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INTO THE WOODS AND OUT OF THE WOODS AND HOME BEFORE DARK: BEOWULF, SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT, AND THE ROLE OF THE MONSTROUS INTRUDER IN UPSETTING SOCIAL STRUCTURES

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When *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*[1] are taught, it is typically with a goal of broadly introducing the medieval period or presenting general thematic similarities, such as the fact that both have a monstrous figure which factors prominently, or that there are elements of heroism or another theme in both texts which students can compare. Certainly, there is a wealth of scholarship treating each poem individually, but there is little attention to close comparative analysis of the two text together, which is a fundamental goal of this project. Within the poems, the central characters are merely human, although they confront physically and symbolically large foes; these two men may be extraordinary and even exemplary among those with whom they share their respective lives but they are, ultimately, human and natural figures confronting abnormal and supernatural figures. Those supernatural figures, the Green Knight and Grendel, seek to take apart the fragile peace and calm set out at Arthur's court and Hrothgar's mead hall. Although those overt displays of peace and richness may seem durable, they are actually quite tenuous, which becomes clear to the reader for the speed and ease with which those monstrous intruders manage to throw the situation into utter disarray. Further, once the intruder has set events in motion, those central figures must leave the place they thought was safe and venture out into the unknown beyond the walls of safety and comfort, and ultimately return to rebuild that place from which they began. This is where another similarity lies within these two poems, which, although this similarity has been treated in other discussion of romance, it has not been much treated in scholarship which brings together these two texts— the two central figures follow a similar trajectory for their journeys and return home. Building on this pattern, I will examine the how the similarities in the narrative arcs of these two poems work to demonstrate how the inherent fragility of an apparently rich and safe community is confronted by a necessary and destructive monstrous figure whose aim is to call into question the values of those communities.

[1] Referred to as *Gawain* for the remainder of this paper.

This pattern can be seen in the work of two scholars—Paul Battles identifies part where he treats the earlier medieval period, and Aisling Byrne outlines a similar pattern further into the later medieval period. The pattern that shapes both texts is this: feasting and intended feelings of safety, a monstrous intruder, and a heroic figure emerging to act as representative for the group to work against that intruder (Battles 436-9; Byrne 33-58). These two scholars' works separately identify instances of this pattern in earlier and later medieval texts, respectively. My project is to use this trajectory to reveal a new way of reading these texts: the physical locations at the hearts of both poems. Despite appearing to be places of safety and comfort, they are actually fragile. The over-extravagance of the feasting scenes show the people and locations as wealthy and beyond the need for fear, but this image in an illusion. Because of these shows of wealth and power, the monstrous intruders are essentially welcomed in to those places, and as the monsters' goal is to destroy either the physical location or the symbolic values for which those locations stand, the monsters easily tear down the barriers of walls and displays of wealth and comfort. These two texts were, of course, written at quite different times, but the pattern above offers a new insight into these poems, namely that there is more in common with them narratively than may originally be evident. This shared trajectory, along with the themes of both poems that are already much discussed in scholarly literature, directs the reader of these poems toward a clear conclusion: while the human main character and the society he represents may be outwardly powerful, there is no human hero capable of withstanding the destructive power of the forces which constantly press upon those societies. In both poems, that destructive force is physically embodied in the monstrous intruders who burst upon a peaceful and rich scene of feasting and happiness, and those monstrous figures immediately begin to work to undermine that happiness. In general, it is clear that both have a hall or court in which a feasting scene takes place, which is soon interrupted by an intruder whom the heroic or central figure of the plot must fight. This interruption or intrusion, is, in fact, necessary for the

overall plot of the work, because this event drives the hero away from the safety of the hall or court, and he will then work for the remainder of the text to return to that original place of safety and comfort in order to be reincorporated into the community from which he came. The figure he fights must also be abnormal or monstrous in some obvious way because the threat must be clear to both the characters and the readers. This monstrosity is combined with a supernatural element in both *Beowulf* and *Gawain*, which serves to further enforce the threatening nature of the intruder. A significant piece of the threat of the intruder is their incomprehensible or inexplicable nature—because this figure is not known to or easily identified by those who encounter the figure, it is immediately identified only as a threat. The depictions of Grendel in *Beowulf* and the Green Knight in *Gawain* are also important for those characters' portrayal as monstrous. Even the lack of real physical description of Grendel lends itself to a sense that this figure is monstrous and threatening—if there is no description at all, the mind can create any number of images. Again, if they did not seem outwardly threatening, the heroic figure might be less likely to leave the safety and comfort of their hall or court and go out to deal with that intruder.

There is a wide range of scholarship that has been written about *Beowulf* and *Gawain*, and while there are scholars who have examined food, feasting, intruders, and heroism separately, there is not as much available tying those topics together. My project, then, is to incorporate arguments from each of the previously mentioned areas into a more cohesive argument about the role of the feasting and intruder motifs as they stand in relation to heroism. This will be framed by discussions of those topics in both *Beowulf* and *Gawain* where I note the presence of all these motifs. One role of feasting in both of these works, as well as in others, is to demonstrate the safety of the court or hall, which then necessitates an intruder to test the virtues of that place. A role of the feasting scenes at the outset of both texts is to demonstrate the safety and comfort the people feel in those places; the

monstrous figure then comes to show that any of that perceived safety and comfort was always, in fact, tenuous.

