Volume 27 (2012)

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Making Sacrifices: Beowulf and Film

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Mysteriously, even ostentatiously sublime, the opening of Beowulf has puzzled, enthused, and enervated generations of readers. The uncanny parallel it draws between the ship burial of a king and the miraculous survival of a cast away—a boy, set adrift alone on the sea, who washed ashore in Denmark, subsequently held all Scandinavia in awe and fathered the Shielding dynasty—inspires complex and conflicting sensations. There are large measures of irony, fatalism, and mystery lurking within this fairy tale framework.: irony, most surely, in the droll litotes comparing the treasures loaded on the bark-bier of Scyld Scefing with the feasceaft origins of the waif the Danes fostered; fatalism in the appreciation that wyrd should achieve so perfect a symmetry of arrivals and departures; mystery, too, in the epistemological fog bank which rolls in at the very end of the passage. None knows whence Scyld came, nor can they guess whither he has gone. Many have remarked on the theme of a savior coming from overseas, which seems to prefigure Beowulf's arrival in another dark time. Many more have been struck by the placement of funerals at the beginning and end of the poem. But few critics indeed have bothered to ask how that child happened to be out alone on the sea in the first place or how this myth of a fortunate foundling contributes to the poem's ambivalent evocation of Germanic paganism in illo tempore. This essay reviews opening scenes in some recent film Beowulfs, which, although they have nothing at all to say about Scyld Scefing, suggest a sacrificial reading of the prologue and perhaps even the whole poem. Although Scyld is conspicuously absent from these adaptations of Beowulf, the specter of the prologue may well have inspired their frank depictions of human sacrifice.

Two films released in 1999 (John McTiernan's The Thirteenth Warrior and Graham Baker's Beowulf) introduce their versions of the story of Beowulf with clear, albeit dissimilar representations of human sacrifice. The Thirteenth Warrior's royal funeral makes us view the sacrifice of an unnamed woman through the foreign, distant perspective of Ahmed ibn Fadlan, who watches the spectacle at a distance through the smoky, torch-lit gloom of pre-dawn. The Arab chronicler's independent, objective perspective thus functions as a stand-in for modern views, establishing the burial as something miraculous, rare, even reified, and battening our gaze on the exotic ship burial, specifically on the sacrificial victim chosen to travel with her dead king to Valhalla. This filmic version of a Viking funeral is several removes from Beowulf and even from its ultimate source in ibn Fadlan's description of the Rus in Journey to Russia:

> Then the people lifted her onto the boat but did not yet let her go into the tent (where the dead king had been placed). Hereupon came men with shields and staves and gave her a bowl of mead, whereupon she sang and drank it. The interpreter said to me: "With this she is bidding goodbye to her friends." Then she was given another beaker. She took it and sang for a long time, while the old woman was urging her to finish the goblet, and to go into the tent where her lord lay. I saw then how disturbed she was. She wished to go into the tent, but put her head between the tent and the side of the boat. The old woman ("the angel of death") took her by the head, made her go into the tent, and also entered with her. Whereupon the men began to beat their shields with the staves so that her shrieks would not be heard, and the other maidens become terrified. Then six men went into the tent and all had intercourse with the girl. Then they placed her beside her dead lord; two men seized her by the feet and two by the hands. Then the old woman placed a rope in which a bight had been made, and gave it to two of the men to pull at the two ends. Then the old woman came to her with a broad-bladed dagger and began to jab it into her ribs and pull it out again, and the two men strangled her until she was dead.[1]

Perhaps most remarkable about the passage in terms of René Girard's theory of scapegoating is its matter-of-factness, its reportorial objectivity. Girard details how myths routinely conceal the realities of sacrifice. He traces evidence of such erasures in myths like that of the Cretan Kouretes, who noisily clashed their weapons around the infant Zeus ostensibly to "save" him from being consumed by his cannibal father Cronos, or the "game" the Aesir played of hurling missiles at the supposedly impervious Baldr. [2] No such "mythologization" is evident in ibn Fadlan's account of the Rus: the drowning out of the victim's screams and the labored process of ritual murder are frankly described in horrible detail. Michael Crichton's version of the scene in his novel Eaters of the Dead (1976)[3] remains quite faithful to this account, but John McTiernan's adaptation of Crichton pales by comparison, producing an exotic, even sublime spectacle of human sacrifice. Gone are the virgin rendered nearly comatose with drink, the series of ritualized rapes, the raucous banging of weapons to hide her screams, the piles of animal carcasses also sacrificed to the dead king "Wyglif," as well as the victim's over-determined death by stabbing and strangulation. What the film offers instead is an apparently inviolate young woman in a white dress partaking in a transcendent ceremony. Both cinematography and dialogue contribute to a distancing effect not present in the novel. All the sex

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[1] Ahmed ibn Fadlan, Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler from Bagdad to the Volga River, trans. Richard N. Frye (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2005), 69-70.

[2] René Girard, The Scapegoat, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 66-75.

[3] Michael Crichton, Eaters of the Dead (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), 46-54.

and blood of the sacrifice is kept off stage in The Thirteenth Warrior. As Herger tells ibn Fadlan: "You will not see this again, it is the old way." The squeamishness is bewildering since the R-rated film doesn't otherwise blanch at depicting sex, violence or cannibalism. But what its adaptation of the novel's adaptation of Beowulf does establish is the theme of human sacrifice as a frame for all that follows.

At this exact point in the surviving epitome of ibn Fadlan's tenth-century travel narrative Eaters of the Dead jumps ship, abandoning the Journey to Russia, which up until now it had traced rather faithfully, in favor of the Old English poem, which Crichton's version drastically reconceives. With the reissue of his novel in 1992 Crichton discussed his options for the rewriting of Beowulf in "A Factual Note." Citing a "scholarly tradition that examined epic poetry and mythology as though it might have some underlying basis in fact,"[4] he explicitly compared his original concept to Schlieman's discovery of Troy, Arthur Evan's Palace at Knossos, and historians' attempts to plot the legendary journeys of Odysseus or the Argonauts. Not content simply with these archeological analogies, he also leveraged oral formulism:

> Thus it seemed reasonable within this tradition, to imagine that Beowulf, too, had originally been based on an actual event. The event had been embellished over centuries of oral retelling, producing the fantastic narrative we read today. But I thought it might be possible to reverse the process, peeling away the poetic invention, and returning to a kernel of genuine human experience—something that had actually happened.[5]

Something like the project here described was actually undertaken in the later film, Beowulf and Grendel (dir. Sturla Gunnarsson, 2005), but in the event Crichton found this fictional version of scholarship too demanding; he settled instead on the related strategy of introducing a "witness to the events that led to the epic poem of Beowulf," a witness whose cultural difference and status as an "outsider" would permit an "objective" account of the history that inspired the legend.[6] Albeit grandiose and ultimately unsuccessful, this notion of medievalism as scholarship by other means is not without merit. In one way or another the convention of the pseudo-scholarly paratext is a founding trope of medievalism from Walter Scott to Umberto Eco. Of course, judged by the disciplinary canons of academic history or literary scholarship, few historical novels or action films

