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Hagiographic Motifs in Beowulf's Fight with Grendel's Mother

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ABSTRACT

Analogues for the narrative structure and content of Beowulf's first two battles have long been identified from northern legend and folklore; it is only in relatively recent years that hagiographic motifs have been considered for Beowulf's first and third fights, against Grendel and the dragon. So far, hagiographic motifs—and their implications—have been overlooked in relation to Beowulf's second fight, against Grendel's mother, perhaps due to their less than straightforward application. This article assembles five of the most prominent hagiographic motifs present before, during, and immediately following Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother, and proposes a new hagiographical analogue for this episode. In doing so, this article considers the implications of hagiographic resonances for our interpretation of this enigmatic episode, and for the poet's engagement with their literary and narrative inheritance, both secular (folkloric and northern legend), and hagiographic.

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Introduction

Two references to light, forming an envelope pattern, frame Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother. Upon entering Grendel's mother's *nīðsele* ("hostile-hall", l. 1513a), Beowulf *fyrlēoht geseah / blācne lēoman beorhte scīman* ("saw firelight, a brilliant light shining brightly", ll. 1516b–17); then, a moment after he strikes the decisive blow to Grendel's mother's neck:[1]

Līxte se lēome,	lēoht inne stōd,
efne swā of hefene	hādre scīneð
rodores candel.	(ll. 1570–72b)

[The brightness shone, a light stood within, just as the sky's candle shines brightly from heaven]

These references reflect two key traditions which themselves inflect how we read the framed content: analogues of the illumination of a cave by firelight, allowing a hero to see his enemy, have been identified in Germanic legends, while a heavenly light signalling

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[1] All references to *Beowulf* are taken from *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ed. Fulk, Bjork and Niles, and are referred to by line number. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

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victory over demonic foes is immediately recognisable from hagiographic tradition.[2] This envelope pattern, framing Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother, thus invites appraisal of the action from the perspectives of both northern legend and hagiography. Analogues for the narrative structure and content of Beowulf's first two battles have long been identified from northern legend and folklore (particularly the "Two-Troll" tradition); it is only in relatively recent years that hagiographic motifs have been considered for Beowulf's first and third fights, against Grendel and the dragon.[3] So far, hagiographic motifs—and their implications—have been overlooked in relation to Beowulf's second fight, perhaps as his contest with Grendel's mother is often subsumed within discussion of his fight with Grendel.[4] Yet, as Alison Vowell has recently noted, the *Beowulf*-poet clearly demarcates Beowulf's first and second fight as separate narrative events, unlike the hero's struggles against two trolls found in northern legend (where the second troll-fight is usually portrayed as a continuation of the first).[5] More likely, hagiographic motifs have been overlooked in Beowulf's second fight as where they are identifiable they do not function in a clear-cut manner. Yet, their complex (and even confused) treatment is entirely consonant with both the enigmatic nature of this episode and with the characterisation of Grendel's mother. This article argues that Beowulf's second fight is worth closer examination for evidence of hagiographic influence: the very act of decapitating Grendel's mother, an action marked, as noted above, by the appearance of heavenly light and preceded by violent struggle reminiscent of that found in saints' lives, suggests a poet who expected an audience to appraise this second monster fight through a hagiographic, as well as folkloric, lens. This article assembles five of the most prominent hagiographic motifs present before, during, and immediately following Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother. Some of these motifs have been noted previously, yet their cumulative effect has not been considered:

(1) A saint voluntarily enters a demonic abode and/or rids a landscape of demons
(2) A saint in an enclosed space is attacked from without by an antagonist, followed by some form of physical and/or verbal struggle