It is exactly because the hall is a place of celebration and feasting that a monstrous intruder must appear to set other events in motion. As feasting and intrusion are at the center of both *Beowulf* and *Gawain*, it is a connection worth discussing. In both poems, a pattern of feasting, sleeping, deadly danger, and ultimate reincorporation appears. What, exactly, would be the purpose of a poem where the feast is uninterrupted? Without the intruder, the poems could not culminate in a reincorporation of the heroic figures into their respective hall or court, nor would the virtues of those places be tested at all. It may also be worth examining the significance of the supernatural element in both poems, as there is not much significant scholarship connecting that element and the intruder at the feast. This essay will establish a clearer connection between the otherworldly elements in both poems and the idea of the intruder as those concepts relate to a modified hero's journey as well.

Before either central character goes off on his journey to rid his people of the monstrous threat, there is a sense that both Arthur's court and Hrothgar's mead hall[2] are in times of peace, safety, and general calm. Arthur has seen fit to host a large feast at Christmastime with the inclusion of games, and Hrothgar has done similarly with ring-giving and mead flowing freely. No one is on guard, and no one seems to suspect the danger that is lurking just outside the doors of each place. Because of this ignorance of the coming danger and how swiftly the intruders throw the whole companies into disarray, we can see the fragility of the peacefulness and calm of those groups. The displays of power and wealth of the people, or at least of those ruling over them in those places, serve only to demonstrate how easily those things can be ripped away. Certainly, there is more

[2] Here, we can understand Heorot as the place that fulfills the sense of "home" for Beowulf. The reader does not see Beowulf in his actual home hall at the beginning of the poem, so for him as well as for his own men, Heorot is the home which has its peace and safety interrupted.

physical destruction in *Beowulf* than in *Gawain*, but the values of Arthur's court are called into question, which is perhaps equally destructive to a group like the one his knights make up. Even though both groups and their respective home locations eventually regain their statuses as places of peace, it cannot be denied that they are shaken from how they started out. Even though Heorot can be rebuilt and Arthur's knights can restyle the green girdle— originally a reminder of Gawain's weakness— into a symbol of strength and honor, it is worth questioning what the lasting impact of those damages might be.

Another significant connection between the two works is found in the similar "timeline" they share. By this I mean that they follow the pattern identified separately by Battles and Byrne, with a common progression of feasting, feeling safe, an intruder, and a heroic figure acting as a representative for the group to work against the intruder. Byrne adds the useful element of the intruder to Battles' existing framework, which states that feasts in Old English poetry can serve one of two purposes: expressions of joy or "catalysts for social disruption and disintegration" (435). To Battles, these two potential purposes make sense given that all feasts in the works he discusses combine a sense of personal honor with alcohol and violence (435). Most of Battles' discussion focuses on what he terms "sleeping after the feast," which is then followed by a "deadly danger" which, as he sees it, is a fairly common sequence throughout many Old English poems. This theme also dates to classical texts such as the *Odyssey*, which proves Battles' observation of the prevalence of the theme (436).[3] In *Beowulf*, this theme is more explicit than in *Gawain*, as in *Beowulf* the action clearly follows the pattern of sleeping after feasting, or in that poem's case, drinking. Battles continues his argument by stating that "[f]easting, sleeping, and danger powerfully attract one another; the three motifs form a deadly triangle, wherein the presence of any two suffices to

[3] Although I am not working with the *Odyssey* or with others of the texts Battles does, it is worth noting the presence of this theme throughout other texts for its role in both of the poems I am working with.

summon the third" (437). We can see this piece of his argument in both poems—when the company sleeps after the feast in *Beowulf*, Grendel takes that opportunity to enter and take dozens of men for a meal; similarly, when the group is relaxed, although not asleep, in Arthur's court, the Green Knight appears. Danger, then, clearly follows a sense of overwhelming calm. Battles goes further into the pattern he sets up earlier to examine common elements of poetry.[4] Again, the pattern aligns more closely with *Beowulf*, and at Battles' count, occurs five times, whereas in *Gawain*, while sleeping is mentioned in the "temptation" scenes with Lady Bertilak, there is a more general sense of relaxation or calmness at the feasts in Arthur's court. The calmness the group feels is the setup for the deadly danger that occurs when the Green Knight enters with his challenge.

Both *Beowulf* and *Gawain* are texts which set out existing values and codes for the places in which they begin and out of which the central characters must journey (Hrothgar's mead hall and Arthur's court, respectively). It is, therefore, significant that the intrusion of the monstrous figure means that those values and codes must be tested against the rest of the world. The very ability of the monstrous figure to enter this seemingly safe place means that something must be amiss in this perceived safety. Thus, part of the hero's task in defeating the monster must be to determine what might have gone wrong and what can be salvaged. Then, at the end of the confrontation with the monster, there will inevitably be either a reinstatement of the existing values or a setting forth of new or altered values. In this way, the central character works to defeat both the literal, physical threat to his people and the more nebulous threat of a questioning of the existing values of the central group of people. Despite the apparent safety of these opening locations, then, and despite the work of the authors to make these locations and people seem beyond the reach of danger, there is the clear presence of the supernatural threat which quickly takes over any sense of safety or peace

[4] Battles continues with the pattern on p. 438, where he includes feasting, sleeping, danger, and the "optional" elements of victims' ignorance of their fate, the aggressor approaching the hall, entering, and staring at the enemy.

the characters within the stories felt. This supernatural element so easily overtakes any other element in the poems, so that while the people experiencing these texts may have fallen prey to the ways the authors idealized these versions of the past, it is clear that neither text is primarily a historical record.