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[4] Michael Crichton, The Thirteenth Warrior (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988; previously published as Eaters of the Dead), 271.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Crichton, The Thirteenth Warrior, 274. See, Hugh Magennis, "Michael Crichton, Ibn Fadlan, Fantasy Cinema: Beowulf at the Movies." Old English Newsletter 35, no. 1 (2001): 34-38. As Megennis explains, "The introduction of the mediating figure Ibn Fadlan, who functions as our educated guide and representative in a world beyond the pale, is a key feature of Crichton's adaptation. We, as readers, can identify with him and sympathize with his responses as an un-heroic outsider on a heroic expedition," p. 35.

are likely to pass muster. However, isn't the corollary notion that medievalism simply represents distortion and baseless fantasy equally suspect? Likewise, is Crichton's creation of an objective perspective through which we can perceive truths hidden beneath the text's supernatural encounters really all that dissimilar from scholars who enter the world of the text to find parallels between the monsters and social structures such as feud or ring givers?

The answers to both questions probably depend upon who is asking and why. If such questions are mere rhetorical strategies intended to level scholarship and popular entertainment, then we should respond by emphasizing the differences between making a popular film and writing a scholarly monograph. Yet if we ask them earnestly in hopes of comprehending the extent to which each is implicated in the other, we can honestly begin exploring the inter-relationships and analogies. In each of the four films discussed in this essay, the figure of the outsider identifies a missing link that connects monsters and men. In each, a scene of human sacrifice serves as a prologue to the main action of the film, marking the unstable borders between inside and outside, human and not human, sympathy and abjection.

To return to The Thirteenth Warrior: the waning of the "old ways" of human sacrifice establishes a distinction between the Vikings and the "Wendol" Neanderthals, as well as an obscure continuity. The two civilizations in Crichton's rendering are contemporaneous but starkly asynchronous in their development. The Viking society as depicted in the film is progressing beyond human sacrifice; in the Wendol they encounter the survival of an earlier stage in their own development as a species. The miraculous re-appearance of the Wendol surprises many within the film because they were thought to have died out long ago. This strange double of humankind ("they are men… they are not men"), who take heads, build altars of human skulls, worship bears, and practice cannibalism seems to reincarnate an early stage in human development so that it can be destroyed once and for all. The ghost of an evolutionary past haunts the Vikings' fear of the Wendol. Their very name is taboo, literally unspeakable, because to speak the name is to invoke these unquiet spirits. While Crichton's faux-scholarly hypothesis about the genesis of the legend of Beowulf from an actual conflict between the sub-species Homo sapiens and Homo neanderthalensis is fanciful, considerably more plausible is the notion that the poem's monsters represent the abiding specter of human sacrifice, a monstrous, fiercely cathected evolutionary scandal which the pagan cultures within the poem are imagined to have (for the most part) transcended.

As I remarked earlier, the final Viking sacrifice ("you will not see it again," says Herger to ibn Fadlan) is presented in the film as a sublime spectacle in the process of sublimation. These distancing strategies in both time and space do not derive from Crichton's novel; rather, the cinematic version undertakes a kind of free adaptation of the ship burial at the opening of the Old English poem. Herger does not share the Beowulf-poet's hesitancy about ship's destination: "We will burn him. In a moment he and all he owns can be in paradise." Still, shouldn't we be equally of suspicious of what René Girard would probably call the Anglo-Saxon poem's mythologization of human sacrifice in the miraculous survival of a child exposed on the open sea? Is there not in the

Beowulf-poet's comparison of those who launched the boy with those who launched the dead king a critique (however sublimated) of benighted rituals devoid of any real meaning or foresight?

Bede's pagan priest Coifi in Ecclesiastical History of the English People makes a similar point when he compares pagan life to a sparrow's brief flight within a hall:

> Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thanes and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on this earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it.[7]

The same metaphysical obscurity brackets the before and after of Scyld's life among the Danes, an instance that exemplifies the general rule laid down by King Edwin's pagan priest on the brink of conversion to Christianity. The Scyld episode forecloses the spiritual horizons of those within the world of the poem, even as it evokes in a Christian audience the awareness that they live in an age distinct from the one depicted in the poem, a world in which the horizons of transcendent knowledge have been opened.[8] Scyld's funeral at the beginning and Beowulf's funeral at the end form another such frame, marking the limits of pagan eschatology and glory from a Christian perspective.

Released in the same year as Thirteenth Warrior, Graham Baker's Beowulf (1999) also opens with the specter of human sacrifice, albeit in a more gaudily neo-gothic vein, as if the title character played by Christopher Lambert were reprising the Highlander role that made his fortune. Think

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[7] Bede, The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, trans. Leo Shirley-Price, rev. R. E. Latham (New York: Penguin Books, 1968, 1990), 129-130.

[8] See, James Earl, Thinking About Beowulf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 71-72: "Beowulf opens with a poetic variation on Bede's parable of the sparrow in the story of the Danish patriarch, Scyld Scefing. He arrives from nowhere with no possessions, creates peace with heroic deeds, is honored as a good king, bears a noble son to succeed him, and dies—all the course of 25 lines." What Earl calls "the ultimate meaning of this exemplary life" (72) is contained in the mysterious disembarkation of the funeral ship: "the brevity of his life and the certainty of death do not rob him of his glorious existence—he did in fact achieve much. More than this we cannot say, however, because he sails back into the unknown ocean whence he came, shockingly diminished in the last line to no more than a 'load' committed to an unknown destination" (72-73). As Earl powerfully concludes, "But here the world of the parable is the world of the poem—a hall in a storm, promised to ruin, distinctly material, strongly determined, wholly immanent. Here the transcendent is simply unknown, everywhere bordering the world of the known as the ocean surrounds the earth" (73).

Highlander meets Road Warrior in a post-apocalyptic, iron-age vampire vs. werewolf noir.[9] In the first shot of the film at night from far above a field, bonfires and soldiers standing post limb an enforced boundary. The camera cranes downward to take in totem poles festooned with corpses, or rather half-corpses—everything below the torso has been amputated. In the distance on a hill rises what can only be called a post-industrial castle featuring smokestacks. Grendel is already within the hall; in fact, holed up in the dungeons beneath, he never leaves it. After a brief, enigmatic encounter with the monster, we follow a scarlet-stockinged nubile over the walls and down into the countryside. It seems that she seeks not just a "bed in the bothies," in Seamus Heaney's controversial translation, but a different zip code. Armed soldiers capture her and beat her and drag her away kicking and screaming. It is important not to slight the intentional disorientation this sequence produces for anyone even passingly familiar with the medieval poem, even more disorienting than the iron-age redux weaponry and synthesizer-laden sound track. Beowulf himself had spoken of Heorot as a hall that had to be purified, but here the border guards seem to be maintaining a modern containment strategy, familiar from a host of zombie films, in the hopes of confining the contagious agent within the hall.[10] This Hrothgar certainly terrifies ("egsode," 6, where it applies to Scyld, not Hrothgar) the surrounding peoples, but because of the contagion his "outpost" contains. The ymbsittendra have drawn very close indeed, imprisoning the Danes within a dragon-like hall that belches fire like the pressure valves on an oilrig.

