7 stanas on blædran weaxað" [liver pain, spleen pain, urine abstinence, womb swelling, loin pain, sand and stones in the bladder grow] (33). A similar passage from Leechbook II [21.4] gives us more body parts to distinguish from the *lendenu*: "7 eft fram þam nafolan oð þone milte 7 on þa winestran rægereosan 7 gecymð æt þam bæc þearme 7 æt þam neweseoðan 7 þa lendenu beoð mid micle sare begyrdedu" [also from the navel or the spleen and in the left spinal muscle and comes at the rear bowel and at the front bowel and the loins are girded with much soreness] (241). While it is difficult to determine what exactly *lendenu* is in anatomical terms, it is clear that it represents something in the area of the groin.

the source word in Latin, invoking the possibility of sexual connotation. Similarly, in the Common of Virgins homily, *lendenum* is the Old English for *lumbi* in its two occurrences. The first use is in a paraphrase of Luke 12:35: “Beon eower lendena ymbgyrde and eower leohtfatu byrnende” [Let your loins be girded about and your lantern burning] ([4.1] 61). The second appears immediately after, in a moment of exegesis. Ælfric informs his audience about how they are to interpret the injunction in Luke: “On þam ymbgyrdum lendenum is se mægðhad and on þam byrnendum leohtfatum sind þa godan weorc to understandenne” [In the girded about loins is virginity and in the burning lantern, the good work is to be understood] ([4.2] 62). If girded loins are linked with virginity, ungirded loins are representative of lust.

Similarly, the Easter homily from the second series of the Catholic Homilies makes just this connection. The word appears three times in this text, the first as a paraphrase of Exodus 12:11: “Begyrdað eower lendenu and beoð gesceode” [Gird your loins and be shod] ([3.1] 19). The second and the final occurrences of the word find their source in Gregory’s Homily 22: “Hi æton þæt lamb mid begyrdum lendenum” [They ate that lamb with girded loins] ([3.2] 303), and “On lendenum is seo galnys þæs lichaman and se þe wile þæt husel þicgan he sceal gewriðan þa galnysse and mid clænnysse þa halgan þigene onfon” [In the loins is the lust of the body and he who wishes to take that Eucharist, he shall bind the lust and accept holy food with purity] ([3.3] 303). This final citation offers us a clear link between lust and loins. The metaphor of loin binding as a restriction of lust is explicit here. Such a connection is echoed in both of Ælfric’s pastoral letters that include the word *lendenu*. To Wulfstan, he writes “On þam lendenum is, swaswa we leornigað on bocum, seo fule galnys and we sceolan fæstlice þa gewriðan and

gewealdan us to clænnysse” [In the loins is, just as we study in books, the foul lust and we shall certainly bind them fast and bring ourselves to purity] ([5.2] 28). While he here speaks primarily of the celibate religious, the connection is not just between loins and lust, but between loins and *foul* lust.

Although *lendenu* might very well be a reference, in the sense of the medical texts, to a specific body part, it seems more likely that *lendenu* is meant, in *Wonders*, as a general reference to that part of the body in order to invoke lust. While Ælfric urges his readers to gird their loins, the female monsters have “on lendum oxan tægl” [ox-tails on their loins]. Rather than being carefully contained, these supposedly female loins take on the form of ox-tails, a strangely bestialized and non-productive protrusion. No artist draws the tail as the phallic object the text describes. Like Tiberius, Bodley locates the tail at the base of the spine, and makes few adjustments to the Tiberius arrangement. In Vitellius, we can see the curve of her buttock in a kind of profile, but the tail seems to be coming out of the side of her leg, perilously close to her groin. This figure’s torso seems to be an amalgamation of sexual and animal parts. Whatever lack of skill viewers might attribute to the Vitellius artist, perhaps this image with its oddly placed tail is truer to the spirit of the description. She looks like a body of excess in both the human and the animal, not like a lovely human body that merely has supplementary animal parts. It is not just the animal elements that make this woman monstrous, but the combination of her excesses. Her body does not simply offer an appearance but implies a kind of action that is far more transgressive than just exceeding human norms. These bodies, both feminine and masculine via their phallic tail, in their duality act out against the viewer both inside

and outside the text. Alexander solves the problem of these women by killing them for what ought to be their appearance alone, whereas artists neutralize them by revising the images.

### **Old English Erasure of Sexuality**

These acts of erasure of monstrous bodies do not take place in a cultural vacuum. A more general sort of erasure of the sexed body takes place in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon writing.<sup>46</sup> In “‘No Sex Please, We’re Anglo-Saxons,’” Hugh Magennis argues that

In their treatment of sexuality, most Old English literary texts reflect either...the lack of concern with sexual themes, characteristic of the Germanic heroic tradition, or the ‘sexual pessimism’ inherited from patristic teaching, an attitude which received expression in particularly acute form in Anglo-Saxon England. (14)

The concept of the body in medieval literature has drawn intense scholarly notice in recent years. Scholars have considered masculine, feminine, and even, in the case of Clare Lees’ and Gillian Overing’s recent book, absent bodies. But Anglo-Saxon culture as we know it does not teem with transgressive bodies. Those bodies that we do see are most often set within a Christian scope. When explicitly sexual bodies are drawn or written, they are meant to give the message that the sexual body is, as with the tusked women, offensive and disgusting.<sup>47</sup> The naked bodies of Adam and Eve in the Junius 11 manuscript illustrations are normative and indeed modest; the creatures that have phalli

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<sup>46</sup> In fact, throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, canon law forbade sex to even married people for most days of the year: “Sexual relations with one’s spouse were also to be kept within strict bounds, and were prohibited when the wife was menstruating, pregnant, or nursing a child, and during certain periods in the church calendar, such as Sundays and Fridays and most major saints’ days, as well as all of Lent and Advent. This left about fifty days a year when a married couple could legitimately have sexual intercourse, and even this was hemmed in by restrictions as to position, time of day, and proper dress” (Weisner-Hanks 37).

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of sexual practices in Anglo-Saxon England, see Carol Pasternack and Lisa M.C. Weston’s recent collection, *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*.

are the fallen angels, rather than Adam. As Mary Dockray-Miller observes, “initial differentiation between the figures of Adam and Eve in the drawings is done most easily by reference to their breasts, specifically their nipples, rather than to the more standard gender markers of hair, dress, or naked genitalia” (221). These images suggest that to possess a sexualized body is to be more transgressive than Adam and Eve. The fallen angels alone are depicted as having bodies with genitals. Wulfstan’s famous *Sermo Lupi ad Anglorum* also attributes explicit sexual acts to a people grown depraved and wicked. The homilist’s desire is to horrify listeners and inspire repentance. Thus he depicts the sexually repugnant men who purchase a woman together and then “wið þa ane fylpe adreogað, an after anum 7 ælc æfter oðrum” [with that one woman they practice abomination, one after another and each after the next] (Bethurum lines 88-89) in order to inspire the audience’s horror and to change their behavior. Even in the law codes concerning rape, we hardly have a legal definition of the term. We know what happens to bodies that break the law,<sup>48</sup> but most of these bodies are physically censured and changed as punishment. While sexed bodies, in these examples, are present, they are depicted in order to ultimately be amended.

Erasure of sexual bodies also occurs in the kinds of bodies that are represented and the ways in which they are depicted. Scribes might choose never to depict sexed and gendered bodies, or they might “remove” layers of sexuality from source materials. Along with being a Christian body, the body in most Old English literature is male, be it the hero Beowulf, or the monk and prolific homilist, Ælfric. However, this masculinity is

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<sup>48</sup> Mary Richards in “The Body as Text in Early Anglo-Saxon Law” in *Naked Before God*, and Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe in “Body and Law in Late Anglo-Saxon England” both discuss practices of maiming the body as a form of punishment, and the kinds of restitution for criminal maiming of an innocent body.



almost never displayed in terms of its sexual valence, but rather its superior position in the social or religious hierarchy.<sup>49</sup> Women are not completely erased from this literature, and are in fact present in a variety of genres, from saints' lives to elegies to historical chronicles. We even see a few of these women translated from the Latin hagiographical tradition to the Anglo-Saxon vernacular, like the female saints Juliana and Elene, and the biblical heroine, Judith.<sup>50</sup> Their bodies, however, are considerably revised by Anglo-Saxon writers in order to conceal sexual details that are present in Latin sources. As Mary Clayton argues, concerning Ælfric's *Book of Judith*, these revisions reveal "a deep-seated anxiety with regard to women using their bodies in ways which had been firmly repressed by centuries of church prescriptions" (225). In the Anglo-Saxon saints' lives of virgin martyrs, despite the fact that sexuality is a matter of consistent concern, Hugh Magennis argues, "the explicit emphasis on such themes is diminished" (3).<sup>51</sup> Women's sexual bodies in these texts are generally excised, or "removed" by Anglo-Saxon writers, despite their existence in source materials.

The scenes of sexual intercourse or temptation that occur in Anglo-Saxon literature are generally covert—another example of the erasure of never drawing. In the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard, contained in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for the year 755, Cynewulf, protected only by a small band of retainers, is caught by Cyneheard

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<sup>49</sup> Most of the figures represented through Old English literatures are upper class. Class above gender seems to be the significant term in power dynamics.

<sup>50</sup> Although study of these texts reveals many intricacies and complications to traditional notions of Anglo-Saxon gender, the literal sexed bodies of these women rarely transgress acceptable norms.

<sup>51</sup> Some scholars conceive of virginity as a radical sexual identity, but the institution of the convent at least provides a place within the confines of Anglo-Saxon society for people to enact this identity. Even for the transvestite saints' lives, like those of Eugenia and Euphrosyne, "the theme of transvestitism, however, with its use of subterfuge, cannot be more than a sub-plot in the life of the virgin martyr, since her gaining of glory comes not in the avoidance of conflict, through disguise, but in her open declaration of defiance at her trial and execution" (Magennis 3).

while ‘visiting a mistress in Merton,’ “7 þa gescode he þone cyning lytle werode on wifcyþþe on Merantune” (Bately 36). The language here does not give any explicit sense of the sexual in the scene, although translators and readers alike assume a tryst. Roberta Frank urges caution in such a reading:

The Chronicle entry as a whole makes clear that Cynewulf was closeted with a woman friend at Merton. But given the reluctance of the vernacular to allow Adam, Cain, and Joseph to ‘know’ their wives, there is some reason to be suspicious of readings that take *wifcyþþe* not as ‘female companionship’ but as ‘carnal knowledge of a woman.’ (309)

She does not completely disregard the possibility of such an understanding, but asks readers to allow for a more nuanced and subtle reading, where connotations remain connotations, and reveal only the modesty of the scribe: “The twelfth-century chronicler, like his Anglo-Saxon predecessor, only hints, decorously and indirectly, at what Æthelweard and modern translators so explicitly affirm. In the privacy of the Old English vernacular, the half-said thing alone worked wonders” (309).<sup>52</sup>

We see this “half-spoken” sexual scenario again in *Beowulf*, when Hrothgar retires to his bedchambers with his young wife, Wealhtheow—who has already given birth to sons. “Ða him Hroþgar gewat mid his hæleþa gedryht,/ eodur Scyldinga ut of healle;/ wolde wigfruma Wealhþeo secan,/ cwen to gebeddan” [Then Hrothgar, protector of the Scyldings, went out of the hall with his troop of retainers; the warlord wished to find Wealhtheow, the queen as a bedfellow] (662a-665a). Here, Hrothgar leaves Beowulf to the hall to meet Grendel and retreats to his private nuptial chamber. The

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<sup>52</sup> See also Donald Scragg’s essay, “*Wifcyþþe* and the Morality of the Cuneuwulf and Cyneheard Episode in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle” in *Alfred the Wise: Studies in Honour of Janet Bately on the Occasion of her sixty-fifth birthday* (1997), 179-85. He argues that *wifcyþþe*, which he suggests might simply mean “in the company of his wife” (180), should not be read as “an opprobrious moral comment” (185) because of the passage’s generally positive vision of the king’s activities.

phrase, “to gebeddan,” echoes the connotations of *wifcybbe*. In other occurrences of this word in the corpus of Old English writing, it refers to such fecund relationships as those between Adam and Eve, and Rebecca and Isaac (DOE online). We certainly see no explicit sexual behavior, but we cannot ignore the connotations of the king retiring to bed to join his wife as a, in Klaeber’s terms, “bedfellow.” Through the rest of the poem, Wealhtheow’s role is largely ceremonial; she carries the meadcup and serves the men in the appropriate hierarchical order. She serves just the kind of function Magennis claims:

Secular heroic poetry in Old English is highly modest in content and has no overt interest in sexual themes...women are typically gracious and nobly-adorned, but presentations of them lack a sexual dimension. The heroic world is a public rather than a private world and its conflicts do not usually arise from matters of sex.  
(11)

Wealhtheow embodies the former; she is appropriately garbed and gracious, and, even as her husband joins her in bed, she seems to be without sexual dimension.

Sex, however, is not entirely erased from Anglo-Saxon literature. Where the Chronicle and *Beowulf* present a hardly-spoken sexuality, the Old English riddles are sometimes more explicit in their use of *double-entendre*. Many scholars have recently turned their attentions to the functions of the sexual valences in these riddles, riddles including 25 (the onion), 44 (the key), 45 (dough), and 61, (churn? helmet?) that all draw attention to sexual states, bodies, and behaviors.<sup>53</sup> The onion riddle invokes the image of an erect penis with lines like “Stapol min is steapheah, stonde ic on bedde” [I am firm and erect, and I stand up in bed] (4a-b), and a sexual encounter when the churl’s daughter “on mec gripeð, ræseð mec on reodne, reafað min heafod, fegeð mec on fæsten” [grips me, assaults me in my redness, seizes my head, [and] confines me in a tight place] (7b-

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<sup>53</sup> Tanke lists the riddles that use sexual double entendre (25, 37, 44, 45, 54, 61, 62) and that include sexual subjects (12, 20, 42, 46, 63, 77, 91) (31).

9a). The key riddle also urges the prurient answer of “penis,” saying that this object hangs “bi weres þeo” [by a man’s thigh] (1b), and that it “bið stiþ ond heard” [is stiff and hard] (3a). The same is true of the dough riddle, which uses language that might describe an erection. This thing is “þindan ond þunian” [rising and swelling] (2a) and it is also a “banlease” [boneless] (3a) object that a young woman “grapode hygewlonc hondum” [the proud-minded woman gripped with her hands] (3b-4a). Many scholars have recently turned their attentions to the functions of the sexual valences in these riddles, often with very different results. John Tanke argues that the function of a riddle ultimately is to replace a sexual reading with another ‘clean’ solution: “Solving a double-entendre riddle involves the concealment of its sexual solution” (30). Mercedes Salvador agrees, arguing that “In sum, the sequence formed by riddles 42-6 seems to have been conceived as a section focused on the body, ultimately warning a potential audience against the dangers of relying on the carnal/literal dimension of the texts and, by extension, of life” (96). While she sees a cycle including two of the most explicitly sexual riddles as a warning against overt sexual behaviors, Hugh Magennis sees these riddles as a signal of real-life acceptance of sexual identity. He says “Their attitude is one of good-humoured impudence rather than of hostility to sexuality; and they also proceed on the assumption that the audience accepts that sex is an interesting subject” (17). Sarah Higley echoes this second attitude, arguing the riddle 61 represents not a churn or a helmet, or even a prophylactic, but a dildo, and further, that this “prurient solution” is in fact “an item that the sexually experienced were well-acquainted with in A-S England” (49). We see in

these examples evidence for the sexual identities of medieval people, although the majority of the literature tends toward the repression, concealment, or erasure of human sexuality.

The erasure of sexualized bodies is not a problem only in *Wonders of the East*, but more generally in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon writing. Writers enact various kinds of erasure: they might “remove” descriptions of bodies that are represented as sexual in the source materials, as is the case with such religious women’s lives as *Judith*. They might move towards the eradication of sexual behavior with literal reproofs against it, as in *Sermo Lupi*, or figurative castigations, as in the sexed bodies of the fallen angels in *Genesis*. By shielding readers from explicit sexual acts, as in the bedroom scenes in “Cynewulf and Cyneheard” or *Beowulf*, writers also effectively perform an act of erasure of sex from the text. Sexualized bodies do remain, despite these kinds of erasure. The riddles present sexed bodies, although many scholars argue that the sexual solutions are meant to be rejected for other solutions. This possible message of the riddles, however, is far less moralistic than the reproofs against sexuality seen in penitentials, laws, or sermons. It is impossible to escape the monastic textual impulse in Anglo-Saxon literature, even in secular texts. But texts like the riddles, and like *Wonders of the East* allow readers to see evidence of sexual bodies, despite attempts at erasure meant to render these bodies impotent.

## **Conclusions**

The sexualized bodies present in *Wonders of the East* offer us a rare opportunity to witness the sexual when linked with the monstrous, and to think about the function of

erasure in relation to specific bodies. Although the Tiberius, Vitellius, and Bodley manuscripts present different contexts and possibilities of interpretation, each incorporates a kind of textual resistance to bodies that are both monstrous and sexed. Monstrous bodies that are also sexually valent exceed boundaries and endanger onlookers—so much so that sexual parts are frequently censored or even literally erased. As we can see in the bodies of the tusked women, who must be killed by Alexander the Great, excessive and sexualized bodies are considered not only unclean and indecent, but also so threatening that they must be exterminated or expunged. Sexualized monstrosity, then, seems to be about more than appearance. Bearing sexual markers in *Wonders of the East* is an act of aggression. To possess a sexed body is to enact one's fundamental identity.

What does this mean in terms of the Anglo-Saxon construction of human identity? Because the sexualized monstrous body defines monstrous identity, the same might be true for sexualized human bodies, particularly because Anglo-Saxon literature resists depicting sexualized bodies. A body compromised by animal parts is indeed monstrous, but does not inspire the monstrous affect as does the sexualized monstrous body. A body that exposes sexuality, as is the case with each of the monstrous bodies discussed here, must necessarily be one that acts out, in *Wonders*, against the viewer, and in Anglo-Saxon literature, against the constrictions of monastic textual practices. Sexuality, then, is a part of human physicality that inspires affect—and more specifically, acts of erasure.

*Wonders* suggests that bodies are fundamental to monstrous identity, and that these bodies are unchanging. Indeed, the only possible responses to sexualized monstrous bodies are acts of erasure, the literal removal of the dangerous body. This might mean

that killing, as Alexander kills the tusked women, or might mean simply eliminating those threatening sexualized body parts. Is the construction of the sexualized body in *Wonders* an anomaly in Anglo-Saxon literature? It does not seem to be, because of the consistent erasure of the sexualized body through the corpus of Old English literature. Rather, these formulations of identity through the essence of the body reflect the Anglo-Saxon understanding of the body as unchanging and inflexible. This does not necessarily imply an allegorical reading of the body, although such interpretations are available. Instead, it reassures its contemporary audience that the most dangerous bodies will be clearly marked and identified; they will not be capable of change, but instead will be controlled through the will of the actor (in the case of Alexander), the viewer, or the scribe/artist. As opposed to later medieval monstrous bodies, these monsters cannot be transformed and redeemed. Therefore, to erase a sexually explicit body is not to change that body or that identity—after all, traces remain—but to attempt to remove its threat.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Dismembering: The Erasure of Grendel's Mother and the Monstrous Body in *Beowulf*

Old English literature, although largely devoid of sexual depictions, is filled with exiles. From the homeless retainer of the poem *Deor* to the lonely speaker of *The Seafarer* to the abandoned woman of *The Wife's Lament*, solitary figures seem to populate Old English poems. *Beowulf* is no exception; Beowulf himself is a kind of exile as he ventures away from his homeland to prove himself, and even the thief who steals the cup from the dragon's lair represents another kind of dangerous exile.<sup>54</sup> The most obvious exiled figures within the poem are Grendel and his mother: in addition to being descended from the original exile, the Biblical Cain, they are called "micle nearcstapan" [great border-steppers] (1348a). They literally wander the borders of Hrothgar's kingdom, living at the outskirts of the community both spatially and socially. But Grendel and Grendel's mother wander other kinds of borders: they possess hybrid bodies. Their forms exist precariously on the boundaries of the monstrous and the human, and, in Grendel's mother's case, as I shall demonstrate, on the boundaries of the female and the

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<sup>54</sup> Beowulf is a kind of exile; mocked in his youth for his deficiencies, he spends his life proving himself. In order to truly prove himself, he must leave his homeland and earn a reputation in another country. He is further exiled by his own methods of battle. He accepts help from no one in his youth, but fights alone, and, in the case of Grendel's mother, in a place that is as far away from his own home as possible. The thief is another kind of exile; having been left on his own, he wanders the land looking for a new lord. He steals the cup in order to buy his way into a new hall—thus angering the dragon. The death of Beowulf, then, follows, to a degree, from the dangers of exile.



male. Their hybrid natures are located in their bodies. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the possession of a monstrous and sexualized body in *The Wonders of the East* can be taken as an act of aggression that invites the literal erasure of and revision to the body. In *Beowulf*, a similar response to the dangerous monstrous body is carried out by the poet, by Beowulf himself, and even by modern critics.

For many years, the monsters were the last aspect of *Beowulf* that critics wanted to discuss; they were deemed too ridiculous, too folkloristic to be worthy of serious scholarly attention. J.R.R. Tolkien, in his foundational 1936 essay “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” addresses this concern directly; he asserts emphatically that “the monsters are not an inexplicable blunder of taste; they are essential, fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas of the poem” (68). Recent scholars, from Jeffrey Cohen to Jane Chance, have acknowledged the import of the monster in their scholarship. Monsters are a part of the landscape of Old English literature and culture just as they are a part of the landscape of *Beowulf*. They embody social and socio-sexual concerns and anxieties, while they simultaneously represent illicit desires and prohibited practices. I argue that in Old English literature, monsters are defined by the permanent status of their monstrous bodies. Monstrous actions may coincide with these bodies, but they are not crucial to monstrous identity because they are temporary and may end at any time. Without being attached to a permanently monstrous body, transgressive actions are not truly monstrous. Monstrous bodies may be monstrous through excess, lack, or hybridity. Monsters of excess may have more body parts than they ought to have or they may simply be larger than a normal human being, as is the case with giants. Monsters of lack do not have all of the body parts that they ought to, like the men without heads in *Wonders of the East*,

featured in the last chapter. Hybrid monsters combine body parts that do not usually go together, whether these monstrous bodies be animal-human hybrids, or even sexual hybrids that contain the parts of both men and women.

But if monsters are so significant, then why do we not see more of them? The answer is the same as for the rare representations of sexuality in the Anglo-Saxon corpus, as I have discussed in the previous chapter. Monsters are victims of erasure. In chapter two, I discussed three types of erasure: never drawing, removing, and revising. I contend that monsters are victims of all three types of erasure. Acts of never drawing, removal and revision take place not only within the text of *Wonders of the East* and the corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature, but also within the poem of *Beowulf*. And, as is the case with sexuality in the corpus and with sexualized monsters in *Wonders*, moments of sexual anxiety seem to motivate the strongest efforts of erasure in *Beowulf*. Specifically, the erasure of Grendel's mother indicates a deep discomfort with the sexualized and monstrous body on the part of those who will erase her, most notably Beowulf and the poet.

The dangers of the monster derive from the monstrous body. Ultimately, the transgressive physical body of the monster, the monster's appearance, acts out against viewers in a way that literally threatens them. That is, appearance is an aggressive action that requires a defensive response, which I term the monstrous affect. This is particularly true in the case of sexualized monsters. In *Wonders*, a reader's primary understanding of monsters comes from their appearance: they are literally drawn for the reader's inspection. In *Beowulf*, the opposite is true. Given the descriptions of the monsters, an artist would be unable to offer a textually accurate illustration. As I shall discuss, what

little detail we can extract about the appearance of the Grendelkin transgresses normal human boundaries; these details act as traces of the monstrous body, visible to Beowulf and, on occasion, to the audience within the text, but never to the reading audience. The reading audience witnesses monstrous actions and the monstrous affect Monsters' actions *and* their monstrous appearances motivate human response—the monstrous affect. However, monstrous actions are ultimately expressed from and originate in the monstrous body.

### **The Body of Grendel**

Although we can determine Grendel's social status, it is impossible to understand entirely his physical presence. Grendel seems to be larger than a normal man; he is called *eoten*, a giant (Klaeber 761a). Moreover, we are told by Hrothgar, who has heard this from his bondsmen, that Grendel was larger than any other man, “‘he wæs mara þonne ænig man oðer’” (1353a-b). Even more telling is the heft of his head: four men struggle when carrying his dismembered head from the mere (1637b-9b).<sup>55</sup> Michael Lapidge

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<sup>55</sup> While this description might be hyperbole, the excessive nature of the body is clear. For more on this kind of exaggeration, particularly in reference to Beowulf's own excessiveness, see Fred Robinson's "Elements of the Marvelous in the Characterization of Beowulf: a Reconsideration of the Textual Evidence," in *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, 119-37. Additionally, although we cannot describe Grendel's appearance, we do know his social role. There is no shortage of nouns pointing to Grendel's status as an outsider—he is called *ellengæst*, bold guest or spirit (86a); *mearcstapa*, a walker on the border (103a); *manscāda*, wicked ravager (737b); repeatedly *feond*, enemy (101b, 725b, 748a, 970a, etc.); and even more explicitly, *feond mancynnes*, enemy of mankind (164b). Grendel is also called *gæst*, which can mean either "guest" or "ghost." Joyce Lionarons comments on the standard edition of the text, saying that Klaeber's glosses betray a personal, rather than textually accurate, glossing of these words. "An examination of Klaeber's lexical decisions in his edition of *Beowulf* shows that in general he prefers the reading 'ghost, spirit, or demon' for usages of *gæst* referring to Grendel and Grendel's mother, and 'stranger, visitor, guest' for *gæst* references to Beowulf and the dragon. His choices tend to reinforce a particular interpretation of the monsters as well as the hero: Grendel and his mother are consistently regarded as supernatural rather than natural (i.e. human or bestial) creatures and thus as 'demons' or 'spirits,' while the supernatural qualities of the hero and dragon are deemphasized in the neutral term 'guest'" (Lionarons 10).

argues that “the *Beowulf*-poet carefully avoided giving his readers any descriptive details concerning Grendel that would enable them to visualize him within categories familiar from their external world” (152). The fact is, as Lapidge quite rightly indicates, readers cannot put together a coherent picture of Grendel—at least not one based on the evidence of the text. Although many critics see him as far more bestial than human, his form seems to be that of a man, not an animal. We can surmise some basic facts from the action of the text: Grendel must walk on two legs, rather than going on all four as a beast. The nature of his tracks, the way he grabs his enemies, and his ability to flee with only one arm all suggest that he must be upright and walk like a man. But little evidence of his appearance actually resides in the poem.

Grendel’s body receives only two explicit, descriptive passages in the poem: we see directly only his glowing eyes and his dismembered arm. No one but Beowulf, presumably, sees the light in Grendel’s eyes, because everyone else is asleep in the hall when he arrives. Nevertheless, first we learn that “him of eagum stod/ ligge gelicost leoht unfæger” [from his eyes shone a horrible light most like a flame] (726b-7b). Glowing eyes seem to be a standard among monsters, belonging not only to the Germanic nightmare creatures that Lapidge compares to Grendel, but also to monsters in *Wonders*.<sup>56</sup> Second, after Beowulf has ripped Grendel’s arm off, the audience is allowed to view it. Though many translators like to take their liberty with this particular noun—Seamus Heaney even calls it a “claw”—Grendel’s hand is only called a “grape” [grip] (836a) initially. Later, when the people look at the hand, it is described for the reader:

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<sup>56</sup> Lapidge says that these nightmare creatures feature “a large head and uncanny bulging eyes” (149). In *Wonders*, the monsters live on an island “in ðam beoð men akend þara eagan scinað swa leohte swa man micel blacern onæle on þystre nihte” [on which people are born whose eyes shine with a light just as if one had lit a great lantern in a dark night] (Orchard 198).

“feondes fingras; foran æghwylc wæs,/ stiðra nægla gehwylc style gelicost,/ hæpenes handsporu hilderinces/ eglu unheoru” [the enemy’s fingers; on the end of each, each of the hard nails, was most like steel; the heathen warrior’s hateful awful (literally unpleasant) handspurs] (984a-987a). “Handspur,” at least according to the glossary of Klaeber’s third edition, may be a possible reference to a claw, which would explain Heaney’s bold interpretive choice. What is most surprising here is not that the nails are frightening, or even that they might be claw-like. No, most amazing is the fact that the formation of the hand itself seems quite human; it has fingers and only the super-strong nails seem remarkable, and even these are described in human terms, as steel is made by humans. True, we are told in the next lines that no iron tool could hurt this bloody hand; nevertheless, we are not told that its skin is scaly or green or even rough. What is most shocking about the hand is how it can (or rather cannot) be damaged, not how it looks. In many ways, this hand is just a familiar appendage whose appearance signals Grendel’s status not only as a shamed and defeated criminal,<sup>57</sup> but also as a creature whose body is like but not like those of its onlookers. The hand looks much like theirs, but is also in excess of theirs; it possesses its own built-in armor. These moments of description reveal a body that carries some of the traditional markers of a monster, but one that is also undeniably human in formation.

Having claimed these as the only moments of physical description concerning Grendel, we should consider the other piece of physical evidence attained by Beowulf: Grendel’s head. We are told that “þa wæs be feaxe on flet boren/ Grendles heafod, þær

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<sup>57</sup> The removal of hands is linked to a criminal tradition discussed by Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe in “Body and Law in Late Anglo-Saxon England,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 27 (1998), 209-32, and also by Leslie Lockett, in “Grendel’s Arm as a ‘Clear Sign’ in Feud, Law, and the Narrative Strategy of *Beowulf*,” a forthcoming article.

guman druncon,/ egeslic for eorlum ond þære idese mid,/ wliteseon wrætlic; weras on sawon” [then Grendel’s head was carried onto the floor by the hair to where men drank, a terrible thing for the earls and the women with them, a wondrous spectacle; the men looked on it] (1647a-50b). We learn that Grendel has hair, which tells us he does not have animal fur, as few hunted animals were probably carried into the hall by their hair. Hair also signifies as a marker between the civilized and the uncivilized, particularly in illustrations. In *Wonders*, one of the ways of distinguishing the monsters from the civilized men is that monstrous humans have long, shaggy, messy hair, while the civilized men are neatly coiffed—being carried by the hair suggests that Grendel’s hair is probably not trimmed and combed, but wild and uncivilized. This is the monstrous affect: here the effect of the head upon the crowd of onlookers is more important to the poet than a description of the head for the reading audience: the terror and wonder of the viewers are human reactions, not monstrous descriptions. In this way, the readers’ experience of the body of Grendel is far different from the viewing audience inside the text. What readers learn about Grendel’s head, then, is its affect, not its appearance, as it acts out against onlookers, even in passive death, and inspires awe and terror in them. By removing the head from the reader’s visual inspection, its actual physical status is, in effect, erased from the reader’s experience of the poem; such an act of erasure simultaneously evokes the reader’s curiosity and guides the reader away from the monstrous body to the monstrous affect. Therefore, readers cannot respond to the body itself, but instead must recognize the impact of the body upon those who witness it.

Despite his excessive and thus monstrous body, Grendel has human motivations and responses. He hears the happy noises of the hall from the dark place in which he

lives, and they cause him suffering. “Ða se ellengæst/ earfoðlice/ þrage gepolode,/ se þe in þystrum bad,/ þæt he dogora gehwam/ dream gehyrde/ hludne in healle;/ þær wæs hearpan sweg,/ swutol sang scopes” [then the bold spirit painfully suffered hardship, he who lived in darkness, for each day he heard the noise in the hall; there was the sound of the harp, the clear song of the poet] (86a-90a). In this passage, Grendel longs for the light and warmth of this happy hall, while he literally suffers through the time or hardship, “þrage gepolode.” Moreover, he is capable of weeping, a human physical ability and emotional response. The Danes witness Grendel’s despair at his defeat by Beowulf: “Norð-Denum stod/ atelic egesa, anra gehwylcum/ þara þe of wealle wop gehyrdon,/ gryreleoð galan godes andsacan” [For the North-Danes, horrible fear rose up, for each one of those who heard his weeping surge, God’s enemy sing his terrible song] (783b-786b). Grendel’s weeping, however terrifying to the Danes, is expressed in human terms, as a response to physical and emotional pain. It is not merely a roar of pain, but both “gryreleoð” [a terrible song] and “wop” [weeping].<sup>58</sup> Whether or not we can picture Grendel as entirely human, we cannot imagine him as completely bestial. His lineage as the kin of Cain and his behavior point to a hybrid monstrous-human identity that springs from an original monstrous action. The original monstrous action of brother-killing results in monstrous bodies, which again and again perform monstrous actions—despite the very human motivation, at least in Grendel, of envy.

Beowulf is the most immediate witness to Grendel’s savage violence: through Beowulf’s eyes we first see the way that Grendel kills. He watches Grendel’s techniques, having already decided his strategy for defeating the invader.

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<sup>58</sup> “Wop” is defined by the Bosworth-Toller and Clark-Hall dictionaries as “weeping, lamentation.” It seems to be a primarily human ability, in a scan of the 370 entries in the *Dictionary of Old English* corpus.

þryðswyð beheold  
mæg Higelaces, hu se manscaða  
under færgripum gefaran wolde.  
Ne þæt se aglæca yldan þohte,  
ac he gefeng hraðe forman siðe  
slæpendne rinc, slat unwearnum,  
bat banlocan, blod edrum dranc,  
synsnædum swealh; sona hæfde  
unlyfingendes eal geferomod,  
fet ond folma.

[the kinsman of Hygelac, the mighty one observed how the enemy of man wished to proceed in his sudden attack. Nor did the enemy think to delay, but he quickly seized, at the first opportunity, a sleeping warrior, eagerly tore into him, bit into his body, drank blood from his veins, swallowed huge morsels; very quickly had he consumed all of the dead man, feet and hands.] (736b-45a)

Grendel is not just here to kill but to consume; this is a hall for feasting, and he does just that. But Grendel's eating is more than ravenous, and even more than bestial. He devours every part of this body, as the poet tells us, even the hands and feet—such excess reveals indiscriminate consumption. This is not the work of any familiar predator. In fact, the only animals that compare with Grendel's ability to consume are the hippopotami in *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*,<sup>59</sup> which swallow whole Alexander's guides. The differences between these two creatures, however, are significant: the hippopotami live in the dangerous "east," and even there do not venture into human habitation; rather, the men travel to them and invade their territory. Grendel, on the other hand, is an invader of civilized human space, and he is much closer to home for the reader as a monster in

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<sup>59</sup> "Þæt wæs þonne nicra mengeo on onsiene maran 7 unhyrlicran þonne ða elpendas in ðone grund þære ea 7 betweoh ða yða þæs wæteres þa men besencte 7 mid heora muðe hie sliton 7 bodgodon 7 hie ealle swa fornamon" [Then there was a host of water monsters in appearance larger and more terrible than the elephants, who took the men to the ground (river bottom) and between the waves of the waters dragged the men and slit them and bloodied them with their mouths and snatched them all up] (Orchard 234).



Europe.<sup>60</sup> More significant is the matter of motivation for their bestial consumption: the hippopotami are simply beasts acting on instinct; they lack the forethought of Grendel, who eats with such glee, and who has waited, longing for companionship, outside the hall for many years. This kind of consumption only reinforces Beowulf's initial assumptions about Grendel: he cannot be approached like any being Beowulf has fought before. The excesses of his action, extreme consumption and nightly usurpation of the human hall, reflect the lineage of his monstrous form: his heritage and his body are also both human and some indescribable monstrous other.

### **Grendel's Mother**

But Grendel is not alone: he has a mother. For many years, scholars, even Tolkien, ignored her presence in this text. While he accomplished many worthy goals in "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,"<sup>61</sup> Tolkien quite obviously excludes Grendel's mother from any discussion of the monsters. As Clare Lees has observed, "Tolkien's monsters are Grendel (the monstrous son) and the dragon; Grendel's mother and other female characters are not mentioned" (133). Jane Chance Nitzsche, in an attempt to reorder critical visions of the poem, argues for a three-part, rather than two-part, structure, in which Grendel's mother occupies the middle space. In her reading, however, she sees Grendel's mother as an "inversion of the Anglo-Saxon ideal of woman as both monstrous and masculine" (288). Keith Taylor, in his 1994 article, summarizes the critical history of Grendel's mother succinctly: "scholars of *Beowulf* tend to regard [her]

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<sup>60</sup> Although *Beowulf* is set in a distant past for its contemporary readers, its setting is not the monster-infested and dangerous "east," but rather in Scandinavia, north of England in an accessible and understandable place.

<sup>61</sup> Tolkien's essay fundamentally redirected the future of Beowulf scholarship to envision the poem as a poem, not just an historical document.

as an inherently evil creature who like her son is condemned to a life of exile because she bears the mark of Cain” (13). He argues against this reading, saying that the poet’s use of the word *ides* [lady] “commends Grendel’s mother for performing a brave deed” (22). Christine Alfano, too, wants to reclaim Grendel’s mother from “feminine monster imagery” (12) that is propagated by nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon scholars, and to “reinststate her in her deserved position as *ides, aglæcwif*: “lady, warrior-woman” (12). Gwendolyn Morgan, alternately, refers to her as an “ogress,” saying readers should “equate Grendel’s dam to the negative aspect of the Feminine” (65).

None of these totalizing claims do Grendel’s mother justice. She is not the sole concern of the poem, nor is she insignificant; she is neither entirely good nor entirely bad. However, we cannot ignore her place both literally and figuratively in the narrative of *Beowulf*: she is in the center. Beowulf swims down to her mere around line 1500, halfway through a poem of approximately 3,000 lines. She is the last foe we see him fight in his youth, and participates in the first moment when we see his vulnerability. She represents neither the glorious victory over Grendel nor the tragic death by the dragon. A formidable foe, she cannot be defeated by physical grappling as Grendel can, and she is not killed by a human blade like the dragon. Indeed, she does not even have her own name, but is identified only through her maternal identity<sup>62</sup>—a fact that has led many critics to only see her fight as an addendum to the story about her son. The reductive naming by critics and translators—Grendel’s dam, the “she-wolf” (Bradley 451), “the brawny water-hag” (451) and the like—functions as a kind of erasure outside the poem,

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<sup>62</sup> Gillian Overing notes that “often the women in the poem are not identified other than as daughters, wives or mothers. Of the eleven women in the poem we know the names of five...these are, notably, all queens, with some titular power of rule” (“Women” 223)

making Grendel's mother into a recognizable, and therefore more easy to overlook, female monster—a reproductive beast or a witch. So too does her namelessness suggest another kind of erasure within the poem. Grendel's mother undeniably occupies a troubling middle ground in the poem that is constantly being revised and erased, but, as I shall demonstrate, her body and her story ultimately leave a residue on the troubling conclusion of the poem. The physical appearance of Grendel's mother is just as amorphous as that of her son, if not more so. Though Beowulf looks on her, “ongeat þa se goda grundwyrgegne,/ merewif mihtig” [then the good one saw the accursed monster of the deep, the mighty mere-woman] (1518a-9a), the audiences within and outside the poem never do. There is no trophy of Grendel's mother—not her arm, and certainly not her head. Even in the very physical struggle that takes place between Grendel's mother and Beowulf, we receive little description. Nevertheless, as with Grendel, body positions can suggest some basic information about her form. Beowulf grabs Grendel's mother by her shoulder, “gefeng þa be eaxle” (1537a).<sup>63</sup> Like Grendel, she walks and moves like a human. More important are the parallels to Grendel's fight, in which shoulders figure significantly; we are told that Beowulf rips his arm off at the shoulder: “him on eaxle wearð/ syndolh sweotol, seonowe unsprungon,/ burstan banlocan” [to him in the shoulder a very great wound became manifest, sinews sprang open, joints burst] (816b-8a).