In whatever ways these two poems can be read, they do not make outright claims toward a valuing of certain attributes or codes over others, but they do each emphasize particular virtues in their characters along with certain patterns of behavior those characters follow. For instance, while *Gawain* advocates for Christian devotion, especially with Gawain's armor and its symbolism,[5] the mead hall of Hrothgar professes no exact religion beyond pagan gesturing.[6] These poems are separated by centuries, but the locations and people of "home" do have more in common than they do difference. Arthur and Hrothgar's men are inherently devoted to their ruler, and there is a reciprocal nature to those relationships which means that each party gives something to the other and expects to receive something in return. It is generally also the case that the ruler gives protection and safety in return for protection in battle whenever the need should arise. The significant physical structures of the court and the hall also play a role in the values of these societies—they are places of safety, comfort, and protection, which serve as symbols of the protection the ruler gives his people; the destruction, whether literal or figurative, of these structures, then, is significant for its extension to the people living there. These references to actions for the good of the collective, such as we can see with the benefits of the reciprocal relationships throughout the poems, serve also to indicate another value which benefits the collective societies contained within the same physical structures: honor for the whole people, even if that is gained or lost by one individual. We can see this honor

[5] For examples of the imagery of the shield and other elements of Gawain's armor, see *Gawain* 566-665. There is significant discussion of the coloring of the armor and its elements, the number symbolism, and what each of these elements means in relation to a particular devotion to Mary, among other Christian symbolism.

[6] There is, however, a remark about Grendel being a descendent of Cain, although this is more of a reference to his cursed and wicked nature than a biblical statement, it seems (*Beowulf* 106-14).

factoring in to the character of the whole people especially when a fight is won or lost, and further when the main characters return to those homes after a significant battle. In each case, this battle is between the main character and the supernatural or monstrous intruder whose goal is to upset the existing structure of the collective, whether that structure is physical or symbolic.

In thinking about the symbolic structure and nature of *Beowulf* in particular, we can examine a 1936 speech in which J.R.R Tolkien addressed other scholars with the goal of discussing some significant elements of the poem. Tolkien noted that *Beowulf* ought to be considered as important of a literary text as it was a historical one at that point. The poetic element of *Beowulf* was often forgotten within scholarship of Tolkien's era, to the point of there being a question as to the poetic nature of the text at all—it was more commonly regarded as a historical document (2-3). Tolkien's aim was to examine other ways of considering the poem, such as the significance of its poetic elements, especially those which relate to the supernatural elements found throughout the poem. He persisted in stating that "it is plainly only in the consideration of *Beowulf* as a poem, with an inherent poetic significance, that any view or conviction can be reached or steadily held," that is, it is only in considering the text as a poetic work that any serious claims about it can be made (6). Tolkien notes that because Beowulf himself is simply a man with no supernatural characteristics of his own, the very fact that he comes up against figures such as Grendel and does not die is significant within the world of the poem, as is the fact of Grendel's supernatural nature (16). The fact that Beowulf and Grendel come together and part with Beowulf alive afterward indicates a tendency of the poem's author to favor the innate strength of human warriors and heroes over any seemingly stronger supernatural figure.

Although there is a clear supernatural element in *Gawain*, the central character of that poem is merely a man, just as Beowulf is. Neither of the central characters of these poems possesses any otherworldly power by themselves, making it even more significant that they are able to best the

figures with which they clash. As a literary figure, Gawain has long been associated with images of chivalry, romance, knighthood, and other lofty ideals. These various associations are well-documented throughout literary history and can be sourced across cultures, historical periods, and languages, and while there are certainly variations, it is overwhelmingly clear that the figure of Gawain is one which has been popular enough throughout history to still be well-known today (Hahn 218). As a central part of many Arthurian stories, the figure of Gawain has come down to modern readers as one who seems to share many of the same characteristics and associations with King Arthur himself. The many retellings of the story of Gawain and Arthur's knights helps to demonstrate the popularity of these figures in fiction and in the collective awareness. Although there are many "knights of the round table" closely associated with Arthur and his court, Gawain is one who has been given particular attention across various forms of media. Because the character of Gawain became so ubiquitous, this character or figure has been elevated to what Thomas Hahn identifies as a *chevalier exemplaire*, or the paragon against which all manhood and all chivalry are tested (220). Gawain's centrality to the Arthurian narrative means he is set completely apart for his superlative nature, which further means the character of Gawain is easy for authors to put into the role of the defender of the court, as the character is used in *Gawain*. Along with the general popularity of these stories, Arthurian tales are cosmopolitan in nature, which is further indicative of the widespread nature of these stories and the characters found within them (218). There are examples of Arthurian stories to be found in the Welsh *Mabinogion*, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, and in other Celtic and French works of similar natures, further indicating the popularity of these stories (218). Still, the character of Gawain in *Gawain* is not a universal characterization of the figure, but is only one representation which has come down from the historical use of this character. As we do not know of a historical, literal basis for the character, poets and other authors likely tended to add characteristics to the depiction to make the character

more acceptable or relatable to their audiences. Thus, there will never be a truly universal representation of the character, but rather, there are various conglomerations with some shared characteristics (221).