Just what's rotten in the state of Denmark becomes clearer as the shot widens to take in a primitive slab of bloodstained wood, fitted with an enormous guillotine-like retractable straight razor set atop an altar. The priest of the sacrifice wears ram's horns and pronounces the sentence: "Kill the beast that is within her." Lambert's Beowulf arrives in the nick of time, heralded by the spaghetti western theme of Sergio Leoni's Clint Eastwood, shot with the broadest of winks in a surprised-to-see-me-here (?) portrait shot of Lambert on horseback.[11] Though the range of weapons is thoroughly over the top—not to mention the hackneyed ninja backflips—the kitschy pastiche remains self-consciously clever, self-mocking even. "Look who's playing Beowulf!" "Look at what

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[9] Kathleen Forni, "Graham Baker's Beowulf: Intersections between High and Low Culture," Literature/Film Quarterly 35 no. 3 (2007): 244-9, describes the generic pastiche: "One surprising artistic decision, however, was to place the story in the future. The setting for Beowulf is in the tradition of post-apocalyptic science-fiction tales such as George Miller's Mad Max trilogy (1979, 1981, 1985), Kevin Costner's Waterworld (Reynolds, 1995), or The Omega Man (Sagal, 1971), in which the future is marked by anarchy, economic ruin, primitive technology, roving gangs, and environmental collapse. Intentionally or not, this dark pessimism about the future replicates the mood of the poem" (245). Forni adduces further generic elements such as Gothic horror and comic book superheroes. The film also will bear comparison with the financially successful Blade trilogy (1998, 2002, and 2004), starring Wesley Snipes, who likewise plays a leather-wearing, kick-boxing, vampire-killing vampire.

[10] The reversal takes its clue from a series of disaster films, which turned cities or even whole regions into prisons. In The Peacemaker (d. Mimi Leder, 1997), for instance, Clooney and Kidman race to find an atomic bomb within New York City, which has been forcibly cordoned off by the United States Army. Similar strategies are pursued in Outbreak (d. Wolfgang Petersen, 1995) and the more recent British film Doomsday (d. Neil Marshall, 2008) where plagues are contained by violent force. In Graham Baker's earlier film, Alien Nation (1988), the "Newcomers" from outer space are first quarantined and then uneasily integrated with the human population.

[11] Forni, "Graham Baker's Beowulf," 246.

we've made of Heorot!" Until the girl that the hero has rescued escapes from her savior and runs back to the sacrificers, preferring certain death over a return to the haunted hall—like the stag which chooses to die on the bank of Grendel's mere rather than enter its terrifying waters. Her death, like the stag's, does much to identify Heorot with an unspeakable, unfathomable fear, and in so doing it inverts or reverses the locus of terror from mere to hall, from outside to inside. The poem repeatedly contrasts the two halls—Heorot and the hall at the bottom of the tarn—but this clever reference to the terror-stricken stag in such an otherwise very loose adaptation of the poem should give us pause. Disparate times and places are collapsed into one. Heorot, the Grendel-kin's mere, and the dragon's cave merge in the film's neo-gothic castle. Likewise, the three monster fights occur within the castle on three consecutive nights. A simplification of the poem's complex structure, certainly, but in what sense is Heorot the site of an abiding curse, cleansed only to be defiled again the next night, then supposedly purged of the kin of Cain, but abiding further kin-killings and a final holocaust?

Baker's Beowulf is the first of four films (the others being Beowulf and Grendel [d. Sturla Gunnarsson, 2005]; Grendel [d. Nick Lyon, 2006]; and Robert Zemeckis' 2007 Beowulf) to give us not simply an aged but also a morally compromised Hrothgar, burdened with a secret sin. In the 1999 and 2007 Beowulf films, the descent of the monsters from Cain is foregone in favor of beings that onwocon from the kinds of unions between humans and monsters that the Beowulf-poet and The Book of Enoch also cite as the genesis of the cursed race.[12] The 1999 Beowulf's Hrothgar has strangely unpleasant wet dreams, inspired by a Playboy playmate in the role of a female he took in the course of a reign of terror that won him his kingdom. That the monsters in both Beowulf films (1999 and 2007) turn out to be psychosexual manifestations of imperialism (1999) and greed (2007), respectively, is not so different after all from scholarly interpretations casting the monsters as social anti-types or personifications of sin; indeed, such films are all of a piece with a wealth of Freud, Jung, Lacan, and Kristeva-inspired readings of the Old English poem.

Georges Bataille observed that "empire is a diversion of violence to the outside,"[13] and so, of course, are sacrifice and scapegoating. For Kristeva, because such abjections are constitutive of subjectivity, they remain in threating proximity to the self, pieces of the self or the social expelled from within are reconstituted as fearsome objects and others.[14] The poem's insistent parallels serve an analogous function, repeatedly collapsing the fragile distinctions between inside and outside. The parallel genealogies—Scyld through Hrothgar and Cain through Grendel—function in similar

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[12] As William F. Hodapp trenchantly remarks in "'no hie fæder cunnon': But Twenty-first Century Film Makers Do." Essays in Medieval Studies 26 (2010): 101-8, 101: such films "use the identity of the father to explain at least in part Grendel's invasion of Heorot. Their answers to this question reveal more about each film's twenty-first century audience than about the poem or its cultural context."

[13] Georges Bataille, Theory of Religion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 67.