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<sup>63</sup> Alfred Bammesberger, in the company of Max Rieger and Eric Stanley, argues that *eaxle* should be amended to *feaxe*, thus having Beowulf throw Grendel's mother to the ground by her hair. His argument relies on metrical motivation: “metrically the change of <eaxle> to <feaxe> in line 1537a eliminates an irregularity. Palaeographically it is defensible. Contextually it would be a major improvement...Seizing her by the hair, on the other hand, was most effective. The legal term *feaxfeng* occurs only once in our corpus of Old English, namely in Æthelberht's laws...[it is] no doubt a legal term” (4). Despite the metrical problem posed by *eaxle*, I choose to keep it. Though Beowulf throwing Grendel's mother by her hair to the floor has obvious and interesting echoes of domestic violence, and also links to the carrying of Grendel's head to Heorot, the connections with Grendel's fight through the word *eaxle*, mentioned above, are more convincing than Bammesberger's arguments for emendation.

Grendel's mother also grasps Beowulf with her "grimman  
grapum" [grim grip] (1542a), a moment that is certainly meant to remind us of Grendel's  
hand, or grip, "Grendles grape" (836a) as it is called when he first leaves it behind in  
Heorot.

Upon first observation, it almost seems that Grendel's mother is a reflection of her  
son.<sup>64</sup> In one of the most complicated comparisons of the poem, and in fact, in all of Old  
English, her might is compared to his. "Wæs se gryre læssa/ efne swa micle, swa bið  
mægþa cræft,/ wiggryre wifes be wæpnedmen,/ þonne heoru bunden, hamere geþruren,  
sweord swate fah swin ofer helme/ ecgum dyhtig andweard scireð" [the terror was lesser  
by even so much as is women's skill, the war-terror of a woman, in comparison with an  
armed man, when a bound sword, forged by hammer, a sword decorated by blood cuts  
the boar on the opposite helmet, with strong edges] (1282b-7b).<sup>65</sup> My modernized reading

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<sup>64</sup> Edward Irving, who sees Grendel as a representation of "Other," "Darkness," and "Death" (111) suggests that "the encounter with Grendel's mother represents a continuation of the symbolic conflict with Grendel...From the first point of view, Grendel's mother is merely Grendel brought back to life" (112). He goes on to acknowledge that her motivations are distinct from her son's. In his later *A Rereading of Beowulf*, Irving acknowledges his own "unconscious" biases in this reading (70).

<sup>65</sup> Klaeber explains the line in a note, saying that her characterization as less dangerous "is evidently to be explained as an endeavor to discredit the unbiblical notion of a woman's superiority" (181). Mitchell and Robinson, in their addition, say of this line only that "The narrator's account of the fight against Grendel's mother does not bear out this statement, unless it is taken to refer to the fact that the female kills only one thane whereas the male kills thirty" (91). Hala leads me to focus on terror as the object of the comparison. He says "the subject of the sentence is "terror" ("gryre")—as being less fearsome by only so much as is the strength of women or "battle-wives" is less than that of male warriors" (40). Irving, notably, does not even mention this comparison in his reading of Grendel's mother. Instead, he simply allies her with the mere (114). H.L. Rogers reads the line simply as "the female monster is said to be weaker than her son" (246). Jane Chance Nietzsche says only that she "is weaker than a man" (288), but adds to this claim in *Woman as Hero*, "In their eyes recognizably female, she threatens them physically less than her son" (101). Puhvel makes much of this line, saying, "the author makes it emphatically clear that she is as a fighter vastly inferior to Grendel" (81). Cohen comments ironically that she is "supposedly less fierce than her son" (Of Giants 27). Orchard in his *Critical Companion* only includes the line in a description of Grendel's mother's approach, but does not examine it (193). It is remarkable that few of the feminist responses to the poem investigate this fascinating comparison. Although Alfano does not read this line, she wants to claim that Grendel's mother is actually just a human woman whose perceived monstrosity derives from the ways in which "her character and actions defy gender assumptions" (12). She sees Grendel's mother's monstrosity as only being implicated through her relationship to her son. Oppositely, Overing does not discuss this line because she does not Grendel's mother to be exactly human: "she is not quite human, or rather she has her

of the comparison is this: ‘Her terror was lesser than Grendel’s by just as much as a woman’s war-terror is lesser than the war-terror of an armed man as he participates in a fight against another armed man.’<sup>66</sup> What we must recognize in this comparison is that neither Grendel’s mother’s size nor her form are literally compared to Grendel’s. It is rather her *gryre*, her “horror, terror, dread” (Bosworth and Toller 492)—the horror, terror, or dread that she inspires in others. This comparison is all about monstrous affect, not about appearance—her size is not necessarily lesser but the terror she inspires is. It is a strange comparison too, because how much weaker is a woman’s “war-terror” than an armed man’s? How many women do we see engaged in physical warfare in *Beowulf*? None—even Thryth has warriors to do her killing for her. Moreover, those women in Old English literature who do engage in warfare are generally extremely successful.<sup>67</sup> Is their “war-terror” truly lesser than men’s, or simply less frequent? This passage raises more questions than it answers about Grendel’s mother, and her physical form remains a mystery to us, although her nameless designation as the mother of Grendel assures us that

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own particular brand of otherness; her inhuman affiliation and propensities make it hard to distinguish between what is monstrous and what is female” (*Language* 81).

<sup>66</sup> Donaldson translates it thus: “The attack was the less terrible by just so much as is the strength of women, the war-terror of a wife, less than an armed man’s when a hard blade, forge-hammered, a sword shining with blood, good of its edges, cuts the stout boar on a helmet opposite” (23). Rogers translates it as “The terror was less by even so much as is the strength of maidens, the terrible power in war of a woman in comparison with a weaponed-man” (246). Orchard’s translates the line as “The terror was less, even as much as the power of females, the war-terror of women in contrast to armed men” (193). Heaney’s translation is: “Her onslaught was less/ only by as much as an amazon warrior’s/ strength is less than an armed man’s/ when the hefted sword, its hammered edge/ and gleaming blade slathered in blood, razes the sturdy boar-ridge off a helmet” (1282-1287). This translation is particularly troubling in Heaney’s comparison of Grendel’s mother to an Amazon, a warrior woman. In no sense in this poem is she portrayed as a true warrior woman, experienced in warfare. This term weakens the point of the comparison. I translate the term *wæpnedman* here as “armed man,” although its semantic sense is most often simply “man.” The choice of this term is necessary for the poetic line to work metrically, but I will also argue that the choice is significant in that it carries the force of a warrior-masculinity in this comparison. Multiple translators, including Donaldson, Orchard, and Rogers above, seem to feel that the term signifies a particular kind of masculinity, as they also choose to translate it as “armed man.”

<sup>67</sup> Most notable are Judith’s beheading of Holofernes and Juliana’s defeat of her spiritual foes, the demon and the dragon.

she is indeed a woman in the most significant, fecund sense. Ultimately, what we can tease out of this difficult comparison is that one of these two creatures is somehow less aggressively powerful than the other, although, as Mitchell and Robinson suggest, the truth of this statement is not borne out in the violent fight between Grendel's mother and Beowulf (91). While this comparison seems to minimize the physical threat of a woman, it also indicates that Grendel's mother is indeed a woman.

Just as this comparison relates Grendel's mother to her son, so does her second mention link her with Grendel. In Hrothgar's speech following her attack on Heorot, we learn of the Grendelkin as "border wanderers," literally those who live along the boundaries of physical territory and social practice. This is our first indication that the Danes knew anything about her:

‘Ic þæt londbuend, leode mine,  
selerædende secgan hyrde,  
þæt hie gesawon swylce twegen  
micle mearcstapan moras healdan,  
ellorgæstas. Ðæra oðer wæs,  
þæs þe hie gewislicost gewitan meahton,  
idese onlicnes; oðer earmsceapen  
on weres wæstmum wræclastas træd,  
næfne he wæs mara þonne ænig man oðer;  
þone on geardagum Grendel nemdon  
foldbuende; no hie fæder cunnon,  
hwæþer him ænig wæs ær acenned/ dyrnra gasta.’

[‘I have heard land-dwellers, my people, hall-counselors say this, that they have seen two such large border-wanderers holding the moors, alien spirits. The first, as far as they could ascertain for a certainty, was in the likeness of a woman; the other, miserable in the form of a man, traversed the tracks of exile, except he was greater than any other man. Land-dwellers in days of old named him Grendel;

they did not know of a father, whether to him was previously born any of secret spirits [they did not know whether for him there was any father, earlier born of

secret spirits]] (1345a-57a).<sup>68</sup>

Hrothgar's somewhat belated revelation, then, figures her as an appendix to Grendel, something not worth knowing until now. Her form seems to be human, like Grendel's, though apparently there is some doubt on the part of the witnesses as to what they have actually seen. They do not observe her up close, and, more significantly, they do not say she is a woman. They say she has the likeness, *onlicnes*, of a woman. This phrase can be interpreted in two ways: 1. her physical categorization is called into question because of her social practice or her relation to the monstrous Grendel; or 2. although she has some of the features of a woman, she is significantly different physically from human women. If Grendel is "greater than any other man," we might wonder if his mother is likewise larger than normal women, but we are not told that she is.

Most interesting in this passage, though, is the insinuation about Grendel's parentage. No one supposes that this woman-figure is his wife. She is clearly understood by the poet and the people within the poem to be his mother. Furthermore, no one has observed a third giant, a father: "no hie fæder cunnon,/ hwæþer him ænig wæs/ ær acenned/ dynra gasta" [they did not know whether for him there was any father, earlier born of secret spirits/ they did not know his father nor whether anyone before was begotten of the mysterious creature] (1355b-57a). As Gwendolyn Morgan suggests, the poet emphasizes "the lack of a Grendel senior" (59).<sup>69</sup> Most scholars comment on this passage only to remark on Grendel's own troubled status: Overing claims that Grendel is

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<sup>68</sup> Klaeber's commentary refers to Earle's rendering of the line: "whether they [i.e. the two demons] had any in pedigree before them of mysterious goblins" (182). This privileges a reading of *him* as plural rather than the singular I choose above.

<sup>69</sup> Morgan's reading of the significance of this is perhaps overstated: "Whether because the Great Mother here, as in her most basic character, requires no mate to procreate or, as in some later manifestations, he is sacrificed to her fertility, the absence of a husband-father suggests that the male principle cannot endure the suffocating embrace of the female, either as mate or offspring" (59).

a “doubtful male” because “the human community don’t know who his father is” (223). Cohen argues more broadly that “This inability to name a progenitor from which to trace descent condenses all the problems of origin the giant embodies” (*Of Giants* 26). These critics assume that there *is* a father who is simply not named. But the text suggests that the community does not know if there is a father for Grendel *at all*. The problem, then, is more than that Grendel is the product of a broken home, or that his father is simply absent. The true concern is that Grendel is simultaneously the kin of Cain—the original monstrous patriarch—and fatherless.

Genealogy, valued in the poem as a whole, helps the reader to understand the identity of the grendelkin and the nature of their habitat: “fifelcynnnes eard/ wonsæli wer weardode hwile,/ siþðan him Scyppend forscrifen hæfde/ in Caines cynne” [that unhappy man occupied the land of the monster-kin for a time, after God had condemned them as Cain’s kin] (104b-7a).<sup>70</sup> Grendel is said to *live* in the land designated for banished kin of Cain, the infamous brother-killer. Only a few lines later, Cain’s banishment and his offspring are described: “þanon untydras ealle onwocon,/ eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas,/ swylce gigantas; þa wið Gode wunnon/ lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald” [All evil progeny were born from him [Cain], the giants and elves and evil spirits, also the giants who fought against God for a long time; He repaid them for that] (111a-4b). It is

suggested but not stated explicitly here that Grendel is part of Cain’s evil progeny, for he lives in that land, and he is suffering, like those who are being repaid for their fight

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<sup>70</sup> For an allegorical reading of the Cain connection, see David Williams’ *Cain and Beowulf: A Study in Secular Allegory*.



against God.

It is not until Grendel's mother enters the picture, over a thousand lines later, that Grendel's kinship to Cain, and thus to giants, elves, and evil spirits, is even affirmed: "Ðanon woc fela/ geoscaftgasta; wæs þæra Grendel sum,/ heorowearh hetelic" [from him [Cain] were born many fated spirits; Grendel was one of them, the hateful cursed foe] (1265b-7a). So it seems that Grendel has human longings although he has a dual lineage based both in the monstrous and the human.<sup>71</sup> He is both the progeny of the human Cain and the progeny of those monsters born of Cain. Clare Lees claims that "The poem opens with the patrilineal family of the Scyldings—the ruling family of motherless Danes—and the ruling dynasties, whether Danish or Geatish, form one of its fundamental preoccupations" (141). As the warriors' lineages define them, so too does Grendel's. We might even read this relation as an inversion: the Danes are "motherless" while Grendel is "fatherless." The Danes, however, are only nominally "motherless" in terms of their family tree as it is written into the poem. As we shall see, Grendel's "fatherless-ness" is a much bigger problem.

We know only that Grendel has a mother—whether his father is human, monstrous, or even non-existent is uncertain. However immediately "fatherless" Grendel is, the figure of Cain stands in as a patriarch to define Grendel's truly monstrous but also tragically human lineage. Most importantly, this mythological and Biblical vision of monsters as Cain's offspring points to the relation between action and appearance. Cain, as the utterly human child of the first couple, Adam and Eve, performs a horrible action:

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<sup>71</sup> The idea of lineage is very important within the logic of the poem: it is Beowulf's lineage that leads him to his battle with Grendel: he comes to, and is allowed to help Hrothgar because of debts owed by his father; even brother-killing Unferth's sword has a powerful lineage.

killing his brother, Abel. Neither in *Genesis* nor in *Beowulf* does his physical form change in any way: he does not suddenly sprout a tail or grow to excessive size.<sup>72</sup> Instead, what we know is that from his monstrous actions grow monstrous other bodies. Grendel's form descends from Cain's actions, which have resulted in bodies waiting to fulfill their monstrous potential.

Although Cain does act as a seminal patriarch for Grendel, there is a fundamental disconnect between the act of Cain and the body of Grendel: is not the literal father of Grendel. What must be most feared about Grendel's mother is that she might not need a father in order to bear children. Grendel's generation is never explained, and thus it stands as an example of the "never-drawing" kind of erasure; the poet simply refuses to depict this monstrous moment for us. The trace of this erasure, the gap in Grendel's genealogy, draws the audience's attention to it, and thus to the reproductive potential of Grendel's mother. Rather than obscuring a disturbing moment, the poet's omission makes Grendel's mother's body *more* transgressive, not less. She might not inflict the damage on the hall that Grendel does, as I will soon show, but she has the ability to create Grendel, and perhaps even more grendels. Commenting on the "certainty of maternity"

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<sup>72</sup> Cain is cursed by God in *Genesis*, but the curse is not primarily physical, although "God him sealde tacn þæt nan þæra ðe hine gemette hine ne ofsloge" [God gave him a mark so that no one that met him would kill him] (4.15). In Ælfric's version of *Genesis*, the curse is rendered thus: "Nu þu bist awyrgeð ofer eorþan þeo þe oponode hire muð ond underfeng þines broðor blod of þinne handa. Þonne þu tilast ðin on eorðan, ne sylð heo ðe nane wæstmas; woriende ond flyma þu bist ofer eorþan" [Now you are cursed over the earth, she who opened her mouth and received your brother's blood from your hands. When you till the earth, she will give you no produce; you will be roaming and an exile over the earth] (4.11-12). While the mark of Cain does seem to be physical, it is meant as a protection, not a disfigurement. The curse, rather, is that Cain will be an outcast, in fact, a border-wanderer like Grendel. The curse is similar in the poetic *Genesis B*: "þu þæs cwealmas scealt/ wite winnan and on wræc hweorfan,/ awyrgeð to widan aldre" [for this killing you will endure punishment and wander in exile, cursed for eternity] (1013b-1015a). Strikingly, intermarriage with Cain's descendents, in the poetic *Genesis*, ultimately results in giants. We are told that God, through the flood, wants to strike down "gigantmæggas, gode unleofe,/ micle mansceaðan, metode laðe" [the sons of a giant, hated by God, the great evil-doers, loathed by the Creator] (1268a-1269b). In *Genesis B*, then, the descendents of Cain physically manifest their curse when they intermarry—although this is never attributed to the "mark of Cain."

ascribed to Grendel's mother, Overing remarks that "she also makes a doubtful female" (73), calling her "unwomanly" (100).<sup>73</sup> She is more than merely a threat of female autonomy or even feminine usurpation of masculine roles. She is a creature of excess sexuality, neither woman nor man, but somehow, at least in terms of procreation, both.

### **Grendel's Mother's Actions**

Having reviewed the problems presented by the body of Grendel's mother, we must consider her monstrous affect. As we have been told before, in an extremely dense and oddly impermeable comparison, her *gryre* [terror] is arguably lesser than a man's. It is most certainly lesser than her son's in sheer numbers: while we have seen Grendel grab thirty at a time, she kills only one: "hraþe heo æþelinga, anne hæfde/ fæste befangen, þa heo to fenne gang" [quickly she had seized in a fast hold one of the nobles, then she went to the fen] (1294a-5b). Although Grendel's mother only kills one man, he is very important. His name, unlike all of Grendel's victims thus far, is remembered. Hrothgar laments: "Sorh is geniwod/ Denigea leodum. Dead is Æschere,/ Yrmenlafes yldra broþor,/ min runwita, ond min rædbora,/ eaxlgestealla, ðonne we on orlege/ hafelan weredon, þonne hniton feþan,/ eoferas cnysedan" [Sorrow is renewed for the Danish people. Æschere is dead, Yrmenlaf's older brother, my confidant and my counselor, shoulder-companion when we defended our heads in battle, when troops clashed together, dashed against boar helmets] (1322b-8a). This is not an anonymous and unproven young warrior, but a trusted advisor of the king, one who slept in the hall to celebrate Beowulf's success and the safety of Heorot. Thus his loss renews all the former

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<sup>73</sup> Overing claims that Modthryth too is "unwomanly" (102), presumably because of her violent impulses. She claims "aggressive, 'masculine' behavior is not a 'lady/queenlike custom'" (103).

sadness of the Danes. Moreover, he is an equal exchange for Grendel. “Ne wæs þæt gewrixle til,/ þæt hie on ba healfa bicgan scoldon/ freonda feorum!” [That was not good exchange, that they on both sides must pay with the lives of friends] (1304b-6a). If it is not good, it is at least even. Neither Æschere nor Grendel can be easily replaced.

What is most telling in this exchange is that it is just that, an exchange. This is an act of reason that is understandable to the Danes, however sad it might make them.

Hrothgar immediately understands that Grendel’s mother attacks in search of revenge, not dinner:

‘Heo þa fæhðe wræc,  
þe þu gystran niht Grendel cwealdest  
þurh hæstne had heardum clammum,  
forðan he to lange leode mine  
wanode ond wyrde. He æt wige gecrang  
ealdres scyldig, ond nu oþer cwom,  
mihtig manscaða, wolde hyre mæg wrecan,  
ge feor hafað fæhðe gestæled.’

[She has avenged the feud, that you last night killed Grendel in a violent way, with hard grips, because he had diminished and destroyed my people for too long. He fell at the battle, having forfeited his life, and now the other has come, the mighty wicked ravager, wished to avenge her kinsman, and has far avenged the feud.] (1333b-40b)

is made all the more clear because she has taken Grendel’s arm, and all in the hall notice the missing trophy: “Hream wearð in Heorote; heo under heolfre genam/ cuþe folme”

[An outcry arose in Heorot; she had taken the well-known hand, covered in blood]

(1302a-3a). The people’s reaction is to the removal of the hand, though Hrothgar

emphasizes the loss of his friend. The hand represented a kind of victory over the

monstrous, an ability to quantify, to interpret, and to understand a body that cannot even

be described.<sup>74</sup> As Lapidge has argued, the poet creates a sense of terror by refusing to describe the monster—this plays on “the instinctual human fear of the unknown” (152). The hand is a literal representation of the body and serves as a thing “for the delectation or interpretation of the viewer” (Lerer 740). Seth Lerer says of the dismembered parts of the monsters, “they survive within the poem’s telling as tame representations of former horror” (741). Therefore, when the arm is removed, the people no longer have an assurance of Grendel’s taming. They no longer have an object in front of them that helps them to comprehend the body of the monster, which functions simultaneously as a reminder of Beowulf’s victory. In losing the arm they lose a sense of security in both the knowledge of the form of the monster, and of their mastery over that monster.

What we recognize from these moments is that Grendel’s mother is not the killer that her son is; her only slaying comes as revenge for the killing of her only child. Though the notion of killing for revenge is certainly built into the prevailing social structure, men, not women, are its initiators. Here we can clearly see a complicated relationship between the chaos of the unknown and monstrous and the rules of civilized society. Grendel, as we have seen before, is certainly not expected to pay *wergild* for the men he has killed.<sup>75</sup> Grendel’s mother, however, seems to adopt the rules of society, even if she does amend them. She is marginal to the society of the Danes, as she lives removed from it in her mere, yet she is still a woman and seems to be bound by many of the same restrictions of women in Hrothgar’s court. Like Wealhtheow, Freawaru, Hildeburh, and

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<sup>74</sup> For a legal reading of the hand, see David Day’s 1999 *JEGP* article, “Hands Across the Hall: The Legalities of Beowulf’s Fight with Grendel” and Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr.’s “Grendel’s Arm and the Law.” See also Seth Lerer’s “Grendel’s Glove”; Mary Godfrey’s “*Beowulf* and *Judith*: Thematizing Decapitation in Old English Poetry”; and Leslie Lockett’s “Grendel’s Arm as a ‘Clear Sign’ in Feud, Law, and the Narrative Strategy of *Beowulf*.”

<sup>75</sup> Of course, Grendel unwillingly pays *wergild* with his life, but he is never expected to participate in the more civilized and monetary system of *wergild*.

the other women of the poem, Grendel's mother remains inside the structures provided by men—as a secondary resident of the mere. Both Grendel and the men of Heorot are responsible for hunting and killing—we never see Grendel's mother in a hunt for sustenance. Women's roles are the hostess, the peaceweaver, the ritual mourner, the goader, and the counselor (Olsen 314). Although we do not see her as the same kind of masculine monster as her son, we cannot easily align her with any one of Olsen's five categories. What we know about her behavior comes mostly in the form of absence; she is not with Grendel when he invades the hall, and she does not seem to sit outside the hall listening miserably to the songs and sounds of the meadhall. She is not the hall-ravager that Grendel is. Her killing takes place for a very specific reason. In fact, she is considered so little of a threat that she is never recognized or mentioned to Beowulf by the Danes until after she takes her revenge. Revenge is a part of civilized society in this text; many of the poems sung in the hall during feasts are concerned with marriages made to create peace, and the breakdown of that peace in order to achieve revenge. However, never does a woman enact this revenge.<sup>76</sup>

The strongest example of how women should behave when their kin are killed is in the Hildeburh episode. Despite the fact that her son and her brother, who are on opposing sides of the conflict, are killed, Hildeburh does not attempt revenge but mourns: “ides gnornode,/ geomrode giddum,” [‘the woman mourned, lamented with songs’] (1117b-8a). Meanwhile, the men around her fight violently to achieve revenge for the

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<sup>76</sup> In fact, not only does this poem lack a truly avenging woman, but one is literally removed or erased from the Sigemund-Fitela digression: the revenging figure of Signy in *Volsunga Saga*. This signals another act of erasure—the poet consciously may have decided in another episode of “never drawing” erasure, if he was familiar with this version, to leave out this particular vision of womanhood as incompatible with accepted Anglo-Saxon visions of women.

murders of their kinsmen. Because the Hildeburh passage occurs in the poem directly before Grendel's mother enters the hall to avenge her son, the poet structurally and thematically establishes a comparison between Hildeburh's passive mourning and Grendel's mother's act of vengeance. In advancing a thesis about the inherent nobility of Grendel's mother, Keith Taylor argues: "If revenge to the Anglo-Saxons was indeed a worthy cause, would it not have been permissible, perhaps even appropriate, for a woman in the absence of a kinsman to avenge the death of her only child? Apparently the *Beowulf*-poet thinks so" (21). He argues against such critics as Nietzsche, who claim her an "inversion" (140) of Anglo-Saxon femininity. While I do not necessarily see this act as "permissible"—after all, Beowulf hunts her down in her mere and kills her, with no attempt at financial exchange—neither do I see it as an act of gender inversion—she does not become entirely male. No other woman in Anglo-Saxon literature commits such an obvious act of revenge for a family member, and the one woman we can see as utterly alone, the lonely speaker of "The Wife's Lament," is hardly able to undertake any action to protect herself, much less avenge her family.<sup>77</sup> Grendel's mother is clearly not acting in the way prescribed for other women within the poem, but she also does not act exactly as her monstrous son does. Her killing is reasoned not instinctual or excessive—she actively engages in the Anglo-Saxon social practice of revenge. The monstrosity of

Grendel's mother is twofold: it stems both from her monstrous form and her inability to

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<sup>77</sup> Traditional interpretations of "The Wife's Lament" designate the speaker as a woman alone, waiting for the return of her husband and a return to some sort of community. While it is certainly difficult to determine the true nature of the "giedd" (line 1), the representation of a woman outside of a community, dependent upon an outside figure seems reasonable.

abide by gender standards. Her primary threat, however, is her sexed body, both in her ability to reproduce and in her sexual form, as we shall see in her grapple with Beowulf.

### ***Wæpnedmen, Wæpenwifestre, and the Failure of the Sword***

The conflicted gender identity of Grendel's mother appears most clearly in terms of grammatical reference. As Andy Orchard notes:

despite being identified as female three times in rapid succession as soon as she is introduced *modor, ides, aglæcwif*, (lines 1258b-1259a), the first time a pronoun is used of Grendel's mother it is grammatically masculine (line 1260a; cf. lines 1392b, 1394 b; 1479b)...the poet's ambivalent depiction of Grendel's mother seems confirmed by the implicitly masculine designation of her as a *felasinnigne secg*...the confusion is compounded further when Grendel's mother is seen in action. (*Critical Companion* 189)

The poet designates her throughout the poem as grammatically both masculine and feminine. As Orchard suggests, the grammatical confusion (whether purposeful or accidental) only helps the audience recognize her conflicted gendered behaviors. This hybrid and excessive designation is borne out in her possession of a weapon.

The fact that she is referred to, grammatically, by both masculine and feminine referents can perhaps be understood through a further examination of the vexed comparison made by the poet: "Wæs se gryre læssa/ efne swa micle, swa bið mægþa cræft,/ wiggryre wifes be wæpnedmen,/ þonne heoru bunden, hamere geþruren,/ sweord swate fah swin ofer helme/ ecgum dyhtig andweard scireð" [Her terror was lesser than Grendel's by just as much as a woman's war-violence is lesser than the war-violence of an armed man as he participates in a fight against another armed man] (1282b-7b). A significant question raised by this comparison is that of weaponry. Are we meant to assume that the woman in the comparison is armed, as is the man to whom she is



compared—the *wæpnedman*? If we attempt to create the same kind of compound for an armed woman, we get the word *wæpenwifestre*. The Old English vocabularies, however, designate *wæpenwifestre* as actually meaning “hermaphrodite” (Clark Hall 394).<sup>78</sup>

According to a search of the *DOE* corpus online, this definition results from its gloss of the word “hermafroditus” in a glossary copied at Abingdon Abbey in the first half of the eleventh century.<sup>79</sup> The term *wæpnedman* carries the meaning of “man,” not necessarily the literal translation of “armed man” that seems suggested by the conjunction of the two terms.<sup>80</sup> However, glosses can provide insight into the semantic force of such conjoined terms. For the glossator of *hermafroditus*, *wæpned* does seem to have carried the semantic force of the masculine, that, when combined with *wifestre*, provided a suitable translation for a person of two sexes. In this sense, then, a woman who takes up a weapon is figured as taking on masculine characteristics. If *wæpnedman* holds the same meaning as “man,” then the possession of weapons seems to signify masculinity. David Rosen claims that “arming as role and *techne* becomes the definitive feature of masculinity” (14). Similarly, Gillian Overing, in *Language, Sign, and Gender*, argues, “the sword may metonymically share human attributes, or the sword or other war gear may replace the warrior,” remarking also that “historical evidence shows that the sword was an important heirloom, passed on from one generation to another, given, in some cases at birth along with a name, or later as a token of manhood” (46). Indeed, the possession of weapons is closely related to one’s gender and identity—and particularly to masculine identity.

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<sup>78</sup> This word does not appear in the Bosworth-Toller Dictionary, but it is featured in both Clark-Hall and the *Dictionary of Old English*.

<sup>79</sup> This gloss occurs in Antwerp Plantin-Moretus manuscript 32, a grammar which includes a copy of *Excerpts from Priscian*.

<sup>80</sup> However, it is interesting to note that the term *wæpnedman* is used in the comparison of the terror of Grendel’s mother, and that most translators use the term “armed man” in their translations, as I have noted previously.

Grendel's mother, however, is also "weaponed." In her fight against Beowulf, she almost penetrates him with her blade:

ond hyre seax geteah  
brad ond brunecg; wolde hire bearn wrecan,  
angan eaferan. Him on eaxle læg  
breostnet broden; þæt gebearh feore,  
wið ord ond wið ecge ingang forstod.  
Hæfde ða forsiðod sunu Ecgþeowes  
under gynne grund, Geata cempa,  
nemne him heaðþbyrne helpe gefremede,  
herenet hearde.

[and drew her short-sword, broad and with a bright edge, she wished to avenge her son, her only offspring. A metal woven corslet lay on his shoulder; that (corslet) protected his life against point and against edge, withstood entrance. The son of Ecgtheow would have then perished under the deep ground, the warrior of the Geats, except that the war-corslet acted as a help for him, the hard war-net.] (1545b-1553a)

Indeed, Beowulf is unable to help himself against her advances; it is his armor not his valor that saves him.<sup>81</sup> Grendel's mother, here, is certainly the only weaponed woman in the poem, while also being the only creature whose procreative abilities remain unexplained, and indeed suspect to the Danes, who do not know if Grendel even has a father. This combination of unique qualities suggests that Grendel's mother possesses a hybrid body—a body that is simultaneously feminine and masculine.<sup>82</sup> The rare term *wapenwifestre* seems to apply most aptly to Grendel's mother here. But if to possess a weapon is to possess masculine attributes, then what happens to masculinity when a

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<sup>81</sup> Hala states that "Beowulf is helpless in the grasp of the *ides* although he is protected by his mailshirt" (44). Similarly, Huisman comments that while he is protected by his armor, "Beowulf cannot even initiate acts of hostility" (220).

<sup>82</sup> I suggest that the weaponry is an essential part of Grendel's mother's identity, and indeed her gender and sexual identity. In *Medieval Identity Machines*, Jeffrey Cohen argues for conjoined identity for a knight and his horse, "the composite body formed by the passionate union of a knoght with his horse" (xxiii)—a cyborg identity. This notion of the cyborg derives from Donna Haraway who, in "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," states that a cyborg is "a hybrid of machine and organism" (150).

sword fails? The answer must be that masculinity is also diminished. Although Beowulf is the only man brave enough to fight against these monsters, he is also the only man in the poem whose sword fails not once, but repeatedly.<sup>83</sup>

Beowulf's sword fails him at multiple points in this narrative, the last of which is in his final fight with the dragon. "Hreðsigora ne gealp/ goldwine Geata; guðbill geswac/ nacod æt niðe, swa hyt no sceolde,/ iren ærgod" [The gold-friend of the Geats did not boast of great victories; the war-sword failed, naked at battle, as it should not have, the iron, good from old times] (2583b-2586a).<sup>84</sup> If we are meant to see the sword as a masculine and also phallic signifier, then we must recognize the connection between Beowulf's failed sword and his lack of progeny—the metaphorical failed sword. This reading is possible *because* the failing of Beowulf's sword is a significant motif in the poem. We never see Beowulf with a sword of his own that *does not* fail. He successfully fights Grendel hand-to-hand, deciding to deliberately forgo the sword (677a-687b).<sup>85</sup> In his fight with Grendel's mother, two swords do not act as they should. The first moment

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<sup>83</sup> The connection between the phallus and the sword is made most explicitly by Freud: "The next memory was of a dream, plainly of a homosexual-masochistic nature; in it a man, who proved to be a replacement figure of the family doctor, attacked the subject with a 'sword.' The idea of a sword, as is so frequently the case in dreams, represented the same idea that was mentioned above to be associated with that of a wooden stethoscope. The thought of a sword reminded the subject of the passage in the *Nibelung Saga*, where Sigurd sleeps with his naked sword (*Gram*) between him and Brunhilda, an incident that had always greatly struck his imagination. The meaning of the symptomatic act now at last became clear. The subject had placed his wooden stethoscope between him and his patients, just as Sigurd had placed his sword (an equivalent symbol) between him and the maiden he was not to touch. The act was a compromise-formation; it served both to gratify in his imagination the repressed wish to enter into nearer relations with an attractive patient (interposition of phallus), and at the same time to remind him that this wish was not to become a reality (interposition of sword). It was, so to speak, a charm against yielding to temptation" (*Psychopathology of Everyday Life Sigmund Freud* (1901), Translation by A. A. Brill (1914) 227).

<sup>84</sup> For a discussion of the sword in *Beowulf*, see Seth Lerer's chapter, "Hrothgar's Hilt and the Reader in *Beowulf*" in *Literacy and Power and Anglo-Saxon England*. See also Dennis Cronan's "The Origin of Ancient Strife in *Beowulf*" and his "The Rescuing Sword"; Johann Koeberl's "The Magic Sword in *Beowulf*"; and Gillian Overing's "Swords and Signs: A Semiotic Perspective on *Beowulf*"; and Allen Frantzen's chapter "Writing the Unreadable *Beowulf*: 'Writan' and 'Forwritan,' the Pen and the Sword" in *Desire for Origins*. William Cooke's "Three Notes on Swords in *Beowulf*" provides material evidence about descriptions of the swords in the poem.

<sup>85</sup> This weaponless approach is necessary in the case of Grendel, who is invulnerable to weapons.

he moves to strike against Grendel's mother, his sword completely fails him—it is simply unable to penetrate her flesh. “Ða se gist onfand,/ þæt se beadoleoma bitan nolde,/ aldre sceþðan, ac seo ecg geswac/ ðeodne æt þearfe; ðolode ær fela/ hondgemota, helm oft gescær,/ fægæs fyrðhrægl; ða wæs forma sið/ deorum madme, þæt his dom alæg” [Then the guest discovered that the battle-gleamer would not bite, harm her life, but the blade failed the noble at his need; it had endured many a hand-battle, often sheared a helmet, the war-garment of one fated to die. That was the first time for the dear treasure that it laid down its glory] (1522b-1528b).<sup>86</sup> Despite its reputation and history as a valuable and experienced weapon, the sword is of no use here.<sup>87</sup>

The second sword that Beowulf uses in the mere is considerably more effective, although it does not survive the battle to act as a whole piece of evidence for Hrothgar's inspection. The waning of the sword is so striking that the poet describes not once but twice its melting, even subjecting it to simile: “þa þæt sweord ongan/ æfter heaþoswate hildegicelum,/ wigbil wanian; þæt wæs wundra sum,/ þæt hit eal gemealt ise gelicost,/ ðonne forstes bend Fæder onlæteð,/ onwindedð wælrapas” [then the sword began to waste away after battle-sweat, the war-blade into battle-icicles; that was a wondrous thing, that it all melted, most like ice when the Father releases frost's bonds, unwinds the water-fetters] (1605b-1610a). The metaphor of ice-melting calls immediately to mind two moments in Old English poetry: the icy waters that the speaker in the elegy “The

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<sup>86</sup> *dom* can also mean authority, according to Klaeber's glossary. In psychoanalytic terms, the idea of the phallus is linked to authority.

<sup>87</sup> It is, of course, noteworthy that the sword is Unferth's, given to Beowulf as a means of signaling Unferth's reconciliation with and support of Beowulf as a champion. Beowulf had bested Unferth in *flyting* prior to his fight with Grendel by reminding the court of Unferth's status as a brother-killer (see especially Clover, “The Unferþ Episode” in *Beowulf: Basic Readings*). Whatever connotations the sword has as the fratricidal sword, these seem to be less significant than the illustrious history of the blade. Beowulf is clearly surprised that the sword fails, which is doubly ironic because he knew that he could not fight Grendel with a sword.

Seafarer” crosses through,<sup>88</sup> and the winter-ice that keeps the Jutes at the hall of the Danes after battle in the Hildeburh digression<sup>89</sup> of *Beowulf*. Ice-breaking in the Hildeburh digression allows the resolution of the battle and the return of the Jutes to their home, just as the melting of the sword signifies Beowulf’s success and return to the human community.

The poet’s second reference to the melting of the sword emphasizes the strange and hostile nature of the monstrous bodies. We are reminded that “sweord ær gemealt,/ forbarn brodenmæl; wæs þæt blod to þæs hat,/ ættren ellorgæst, se þær inne swealt” [the sword had melted earlier, the wavy-patterned sword burned up; that blood was too hot for it, the poisonous alien spirit who had died in there] (1615b-1617b). The blood—called “battle-sweat” in the first description, recalling the physical labor and conjoined bodies of the fight—literally is “too hot” for the sword, thus melting it. This sword does not fail Beowulf in battle, but only melts after his domination over the body of Grendel’s mother and the corpse of Grendel. While it is necessary to give Beowulf some of the credit for its success in battle, the other part of the credit must go to the genealogy of the sword itself. After Beowulf’s human sword has failed and he is put into danger, he “Geseah ða on searwum sigeadig bil,/ ealdsweord eotenisc ecgum þyhtig,/ wigena weorðmynd; þæt wæs wæpna cyst,/ buton hit wæs mare ðonne ænig mon oðer/ to beadulace ætberan meahthe,/ god ond geatolic, giganta geweorc” [Then he saw among the armor a victory-

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<sup>88</sup> The comparison with “The Seafarer” is resonant in that the speaker of that poem is in a kind of exile, and a watery kind of exile, from human companionship and community, just as is the problem with the grendelkin, the sword (in that it is made by giants), and the battle itself, which are all located in a watery border-land.