Similarly, the character of Beowulf is clearly set apart from his peers in the poem, although perhaps this character purposefully has no apparent peers. Both Beowulf and Gawain are situated within their respective texts as separate from others around them and as significant within their stories. These men are distinctly human, but are not human in the same way the others who are part of their respective communities are. It is clear, then, that the authors of these poems worked to make sure their readers saw these main characters as different— as something in between the common man and the monster they eventually fight. It is certainly significant that their ultimate victories come because of their human power and will, rather than from any object or weapon they use at other points in the poems. The reader gets an initial description of Beowulf, who is a "good man" and "strongest of all living men" (195-6), but it is still clear he is only a man, even if he has these seemingly superhuman attributes. We also get an initial description of his people, the Geats, as he packs them up and goes to Hrothgar's aid (198-201). Beowulf, then, is also a man who understands the value of relationships that require action on the part of himself and his men, which is why, upon learning of the terror Grendel is responsible for at Heorot, he packs up his Geats and goes to aid Hrothgar in whatever way he can. Later, Beowulf addresses Hrothgar and his men directly, stating their purpose and for what reason they have come, which we can at least partially understand as being due to the fragility of the community he is entering:

> That noblest man then gave him an answer,
> the leader of the band unlocked his word-hoard:
> "We are of the race of the Geatish nation,
> sworn hearth-companions of Hygelac their king.

My own father was well known abroad

[…]

From a generous mind

I can offer Hrothgar good plan and counsel,

how, old and good, he may conquer his enemy,

if reversal of fortune is ever to come to him. (*Beowulf* 258-62, 277-80)

Beowulf and his men offer "good plan and counsel," clearly intending to help in whatever way is possible for them, including "conquer[ing] his enemy." The defeat of Grendel is the only way past the suffering Hrothgar and his retainers face and toward a "reversal of fortune," and Beowulf understands that the relationship his father and Hrothgar had means that he and his own men are now responsible for aiding in this mission. The reader can understand that the disruption the community suffered was due to the weakness of the community Hrothgar fostered, despite any outward strength. In a similar vein to Beowulf's clear strength and willingness to help a weakened community, from the first introduction to Gawain, we learn that while he feels he does not possess any superior qualities, he is willing to take up the challenge of the Green Knight, which no one else in the court was willing to do. In Arthur's place, Gawain answers the Green Knight's challenge, plainly ready and willing to do whatever his king requires of him; he values the good of the community or collective over whatever might serve only himself (339-42, 354-6). He takes this action easily, it seems, and even though he calls himself "weakest of your warriors and feeblest of wit" (354), he is still able to take this challenge from Arthur, whose life is arguably more valuable than Gawain's. Gawain speaks to his king:

"I am weakest of your warriors and feeblest of wit;

loss of my life would be at least lamented.

Were I not your nephew my life would mean nothing"

[…]

The knighthood then unites

and each knight says the same:

their king can stand aside

and give Gawain the game. (*Gawain* 354-6, 362-5)

Both main characters are confronted with a choice between acting as the representative for their collective group by taking what steps they can to restore honor to that group and failing to take up the challenge against the monstrous intruder. Ultimately, each of these men, despite being mere humans and having little guaranteed about their futures once they do fight these creatures, takes up the challenge and works to undo the harm caused.

Beowulf and *Gawain* were written at very different times and therefore work to represent very different groups of people. Another shared trait of the two texts is that representation of the characters would have been quite different from what most of these texts' audiences would have experienced. Those representations could be in the depictions of the characters themselves, or in the depictions of kinds of food and activities occurring. For instance, the "common person" encountering *Beowulf* might not have personal experience being a retainer in a hall, although they would probably know what it meant to be such a person, or might otherwise know someone who had a degree of personal experience. Similarly, a person might not have personal experience with the lavish feasts described in *Gawain*, but would have familiarity with some elements of the scenes described. The lavish and extravagant nature of the feasts and revelry scenes in the two texts is another way of demonstrating the fleeting nature of the wealth displayed in both primary locations of these poems. It may seem like these scenes are going to be lasting representations of the court

and hall we see at the outset of these poems, but of course, the monstrous intruder will not permit that.

Luxury goods like the ones described by Christopher Dyer in his discussion of material wealth pointing to an ability to make use of free time, as objects contained within the interior world of those places, are essential in the depiction of the court and mead hall as places of comfort and safety.[7] The intruder, however, is a character who moves the action of the text outside of the court or safe place it starts in, as described by Byrne. While Byrne focuses on *Gawain*, her ideas can also connect to *Beowulf*, where there is another intruder in that hall who serves a similar purpose. The event of the entrance of the intruder is itself the catalyst for the rest of the action in both texts, so Byrne sees this entrance as worthy of discussion, and states,

> The entrance of the intruder widens the focus of the narrative from the microcosm of the court to the world beyond and usually constitutes an invitation to quest and adventure. The tensions and conflicts it contains are unpacked throughout the rest of the text. (34)

Even though the event of the intrusion may take up very little time in the narrative of the text, it is significant for creating the space that will be filled by the rest of the poem. As Byrne states in the passage above, the entrance of the intruder makes it possible for further action to occur within the poem. Because both texts begin in peaceful settings, they would likely not be very interesting to readers were there not the intrusion of the monster where those intrusions take place; without this disruption, these poems may not have been interesting enough to withstand the test of time. As the court is opened up into a space for other action to occur, it is also opened up to outside forces that could act on it, such as the monstrous figures of Grendel or the Green Knight, because once the doors are opened, there is no easy way to shut them. Byrne sets up the opposition of the court and

[7] For Dyer's discussion of material goods, wealth, and the role of luxuries, see Dyer 218-20.

the rest of the world as she says, "The court, embodying civilization, rationality, order, peace and the known, interior world is suddenly intruded on by the forces of wildness, conflict, churlishness and the unknown, exterior world" (34). Without an intrusion as it occurs in each text, there would essentially be no poem and no purpose for one, and there would certainly not be a quest or adventure undertaken by the central characters. In many cases, the intruder figure is also often a means to an end, such as reinforcing the pre-existing values of the place they intruded upon, which seems to at least partly be the case in both *Gawain* and *Beowulf*. We can see the main characters of each poem working to reinstate the values of their respective "homes" when they return there after their confrontations with the monstrous figures—there has been significant damage in both cases. Byrne describes the intruder in such texts as these as a necessary threat which forces the court or hall into action against a figure that is trying to destroy or disrupt their regular lives (35). Because the intruders are able to enter, and further because they can dismantle the structures of perceived collective safety as easily as they do, it is clear that these groups and their comfort are not as well-founded as they seem. It is evident, then, that everything about these people, even the most powerful, is artifice with no solid footing. Still, they do their best to make it seem as though they are powerful and not afraid of any outside threat.