[14] See, for example, her chapter "Something To Be Scared Of" in Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 32-55.

ways, threatening, like the invasions of the hall, a collapse of difference that abjection and sacrifice are constituted to enforce.[15]

This destabilization of the binaries that establish ideas of self and civilization is apparent early in the poem. The "outlawed" Grendel nightly invades the hall in a terrifying mockery of the founder Scyld, inspiring terror and taking men from their mead benches in tribute. The Danes dub this menace a "feond mancynnes" (164) but, arguably, they also offer sacrifices to him at pagan shrines in hopes of expiating the scourge:

Hwilum hie geheton	æt hærgtrafum
wigweorþunga,	wordum bædon
þæt him gastbona	geoce gefremede
wið þeodþreaum.	Swilc wæs þeaw hyra,
hæþenra hyht;	helle gemundon
in modesfan	metod hie ne cuþon…

Sometimes they sacrificed	at the temples of idols,
Doing them honor,	prayed in words
That the soul-slayer	send help
Against the nation-scourge.	Such was their practice,
Custom of the heathens.	They remembered hell
In their heart-thoughts;	they did not know the measurer (…)
	(175-180)[16]

Itself set apart early on as an egregious interpolation, this remarkable passage is still perhaps best understood as the Danes' failure "to live up to (the poet's) own modernized representation of them," as Klaeber suggested long ago.[17] The blending of Christian and pagan shadings here is evident in the pun on gastbana (demon-slayer or slayer of souls): the first evokes a giant-killer like

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[15] Richard Kearney, Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness (London: Routledge, 2003). In a wide-ranging work on alienation in nation-building narratives, Kearney relates the killing of Grendel to myths of the "sacrificial origins" of nations: "In particular, the scaled monster, Grendel, haunts the unstable borders of the struggling nation divided as it is between Geats, Norse, Swedes, Saxons and Celts" (37). Later in the same very general discussion he concludes, "In time, the genealogical descendents of Grendel become the colonial enemies of the conquering British empire, both overseas (Africa, Asia and the Americas) and closer to home in Ireland, where the 'natives' were caricatured as simian-like, mindless savages: the degens serving as dialectical foil to the gens" (38). These provisional assertions deserve further exploration as to how the scapegoating of the kin of Cain functions in Anglo-Saxon state formation and in nineteenth-century intersections of medievalism and imperialism.

[16] Quotations from Beowulf are taken from: Klaeber's Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg, fourth edition, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). Translations from: Beowulf in Faithful Verse, trans. E. L. Risden (Albany, NY: Whitson Publishing Company, 2006). Text and translation are hereafter referenced by parenthetical line numbers.

[17] Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, 3rd ed., ed. Fr. Klaeber (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1950), 135.

Thor, the second precisely the kind of murderer of souls with which Danes are currently afflicted. The irony is no doubt intentional: the Danes in their unenlightened paganism are sacrificing to the very demon that haunts them. These tantalizing, guarded references to pagan ritual give us very little to go on, but clearly both prayer ("wordum") and sacrifice ("geheton… wigweorþunga") seem intended. Whatever victims they may be offering in sacrifice—Pope Gregory's letter to Abbot Mellitus records that the backsliding Anglo-Saxons sacrificed cows—are not only useless but redundant: the Danes self-blighting, paltry imitation pales in comparison with Grendel's nightly blood-letting.

In both The Thirteenth Warrior and the 1999 Beowulf young women are sacrificed. Among the five Anglo-Saxon poems that employ a vocabulary most similar to the description of pagan sacrifice in Beowulf, two virgins are threatened with rape and marked for sacrifice (Judith and Juliana), while two other poems equate pagan sacrifice with cannibalism and the torments of hell (Andreas and Elene). In Pope Gregory's discussion of Germanic sacrifices, he suggests a program of conversion that extends even to the structures where Anglo-Saxons formerly sacrificed to the pagan gods:

> The temples of the idols of that people should on no account be destroyed. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them, and relics deposited there. For these temples are well built, they must be purified from the worship of demons and dedicated to the service of the true God…. And since they have a custom of sacrificing many oxen to demons there, let some other solemnity be substituted in its place, such as a day of Dedication or the festival of the holy martyrs whose relics are enshrined there.[18]

Similar rites of purification and sanctifying substitutions occur within the pagan temples of all these poems. Judith is brought to Holofernus' træf (lines 43, 255, 268) situated high on a hill, which is often somewhat misleadingly translated "tent" or "pavilion." The space is in fact a temple, or rather a parody of one. The word træf here refers specifically to the "gylden/ fleoh-net fæger" (46b-47a),[19] which serves as a canopy for Holofernus' bed and functions like one-way glass, allowing the Assyrian leader within to observe those outside while no bystanders can see within. The distinction is important, because what occurs in this confined space represents a conversion of pagan sacrifice—in biblical sources described as occurring behind a curtain with the utmost secrecy.[20] The dazed drunkenness of Holofernus and his followers is likewise similar to descriptions such as those of ibn Fadlan emphasizing the inebriation of victims before sacrifice. The beheading occurs in camera,

[18] Bede, Ecclesiastical History, 86-87.
[19] Citations from this poem, hereafter referenced by line number only are taken from: Beowulf and Judith: The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, IV, 5th edition, ed. Eliott V. K. Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953).
[20] The Holy of Holies was a place of yearly sacrifice in the Tabernacle, the curtain of which was rent at Christ's sacrifice as described in Hebrews 6.

behind the veil; Judith positions her victim deliberately and preserves the head in a food basket, which she takes with her as a powerful totemic symbol.[21] Of particular importance for our discussion, however, is the nature of the ritualized sacrifice. The taking of the head and its display represent more than an ironic turning of the tables wherein the victimizer becomes victim, the sacrificer the sacrificed; rather, the ritualized murder of Holofernus marks the end of sexual pollution, a rending of the pagan veil, which transforms the sacrifice into an allegory of Christian eschatology.

A second virgin threatened with sexual violation and sacrifice is the Cynewulfian Juliana. This work deliberately conflates hell and temple sacrifices, much as does Beowulf whose pagan congregants "remember hell" (helle gemundon, 179) in their worship. In Juliana idolatry and sexual desire seem to be one in the same. In the wake of Maximian's leveling of Christian churches and his spilling of the blood of Christian martyrs, Eleusius worships idols as well as the virgin Juliana—all in the space of the first thirty lines. Told by her father that she must sacrifice to pagan idols and marry Eleusius or suffer terrible tortures, Juliana in reply demands that Eleusius must first abandon sacrificing to idols: "forlæte þa leasinga,/ weohweorþunga" (179b-180a; emphasis added).[22] The word weohweorþunga (sacrificial offering), a variant of the form in Beowulf (wigweorþunga, 176), occurs nowhere else in the poetic records. Later in her prison cell, Juliana is again tempted to sacrifice or be sacrificed by a demon posing as an angel of God, quickly exposed by a genuinely divine messenger. This satanic ruse in a sense incarnates the pagan idols and establishes the leasinga (false, deceitful practices) of pagan sacrifice as a hell-sent simulacrum of Christian belief—perhaps not that different after all from that hell-demon ("feond on helle," 101), who drives the Danes to sacrifice to pagan idols in Beowulf.