<sup>89</sup> I use this term, advanced largely by Adrien Bonjour in *The Digressions in ‘Beowulf’*, for convenience. I do not mean to suggest that the many tales included in the structure of the poem are in any way unrelated to the larger themes of the poem. I concur with Andy Orchard’s assessment in *A Critical Companion to ‘Beowulf’*, that “all of the so-called digressions lend considerable depth and contrast to the events of the main narrative” (92).

blessed blade, the ancient sword made by giants with strong edges, the honor of warriors; that was the best of weapons, except it was greater than any other man could bear out to battle, good and adorned, the work of giants] (1557a-1562b). That Beowulf is able to carry and use this sword of giants is to his credit—after all, the poet assures us that no other man could put it to use because of its weight.<sup>90</sup> Still, the only reason that he is able to defeat Grendel’s mother is because this is the sword of giants. While human swords must necessarily fail, a monstrous sword can defeat monsters.

Beowulf’s most glorious victory, that against Grendel, is achieved without a sword. In each of the other situations, the sword is a problematic object and symbol. Beowulf’s own sword-might fails in his battle with Grendel’s mother; he can only be successful when he attains a sword of excess, which is not his own, and not, in fact, human. In picking up the monstrous sword, he becomes more than human, and in its melting, he becomes less of a man.<sup>91</sup> Both Beowulf’s life and his masculinity are at stake in the battle against Grendel’s mother. Although he protects his life and defeats his enemy, his human masculinity and sword-might fail him in the process.<sup>92</sup> Beowulf is not

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<sup>90</sup> It is this ability, in fact, that makes us question his human status. He is greater than any man because he can carry the sword, because he has the hand-strength of thirty men, and he is so supernaturally able to beat monsters. Beowulf’s form, however, remains all too human and is ultimately mortal and imperfect in battle. However, up until he locates the sword, Beowulf is not particularly effective against Grendel’s mother; as Rosemary Huisman suggests about Beowulf seizing the sword, “Because he has the mental attitude of a hero, Beowulf can still be given the lexical description *yrre oretta*, ‘angry champion’ (l. 1532), though so far in this encounter he has scarcely functioned as a grammatical hero” (221).

<sup>91</sup> Many scholars discuss problems of masculinity in this poem; see Allen Frantzen’s *Before the Closet*, David Rosen’s *The Changing Fictions of Masculinity*, and Clare Lees’ “Men and *Beowulf*” in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*. Masculinity can be considered in various ways, relating to vigor in battle and/or to sexual identity. I suggest that the two are inherently related in Beowulf’s body, especially because of his contact with the dangerous excess gender and sexuality of Grendel’s mother.

<sup>92</sup> Hala argues for the phallic nature of giant sword, saying that the “stalemate” between Grendel’s mother and Beowulf, who struggle for the “phallic” authority, can only be broken by a “third term”: “the *eotenisc* magic (and phallic) sword. This sword, in as much as it succeeds where Hunlaving failed, represents the Phallic/Signifier” (46). It is not Beowulf’s masculine virility that causes the sword to succeed, but the sword’s independent identity that enables its success. Of course, Beowulf is the only man who could have

monstrous himself, and cannot maintain the monstrous sword as phallus. When this assumed and excess masculinity melts away, only a failed human masculinity is left behind, as I shall demonstrate.

### **Acts of Erasure**

The problem of Beowulf's feminization in the fight is one that has troubled scholars for many years. Fred Robinson, in his 1994 article in *Notes and Queries* asks the question, "did Grendel's Mother Sit on Beowulf?" He reconsiders the Old English word *ofsittan*, determining ultimately that the meaning should be "set upon," as in Grendel's mother attacked Beowulf.<sup>93</sup> His motivation for such a reconsideration is that "like the students in our classes, the translators of the poem...are often uncomfortable with the meaning which the glossaries stipulate for *ofsittan*. To avoid the comic indignity of Beowulf's being sat upon, they fudge the verb's meaning in artful ways" (2). Robinson's essay aims to determine the "diverse meanings" of the derivatives of the verb "sittan" (3), but he also acknowledges that "the central meaning of the simplex *sittan* is indeed 'sit'" (3). Although Robinson's scholarship is impeccable, I wonder about his stated motivation. Are students and translators alike uncomfortable because Beowulf being

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wielded the sword, but contrary to Hala's argument, the masculine or phallic authority imbued in the sword is lost when it melts.

<sup>93</sup> In this article, Robinson considers the 36 occurrences of the word *ofsittan* in the Old English corpus, determining many lexical possibilities. This study also aims to recommend the Healey-Venezky *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English* as a tool for Anglo-Saxon scholars. While Robinson makes a fine point that in most other contexts, *ofsittan* does not seem to mean "sit upon," this translation for the *Beowulf* passage is still viable. In her close reading of this passage, Rosemary Huisman investigates the power dynamics of the fight, saying "Not only is he [Beowulf] the Goal of process, but the monster *sits* on him! The clause...is the high point of the monster's success in the encounter" (223). If the term simply meant "set upon," Beowulf's reversal of the situation could not be so dramatic. Furthermore, as Huisman notes, "In line 1556b Beowulf himself has the Actor role: he stands up" (224). This seems to me to be clearly in opposition to being sat upon, not being "set upon."

topped is comic, or more precisely, because it is not comic at all? I argue that Grendel's mother did indeed sit on Beowulf, and that Fred Robinson is right to be concerned about it. Robinson's motivation points to a fundamental discomfort with the monstrous female body, which results ultimately in its erasure.

Erasure, as I have discussed in chapter two, can take three forms: never drawing, removal, and revision. The poet purposely chooses to never draw the physical forms of Grendel and his mother; this kind of descriptive leaving-out serves to highlight the terror of these bodies, as Lapidge has argued. The bits of the bodies that we do witness—the glowing eyes, the arm Grendel leaves behind—serve as traces of the whole and therefore remind us of what it is that we do not see. To change “sit upon” to “set upon” is to revise Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother, and also to revise her body. She becomes a woman who attacks Beowulf, but not a woman with whom he intimately wrestles—a woman who opposes but does not top Beowulf. Robinson's revisioning of the word *ofsittan* erases a significant aspect of Grendel's mother's body, but the trace of the term, the *sittan*, also draws attention to it. Just as the poet and critics erase aspects of the monstrous body, so too does Beowulf himself attempt to revise his struggle with Grendel's mother. But as I have discussed previously, erasure always leaves a trace. Therefore, in the very act of revising this fight for his different audiences, Beowulf draws attention to the lingering presence of Grendel's mother.

Grendel's body is not as subject to erasure as his mother's. True, the poet refuses to describe both of these monstrous bodies for the reading audience. However, the Danes *do* get to witness two parts of Grendel's form: his arm and his head. By contrast, they never get to see any part of Grendel's mother's body. Only Beowulf gets to witness her



body, and he decides not to share it with those waiting outside the mere. Grendel's body, on the other hand, is put on display, first when witnesses look upon his arm: "Grendles grape under geapne hrof" [Grendel's grip up under the curved roof] (836a-b), and then when they look upon his severed head. Here, the desire is to *reveal* the body, or its parts.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Hrothgar immediately reveals the story of Grendel's attacks, but details about his mother are not so forthcoming. Of course, Grendel is the primary concern at this point, and the poet probably also wants to maintain narrative suspense, but generally speaking, Grendel's story and his body are considerable more visible than his mother's. Hrothgar immediately tells his tale of Grendel's twelve years of ravaging—a tale that Beowulf has already heard, as he enters the hall saying: "Me wearð Grendles þing/ on minre eþeltyrf undyrne cuð" [the story of Grendel was made known to me in my own native country] (409b-410b).

Likewise, Beowulf's fight with Grendel takes place in plain sight in Hrothgar's hall. "Ðær genehost brægd/ eorl Beowulfes ealde lafe,/ wolde freedrihtnes feorh ealgian,/ mæres þeodnes, ðær hie meahton swa" [There, most earnestly, Beowulf's men drew their swords, wished to protect the life of their lord, the famous prince, as they might] (794b-797b). In this passage, which directly follows Beowulf's initial grip on Grendel's hand, it is clear that Beowulf's men are watching the battle, swords ready. They are witnesses to this fight; more than one person can and will report the details of this battle. In each of these instances, Grendel's story and his body are revealed to the observing eyes of Dane and Geat alike. Just as the arm is considered a sign, *tacen* (830), so also might we

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<sup>94</sup> In this same way, Grendel's mother's taking of the arm removes Grendel from display and reclaims his body. For more on this act, see Leslie Lockett's "Grendel's Arm as 'Clear Sign.'"

consider Grendel's body to be always signified and remembered by those inside Heorot. Rather than being erased in his fight with Beowulf, Grendel's body is inscribed.

The same is not true for the body of Grendel's mother. Grendel himself is discussed in at least three places before his battle with Beowulf (lines 86-188, 405-490, 702b-736a), but Grendel's mother is not mentioned until after she makes her single foray into Heorot. Then Hrothgar seems to remember having heard of her before, saying "Ic þæt londbuend,/ leode mine, selerædende secgan hyrde,/ þæt hie gesawon swylce twegen/ micle mearcstapan" [I have heard landsmen, my people, hall counselors, say that they saw two such great border-steppers] (1345a-1348a). In the poet's, and Hrothgar's, neglect to mention Grendel's mother to the audience, and to Beowulf, we see the first act of erasure. This is the erasure of never drawing, better termed here, perhaps, never mentioning. It is only after she appears in the hall that the poet offers, through Hrothgar, the first confounding description of Grendel's mother, discussed earlier. Most intriguing about this passage, though, is who reports to Hrothgar: two, and perhaps even three groups claim witness of two monsters: landsmen—workers and owners of land outside Heorot—report to Hrothgar, but also his own hall counselors, *selerædende*, claim to have seen the pair. The third possible group, his "people," might just be metonymically referring to either of these two groups, but it also might refer to a larger, less specific group of Hrothgar's people. These multiple accounts of Grendel having a companion are meaningful because Hrothgar seems to disregard not one but many reports. In any other feud, the hall would be prepared for vengeance at the loss of a member; Hrothgar's erasure of Grendel's mother from the early narratives about Grendel results in the loss of his beloved counselor Æschere.

In addition to the obvious necessity of narrative suspense, one might presume that Hrothgar's erasure results from a conjecture about the differences between monster culture and human culture, or that because of her supposed sex, he assumes Grendel's mother is not capable of the revenge required by the human social system. His speech in the wake of her attack proves another, perhaps retrospective, kind of understanding. He twice assimilates her action into an appropriate human response: "Heo þa fæhðe wræc" [she has avenged the feud] (1333b) and "ond nu oþer cwom mihtig manscaða, wolde hyre mæg wrecan" [and now the other has come, the mighty harm-worker, has wished to avenge her kinsman] (1338b-1339b). According to these statements, her response is not entirely unexpected by Hrothgar, although he has never mentioned her before. It is only after her attack that he challenges Beowulf to seek her and to end the feud by killing her.

Grendel's mother has already been erased from the poem once, but she resurfaces when Beowulf engages her in battle. Despite the fact that Grendel's mother is "læssa," lesser, than her son, her fight with Beowulf is more of a challenge for him. Whereas only twenty lines are devoted to his fight with Grendel, the fight with Grendel's mother is more than twice as long at almost 50 lines. The length and detail of the description of the battle offers us a very different perception of Beowulf, one in which he is often at a disadvantage. Not only is this fight more dangerous and detailed, but the language used to describe it is sexually charged.<sup>95</sup> Beowulf seizes Grendel's mother by the shoulder,<sup>96</sup> "Gefeng þa be eaxle" (1537a), pulls her to the floor, "brægd...þæt heo on flet gebeah" (1539a, 1540b), and she grasps him, from her position on the floor, "ond him togeanes

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<sup>95</sup> Jane Chance remarks, "the poet exploits the basic resemblance between sexual intercourse and battle" (102). Chance uses this claim to discuss Grendel's mother as an inversion of femininity, which I see as a simplification of her role in the poem.

<sup>96</sup> see note 63 above.

feng” (1542b). In the process of this rolling around on the floor of her cave, the audience is told that Beowulf is battle-hard (literally hard of battles) “beadwe heard” (1539a) and that he was swollen (or enraged) by the life-enemy “þa he gebolgen wæs, feorhgeniðlan” (1539b-1540a).<sup>97</sup> Although terms like battle-hard and swollen work as battle metaphors, these *double-entendres* remain purposefully to paint Beowulf as full of a very masculine vigor, but also as a sexually engaged combatant.<sup>98</sup> Beowulf’s masculine authority in battle, and particularly in this sexually charged battle, is called into question by his near-mastery by Grendel’s mother. After he has pulled her to the floor and she has grabbed him, he falls on his back on the floor while Grendel’s mother sits astride him, having pulled her short sword: “Ofsæt þa þone selegyst, ond hyre seaxe geteah, brad ond brunecg, wolde hire bearn wrecan, angan eaferan” [Then she sat upon the hall-guest and drew her short-sword, broad and with a shining blade, she wished to avenge her child, her only son] (1545a-7a). This is a dangerous position for Beowulf, one that makes not only

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<sup>97</sup> *gebolgen* from *belgan* “to swell with anger” (Bosworth and Toller 82) and *belg*, “bulge” (82). Although *gebolgen* shows up repeatedly in non-sexualized accounts of anger in the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus Online*, the idea of swollen and hard as associated with masculine sexuality is reinforced by their opposition to soft as feminine and feminized. Allen Frantzen in “Kiss and Tell: Anglo-Saxon Tales of Manly Men and Women,” discusses the feminized figure of Sardanapallus in *Historiarum adversum Paganos Libri Septem*. Here he claims that “another word that characterizes Sardanapallus is ‘hneslice,’ which means ‘soft,’ ‘wanton,’ or ‘weak.’ It is a term also used in an Anglo-Saxon penitential to describe men who have sex with other men” (91). Andy Orchard also notes that Sigemund “is described as ‘hard in battle’ (*wiges heard*, line 886a) (*Critical Companion* 109). Although this is not the exact same formulation, the similarity is undeniable. Here Orchard comments on the vexed comparison between Beowulf and Sigemund, but has no further comment on the meaning of the phrase.

<sup>98</sup> Phallic *double entendre* also abound in the Old English riddles of the Exeter book, particularly in riddle 44 (the key), and riddle 45 (dough). These riddles notably invite the prurient solution of an erect penis in the midst of a sex act, but have “clean” answers. In the key riddle, we are told that “þonne se esne his agen hrægl/ ofer cneo hefeð, wile þæt cupe hol/ mid his hangellan heafde gretan” [when the man pulls up his own robe over his knee, he wishes to greet that well-known hole with the head of his hanging thing] (4a-6b). The key as phallus here is depicted as “stiþ ond heard” [stiff and hard] (3a), just as Beowulf is “heard.” We are later told that a good sword should also be hard: “hond and heard sweord” [the hand and the hard blade] (line 2509). A good sword is a hard one that has lasted through many battles and has not broken. Similarly, the dough riddle’s *double entendre* emphasizes the terms of erection through swelling. The dough is “weaxan” [growing] (1b), “þindan ond þunian” [swelling and standing out] (2a), and “hebban” [heaving or rising] (2b). Both terms of “hard” and “swelling” are applied to Beowulf in this situation.

him, but scholars and students alike, as Fred Robinson claims, uncomfortable. The discomfort for reader and fighter alike illustrates the impact of this fight and this moment. Beowulf very nearly loses; the story very nearly ends. Significantly, the fight would not gain Beowulf any glory were she not a truly dangerous foe.

Because the fight contains other sexual elements, the phallic nature of the sword is particularly pronounced. Just after Grendel's mother tops Beowulf, his sword fails to bite, "se beadoleoma bitan nolde" [the battle-gleamer would not bite] (1523a-b). Beowulf seems to be utterly impotent until he finds another sword, a sword that James Hala identifies as both "magic" and "phallic" (44). The sword that he finds in Grendel's mother's cave is not only supernatural, but indeed endowed with the excessive masculinity of the giant: it is "sigeeadig bil,/ ealdsweord eotenisc ecgum þyhtig" [a victory-blessed blade, ancient giant-made sword with firm edges] (1557b-1558b). More than just being made by giants, the sword is also clearly excessive because, as I have previously discussed, only Beowulf could handle it: "buton hit wæs mare ðonne ænig mon oðer/ to beadulace ætberan meahte,/ god ond geatolic, giganta geweorc" [except it was greater than any other man could bear out to battle] (1558b-1559a). Because of the language and body positions described, this scene figures as one of the most suggestive narratives available in Old English: a (monstrous) woman sits astride a man, who lies prone on the floor; she threatens to penetrate him, while his sword has proved to be flaccid. It is not unremarkable that the participants are a monstrous woman and a man with a monstrous sword. This is no simple sex scene, but a moment crucial and in fact central to the poem, as it is retold and revised through the rest of the poem.

Because this battle is more difficult, we might expect Beowulf to boast afterwards

of his success in it, as he has when speaking of previous exploits. The amount of glory derived from a fight should reflect the amount of danger braved by the fighter. Of course, the hero often makes less of a fight in the laconic-heroic style, particularly through the use of litotes, as in “that was no easy fight” rather than “I was almost killed in that fight!” Beowulf certainly uses this strategy in describing his earlier fights, as when he sets Unferth straight about his swimming match with Breca. Indeed, the litotes in the Breca passage usually applies to either someone Beowulf is helping or his foes, rather than to his own experience in the fight. Of Breca, he says “No he wiht fram me/ flodyðum feor/ fleotan meahte” [He could not swim at all far from me in the flood-waves] (541b-42b), and of his attackers, he says “Næs hie ðære fylle/ gefean hæfdon” [They had no joy at the feast] (562a-b), when he defeats them. Of himself, he is not so reticent to give details: he says of his own valor, “Soð ic talige/ ðæt ic merestengo/ maran ahte/ earfeþo on yþum/ ðonne ænig oþer man” [I tell the truth that I had more sea-strength and hardships on the waves than any other man] (532b-34b) and “No ic on niht gefrægn/ under heofones hwealf/ heardran feohtan” [Nor have I heard of a harder fight in the night under heaven’s vault] (575b-76b). He proceeds to describe over the course of 60 lines the details of his story. This is, of course, in response to Unferth’s challenge, and in service of gaining himself the authority to serve Hrothgar in defeating Grendel. Yet in this description, Beowulf leaves no shortage of detail and certainly displays no hesitation to boast, as is appropriate, on his own behalf. But in reporting his fight with Grendel’s mother, Beowulf offers no such detail. Indeed, not only does Beowulf leave out details about the fight, but he also revises the story significantly in each retelling.

The fight takes place not in Hrothgar’s hall under the gaze of the Danes and the

Geats, but in Grendel's mother's mere, where neither Beowulf's nor Hrothgar's men can see the battle. Why are witnesses, or the lack thereof so significant here? Because Beowulf recasts the story with each telling, and there is no one to verify his claims. The goings-on in Grendel's mother's mere seem considerably less noble than what took place in his unarmed and unarmored fight with Grendel. Instead, he is very nearly killed by her and is saved only by his armor, not his valor: "Hæfde ða forsiðod sunu Ecgþeowes/ under gynne grund, Geata cempa,/ nemne him heaðobyrne helpe gefremede" [Ecgtheow's son would have perished under the gaping ground, the Geatish champion, if the war-corslet had not worked as a help for him] (1550a-1552b). This moment is doubly ironic, in that his disrobing and disarming is featured as a significant part of his conflict with Grendel. He admits as much when he gives his victory speech to Hrothgar, saying that he won the fight *unsofte*, not easily (1655a) and *earforðlice*, with difficulty (1657a)—both terms necessary to emphasize the value of his victory. Upon leaving the mere, Beowulf takes a trophy, but it is not the trophy we might expect. After he has beheaded Grendel's mother, he finds Grendel's body *aldorleasne*, [lifeless] (1587a), and chops off his head. It is this head, not Grendel's mother's, that he brings back to Hrothgar, although she was his target

when he entered the mere. We might explain his choice by arguing that it is Grendel who raids the Danes for twelve years, not his mother, but another element of the plot makes the decision not so straightforward.

The choice of heads is thrown into sharp relief by Beowulf's claims about the fight. When he recounts the rigors of the battle, he never once explains that it was

Grendel's mother who challenged him so effectively. Instead, he claims that he fought both Grendel and his mother in the cave, saying, “Ofsloh ða æt þære sæcce, þa me sæl ageald,/ huses hyrdas. Þa þæt hildebil/ forbarn brogdenmæl, swa þæt blod gesprang,/ hatost heaþoswata. Ic þæt hilt þanan/ feondum ætferede” [“I struck then, the house's guardians, at the battle, when I had the opportunity. Then that battle-sword, that wavy-patterned sword, burned up, as that blood sprang forth, the hottest of battle-sweats. I have carried away the hilt from the enemies”] (1665a-69a). Both *hyrdas* and *feondum* are clearly plural forms.<sup>99</sup> This battle, Beowulf claims, was so difficult because he fought not one, but two enemies. The head he brings back is Grendel's, so his audience within the poem is left to assume that Grendel, still alive but possessing only one arm, presented the greater threat in the fight in the mere. Thus by leaving Grendel's mother's head behind but bringing back her son's, Beowulf revises the fight, glossing over, and thus erasing, the significant challenge of the female monster.

Beowulf thus replaces the head of his real opponent, Grendel's mother, with the head of his already-defeated and long-deceased opponent, Grendel. No evidence of his near-defeat at her hands alone remains, and there are no witnesses to tell the difference. While the textual audience recognizes Beowulf's sleight-of-hand, the audience of Danes and Geats remains in ignorance. Thomas Bredehoft argues that “The reader can hardly help but imagine that Beowulf might prefer to not reveal all the details of the encounter. Beowulf's account, like Heorot and the mere, has been sanitized and ‘cleaned up,’ made

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<sup>99</sup> I suggest that the grammatical form Beowulf uses is a rhetorical trope to mask the exact identity of his opponent(s). This claim seems reasonable, given that Alfred Bammesberger, in “The Half-Line *Grendeles Mægum*,” suggests that the plural form of the word *mæg* in line 2353b means “Grendel and Grendel's mother” (3), rather than being a bizarre form of the singular. This use of the plural occurs in Beowulf's final retelling of his fight.



presentable for the Geatish audience” (19). Thus leaving out the real threat of Grendel’s mother and leaving behind her head is “cleaning up” the story—but these acts of revision are not merely undertaken to make the story understandable for Beowulf’s immediate audience. Rather, I argue that it is the sexual element of this fight that makes Beowulf particularly uncomfortable. He finds himself in a feminized position in the fight, flat on his back and about to be entered by the penetrating blade of a woman’s sword. Her weapon, it appears, is mightier than his, which failed when it came into contact with her flesh at the onset of the fight.

The real problem of Grendel’s mother is that she has access to both female and male roles, as well as female and male bodies. Her primary identity, as is demonstrated by the only name the poet gives her, is that of a mother. This identity is both social and physical—her name implies that she nurtures Grendel and her consistent presence the mere (along with her lack of envy of Heorot’s hall-joy) suggests that she is bound more fully to the domestic space of the mere than is Grendel; she is also his progenitor. Of course, part of the problem of Grendel’s mother’s body is the Danes’ fear that there *is* no father—that she might be able to procreate independently. The possibility of a dual-gendered body is only further emphasized by Grendel’s mother’s access to masculine roles. Not only does she seek revenge rather than standing by and mourning as does Hildeburh, but she wields a dangerous weapon. This weapon is a fundamental part of her physical identity in the fight with Beowulf, just as the failed, and then the monstrous swords are parts of his identity. This female monster has an access to male sexual roles in her dominant and penetrative action in the fight. She does not “become” male or trade in her female body, but instead enacts both male and female actions, and suggests both male

and female forms. She, it seems, is simultaneously both man and woman enough, and it is this terrifying identity, inherently connected to her body, that leads to Beowulf's erasure of the monstrous female body.

Beowulf's own<sup>100</sup> human weapon fails him, he finds a giant's tool in the giant's cave, and the monster sword is wielded as an assumed phallus. When the fight is over and this borrowed masculine authority has dismembered both Grendel's mother and Grendel, then Beowulf returns to the surface, carrying his failed sword, the melted hilt of the monster sword and the head of Grendel.<sup>101</sup> Just as the final weapon of the battle never makes it to the surface of the water, neither does evidence of the most threatening body—the monstrous feminine body of Grendel's mother. The hilt stands as a trace of the monster weapon, much as Grendel's head serves as a trace of his mother's body, reminding the reading audience and Beowulf that Grendel's head stands in for, but is not, hers. Although Hrothgar and his men make their own interpretation of these objects, it is Beowulf who provides and contextualizes the object for interpretation.<sup>102</sup> Thus, the reading audience alone witnesses Beowulf's process of erasure. What has been left in the mere, the body of Grendel's mother, seems attached to Beowulf's own failed masculinity,

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<sup>100</sup> Although this is Unferth's sword, the true owner of the human sword is less significant. Beowulf accepts the weapon knowing Unferth's history, and fully expects it to be successful in battle. Were it his own sword, it would have also failed because, whatever else it might be, it is a sword made by and for human men.

<sup>101</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that there is a relationship between scenes of beheading and "political, sexual, and social coming of age" ("Decapitation" 174). The moment Grendel's head is revealed "unambiguously announces Beowulf's full status as a hero, as a man to be revered as a vehicle of cultural ethic" (173). Building on this claim, I argue that while the revealing of the head may announce him as a hero and a man to the community, Beowulf's revision of the story is noticeable to the textual audience, who recall his unrecounted wrestling match with Grendel's mother and the nature of his failed and melted swords. He is a victorious hero, but a hero who revises the details of his glory.

<sup>102</sup> Lerer compares the headless bodies of Grendel and his mother to the now bladeless sword, calling both "impotent" and saying "those monsters now are like the hilt itself. Both come as a written tale, able to enter the hall and hurt no one, to sit silently like a souvenir of an alien kingdom" (179). But Grendel's mother's head is not disempowered entirely because it never serves as a souvenir.

resuscitated briefly by the borrowed sword of creatures of excess masculinity. Just as the phallic giant-made sword melts, so too does Beowulf's masculinity. He has been successful in battle, but in the process of the battle he has lost something. Beowulf's desire to elide and erase the sexual nature of the fight implicates his own sexual identity. Therefore, when he enters the next supernatural fight, the fight with the dragon, Beowulf's sword has always already failed. "Hreðsigora ne gealp/ goldwine Geata; guðbill geswac/ nacod æt niðe, swa hyt no sceolde,/ iren ærgod" [The gold-friend of the Geats did not boast of glorious victories; the war-sword failed, naked at battle, as it should not have, the iron that was good from old days] (2583b-2586a).

### **Beowulf and the Productive Body**

Beowulf recognizes his own lack of an heir as he suffers his mortal wounds. He mourns his inability to pass his possessions to his son, saying "Nu ic suna minum syllan wolde/ guðgewædu, þær me gifeðe swa/ ænig yrfeweard æfter wurde/ lice gelenge" [Now I would wish to give my war-dress to my son, were any heirs belonging to my body granted after me] (2729a-2732a). Here Beowulf acknowledges that there is indeed a difference between an heir like Wiglaf—the only warrior to aid him in his fight against the dragon—and one 'of his body,' *lice gelenge*. His first desire upon recognizing his encroaching death is to have a true and physical heir. He sends Wiglaf into the dragon's barrow to bring out the treasure hidden inside, and only after he looks on the jewels does he designate Wiglaf as a kind of heir. "Nu ic on maðma hord mine bebohte/ frode feorhlege, fremmað gena/ leoda þearfe; ne mæg ic her leng wesan" [Now that I have bought the hoard of treasures with my old life, you must attend to the people's further

needs; I cannot be here long] (2799a-2801b). Here Wiglaf is commanded to care for the people, and the means by which he can do so is the treasure ‘bought’ by Beowulf with his life. Since he does not have a true heir, Wiglaf, whom he recognizes as “endleaf/ usses cynnes,/ Wægmundinga” [the last of our kin, the Waegmundings] (2813a-2814b), will have to do. Here Beowulf is described as “gomel gíohðe” [the old man in sorrow] (2793a), and although we must consider his own grief at the loss of his life, the sorrow also seems to reflect the futility of his sacrifice: neither this heir nor the treasure will save his people.

Wiglaf seems to know this; in his speech at Beowulf’s funeral he predicts the threats to the Geats. “Þæt ys sio fæhðo ond se feondscipe,/ wælnið wera, ðæs ðe ic wen hafo,/ þe us seceað to Sweona leoda,/ syððan hie gefricgeað frean userne/ ealdorleasne, þone ðe ær geheold/ wið hettendum hord on rice” [That is the feud and the enmity, the deadly hate of men, for which I have expectation that the people of the Swedes will seek us after they learn that our lord has lost his life, that one who previously held the hoard and kingdom against enemies] (2999a-3004b). Wiglaf, as Beowulf’s not-quite-good-enough heir, is always already doomed to failure; he cannot possibly hope to replace Beowulf. Instead, even while designing a course of action, neither he, nor the reader who already knows the historical fate of Beowulf’s people, expects it to be of much avail. Wiglaf tells his people that without Beowulf they will fight without much hope, and indeed characterizes them as “fægum” [fated to die] (3025a). After this speech, the poet remarks on the accuracy of Wiglaf’s predictions, saying “Swa se secg hwata secgende wæs/ laðra spella; he ne leag fela/ wyrda ne worda” [So the valiant man was a speaker of

a loathed message; nor did he much lie in his words or in what was destined] (3028a-3030a).

The worst fate for the people that Wiglaf accurately predicts is not only that they will be defeated, but also that they will be exiled: “nalles eorl wegan/ maððum to gemyndum, ne mægð scyne/ habban on healse hringweorðunge,/ ac sceal geomormod, golde bereafod/ oft nalles æne elland tredan,/ nu se herewisa hleahtor alegde,/ gamen ond gleodream” [No earl will wear treasure as a remembrance, nor will a beautiful maid have on her neck a necklace, but with a sad mind, deprived of gold, but will tread foreign lands, often, not just once, now that the army leader has laid aside laughter, his game and mirth] (3015b-3021a). They will suffer not just death or defeat, but the results of that defeat—exile. The other exiles of this poem, Grendel and his mother, are immediately called to mind upon reading this section of the poem. Just as Beowulf’s people will have to wander in foreign places, so are Grendel and his mother doomed to wander: they are literally wanderers of the border, in Old English, *mearcstapan*. Grendel is called “mære mearcstapa” [the famous border-stepper] (103a) by the poet when we first learn of his lineage from Cain prior to the fight with Beowulf. The second and final occurrence of the word comes in Hrothgar’s speech following Grendel’s mother’s attack where he reveals his prior knowledge of her. Here, we learn that both she and Grendel are known as “micle mearcstapan” [great border-steppers] (1348a). Both halves of this compound point to the nature of exile: *mearc* means “a limit, boundary...confine of a district, border” (Bosworth Toller 673), that is, a place that is uninhabited and literally on the outskirts of civilization; *stapan*, from *stepan*, means to step, stride, walk. Wiglaf predicts exile, and thus homelessness for Beowulf’s people. The curse of walking without a home or a safe

destination resembles the curse of Grendel and his mother. Just as they walk the borders, so will the Geats—although in a much different way and for a far different reason.

Beowulf's (dead) body produces exiles not heirs.<sup>103</sup>

Beowulf's body thus proves to be infertile and unproductive in a way that will be disastrous for his people. This upcoming disaster, although known by the audience outside of the text but also figured in the poet's affirmation of Wiglaf's predictions, is known to the audience inside the text in the figure of Wiglaf and Wiglaf's larger audience at Beowulf's funeral. The failure of Beowulf's body, not in his defeat by the dragon but in his inability to provide the safety valve of a properly prepared heir, is subject to public witness.

This question of witness reminds the reader of those moments that are unwitnessed. The crucial unwitnessed moment, that of the fight with Grendel's mother, is also the one that is consistently retold, and revised. After Beowulf's initial revision, in which he tells the Danes that he fought both Grendel and his mother in the mere, he revises the story again for Hygelac upon his return to the Geats.<sup>104</sup> This time, Beowulf

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<sup>103</sup> Heirs are a problem throughout this poem. Although Hrothgar clearly has heirs, he wants to adopt Beowulf, an outsider, as his heir. Beowulf agrees to guard the throne for the rightful heirs, after Wealhtheow's careful reminders to her husband. However, we know that this throne is destined to be usurped by Hrothulf, as is noted in a footnote in E. Talbot Donaldson's translation for lines 1017b-1019b, in which he claims "a reference to the later history of the Danes, when after Hrothgar's death, his nephew Hrothulf apparently drove his son and successor Hrethric from the throne" (19). The fact that Hrothgar has heirs does not mean peace for his people, but his is a problem of too many claims to the throne rather than their lack, as is the case for the Geats after Beowulf's death.

<sup>104</sup> Huisman examines the rhetorical situation of each telling, remarking that "The difficulty of the task is not, however, Beowulf's primary emphasis here, as it was for Hrothgar" (230). Instead, she claims that to best honor Hygelac, Beowulf must focus on his rewards: "in the immediate social context of this telling is that Hygelac can realize that his hero/retainer has performed a difficult deed, which brings glory to Hygelac" (230). While the rhetorical situation certainly dictates the nature of the telling, it remains significant that Beowulf revises the details of the fight that he does choose to reveal. Significantly, Lerer claims that "Beowulf offers a revision of the tale and a potential recasting of its central themes" (183). However, he focuses on the naming of Hondscio and the description of Grendel's glove as revised elements.

acknowledges his struggle with Grendel's mother (2115a-2143b), saying "þær unc hwile wæs hand gemæne" [there for the two of us was a hand-to-hand battle, for a while] (2137). Although this story does not deny the fight with Grendel's mother, it erases the sexualized nature of the struggle. Beowulf, using litotes, claims that "unsofte þonan/ feorh oðferede" [I bore away my life from there with difficulty] (2140b-2141a), but continues to omit the brawling nature of the fight. This is not the final mention of the fight; it resurfaces again just before Beowulf engages the dragon. Here, the poet reminds us that "æt guðe forgrap Grendeles mægum,/ laðan cynnes" [in battle he crushed Grendel's kin, the hated race] (2353a-2354a).<sup>105</sup> The poet points the reader back to both fights and their consequences, that not just Grendel is exterminated, but that his whole "race," his family is. The feud can only be ended when the audience is absolutely assured that no Grendelkin remain. Beowulf, however, in his rally before the fight with the dragon, only recalls aloud his fight with Grendel, saying he would fight the dragon without a sword, "swa ic gio wið Grendle dyde" [as I did against Grendel in days of yore] (2521b) if he thought it might be successful against the dragon. In each of these retellings of the fight, traces of the dangerous body of Grendel's mother remain. The fight itself is not denied but revised. However, the reiteration of the scene connects and reconnects Beowulf's unproductive body with the productive body of Grendel's mother. The battle ultimately functions as a pseudosexual event, one that is not procreative but destructive as it gives birth to death, ultimately, for the Geats. Where Beowulf has no heirs, Grendel's mother has produced a powerful son. But just as her own line ends with her death, so too does Beowulf's fecundity disappear when he dismembers Grendel's mother.

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<sup>105</sup> See note 99 above.

Beowulf is offered both a throne and a wife after the death of Hygelac: “þær him Hygd gebead hord ond rice,/ beagas ond bregostole; bearne ne truwode,/ þæt he wið ælfylcum eþelstolas/ healdan cuþe, þa wæs Hygelac dead” [There Hygd offered him treasure and kingdom, rings and lord’s throne. She did not trust in her son, that he could hold the native throne against foreign people, now that Hygelac was dead] (2369a-2372b). Although Hygd is not included explicitly on the list of what he will gain, she seems to be offering herself as his wife so that he may rightfully gain the position of ruler. Beowulf, however, refuses: “No ðy ær feasceafte findan meahton/ æt ðam æðelinge ænige ðinga,/ þæt he Heardrede hlaford wære,/ oððe þone cynedom ciosan wolde” [Nor could the bereft ones earlier prevail either of these things upon that noble, that he would be lord of Heardred or would choose royal power] (2373a-2376b). Beowulf seems to be taking the noble route, not wanting, for the second time in the poem, to usurp a throne not rightfully his.<sup>106</sup> However, to marry a queen is not exactly to usurp a throne, although it does complicate matters for the king’s heirs. Furthermore, the political upheaval that befalls the Geats following Beowulf’s refusal results in the loss of many lives and, ultimately, in Beowulf gaining the throne. Beowulf’s refusal of Hygd points, however, to his long-term decision to remain unmarried. As Robert Morey notes, “Beowulf is the only king in the poem who never marries” (493).<sup>107</sup> In a poem that is deeply concerned with what it means to be a “god cyning” [good king] (11b), Beowulf’s singular position

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<sup>106</sup> The first is when Hrothgar wants to adopt Beowulf, but, after Wealhtheow advises Hrothgar against this, Beowulf graciously declines.

<sup>107</sup> Morey, who suggests a queer reading of Hrothgar’s affection for Beowulf, does not suggest that Beowulf reciprocates. Instead, he claims that “Beowulf appears married to the *eorlscipe* he enacts among the Danes” (493).



as a bachelor king is remarkable. Beowulf himself implicitly critiques his unmarried and unproductive status when he mourns his own lack of an heir.

Grendel's mother, too, remains without a mate.<sup>108</sup> In fact, in a text filled with women, she is the only woman who remains unmarried. Even Freawaru, Hrothgar's daughter who is still at Heorot when Beowulf is there, is conceived of as a part of the marriage peace-contract system. Beowulf returns to Hygelac with stories of her upcoming marriage to Ingeld of the Heatho-Bards, imagining the inevitable failure of such a peace-weaving marriage. Every other woman in this poem, Wealhtheow, Freawaru, Hygd, Hildeburh, and even the man-killer, Thryth who is married off to control her murderous impulses, is or will be married. The same is true for men of power and influence. No king in the poem, except Beowulf, remains so clearly unmarried and without an heir through a very long life. Thus, the unmarried bodies of Grendel's mother and Beowulf are linked narratively. The fact that even Grendel's mother has an heir emphasizes the fact that Beowulf does not.