The opening of *Gawain*, of course, takes place at Christmastime, when Arthur requests some entertainment at his feast. This then prompts the arrival of the Green Knight and Gawain's entire journey throughout the poem, and as Rebecca Douglass notes, we can find significance in a religious reading of the poem, especially in the setting of the poem at Christmas and the inclusion of other liturgical observances in the poem. She argues that Gawain's failure is tied to his lack of adherence to Christian observances such as mass and the feast of the Holy Innocents, both of which take place after he has arrived at Bertilak's castle. Gawain's overall failure is also tied to the encroachment of the pagan onto the Christian (21-2), which we can see in the intrusion of the pagan other (the Green

Knight himself) upon the Christian court of King Arthur. Douglass notes the instances of the opposition between pagan and Christian that occur throughout the poem, as she participates in an ongoing argument in current scholarship about Arthur's court as representative of the morals of Christianity and Bertilak's court as representative of pagan ideals. Douglass goes on to argue that Gawain's faith is tested against the natural and pagan ideas of Bertilak's court, and in fact loses to those natural and pagan ideas at times. For instance, Douglass states that Gawain's failure to attend the midnight mass and later the feast day shows he has at least partially fallen prey to Bertilak, thus failing Arthur and his court in the most basic way: failing to meet his obligations as a Christian. Despite having prayed much and donning armor indicating his faith, Gawain's failure to meet these obligations indicates a larger failure (21-2).

Arthur has essentially invited the Green Knight into his court with a request for entertainment, and Bertilak uses this opportunity to challenge the morality of Arthur's court as a whole, as well as Gawain's morals in particular. Of course, Arthur did not directly ask for his court to be challenged, but rather, by inviting the possibility of a game, the Green Knight could enter the court and give whatever challenge he chose. Because Arthur felt he could open his court up to an external challenge, then, his court would certainly be tested in some way. This moment of challenge can also connect to Byrne's idea of "the intruder at the feast," where "the court, embodying civilization, rationality, order, peace and the known, interior world is suddenly intruded on by the forces of wildness, conflict, churlishness and the unknown, exterior world" (34) as well as to Battles' idea of "deadly danger" (436). The element of the game, asked for by Arthur and introduced by the Green Knight, adds the element of the "intruder at the feast," which also related to *Beowulf*. The challenge itself means there is a clear and obvious element of danger that has been allowed into the court, and the Green Knight himself is immediately threatening in this scenario because of his physical appearance and actions. Therefore, the safety and peacefulness of the court are quickly

disrupted and thrown into upheaval. This upheaval is comparable to the corresponding entrance scene in *Beowulf*, as when Grendel intrudes upon the mead hall on multiple occasions, everything is thrown into disarray just as quickly and easily. Neither physical location is as sturdy as its people may have thought it, and from those moments in each poem, the reader can never be certain about the sturdiness of those places, whether physically or symbolically.

Kathryn Hume discusses the concept of the Anglo-Saxon hall in Old English poetry broadly speaking, accounting for the physical realities of them and for the social structures they represented, historically and in poetry (63-74). While the halls of the time were extensive social units and physically large buildings, they were also "a circle of light and peace enclosed by darkness, discomfort and danger [and] the 'centre of power from which treasure was distributed,""[8] showing the multiple purposes the hall served (64). The gift-giving by the lord to his retainers would have served to reward deeds done on the lord's behalf and to ensure future deeds (65). This meant there was a reciprocal understanding present in the halls which protected the lord and the retainers in equal parts. The loss of a hall, or perhaps being forced from the hall, then, would have been the greatest fear of any retainer (68). While Arthur's court would not have had exactly the same connotations as the medieval hall, the senses of duty, belonging, and protection would have been similar in both places. If a hall or court was attacked, then, it would have certainly been significant. Even if, in the case of the Green Knight, the intruder is technically invited, the disruption of normal life in such a drastic way would have been shocking and threatening.

This sense connects to the idea of the hall or the court as a place of peace and protection, at least in its ideal form, which for both texts is temporary. At the beginning of *Beowulf*, we do not see

[8] Hume quotes Jeffrey Helterman's "*Beowulf*: The Archetype Enters History," *English Literary History* vol. 35, 1968, p. 6.

Beowulf's homeland, but we do see feasting and revelry at Hrothgar's mead hall, which serves as the home location for Beowulf throughout the part of the poem I am examining:

> The hall towered high,
> cliff-like, horn-gabled, awaited the war-flames,
> malicious burning; it was still not the time
> for the sharp-edged hate of his sworn son-in-law
> to rise against Hrothgar in murderous rage.
> […]
> The warriors hastened,
> marched in formation, until they could see
> the gold-laced hall, the high timbers,
> most splendid building among earth-dwellers
> under the heavens — the king lived there—
> its gold-hammered roofs shone over the land. (*Beowulf* 81-5, 306-11)

Here, we can see the richness and impressive power of Heorot, which is "gold-laced" and the "most splendid building among earth-dwellers" thus clearly demonstrating the wealth used to bring it into existence. There is, however, an undercurrent of the waiting danger that surrounds this rich hall; the "sharp-edged hate" will not disappear without someone facing it. The weakness underneath these displays of wealth and power are brought into the open when Grendel attacks and continues to do so until so much is destroyed. In *Gawain*, there is a similar sense that the mirth and wealth of the scene cannot fade:

> It was Christmas at Camelot—King Arthur's court,
> where the great and the good of the land had gathered,

the right noble lords of the ranks of the Round Table

all roundly carousing and reveling in pleasure.