In another of Cynewulf's poems, Elene, Christ's triumph and Constantine's Christian empire continue to be opposed by another talkative demon, but the symbolic notion of a pagan shrine as an earthly hell gives way to the notion that the underworld itself is a hidden shrine from which Satan will launch counterattacks:

> …now I am humiliated, deprived of my goods, outlawed and friendless… But yet, out of the dwellings of the damned (weargtræf) I shall be able by subterfuges to find retaliation against this. (lines 922b- 926a)[23]

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[21] The relevant lines in Judith designate the container as a pouch ("fætelse," 127) brought along by Judith's servant girl to hold food ("nest," 128). Later, back among the Hebrews, Judith commands the girl to "uncover (onwriðan) the head of the war-wager and show (ætywan) it all bloody to the citizens as proof (to behðe) of how she succeeded in the contest (lines 171-175; trans. Fulk 2010, 310-311). Also note the similarities of this celebratory, ritualized use of the head as a sign to the scene discussed below where Beowulf presents the head of Grendel to Hrothgar in Heorot.

[22] Citation from The Exeter Book: The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, III, ed. George Philip Krapp and Eliot Van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936.

[23] Citation from The Exeter Book: The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, III, ed. George Philip Krapp and Eliot Van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936.

Whereas in Andreas (along with Judith the poem most often thought to contain similar scenes, clauses, and perhaps even reminiscences of Beowulf), what first appears at a distance from out at sea as the tiled shrines ("tigelfagan trafu," 844) of Mermedonia is later revealed as a hell-træf (hell-shrine," 1693),[24] a prison ruled by Satan and liberated by Andrew. The inhabitants of this prison/shrine are blinded and forced to drink a potion that robs them of human thoughts and feelings. The potion makes these sacrificial victims bestial before they are consumed by the race of cannibals native to the island. The notion that human victims should be made drunkenly stupefied before their sacrifice, which we have seen repeatedly, is obviously present here as well. Without compromising the supernatural character of the passage, we should note the ritualistic character of this description of sacrificial cannibalism. Victims are given a mind-altering potion by "dryas" ("sorcerers" the word may be a borrowing from the native Gaelic word, druidh, druid), which robs them of their humanity. They are kept in a træf for a predetermined time and then consumed in a communal feast.

Perhaps Michael Crichton drew upon the similarities with Andreas in his adaptation of Beowulf as a battle between Vikings and "eaters of the dead," though he has never acknowledged the source. One problem stems from the embarrassing possibility that Crichton's postulation of an evolutionary reality behind the poem as we have it derives not from archeology or ancient myth but in fact from an avowedly Christian representation of paganism that, because of deliberate design or the serendipities of oral formulism, happens to parallel Beowulf in a number of intriguing ways. Of course the Christian Anglo-Saxon poets weren't archeologists or anthropologists either. Their reconstruction of pagan religions across representations of many disparate cultures is so uniform and repetitive because it too is formulaic and traditional. What the fascination of modern films with human sacrifice can accomplish is to provoke us to look again at sacrifice as depicted across the poetic corpus and encourage us to look more closely at how it functions in Beowulf.

One question that all these films try to answer with varying degrees of success concerns the etiology of monsters. The Oedipalizations of the two Beowulf films (1999 and 2007)—Grendel is Hrothgar's son—provide one kind of predictably trite answer, while the surprising (but perhaps equally trite) evolutionary hiccup in McTiernan's Thirteenth Warrior offers another. If Freudian psychology and Darwinian evolution do not hold intellectually and aesthetically satisfying etiologies for medieval beliefs in trolls and dragons, then the psychology of Kristeva's abjection and the anthropology of Girard's scapegoat may well offer more attractive perspectives from which to assess the relationships between men and monsters. John Gardner's sympathetic, existential Grendel was already a step in a much more interesting direction, and it has left its mark (along with Kristeva and Girard) on the best of the film adaptations of the medieval poem, Beowulf and Grendel (2005).[25]

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[24] The Vercelli Book, II, ed. George Philip Krapp (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932).

[25] Earlier critical attempts to reconcile the poem's monsters with human sacrifice, such as Kearney, Strangers, Gods and Monsters or Eric Wilson's provocative "The Blood Wrought Peace: A Girardian Reading of Beowulf" (English Language

Its prologue, entitled "A Hate is Born," could just as accurately have been called "A Monster is Born," though this monster is made, not born. An extended 180-degree pan moves from the Icelandic coastline past rolling green hills to glaciers in the distance. Toward us comes a frolicking child laughing as he skips over the crest of a hill. The opening credits had featured a faux-medieval map that marked the North Sea with a monstrous sea-beast, from whose storms early myth critics once derived the monsters of Beowulf; here there's no hint of that meteorological divine, only a child in a landscape sublime enough all by itself. The only early hint of anything like the sacrificial preludes of the other films we have surveyed are the fat rams grazing in the foreground. Soon the child's father emerges over the hill, dressed in the same furs and leathers as the boy. As the child somersaults out of frame, we focus on the impressive strangeness of his father: gigantic, thick-bearded, muscular, a mountain of a man among the mountain peaks, but with unusually thick tufts of hair on his arms and legs. Could this bear of a man be Beowulf himself, a figure who looks as if he could crush a foe in his bare arms, as the hero is reported to have done with Dæghrefn? When the figure moves closer, catching a scent on the air, his physical idiosyncrasies become more marked. Cut to a starkly different shot in an as yet unspecified location showing an impressive troop of mounted warriors in helmets and face guards, the leader of whom wears a simian mask. The riders storm through shadow and mist. They are what the mountain man had smelled, like a deer scents a wolf pack. He calls the child, "Grendel," gathers the boy in his arms, and limps hastily away. In that limp and the other physical deformities we see the ubiquitous signs of the scapegoat whose differences set him apart as a target. For the first time the boy's similar strangeness becomes evident: hirsute cheeks, a prominent forehead, and an enlarged cranium.[26] The crosscuts between armed warriors on horseback and the two fugitives make us feel the threat even before it becomes fully evident: the father and son are being hunted. A subtitle identifies the beach along which the troop rides: "500 A.D.—Outskirts of Daneland." The riders come over the hill and chase the "troll" (as Hrothgar will later term him) to the edge of a cliff, while the child watches from his concealed perch just over the crest. The warriors encircle the giant with spears and torches. With practiced efficiency two arrows are fired into his chest, a bucket of tar splashed at his feet, a torch thrown in to set him aflame and force him backwards over the precipice. In its overkill the killing well deserves the title of human sacrifice. We are all but asked: "Just who are the monsters here?" The film's prequel thus offers a very dark reflection of/on the events of the poem: it is Hrothgar's geoguþ that comes loping

Notes 34 no. 1 [1996], 7-30) have nothing on the ingenuity of Andrew Rai Berzins' screenplay for Beowulf and Grendel. Berzins also wrote Chasing Cain (2001) and a TV-movie sequel, Chasing Cain: Face (2002).