Rosen connects the "failure of arming" (16) with Beowulf's reproductive failure, claiming "fittingly he would have liked to pass along his armor to that son: a son made nonexistent by the armor that put fealty above blood, duty above passion" (18-19). However, there is no real hint of sacrificed "passion" on Beowulf's part. Allen Frantzen claims "no women are associated with Beowulf, but his manliness is never in doubt"

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<sup>108</sup> It is crucial that Grendel have a mother, not a wife. A wife would imply a sexual identity for Grendel, and a constant fear that there might be more progeny. Even though Grendel's mother may be capable of autonomous reproduction, this ability seems limited. She seems quite closely bound to her offspring; thus, an audience can assume he is her one and only child.

(95).<sup>109</sup> Overing, on the other hand, identifies him as a potential “hysteric” known “for the kinds of ambiguity he generates” in relation to the binaries provided by the heroic code (*Language* 84). While I have no desire to claim that Beowulf is painted as homosexual—literally or stereotypically—I argue that his impulses are profoundly anti-sexual, explicitly with regards to women, and that these impulses result from his intimate contact with the sexualized body of the monstrous feminine. Most scholars shy away from this moment, building his childlessness into the larger structure of inevitable dynastic failure. Clare Lees claims “while praising these dynasties, the poem leaves us in no doubt of their tenuous hold on life in the hall. The maintenance of patrilineal genealogy is no easy thing” (141). While the failure of these dynasties is certainly an important theme of *Beowulf*, the issue is particularly vexed in the body of Beowulf because there is never any possibility for an heir or a dynasty if he never marries or has heirs.

### **Conclusions: Centrality and Erasure**

The bodies of monsters in *Beowulf* are not visible to the audience in the ways that monstrous bodies are in *Wonders of the East*. They are, so to speak, never drawn here. In a text that does not spare descriptive detail of the landscape, especially if we look at such passages as that describing the journey to the Grendels’ mere, such a lack should strike us as purposeful. Lapidge and others have argued about the purpose of the unseeable nature

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<sup>109</sup>His project in this chapter is to locate Hrothgar as feminized, through his inability to rid himself of Grendel, his weeping and embracing of Beowulf, and his “secret longing” (95) for Beowulf. Frantzen ultimately finds that “it is not just Beowulf’s departure that grieves him...but the passing of his younger and more valorous—may I say more manly?—self” (98). He does not wish to claim the relationship between Hrothgar and Beowulf as necessarily sexually transgressive, although some of these valences do exist in Hrothgar’s private, “secret” according to the poet, desires.

of these bodies; it seems fair to say that the lack of description is more terrifying than a detailed depiction would be. But the lack of description does not erase the importance of their monstrous bodies. Grendel and his mother are monstrous because they possess hybrid and monstrous bodies. All of the monstrous actions they undertake can only be enacted by bodies that are always already monstrous. Grendel's mother's transgression is not simply in her attack on Heorot, but in the possession of a hybrid body that makes such an act possible. Her body is a double threat, in that it mysteriously and perhaps singularly seems to produce Grendels, and in that it draws Beowulf into the most violent and sexually suggestive encounter in Old English literature. Beowulf's attempts at erasure simultaneously cover up and reveal the body of Grendel's mother and reiterate her position in the center of this text: although the audience inside the poem never knows what happens, the attention of the reading audience is drawn again and again to the facts of the fight each time Beowulf retells and revises it.

The structure of the text supports the idea of Grendel's mother's erasure as much as both Beowulf's and Hrothgar's actions and erasures. She is featured in the center of this poem, and is, in fact, central to it, just as she is both named (as Grendel's mother) and never named (in having no name of her own). She is Beowulf's most complicated and only unwitnessed fight. Because of the location of the fight in the middle of this text, however, it can be read doubly. Instead of being seen as central, Grendel's mother can be, and has often been, seen as merely a follow up to Beowulf's fight with Grendel—a loose end to be tied up. Although the structure of the narrative places her at its center, it also covers her up. Ultimately, the poem ends with the death of Beowulf, a death that draws us back to the deaths of Grendel and his mother, as Beowulf defeats his final monstrous

foe, the dragon. When Beowulf ends the line of grendels by killing Grendel's mother, he also puts an end to his own line. We expect that he should marry and reproduce once he ends his monster-fighting days and becomes king. However, his body, unlike that of Grendel's mother, is not productive. Figured in her body, and his very physical grappling with that body, is not only the end of her line, but his patrilineal impotence.

## CHAPTER 4

### Circulation and Transformation: the Monstrous Feminine in *Mandeville's Travels*

“a monster is a þing difformed a3en kynde bothe of man or of best  
or of ony þing elles & þat is cleped a Monstre”

[a monster is a thing deformed against kind, both of man or of beast  
or of anything else, and that is called a monster] (Cotton 30)

A widely circulated medieval text, *Mandeville's Travels* gained popularity because of its ability to entertain the concerns of many audiences, from those looking for a practical travel guide to those desiring to envision strange and interesting people and places. The text is both typical in its depictions of the marvelous and unique in its particular collection and description of monstrous humans. Each of the Mandeville author's four transformative female monsters derives from previously depicted monsters but departs significantly from the source materials. Most scholars see the monsters that I will discuss here as a part of the fictional narrator's, that is, Sir John Mandeville's vision of the diversity of the world. To them, the monsters are interesting, but ultimately only tangentially related to the Mandeville author's larger textual purpose of comparing a faulty Christendom to the most powerful of foreign communities, including those of the

Sultan and Prester John. These other, less “important” groups or individuals—the female monsters whose bodies transform—present a more nuanced vision not only of the various communities visited by the fictional Sir John, but also of the Christian community he represents, addresses, and hopes to affect. Andrew Fleck claims that monsters “are included in Christian cosmography because they provide an aesthetic contrast, as a clearly sub-human other, to the reader’s sense of self” (385). They do provide a contrast, but a less stable one than Fleck suggests; monsters force readers to reconsider their own sense of self, their own distance from the monstrous. More than asking his audience to reconsider their desire for conquest, the Mandeville author asks his European audience to revise its stable visions of humanity, the body, and community.

In *Mandeville’s Travels*, four monsters possess bodies that physically transform from one thing to another—be it from woman to dragon, death to life, wife to Amazon, or potentially lethal virgin to carefully kept wife. Significantly, these monsters are geographically dispersed and are not confined to a single area of the mysterious or exoticized East. For the Mandeville author, monsters are not stable and permanent either in their physical formation or their geographic location. Monsters, whose bodies had been unchanging, and who thus existed outside the community, enter human communities and can even remain unrecognized because of their ability to transform themselves. While monsters could be erased in Old English literature, they persistently disrupt communities in *Mandeville’s Travels* because they are not located away from civilization. The implicit drive of each of the four narratives of transformative monstrosity in *Mandeville’s Travels* is to make less secure the notion that the monstrous is elsewhere.

## Monsters and Manuscripts: the Problem of Popularity

Recently, *Mandeville's Travels* has enjoyed a revival in scholarly interest. Book-length studies by Iain Macleod Higgins and Rosemary Tzanaki in the last ten years have approached the text through various theoretical lenses. In *Writing East: The "Travels" of Sir John Mandeville* (1997), Higgins is primarily concerned with the shape of the world, as presented by the text's titular fictional narrator, Sir John Mandeville. In *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences* (2003), Tzanaki considers the text's multiple functions for its multiple audiences, claiming that it participates in five genres: pilgrimage, geography, romance, history, and theology (xi). Both scholars address the problem of the many varying manuscripts of the text, and both call the text *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, in order to more clearly assert the distinction between the fictional narrator, Sir John Mandeville, and the anonymous author of the text, who is most likely *not* Sir John Mandeville.<sup>110</sup> I here refer to the text as *Mandeville's Travels*, following the lead of the most recent published editions of the text,<sup>111</sup> although I recognize the important differentiation between author and speaker.

Both of these recent studies discuss the monstrous, most often as a subset of the larger category of the "marvelous." Although both recognize the marvelous as a significant part of *Mandeville's Travels*, they seem to speak of it as functioning in opposition to, or separately from, the more serious aspects of the text. In her preface, Tzanaki assures us that "the author's own intentions were rarely understood and his

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<sup>110</sup> Here I refer to the anonymous author as the Mandeville author. In this chapter, I occasionally refer to moments of the text as Mandeville's story; by this I mean the fictional story presented by the fictional Mandeville character.

<sup>111</sup> Notably, M.C. Seymour, editor of the 2002 *Defective Version of Mandeville's Travels* (EETS), retains the title as *Mandeville's Travels*, in accordance with most of the previously published editions of the various manuscript versions.

religious syncretism was often ignored, with audiences preferring the more marvelous aspects of his work” (xi). For her, willful audiences, translators, and redactors have focused inappropriately on these “marvelous aspects,” often ignoring or revising the larger arguments of the text’s “original” author. Higgins, however, suggests multivalent reading practices rather than readerly error. He refers to the marvelous aspect of the text as “a marvelous mélange that may remind us of the culturally and historically shifting boundary between the imaginary and the real, as it serves to provide a kind of aesthetic pleasure in counterpoint to *The Book*’s historical, moral, and religious lore and lessons” (85). According to both Tzanaki and Higgins, the marvelous is secondary to, not complicit in, the most important and serious purposes of the text. However, the reception history and continued focus on the marvelous by readers, translators, and redactors suggests that these elements held significance for medieval readers that should not be ignored.

Indeed, readers, translators, redactors and artists often focus on the marvelous, although not necessarily exclusively, as Tzanaki indicates in her study of the many manuscript versions. Early in its reception history it was read most often as a pilgrimage narrative:

The wondrous elements so beloved of the illustrators would soon prevail over the more serious religious aspects of the *Book*. The marginalia, however, show that even when the work was seen as a source of marvelous material, the Holy Land, the relics of the Passion and Jerusalem itself were never completely ignored by Mandeville’s many audiences. (77)

Those who illustrated and compiled the manuscripts, then, focused on the wonders, but readers also expressed an interest in these same marvelous creatures:



But it was the strange peoples who captured the reader's eye most often, particularly the Plinian Races; almost every annotated manuscript draws attention to the extraordinary aspect and customs of the inhabitants of countries beyond the Holy Land. Even the remarkable animals, ranging from parrots to griffins, did not impress as much as the weird and wonderful human or semi-human races found in the Orient. (Tzanaki 124)

While the narrative of pilgrimage and the idea of travel drive the narrative, it was the monsters, and specifically the human monsters, that were most popular in a text noted for its own popularity.

*Mandeville's Travels* was a very popular text in medieval Europe, not only appealing to members of various social classes, but to citizens of various European countries. As Tzanaki relates, *Mandeville's Travels*

was one of the most popular works of the late medieval period, being read by a wide range of audiences from its inception in the 1350s or early 1360s until the seventeenth and even eighteenth centuries. The huge number of surviving manuscripts—around three hundred—and early editions across Europe attest to its importance. By the 1420s there were versions of the *Book* in French, Anglo-Norman French, English, German, Flemish, Czech, Castilian, Aragonese and Latin, and within another fifty years it had also been translated into Italian, Danish and Gaelic. (1)

Clearly, given its popularity, the material included in *Mandeville's Travels* must have held special resonance for its audience. Many texts offered similar travel narratives—several even serve as sources<sup>112</sup> for the author—but something about this version drew audiences.

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<sup>112</sup> The two main sources were William of Boldensele's *Liber de quibusdam ultramarines partibus* (1336) and Odoric of Pordenone's *Relatio* (1330); both were translated into French in 1351 by Jean le Long. (Higgins 9). Higgins, along with others, suggests the author's reliance on the French translations above the original Latin versions, although he seems to have used the Latin at times. According to Lisa Verner, he also relied on "the works of Jacques de Vitry, Vincent of Beauvais, John of Plano Carpini, Odoric of Pordenone, Hetoum (or Hayton) of Armenia, and the anonymous (and ubiquitous) *Letter of Prester John*" (124). For more on source materials, see both Higgins and Tzanaki. A great deal of scholarship has focused on the author's use of source material. Some scholars have seen the author as a plagiarist because of his extensive borrowing. Mezciems has shown that such a designation would have been meaningless for

‘This version,’ perhaps, is a dangerous designation; though most of the manuscripts offer the same general story, the details vary, and we have no ‘original’ form against which to compare the various redactions. “The *Book*’s archetype, written c. 1357-60, is no longer in existence, so far as is known. It can only be postulated from the two versions directly descended from it, the Continental and the Insular” (Tzanaki 15). I primarily study the Insular or Insular-derived versions written in English rather than the Continental (primarily written in French) because there seems to have been very little correspondence for this book between England and France after the original text came to England.<sup>113</sup> The Insular version seems to be particularly English, because “most of the c. 25 manuscripts extant circulated in England” (Tzanaki 16). The Insular version, however, gave rise to other redactions in England like the Defective Version, which “proved the most popular English text; about 38 manuscript copies remain and all the English editions stem from it” (16). In total, 44 English copies are extant; of these copies, one copy of the Bodley, dated between 1390 and 1450; two copies of the Cotton, dated at 1400; 38 copies of the Defective, dated after 1400; and one copy each of the Egerton, 1400-1430; the metrical, 15<sup>th</sup> century; and the stanzaic fragment, 15<sup>th</sup> century, remain (Higgins 22, table 1).

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medieval readers. In addition, it is important to note that the author frequently reworks his borrowed material in significant ways.

<sup>113</sup> “None of the versions made outside England is known to have crossed the sea before the sixteenth century except the archetype of the Insular Version (an Anglo-French copy of the original French text, from which all extant versions of *Mandeville’s Travels* derive) and a degenerate and unfinished French manuscript” (Seymour, Metrical, 1).

Both Higgins and Tzanaki consider multiple versions of *Mandeville's Travels*, because, in Tzanaki's words:

...it is impossible to read the *Book* as a single text due to its multiplicity of incarnations and reincarnations across Europe. This intertextual richness has been largely ignored by modern scholarship, with each commentator choosing a single text as the basis of their reading. This has resulted in the *Book* being read in very limited ways, at least partly due to the version studied. . . Higgins, in his multitextual reading of the *Book*, is one of the few to have acknowledged the importance of this issue. (19)

While it is Tzanaki's goal to consider all of the manuscripts dated before 1500, Higgins focuses on the Bodley, Cotton, Defective, Egerton, and Metrical versions in English, using other language versions for comparative purposes (viii). Higgins points out that most scholars have used the Cotton version, seeing it "as authoritative, sometimes even while drawing attention to *The Book's* textual multiplicity" (19).

Although the Cotton version has been used by most scholars for primary reference, I consider the Defective version as my primary text. Higgins justifies his own primary reliance on Cotton by stating:

The Cotton Version's adaptations, for instance, are infrequent and minor, making the rendering quite a good copy for the authorial version, and much the same could be said of the Defective Version, were it not for the numerous lacunae (in addition to the Egypt gap) riddling the text. The related Egerton Version stands somewhat apart from these two renderings in that it often tidies up the local disposition of material and renders it in a more supple, often periphrastic northern English prose that is a pleasure to read. (24)

The Egypt gap, noted here by Higgins, is a part of the description of Egypt from the second quire that is omitted in the Defective version, thus causing this version to be known as "defective." Despite this omission, Seymour states that the "text of the Defective Version established itself as the dominant form of the book in England" (xi-xii). In addition, he notes that the edition of the Cotton version used by most scholars,

that edited by Hamelius for EETS in 1919, “is inaccurate; there are large lacunae...and there are innumerable misreadings” (xii, note 2). In addition to the problems of the available edition of the Cotton, there are significant reasons for choosing the Defective version as a primary text. Not only was it the most popular English version of the text, extant in over thirty different manuscripts,<sup>114</sup> it is the “oldest English translation of the Insular Version” (xi), and served as the base text for both the Cotton and Egerton versions (xii). Although I cite the Defective version as primary, I follow Higgins in considering the Cotton, Egerton, Bodley, and Metrical versions.

### **Circulation and Monstrosity**

*Mandeville’s Travels* narrates the journey of its titular fictional narrator, Sir John Mandeville. Sir John leaves his home in England in 1332 and travels east, through Rome, Constantinople, the Holy Land, India, and the marvelous East, before he returns home again. He begins this pilgrimage with the attitude that though Christians of the west are sinners (guilty of “pruyde, enuye, and couetise” [pride, envy, and covetousness] (Defective 4), it is their duty to reclaim the Holy Land from the undeserving: “we owe to calenge þe heritage [þat] oure fader left to vs and do it out of straunge men hondis” [we owe it to the heritage that our father left to us to take it out of strange men’s hands] (4). Sir John, however, is less a crusader than an observer, as scholars including Stephen Greenblatt, Donald Howard, Iain Higgins, and Rosemary Tzanaki have noted. Greenblatt claims in *Marvelous Possessions* (1991), that *Mandeville’s Travels* is “about what it means not to take possession, about circulation or wandering as an alternative to

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<sup>114</sup> It is complete in 33 manuscripts, while six additional fragments and extracts exist (Seymour xii).

ownership, about a refusal to occupy” (27).<sup>115</sup> Ultimately, as Greenblatt suggests, Sir John seems persuaded that Christian men should address their own problems at home before they can properly convert the non-Christians of the East. After the Sultan lectures him about Christian law and how Christian men do not abide by it, Sir John comments:

And þanne hadde Y grete merueyl of þis grete sclaundre of [oure faith], for þei þat schulde be yturned þur3 oure good ensample to þe feiþ of Ihesu Crist, þei beþ ydrawe away þur3 oure wickide lyuyng. And þerfore it is no wonder þou3 þei clepe vs wickid. But þe Sarasyns beþ trewe, for þei kepiþ wel þe comaundementis of here *Alkaron*... [And then I marveled at this great slander of our faith, because they that should be converted by our good example to the faith of Jesus Christ are drawn away by our wicked living. And therefore it is no wonder that they call us wicked. But the Saracens are true, because they keep well the commandments of their *Alkaron*...] (Defective 61)

Sir John’s circulation through the Holy Land and beyond, then, provides a lesson about the desire for crusade and conversion, as the narrator implicitly asks those who would crusade and convert to first improve their own adherence to Christian tenets.<sup>116</sup>

While *Mandeville’s Travels* is clearly a text concerned with the circulation of Sir John and the circulation of Christianity, it is also a text concerned with the circulation of bodies. The circulation of monsters—that is, creatures whose bodies are significantly different from the norm—is an important part of Sir John’s narrative. Sir John brings forth a number of such fascinating “dyuersiteez” [diversities] and “meruaylles” [marvels] (209) in his narrative for an audience of medieval readers at home, providing a circulation of these monstrous bodies for the gratification of curious onlookers as well as for the well-being of potential travelers. *Mandeville’s Travels* is interested in an even

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<sup>115</sup> This quotation refers explicitly to what Greenblatt says his chapter will address, but it also refers to the work done by *Mandeville’s Travels*.

<sup>116</sup> For further discussion on the problems of pilgrimage and crusading, see Tzanaki.

more specific kind of circulation: the circulation of reproductive bodies.<sup>117</sup> Sir John limits his own circulation in this particular sphere. He writes the book when he is old and infirm, without mentioning a family of his own: "...and now am come to rest, as man discomfited fro age and travail and feebleness of body that constrain me thereto" [and now I am come to rest as a man overcome by age and physical labor and feebleness of body that keep me at home] (Egerton 222).<sup>118</sup> We have no way of knowing what has passed in the 34 years between pilgrimage and the composition of his narrative for this fictional character, but we do know that he shuns a marriage while he travels. Sir John brings back only the story of his travels rather than a nuptial and familial and thus enduring bond to the East, choosing to forego a marriage to a Babylonian princess: "And he wolde haue maryed me full highly to a gret Princes daughter 3if I wolde han forsaken my lawe & my beleue" [And he [the Sultan] would have married me full highly to a great

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<sup>117</sup> R. Allen Shoaf, in 2001's *Chaucer's Body: The Anxiety of Circulation in the "Canterbury Tales,"* also uses the term "circulation" in a figurative and abstract sense. He notes that the term "circulation" would have been a word familiar to Chaucer from his reading in alchemy (3). He further notes the definition of the term from the *Middle English Dictionary*: "circulacioun n. [L} *Alch.* The operation or process of changing the "body" (by heating or cooling) from one "element" into another, or an instance of it" (MED C: 276). Circulation, in alchemical terms, means the transformation of a body from one thing into something else entirely, thus corresponding with Caroline Bynum's discussion of metamorphosis, to be discussed later. Shoaf himself uses the phrase "anxiety of circulation" to denote a number of upheavals in the fourteenth century in England, from the Black Plague to the mobility of the lower classes (4). He comments: "All these phenomena, and many others, can usefully be understood as instances of greater, more fluid, and finally more mysterious circulation—of goods and people as well as signs" (4). Thus, the term "circulation" functions economically as well as geographically. In a search of Middle English corpus through the *Middle English Dictionary*, more than 100 forms of "circulation" appeared. These occurrences concerned topics from alchemy, potion-making, the circulation of liquids through the body, circulations in the heavens, particularly of the planets or the sun, and the circulation of the four elements.

<sup>118</sup> For this portion of the chapter, I cite the versions of *Mandeville's Travels* that best express these thoughts. Each version carries a section making a similar point, although the Defective Version has a significantly truncated version of the final section. For example, this is the Cotton rendition of this passage: "And now I am comen hom mawgree myself to reste for gowtes Artetykes þat me distreynten þat deffynen the ende of my labour..." [And now, in spite of everything, I have come home to rest because of gout and arthritis that restrain and mark the end of my labor...] (Cotton 210).

Prince's daughter if I would have forsaken my law and my belief] (Cotton 21).<sup>119</sup>

Greenblatt regards this refusal as “his own version of renunciation in the service of the Christian faith” (27), and sees it as a part of his larger project to circulate without “taking possession.” Sir John's circulation is, in a sense, finite and clear: although he has conversations with some of the most powerful men in the East, and even serves them militarily, he does not maintain connections. Although he is a knight, he maintains a kind of religious purity, in that he will not marry outside of his faith.<sup>120</sup>

Where Sir John's reproductive circulation is carefully guarded, that of the Eastern peoples is laid open before him and his readers, as he regularly accounts for the marital and reproductive practices of the communities he visits. While marriage may not seem to be a regular practice in monstrous communities, many of the monsters in Sir John's narrative are not confined to strictly monstrous communities. They have intercourse with, and may even be part of, human communities. As I will demonstrate, the circulation of these monstrous bodies is of profound concern for human communities because the division between the monstrous body and the human body in *Mandeville's Travels* is at times invisible.

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<sup>119</sup> The Defective Version states this just a little less clearly: “he wolde þat I hadde weddid a grete princes dou3ter and riche of his londe, so þat I wolde haue forsake my treupe” [he [the Sultan] wished that I had married the daughter of a great prince, rich in lands, so that I would have forsaken my faith] (Defective 21-22).

<sup>120</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in *Medieval Identity Machines*, points out that laws forbade unions between Christian men and Jewish and Muslim women, remarking that “such miscegenation was associated with bestiality and sodomy, and was likewise punishable by death (201-202). He also notes, however, that characters like Bevis of Hampton and Guillaume d'Orange marry Saracen women, who ultimately convert to Christianity.

## **Monstrosity Defined and Transformed: Old English to Middle English**

In previous chapters, I have defined monstrosity as a primarily physical category. Monsters are monstrous because their bodies are different. Their behavior, as I have argued earlier, is secondary to their appearance. A monstrous body, then, is all it takes for a creature to be deemed monstrous—whether it is a body of lack, excess, or hybridity. In Old English literature, monstrous bodies are permanent and unchangeable: a creature is born with his face located in his chest, and this never changes until his death. Although there must be transformations for these bodies associated with aging or reproducing, these are never represented for readers or viewers; moreover, the facts of the body that make it monstrous remain the same, despite these other kinds of change. The human response to the monstrous body is a desire for its erasure, or its death, not for its transformation or redemption.

The permanent bodies of Old English monsters mark them as other, as outsiders; these monsters also dwell outside of human society in their own communities. If they enter human communities, it is only briefly, and for a clearly delineated purpose. For instance, as I argued in chapter three, Grendel enters the Danes' hall, Heorot, in order to consume the men whose camaraderie and "hall joy" he seems to envy, while Grendel's mother comes to Heorot to avenge the death of her son. Each monster retreats after achieving this goal and returns home, to the monstrous mere. The separation of monstrous and human society is even more pronounced in *The Wonders of the East*, as I have discussed in chapter two, where human society is located at a significant distance from groups of monsters. Only wayward travelers, who frequently get eaten, or adventurers, like Alexander or the anonymous narrator of *Wonders*, come into contact



with these monsters; the wayward travelers seem to be profoundly lost, while the adventurers seem to have come for the precise purpose of seeing these monsters. In *Wonders*, only tales of the monsters are brought home, while Beowulf brings back trophies of the monstrous: Grendel's arm and his head. Yet in both of these Old English texts, the communities exist in very different spaces with intercourse occurring only between individual members for limited periods of time and for very specific purposes.

The same, however, is not true in Middle English: monsters not only affect but also enter human communities. They pass into and out of these communities, at times, with a kind of ease that signals a distinct change in visions of monstrosity between the two periods. It is not only a different understanding of a physically monstrous body that permits monsters to enter communities; rather, monsters are able to disguise, cover up, or transform their monstrous bodies. Whereas Old English monstrous bodies and therefore monstrous identities are permanent,<sup>121</sup> many monstrous bodies in Middle English literature are capable of transformation. In some cases, the monstrous body, against the individual's will, covers up an identity that is human, through a curse or some such narrative device. In other cases, the monstrous identity of the body is invisible to onlookers because it resides inside the human-appearing body, waiting for private and intimate moments to make itself known. Regardless of the individual situations, we see in Middle English literature, and in *Mandeville's Travels* specifically, the ability of a monstrous body to transform or be transformed—something evidently not possible for monsters in Old English literature.

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<sup>121</sup> I do not pretend to perform a comprehensive study of *all* Old English monsters, but the majority of the monsters have permanently monstrous bodies and identities. I have not yet come across a transformative Old English monster.

I am not alone in recognizing the possibility for changing bodies in Middle English literature. Caroline Walker Bynum's recent book, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, explores concepts and representations of change in Middle English texts. Just as I suggest a lack of transformative bodies in Old English literature, so too Bynum notes that "metamorphosis stories, popular in Antiquity but not in the early Middle Ages, revived" (25). She argues for an increased fascination with the nature of change:

intellectuals, religious leaders, and (insofar as we can glimpse them) ordinary people were fascinated by change as an ontological problem—not merely the birth and decay inherent in the life cycle, the economic and political opportunities attendant upon growth, the threat and promise posed by shifting gender relations and family structures, the efforts to position self engendered by cross-cultural contact and emerging national identities—but also and preeminently change itself: the fundamental fact that something can become something else. (18)

Change exists in two formulations: metamorphosis and hybridity. Metamorphosis is what she calls "replacement change," or a series of replacement changes, where something literally becomes something else. Hybridity, however, is visible multiplicity, where something has the parts of more than one creature: her example concerns the werewolf, which is hybrid in that it is part man and part wolf (29-30). She clarifies by denoting that hybridity is about a dual (or more) nature that exists simultaneously while metamorphosis is about mutation—a temporal change (30). Bynum explains this emerging interest in the idea of change by suggesting that changing bodies are reflective of significant social changes:

Changing social circumstances provided the context for such relevance. Agricultural, economic, and urban growth in the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries has led to transformations of familial and social structure that made it increasingly possible (if still not easy) for people—especially privileged people—to change their social roles. . . Thus we find, in the years around 1200, a new fascination with the other and with images of change in which one thing is, for better or worse, really replaced by something else. (26-27)

With social change providing the arena, the changing bodies are reflective of a no-longer stable personal identity. For Bynum, this lack of stability, in fact a lack of unity or permanence, indicates the development of individual identity often associated with the later medieval period (32-33).<sup>122</sup> These changed bodies, hybrid or metamorphic, according to Bynum, both maintain and challenge human identity.

According to John Block Friedman in *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, however, these monstrous humans were not conceived of as truly human. In the chapter “The Human Status of the Monstrous Races,” he recounts medieval scholastic arguments concerning these monsters and concludes that “it was not possible to grant full and equal humanity to an alien race...As long as the definition of ‘man’ was based upon a Western model, the monstrous races could only be assigned a subordinate place in the Chain of Being” (196). He claims that the medieval learned vision of monsters remains largely unchanged from Greek and Roman thought, which held that “the sense of the alien or ‘other’ in the marvelous races of the East was so great as to disqualify them...from the epithet ‘men’” (34). This same argument is repeated by Kim Hall, who claims that monsters’ “fantastically grotesque bodies serve to create ‘absolute difference between the reader and the subject’” (27, qtd in Fleck 383), and by Andrew Fleck, who argues that monsters “are included in Christian cosmography because they provide an aesthetic contrast, as a clearly sub-human other, to the reader’s sense of self” (385). While this sense of the monster as utterly different may be reflected in medieval learned visions of monstrosity, popular representations, particularly those that figure transformative bodies, suggest a different understanding of the monstrous body as

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<sup>122</sup> For further discussion, see Bynum’s essay “Why All the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective.”

recognizably human. Mary Campbell asserts that the Mandeville author attempts to naturalize the monsters, saying “The Elsewhere of sub- or supernature, into which the West had so long projected the other halves of its divided self, is *not* accessible to the earthly traveler, and Mandeville has rendered the places and peoples that once belonged to it as ‘part of nature, part of us’” (160-61). While these monsters are rendered as a part of the same natural world that contains the human, the visibly monstrous remain hierarchically inferior to the human. It is when the monstrous becomes less visible, or less permanent, that the relation of the monstrous to the human must change. If a monster can pass as a human, then that changes what it means to be human.

The author of *Mandeville’s Travels* lists more than twenty different kinds of human monsters in his pilgrimage through the Holy Land and the marvelous East.<sup>123</sup> Of these monsters, four are transformative: the daughter of Hippocrates, who turns from a woman into a dragon, the impregnated dead woman who gives birth to a monstrous head, the Amazons, and the poison virgins.<sup>124</sup> Although drawn from a number of sources, these transformative monsters bear some significant similarities. First, in each case, the monstrous and transformative body is female. Second, each case raises questions of

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<sup>123</sup> Lisa Verner’s 2005 book, *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages*, includes a chapter on *Mandeville’s Travels*. In this chapter, she concludes, somewhat unhelpfully, that monsters “are, sometimes simultaneously, pious and secular, informative and diverting, symbolic and arbitrary. In the *Travels* meaning has become fluid and dependent on perspective or situation” (153). She offers readings of some specific monsters, including the Cyncephali, the Pygmies, the Cannibals, and the Blemmyae, but mentions none of the monsters I discuss in this chapter.

<sup>124</sup> Two other people might be considered monstrous transformations: two men, in different parts of the narrative, are raised from the dead by contact with Christ or with a relic. The living dead, also, certainly comprise a category of monstrosity. For more on the living dead, see Kari Ellen Gade, “The Naked and the Dead in Old Norse Society,” *Scandinavian Studies* 60:2 (1998 Spring), 219-45; Elizabeth Jane Stern’s unpublished dissertation, “Legends of the Dead in Medieval and Modern Icelandic” (1988); and Gregg Smith’s unpublished dissertation from the University of Washington, “Death and Desire: The Thematic Function of the Dead in Medieval Icelandic and Irish Literature” (1996). I would argue, however, that these two figures are not truly monstrous, as they are brought back to their living forms, and are not corpses continuing to live unnaturally. They are miracles rather than monsters.

marital and reproductive circulation for these monstrous bodies. The monsters I study here may seem to reflect both of Bynum's categories of change, metamorphosis and hybridity, but ultimately even if they are hybrid monsters they undergo literal metamorphosis: changing from one thing to another. Thus the quality they all share is a lack of permanence. The problem with the transformative body is that at times it appears to be completely human, while at others, it is clearly monstrous. When the body appears human, it can participate in the marital economy; however, this situation becomes complicated when the body is transformed. Whereas truly and permanently monstrous bodies do not exist in human communities, those that are transformative are able to enter and participate in these communities. In Middle English literature, and especially in *Mandeville's Travels*, the monster has infiltrated the human community of readers, forcing readers to reconsider the nature of monstrosity and the permanence of human identity, as well as the stability of their communities.

### **The Dragon Woman: Out of Circulation**

Critics often split Sir John's narrative into two halves: in the first, he journeys away from home and through the Holy Land. He speaks with the Sultan about the problems of Christianity and rejects marriage to the Sultan's daughter. In the second half, he moves past the Holy Land into the marvelous East. Here he encounters the communities of the Great Khan and Prester John, two powerful leaders, and he sees unfamiliar and fascinating parts of the world before journeying home. Donald Howard argues that these two halves of the text are set against each other structurally and purposefully: "The book, for all its digressiveness, is remarkably structured; its two parts

are set against each other so as to reveal a common truth from different perspectives” (67). For Howard, the first half is a journey through Biblical time while the second half is a journey through a time *before* Biblical time. However, these structural categories are not absolute. The first half is not devoid of monsters, just as the second half is not devoid of Christianity. In fact, of the four transformative monsters that are the concern of this chapter, two appear in the first half, and two appear in the second half—and those in the first half do not mirror those of the second half. Instead, the dispersion of these monsters indicates that they are not geographically limited to a single and exotic space—they are everywhere. Therefore, a witness cannot simply ride away and safely distance himself from these monsters. They are implicated in, not simply extracted from, civilization.

The first two transformative monsters of the text are, in some ways, historically removed from the narrator. Rather than being monsters he claims to witness, they are described to him as parts of the history of the geography he encounters. They are fundamentally linked to the places in which they exist—the dragon woman because she is the heir to a kingdom, and the monstrous head because it causes the destruction of the city of Satalia. Just outside of Constantinople, Sir John learns about the dragon-shaped daughter of Hippocrates, a transformative creature upon whose human body depends the future of a kingdom. Although discussed cursorily by recent scholars, her significance has historically been overlooked; for instance, Josephine Bennett, in her formative 1954 study, *The Rediscovery of Sir John Mandeville*, remarks on the dragon woman only because the Mandeville author changes the location of the tale from the location in his source material, and she never comments on the details of the story itself (50). More recently, Higgins has noted the tale’s early placement in the narrative:

...coming as it does right after the apology for digressing into ‘choses estranges,’ this local legend...both reinforces and supplements the already established expectations about *The Book*’s heterogeneous nature and capacious extent— incidentally disproving the common recent view that the *Mandeville*-author’s ‘taste for romancing’ grew as he went and took ‘bolder flight’ only when the text passes beyond the biblical East. (85)

The significance of this story, however, lies not only in the fact that its location suggests another geographical possibility for marvels, but also in the geographical and social proximity of such a marvel to recognizable and civilized human communities like Constantinople.

In his description of this first transformative monster, Sir John indicates a division between the monstrous form and the human trapped inside. Although he does not actually witness this creature, he explains its nature to his audience: “And somme seiþ þat in þat yle of Lango is Ypocras dou3ter in schap of a dragoun þat is an hundred feet long, as men seiþ, for Y haue not yseye it” [And some say that in the isle of Cos is Hippocrates’ daughter in the shape of a dragon that is a hundred feet long, as men say, because I have not seen it] (Defective 15). The monster here is clearly identified as human: she is the daughter of a known man who has only assumed the “schap,” or in the Cotton version, “forme and lykness” (14), of a dragon—she is not really a dragon at heart. Therefore, her appearance—her shape or her form—is monstrous but, the author seems to suggest, her essence as well as her lineage are quite human. Not only is this identity human, but it is also, as Rosemary Tzanaki suggests, noble: “Thus we are dealing with a person of noble birth; her noble nature is at least partly retained while she is externally a monster” (153). Despite the outward form of dragon, the inward reality is both human and noble.

It is precisely because she is noble that the transformation of this girl is so troubling. She has not set the spell on herself; instead she has been enchanted, by Diana in most versions, but by a cruel “stepmoodire” [stepmother] (line 673) in the Metrical: “And heo was þus chaungid fro a feire damysel to a dragoun þur3 a goddess þat men clepiþ Deane” [And she was thus changed from a fair damsel to a dragon by a goddess that men call Diana] (Defective 15).<sup>125</sup> While Diana’s classical association with female chastity lends her motivation to maintain the young woman’s virginity, we can only suppose that the stepmother’s desire to keep her out of circulation stems from the stereotypical dynastic impulse of most fairytale stepmothers. The stepmother wants to replace the rightful daughter with her own children, thus subverting the uppermost level of the class structure by effectually neutralizing or neutering the heir to the throne. The only way for this enchantment to be broken is through the kiss of a man both appropriately classed and brave, a knight: “And men seiþ þat heo schal dwelle so to þe tyme þat a kny3t come þat is so hardy þat dar go to here and kisse here mouþ, and þan schal heo turne a3en to here owne kynde and be a woman, and aftir þat heo schal not lyue longe” [And men say that she shall dwell in this way until the time that a knight comes that is so hardy that he dares to go to her and kiss her mouth, and then shall she turn again into her own kind and be a woman, and after that she shall not live long] (Defective 15). This kind of spell may seem very familiar to modern readers—however, it is not the frog that is transformed into a handsome man but the body of the woman that is transformed upon the arrival and success of only a worthy contender from the proper social class. Her

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<sup>125</sup> The Bodley Version says that Diana transforms her because she is envious (426), so the impulse for the maintenance of her virginity is not emphasized in quite the same way.



status as inwardly human is reaffirmed here, when the author declares not only that she will be a woman again but that this transformation will enact a return “to here owne kynde.”

Her imminent death upon the transformation, however, must make the reader fundamentally uncomfortable. If transformation means death, does the young woman truly seek to be transformed? Her actions and reactions are certainly complicated by the ultimate outcome of her transformation. Similarly we must question the impulses of the knights who come to offer the transformative kiss. What is the reward for the knight if his betrothed will soon be dead? The inheritance of the kingdom seems more likely than either the promise of a lovely wife or the satisfaction of saving a damsel from her own body. If such a financial and social boon is the primary motivation for the knight, then the knight is a fundamentally flawed representative of this ideal class.