[…]

for the feasting lasted a full fortnight and one day,

with more food and drink than a fellow could dream of.

The hubbub of their humor was heavenly to hear:

pleasant dialogue by day and dancing after dusk,

so house and hall were lit with happiness

and lords and ladies were luminous with joy. (*Gawain* 37-40, 44-9)

Everyone in this scene is "roundly carousing and reveling in pleasure" and this feasting goes on for quite a while before Arthur decides he wants a new form of entertainment. In this way, *Gawain* differs from *Beowulf* in the fact that the danger was somewhat invited in to the feast. At this point in the poem, however, there is no sense of danger, even though it is imminent. As these physical locations shine with light and happiness, they do also serve more significant purposes within the poems than being the locations for feasting. Certainly, depictions and conceptions of the earlier medieval hall and the later medieval royal court were not the same, nor did those historical locations have the same uses, but they share the ideas of safety, protection, reciprocal relationships between the people using those spaces, and communal living for a shared purpose.

The monstrous figures are threatening and monstrous in rather different ways. Grendel and the Green Knight do not share much physically, and in fact, Grendel is not described physically, leaving the reader to imagine what it is that makes him as outwardly threatening as he is in the poem. It is obvious that he is a terrible creature, but we are not given many specifics about why he appears threatening, although we are given a record of his actions, which include killing and consuming many people before he is killed himself. The Green Knight, however, is given a much more detailed

physical description, and a large part of his characterization hinges on his otherworldly appearance—he is tall, has green skin, is richly dressed in green and gold, and is both beautiful and terrible. Grendel's monstrous actions are more obvious than those of the Green Knight as well, and he is more outwardly threatening despite the reader not knowing what he looks like; Grendel's destruction is a physical kind that intends to tear apart the collective nature of the mead hall:

> That murderous spirit was named Grendel,
> huge moor-stalker who held the wasteland,
> fens, and marshes; unblessed, unhappy,
> he dwelt for a time in the lair of the monsters
> […]
> When night came on, Grendel came too,
> to look around the hall and see how the Ring-Danes,
> after their beer-feast, had ranged themselves there.
> Inside he found the company of nobles
> asleep after banquet— they knew no sorrow,
> sad man's lot. The unholy spirit,
> fierce and ravenous, soon found his war-fury,
> savage and reckless, and snatched up thirty
> of the sleeping thanes. (*Beowulf* 102-5, 114-23)

This is the first intrusion of Grendel upon Heorot, and he is clearly frightening and destructive from this beginning. Ostensibly, Grendel's justification for his attack is the laughter (86-8), perhaps because he was never included in that joyous feasting, but the extent of his destruction of the collective, by snatching up thirty men at once, does not seem to match the interruption brought about by mere laughter. He, the "unblessed, unhappy" creature, seeks to undo the revelry he comes

upon at Heorot, and does so effectively, night after night. The fact that the residents of the hall were all asleep when Grendel first enters, as well as the several subsequent times, indicates that they felt their peace and happiness was altogether unassailable, which proves not to be the case. A similar feeling is true for Arthur's court, which was in the midst of a rich feast when the Green Knight entered:

> A fearful form appeared, framed in the door:
> a mountain of a man, immeasurably high,
> a hulk of a human from head to hips
> […]
> But handsome, too, like any horseman worth his horse,
> for despite the bulk and brawn of his body
> his stomach and waist were slender and sleek.
> In fact in all features he was finely formed
>
> it seemed.
>
> Amazement seized their minds,
> no soul had ever seen
> a knight of such a kind—
> entirely emerald green.
>
> […]
> No waking man had witnessed such a warrior
> or weird warhorse—otherworldly, yet flesh
>
> and bone.
>
> His look was lightning bright
> said those who glimpsed its glow.

It seemed no man there might

survive his violent blow. (*Gawain* 136-8, 142-50, 196-202)[9]

An interesting element of this passage is that the Green Knight is described as handsome, while also having a "fearful form," indicating that he may not be immediately seen as a threat. There is plentiful description of the Green Knight, unlike Grendel, who receives no physical description. It is perhaps the otherworldly beauty and overall impression of the Green Knight which makes him threatening—because he is so outside of what the court thinks a person ought to be, and does not seem to be a human at all, he is a threat for that reason. Thus, we have two very different displays of the monstrous, each perhaps befitting to the environment in which he is found. Regardless of their physical appearance or other descriptions, both figures are immediately threatening to the central character and to others who surround them, making these intruders clearly significant.

Along with the physical descriptions or lack thereof, both monstrous figures are seemingly supernatural or otherworldly in a way that sets them apart from others around them, especially the central character who epitomizes the human hero in the poems. The hero both is instantly ready to fight this figure and sees them as something that must be removed from their vicinity by any means necessary. The intruder or monstrous figure has clearly crossed a boundary by entering into the court or hall, and therefore must be removed, although there is the possibility of the boundary being religious, based on membership in the group—knights of King Arthur or retainers of Hrothgar— or yet another reason these figures do not belong in the places they enter.