[26] Since the gigantism is later demonstrated to be genetic, Grendel and his father are probably being portrayed as sufferers from an inherited disorder such as multiple endocrine neoplasia, in which small, non-cancerous tumors grow on the endocrine glands, making them overactive. In the pituitary glands these tumors produce an excess of male growth hormone, which leads to abnormal growth in childhood before the bone growth plates close. Such a condition would explain their unusual size and strength, the pattern of male baldness coupled with excessive body hair, the father's apparent joint problems, their unusually prominent foreheads and jaws, as well as Grendel's headaches and hormone-induced rages. For a fuller description see The University of Maryland Medical Center website at: http://www.umm.edu/ency/article/001174all.htm.

beneath a cover of mists ("mist-hleoþum," 710). Grendel and his father become the innocent victims of an inhuman violence, no less monstrous for being flawlessly orchestrated, well-drilled, even mechanistic in its faceless professionalism and efficiency.[27]

Like Scyld, Hrothgar terrorizes those at his borders, but he cannot bring himself to kill the child, clinging to the edge of the cliff, who glares at king's raised sword with brave defiance. Stellan Skarsgård's role as Hrothgar is compatible with his portrayal the year before of the racist Saxon invader Cerdic in King Arthur (d. Antoine Fuqua, 2004). Unlike the ethnic cleanser Cerdic, Hrothgar makes the mistake of deciding not to kill the child. Grendel, also like Scyld, has become a destitute orphan whose miraculous survival will in turn terrify the Danes and demand a grisly tribute in corpses. His feud against the Danes is thus motivated in ways a great deal less Manichean than a war between darkness and light, good and evil—a metaphysics that earlier Beowulf films made before 9/11 reproduced uncritically. In a sense, then, Sturla Gunnarsson's Beowulf and Grendel debunks the politics of the evolutionary approach in McTiernan's Thirteenth Warrior: the "monsters" are not a different species; they are just treated as if they were.

Beowulf and Grendel plays giddily with expectations aroused by the poem and its earlier film adaptations, exposing the received legend as the fabrication of an inveterate liar already at work within the film on the poem who invents scary, heroic stories for the neighborhood children.[28] Initially, Beowulf is forced to assume the role of a detective and bounty hunter rather than monster-slayer because Grendel, puckishly playing hide and seek, disdains to materialize when (or in) the expected manner. Repeatedly the Geats are startled by things that go bump in the night. The first evening, after Beowulf's impressive gilpcwide (640) to the effect that the Geats will kill the monster or die trying, there is a noise at the door, which disappoints all expectations by failing to burst open as the warriors wait anxiously on the other side. Nary a green light is to be seen—and neither is Grendel in any form. The monster's abject assault includes neither dismemberment nor supernatural special effects; instead, dog-like, he marks the entrance to the hall with a prolonged, satisfying and exceptionally pungent piss. Once the warriors recover from the daunting stench, they charge out into the empty darkness. The morning after is spent cleansing with brimstone this mock-diabolical pollution of the hall. Marking his territory in this crude way, Grendel travesties the Danes' earlier attempts to enforce and extend their borders, yet it also encourages the conclusion that, unlike the Danes, this monster does not kill indiscriminately. Beowulf and his companions follow the laðes lastas ("loathed one's tracks," 841) through rough country over a rocky summit to discover… not a hellish tarn, but a vast, snow-covered plain. This empty expanse is the visual equivalent of Beowulf's earlier declaration that they are fighting "a thing beyond our ken," a "thing" capable of laying false trails and setting booby traps, in short, a man, not a troll. Although not nearly as funny, these parodies are fully within the Monty Python tradition.

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[27] For another discussion of the opening scene, see: Hodapp, "no hie fæder cunnon," 103-104.

[28] As Hodapp (103) notes, the film also offers itself as the "real" story behind the hyperbolic accretions in the making of the legend.

Eternally a boy in a giant's body, Grendel howls as he bowls with human heads, while the mad Irish monk, Brendan, baptizes Danes in a freezing river. Hrothgar, maddened himself by drink and despair, contemplates following Unferth into the Christian faith:

> Hrothgar: Baptism, they call it. Unferth feels he has fallen from the grace of the gods. It's not every man's wish to sit in blood. If this Christ can stiffen Unferth's heart, what's the harm?
> Beowulf: They swim only out of fear.
> Hrothgar: But still, they swim.

Hardly Bede's miraculous conversion, that--rather an ecumenical existentialism which judges all options better than despair, even self-delusion. As Gerald Butler's downsized Beowulf continues his investigation, it becomes increasingly evident that neither paganism nor Christianity will help to solve the mystery of Hrothgar's troll.

Beowulf next encounters an outlying witch, Selma (played by Sarah Polley), the waif-like, red-haired stepsister of Unferth, who foresees how men will die. While she does collect herbs and possesses a second sight, she is no witch. Still, Selma willingly inhabits the role in which she has been cast and a place on the outskirts of Daneland, a situation she much prefers to the alternative: a life of sexual slavery and abuse within the confines of civilization. Finding her an uncooperative witness, Beowulf interviews Hrothgar again, probing for the secret he suspects lies behind the troll's depredations: "My wits still war with how this all began." Hrothgar offers the traditional, fuzzy explanation:

> Hrothgar: Hate for the mead hall, I can only guess. The night we finished it, I felt it came. We hadn't seen a troll for fifteen or twenty years.
> Beowulf: (hesitantly) So no one did anything to the troll itself?
> Hrothgar (angrily): Oh, Beowulf, it's a f****** troll! Maybe someone looked at it the wrong way.
> Beowulf: Some Dane?
> Hrothgar: Who hands you this, Selma? Come on, she's been out in the wilds too long. Her head is full of spiders, her lap is full of moss.
> Beowulf: It's said she sees things.
> Hrothgar (yelling): Well, the crazy do see things!

The lie harkens back to that time fifteen or twenty years before when Hrothgar saw the wild-eyed boy at the cliff's edge. This exchange as a whole neatly encapsulates the film's critique of poem's supernatural. The realm of the supernatural is composed of outcasts and scapegoats, their seemingly malevolent powers created by the very rituals of abjection that mark them as different—and

therefore fearsome—in the first place. The mark of the beast is the also the mark of ethnogenesis: a people is created (and so are their nightmares) by what it excludes.[29]

The following night the film's anti-Beowulf parody concludes the series of anticlimaxes with another false alarm. Grendel throws rocks at the hall and elicits another outpouring of armed Danes into the darkness, all dressed up for battle with no one to fight. But of course that is precisely the point of these Beowulfian feints: there is no monster here, and there never was one. The explanation of these night terrors lies in a reading of the poem that is thoroughly Girardian. The poem's monsters are in service of what Girard calls mythologization, a form of euhemerism in reverse that creates gods and monsters out of what were originally real sacrificial victims. Lest that point be missed, the same children we saw earlier listening to the poet's hyperbolic retelling of Beowulf's battles with Grendel later re-assemble as a mob and begin stoning a wretched, retarded man. Beowulf puts a stop to this by assuring the children: "he's not of that race." The interlude leaves a bitter aftertaste: to what degree is the children's imitation of Germanic heroism true to life? In their encircling of the helpless, beleaguered scapegoat, we are treated to a nuanced reinterpretation of the film's opening scene, where Hrothgar's warriors encircle Grendel's father, firing arrows and throwing torches to set him aflame. This is textbook Girard, for whom the ground zero of the scapegoating impulse is always the circle drawn around a prospective victim. When Hrothgar is finally pressed by Beowulf to explain the murder of Grendel's father, the answer turns to dust in his mouth: "He crossed my path… stole a fish."[30]