The first knight to visit her, “the knight of Rhodes,” is clearly flawed, lacking both bravery and the ability to uphold his boasts to win her. When he does approach, with the intention of kissing the dragon, he sees her and flees because he “sau3 it so [hydous]” [saw it was so hideous] (Defective 15). Among the variations of the Defective Version, the description of her repulsive form is augmented in other ways, one manuscript saying “meruelous” instead of hideous, another adding “hydous and so horrible” [hideous and so horrible] and yet another declaring that he ran when he saw “the huge beest” [the huge beast] (15, note). While the text emphasizes the horrors of the dragon’s form, it also suggests that any knight worth winning her hand and her kingdom must be brave enough to face such a monster. The Defective, Cotton, Bodley, and Egerton versions attribute the knight’s death directly to the dragon’s actions, as a direct and angry response to his

cowardice and failure.<sup>126</sup> After he flees, “...þe dragoun folewid after and toke þe kni3t and bare hym mawgre his teep on a roche, and of þat roche heo caste hym into þe see, and so was þe kni3t lost” [...the dragon followed after and took the knight and bore him in (her) teeth onto a rock, and from that rock she cast him into the sea, and so the knight was lost] (Defective 15). The Cotton lends her act just a little more violence, because she carries him by “his hede” [his head] (15) to fling him into the sea. The knight is clearly a failed representative of his class, unfit to marry her and to rule a kingdom because of his inability to perform as a proper knight should.

While deserved, the punishment of the knight must cause an audience to be concerned about the woman who enacts it—the gentlewoman trapped inside the hideous body of the monster. The dragon form preserves her life, but does it preserve her humanity? While we have been assured early on that the dragon “dop no man harm but yf ony man do here harm” [will do no man harm unless any man should do her harm] (Defective 15), this story offers an intriguing glimpse of human motivation and dragonish action. Even if we consider the knight’s cowardice to be deserving of death, the audience should be shocked that the damsel in distress functions as the agent of his demise. Her female human reaction to the insult and rejection by the knight leads to her dragonish murder of him. However much we are told she is only dragon on the outside, she seems to have assimilated some of the behaviors inherent in the physical form of a dragon. The transformation of her body serves as more than a disguise of the real girl inside. Bynum

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<sup>126</sup> In the Metrical Version, we do not even have a chance to hear about the knight’s reaction, because his horse’s is so violent: the horse takes one look at the dragon and “He fledde for feere and wolde naught bide/ Til he come to the see side,/ And into the see lepe the hors than,/ And so was lost both hors and man” [he fled for fear and would not stay until he came to the seaside, and the horse leapt into the sea, and so both the horse and the man were lost] (693-96). The death of the knight cannot be blamed on his own desire to run, or on the dragon’s response to his running; instead, “his failure is explained as the result of the dragon’s great ugliness rather than his own lack of courage” (Tzanaki 157).

argues that in the act of transformation, “something perdures, carried by the changing shape that never completely loses physical or behavioral traces of what it was” (32). Although the human resides inside the dragon, the physical possibilities of the dragon body change the abilities and identity of the human inside. Just as traces of the human remain, so must traces of the dragon.

The dragon body that informs the human identity, however, is not entirely permanent. Because of this transformative ability, the woman’s human body is misleading and open to misinterpretation. Somehow the young woman is able to transform back and forth, for a young man who does not know about the curse comes upon her castle after a shipwreck and finds her in human form. He sees “a damysel þat kembid here heed and lokid in a myrrour, and heo hadde myche tresour aboute here, and he trowid þat heo hadde be a comyne woman þat dwelled þere to kepe men [a damsel that combed her hair and looked in a mirror, and she had much treasure around her, and he thought that she was a common woman (a prostitute) that dwelled there to keep men] (Defective 15-16). This man, who is notably *not* a knight, considerably misreads her situation. Instead of recognizing her as being *out* of circulation, he sees her as a much-circulated object, a prostitute. He assumes that she has earned the treasure lying around through the exchange of her body. Readers, however, recognize that she, like the money and castle, is an economic asset that is not being properly circulated because of her monstrous form. The treasure may also serve to remind us that she is a dragon that does what dragons do: sit on treasure. The image functions multivalently to suggest the same truth that the man misunderstands; she represents an unusable commodity. Moreover, the mirror that she gazes into serves as a reminder of the problem of her physicality. The

mirror, often a symbol of female vanity, duplicity, and falseness, asks us to decide upon her true identity. Higgins suggests that “Perhaps the mirror into which the damsel gazes is a symbol less of vanity than of self-knowledge: powerless to help herself, the passive figure understands her situation and motives far better than the two lecherous suitors do their own” (88). Does the mirror reflect her true form, the human one, or does it suggest a trick that the unsuspecting young man will soon suffer? Upon considering the mirror, readers are asked to decide which is the true identity of the maiden: her original form or the monstrous one imposed upon her. Perhaps the unsettling answer to such a question is that, because traces of the dragon will always remain, the maiden and the dragon are truly inextricable.

While the audience might feel pity for the trapped woman, it must also recall her violent response to the knight of Rhodes. If we recognize that a real (although cowardly) knight failed, then we can only expect worse for this poor sailor who has so grievously misread her situation. We must see her as at least a little dangerous—a little more dragon and a little less human than the simple spell suggests. The woman tells the man to make his shipmates knight him and to return to her the next morning; however, this transition seems less than convincing because class status simply cannot be that easily changed. She also warns him not to fear what he might find, and assures him that he will be repaid for his efforts:

And heo bade hym haue no drede, for heo schulde do hym non harm yf al hym þou3t þat heo were [hidous] to se. Heo seide it was don by enchauntement, for heo seide þat heo was siche as he sau3 here þanne. And heo seide 3if he kissed here, he schulde haue al þe tresour and be lord of here and of þese yles. [And she bade him have no fear, for she would do him no harm, if all he thought that she

was hideous to see. She said it was done by enchantment, for she said that she was such as he saw her then. And she said if he kissed her, he would have all the treasure and be lord of her and of these isles.] (Defective 16)

Her promises of what he will gain by kissing her further suggest her anticipated return to economic circulation. The assets of the castle have been removed from the community by her transformation, and they must be restored.

However, like the first knight, this man is doomed to fail. His knighthood, bestowed by his shipmates, is neither valiantly won nor validly granted. He is less of a knight than the knight of Rhodes, a fact that seems to be noted by the dragon, as she reacts less violently to him:

And when he sau3 here come out of þe caue in likenes of a dragoun, he hadde so grete drede þat he fli3 to þe schip. And heo folewid hym, and when heo sau3 he turned no a3en, heo bigan to crie as a þing þat hadde grete sorwe, and heo turned a3en. And als soone þe kni3t deide. [And when he saw her come out of the cave in the likeness of a dragon, he had such great fear that he flew to the ship. And she followed him, and when she saw he did not turn back again, she began to cry like a thing that had great sorrow, and she turned back again. And also soon the knight died.] (16)

This time she does not kill the man so recently made a knight. Like the dragon, the audience should note his cowardice but criticize it less, as he is not truly a knight. In most of the versions he dies not from her violence but later from fear, as the Bodley Version clarifies: he “soone deide for ferednes that he had whenne he saw3 hir come after him” [soon died because of the fear that he had when he saw her come after him] (427).<sup>127</sup> His attempt to change social class is not only futile but also fatal. He is killed not by an

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<sup>127</sup> In the Metrical Version, he does not die at all; he flees in line 745 and in line 746, the author begins talking about the geography of Rhodes.

outside source, like the first knight who fails to live up to the standards of his class, but by an inherent weakness. The dragon woman simply does not hold the same expectations for him as she did for a real knight.

In this second interaction, the monster's dual nature and geographical location become clearly linked with danger to the community. Here the dragon woman's human emotions overpower any dragonish action. Higgins argues that the audience feels sympathy for the monster, saying "one can hardly deny that the erotic legend is told in a manner that evokes pity for the transformed, trapped, and desperately human damsel rather than awe or terror at the power of pagan magic, as one might expect in a pilgrim's guide" (88). We are invited to feel pity at the conclusion of the tale, when the final lines inform us that no knight has yet met with success. While we cannot help but critique a class of knights that fails at a task requiring no real fight with the monster, we also cannot ignore the hybrid nature of the dragon woman. Her person and situation remain an alluring attraction and have enticed a number of knights, members of the elite class that are responsible for propagating their bloodlines, to very unproductive deaths. The human body that drew the ignorant sailor in through its attractiveness and (false) availability continues to lead men astray with its promises of plenty: "But when a kni3t comeþ þat is so hardy to kisse here, he schal not dei3e but he schale turne þat damysele into here ri3te schap, and he schal be lord of here and þe yles biforeseid" [But when a knight comes that is so hardy to kiss her, he shall not die but he shall turn that damsel into her right shape, and he shall be lord of her and the isles mentioned before] (Defective 16). Higgins comments that this is a "(mocking?) challenge to chivalric readers" (88); they are invited to prove their worth in view of clear evidence of their failure.

The dragon woman remains a danger to communities precisely because her body is transformative. Monstrosity removes her from the social role she ought to occupy—it interrupts the processes of both reproduction and inheritance. Although the story is often seen as a less-than-serious diversion, the consequences for a knightly community seem serious. Because the fictional Mandeville, the aged knight as a narrator, is painted somewhat ironically, the comment on knighthood here is often taken to be similarly ironic, as Tzanaki indicates:

And it is true that an episode which could have been no more than a frightening monster story has been transformed into a tale where the ‘knight’ unexpectedly proves to be an anti-hero and the dragon is the wronged victim. This reversal of the expectations of romance, while preserving its attributes, is a humorous development...Mandevillian irony is used here to parody romance as well as to make a more serious point. (155)

But what is this serious point? Higgins suggests that “the legend can be read as an indirect critique of the knightly estate partly resembling the more open attack in the exordium, which reproaches those involved in divisive quarrels at home when there is a divine inheritance to be won overseas” (86). While this claim reflects the primary set of concerns of *Mandeville’s Travels*, it also ignores another serious comment made about communities at home. Marital circulation is a part of this economic equation, and women’s bodies are the basis for this circulation, as is all too evident in the dangerously remote transformative body of Hippocrates’ daughter, the dragon woman. The woman’s body, in this episode, is bound to the monstrous one. Because she is monstrous, she is capable of taking lives, but because she is transformative, she presents the tempting possibility of reintegration. It is the latter that makes her most dangerous.

## **Necrophilia and the Reproductive Body**

Community and women's bodies also figure significantly in the following story about the fall of the city of Satalia. While many critics discuss Hippocrates' daughter, they pay much less attention to the fall of Satalia. Most often, the two stories are linked both structurally and thematically by scholars. Donald Howard argues that the stories of Hippocrates' daughter and the fall of Satalia, which he sees as paired together purposely, reflect the paired structure of *Mandeville's Travels* as a whole. However, he ultimately fails to comment at any length or with any detail on the meaning of the stories. Tzanaki, too, comments on the relationship of the two stories, focusing more thematically: "Coming as it does so soon after the dragon-woman tale, this story shows certain thematic similarities: a lady, a love, a wrongful deed, a horrible monster and vengeance wreaked on the perpetrator of the act" (158). While the relationships between the two stories are striking, the fall of Satalia offers two very complicated kinds of transformative bodies not present in the story of Hippocrates' daughter: the reproductive body and the dead body.

Mandeville opens by pausing on a geographical tour of the area at the spot of a lost city, telling us that Satalia has been lost "þur3 þe foly of a 3ong man" [through the folly of a young man] (Defective 17). This young man has lost his beloved: "þer was a faire damysele þat he loued wele, and heo deide sodenly and was [put] in a graue of marbel" [there was a fair damsel that he loved well and she died suddenly and was put in a grave of marble] (17). Like the knight killed by the dragon-woman, he is a man of some status according to the Metrical version, which claims he was "a burgeis sone of grete renoun" [a burgess' son of great renown] (763). Despite his good reputation, he engages



in a behavior that is not only ignoble, but also perverse: “And for þe grete loue þat he hadde to here, he went on a ny3t to here graue and openyd it and went yn and lay by here and 3eode his way” [And because of the great love that he had for her, he went at night to her grave and opened it and went in and lay by her and went his way] (Defective 17). The Cotton version attributes his act to “lust” rather than love (16). His necrophilic act is problematic because he transgresses the boundary between living and dead bodies, and in doing so he does not perpetuate his line with a woman who can bear children. He has closed off his own genetic circulation in the community.

While he is the one acting perversely, it is the dead body of his lover that becomes transformed. Just as he crossed the boundary between living and dead by engaging in sexual relations with a dead woman, so does her body transgress this boundary by abiding by the functions of a living body. Nine months later,<sup>128</sup> the young man hears a voice that tells him to return to her grave and to open it “and behold what þou hast gete of here, and if þou go nou3t, þou schalt haue grete harm” [and behold what you have gotten by her, and if you do not go, you shall have great harm] (Defective 17). The man returns to the grave as he is directed, and upon opening the tomb, he releases the monstrous birth of his dead lover—a hideous head: “þer flowe out an hede ri3t [hideous] to se, þe whiche alsoone flowe aboute þe cite and þe cuntre, and als soone þe cite sank doun” [there flew out a head right hideous to see, which immediately flew about the city and the country, and immediately the city sank down] (17). The Egerton adds “horrible” to “hideous” (19), while the Bodley offers even more description: “Thenne anon flewe out of the towmbe as it had ben in manere of an heede of a foule forshapen horrible beest” [Then at

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<sup>128</sup> The length of time in the Metrical and Bodley versions is 12 months, while Egerton, Cotton, and Defective go by the more natal nine.

once flew out of the tomb something in the manner of the head of a foul transformed horrible beast] (428). In the Metrical Version, the head, along with its eye and countenance, are “brennynge” [burning] (783-4), and they catch the city aflame and “brent it clene vnto þe grounde” [burned it clean unto the ground] (786).

We never witness the supposed birth of this horrifying head, but both the length of time of its gestation (nine months) and the fact that the voice claims that the young man ‘gets’ it by his dead lover suggest that the head is the monstrous progeny of the perverse union. Instead of reproducing his wealthy line within a sanctioned union, the young man reproduces death and destruction in the form of an incomplete and horrifying monster. Only in the Bodley Version is the head described as being that of a beast; the absence of description in the other texts suggests that it takes a more human shape, as it is the (monstrous) product of human bodies. The feminine processes of pregnancy and birth imply a natural kind of transformation of the human form; the processes of death and decay are similarly natural. However, by combining the properties of both natural processes, the author offers a new kind of monster—one that is not associated with the more recognizable living dead. The dead lover here does not perambulate or even function as more than a plot device; she is simply the means through which the young man enacts his perversion. The crime is not so much the necrophilia—although it is obviously punished—but the young man’s inability to integrate himself in the economy of marriage and community. While the flaming head is clearly monstrous, the more dangerous monster is the living dead body of his lover that lures him even after death. It is a hybrid female body that operates productively and destructively. The young man’s

union with the monstrous—a thing that looks like his lover but is transformed by death—results not only in the horrifying head, but in the literal destruction of the entire city of Satalia.

The Mandeville author emphasizes ideas about dangerous unions, monstrous bodies, and destroyed communities by linking the story of the dragon woman with the story of the fall of Satalia. In one, a proper knight is required to relieve the dragon of her “hideous” form while in the other, the son of a prominent figure in the community engages in an unsanctioned and exogamous union. In both, whole communities are punished: Cos waits indefinitely for Hippocrates’ daughter to marry and provide a new leader, and Satalia is destroyed because the burgess’s son fathers a monster with his dead lover. I am not the first to see the connections between the two tales. Howard argues that their pairing reflects two sides of the same coin: “one is about the possible and hopeful, the other about the forbidden and dreadful; in one death may be overcome, in the other death is hideously reproduced. It would not be impossible to see in them a suggestion of salvation and damnation, spiritual life and spiritual death” (66). While the fall of Satalia is certainly representative of spiritual death, the story of the dragon woman seems more reflective of futility and the crisis of the transformative body that is hopelessly dual. Although she might still be rescued from her dragon form by a kiss, the result of such “salvation” is ultimately death for her. Once transformed, the body cannot be truly redeemed; it carries with it lasting traces of the other identity. Campbell, too, remarks on the paradox represented by both stories, as well as by *Mandeville’s Travels* as a whole. For her, the East through which Mandeville travels is a paradox because it simultaneously represents biblical history and the marvelous. The tales of Satalia and Hippocrates’

daughter reflect just such a paradox, in their representation of a series of images that she claims carry through the text as a whole: “tomb/ditch/pit/well/breast/flood: earth and water, body and spirit, fecundity and carnality and necrophilia. Paradox is the major arrangement...” (152). The recurrence of such images noted by Campbell, I argue, reflects larger concerns not only with birth and death, but with marriage and reproduction—concerns necessary for the perpetuation of communities. These paradoxical images are excessive; they appear continually through the text, but more importantly, they represent bodies that are excessively changeable and thus untrustworthy.

These two tales represent very similar anxieties about bodies and communities. Tzanaki argues that the “two tales are versions, or rather inversions, of the romance theme of courtly love, taken to unpleasant extremes” (159). They reflect punishments for misbehavior, as “those who do not live according to the rules of virtue, particularly members of the nobility, are punished accordingly through supernatural means” (160). While the first knight and the young man are clearly punished for inappropriate noble behavior, the fact that more innocent characters are also punished complicates the moral lesson. The initially innocent young daughter of Hippocrates is trapped indefinitely in the form of a dragon, alternately killing or weeping over the men who flee her horrifying ‘schap,’ while the entire city of Satalia suffers by the young man’s moral failings. The two tales do function as moral exempla, but the moral is about something less idealistic than virtue. Instead, both tales urge the socially appropriate circulation of stable and human bodies, while they simultaneously suggest that the bodies of women—not just dead women—teeter terrifyingly close to the possibility of monstrous transformation.

Most significantly, these women's bodies are affiliated with named and recognizable communities; they are no longer curiosities to be stared at from afar, but are implicated in the processes by which civilized communities live and die.

### **Self-Inflicted Monstrosity**

The stories of Hippocrates' daughter and the Head of Satalia are told before Sir John reaches Jerusalem, and reflect the distant past of their respective locations.<sup>129</sup> The next two transformative monsters that will be discussed, however, are reported after Sir John visits Jerusalem, and as he makes his way through the marvelous East and the lands of the Great Khan and Prester John. They are not a part of what Higgins calls the "famous set-piece list of monsters" (150), a list of the traditional Plinian races that shows up in all but the Metrical Version. While the list is fascinating in its own way, it offers no transformative bodies; moreover, as Tzanaki notes, it "is a simple listing of attributes, with none of the sociological commentary accorded other strange peoples such as the Cyncephali" (95). These monsters, including the single-footed men, the men with faces in their chests, and the hermaphrodites—derived from Pliny and the *Speculum historiale* (95)—are the monsters most commonly identified with the post-Jerusalem portion of the narrative. Donald Howard designates the post-Jerusalem portion of the narrative as the "second half," and claims that it works as a journey backward in time:

In this world of the distant past lies the dispersal of individuals, peoples, and languages; at the root of all, the expulsion from Paradise. We pass through the leavings of the *first* age of the world, the age before the law of Moses, the Age of

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<sup>129</sup> The city of Satalia has been completely destroyed by the fiery head, and no new communities have come to exist in its place. Similarly, the community at Cos is also one that exists only in the past, because it has no heir after the king's daughter is turned into the dragon.

Nature. It is, however, *fallen* nature, nature in decline from its primeval state—a world of grotesques, sports and freaks of nature, of anthropophagi and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders... (72)

While the Plinian monsters might reflect fallen nature—through what Howard sees as the monsters’ incomplete humanity—the Amazons and the poison virgins have more in common with the dragon woman and reproductive dead body of the first half. They reflect a similar concern about the narrative proximity and reproductive circulation of monstrous bodies. Most significantly, I argue that the bodies of the Amazons are associated not with biblical history and pre-Christian Jews, but with Christian continuity because they protect humanity from the coming of the next age, which will be hastened by the Jews—the coming of the Antichrist. However, in their position as guards as well as in the configurations of their physical bodies and the structure of their society, they remain liminal to “normal” human society. While most of the non-Christian societies in *Mandeville’s Travels* can be considered liminal to some extent, the community of Amazons is differentiated through the marked and monstrous bodies of its members as well as its transgressive social practices.

The Amazons are human women who become monstrous when they mark their bodies as physically different. Rather than a magical transformation by a cruel stepmother or jealous god, these women effect their own transformation. They cut off a breast of all female children: “And 3if it be a female þei don away þat on pappe with an hote hiren” [and if it is a female, they do away with one breast with a hot iron] (Cotton 103).<sup>130</sup> This is not mere butchery; it functions practically while simultaneously serving

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<sup>130</sup> The Defective, like the Metrical does not describe the breasts being burned off with a hot iron, and also does not mention this practice in the context of a discussion of what happens when children are born to the

as a marker of social status within the community itself: “And yf þei be of gentel blood, þei brenne of þe lyft pap for beryng of a schild; and yf þei be of oþer blood, þei brenne of þe ri3t pap for scheotyng of a bowe. For wymmen þere beþ goode werriouris” [And if they are of gentle blood, they burn off the left breast for the bearing of a shield, and if they are of other blood, they burn off the right breast for the shooting of a bow, because women there are good warriors] (Defective 69). While the process by which the breasts are removed differs among the manuscripts, some suggesting that the breast is burned off, others that it is cut off, the designation of the breast removed according to social class remains unchanged in all manuscripts considered. Thus the removal of the breast distinguishes the women not only from external societies, but also within the internal social order. That upper class women bear shields while lower class women shoot bows raises interesting questions about this specific division of labor. The fact that certain classes perform certain battle functions is less significant than the fact that such class distinctions are articulated through the form of the body. Single-breastedness, then, not only identifies these women as Amazons, but also declares their class identities within their community. In this case, the transformation serves to reveal the monstrous social identity of a body that would otherwise appear “normal.”

The Amazons’ single-breasted and therefore monstrous bodies<sup>131</sup> transform themselves in much the same way that this community’s female-only identity developed: through physical actions in response to troubling social circumstances. The Amazons,

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women, although it does discuss the reasons for the removal of a breast, as I will discuss. The Egerton and Bodley Versions have girl children’s breasts being shorn away rather than burned off, although the breasts are said to be burned after they are removed (111, 458).

<sup>131</sup> I do not mean to suggest that such standards hold true today—ideas of normality function differently for twentieth century communities, as is discussed by Michael Warner in “The Trouble with Normal.”

who “...wole suffre no man among hem noþer to haue lordschipe of hem” [will suffer no man to [live] among them nor to have lordship of them] (Defective 68), were once defined by their roles as wives and mothers left behind in war. Their king, Solapence,<sup>132</sup> “was slei3e in bateil and al þe good blood of his lond wiþ hym” [was slain in battle and all the good blood of his land with him] (68). The women, instead of becoming prisoners or settling for lesser men, band together and kill the rest of the men left among them: “þei gedrid hem togedir and armed hem wel and þei slowe al þe men þat were yleft in here lond” [they gathered together and armed themselves well and they slew all the men that were left in their land] (68).<sup>133</sup> Although the Defective, Egerton, and Bodley manuscripts make no moral judgments about this action, Cotton comments that when they kill these men the women are “creatures out of wytt” [creatures out of their minds] (102). The action is troubling, as is evident in Cotton’s comment upon their insanity when performing it, but it is not so troubling that the community is shunned by others or condemned by Sir John.<sup>134</sup> It is the action, however, that defines them as a community of women actively without men; as they cut the men from their community, so too do they cut off a breast to enable their performance of the traditionally masculine practice of war.

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<sup>132</sup> He is Colopeus in Cotton, Egerton, and Bodley, while he is Tholopeus in Metrical.

<sup>133</sup> Metrical has them fighting and killing the enemy army, as “alle thaire lordis oolde and yonge” [all their lords old and young] (line 1804) have been killed. This move makes the women’s violence less troubling because it is directed at an enemy army out of vengeance, but still reiterates class issues: while the husbands in the other texts are of “good blood,” here they are all “lords,” suggesting a similar class status.

<sup>134</sup> Sir John notably refuses to make judgments upon the practices of other cultures, except the Jews, who are painted as completely evil throughout. For a discussion of his unbiased treatment of the many communities, see Fleck, “Here, There, and In Between: Representing Difference in the *Travels* of Sir John Mandeville” and Sebastian Sobiecki’s “Mandeville’s Thought of the Limit: The Discourse of Similarity and Difference in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*,” in addition to Higgins, Tzanaki, Howard, and Greenblatt.



Here it is the arguably monstrous murder of men of “low blood” that leads to the marking of the body as monstrous. This is quite different than the case of the dragon woman, where the monstrous body instigates the monstrous action.

While the excision of men and breasts seems to be antithetical to the continuance of community, it actually protects proper reproductive circulation. It is preferable that these women kill rather than be led by, marry, or have children with men who were not of “good blood.” This does not mean that they will not continue to circulate with acceptable men: the Amazons do not give up their identities as mothers or even as sexual beings simply because they have banned men from their community, just as they do not lose their identities as women because they cut off a breast and take up the weapons of war. The location of sex acts, however, is not in the center of the community, but is instead liminal to it: “And whanne þei wole haue ony man to lye by hem, þei sende for hem into a cuntre þat is nere to here lond, and þe men beþ þere viii dayes oþer as longe as þe wymmen wole and þenne þei goþ ayen” [And when they wish to have any man lie by them, they send for them into a country that is near to their land and the man is there eight days or as long as the women wish and then they go again] (Defective 68-69). Here it is unclear whether the relationship takes place in the Amazons’ country, with the man departing after this short period of time, but this issue is clarified by Bodley and Egerton. Bodley says “they drawe hem to the side of the londe where her lemannes arn dwellynge, and be with hem ix or x dayes” [they draw themselves to the side of the land where their lovers are dwelling and are with them nine or ten days] (Bodley 457). These relationships are external to both countries; they take place instead on the borders between. If the women bear female children, they become Amazons, and if they have male children, they

“sende hem to here fadris when þei kunne goo and ete” [send them to their fathers when they can walk and eat] (Defective 69).<sup>135</sup> By killing low class men, the Amazons protect their social structure; this protection of the social order is perpetuated through the class-based removal of the right or the left breast from young girls. Proper circulation is thus ensured, then, through the murder of inappropriate partners, the selection of fathers from nearby lands, and the marking of bodies so that class status cannot be transgressed.

Sir John and members of most surrounding communities marvel at the social structure of the Amazons. In Mandeville, they are not merely ridiculous inversions of femininity as they are elsewhere in medieval literature, as noted by Tzanaki:

The legend of the Amazons is also transformed into something rather different from its originals. In the *Roman d’Alexandre* and the *Letter of Prester John*, the Amazons are seen as an inversion of normal customs: instead of the knights returning from warfare to their ladies, it is stressed, sometimes comically, that the roles are reversed by the warrior-women. Mandeville’s approach is not the same. The Amazons, no longer historical legend but contemporary exoticism, are remarkable more for their admirable political system than their sexual roles. (44)

Similarly, they are significant for more than their transgressive and fascinating physical forms. Instead, they are worthy of notice for their effective governance, even as this is affected by their physical forms and social structure. “What interests the *Mandeville*-author about Amazonia, for example, is not so much its lack of men as the at once monastic and feudal way in which the all-female realm itself is organized” (Higgins 145). All the manuscripts say that the queen “gouerneþ þat londe wel” [governs that land well] (Defective 69), and all but the Defective manuscript elaborate on the manner of her election and the prowess of the women in general. The women “maken here queen by

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<sup>135</sup> Cotton, Egerton, and Bodley all say that they may also kill male children, but Defective and Metrical erase this more unpleasant possibility. The most popular text, then, the Defective, makes the women less violent and more understandable as human mothers.

electioun þat is most worthy in armes” [make her, who is most worthy in arms, queen by election] (Cotton 103). Their martial identity is paramount to their ability not only to retain a group identity, but to financially support themselves, for “þei gon often tyme in sowd to help of oþer kynges in here werres for gold & syluer as othere sowydoures don” [they often go as soldiers to help other kings in their wars for gold and silver as other soldiers do] (Cotton 103). Very much unlike the dragon woman, they circulate reproductively and financially, even if they do not marry. They upset traditional social systems, but they are not entirely disruptive figures.

While they themselves circulate, part of their function, narratively, is to keep undesirables *out* of circulation. They kill off the men of their community who are not of “good blood,” but more importantly, they use their physical location and martial prowess to keep the most loathed of groups—the Jews—from circulating freely. Thus the Amazons, while monstrous and socially disruptive, ultimately serve the good society at large, unlike the rest of the monstrous transformative women in *Mandeville*. The Amazons may be preferable to the Jews, but they still remain external to “normal” human society. While *Mandeville* is notably tolerant of the many strange cultures he encounters, his attitude toward the Jews is harsh.<sup>136</sup> The Jews here are the twenty-two tribes enclosed, legendarily, by Alexander the Great.<sup>137</sup> They are surrounded on three sides by hills and

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<sup>136</sup> Stephen Greenblatt notes: “And now I turn to the second shadow that falls across *Mandeville’s Travels* and darkens the generous accounts of Brahmin mystics, Tibetan cannibals, and Chinese idolators. Such peoples were, of course, completely fantastic for a fourteenth-century European audience, but there was a strange people, an other, actually living in their midst. I am referring to the Jews, and toward them *Mandeville* is surprisingly ungenerous. The Jews of his own time scarcely figure into his account of the Holy Land...But when *Mandeville* turns away from the Dome of the Rock to the sphere beyond, the Jews make several peculiar and highly charged appearances” (50).

<sup>137</sup> Scott Westrem remarks on the author’s association of the Jews with Gog and Magog, “which we have seen literalists in western Europe already doing in the twelfth century” (69). Gog and Magog, he explains, have been adopted “as a pseudonym for political threats from the Goth under Alaric to the Soviets under

on the fourth, by the Caspian Sea, and are forced to pay tribute to the Amazons:<sup>138</sup> “And þe schal vndirstonde þat þe Iewis haueþ no lond of here owne to dwelle ynne but among þe[se] hullis, and 3it þefore þei paieþ tribute to þe queen of Ermonye” [and you shall understand that the Jews have no land of their own to dwell in but that between these hills, and yet therefore they pay tribute to the queen of Ermonye] (Defective 112). The Cotton expands on the Jews’ inability to leave this land: “And 3it þei 3elden tribute for þat lond to the queen of AMAZOINE the whiche þat maketh hem to ben kept in cloos full diligently tat þei schull not gon out on no side but be the cost of hire lond” [And yet they yield tribute for that land to the queen of the Amazons, who makes them be kept in close full diligently, so that they shall not go out on any side, but by the coast of their land] (175). The Metrical version makes the relationship the clearest: “And sho with strength holdith ham in/ That thei may not thens wyn” [And she holds them in with strength so that they may not wend from there] (lines 2223-2224). The Amazons function as guards of the Jews—they are that which stands between a community completely reviled and the community that reviles them.<sup>139</sup> Once again, the Amazons exist in a liminal space, this time between the Christian and Jewish communities.<sup>140</sup>

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Brezhnev” (55). See this article for a study of the historical tradition of Gog and Magog and their geographical representations.

<sup>138</sup> In all but the Defective, it is clearly the Amazons to whom the Jews must pay tribute. In Defective, the Jews pay tribute to the “queene of Ermonye” [queen of Armenia] (112). The Index of Places for the Defective Version says that Damazyn is another name for Ermonye (231). Perhaps the scribe of this text misread his original referring to the Amazons and thus made this transition. The error on the part of the Defective scribe is borne out by evidence from the later German version, the Von Diemeringen Version. The editor of the Egerton text says “Von Diemeringen expands the story about the Queen of the Amazons. She was called Pencesolya and she penetrated into the mountain fastness and reached and subdued the enclosed people. He gives a fine picture of the lady seated in conference with two Jews in their characteristic medieval hats” (185, note 1). While most other versions do use the term “amazon,” this text expands the story so that the name cannot be mistaken in any way.

<sup>139</sup> Vincent DiMarco discusses the place of Mandeville’s Amazons within the Amazon tradition. He traces two traditions that seem to inform the depiction of the Amazons as the killers of men and the guards set against the Jews, noting that the episode describing their community and practices—particularly their

Although the Jews function as the most loathed other, the monsters offer us an even deeper understanding of the anxieties surrounding difference and community. While the Jews will never be mistaken for Christians because they fundamentally differentiate themselves through language and their own kind of exclusive community, monsters can and do pass as “normal” humans.<sup>141</sup> These monstrous bodies infiltrate human communities, and exist within them. Monsters like the Amazons present a threat that differs significantly from the threat of the Jews, one that is less obvious and clearly stated. They are not dangerous because they one day will take over the world, but because they contaminate and change communities through transgressive reproductive practices. Whereas the other transformative monsters are negative figures, the Amazons

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killing of the men of their community—is not meant to comment on their later appearance as guardians (70). He suggests that “the contradictory conception of her that develops—as the defender against the Jewish Gog/Magog or as convert of the Jewish Antichrist—reflects both the hopes and anxieties latent in Christianity’s struggle for hegemony” (81).

<sup>140</sup> Mandeville’s treatment of the Jews, while not unusual for medieval literature, is, as Greenblatt has observed, surprising. They are being guarded by the Amazons because they are a threat to Christian communities. Mandeville sets up a kind of conspiracy theory, one that Scott Westrem claims is the “most direct claim I know of that European Jews were complicit in a plot against Christians” (68): that Jews around the world maintain the Hebrew language so that they can communicate with the enclosed Jews when they are finally freed by the Antichrist through the form of a fox (Defective 112). When they are free, they will go forth to “to destruye christen men” [destroy Christian men] (Defective 112). The Jews are clearly a significant threat in the Christian imagination—and certainly in the author of Mandeville’s. In *Mandeville’s Travels*, they alone are enclosed and guarded, while creatures with tails and faces in their chests are simply marveled at. Greenblatt argues that this response results from the fact that Jews are not only or necessarily real, but more significantly, present within Christian and European communities, and that they directly compete with Christians for control over the Holy Land: “...they are located, in a way Mandeville evidently finds intolerable, between the realms of the secular and the sacred, metonymy and metaphor, because they embody the estrangement that continually threatens to surface in relation to his own beliefs, because they are at once rivals in the dream of repossession and rivals in the dream of wandering” (Greenblatt 50-51). While Mandeville and the readers of his narrative marvel at the strangeness of the faraway Amazons, the dragons, the men with faces in their chests, the Jews are dangerous in a different and more immediate way because they are present in Christian Europe. Jews are by no means to be tolerated, and clearly exist as an antithesis to Christians, while other more distant human communities, like those of the Sultan and of Prester John, can be held up as examples of certain behaviors that Western Christians would be well-advised to emulate.

<sup>141</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Jews are not “normal” humans. But, as many scholars have suggested, the Jews are the only group singled out as truly unacceptable by the Mandeville author; their communities are not meant to be compared, except in negative ways, to the other communities in the narrative.

embody a kind of social wish-fulfillment; they are human women who declare their monstrosity through their transformation of their “normal” physical forms so that no one can mistake them. Their transformation does not conceal, it reveals.

The social structure of the Amazons is, as I have noted above, much admired by Mandeville. He seems to approve of their means for electing a queen, their obedience to her commands, and even their sexual moderation.<sup>142</sup> As Higgins comments, “Despite its manlessness, then, ‘la terre de Femynie’ looks very much like a model secular society in a world where war was considered a heroic necessity: disciplines, practical, hierarchical, monarchical, meritocratic, and democratic, Amazonia is almost everything that the exordium says Christendom was not” (145). The Amazons are not only convenient to the location of the Enclosed Tribes, but worthy and capable of serving as guardians for Christianity. Higgins claims that it is because of their violence alone that they cannot be a true ideal for Christian communities: “the image contains a disabling flaw: the origins of Amazonia are self-inflicted violence...*The Book*’s portrait of Amazonia cannot be a universal paradigm, as Prester John’s Christian kingdom alone perhaps is, but a model showing what even a faithless and manless society can achieve” (Higgins 146). It is this

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<sup>142</sup> DiMarco comments on the noble chastity of the Amazons in de Vitry (74), noting that even in Mandeville their contact with men from other communities serves primarily as a means for reproduction, and is limited to only a few days per year. Higgins offers a similar commentary: “...just as the Amazons’ admirable chastity depends on historical accident, as it were, the Calonakan king’s procreative accomplishments stem from his having many wives. What this particular juxtaposition suggests, then—since it shows *The Book* depicting both sexual restraint and (divinely enjoined) sexual indulgence favorably—is that many of the text’s wonders resemble speculative explorations into recognizably possible worlds characterized by diverse forms of human and sometimes natural Otherness. The result, for modern as well as medieval readers, is a vicarious journey through a marvelous gallery that offers a shifting mix of pleasure, puzzlement, repulsion, instruction, and (historically-specific cultural) Self-criticism” (149). I would argue, however, that the Amazons fit into a different category than the sexually “indulgent” Calonakan king, as he is clearly human, while they have bodies that cannot fit comfortably or easily into “normal” human communities. Therefore the juxtaposition of sexual practices made by Higgins, while interesting, is also troubling because these are very different kinds of communities.

“self-inflicted violence”—to their bodies and to the men remaining in their community—that keeps them from truly serving as an ideal community, although some of their structures and practices are worthy of Christian attention.

The “self-inflicted violence” of the Amazons is what makes them monstrous, but also what makes them more socially acceptable. Killing the lower class men of their community simultaneously destroys and defends their community. Once these men are dead, the community will never be the same. However, it is when the Amazons cut off their breasts that they become both monstrous and admirable. In marking their bodies as monstrous, they develop clearly articulated social boundaries that separate them from human communities, and that designate their internal class structure in a way that is clearly visible and impossible to transgress. I argue that the Amazons’ choice to construct such insurmountable class boundaries is what makes them eligible to protect Christendom from the Jews.

### **Penetrating the Community: The Poison Virgins**

As we have seen, critics have consistently underestimated the social significance of the transformative monstrous body. These bodies are most often discussed as part of the Mandeville-author’s predilection for marvelous “distractions”—they are seen either as diverting episodes included to appeal to base audience demands for entertainment, or as examples of the diversity in the world that the author hopes to paint for his audience at home. The same underestimation holds true for the most intriguing set of monstrous bodies in *Mandeville’s Travels*—the poison virgins. Although a few critics make mention of these strange women, when they do, it is rarely to comment on their social or

communal significance. Higgins includes them in his defense of the Mandeville-author's decision to depart from his source, Odoric's itinerary. He claims that the strange creatures included in this original section are not frivolous; rather, he says:

...one can probably assume that the *Mandeville*-author wanted to offer a diverting change of pace and focus after the considerable attention given to a very few figures of unmatched power and religious influence. In addition, since the survey contains an inventory of exotic animals—'cocodrilles,' chameleons, lions, elephants, and so on—one might likewise suppose that the author was overwriting the closing sections of Odoric's *Relatio* so as to make them better reflect the world's copious diversity. (203)

According to Higgins, then, the poison virgins are merely grouped with other strange creatures and have little to do with the Mandeville-author's commentary on those "few figures of unmatched power and religious influence." They are simply reflective of diversity,<sup>143</sup> rather than holding any narrative significance of their own, and in fact fit into the same category, for him, as marvelous animals. In a text that is concerned not only with interesting inhabitants of the world, but with the social practices of communities that instruct, rival, or outdo the civilized behaviors of Christians at home, to group human or human-like communities with animals is to undervalue their significance.