Instead of focusing on each confrontation element of the two poems, I find it helpful to only look at the significant confrontation scenes, namely those where the monstrous figure is

[9] We also gain many details about the body, clothing, and horse of the Green Knight in ll. 151-195, which is part of this extended passage that focuses on the appearance of this monstrous figure who intrudes upon Arthur's court. There is no comparable passage about Grendel, so the reader is left with different ideas about the physical appearance of that figure, namely that there is no basis for any clear depiction.

ultimately vanquished. In *Beowulf*, this is the scene where Beowulf defeats Grendel and the hall is safe from that particular threat for the time.[10] When Beowulf fights Grendel, it is as a mortal man using his human strength against a supernatural threat to his people, and even though he is tested and the hall itself nearly collapses,[11] Beowulf is victorious:

> Under dark skies he came till he saw
> the shining wine-hall, because of gold-giving,
> a joy to men, plated high with gold.
> It was not the first time he had visited Hrothgar;
> never in his life, before or after,
> did he find harder luck or retainers in hall.
> […]
> The shepherd of sins then instantly knew
> he had never encountered, in any region
> of this middle-earth, in any other man,
> a stronger hand-grip; at heart he feared
> for his wretched life, but he could not move.
> […]
> The terrible creature
> took a body wound there; a gaping tear
> opened in his shoulder; tendons popped,
> muscle slipped the bone. Glory in battle

[10] It could also be useful to examine the differences between this scene and the confrontation with Grendel's mother (beginning at line 1518), although my focus here is on the initial intruder to the court and hall for the respective texts.
[11] See ll. 770-82 for discussion of how the blows inside the hall nearly collapse it, even though it is strongly reinforced.

was given to Beowulf; Grendel fled,

wounded, death-sick (*Beowulf* 714-19, 750-54, 815-20)

Even though Grendel is clearly full of hatred when Beowulf fights him, Beowulf does not give in to any fear he might be feeling in that moment. Instead, Beowulf uses his own strength to give Grendel "a body wound" which leaves him fleeing the hall to die elsewhere. In this way, Beowulf uses his human strength to overtake the monstrous intruder, thus ridding his community of the disruption they have suffered. Grendel imposes upon the people with "God's wrath," having already killed numerous men, but even he realizes the strength of Beowulf will ultimately be too much for him. And, as Beowulf is given "glory in battle," this fight comes to its end with the representative of the hall victorious, as he must be in order to defend the hall and the people for which it stands. I have also chosen to focus on the final blow the Green Knight gives to Gawain, rather than a lengthier discussion of all of them, as it brings the poem to its conclusion and shows the reader the purpose the Green Knight had for the test in the first place:

The warrior steps away and leans on his weapon,

props the handle in the earth and slouches on the head

and studies how Gawain is standing his ground,

bold in his bearing, brave in his actions,

armed and ready. In his heart he admires him.

[…]

"Because the belt you are bound with belongs to me;

it was woven by my wife so I know it very well.

And I know of your courtesies, and conduct, and kisses,

and the wooing of my wife—for it was all my work!

I sent her to test you—and in truth it turns out

you're by far the most faultless fellow on earth."

[…]

"My downfall and undoing; let the devil take it.
Dread of the death blow and cowardly doubts
meant I gave in to greed, and in doing so forgot
the freedom and fidelity every knight knows to follow.
And now I am found to be flawed and false,
through treachery and untruth I have totally failed" (*Gawain* 2331-35, 2348-63, 2378-83)

In the above passage, we see the Green Knight's explanation for the testing of Gawain, and by extension, of Arthur's entire court, for which Gawain was a representative while he was outside the castle. We are told that "in his heart he admires him" and that the entire axe blow trial was set up purposefully to test Gawain and his virtues, thus the worthiness of Arthur's court. Although his intrusion threw the court into disarray, the Green Knight may not have intended for that disarray to be permanent, and he says of Gawain "you're by far the most faultless fellow on earth." Gawain himself does not see this as a victory at this point in the poem, as he feels his "dread of the death blow and cowardly doubts" indicate his own failure and that of Arthur's court, despite the Green Knight's statement to the contrary. Once he returns to Camelot, however, he is welcomed back with open arms and in the process of this reincorporation, the symbol he saw as shameful is transformed into a point of honor.

Related to the values reinstated by the return of the heroes to their homes is the closeness, brotherhood, and reciprocity that existed in halls and courts of both parts of the period (earlier medieval in *Beowulf* and later medieval in *Gawain*). Both places seem to engender a sense of duty, belonging, protection, and communal living that would have been central to the historical hall and

court as well. Generally, the king or lord of the place promises protection and safety while the retainers or knights promise loyalty and defense of the place and its people. This connects to the literal places and to the fictionalized versions that appear in these. The fact that Gawain and Beowulf had to leave these places of comfort among people they knew would protect them is significant to their journeys into the wider world. The heroic figure in both texts also acts as a representative of the court or hall when he is in the world, meaning he speaks for everyone as well as for the values, ideals, and morals they stand for. This is seen in Gawain's carrying Christian symbols on his armor, for instance.[12] Those values are reinforced by the poems when the hero leaves and later returns to that place of origin, because when he, as representative of the values, returns to them after having defeated someone who goes against them, it is clear the values of the court or hall are superior. Beowulf, unlike Gawain, does not begin his journey to defeat Grendel from a true place of home, but because of the existing relationship between his father, Hrothgar, and himself, there is a sense in which Heorot is already a place of home for him. Along with these insular communities, there is a set of values each place espouses, and it is important to note that those values are challenged by the intruder and ultimately reinforced by the main character when he returns to that home.