Beowulf's rescue of the beggar from stoning gestures toward an imitation of Christ, but it also yields at last the information he has so long sought: the location of Grendel's lair. This is perhaps the bitterest of the film's ironies, for here it is the victim of scapegoating and Christian convert who betrays Grendel's hiding place. The beggar's newfound faith in Christ means he no longer need fear death or the monster. He gives the Judas kiss, leading the Geats to Grendel's cave. But yet another anti-climax ensues; the hunters can't make their way down the sheer rock-face to the cave, because they've neglected to bring a rope. The next morning as they set off again they find the Judas goat on the doorstep with a broken neck, his face twisted back to front.

Meanwhile, Handscio has been having bad dreams. He has seen his own death. When the Geats finally make it to his lair, Grendel is predictably absent. What they discover there is a charnel house in both senses of the word: the father's gigantic head carefully preserved on an altar above a litter of human remains. The scene owes much to that in The Thirteenth Warrior, but it serves a very different purpose. Handscio sees the idol of Grendel's father's head and flies into a rage: "Look, our

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[29] Although there is probably no question of influence, the film's implicit reading of the poem will bear comparison with similar approaches in the scholarly literature. See Kearney, Strangers, Gods and Monsters and Wilson, "The Blood Wrought Peace."

[30] René Girard, The Scapegoat, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 66: "The configuration of the scene is always the same—the murderers are in a circle around the victim—but the obvious or intentional significance of the scenes can vary widely. It may share only a single characteristic: the awareness that they do not signify collective murder."

friend Grendel doesn't come from mist and shit alone." Then, speaking very un-Hamlet like to the severed head, he raves: "I curse you and all your kin" (spitting on it). Thus, in another of the film's uncanny euhemerisms, Handscio, not God, marks and curses "Caines cynne" (107). Having completely lost his wonted ironic distance, Handscio further desecrates the idol, smashing the cured head into pieces. The outburst is shot from the perspective of his fellow Geats; when the counter-shot finally situates this perspective, the physical and emotional distance between Handscio and the other Geats has widened significantly. They are still, silent, bunched together, masked, and within a smoky haze; he is frenetic, well-lit and without a helmet. As Handscio feels the shock of this group gaze—a gaze that excludes and abjects the group's most popular member—he comes to himself in a chilling anagnorisis, realizing that he is fæge (fated, doomed). With this scene ends what I have been calling the anti-Beowulf: there will be no more false starts, no more "where's Waldo" bathos.

Revealingly, the fight against Grendel within Heorot doesn't begin until 5/7 of the way into the film, after more than a 75-minute prelude. Bellowing and crashing stones together, smearing his face with his own blood, the Handscio-cursed "demon" comes loping down to the high hall to see how the Geats are resting after their iconoclastic pollution of his home. Beowulf's investigations have already established that the "troll's" attacks are motivated by revenge, not a lack of appreciation for architecture or poetry. Thus far he has not harmed any of the Geats, though he has mocked and stymied them, much as John Gardner's Grendel does, but according to a fully reasonable code of justice. When at last the door to Heorot finally bursts open, Grendel sends Geats sprawling in every direction, leaving them battered but not broken. But when he identifies Handscio by his smell, he speaks a rare comprehensible word, "Papé," and breaks the neck of the fæge eorl.

Henceforth, Beowulf's defeat of Grendel and his mother are staged quickly and unremarkably. At the level of the diegetics, this is something that has to happen within the expectations of action cinema, but it rings hollow and pales in comparison with the screenplay's earlier parodies of the inherited tale. The screenplay doesn't just give in to expectations; it also gives ground on its de-mythologizing critique of scapegoating. Throughout the majority of the film the supernatural is systematically demystified by exposing the scapegoating logics beneath the monsters of Beowulf. After the death of Grendel, the supernatural re-emerges in the figure of Grendel's mother, an albino troll. She was always there lurking within the sea; she had tried (unsuccessfully) to pull Geats out of their boat on a few occasions. She certainly poses a threat, but it is Grendel, not she, who kills Handscio in the film. As her dismembered protégé stumbles into sea after his defeat, her taloned hand emerges from the water to bear him—Arthur-like—to her version of Avalon. The film is searching here for something like the sublimity that invests Beowulf's fight with the dragon, but it violates its own carefully crafted ontology, wherein monsters are the victims of congenital birth defects and scapegoating. The amphibian, whitewashed mere-wif is the movie's white whale, but she doesn't belong in the world circumscribed by the film, and her existence violates the moral principles that underpin its euhemeristic approach. In Girard's terms she represents a re-mythologization of the sacrificial mechanism, one that suspiciously reverts to the monstrous

feminine even after exposing how men—Grendel and the retarded beggar—become scapegoats. This reversion to the ambiguity of the fantastic is not simply another turn of the screw; it suggests the film's makers wanted to have it both ways, perhaps because a uniform critique of scapegoating threatened to take the purportedly action-adventure film too far afield from heroic action.

The hard to find and highly derivative 2006 Grendel (d. Nick Lyon) was made for the Sci-Fi Channel (SyFy) and released on DVD in 2010 by Universal Pictures. In many ways, this regrettable film encapsulates approaches to the poem emerging in all three of the earlier films discussed above. Though clearly what might well be called a re-adaptation of films such as The Thirteenth Warrior and Beowulf and Grendel, it also rationalizes the relationship between human sacrifice and the monsters in a much more straightforward manner. Early in Thirteenth Warrior as the Geats enter Hrothgar's village they are shocked to find not only a lack of defensive measures, but also "scarcely a man between 15 and 50 left alive." Grendel imitates this scene but the shocking scarcity is in children, not warriors. Just as the earlier films sought to interpret the Old English poem by searching out the anthropological truths (Thirteenth Warrior and Beowulf and Grendel) or hidden sins (the 1999 Beowulf) behind the poem's man-like monsters, so too do the Danes of Grendel nourish a dark secret that lies behind the apparent infertility of Hrothgar's realm.