Indeed, this community is described in very positive terms; they are a "faire folk and good" [fair and good people] (Defective 122), "good" [good] (Egerton 200), and "full fair & gode & gret" [full fair and good and great] (Cotton 90). This is a human community: its citizens do not obviously possess strange physical forms, and they enjoy a social structure bolstered by civilized practices like marriage. They have one strange

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<sup>143</sup> Bennett makes a similar comment, but instead relates the poison virgins to other sexually provocative wonders. She too comments on the author's refusal to comment upon their nature, attributing this refusal to a desire to simply list interesting creatures and practices: "He does not have the zest for crudities of the flesh, and especially for the scatological, which possessed Rabelais. He mentions the taboo of virginity, and the races of the hermaphrodites, but he does not elaborate. He simply includes them among the wonders of the earth" (75).



practice that Mandeville elucidates: although they have a desire for monogamous marriage,<sup>144</sup> the men of the community require another man to sleep with their wives on the first night of their marriage: “þe maner is siche þat þe firste ni3t þat þei be þy weddid, þei takip a certeyn man þat is yordeyned þerto and lete hem lye by here wyfes to haue here maidenhood” [the practice is such that the first night that they are wedded, they take a certain man who is ordained for this purpose and let him lie by their wives to have their virginity] (Defective 122). Although this act is not in accordance with Christian practice, it is institutionalized in such a manner that it seems both as chaste and civilized as possible; there is a special class of men “ordained” for this social function. The term “ordained” invokes Christian terminology, but also clearly establishes these men as a separate and distinct class of people, with its own codes of behavior.<sup>145</sup> Thus, these men are inherently separate from the rest of community.

Although the role might seem like a powerful and coveted one, Mandeville reveals almost immediately the common perception of this role: the men are known as “gadlibiriens” (Defective 122), translated for us (not in the Defective version) as “the foles of wanhope” [fools of wanhope] (Cotton 90), “a foule dispayr” [a foul despair]

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<sup>144</sup> The women sleep with the other man only once, on the night after their marriages. Thereafter, they are guarded and kept away from all other men, in a hyperactive response that reveals the masculine marital discomfort with this practice: “But after the firste nyght þat þei ben leyn by þei kepen hem so streytely þat þei ben not so hardy to speke with no man” [But after the first night that they are laid by, they keep them so strictly that they speak with no men] (Cotton 90); “But aftir the first nyght that they arn so defoulid, they are kepud streyte aftir” [but after the first night that they are so befouled, they are kept strictly afterwards] (Bodley 467).

<sup>145</sup> According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, “ordeinen” means “To put in order, organize; list in order; to regulate, control, or govern; subordinate (one's will to God's will); conform to God's will.” The term is used in non-religious circumstances, but most frequently seems to suggest a larger ordering of the world, relating often to the arrangement of the stars or the will of God. It can also mean “To create; to build, construct, form, make” this seems like the intended sense of the word in this passage. As with “to organize,” this sense of the word also relates most frequently to religious contexts, and is used in Biblical references and religious commentaries.

(Bodley 467), and “fools despaired” (Egerton 200).<sup>146</sup> These sexually potent men, who are handsomely paid, are known as the “fools of despair” because of the danger their work entails: “for men of þat cuntre holdiþ hit a grete þynge and a perilous to make a woman no mayde” [because men of that country hold it a great and perilous thing to make a woman not a virgin] (Defective 122). Although these men’s bodies are problematic in terms of circulation, it is not the bodies of the fools of despair that are truly monstrous. It is the bodies of the virgins—they are indeed “perilous” according to Defective, Cotton, Bodley, and Egerton.<sup>147</sup>

The virgins of this community are dangerous, although not threatening in the same way as the Amazons, or even Hippocrates’ daughter or the mother of the head of Satalia. Whereas the bodies of these women are clearly marked as dangerous—the Amazons by the removal of one breast, Hippocrates’ daughter by her transformation from woman to dragon, and the mother of the head by her reproductive but dead body—the women of this community appear to fit in. In fact, they are considered safe after the fools of despair have done their job, so no immediately visible transformation seems to have taken place. But in fact, these women hide their monstrous forms inside their bodies, only

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<sup>146</sup>According to Malcolm Letts, editor of the Egerton, “Cotton calls them ‘fools of wanhope.’ The name is unexplained. The Paris text has ‘desesperes.’ The source of this unedifying story has not been traced, but there is something like it in Vincent of Beauvais...Dr. N.M. has an interesting note in his *Poison Damsels*, 1952, p.37. He traces the story back to Solinus and Pliny (vii, ch. 2. 17, 18) where the damsels had poison in their eyes as well as elsewhere, and associates the story with the fear of defloration, the presence of evil influences, or the dread of impotence in the man” (200, note 1). Bennett comments more extensively on their possible sources, and the Mandeville author’s decision to relocate them, geographically: “sometimes Mandeville may make a bold transfer of a bit of folklore; for example, he attributes to a tribe in India a superstition about the breaking of maidenheads which Julius Caesar had attributed to the Britons. The historians of travel literature have been particularly outraged by this transposition, but Mandeville was certainly right in putting the belief in a far away country. In fact, he may not have been following Caesar at all, but Solinus, who tells a slightly different version of the story about the Augyles, who live next to the Troglodites in Ethiopia (which in the Middle Ages was considered to be a part of India)” (52-3).

<sup>147</sup>Metrical does not include this story, which is not unexpected in a text that leaves out many stories contained in the longer prose versions.

to be revealed in defense of their “maidenhood.” Because of the danger presented by their bodies, it was “here custome to make oþer men to asaye þe passage bifore þat þei were put in auenture” [their custom to make other men try the passage before they were put to that adventure] (Defective 122). Sex with these women is described by all the versions considered here as “auenture” [adventure]—a dangerous quest. The word “adventure” here is particularly striking because it links this story to romances.<sup>148</sup> Here, a man goes forth into the dangerous and unknown body of a woman, just as a knight like Gawain or Amadace sets off into unfamiliar and perhaps threatening territory to prove or establish honor.

The virgins’ bodies do provide adventure and danger for those who attempt to enter them, at least according to the tradition of the community. Sir John, upon asking, learns the threat of these monstrous bodies that do not appear to be monstrous:

And Y askyd what was here cause whi þei dide so, and þei seide somme housbandis lay by here wyfes [first] and non oþer but þei, and somme of here wyfes hadde naddris in here bodyes þat twengid here housbandis vpon here 3erdys in þe bodyes of þe wymmen, and so was many a man yslawe. [And I asked what was the cause why they did so, and they said some husbands lay by their wives first and no other but they, and some of their wives had serpents in their bodies that stung their husbands upon their yards (penises) in the bodies of the women, and so were many men killed]. (Defective 122-3)

The virgins’ bodies conceal their monstrosity: no one claims to have seen the serpents, but their effect is seen on the bodies—in fact, the “yards”—of their husbands. It is not clear which women’s bodies contain these serpents and which do not; it is only *some* of the wives, not all, that necessitate the tradition of the fools of despair. It is absolutely

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<sup>148</sup> According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, the term *aventure* carries the meanings “fate, fortune, chance”; “an event or occurrence”; “danger, jeopardy, risk”; “a knightly quest”; “a marvelous quest”; and “a tale of adventures.” In a search of the *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*, the term *aventure* turns up over 100 matches, the majority of which are located in Middle English romances. It seems fair to suggest, then, that this word’s use is meant to call up images of traditional romance adventures.

unclear to the eye which women present a danger and which do not. The possibility of danger is so great that, according to both Cotton and Bodley, if the fools of despair fail to do their duty (because of “dronkenness” [drunkenness]), the husband can react “as þough the officere wolde haue slayn him” [as though the officer would have slain them] (Cotton 90). The danger presented by the virgin body, whether or not it contains a serpent, is tantamount to an act of murder.

The women of this community *do* circulate; they are a part of its marital economy. There are two dangerous possibilities for their bodies, however, and one must be acted out. Either they circulate too little or too much. If the serpent in a woman’s body kills her husband in his attempt to take her virginity, then she does not and cannot circulate—she is no longer married and does not bear children. On the other hand, if a fool of despair successfully performs his work on her wedding night, then the woman circulates in excess. Although such an occurrence is not mentioned explicitly, it is possible that a woman could bear a child that is not her husband’s. The dangerous result of their over-circulation, then, is a physical kind of openness that can only be counteracted or controlled by closing them in. They are kept so strictly after their marriages that, according to Cotton, they have no contact with men other than their husbands: “But after the firste nyght þat þei ben leyn by þei kepen hem so streytely þat þei ben not so hardy to speke with no man” [But after the first night that they are laid by, they keep them so strictly that they speak with no men] (90). Bodley points out the danger of the over-circulated body, saying that “aftir the first nyght that they arn so defoulid, they are kepide streyte aftir” [but after the first night that they are so befouled, they are kept strictly afterwards] (Bodley 467). The bodies that potentially contained

snakes that might sting men are, after their deflowering, “foul” in an entirely different way. Before their wedding night, the danger was that they could not circulate; after, the danger is that they are always potentially in circulation unless they are “kepid streyte” [kept strictly].

Like the Amazons, the bodies of the poison virgins are transformative in a less traditional sense. The Amazons are not born with monstrous bodies; they design and execute the transformation of their bodies through the removal of a breast. While one must suppose that the poison virgins are born with the serpents inside them, the serpents remain invisible, concealed. Their physical forms do not reveal them to be monstrous to the observing eye—it is only the intimate experience of their monstrous bodies that gives them away. Therefore, the bodies of *all* women in the community are suspect. This is not to say that all women’s bodies in the East are thought to be dangerous, nor that the East serves as the oriental erotic fantasy, as Higgins argues:

This last ‘marvel’ [the poison virgins] is as frivolous as anything in *The Book*. The East was not yet the space of erotic fantasy and sexual power such as it would later become (see *Orientalism*, 186-88), but its marital and sexual customs sometimes prompted salacious stories and comments: see, for example, Polo’s account of premarital promiscuity in ‘Tebet.’ (Higgins 294)

If the poison virgins are not exactly a fantasy with all the appeal and danger of Eastern sexuality, as argued here by Higgins, neither are they, as I have suggested above, simply a frivolous distraction to the *real* work of *Mandeville’s Travels*. The poison virgins inform readers that the monstrous can be invisible and sexual—it no longer declares itself through an obvious and visible physical aberration. Although the bodies of the poison virgins transform themselves by being divested of their serpents after they are visited by

the fools of despair, they exist, unidentified in the community, for many years beforehand. They have infiltrated a human community—which has notably undertaken efforts to protect its members.<sup>149</sup>

I began this discussion of the poison virgins by suggesting that *Mandeville's Travels* is a text concerned not simply with Eastern diversity, but also with the social practices of communities that instruct, rival, or outdo the civilized behaviors of Christians at home. The author here does not seem to be suggesting that Christian women have poisonous serpents inside them, or that there should be a caste of men to deflower women before their husbands can have intercourse with them. Instead, this portion of the text suggests that monstrous bodies are not as obvious or as permanent as Christians might suppose. They are not so easy to defend against as the Christians can defend themselves against the Jews. Monsters are capable of entering and endangering communities. Although there is a system in place to protect against the poison virgins, they also represent a new possibility for the monstrous—that although monstrosity is physical, it can also be disguised or invisible. Because the bodies of the poison virgins must be entered by a stranger before they can be used by their husbands for reproduction, they contradict the notion of marriage and of legitimate reproduction. The problem is not so clearly defined as Sir John's relatively uncomplicated refusal of the Sultan's non-Christian daughter; monsters no longer remain in the East, clearly marked by physical difference. Monstrosity, with the bodies of the poison virgins, has moved to the inside of a creature, rather than being easily identified by its outside appearance.

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<sup>149</sup> It might be argued that the fools of despair too have developed monstrous bodies in that their bodies are “immune” to the poison virgins. It seems more likely to me that these men are expendable. If a serpent happens to be inside the virgin, its venom will be spent on an unmarriageable man who will then have served his life's purpose.

## **Conclusions: The Presence of the Monster**

In each of these four episodes, monstrosity and reproduction are intimately related to the problem of transformation. These bodies are so very monstrous and so very threatening because they are undeniably connected to human communities. The dragon woman and the fecund dead woman are residents of the communities of Satalia and Cos before their transformations, and their transformations hold serious repercussions for both of these communities: the woman's transformation to dragon removes her from the line of succession and prohibits the island kingdom from passing to a proper heir, while the birth of the monstrous head in Cos literally destroys the entire community. These consequences come from the inside of the community, not from the outside. The monsters do not come from far away and attack; they are always already there, inside the community, simply waiting to be drawn forth.

While the monstrous potential for the dragon woman and the dead woman is self-imposed, the Amazons take advantage of this potential through their own agency. They transform themselves in reaction to significant changes to the make-up of the community. They too are fundamentally bound to the community in which they exist, which they significantly transform along with their own bodies. Their reproductive practices perpetuate their monstrous community, but the marking of their monstrous bodies so as to be unmistakable makes them acceptable and understandable to Christian communities. Unlike the poison virgins, they cannot exist unrecognized in human communities. Of all of these transformative female monsters, the poison virgins represent the greatest danger. Their transformative monstrosity is physical, but unrecognizable, and impacts their

community and its social structure in essential ways. The community's reproductive order and marital practices result from the monstrous potential of the women's bodies.

Although the bodies of the poison virgins are transformed by being divested of their serpents after they are visited by the fools of despair, they exist, unidentified in the community, for many years beforehand. They are a part of a human community—which has notably undertaken efforts to protect its members. The lesson of the poison virgins is that monsters no longer remain outside of human civilization, clearly marked by a visible physical difference. But, in some ways reassuring is the fact that these monstrous women are rescued by their transformation—they no longer have to pass as human, because they *seem* to have passed back into humanity.

All of these monsters complicate notions of humanity and hybridity because of their transformative status. As the dragon woman, the monstrous head, and the Amazons pass out of humanity, so do the poison virgins pass into it. In fact, two of these monsters pass as human at some point—the dragon woman, when she lures a doomed sailor to her castle, appearing as a beautiful woman, and the poison virgins before they are penetrated by the fools of despair. The audience knows that these women's transformative bodies are not entirely human—they are hybrid specifically in their conflation of the bestial with the human—be it dragon or internal serpent. And yet all of these female monsters have a provisional human status—the dragon woman before she was cursed, the woman of Cos before she died, the Amazons before they remove a breast, and the poison virgins after their deflowering. However, this human status is indeed provisional: once the monstrous form is introduced, the body becomes hopelessly hybrid. The dragon woman teaches us that her body, once bestial, becomes implicated in her human identity. Similarly, the



second episode reveals a hybrid between living and dead, between reproductive and destructive: it is the enduring human identity of the woman's corpse in Cos that draws the Burgess' son to her grave. While the Amazons' humanity is retained to a degree because they copulate and thus procreate with human men, they are simultaneously marked as monstrous by the removal of a breast. The Mandeville author suggests too that the poison virgins' bodies—although no longer a physical threat to their husbands—are still not entirely trustworthy. The narrator points out the danger of their over-circulated bodies by assuring the audience that the women are “kept strictly” after their first night with a fool of despair. The bodies that potentially contained snakes that might sting men are, after their deflowering, “foul” in an entirely different way. Where their bodies are dangerously hybrid before they are transformed, they are clearly sexually polluted after this necessary transformation.

While Bynum argues that the hybrid and the metamorphic are two different categories of transformation, I argue that the metamorphic monster is always in some way hybrid. The body that may *seem* to be human is never really entirely human after its transformation. The monstrous form is always implicated in bodies which can or which have taken on monstrous attributes. Thus, although the dragon woman may *appear* human to the sailor she draws in, the dragon is always already present—she has internalized the identity of the dragon body when she causes the death of the Knight of Rhodes. Similarly, when the poison virgins are divested of their dangerous serpents by the fools of despair, their bodies retain a “foulness” that must be carefully guarded and controlled by their husbands. So although these transformed women may seem to be human, they are in fact only *passing* as human. They are always already monstrous.

And because the bodies of human women have such a potential to transform and become monstrous, communities cannot defend against them.

In each of these cases, the monstrous bodies of women are closely tied to human communities through the transformative nature of their monstrosity. They are not exiled to a single location in the monstrous and exotic East, but exist in various geographic locations, both to the East and the West of Jerusalem. The Mandeville author offers a range of test cases of reproduction involving monsters, and while each situation is a little bit different, the point is the abiding theme of their existence. No single type of transformative monster unifies the text, but they all make the same point in different ways. The Mandeville author provides an anatomy of issues, a handbook of reproductive monsters from England to the East, that argues for the widespread nature of the phenomenon of the monstrous.

While Old English texts manage to erase their monsters, *Mandeville's Travels* depicts monsters that cannot be erased. It is one of the few medieval texts that does not attempt to resolve the problem of the monstrous. Instead, because of their new ability to transform, monsters not only continue to exist, they do so within human communities. It is because monsters are, at times, indistinguishable from humans that they cannot be erased, and, in fact, that they can reproduce. Transformation enables monsters to appear human, and it is this that makes them most monstrous.

## CHAPTER 5

### Paternity and Monstrosity in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gowther*

Although *Mandeville's Travels* features the bodies of four transformative women, not all monsters in Middle English literature are transformative, and not all transformative monsters are female. The monsters in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gowther* are both male, with one being transformative and the other not. Moreover, these two Middle English texts seek to rid human communities of their monsters in safe and final ways. While the monsters in both texts are erased—one through death and one through transformation—they consistently resist erasure, as do the monsters in *Wonders of the East* and *Beowulf*. The male monsters of the Alliterative *Morte* and *Sir Gowther*, monsters of excess appetite and sexuality, continue to haunt the communities they once terrorized after they are erased from the narratives.

In the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the Giant of Mont St. Michel is not a transformative monster, but he does function as a reproductive threat to Arthur's kingdom and to many others. He is a rapist of women, eater of infants, and killer of kings. These three actions, when taken together, endanger not just those individuals directly involved but also the nation and lands under Arthur's authority. However, when Arthur castrates and beheads the giant, he does not entirely remove the problems

presented by the giant's body. The giant's excessively masculinized body not only indicates but also exacerbates Arthur's own paternal and regal failures. The erasure of the monster, then, does not resolve the problems of the community; instead he remains as a spectre of the paternal and reproductive collapse of Camelot and Britain.

While the Giant of Mont St. Michel is killed in the first half of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the monster in *Sir Gowther* is erased in a far more subtle and reassuring way. Born of a woman and a demon, this violent and excessive monster, also a rapist and killer, is eventually transformed from the son of a demon to a son of God. This spiritual transformation takes place through acts of penance so significant that the monster becomes a man, and not only a man, but a saint. This kind of resolution is far more reassuring to communities within the text and for readers of that text for two reasons. First, the monster is dispatched in such a way that his traces do not continue to disrupt the community. Second, the dangerous and tricky transformative bodies in *Mandeville's Travels* are replaced with a safe and positive kind of monstrous transformation; that is, the man does not become monster, but the monster becomes (and remains) man. This is a story not only of the spiritual power of the Church but also of the reformatory possibilities of transformation.

### **Castration and Beheading in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure***

Monstrosity is deemed by many twentieth (and twenty-first) century scholars to be a sign of the ridiculousness of a story—an irrelevant or distracting element that draws the audience away from the real work of the text. Just as this attitude is evident in my discussion of the scholarship surrounding *Mandeville's Travels*, so the trend continues

with the scholars writing about the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*.<sup>150</sup> Many of these scholars clearly point to Arthur's contest with the giant of Mont St. Michel as a less-than-serious element of the narrative. Karl Heinz Goller claims "the battle with the giant of Mont St. Michel is certainly a very twisted 'romantic element in the story.' Arthur's humour and irony, the emphasis on bawdy and grotesqueness, all this turns the episode into a burlesque *aventure*" (22), while Jean Ritzke-Rutherford dismisses it as "a mock-heroic parody of the conventional type-scene" (89).<sup>151</sup> The episode with the giant of Mont St. Michel should not be dismissed as too fantastic to bear relevance to the chronicle-historical<sup>152</sup> concerns of the poem as a whole, but instead should be recognized as a fulfilling the larger themes of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is a text concerned with questions of masculinity, especially chivalry, kingship, and paternity. These themes occur in other versions of the end of Arthur's life, but they are particularly highlighted in the Alliterative version.<sup>153</sup>

Although based on chronicle sources, the Alliterative *Morte* significantly alters them. The

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<sup>150</sup> The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* exists in only one manuscript, number 91 in the library at Lincoln Cathedral. The manuscript seems to be the work of a 15<sup>th</sup> century scribe, Robert of Thornton, who has signed the text. The manuscript is dated between 1430 and 1440 (Krishna 1). The story itself is the final portion of Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle of Arthur's life, although, as Krishna notes, "the immediate source of the *Morte Arthure* is uncertain" (17).

<sup>151</sup> Notably absent from this list of dismissive scholars is John Finlayson, who strenuously argues for a serious consideration of this particular scene.

<sup>152</sup> The question of genre has been an important one in the study of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century poem, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. Scholars have identified it variously as a chronicle, a romance, a tragedy, a *chanson de geste*, and an epic, to name only a few. As Edward Donald Kennedy has pointed out, recent critical work rarely attempts to classify or limit the poem through the category of genre. Valerie Krishna's edition offers an excellent overview of the genre debate concerning the poem (19-22).

<sup>153</sup> John Finlayson nicely summarizes other redactions' treatment of the fight with the giant: "In Wace and Layamon a general picture is given of the terror and damage caused by the giant (Wace's is more detailed). Geoffrey of Monmouth simply states that a giant from Spain had carried off Helen. Though it has been argued that there is a close correspondence at this point in the narrative between Layamon and our poem, this claim is not supported by close examination of the relevant passages. In fact AM seems to owe little but the general outline of the incident to either W or L, much less to G, and develops the episode in a manner which indicates that our author attaches far more significance to the encounter than did the writers of other chronicles" (113).

poem emphasizes certain thematic elements by making Mordred into a reluctant regent, dramatizing the queen's farewell to Arthur, incorporating into the figure of the giant "the hobby of collecting kings' beards," and developing a mutual and productive relationship between Gaynor and Mordred (Fries 35, 36, 40, 41). These changes all accentuate the themes of masculinity and potency already embedded in the larger narrative. I argue that the Giant of Mont St. Michel acts as a focal point for these problems of masculinity both before and after his death. By dispatching the monster, Arthur does not dispose of the problems the giant embodies. Instead, the way in which the monster is killed continues to indicate the problems inherent in the community and kingdom he terrorizes.

The giant is a common figure in medieval romance. John Block Friedman notes that giants are not considered to be prodigies, freak occurrences, but instead, according to Isidore, they constitute a whole race of monster (116). Friedman claims that they derive from the Alexander tradition, rather than being a part of the Plinian races, and, according to his general definition, they can be either hairy or "smooth-skinned" (15). They usually carry a mace or club rather than a sword, which shows them to be "ignorant of chivalric weapons and the military customs of civilized Westerners" (33). Walter Stephens claims that "giants in the erudite tradition clearly evolved from those in primitive folklore, and in both traditions the Giant maintained his negative function as a representation of otherness" (58). For Stephens, then, medieval giants are entirely inhuman. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, convincingly, finds this argument *unconvincing*,<sup>154</sup> arguing instead that the giant

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<sup>154</sup> Cohen states that Stephens' "estimation of the giant's cross-cultural signification in the Middle Ages is too constraining for so enormous a figure. For Stephens, the word *giant* is always to be written 'with a capital G' because the term designates an ontologically evil race of monster generically distinct from humans. I will argue for the giant's *hybridity* upon his continued popularity, usefulness, and appeal, at least in England; Stephens looks almost exclusively at medieval giants in their biblical and ecclesiastical purity"

is such a powerful monster precisely “because he cannot be fully banished from, or integrated into, those identity categories that his body constructs” (xiv), that is, categories of both the human and the more-than-human.

The giant’s monstrosity arises from his body of excess; he is larger than a normal man, and usually has excessive appetites for food, violence, and even sex. Medieval giants are most often male, and excessively male; as Cohen claims, “The giant is a violently gendered body. While it is true that some medieval giants were female, especially in Norse tradition and in some of the crusader romances, these giants were then, as now, the exception” (Cohen xii).<sup>155</sup> The giant is often linked with the popular transhistorical figure of the “Wild Man,” a being who is traditionally associated with nature and excess.<sup>156</sup> Cohen draws upon Richard Bernheimer’s reading of the wild man as a “nostalgic” and “presocial” figure (Cohen xv) in order to argue for the giant’s troubling place in relation to man. Louise Fradenburg, drawing from the Wild Man’s appearance in pageantry, designates the wild man as “a liminal figure: he appears on the borders and edges; he guards limits; he ushers in and out” (235).<sup>157</sup> For Cohen, however, the giant is more foundational than liminal; he both prefigures and destabilizes masculine

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(Cohen, *Giants* xv). He also notes that Stephens considers giants in France, primarily, while his own work locates those giants that function in “English national imagery” (xv).

<sup>155</sup> Although female giants are rare, they do exist. Cohen notes, for example, the existence of the female giant, Barrock, in *The Sowdon of Babylon*. They appear far more frequently in Old Norse literature, which generally depicts women in a significantly different light than Old or Middle English literature.

<sup>156</sup> Finlayson notes, in reference to Richard Bernheimer’s *The Wild Man in the Middle Ages* (1952), that “confusion between wild men and giants was...almost inevitable, so that the attributes of the two became mixed up” (116). In addition to Cohen’s cogent discussion of the wild man figure, see Richard Bernheimer, Timothy Husband’s *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism*, David Sprunger’s “Wild Folk and Lunatics in Medieval Romance” in *The Medieval World of Nature*, and Louise Fradenburg’s “The Wild Knight” in *City, Marriage, Tournament*.

<sup>157</sup> Fradenburg suggests that the wild man “could serve as an image of nature ‘harnessed’ through the rule of the sovereign, who is the embodiment of civilization, of the human, and who wields a power of alteration over nature” (236-7). Cohen’s argument, while related, is quite different; he sees the wild man and the giant, instead, as figures that cannot quite be contained. Instead of representing the sovereignty of the human, they ultimately imply its failure.

identity, particularly in the history of English national identity. He ultimately argues that “The giant, that foundational monster who produces the masculine corpus, is also its guarantee of failure, of its inability to vanquish forever the intimate stranger at its heart” (xx). Even though the giant is always killed by the knight, usually violently, the knight and his kingdom are never really rid of the giant because he is originary. Indeed, the giant is the first inhabitant of Britain, defeated by first Brutus and then Arthur in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*. For Cohen, then, the giant’s masculinity both precedes and exceeds that of a normal man.

I argue that monsters are monstrous because they are physically different; the giant is monstrous because he is a figure of physical excess. He is larger than a normal man, and most often exists outside of traditional social constructs; that is, he attacks society rather than living within it. In romance, he is marked by extreme hairiness, and usually wields a club rather than a sword.<sup>158</sup> He stands opposed to the chivalric order. The Giant of Mont St. Michel is an exemplary giant: he is grossly hairy: “His fax and his foretoppe was filterede togeders” [His hair and his forelock were matted together] (1078) and “His berde was brothy and blake, þat till his brest recede” [His beard was bristly and black, and reached down to his breast] (1090); he carries a club made “all of clene yryn” [all of clean iron] (1105), and he is excessive in size as he is deemed to be “Fro þe face to þe fote was fyfe fadom lange” [From the head to the foot, he was five fathoms long] (1103), with “Ruyd armes as an ake” [Arms as stout as an oak] (1096) and “Thykke these as a thursse, and thikkere in þe hanche” [Thighs as thick as a monster, and even thicker in

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<sup>158</sup> Husband summarizes the physical characteristics of the wild man: “he differed from man mainly in his thick coat of hair...In early medieval times the wild man was thought of as a giant...the universal attribute of the wild man is a large club, or occasionally uprooted tree” (1-2).



the haunch] (1100). His excess carries from his body to his behavior, as he acts as a terror to not only one, but several kingdoms. Significantly, he cannot be a transformative monster. The only transformation available to giants is that achieved in their death and dismemberment. As Cohen notes, “Giants always perish through the breaking of their bodies, a corporal and symbolic rebuke to the deviance they incorporate” (153). This is no magical transformation; instead the extreme measures used to dispatch the giant reveal the extreme danger represented to others by his body.

The phallus, and its presence or absence, is consistently of concern in this text. Goller claims that “the author seems to have been mildly obsessed with wounds ‘below the belt’” (23), and Anne Clark Bartlett observes “those conquered in battle are routinely forced to participate in rituals of symbolic emasculation” (57). The most obvious phallus in the poem is that of half-naked giant of Mont St. Michel—he is literally “breklesse” [breechless] (1048) when Arthur meets him. On his way to confront the tyrant Lucius of Rome over lands that he has the right to rule, Arthur is informed of the crimes of a giant, who is rapidly depopulating the area. In seven winters he has eaten more than “fyfe hondrethe” [five hundred] (845) people and “als fele fawntekyns of freeborne childyre” [as many children of freeborn knights] (846). More importantly, he has killed all the male children of the clans, “...ne kynde has he leuede...That he ne has clenly dystroyede all the knaue childyre” [not a family has he left...of which he has not cleanly destroyed all the male children] (848, 850). His most recent affront, in addition to the continuing cannibalism of knights and children, is that he has kidnapped the Duchess of Brittany in

order “To lye by that lady aye whyls hir lyfe lastez” [to lie by that lady while her life lasts] (855). The giant’s gustatory and sexual appetites are excessive, and, notably, the targets of each are the noble classes.

This passage presents a number of problems, of which the most significant is the passing of hundreds of lives over seven years. Arthur’s goal in the poem is to regain his rightful lands because his ancestors were rulers of Rome (272-87), but also because, as King Angus says, “Thow aughte to be ouerlynge ouer all oþer kynges, Fore wyseste and worthyeste and wyghteste of hanndes” [you ought to be overlord of all other kings, being wisest, worthiest, and most skilled of hands] (289-90). However, Arthur has already failed to protect his people in the nation closest to England—France. While the killing and consumption of children is meant to demonize the giant, the significance is not only in their age. He is killing all the male children, the heirs of all the noble families. Moreover, he kidnaps the Duchess not to consume, as he does the children and the knights, but to “lay with.” We will later learn that she descends from “the rycheſte” (865), most powerful bloodlines, and is, in fact, a cousin of Arthur’s wife. The giant seems to desire the removal of existing heirs, perhaps with the goal of replacing them with his own. This is more than an impulse of excessive consumption and immediate satisfaction for carnal desire; it is a political and dynastic impulse because it targets only noble mothers and their sons. Moreover, these acts directly threaten Arthur and invite his intervention—an intervention that is notably delayed for seven years.

The giant’s excessive size and masculinity make it literally impossible for him to engage in successful intercourse with a human woman: Arthur is later told by the Duchess’ grieving nurse that “He hade morthirede this mylde be myddaye war rongen,

/Withowttyn mercy one molde— not watte it ment./ He has forsedde hir and fylede, and cho es fay leuede;/ he slewe hir vnslely and slitt hir to þe nauyll” He murdered this mild thing without any mercy on earth (he doesn’t know what mercy is) before midday was rung out. He violated her and defiled her, and she is left dead; he slew her savagely and slit her to the navel (976-79). It is literally his desire that kills her; his phallus not only penetrates, but “slits her to the navel.” This dynastic impulse results not only in the loss of heirs, but also of the potential mother. The problem, then, is not exactly that the giant is impotent, but that he is too potent—he is simply too large for a woman. Cohen suggests that the poem links the giant and Arthur linguistically, specifically through the feasts both partake of (153), but the childlessness of both, resulting respectively from impotence and “extra”-potence, provides a more significant link between these two figures. Neither the giant nor Arthur produce an heir. Jeff Westover has stated that “In the culture of the poet, Arthur’s childlessness suggests the failure of his manhood” (313), while in contrast to Arthur’s impotence, Ann Bartlett designates the giant as possessing “pathological virility” (66). Despite the impossibility of reproduction for the giant, he remains a potent threat to the kingdom.

The giant has proved a threat to other kings, those underkings for whom Angus suggests Arthur should be overlord. According to the Duchess’ nurse, the giant wears a garment “bordyrde with the berdez of burlyche kynggez, Crispid and kombide, that kempis may knawe/ Iche kyng by his colour” [bordered with the beards of strong kings, curled and combed so that warriors may know each king by his color] (1002-04). Bartlett suggests that in this poem, the taking of hair is representative of defeat and emasculation, as is the case when Arthur causes the defeated Romans to have their hair shorn (62). The

giant's beard-collecting introduces the pattern of emasculating hair-taking. The giant not only has defeated these kings, whether or not they faced him in battle or sent their shorn beards in response to his demand for such tribute, but he has assumed their power as his own in the wearing of their beards for any warrior to recognize. As Westover claims, "The coat is a token of the masculine, since the beards with which it is embroidered serve as synecdoches for individual men. Their cumulative effect is to increase the heroic, eminently masculine prestige of the coat's owner...at the same time, however, the coat is fraught with ambiguity, since it signifies tyrannous injustice as well as manhood" (315). The giant wears the kirtle as a badge of authority, which is only powerful in its excess of masculinity. It takes the beards of many kings to construct the masculine authority necessary to satiate the giant, but he will not be satisfied until he has the beard of the most powerful king—Arthur.

Most significant in the kirtle is the absence of one beard, or the presence of lack. The giant, it seems, has been demanding Arthur's beard as tribute for the past seven years—the period during which he has been terrorizing Arthur's people: "And he has aschede Arthure all þis seuen wynntter:/ Forthy hurdez he here, to owtraye hys pople,/ Till þe Bretons kyng haue burneschte his lypys,/ And sent his berde to that bolde wyth his best berynes" [and he has asked for Arthur's these seven winters; because of that he hides here, to injure his people, until the king of the Britons has polished his lips and sent his beard to that bold one via his best warriors] (1009-12). Arthur's impotence in defending the people attacked by the giant for the last seven years is compounded by the giant's direct challenge to him. Arthur responds immediately and vehemently to Rome's demands for tribute, setting off on a crusade to regain his forefathers' lands, but for seven

years, he has ignored the giant's demands. In this case it is not only his pride, but his people who have suffered for it. His lack of involvement at Mont St. Michel has resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians and noble men and women, but more significantly, in the decimation of the next generation of nobles. Patricia Ingham argues that the poem points to the inevitability of loss within the Arthurian system, claiming that certain kinds of losses are acceptable, while others are "catastrophic," like that of Gawain later in the poem (89-90). She counts the death of the Duchess as one of those acceptable losses. I argue that this loss is neither acceptable nor singular, because it is not simply the loss of a lone noble woman, nor of the pathos-inspiring children. It is the loss of posterity and it echoes Arthur's own heirlessness and lack of paternity. Just as there is no heir for him, he tolerates this lack of paternity for a significant portion of his kingdom; this is indeed a catastrophic loss.

The real problem with the giant, then, is not that he is wholly monstrous and uncivilized, but that he is partially human and takes part in human systems. This is revealed in his behavior, as he eats off "a chargour of chalke-whytt syluer" [a charger of chalk-white silver] (1026), a platter that would not seem out of place at Arthur's own table. Further, he cooks his meat, and even seasons it with "pekill and powdyre of precious spycez" [sauce and powder of precious spices] (1027). He has truly noble pretensions, but underneath these are his monstrous impulses; underneath the expensive flavors, the meat he cooks each night is "seuen knaue childre, / Choppid" [seven knave children, chopped] (1025-26). He has sexual impulses for human women, seen in more than just the kidnapped Duchess; he has maidservants to do his bidding, but his lust does

them in, as we are told “Siche foure scholde be fay within foure hourez,/ Are his fylth ware filled that his flesch yernes” [Four of such would be lifeless within four hours, before his filth would be fulfilled for which his flesh yearns] (1031-32).

Arthur’s first vision of the giant confirms all that he has been told; indeed, the first glimpse of the giant embodies all the threats he bears. He “lay lenand on lang” [lay leaning out his whole length] (1045), so that we may see his massive size, further emphasized by the description of the bare body parts he warms at the fire, “His bakke and his bewschers and his brode lendez” [his back and his buttocks, and his big loins] (1047). Plainly open to view are the giant’s enormous back, buttocks, and his big loins, which can be explained by the fact that “breklesse hym semede” [he appeared breechless] (1048). From our first vision of him, this giant is not only excessively large, but that size is denoted in explicitly sexual terms. Indeed, Bartlett comments on his “insatiable sexual appetite and monstrously oversized penis” (66). The nudity is certainly a quality of the monstrous, as Rebecca Beal argues, “the poem connects his lack of clothing to his separation from the civilized” (39), but it seems odd in conjunction with the other items of status mentioned above, those markers of society, the silver charger and the expensive spices and wine. Rather than performing only a function of general monstrosity, his nudity denotes the origin of his threat: the parts that should be covered by civilized clothing, most strikingly, those big loins. As a contrast, we immediately see man’s impotence against him, for he sits munching on the haunch of a man, “þe thee of a manns lymme lyfte vp by þe haunche” [the thigh of a man’s leg he lifted up by the haunch] (1046). Compared to his own huge thighs and masculinity, the human haunch seems tiny, and its possessor has obviously been ineffectual in defeating the giant.

Upon witnessing this scene, Arthur prepares himself for battle and addresses the giant, but does not identify himself as the possessor of the longed-for beard. He invokes God's vengeance and insults the giant, calling him "the fulsomeste freke that fourmede was euere" [the foulest warrior ever made] (1061). The king addresses the giant as not only a human, but a warrior. He approaches the battle with the giant as he would another knight, engaging in flyting, a sort of battle of words prevalent in warrior culture. His first order of concern is the giant's diet, claiming "here is cury vnclene" [here is unclean food] (1063). Next Arthur turns to the actions preceding the cooking, "þow killide has þise cresmede childyre,/ Thow has marters made, and broghte oute of lyfe" [you have killed these christened children, you have made martyrs and brought them out of life] (1065-66). If we are to consider this in terms of a hierarchy of critique, then, we see the first criticism is that the giant is formed in a foul way, that he looks different. The second is the critique of his repast: he consumes people. The third is that he has killed many people and made Christian martyrs, which quite obviously implies that the giant's is a crusade against not just civilization, but specifically against Christian civilization. After Arthur has ironically declared he will reward, "merke þe thy mede" (1068), the giant for his mighty service on Mont St. Michel, then he adds his revenge for the Duchess, almost as an afterthought, "And for this faire ladye, þat þow has fey leuyde,/ And þus forced one foulde, for fylth of þi selfen" [And for this fair lady, that you have left lifeless, and thus forced in the dust, for your own filth] (1070-71).