The intruder, then, even when somewhat welcomed or expected, can be a major disruption in courtly life. As Hostetter notes, the "visitor to the hall is a fascinating, repeated motif in Beowulf," noting the intrusion of Grendel, his mother, and the dragon in this context (43). Byrne, who deals specifically with the intruder at the feast, talks about the motif in medieval romance. The intrusion, she argues, is necessary because of its function to "[widen] the focus of the narrative from the microcosm of the court to the world beyond and usually constitutes an invitation to quest and adventure. The tensions and conflicts it contains are unpacked throughout the rest of the text" (34).

[12] For a closer look at the Christian symbolism present on Gawain's armor, see ll. 619-61.

The intrusion is also necessary because it "[shakes] the court out of its complacency and [offers] it an opportunity to justify its existence" (35). The court and its representative must prove their chivalric ideals are valid, which could not happen without an intrusion on its usual existence. The reconciliation of the heroic figure and reincorporation into the court or hall is the final element of the pattern I have been setting out throughout this essay, and this element works to justify the hero leaving the mead hall or court in order to defeat the monstrous intruder (Byrne 45). After the intruder is vanquished or the quest completed, the heroic figure or representative must regain their place in the court or hall, meaning the poem has come full circle back to peacefulness as it was at the beginning.

Once the confrontation or battle is over, and the hero is victorious, he must necessarily return to the place from which he came. Doing so will mean he is reincorporated into the collective he left and is able to reinforce the values of that place which were tested by the monstrous intruder. The notion of "home" itself only changes in the way the characters may view it—the evident fragility of these places means that when the heroes return there, something will have shifted and will need to be built back up, generally the other characters' senses that those are still safe places. In *Beowulf*, this restoration of safety means rebuilding parts of the hall that were destroyed and promising to help again should things become the way they were when Grendel and others were terrorizing the mead hall:

> Then the great-hearted man slept undisturbed.
> The hall towered high, golden in darkness.
> […]
> Then sunrise came
> and the warriors prepared to return to their people;
> the brave visitor would set his sail

for their far land, hoped soon to see it.

[…]

Beowulf spoke, Ecgtheow's son:

"Now we voyagers, coming from afar,

would like to say that we wish to seek

our Hygelac again. We have been entertained

most properly, kindly, brought every good thing

we could possibly ask. You have dealt well with us.

If ever I can do anything on earth

to gain your love more. lord of warriors,

than my fighting thus far, I will do it at once." (*Beowulf* 1799-1800, 1803-6, 1817-25)

Here, we return to Heorot after Grendel and his mother are defeated and the hall can return to the sense of peace and wealth it started with. Once the immediate threat is gone, the men can "[sleep] undisturbed" inside their safe home, even though they are now aware of the fragility of that safety. To reassure Hrothgar and to continue to uphold his part of their reciprocal relationship, Beowulf states he will return to aid them if it is needed again; what he gains in treasure after successfully defeating this great evil, he will repay in devotion should that become necessary. Gawain also finds the court somewhat changed when he returns there, and this is especially evident in Arthur's praise for the actions Gawain felt were cowardly:

He grimaced with disgrace,

he writhed with rage and pain.

Blood flowed towards his face

and showed his smarting shame.

> "Regard," said Gawain, as he held up the girdle,
> "the symbol of sin, for which my neck bears the scar"
> […]
> The king gave comfort, then the whole of the court
> allow, as they laugh in lovely accord,
> that the lords and ladies who belong to the Table,
> every knight in the brotherhood, should bear such a belt,
> a bright green belt worn obliquely to the body,
> crosswise, like a sash, for the sake of this man.
> So that slanting green stripe was adopted as their sign,
> and each knight who held it was honored ever after. (*Gawain* 2501-6, 2513-20)

Gawain feels the green girdle is a "symbol of sin" and a token of his "smarting shame," but Arthur dismisses that notion and claims it as a symbol of the honor of all the knights of his Round Table. More than being just a symbol for these particular knights and ladies, Arthur embraces the girdle and states it will be a symbol of his people forever, so this object is transformed wholly from its original meaning to one which is much more impactful. Still, the girdle would always remain a reminder of how easily an outsider could come into the court and attempt to dismantle it, thus demonstrating the ultimate weakness of that place.

In these patterns, there is also a return to the normal world after facing an unusual or supernatural force, as is the case in both poems (Byrne 55). The introduction of disorder ultimately serves to demonstrate the benefits of the existing and regular (56), which seems to be the overarching theme of the pattern and of both poems discussed here. When the heroes return to their homes, or home locations, as the case may be, they return to places that have been altered by

the monstrous intruders they have worked hard to oust from those places. The very fact that these monstrous figures can undermine the safety and comfort felt in those locations indicates a significant fragility implicit in the systems the locations represent. And, when the main character steps outside those locations to confront that same monstrous figure, he is a singular representative of the values of honor, community, unity in battle, reciprocal care, and chivalry inherent in the collective group living in the court or hall. When he returns, he, along with the ruler of the place, must take stock of the damages done, which necessarily means coming to terms with the changes that may have occurred to those value systems once thought to be strong and unflinching. The main characters of these two poems must work to put their lives and their homes back in order, which is to say that they must identify what has been lost, whether that is walls of the building or a sense of security against that outside world and its threats that was once secure. They must also, then, consider who they are as a people going forward, which can involve taking up a new symbol of their honor, as in *Gawain*, or strengthening bonds with other groups who will continue to protect them if needed, as in *Beowulf*.

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