Like these earlier films as well, Grendel installs a series of unsuccessful attacks on the monster before he is finally quelled. This duration, as in Beowulf and Grendel, serves as the intellectual equivalent of physical battle, a battle of wits. Seemingly, before the Grendel can be dispatched the human sin or secret that he represents must be brought to light—a not uninteresting variety of the sapientia et fortitudo topos. When the Geats' incendiary-charge-firing crossbow fails to kill Grendel, the monster takes revenge by savaging the outlying towns. Ben Cross as Hrothgar rebukes Beowulf from the giftstol set high within the Doric-columned Heorot:

> Hrothgar: And so it begins. You have failed me, Beowulf. You failed me and now the monster takes its revenge. We had reached a sort of understanding with the creature. Now more innocent lives will be lost.
> Beowulf: It is true; I have failed in defeating the Grendel. But I ask you this, have you failed yourself and your people?
> Hrothgar: What say you?
> Beowulf: The beast has poisoned you with fear and hatred. Your land is dying; your people are dying. There are no children to carry on when you are gone. Because of your fear, your home has become a coffin. Your nation is perishing at the hands of Grendel. You know this is not my doing. This wickedness was put into motion long ago.

This counter-accusation casts Hrothgar as a kind of Fisher King or Tolkienian Theoden King. The wasteland results from the king's spiritual not his physical debilities. In the terms of the 1976 film

Excalibur (d. John Boorman), "the king and the land are one." Yet unlike what we find in Excalibur or the 1999 and 2007 Beowulfs, the spiritual corruption is not sexual, nor is its offspring a monstrous incarnation of Oedipal fantasies.

For René Girard the triumph of Freud's Oedipus complex as a mechanism for the explanation of violent impulses has only worked to displace or indeed repress the remnants of sacrifice and scapegoating. In different albeit related ways, Deleuze and Guattari argue against what they call "Oedipalization" because it functions to reproduce a triangulated family structure in service of an opposition between the family's production of desire and the repression of that desire by social forces.[31] However differently, both theories attempt to decenter Oedipal desire and to reorient the self vs. other binary. Girard seeks to return us to the primitive social, Deleuze and Guattari to a primitive individual desire. In making monsters of Hrothgar's sons, the 1999 and 2007 Beowulfs employ the Oedipal family romance to domesticate the unheimlich Grendel, making his attacks a war not simply against the father, but against the Name of the Father, the father-as-phallus, thereby exposing the illusory nature of his power. The film Grendel, on the other hand, leaves the monsters alone. They exist in a CGI separateness, their psyches as opaque as their motives. Instead the film focuses on Hrothgar's self-destructive attempts to control the menace. To continue with the peripateia quoted above:

> Hrothgar: Our land was poisoned long ago. Poisoned by a dark secret.
> (At this point Marina Sirtis' rouge-caked Wealhtheow comes bursting Jocasta-like into the hall)
> Wealhtheow: No! No, tell him no more. (Taking Hrothgar's face in her hands.) Tell him no more, my lord, I beseech you. Tell him no more.
> Hrothgar: Where is the sense in that, woman? Beowulf speaks the truth. To deny the truth is to continue to live in fear. It is time to stop hiding behind our secret. This may be our last chance. (She sinks to his knees in front of the throne.) Our people were first attacked long ago, when Scyld was still king.
> Beowulf: Scyld knew the Grendel?
> Hrothgar: I speak of his mother, Hag. She would come from the forest and slaughter indiscriminately.
> At this point we are given a hurried flashback in sepia tones to "Hag" fitted with dragon wings hanging like a bat from the roof of a cave. Hrothgar continues:
> She could not be stopped. In an effort to placate her blood thirst, the Scyld made a pact with her. A stone altar was built and each full moon… offerings made.
> Here a second, longer flashback is interposed. We see a bloody altar with adults milling around it. There is a shot of a small boy lurking behind a shield by

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[31] See Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 51-137.

> torchlight. The irony of course horribly undercuts what Scyld's very name would seem to promise. As the crowds watch, a girl is bound to the altar, and theHag comes flying down to devour her:
>
> Beowulf: (With a condemning skepticism) Sacrifice? (Cut to a close up of Wealhtheow's face on Hrothgar's knee. Her clown-like make-up at last revealed as correlative with her desire to hide the truth.)
>
> Hrothgar: Yes… terrible, but it worked. For years the Hag did not attack. And then one day she disappeared back into the forest and was never seen again. It was thought that she had died. But not before she gave birth to a son. (Cut to a shot of the infant Grendel.) The same beast who terrorizes us to this very day. When he was young, he would hunt mainly in the forest—animals, wayward travelers—but in time, like his mother before him, he began to attack the towns and the villages. So I renewed the pact. That is our dark secret, Beowulf. The reason you see no children here is because there are no more for me to sacrifice. It was then Grendel began to attack Heorot.
>
> Beowulf: So there truly are no children.
>
> Hrothgar: Oh, there are children here somewhere. But they are kept well hidden from Grendel and from me, their parents fearing the day when I was forced to begin the sacrifices again. Well now that day has come. I suppose that now you think the Grendel is not the only monster in my land. And you would be right. I'm not proud of what I've done or what I have become.

Beowulf's mission becomes at this point that of a culture hero like Theseus who must kill the monster in order to put an end to the barbaric sacrifices that ensure the "protection" of the society as a whole. The film thus makes the backsliding of the Danes in lines 175-183 a recurring lapse into child sacrifice that characterizes their history from Scyld to Hrothgar. The Oedipal conspiracy that characterizes the solutions of earlier Beowulf films is replaced by a revelation of a sacrificial mechanism that Girard believes underlies the "mythologization" of human sacrifice and Deleuze and Guattari the "Oedipalization" of the fundamental aggressiveness between self and others.

Coda

Arguably, such films' identification of sacrificial logics in the Old English epic deserves to be taken with more seriousness than the films themselves manage to sustain. It is in the nature of sacrifice to demonize and deify by turns the sacred victim. Even as the poem monumentalizes Beowulf's glory, it is undermined by a strain of recriminations coming first from Wiglaf and echoed in the modern world by scores of critics. A fully Girardian reading of the poem would be less likely to blame the

dead. At Beowulf's funeral, the panic over future invasions is already beginning to mount. Wiglaf also condemns the cowardice of the twelve retainers and suggests that they are responsible for the invasions to come: when their cowardice is known, the enemies of the Geats will think them easy pickings. That is to say that with the death of Beowulf mimetic rivalry returns with a vengeance. The deep fissures within the Geatish society over the scandal of Beowulf's death are giving birth to a new sacrificial crisis, one that will demand new victims. They may already be present if only in potentia. The twelve horsemen who ride in ceremony around Beowulf's pyre and the Geatish woman with hair bound up ("Geatisc meolwe… bundenheorde," 3150b-3151b) sound suspiciously like prospective victims.[32]

[32] I explore this sacrificial reading of the poem in much more detail in a book currently being co-written with E. L. Risden on Beowulf films to be published by McFarland.