Although Arthur has addressed the giant as a warrior and engages in the human practice of flyting, the giant seems incapable of language. As Ward Parks argues:

In the final lines of the speech, Arthur, by challenging the giant to battle and by predicting his own victory, is initiating the contractual process: a death struggle will provide judgment on the issues that he has raised. The monster does not ratify this contract proposal verbally—like Grendel, he is never humanized to the extent of enjoying the powers of the *reordberende* ('speechbearers'); and yet his 'body language'...conveys unmistakably that the prospect of a fight is quite acceptable to him. (65)

The giant is only able to glare, gape, and groan: "Than glopned þe gloton and gloreð vnfaire;/ He grenned as a gewhounde, with grysly tuskes;/ He gaped, he groned faste, with grucchand latez" [Then the glutton gaped and glared unfairly, he grinned like a greyhound with ghastly teeth, he gaped, he growled with a raging expression] (1074-76). The next 25 lines are occupied with a description of the giant. The structure of this passage suggests that he responds to Arthur's insults and threats by grimacing and thus emphasizing his frightening appearance, which is notably bestialized, as he is likened in appearance to at least eleven different animals, including a hawk (1082), a bear (1089), and even a sea-hog (1091).<sup>159</sup> Arthur's challenge, 13 lines long, is only half the length of the giant's description. If this is, as Arlyn Diamond has commented, "a notably phallic contest" (299), then Arthur already comes up short.

The battle begins immediately, the giant using his club, and Arthur, his sword. We certainly are meant to see a contrast, the club, though made "all of clene yryn" (1105), is still a barbarian tool, while we are meant to see the lineage of Arthur's sword, as representing both civilization, and his status as the anointed king. After an exchange in which Arthur barely avoids blows and manages to stab the giant in the forehead through "to þe brayne" (1114), he drives his sword into the giant's thigh and slices upwards: "Hye

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<sup>159</sup> I would like to note that never does the poet say that the giant actually possesses animal parts, but only that his parts are like those of whichever animal. The giant's body, while hybrid as are all monsters, is a body of human excess, not of bestial intervention.



vpe on þe hanche with his harde wapyn,/ That he hillid þe swerde halfe a fote large--/ The hott blode of þe hulke vnto þe hilde rynnez;/ Ewyn into inmette the gyaunt he hyttez,/ Iust to þe genitals and jaggede þam in sondre” [high up in the haunch with his hard weapon, so he buried the sword in half a foot, the hot blood of the hulk runs over the hilt, even into the innards of the giant he hits, right to the genitals and cut them apart] (1119-23).<sup>160</sup> Arthur’s response to the giant’s consumption of noble heirs and the attempted rape of the Duchess is, effectively and primarily, a castration: he cuts the giant’s genitals asunder. While the sexual punishment for the sexual crime is a clear motivation, castration for rape, it seems that Arthur acts perhaps a little too violently for the punishment to be so narrowly focused. In addition to being the appropriate punishment for rape, perhaps here we see Arthur engaging in an eye-for-an-eye kind of justice. The giant’s goal is Arthur’s beard, which he desires to complete his collection. The beards he has already obtained represent his authority over the kings who have lost their beards; they have submitted to him, have given up their potency as leaders. The giant has castrated them, and intends the same for Arthur. Arthur thus responds to the threat to his beard by removing the literal signifier of the giant’s masculinity and potent authority. No more can the giant impose himself in the place of a male noble and assume the privileges thereof.

Castration does not immediately kill the giant, and significantly, it does not end the threat to Arthur’s life. Instead, the enraged giant grabs the king and they engage in a violent wrestling match. Never having struck Arthur with his club, the giant embraces Arthur in a way that is far more life-threatening:

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<sup>160</sup> The use of the term “genitals” clearly refers to the phallus and masculine potency, the other two mentions of this word in the Middle English corpus are from Gower (*Confessio* V. 801-900), where it refers specifically to a castration, and from a medical remedy from *Secreta Secretorum*.

Thane he castez the clubb and the Kyng hentez:  
 On þe creeste of þe cragg he caughte hym in armez,  
 And enclosez hym clenly, to cruschen hys rybbez—  
 So hard haldez he þat hende þat nere his herte brystez.  
 [Then he throws down the club and seizes the king, on the crest of the crag,  
 he caught him in his arms, and encloses him tightly to crush his ribs, and  
 he holds him so hard that his heart nearly bursts.] (1132-35)

The watching maidens, who had been the giant's spit-turners, cry and pray for Arthur's life (1136-39), and Sir Kay, who has just rushed up to the scene, is convinced that Arthur is dead (1152-55). The language of the wrestling match combines elements of the sexual and the violent. This is not the noble battle of knights, but an intimate, and perhaps inappropriate grappling. The verbs, obviously chosen for alliteration, nonetheless reflect the double nature of the fight, for Arthur and the giant wrestle together, toss around, wallow, tumble, turn over, tear each other's clothes, tilt together, and exchange places on top and bottom: "Wrothely þai wrythyn and wrystill togederz,/ Welters and walowes ouer within þase buskez,/ Tumbellez and turnes faste and terez þaire wedez;/ Vntenderly fro þe toppe þai tiltin togederz,/ Whilom Arthure ouer and oþerwhile vndyre" [With anger they writhe and wrestle together, welter and wallow over within the bushes, tumble and turn fast and tear their clothes, untenderly on the top they tilt together, sometimes with Arthur on the top and sometimes underneath] (1141-45).

This fight will decide much more than physical superiority; it is a fight over threatened masculinity and the patriarchy of a nation. Cohen claims this is Arthur's "most heroic battle" (152). Certainly the stakes of this fight are quite high—if Arthur fails here, he not only cedes superiority and rule to a rapist and cannibal, while not revenging a dead noblewoman, but he also fails to make good his agreement to confront Lucius in order to confirm his right to his lands. In essence, if Arthur loses here, he fails as a king in all

ways, from simple justice to dynastic collapse. With such noble stakes and “heroism,” however, we might expect a more noble fight. Instead, as Markus remarks, “the brutality of the fight, the blows to brains and bowels and the splitting of genitals throw rather a negative light on Arthur” (64). We do not see heroic swordplay, even as Arthur fights against all odds, but rather, we get blows below the belt and rather undignified wrestling, with bushes being rolled through and clothes being torn. Cohen rightly remarks that the king and the giant are inextricable in this moment: “At the end of their long battle, the king and the giant are physically entwined to the point at which they can be separated only by death” (Cohen 153). Cohen goes on to argue that this moment reveals a connection that has always existed between the two, but I think that it is in this moment of physical contact that the connection is forged. Arthur gives up his sword and his dignity, his failures as a king and a fighter having been revealed. The match culminates only when Arthur pulls a dagger and jams it into the giant “vp to þe hiltēz” (1149). Arthur cannot defeat the giant through wrestling (he is, after all, not a giant himself!), but must use a weapon.<sup>161</sup>

Although the giant’s physical superiority is emphasized, Arthur’s status as a civilized and potent knight is also reinscribed at this moment. However, it is rewritten not with a sword, but with a dagger—with cunning, no doubt, but not exactly with nobility. He further attempts to supplement his masculinity, by “appropriating the symbols of the Giant’s sexual prowess” (Bartlett 68) in his assumption of the giant’s most potent possessions, the kirtle of kingly beards and the iron club: “Haue I the kyrtyll and þe clubb, I coueite noghte ells” [If I have the kirtle and the club, I covet nothing else]

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<sup>161</sup> This wrestling match may remind us of Beowulf’s successful wrestling match against Grendel, but the desperate use of a weapon also recalls Beowulf’s fight against Grendel’s mother.

(1191). Even though Arthur's defeat of the giant is total—the giant is after all castrated not once but twice, as his head is removed and put on display—Arthur is unable to solve the problems of his own kingdom, and indeed his own family. He gains no more masculinity by defeating the giant than he does in conquering Lucius. Arthur's biggest failure, ultimately, is at home. Cohen argues that the abstract figure of the giant is representative of the Lacanian concept of "extimite": "the monster appears to be outside the human body...thus he threatens travelers and errant knights...But closer examination reveals that the monster is also fully within, a foundational figure; and so the giant is depicted as the builder of cities...the origin of the glory of empire" (xii). The giant is simultaneously dread and pleasure, simultaneously human and more than human. The giant thus represents that which opposes Arthur, but also, as Cohen suggests, the masculine authority that always already comes before him.<sup>162</sup>

This moment with the giant indicates Arthur's failures as a king—it shows that he is able to take care of neither what is at home nor what is away. He cannot protect his noble subjects, but he also cannot protect or fulfill his own position as a husband and a father. Cohen claims, "Even after his defeat, the giant continues to have an ambiguous life within Arthur" (153).<sup>163</sup> Although he has been literally erased from the landscape of

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<sup>162</sup> This claim contrasts starkly with Finlayson, who associates the giant with "Evil" and thus Arthur with "Good." He argues that this scene is so relevant to the larger narrative because it makes clear that "Arthur is not only a great conqueror, but is also, more significantly, the champion of Christianity and the redeemer of his people" (119). He mentions neither Arthur's killing of Mordred's children nor his notable delay in responding to the problem of the giant in the first place.

<sup>163</sup> Although I agree with Cohen that the giant remains as a kind of presence in the text, we differ in that he argues that Arthur's own monstrous behavior echoes the giant's: "Unlike the Green Knight, there is no redemptive return to humanity for Arthur, because his monstrosity is ideological, a product of the imperialistic political system he embodies, and not the result of some playful enchantment" (153). I do not see Arthur as a monster primarily because he suffers no physical transformation, but also because he is all too human and fallible in what are precisely human ways. He is neither all-knowing nor all-powerful.

Brittany by his double dismemberment and death, he seems to haunt the rest of the narrative. After Arthur's retaking of Rome, Arthur becomes a kind of tyrant, much like the giant. Arthur performs his own version of beard-collecting by shaving the two Roman senators who submit to him after his victory: "They schouen thes schalkes schappely theraftyre;/ To rekken their Romaynes recreaunt and 3olden;/ Forthy schour they them to schewe, for skomfite of Rome" [Then they shaved these creatures as was fitting in order to prove these Romans cowardly and defeated; therefore they shaved them to show the humiliation of Rome] (2333-35). Bartlett suggests that the taking of hair is representative of defeat and emasculation, not only in the shaving of the Romans, but also in the episode with the giant (62). The taking of these men's hair asserts Arthur's authority over them and their government, just as the giant took the beards of the kings as a marker of their submission to his authority.

More than marking the bodies of the defeated senators, Arthur's new tyranny is enacted in the taking of lands and kingdoms that do not rightfully belong to him. After his defeat of the emperor of Rome, he plans to take Lorraine, Lombardy, and Tuscany, saying of Lorraine, "'The lordschipe es louely, as ledes me telles. I will that ducherye devyse and dele as me likes'" [His lordship (land) is lovely, as the people tell me. I will divide that dukedom and deal it out however I like] (2399-2400). Although Arthur later gives the explanation that the duke has been a "rebel" (2402) to the Round Table, the initial impulse seems to be about possession of something valuable and lovely, with the authority to do as he likes with it. After taking Lorraine and Lombardy, Arthur demands that the citizens be treated well (3081-83), but Tuscany does not fare so well. There he and his men "take townnes full tyte" [take over towns quickly] (3151) and "Towrres he

turnes and turmentez þe pople” [tear down towers and torment the people] (3153). They do not treat the citizens well, but they “sprynge and sprede and sparis bot lytull” [spread and disperse and spare but little] (3158) and “Spoylles dispetouslye” [plunder mercilessly] (3159). Arthur and his men are without mercy and without respect for the people of these lands, just as the giant treated the people of Brittany. Arthur’s desire to take what is rightfully his has turned into an “insatiable appetite for world domination which has in fact come more to resemble the Giant’s indiscriminate cruelty than its original motive” (Bartlett 70).

Moreover, during Arthur’s pursuit of “world domination,” his own kingdom has fallen into disaster. He is not behaving as a proper patriarch of his people; he left Mordred behind as a reluctant regent,<sup>164</sup> ignoring Gaynor’s conjugal plea not to deprive her of her “wedde lorde” [wedded lord] (700). When Arthur is informed of Mordred’s usurpation of the kingdom as well as wife, Arthur’s impotence as a ruler is revealed. He fails to protect his people and his wife, and as a consequence, his lands are in utter disarray—Danes, Saracens, Saxons, Picts, “paynims” (3533), and Irish outlaws are ruling and routing his kingdom under Mordred’s command. This affects not only the despoiled monks and ravished nuns (3539) and the ravaged poor (3540), but the castles (3543) and woodlands (3544) of the wealthy. Mordred has most clearly revealed Arthur’s impotence by impregnating Gaynor (3552), a feat Arthur had proved unable to perform. Her fertile body here serves as a reminder of the sacrificed body of the duchess, usurped by the giant.

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<sup>164</sup> Mordred begs Arthur to choose another regent and to allow him to go with Arthur to fight the Romans, saying “To presente a prynce astate my powere es symple” [My power is weak to act the prince’s part] (683).

Perhaps the most alarming link with the giant is the way in which Arthur dies. He is, as Westover argues, symbolically castrated (310). In the contest between Mordred and Arthur, Mordred cuts Arthur, as Goller would say, “below the belt” (23): “The felettes of be ferrere side he flassches in sondyre” [the loins to the other side, he slashes apart] (4237).<sup>165</sup> As Westover notes, the recent editors of the poem gloss *felettes* as “loins,” which is “one of the secondary meanings listed under *filet* in the MED” (310). He argues that “the definition of the word ‘loins’ may be taken by metonymy to mean ‘genitals’” (311). However, because the exact term “genital” is not used, as it is in reference to the giant’s castration, Westover argues that “Mordred’s deadly wounding of Arthur functions as a symbolic emasculation, a wound which marks the end of both the king’s heroic enterprise and his royal lineage” (Westover 310). Arthur’s death by a wound “below the belt” to a part of the body linked with masculinity not only raises the spectre of the giant, but also recalls Arthur’s excessive response to the potent body of the giant.

The trace of the giant is most strongly felt in the conclusion of the poem. The final emasculation of Arthur is not Mordred’s usurpation of his kingdom, but of his sexual rights. The fact that Gaynor bears Mordred children points expressly to Arthur’s impotence, which was first revealed on Mont St. Michel. Arthur’s response, the murder of Mordred’s children, reflects the problems inherent in the episode with the giant. Beal suggests that “The children are to die, and not by due process of law, but rather [are] consumed as a threat to dynastic stability” (5). The problem is paternity and succession; there is no generation after Arthur, not of his own line, and certainly not in the vicinity of Mont St. Michel because the giant has killed all the kings and their heirs. The poem ends

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<sup>165</sup> Goller lists the “wounds below the belt” in the text. He offers at least three instances, one of which concerns the giant’s castration (23-5). Westover adds the cut to the *felettes* to Goller’s list.

at line 4346, extolling Arthur's lineage; he "was of Ectores blude, the kynges son of Troye, And of Sir Pryamous the prynce, praysede in erthe; Fro thythen broghte the Bretons all his bolde eldyrs Into Bretayne the Brode, as þe *Bruytte* tellys" [was of Hector's blood, the King of Troy's son, And of Sir Priam the Prince's, praised on the earth; From Troy the Britons brought all their brave elders into Britain the Great, as the Brut says] (4342-46). With Arthur then, his line ends. However, this noble listing of paternity is flavored by Arthur's dying words, only 40 lines before: "And sythen merke manly to Mordrede children, That they bee sleghely slayne and slongen in watyrs; Latt no wykkyde wede waxe, no writhe one this erthe" [And then mark strongly that Mordred's children be secretly killed and thrown into the sea; let no wicked weed grow, nor flourish on this earth] (4320-22). As Lee Patterson suggests, through this killing of Mordred's innocent Christian children, "we are forced to recall...the giant of Mont St. Michel, [who,] in a detail unique to this version, feeds on 'crysmede chilyre' (line 1051)" (223). These children, not Arthur, are the final descendents of the noble line. Therefore, in deciding to kill the children and end the noble line, Arthur chooses to enact vengeance against Mordred's usurping potency rather than to allow a succession in which he himself is not directly implicated.

The literal murder and figurative erasure of the giant from Mont St. Michel and the narrative does not entirely remove the giant from the text. Arthur's excessive sexualized violence in his meeting with the giant reveals his own impotence, and makes it impossible to forget the giant for the rest of this poem. Instead, the giant is a spectre of excess masculinity, constantly reminding the audience of Arthur's shortcomings—reminders which are ultimately fulfilled by Arthur's own failure to reproduce and



exacerbated by his strangely reminiscent murder of innocent children. Although he is not transformative, the giant of Mont St. Michel *does* try to enter the human community—not subtly as do the transformative female monsters in Mandeville, but violently, through ridding the land of kings and heirs, and through the overwhelming (and unsuccessful) attempt to engender his own heirs through the rape of noblewomen. Killing the monster, however, does not rid the land of the problems he indicates, although it does put an end to the immediate dangers his body presents. The giant could not have been killed more completely, beheaded not once but twice, but even this does not successfully remove him from Britain. Cohen writes, “according to numerous chronicles based ultimately on *The History of the Kings of Britain*, the first inhabitants of Britain were a race of towering monsters...The Trojan triumph over these bellicose monsters marks the birth of the British nation” (31). The body of this giant, because it is doubly dangerous and thus doubly castrated, points back to the origin of the nation. The giant reminds the reader that Britain is founded upon the corrupt bodies of giants—the first native inhabitants of the land according to the Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Albina legend, as I have discussed in the introduction. The giant of Mont St. Michel himself serves as a trace of these original giants. In his excessive body, he suggests the comparative fragility and vulnerability of human masculinity. His castration only reminds the reader of what Arthur always already lacks. Therefore, the dead and dismembered body of the giant does not affirm Arthur’s authority, but instead marks his impotence. The damning trace of the giant remains when Arthur attempts to rub him out. In order to resolve the problem of the monstrous, it is not erasure but transformation that is required.

## ***Sir Gowther* and the Potential of Transformation**

Although transformation provides frightening possibilities for the monstrous body in *Mandeville's Travels* and other medieval texts,<sup>166</sup> the fifteenth century romance *Sir Gowther* rewrites the scene of transformation. In this text, the monstrous body is transformed into the spiritually penitent body. The nature of transformation itself is revised: instead of a seemingly human body being made horrifying by its ability to transform, a body that is terrifying and hybrid is saved through the healing power of transformation. Instead of being killed, the body of the monster is revised, rewritten into something recognizable, understandable, and not only safe, but saintly.

The genre of *Gowther* is a much-debated subject—scholars struggle to align its obvious penitential message with its violent secularity.<sup>167</sup> How is an audience to define a text whose main character bites off his own mother's nipple, then performs penance by eating out of the mouths of dogs, while surreptitiously killing Saracens? Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury state: "Defined variously as a tale of trial and faith, a penitential romance, a hagiographical romance, secular hagiography, a Breton lay, and simply a 'process' of romance, *Sir Gowther* resists singular designations, but rather complies to a variety of possibilities" (264). The textual history of this poem does not help to negotiate this complicated problem: it exists in two different late fifteenth century manuscripts that

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<sup>166</sup> For instance, Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* introduces multiple transformative bodies, including fairies that magically appear, and a woman who can be ugly or beautiful (as well as faithful or unfaithful) by day or by night, depending on the choice of her betrothed. Similarly, *Sir Launfal* depicts the lovely and "aweful" disappearing body of the fairy-lover, which resolves but complicates the problematic identity of the titular knight.

<sup>167</sup> For a thorough discussion of the question of genre, see Bradstock, "*Sir Gowther*: Secular Hagiography or Hagiographical Romance or Neither?" and Shirley Marchalonis, "*Sir Gowther*: The Process of Romance."

differ in significant ways, known as Royal and Advocates.<sup>168</sup> Royal suppresses some of the more explicit elements of the story, including the raping of the nuns—Laskaya and Salisbury attribute the “gentler” treatment in this manuscript to a possibly “more cultured and refined audience” (263). Advocates, alternately, uses graphic descriptions, and, in fact, seems to revel in its vivid depictions of sex and violence. The distinction between the two manuscripts is so marked that Alcuin Blamires chooses to concentrate solely on the Royal manuscript, as it “dwells more effectively on the story’s latent social meaning” (Blamires 47-8). Most other scholars tend to study Advocates because Royal seems only to cut explicit moments rather than adding anything significant to the poem (although its elisions do offer interesting possibilities for interpretations like Blamires’).<sup>169</sup> I concentrate primarily on the Advocates version because it tends to emphasize Gowther’s monstrosity, which is often sexualized and therefore cut or elided in Royal.

Gowther is, indeed, a monster, but what kind of monster is he? He has many of the qualities of a giant, but he is not simply a giant. There is no suggestion in medieval romance that giants are parented in any way by humans.<sup>170</sup> Gowther, however, does have at least one human parent. His mother, unable to conceive with her husband the Duke and therefore threatened with dissolution of the marriage, prays to Mary, asking that she “Schuld gyffe hur grace to have a chyld. On what maner scho ne roghth” [should give her

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<sup>168</sup> The two manuscripts are British Library Royal MS 17.B.43 and National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1. Both versions of the poem are written in twelve-line tail rhyme stanzas, and both derive from Northeast Midlands (Laskaya and Salisbury 263).

<sup>169</sup> Andrea Hopkins claims that scholars are split in their choice of version, and she is right, in the sense that of the four edited versions, two edit Royal and two Advocates (144). However, in terms of recent scholarly attention, most scholars use Advocates. She usefully notes that scholars who use Royal do so because it is more “refined”, while scholars who use Advocates do so because it is “less corrupt” (144). She and Bradstock both prefer Advocates because the structural pattern established by the poet “emerges more distinctly” (Bradstock 3) than in Royal.

<sup>170</sup> In fact, in *The Sowdon of Babylon*, when humans take in orphaned giant children (who are the progeny of giants), their parenting explicitly fails and the children die.

grace to have a child. She didn't care in what manner] (65). While the prayer is to Mary, its resolution is not so holy; a demon who looks like her husband appears in the garden in which she prays and he seduces her. He immediately transforms<sup>171</sup> into his own form and announces her impregnation: "When he had is wylle all don/ A felturd fende he start up son,/ And stode and hur beheld;/ He seyde, 'Y have geyton a chyld on the/ That in is yothe full wyld schall bee,/ And weppons wyghtly weld'" [When he had done what he wanted, he leapt up quickly as a shaggy fiend, and stood and beheld her; he said 'I have gotten a child on you that shall be very wild in his youth and mightily wield weapons'] (73-8).<sup>172</sup> The Duchess immediately seduces her own husband to cover her conception, and the ruse is successful. The Duke accepts the child as his own.

For some scholars, the fact that the demon takes on the form of the Duke, and the Duchess' pursuit of cover-up sex raise questions about Gowther's paternity.<sup>173</sup> Francine McGregor acknowledges the true parentage of the demon, but she argues that, because of the demon's disguise, the Duke is implicated in his conception: "the Fiend's appearance

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<sup>171</sup> Although the fiend is a fascinating and transformative figure, fiends and demons present a problem quite distinct from the problems of human monsters. At the most basic level, fiends or demons are not human in any way. In fact, Cohen, in "Gowther Among the Dogs," Corrine Saunders, and McGregor note that the fiend is usually a figure who simply takes on other forms but is rarely featured in his own—therefore *Sir Gowther* is unusual in its depiction of a fiend's "natural" form. For more information on fiends and demons, see Dyan Elliott's *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (1999).

<sup>172</sup> Many scholars acknowledge that this is an act of rape. Saunders discusses this element of the romance in detail in her excellent article, "'Symtyme the fende' Questions of Rape in *Sir Gowther*."

<sup>173</sup> Blamires argues unconvincingly that the Royal version mitigates the demon's paternity: most of the relevant passages remain in place, even the reference to Merlin as Gowther's half-brother. He then claims that the Duchess, in inviting sex with her husband after she is impregnated attempts to replace "the pseudo-husband's insemination with the real husband's: she is trying to 'make' her husband be the father, to conceive a sanctified and not-wild son" (51-2). Finally, he works at a metaphorical level, associating what he terms as the Duke's "arrogance" with being a fiend: when the fiend takes on the Duke's form, this "invites us to conclude that the Duke might just as well be the father, or, that the Duke might as well be a fiend. It is as if the Duke's crude, inhuman, egotistical presumption betrays fiendishness and thence 'engenders' a monster" (52). While the Duke's threat to leave his barren marriage might be deemed "arrogant," as a character, he is not overwhelmingly so. Even if he were arrogant, I would argue that this behavioral capacity could not, and would not, cause a physically manifested monstrosity in his child.

cannot obviate the guise in which he approached the Duchess; he did so in the form of the Duke so that, eerily, both Duke and Fiend are present at the child's conception. Both are Gowther's "real" father; both create his paternal inheritance" (73-4). Similarly, Cohen complicates the issue of Gowther's paternity further by suggesting that when the demon assumes the Duke's form, he takes not only his appearance but some of his essence, and this essence is transmitted in the sex act:

If the 'kynde of men' that the incubus steals refers to man's semen rather than man's shape, then the fiend is a disembodied delivery system...the *material* is still the Real of the father. Another way of putting it: the fiend *is* the duke, or at least the 'father in reality'...as opposed to the pure and incorporeal function of paternity. (229)

Despite these suggestions, the text seems to assert that the demon is the true father of Gowther. As Hopkins claims, Gowther "is presented as having inherited from his father a really evil nature" (147).<sup>174</sup> He has predicted his progeny's "wild youth" and his skill with weapons—attributes that Gowther certainly fulfills. The poet even goes so far as to take the family relationship a step further: "This chyld within hur was no nodur,/ Bot eyvon Marlyon halfe brodur" [This child within her was no other than Merlin's half brother] (97-8). The same demon that fathered Merlin fathers Gowther—this is an unmistakable reference for an audience well-acquainted with the mysterious dangers of that character.<sup>175</sup> Although Gowther is christened under the Duke's authority, and he thus takes responsibility for naming him, the demon is clearly the father of Gowther.<sup>176</sup> This much is evident in Gowther's excessive growth.

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<sup>174</sup> Hopkins notes this issue of paternity as one of the significant differences between the Robert the devil sources and *Gowther*; Gowther is "actually the son of the Devil rather than owed to him as a debt" (147).

<sup>175</sup> Joanne Charbonneau argues that *Gowther* is an ill-put-together romance, filled with unrelated details. She sees the references to Merlin as one of these useless but "titillating" details: "The allusions to Merlin, similarities to Robert the devil stories, and evocations of incubus lore seem pointless if the reason for the

Gowther is physically transgressive and thus monstrous: he grows at an extreme rate, exhibits early dentition, and possesses extraordinary strength. By the time he is a year old, he is the size of a seven year old: “In a twelmond more he wex/ Then odur chyldur in syvon or sex” [In a year he grew more than other children do in seven or six years] (145-6). His early excessive growth identifies him as the son of a demon, marking him clearly as monstrous. Cohen even identifies his brand of monstrosity: “Gowther is nonetheless something of a giant. Like the monstrous progeny of the biblical and chronicle narratives, Gowther grows at a prodigious rate” (224). We should notice here that Cohen does not claim that Gowther *is* a giant—just that he has characteristics of the giant, rapid growth in particular. Even Blamires, who argues unconvincingly for the Duke’s paternity, acknowledges that “On the one hand his premature size and violent power attest fiendish monstrosity (53).<sup>177</sup>

In addition to his growth, or even possibly to enable it, Gowther possesses an insatiable appetite. Through his extreme physical need, he not only sucks his wetnurses dry, he kills them: “He sowkyd hom so thei lost ther lyvys,/ Sone had he sleyne three!”

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references is not sharply and immediately understood by an audience. . . . perhaps the original audience would have been satisfied with a few titillating tidbits to make the story more interesting, but modern readers demand more than throw-away bits of sensationalism and expect instead a narrative filled with coherency and meaningful details” (22). I argue that this reference is indeed very meaningful and emphasizes the demonic paternity of Gowther; it attempts to make familiar the demonic impregnation for the audience by invoking a known magical half-demon figure. As Laskaya and Salisbury argue, “Demonologists in the late Middle Ages considered him [Merlin] a figure for the antichrist, prophesied in the *Book of Revelation* to signal the end of the world. . . . The fraternal relation between Gowther and Merlin and their shared paternity with the fiend would most certainly presage disaster for a medieval audience” (266).

<sup>176</sup> Jesus Montaña discusses strange physical differences in children fathered by Saracens upon Christian women (121). However, once these children are baptized, these physical aberrations are resolved and their fathers usually convert. Baptism does nothing to curb Gowther’s monstrosity, which reveals a clear difference between Saracen fathers and the demon as father.

<sup>177</sup> In this construction, Blamires also notes that “Medieval culture conventionally applauds the production of inheritors of notable physique and indomitable power” (53); this approbation of physical superiority in *Sir Gowther*, then, is figured as horrifying.

[he sucked them until they lost their lives, soon he had killed three!] (113). Killing one nurse through such an appetite might be explained, but three seems ridiculous—yet these three nurses seem to represent only Gowther’s first few months of life. As we know, he grows incredibly quickly, and “Be twelfe monethys was gon/ Nine norsus had he slon/ Of ladys feyr and fre” [By the time twelve months passed, he had slain nine nurses, ladies both fair and noble] (118). Before he can be consciously aware of evil, Gowther is responsible for taking the lives of nine women—these women cannot even be dismissed because of an inconsequential class status; they are noble women. Gowther’s violent impulses here are purely instinctual, driven by his own excessive physical requirements. Michael Uebel claims that Gowther “vampirically” sucks nursemaids dry (100); while Gowther does seem to be sucking the life force from these women, Gowther is in no other way associated with the attributes of the vampire. His crime is one of excessive appetite, not appetite for blood. Significantly, however, his impulses are depleting the community of wives and mothers.

Gowther’s extreme consumption does not go unnoticed by the community: in addition to perpetrating a crime against the women he unintentionally kills, he commits a crime against their families. These families decry not only Gowther’s murders, but his father’s complicity. Their authority derives from their social status: the men who have lost wives and who stand up to the Duke are “Knyghtus of that cuntre” [knights of that country] (121). They demand that the Duke procure no more nurses for his son. Therefore, Gowther’s mother is compelled to nurse her son, and put her own safety in jeopardy. She is not killed by his extreme consumption; instead, his inherently violent physical form punishes her body in a different way. His early dentition becomes evident

only with his mother. When Gowther is finally offered his mother's breast, he bites off the nipple: "His modur fell afowle unhappe,/ Upon a day bad hym tho pappe,/ He snaffulld to hit soo/ He rofe thos hed fro the brest--/ Scho fell backward and cald a prest" [His mother fell afoul unfortunately, One day she gave him her breast, he suckled it so that he ripped the nipple from the breast—she fell backward and called a priest] (127-31). In requiring the attention of a priest before she is attended to by doctors, Gowther's mother makes clear that she is concerned not for her physical but her spiritual well-being. She knows that Gowther's body presents more than a physical threat—she requires a blessing and religious protection even more than she needs stitches. Even though she is physically healed, neither she, nor any other woman, nurse him further: "Wemen durst gyffe hym souke no mare" [Women no longer dared to nurse him] (134).

Most critics read Gowther's violence against the women who nurse him as willful acts of identification. Blamires reads the nipple-biting as a rejection of the maternal: "Here is the heir who will not imbibe maternal pedigree aright, who asserts 'self' violently against that pedigree" (53). In this early act, Gowther refuses to be bound by his place in the hierarchy—this is his first act in a chain of acts through which he refuses to be a proper heir. Cohen similarly reads this early violence as a reaction against nurturance and the domestic: "The physical violence that attends every attempt at nurture demonstrates that no place exists for him within the domestic spaces represented by the parade of nurses and his mother; Gowther, from infancy, resists familialism" (225). Uebel, however, reads this as more than resistance: for him it is "sadistic" and violent in a truly intentional way: "Considered together, Gowther's preoedipal crimes represent a sadistic rebellion against the maternal, the earliest indication of his urge toward



annihilation” (101). While Gowther’s killing of the nurses and maiming of his mother certainly do harm him in that he loses the most beneficial source of nourishment, his violence does not seem, at this point, to derive from a sadistic pleasure in pain. The poet notes no pleasure on the part of the infant, but merely his growth—this emphasis reiterates only his insatiable appetite as it is driven by sheer physical need.<sup>178</sup> Saunders reads these acts as evidence of his “evil and unnaturalness” (298), and, in a sense, she is right. Gowther is simply acting out his physical identity, which is “evil” and “unnatural” in that he is only half human. He is not willfully declaring himself against society, the maternal, or family, although his acts do rebel against these systems. Gowther’s early acts are not acts of will, but are artifacts of his true parentage.

As he ages, however, Gowther’s acts become intentional: we are told that “He was so wekyd in all kyn wyse” [he was so wicked in all kinds of ways] (148). His physical potential combines with his “wicked” behavior when, at 15, he creates his own weapon, “A fachon bothe of style and yron,/ Wytte yow wyll he wex full styron/ And fell folke con he feyr” [A falchion both of steel and iron, you should know that he grew full fierce and terrorized many people] (142-4). This falchion fits only someone of his size and excessive strength; we are told that no other man can wield it because of its heft: “No nodur mon might hit beyr” [no other man might bear it] (141). The falchion has significant symbolic connotations: Cohen claims that “the falchion is an Eastern weapon,

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<sup>178</sup> Uebel continues to link Gowther’s acts to specific kinds of monsters: werewolves and vampires: “Premature dentation, often associated with canine qualities..., had folkloric significance as a sign of vampirism, lycanthropy, or the intervention of sorcery” (101). Although the poet certainly wants the audience to notice Gowther’s monstrous impulses, he does not demonize Gowther in these specific ways. Gowther does not transform from human to monster, as do the werewolf and the vampire—his monstrosity results not from a traumatic attack, but is inherent in his parentage. Moreover, Laskaya and Salisbury claim that this same attribute is linked with another category: that of the demon-father: “According to folk belief the presence of teeth at an early age functioned as proof of demonic paternity” (267).

suggestive of Saracens and other fiendish heathens” (225), while Laskaya and Salisbury suggest that it is representative of his identity as a “wild man” (269). Significantly, however, the falchion is forged using conventional and “civilized” metals into a form that is recognizable as a sword—it is nothing like the rude club used by uncivilized wild men. Montaña asserts the Saracen cultural association of the falchion, claiming that the “falchion functions as the outward and visible symbol” (123) of his racial identity. While the falchion is certainly a Saracen signifier, Gowther’s frightening hybrid identity is not racial, Saracen-Christian, but special, demon-human. The falchion marks Gowther as Other, invoking the Saracen, but its primary significance is in its size and excess. These qualities indicate Gowther’s physical difference and the problems inherent in Gowther’s physical and spiritual make-up.

Gowther’s use of this falchion is in no way governed or proscribed. Just as his physical growth—representative of his demonic paternity—is uncontrolled, so is his violent behavior. The Duke has no real authority over him; as Charbonneau notes, “Although Gowther thinks he is the Duke’s son, he acts like the creature he really is” (25). In an attempt to control Gowther’s wicked behavior, the Duke tries to direct the boy’s aggression into an acceptable outlet: he knights him. “Tho Duke hym might not chastise,/ Bot made hym knyght that tyde” [The Duke could not chastise him, but made him a knight at that time] (149-50). Knighting him, however, does nothing to curb Gowther’s violence; instead, the poet suggests immediately after mention of this knighting that no one in the kingdom can survive one of his blows (153). The failure of this attempt does not designate a failure of the knightly class, but instead, as McGregor argues, the false paternity of the Duke: “As Gowther's continued violence demonstrates,

the symbolic dimension of paternity the Duke tries to employ remains impotent. The Duke is quite literally his father in name only, an empty placeholder” (71-72). MacGregor suggests that this impotence points to a problem inherent in paternity: the “potential disjunction between the father and his authority as a symbolic figure” (71). However, we have no situation in the poem through which to test this claim: the only father who fails here is not actually a father—he is instead shown to be impotent, physically and symbolically, from the first lines of the poem. This powerlessness is even more clearly marked when the Duke simply expires, his attempt to circumscribe Gowther’s violence having failed miserably: “For sorro tho Duke fell don ded” [The Duke fell down dead from sorrow] (154). The institution of knighthood has no power to control the physical monstrosity of one of its knights because Gowther is governed by a far stronger force: his real paternity. Just after the fiend impregnates the Duchess, Gowther’s demonic father does not so much predict Gowther’s future behavior as notify Gowther’s mother of Gowther’s identity: “He seyde, ‘Y have geyton a chyldre on the/ That in is yothe full wyldre schall bee,/ And weppons wyghtly weld’” [he said ‘I have gotten a child on you that shall be very wild in his youth and mightily wield weapons’] (76-8). Gowther, at his conception, is defined by his father.

In the midst of describing Gowther’s most horrible deeds, the poet assures us that “He wold wyrke is fadur wyll” [He would do his father’s will] (176). While Gowther is violent before the Duke dies, his crimes grow significantly more troubling (or at least are described more explicitly by the poet) when this false heir becomes Duke himself: “Now is he Duke of greyt renown” [Now is he Duke of great renown] (169). This new responsibility puts Gowther’s crimes into sharp focus: not only does he fail to protect his

people and those who cannot protect themselves—the jobs of a knight—but he is also the one who terrorizes them. His crimes are both sexualized and violent, and they are generally played out against people affiliated with or reliant upon the church. He does not merely fail as a proper signifier of knighthood and right belief by refusing to hear mass or matins, he actually beats up priests: “And men of holy kyrke dynggus down/ Wher he might hom mete” [And smites down men of the holy church whenever he meets them] (172-3). More than just abusing those he meets by chance, Gowther courts conflict. He goes to a convent, and because of his position, the nuns are obligated to meet him: “Thos pryorys and hur covent/ With presescion ageyn hym went/ Full hastely that tyde” [The prioress and her convent went to meet him in a procession quickly that time] (184-6). Gowther abuses this honor: not only do he and his men rape the nuns, but they lock them inside the church and set it on fire. “Thei wer full ferd of his body,/ For he and is men both leyn hom by--/ Tho soothe why schuld y hyde?/ And sythyn he spard hom in hor kyrke/ And brend hom up, thus con he werke” [they were afraid of his body, because he and his men both lay with them—Truly, why should I hide it? And then he enclosed them in their church and burned them up, thus did he work] (187-92).

He clearly functions as a leader, because he is accompanied by his men—but he is a leader who inspires lawbreaking and abuse of innocents. Gowther’s burning of the nuns signifies once again his excessive nature, perhaps predicated by his demonic physical need, but is also purposeful and premeditated in a way that his slaying of his nurses was not. Laskaya and Salisbury connect Gowther’s early appetites and his later violence through the concept of hunting:

In a short time his appetite for food assumes a predatory form—hunting becomes his favorite pastime—but not as practiced by other members of the aristocracy. Rather he becomes the raptor, a sharp-taloned, aggressive predator of the disempowered: religious women, a widow, a newlywed couple, hermits, and clerics. (267)

The metaphor of hunting, however, locates Gowther firmly within the aristocratic system—despite his perversion of its basic tenets. Gowther might stalk prey, as he does the nuns, but these “hunts” are in no way productive or satiating, as a traditional hunt ought to be. While tournaments and hunts mitigate the violent urges of the aristocratic male, Gowther is not fulfilled by his violence, but only seeks more and more.

Ironically, Gowther’s excess makes clear to the community, if not to the Duke himself, that he is simply not the son of the Duke. After observing continued assaults on the community, including the hanging of parsons on hooks and the setting of hermits and widows on fire (200-4), an old earl from that country confronts the new Duke, “And seyde, ‘Syr, why dose thou soo?/ We howpe thou come never of Cryston stryn,/ Bot art sum fendys son, we weyn,/ That werkus hus this woo./ Thou dose never gud, bot ey thou ylle--/ We hope thou be full syb thou deyll” [And said, “Sir, why do you act so? We suspect that you don’t come from the Christian strain, but are the son of a fiend, that works this woe for us. You never do good, but always the evil—We suspect you are full kin to the devil”] (207-12). Although critics, including Blamires and McGregor, argue for the Duke’s (shared) paternity,<sup>179</sup> it is clear to the community that Gowther does not originate from the Duke’s line. His uncontrolled aggression and physical violence mark him as the

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<sup>179</sup> McGregor argues that “the emphasis in *Sir Gowther* that the fiend has adopted a form representing what he “really” is (a “felturd fend”) enables him to claim paternity and demarcate his own contribution to the child. Gowther’s very wickedness is his father’s gift. I want to suggest that the Fiend’s appearance *as* a fiend insists that we recognize a paternal demand for transgression as corporeal, as a real component of the subject. At the same time, however, the Fiend’s appearance cannot obviate the guise in which he approached the Duchess; he did so in the form of the Duke so that, eerily, both Duke and Fiend are present at the child’s conception. Both are Gowther’s “real” father; both create his paternal inheritance” (73-4).

son of a fiend. Significantly, although the audience knows that Gowther is physically different from humans because of his paternity and his excessive growth, his behavior seems to be the clearest sign of his monstrosity for the community. I have argued that monsters are physically different from humans, and it is this difference that defines them as monsters; here, Gowther does possess significant physical differences. And while the community notes his excessively violent acts, they ultimately must attribute them to a very physical cause: Gowther is clearly not entirely human—so he must be the son of a fiend not a man.

Gowther's response to the old man is remarkable indeed; although he has raped, killed, and burned his way through his own country, he does not murder this man who challenges him. He merely throws the earl into prison and seeks his own mother, who earlier had fled.<sup>180</sup> Although he accuses the man of lying, Gowther clearly suspects the truth of the man's statement. He, at some level, recognizes the dangers presented by his body, and his parentage seems like a reasonable cause for them. When he finds and confronts his mother about his paternity, she denies the charge, but finally confesses "A fende gat the thare,/ As lyke my lorde as he might be" ["A fiend got you there, and like to my lord as he could be"] (231-2). Gowther's, and the townspeople's, suspicions are confirmed. But now Gowther must decide how to approach this knowledge. Cohen sees this as a moment of crisis and confusion for Gowther:

Despite its revelatory power, however, the moment of origin remains indecipherable (was it rape? Was it desired? A rape-in-desire? How does one judge such an event? How does one represent the Real of the sexual relation?)...Gowther is faced suddenly with the elemental nonsensicality of his

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<sup>180</sup> She flees because, witnessing all of his violence, she has grown tired of keeping her secret: "so wo of red" [so weary of the secret] (155). She and her men are notably worried that Gowther will kill them.

coming into being. Through his mother's testimony he witnesses the act in its inescapable materiality, and now he must find a way to symbolize that encounter, to incorporate it into a meaning-system not reducible to 'mere' sex. (228)

The meaning for Gowther is not sexual, but seminal—he has been engendered by a fiend and has acted out of the instincts derived from this identity without recognizing or challenging them. The solution for Gowther is to defy his strongest impulses and to accept wholly that which he had abjected: the church. Instead of raping nuns, he will turn to their faith for a solution. He immediately decides that he will seek the Pope: “For y wyll to Rome or that y rest/ To lerne anodur lare” [“For I will go to Rome before I rest, to learn another way”] (236-7). He recognizes at this moment the necessity of salvation, and is aware of the danger of having a fiend for a father, for he begins to pray for the first time: “To save hym fro is fadur tho fynde;/ He preyed to God and Mare hynde,/ That most is of poste,/ To bring is sowle to tho blys” [To save him from his father the fiend, he prayed to God and gentle Mary, that have the most power to bring his soul to bliss] (242-4). Still clearly the son of a demon, Gowther desires to come under the protection of a different set of parents.

The moment of recognition begins Gowther's process of conversion from sinner to saint—but even as his behavior changes, his identity as the son of a demon does not. He travels to Rome and supplicates the Pope on his knees, asking for “schryfte and absolyscion” [shrift and absolution] (269). He identifies himself as a christened person, saying “Yey,/ My name it is Gowther; Now y lowve God” [“Yes, my name is Gowther, now I love God”] (278-80), and confesses his parentage. Uebel rightly observes that Gowther does not confess his own actions but dwells upon his conception: “Notably, Gowther confesses to no crimes...but he does confess his fiendish origins by rehearsing

his familial history...Gowther presents himself as victim rather than sinner” (104). As we have acknowledged, Gowther’s problems certainly derive from his parentage and his monstrous body, but this confession nonetheless seems incomplete. Regardless of Gowther’s omission of his sins, however, the Pope recognizes the damage Gowther has done to the Church. When he says, “For thu hast Holy Kyrke destroyed” [“For you have destroyed Holy Church”] (283), we must assume that the Pope refers to more than the fact of Gowther’s birth, as Gowther is not the only child of a demon to ever be born—he must also know of the insults inflicted on the religious people in Gowther’s dukedom. Gowther begs for penance and promises to hold to the penance given him, but he refuses when the Pope asks him to lay down his falchion. His refusal is logical, “My frendys ar full thyn” [“my friends are full thin”] (294); Gowther, after all, has made many enemies since his birth. Still, the falchion is more than a symbol of his knighthood; it is also a symbol of his physical difference and propensity for excess, qualities he is unable to simply put aside.

The Pope gives Gowther penance to perform and even absolves him (307), but ultimately, Gowther’s forgiveness can only come from God—his is no simple case. The penance Gowther is given circumscribes his interaction with the outside world; he can neither eat nor speak like a human: “Wherser thu travellys, be northe or soth,/ Thu eyt no meyt bot that thu revus of howndus muthe/ Cum thy body within;/ Ne no worde speke for evyll ne gud./ Or thu reyde tokyn have fro God,/ That forgyfyn is thi syn” [“Wheresoever you travel, be it north or south, eat no meat but that you receive from a dog’s mouth, [none but that should] come within your body; Nor speak any word either for evil or good, until you have received a sign from God that your sin is forgiven”]



(295-300).<sup>181</sup> Even the Pope, it seems, is unsure if Gowther's sins can *really* be forgiven because of his physical identity. Although he gives Gowther penance to perform, its duration is indefinite—the end will only be achieved through God's own intervention. Charbonneau argues that this story of penance and conversion cannot really serve as a model for humans (except perhaps in the sense that if Gowther can be redeemed, anyone can):

Gowther's dilemma then is not a typical human one, but rather the playing out of that tricky theological question of whether despite unintentionally fulfilling his devilish patrimony and committing the most heinous sins, he can be forgiven. He is no Everyman—and by his very birth cannot be—so that the text explores the precise nature of his ambiguous, semi-determinate nature as not quite human. (25)

Gowther's identity as a half-demon, half-human confounds even the Pope: even a permanent change in behavior for Gowther does not necessarily guarantee his forgiveness because his very body is genetically shaped with a deep and profoundly different kind of sin.

Gowther leaves Rome and wanders into another country, but he dutifully obeys the terms of his penance; as Cohen has termed it, he “becomes dog.” He is fed by a greyhound each night of his travels, which reveals to the audience that God is watching his penance with approval. The fact that it is a greyhound that feeds him also confirms his status as (at least half) noble; David Salter argues that the greyhound “can also be viewed as an emblem of Gowther's noble nature, drawing attention to his role as an aristocratic

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<sup>181</sup> Uebel demonstrates the appropriateness of this particular kind of penance, although he argues that it is ultimately unsuccessful: “Remarkably, the pope attempts to turn the sadistic Gowther into a masochistic knight by compelling him to focus his identity on one part of his body, his mouth, transforming the site of his original sins (the oral attacks on his nurses and mother) into a sign of penance” (104). Blamires sees the penance as appropriate to what he perceives as Gowther's most significant crime: his arrogance. He gains a new humility is through “series of moments of interior self-suppression” (55).

hero of romance, as well as his identity as a saint” (Salter 80).<sup>182</sup> Uebel sees this transition as neither productive nor positive, however; he notes that Gowther does not really suffer because he is cared for by these dogs, so the penance is not really so terrible. Moreover, he claims that “Gowther contaminates his soul—for he cannot do otherwise—by abjecting himself as a dog. The hybrid dog-man was, throughout the Middle Ages, seen as an image of the punishment that submission to sin brings down upon mortals” (108). These critics, then, raise the question does Gowther become a dog because he lives like one?

Gowther does indeed live *like* a dog, but he clearly exists in a significantly more human category. When he first enters the emperor’s castle, having waited meekly to be invited in by the porter, he immediately settles himself under the high table without speaking a word: “Unto tho hye bord he chesse,/ Ther undur he made is seytt” [Unto the head table he went, and under it he made his seat] (332-3). The odd behavior earns him threats from the head porter, who nonetheless notes his noble appearance when he reports the strange man’s presence to the emperor: “a mon,/ And that tho feyrest that ever y sye” [“a mon, and that is the fairest that I ever saw”] (339-40). Gowther is not so “humiliated” by this dog-status that his class is not recognizable. His comportment, however, is almost immediately recognized as penance: “And yet mey happon thoro sum chans/ That it wer gyffon hym in penans” [“And yet it may be through some chance that it was given him in penance”] (346-7). Cohen claims that “Gowther’s body is to be completely closed from social intercourse” (229), but truly, his body is a very readable

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<sup>182</sup> This argument relies upon Schmitt, who has observed (1983): “unlike other dogs who tended to be somewhat disparaged during the Middle Ages, greyhounds were prized for their innate nobility, and came to be regarded as symbols” of chivalry (qtd in Salter 80).

text. Even in his muteness, Gowther's motivation is clearly communicated. This kind of adherence to penance is not humiliating but admirable, as the court respects Gowther's behavior and allows him to remain under the table. They try to give him good food, but he resists it, eating only when a spaniel comes under the table with a bone in his mouth for Gowther, who "...gredely on hit he gnofe,/ He wold nowdur curlu ne tartte./ Boddely sustynans wold he non/ Bot what so he fro thoe howndus wan,/ If it wer gnaffyd or mard" [...he gnawed on it greedily; he would take neither curlew nor quail. He would take no bodily sustenance except that that he won from dogs, even if it were gnawed or spoiled] (356-60). This repast is certainly not appetizing, and locates Gowther "at the bottom of the social hierarchy" (Laskaya and Salisbury 270), but it does not transform him into a dog.

While Gowther's penitential status is temporary and marginal, he still remains as much of a human as he was before. Uebel concedes that Gowther's dog-status is not literal: "Yet Gowther's 'becoming-dog' is, of course, purely demonstrative; he cannot, unlike a conventional lycanthrope, actually, that is to say physically let alone mentally, become canine" (107). But Cohen sees this state as a successful overcoding of the human body, necessary for Gowther to obtain true humanity. He argues:

...all of the forces that are transmitted through the canine body rebound to overcode the human. An interstitial monster springs temporarily into being: a dog-man, a cynocephalus, a werewolf. But once the overcoding 'takes,' the body passes out of its freakish hybridity to be inscribed more fully than ever into the secure space of the Human. (232)

While this discussion of the temporary dog-state of Gowther is fascinating, it must remain ultimately unconvincing. Gowther is never a dog, although "He is literally and symbolically set apart from God and from men by living under the High Table with the

dogs as companions” (Charbonneau 27). His continuing part-human status is recognizable in the fact that he is given his own private chamber by the emperor, however small it might be—a luxury not allotted to the castle’s dog population. More significantly, however, he is given a name—a name that carries with it a clear marker of human status: “Hob hor fole thei con hym call” [Hob their fool they called him] (371). Gowther might be a “fool,” but a fool is inherently *not* a dog—fool is a human category. His behavior might seem ridiculous, and it might locate him at the lowest social stratum, but it does not actually bestialize him.

Through his muteness, Gowther is linked not only to the dogs under the table, but also to the Emperor’s mute daughter. Her disability does not come by any self-imposed penance, but through inability: “Scho wold have spokyn and might noght” [She would have spoken, but could not] (376). It is this young woman that provides the means for Gowther’s final redemption. She is the cause of a war between her father and a great Sultan who desires to marry her. Her father absolutely refuses this alliance in the name of Christ: “” And y wyll not, be Cryst wonde,/ Gyffe hor to no hethon hownde” [“And I will not, by Christ’s wounds, give her to any heathen hound”] (391-2). This phrase, “heathen hounds,” familiar enough in Middle English literature,<sup>183</sup> is a phrase that serves to link Gowther with the Saracens as well. Gowther is first connected to the Saracens through his blade, the falchion, as Uebel suggests:

The blade itself is foreign; curved like a sickle, it symbolizes the brutality of the Saracen other, whose very identity, as Norman Daniel has shown, was imagined

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<sup>183</sup> The phrase appears in *Merlin: or, the history of King Arthur: a prose romance*, chapter XXIX, and chapter XXXII, in *Octovian* Cambridge University Library Ms. Ff.2.38, between lines 1401-1500, in *Pe Liflade of St. Juliana*, the Royal manuscript, and at least three times in *Layamon’s Brut*. John Block Friedman, too, comments on the link between the term dog and Moslems (67). See Montañó for further discussion (124-6).

throughout the Middle Ages to inhere in the double threat of violence and sexuality. Gowther has in effect become Saracen, his sadism and his fetishism interanimating him to the point of a pure will to power. (103)

While possessing this kind of Eastern blade might imply a strange and Saracen identity for the transgressive Gowther, it does not “transform” him into a Saracen—it merely indicates his status as “other” in comparison to normative Christian identity. However, this connection, when paired with Gowther’s enforced bond to the castle dogs, does link him, as Uebel has noted (108), to the “heathen hounds” who oppose the Emperor. The dogs’ symbolism is double: through the muteness and humility of the dogs, Gowther is linked to the mute daughter and the injunction of the Pope, but through their bestial nature and the metonymic tie to the Saracens, Gowther is linked to the non-Christian. These connections highlight Gowther’s troubled and double identity: he is human and able to be forgiven, but he is also demon, and thus inherently (and physically) opposed to the Christian. No matter how humble his behavior, this physically dual nature makes redemption impossible.

Gowther, at this point in the narrative, does live a double life, recognized only by the mute daughter. To everyone else at the court, he remains “Hob the fool.” But when the war begins, Gowther goes to his room and prays silently that God “Schuld sende hym armur, schyld and speyr,/ And hors to helpe is lord in weyr” [that he should send him armor, shield, and spear, and horse to help his lord in war] (406-7). This prayer is answered immediately; Gowther finds a black horse and armor at his chamber door (411). As he rides out to war, the audience is assured that “Non hym knew bot that meyden gent” [none knew him but that gentle maiden] (419). Gowther rides out to battle and is very successful, in fact, incredibly violently successful: he chops off heads and bursts

brains left and right. “Mony a crone con he stere” [Many a head did he remove] (425)...” and “He gard stedus for to stakur/ And knyghttus hartys for to flakur/ When blod and brenus con brast;/ And mony a heython hed of smott” [He made horses stagger and knights’ hearts flutter when blood and brains burst, and many a heathen head off smote] (427-30). When he is done with this bloodshed and the Sultan retreats, Gowther returns humbly to his spot under the table “Too small raches between” [between two small hunting dogs] (444). No one else has recognized him, so this behavior does not seem strange to any but the maiden. She rewards him within the terms of his penance: “Tho meydon toke too gruhowndus fyn/ And waschyd hor mowthus cleyn with wyn/ And putte a lofe in tho ton;/ And in tho todur flesch full gud” [The maiden took two fine greyhounds and washed their mouths clean with wine, and put a loaf into the one and in the other, good meat] (445-8). Thus, in the structure of the narrative, Gowther is behaving rightly—he maintains the terms of his penance, does not boast of his valiant fighting or demand recognition, and is rewarded for his behavior by the symbol of peace and humility within the poem: the silent Christian virgin.

Uebel argues that Gowther identifies with the “heathen hounds” whom he “massacres” (108), in what seems to be a masochistic way—he must be denigrating himself if he is killing them so vehemently. However, while the kind of violence enacted by Gowther might seem like a release of his inherently violent and demonic tendencies, these actions are undertaken in a socially and morally sanctioned forum. Because his use of the falchion is guided by God’s response to his prayer and reaffirmed by the reward of the Emperor’s daughter, Gowther’s battle-performance is not only allowed but also commended. Gowther sets himself against the Saracens, and, indeed, is perhaps so

successful because he turns his own “Saracen” blade against them. Gowther is not symbolically killing himself by killing the “heathen hounds”; he is defining himself against their unchristian and now dead bodies. Indeed, Salter takes the approval of Gowther’s killing to suggest an affinity between Gowther’s role here as warrior and his later role as saint: “Thus, not merely does the poem claim that there is no conflict between Gowther’s dual roles as knight and saint, it actually seems to imply that God grants him a place in heaven as a reward for so conscientiously discharging the morally burdensome obligations expected of a knight” (76). Gowther does what a good knight should do, but he does it more successfully and with more humility.

Gowther’s success in battle continues over the following two days, while he also successively becomes purer and purer in the eyes of God. Gowther’s transition from sinner to saint is visible in the text through his change in clothing. The first day in battle, God sends him a black horse and black armor. For the second day of battle, he wears red: “God sende Syr Gwother thro Is mughth/ A red hors and armur bryght” [God sent Sir Gowther through his might a red horse and bright armor] (466-7). The significance of this color-change becomes clear when we are told of Gowther’s exploits in battle that day: “He leyd apou the Sarsyns blake” [He set upon the Saracens black] (478). He had been a black knight himself only the day before—a day in which he proved his opposition to those with whom he had previously been linked. The Emperor notices the red knight’s successes and recalls those of the black knight from the day before—but still does not recognize “Hob the fool.” Gowther once again returns to his place with the dogs and is rewarded again by the Emperor’s daughter (511-12), while the Emperor gives a speech, attributing his success to the black and red knights: “Had eydur of hom byn to lacke/ Full

evyll we had ben steyd” [“had either of them not been there, we would have experienced great evil”] (523-8). Gowther still does not speak or engage in the celebration, but lies in his chamber, physically weary—but we are told his only concern is with the state of his soul: “For he was full wery,/ Bryssud for strokus that he had laghtth/ When he in the batell faghtth,/ Amonghe that carefull cry./ He had no thought bot of is syn,/ And how he might is soule wyn” [For he was very weary, bruised by strokes that he had received when he fought in the battle, among careful cry. He had no thought but of his sin and how he might win his soul] (534-9). Gowther’s actions and thoughts are further rewarded by his transition to a “mylke white” [milk white] (563) horse and armor the next day.

On Gowther’s third and final day in battle, he combats the Sultan, who figures as Gowther’s final battle against his own impulses. The Sultan is dressed richly, in “sabull blacke” (577), the color in which Gowther first appeared in battle. As Cohen claims, “The Sultan takes the place of the giant which Gowther no longer is” (233). While Gowther is still physically aberrant, he is no longer behaviorally linked to the Sultan. Just before the final moment of battle, the poet interrupts the narrative to remind the audience of Gowther’s attention to the Pope’s instructions: “Bot he wold not for yre ne tene/ No worde speke, withowt wene,/ For dowtte of Godus wreke;/ If all he hongurt, noght he dyd eytte/ Bot what he might fro tho howndus geyt;/ He dyd as tho Pwope con hym teche” [But he would not for anger or injury speak any word, without a doubt, for knowledge of God’s divine judgment. If he hungered, he ate nothing but what he might get from the dogs; he did as the Pope taught him] (607-11). This description comes not because we see a moment where we suspect Gowther might eat or speak when he should not. It comes as a reminder of Gowther’s sanctioned and controlled behavior, which then makes him



worthy to ride beside the Emperor to protect him from harm (614). When the Sultan captures the Emperor, when the evil Saracen is about to overcome the good Christian, Gowther intervenes: “Tho dompe Duke gard hym ley a wed./ Stroke of his hed anon,/ Rescowyd is lord, broght hym ageyn” [The mute Duke made him remain a hostage, then struck off his head, rescued his lord, brought him back again] (629-31). Gowther defeats that with which he was metonymically and symbolically allied through the entire narrative. Gowther is under the direction of the Pope, and of Christianity, as McGregor suggests:

The sword that Gowther fashions in his wild youth and refuses to relinquish even at the Pope's bidding marks the conjunction of his symbolic and obscene fathers; a weapon once used to murder at the Fiend's direction becomes the weapon with which he defends the emperor in God's name. (75)

Gowther has changed his behavior; he has become a soldier for God instead of a soldier for Satan. Although Laskaya and Salisbury suggest that “With [the falchion] he defeats the Saracen enemy, and, in this sense, overcomes the wild man in himself” (269-70), Gowther cannot change his physical status. As Montaña suggests, “Gowther does not totally lose his prior identity, but he turns to new allegiances... The text shows that although Gowther is now a complex combination of Christian and Saracen elements, he is firmly identified with a single cultural community, a Christian one” (128). For him, the problem of Gowther is resolved when his armor turns from black to red—this resolution then shows that Gowther’s “racial identity is less determined by biological criteria and defined more according to custom, law, and religion” (129). It is true that at this point

Gowther is still a hybrid being—but he cannot be absolved while this multiple identity exists. Gowther is still not forgiven, and his penance is still not lifted—he is physically still the son of the demon, still a physically hybrid creature, a monster.

Gowther's redemption and transformation comes only through the medium of the broken body of the Emperor's daughter. As he is saving the Emperor, Gowther is hit by a Saracen spear through his shoulder (635); the maiden witnesses this event, and she "for sorro fell owt of hur toure" [for sorrow, fell out of her tower] (637). She lies in a kind of coma, not stirring for two days, and lying more still "Then ho deyd had ben" [than if she had been dead] (642). Blamires, who sees arrogance that is associated with the problematic noble classes as Gowther's major sin, claims that the maiden "takes the fall" for Gowther:

Now, falling was the commonplace sign of divine punishment for individual arrogance... The princess herself does not strike us as tainted with arrogance—it is more the case that she is enacting on Gowther's part, as if sacrificially, the paradigm of the 'humbling of the mighty' which now seals his own moral rebirth and re-socialisation. (56)

Gowther's flaw, however, is not arrogance, but hybridity. The maiden's fall is not a fall into humility, which Gowther has already achieved through his silent service and submission under the table. Her fall makes possible Gowther's redemption not only because it allows for a miraculous recovery, but also because it necessitates the presence of the Pope.

When the Pope arrives "to assoyle that swett thing" [to absolve that sweet thing] (656) for her burial, the princess miraculously awakens, and even more miraculously, speaks. It is not only that she speaks but what she says that allows for Gowther's redemption. She brings a message from God to Gowther, whom she addresses; in fact, it

is the message the Pope bade him wait for: “Hoe seyde, ‘My lord of heyvon gretys the well,/ And forgyffeus the thi syn yche a dell,/ And grantys the tho blys;/ And byddus the speyke on hardely,/ Eyte and drynke and make mery;/ Thu schallt be won of His” [She said, “My lord of heaven greets you well and forgives you your sin in each part, and grants you blessing; and bids you speak on bravely, eat and drink and make merry; you will be one of his own”] (657-66). It is with these words that Gowther is transformed—he is not merely forgiven, but he becomes one of God’s own.

This is affirmed when the Pope authoritatively shrives Gowther and announces his new status in the eyes of the Church: he kisses Gowther “And seyde, ‘Now art thou Goddus chyld;/ The thar not dowt tho warlocke wyld,/ There waryd mot he bee” [and said “Now you are God’s child, you need not fear the wild devil, there vanquished must he be”] (670-5). Through Gowther’s penance and the miracle of the mute maiden’s recovery of both consciousness and speech, Gowther is forgiven and transformed literally from the son of a demon to “God’s child.” Laskaya and Salisbury concur, saying, “Gowther is liberated from his position under the table and the silent prison of his body. But most significantly Gowther’s paternity is transferred from one father to another” (272). And with this change of paternity comes a change in physicality; Gowther is no longer a human-demon hybrid, prone to the excessive strength and growth of the giant. He becomes entirely human, under the authority of the Pope, and ultimately of God. McGregor argues that this unified identity as the child of God relies on the fact that he has two fathers, the Duke and the demon:

The poem arrives at its celebration of God's power through reconciling in one father the split function of paternity represented by the Fiend and the Duke,

ultimately recognizing that the symbolic father and the obscene transgressive father are essential components of one another. The resolution depends not on Gowther obliterating all traces of his connection to the Fiend, not on his murdering him as Zizek argues the anal father must be murdered, but upon his being inextricably associated with him. (75)

The paternity of God, however, erases the presence of the fiend, his father, as the Pope's blessing clearly indicates: Gowther no longer needs to fear the "warlocke wyld" because he is no longer present in his body. He has been "waryd," replaced.<sup>184</sup> Gowther has undergone what Caroline Walker Bynum would term a "replacement change" (*Metamorphosis* 29) His hybridity has been replaced by singularity. Cohen suggests that "Because 'geyton with a feltyrd feynd' and sanctified after a long journey through a series of transitional bodies, Gowther has come to signify a transformative, corrective, normalizing principle" (236). I would argue that although Gowther does indeed represent a normalizing and corrective principle, he has not actually had transitional bodies: his body, always the son of a demon, has been controlled through penitential behavior until it is transformed through a miracle and the blessing of God and the Pope.

Charbonneau suggests that this narrative begs the question if and how Gowther "can become a man, not a devil, and whether as a half-devil/half-man who has been baptized, he can attain salvation at all. This is an altogether different kind of story from the typical conversion story, the common story of human redemption, or of the hardened sinner redeemed" (25). The answer to this question is yes, Gowther can indeed become a man and achieve salvation, in that order. She finds the answers to this question unsatisfying: "The author, by too many sleights of hand, however, fails to create a

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<sup>184</sup> This word presented a number of difficulties: no verbal entries under the letter "w" in the *Middle English Dictionary* seemed to correspond with this term. I argue that the word is actually a form of "varien," to undergo a change in form, to differ from, or to change.

coherent story of transformation. Too many pieces do not fit into this text, which moves uneasily between exemplary romance, secular hagiography and church propaganda” (27). What she calls the “muddle” of the middle of the story, however, does function coherently to allow us to understand the ways through which Gowther reforms his behavior as much as he possibly can without holding the actual power to transform himself. The narrative wants to suggest instead that though reformation is crucial, the sanctions of God and Church hold the actual powers of transformation. Penance is attainable, even for Gowther; as Hopkins suggests, the poet’s message is “one of hope” (170). God can and will intervene with the power of transformation. Though the devil is invited in through his mother’s prayer, he is also “waryd” out through God’s blessing.

Gowther’s first act after his transformation is to abide by his social contract as a noble: he marries. When he marries the Emperor’s daughter, “Of all hur fadur londus eyr” [heir of all her father’s lands] (680), he becomes heir to those same lands. He gives away his own Dukedom to the old earl who questioned his parentage, upon whom he also bestows his mother’s hand (686-90). Next, he makes reparations for his horrible crimes against religious people by building an abbey and filling it with monks (691-4). Despite the forgiveness he has received from God and the Pope, he remains haunted by what he did to the nuns: “All yf tho Pope had hym schryvyn/ And God is synnus clene forgevon,/ Yett was his hard full sare/ That ever he schuld so yll wyrke/ To bren tho nunnus in hor kyrke” [Even though the Pope had shriven him and God had forgiven his sins, still his heart was pained that he should ever have done such a terrible deeds as to burn the nuns in their church] (697-701). He builds them an abbey, which becomes known as a center for wisdom (703-8). Gowther’s former monstrous identity and acts are thus replaced too,

with the replacement of destroyed churches and bodies. These items act as monuments, commemorating the transformative power of God, but also the destructive power of the demonic Gowther.

Gowther spends the rest of his days as an exemplum of Christian knighthood, an identity that is ultimately replaced by sainthood. Upon the Emperor's death, Gowther becomes "...lord and emperowr,/ Of all Cryston knyghttus tho flower" [...lord and emperor, the flower of all Christian knights] (712-13). He stands ready against Saracens, supports the poor and rich, helps the church, and "Thus toke he bettur reyde" [Thus he took better counsel] (720). When he dies after many years of wise rule, he is buried in the abbey he first destroyed then rebuilt. Gowther's burial alone stands as a miracle, for this Christian became one only through his miraculous transformation: "God hase done for his sake/ Myrrakull, for he has hym hold; Ther he lyse in schryne of gold/ That suffurd for Goddus sake" [God has done a miracle for his sake, for he has him in his hold; there he, who suffered for God's sake, lies in a shrine of gold] (729-32). The war within Gowther is won by God and religious powers on earth through the physicality of penance; this causes the transformation, which is both physical and spiritual.

Gowther's miraculous transformation is not the only one in this text, however. After his death, Gowther acts as a kind of intercessor for God. We are told that Gowther has power through the Holy Ghost to help the suffering of those "Who so sechys hym with hart fre" [Who so seek him with a free heart] (733). Specifically, Gowther transforms troubled bodies: "For he garus thos blynd to see/ And tho dompe to speyke, parde,/ And makus tho crokyd right,/ And gyffus to tho mad hor wytte,/ And mony odur meracullus yette, Thoro tho grace of God allmyght" [For he causes the blind to see and

the dumb to speak, also, and makes the crooked straight and gives to the mad their wit, and many other miracles also, through the grace of God almighty] (739-44). Although Gowther had no power to transform himself, after his death, through the power of God, he enables the transformation of other bodies. None of these bodies, notably, are hybrid bodies, but they are bodies that lack specific qualities: the powers of sight and speech, straightness, and wit. Gowther's transformation serves as a singular example of transformation and conversion. The kind of transformation he undergoes is not meant to be repeated, but to be a comfort to others. Transformation here is positive, reassuring, and finally, available through God's grace and through the intercession of pope or saint.<sup>185</sup>

For some readers, Gowther's transformation seems incomplete. Charbonneau finds the narrative unsatisfying, saying "How could an author expect us to believe this hopelessly ill-prepared transformation from devil's son to saint, from burner of convents to builder of them, from disfigurer and mutilator of women to caretaker of them?" (21). We, as an audience, are not being asked to believe that Gowther is casually reformed through his own hard work and penance. We are meant instead to recognize an alternative and safe practice of transformation. We are meant to see the power of God and Church over the body of the monstrous. In *Sir Gowther*, the body ultimately cannot and does not infiltrate and destroy; the monstrous body is infiltrated by the grace of God. Another kind of resistance to this transformation comes from Uebel, who argues "that Gowther remains resolutely (and tragically) abject over the course of his career as royal son, knight, penitent, Christian soldier, lord, and finally miracle-working saint" (96).

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<sup>185</sup> Blamires cautiously suggests a late 14<sup>th</sup> Century date for the poem, based on its reclamation of Papal authority: "Like the Charlemagne romances, it could be said to promote papal authority (damaged at the time by the schism) and to warn against tyrannical lordship (a phenomenon, to be sure, of the last decade of the century)" (Blamires 57). Charbonneau also remarks that this seems like "church propaganda" (27).

Uebel claims that even though his status changes, Gowther's basic nature, that of someone liminal to society, never does. "Gowther remains fully the son of a demon, a perpetual foreigner, and inassimilable outsider to the changing social contexts through which he moves with limited agency" (97). While Gowther's status as liminal might be a continuing quality, certainly his paternity and physical nature are changed through the intercession of God. But the fact is, with Gowther, something *does* seem unfinished.

Gowther's transformation is fascinating because it reverses the process of most monstrous transformations in Middle English literature. These other transformations feature a human-seeming body that then disastrously is revealed to be monstrous. Instead, Gowther transforms from a monstrous human into a wholly and holy human one. The transformative monster presented by *Sir Gowther* revises the threatening process of the transformation through the authority of God and the Church. Yet one trace of the monster remains. Uebel suggests that through Gowther's status as a fetishistic devotional subject "Gowther thus continues to have a contaminative effect, outlasting his death, on the people around him" (110). I argue that Gowther's "contaminative effect" is not his status as a saint and miracle worker. The problem with Gowther is that the disappearance of the monstrous from his body is never really tested. The trouble in this romance begins with the struggle of an infertile noble couple who have no child; Gowther is born through a mother's desperation to fulfill her part of the marital contract and the couple's obligation to succession. The Duke is ready to divorce his wife of ten years in order to find someone who might bear a child, because otherwise "'Eireles mon owre londys bee'" [heirless must our lands be] (59). The monstrous body of Gowther is the result of this dangerous anxiety, but in his body, the problem of heirlessness is never resolved. Gowther and his



wife never seem to conceive a child. The poem seems to want to make doubly sure that the monstrosity is excised from the body and the community. While we can reasonably trust that Gowther's body has been transformed, the poet cannot take the risk of Gowther's reproduction. So while Gowther's own paternity is resolved by the power of God, it is not so absolute that Gowther himself can become a father.

### **“Weryd Mot He Bee”: Transformation and the Trace of the Monstrous**

The monstrous serves as a threatening category in Middle English literature—but writers respond in significantly different ways to this category. The primary response to the monstrous is a desire to erase it—from the text, from the community, from the memory. But monstrosity is not so easy to escape. Even when monstrosity is erased, a trace of it remains and constitutes a clear presence within the text. This is most obvious when the desire to erase is enacted only through violence: the giant of Mont St. Michel is killed, but the masculinity and potency that he both embodies and symbolizes haunt the remainder of the narrative. The giant, a monster who is not transformative, cannot be easily erased from the text of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. In Arthur's excessive excision of the monster from the text, we become increasingly aware of how he continues to affect and reflect the reproductive failures within the narrative. It is the violated body of the giant that serves as a trace, reminding the audience of Arthur's failures to protect his people and impregnate his wife. Although the giant is not transformative, and thus does not have a body that is tricky and troublesome to identify, the desire to erase it only

yields a constant reminder of it. Whenever we see assertions of masculinity and paternity for the remainder of the text, and particularly in its conclusion, we remember the castrated body of the overly potent giant.

*Sir Gowther*, then, offers a consoling solution to the problem of the monstrous body. Transformation in this text is neither monstrous nor threatening, as it is in *Mandeville's Travels*. Transformation in this text is controlled by the will of God through the authority of the Pope and the Church. *Sir Gowther* not only provides a solution to the problem of the transformation, it also allows for the successful erasure of the monster not through death, but through Bynum's category of replacement change. When Gowther's paternity changes—when he becomes the “child of God”—the change is more than philosophical or spiritual. The change in paternity is a change in biology; Gowther literally becomes a different being. The demon is evacuated from his form and thus Gowther's physical excess is no more. The body of the demon's son is replaced by the body of a child of God, just as the ruined convent and its raped and burned nuns are replaced by a more renowned convent, known for its wisdom and goodness. However, when one thing is replaced by another—for instance, when the new convent replaces the old one—the viewer is reminded of what was once there. Something common exists through the replacement. In Gowther's case, although his biological identity has changed, the poet never suggests that his appearance changes. Thus, the problem with this replacement is that it always holds traces of that which it once was. Its very presence, then, reminds us of another presence. While we are reassured that the previous presence has been replaced, the tiniest hint of former identity remains. It is precisely the problem of the trace that makes Gowther's body safe, but not safe enough to reproduce. Thus,

while transformation becomes a solution to the problem of the monstrous body, that solution can never be wholly assured. Killing the monster does not resolve the problem of the monstrous body—although it might help the surrounding community in an immediate way. Transformation, a quality that serves to highlight the dangerousness of monstrosity in other medieval texts, is called on by the poet of *Sir Gowther* to replace instead of erase monstrosity. Replacement certainly functions more effectively, allowing Gowther to achieve the forgiveness of God and the acceptance of the community. Despite this revisioning of the dangerous possibilities for transformation, however, that which has changed bears remnants, traces, of what it once was. Although Gowther replaces the demon as father with God the father, he himself never becomes a father. While his monstrous identity has been replaced by a holy one, his body still holds traces of its dangerous former presence. His body, it seems, is always already monstrous—even though it has been transformed by God.

The problem of the monstrous body is not one that is easily resolved. In Old English texts, writers, readers, and characters attempt to rid themselves of the monstrous through acts of erasure, both literal and figurative. But when a figure is excised from a text, the evidence of that erasure remains: such is the case with the erased genitals in *Wonders of the East*—we can literally see where these body parts are covered over or scratched out. Figurative traces of Grendel's mother, too, remain in the text after she is erased from the story by Beowulf. Although her body is left decapitated in the mere, she returns to the text every time Beowulf retells and revises the story of their fight, and ultimately reveals Beowulf's own failure of paternity.

Killing the monster does not remove it entirely from the text. In Middle English, these bodies resist erasure through transformation. They come closer and closer to the communities and bodies of humans through their ability to look like them; thus in *Mandeville's Travels* the woman who becomes a dragon can appear human to draw in unlucky knights, and the poison virgins can disguise their secret and fatal monstrosity inside their bodies, thus disrupting the reproductive practices of the community in which they live. These bodies remain unresolved and utterly dangerous to those humans with whom they interact. *Sir Gowther*, however, attempts a solution to the problem of the monstrous body; through penance, the child of a demon and a noble woman transforms physically and spiritually into a child of God. In the end, however, the transformed body remains hybrid; the traces of what it was before linger in the new and different body. Most of these texts attempt to dispel the threat of the monster through erasure, be it the literal removal of the monstrous image, the killing of the monster, or the rehabilitation of the monster through religious means. These attempts are doomed to fail because not only does the monster always return, the monster never departs.

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