[2]For example, in the Sandhaugar episode of *Grettis Saga* (chapters 64–5), the cave into which Grettir follows the troll-wife is illuminated by a great fire: see Garmonsway and Simpson, *Beowulf and its Analogues*, at p. 315. See also notes in *Klaeber*, p. 186; Andersson "Sources and Analogues," 125–48; Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies,* 140–68. Christian resonances with the firelight in the cave have also been noted, particularly in relation to the mere as an entrance to hell. See Russom, "At the Center of *Beowulf*," 225–40; Andrew, "Grendel in Hell." For an alternative view that reads the fire as an ordinary fire see Pascual, "Grendel's Mere, Beowulf's Dive, and the *Visio Sancti Pauli*." For a recent appraisal of the legendary and folktale parallels with Beowulf's fight with Grendel and his mother see Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf*, 111–8. On Grendel's mother and Germanic heroic legend, see Vowell, "Grendel's Mother." Parallels to the heavenly light that appears in aid of Saint Anthony have been noted by Margaret Goldsmith in *Mode and Meaning*, 261–4; homiletic and hagiographic parallels are discussed by Orchard in *A Critical Companion*, 151–68; Leneghan, "The Haunting of Heorot"; further hagiographic parallels and scholarship are discussed below. Biblical parallels have long been noted, as have Christological resonances in Beowulf's actions: for an overview of the scholarship see Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 159–73 and 231–5. See also Leneghan, "*Beowulf*, the Wrath of God and the Fall of Angels." On Christian parallels to references to fire and water in the poem, see Anlezark, *Water and Fire*, particularly chapter 6. On fire in hell, see Revelation 20:14–15 (Vulgate).

[3]An exception is Christine Rauer's 2000 monograph, *Beowulf and the Dragon*. Recent works addressing hagiographic sources, analogues, and motifs include Leneghan, "The Haunting of Heorot" and Peter Ramey, "St. Beowulf."

[4]Kenneth Sisam, for example, in *The Structure of Beowulf* seems to regard Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother as a narrative addition to his battle with Grendel (see 4–6), and Tolkien famously does not mention Grendel's mother in "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics". M. Wendy Hennequin discusses the tendency (in some early scholarship) to overlook Grendel's mother in "We've Created a Monster."

[5]Vowell, "Grendel's Mother,', 242. For a recent study building upon Vowell's work, see Xu, "Grendel's Lupine Mother."

(3) A saint requires divine aid to strengthen their will
(4) A heavenly light appears as a sign of the saint's victory
(5) The saint is beheaded, and the saint's body and/or head is revered as a relic OR the saint's head is brought to heaven by an angelic host.

In recognising and assessing these motifs, it is not the intention here to suggest that the poet was drawing upon a single source, or one particular saint's life: rather, this study contends that the poet drew just as freely on popular narrative elements from a variety of hagiographic sources for the second monster fight as they seem to have done for the first and third fights. In taking this approach, and by considering saints' lives that both pre- and post-date *Beowulf*, this article follows studies that place *Beowulf* in conversation with later Norse and Icelandic analogues: the focus here on Christian narratives picks up the threads of much earlier scholarship which merit revisiting.[6] Ultimately, this article considers the implications of hagiographic resonances for our interpretation of this enigmatic episode, and for the poet's engagement with their literary and narrative inheritance. It concludes by positing a hitherto unnoticed hagiographic analogue for Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother.

Beowulf and hagiography: then and now

Christian and biblical allusions have long been recognised in *Beowulf*, yet hagiographic parallels have only recently begun to receive sustained critical attention.[7] Building upon Christine Rauer's 2000 monograph, which identified close hagiographic analogues for Beowulf's dragon fight, recent studies shift the focus away from (oral) northern legendary and folklore analogues for Beowulf's fight with Grendel, and instead consider (written) hagiographic and homiletic influences.[8] Based on structural, narrative, and verbal parallels, Francis Leneghan posits an episode in Gregory's *Dialogues* (in which a saint exorcises a demon from an abandoned building) as a hagiographic analogue and possible source for Beowulf's fight with Grendel. Taking a broader approach to points of connection between *Beowulf* and hagiography, Peter Ramey has more recently still outlined the hagiographic contours of the *Beowulf*-poet's narrative style and, in turn, the influence of conceptualisations of holiness on the construction of Beowulf's heroism.[9] Disputing the "dramatic irony" theory (that there is a dislocation between the perspective of the Christian narrator and that of the characters of *Beowulf*), Ramey describes the following as being characteristic of hagiography rather than of northern legend: the presentation of stark moral binaries (in particular how the Grendelkin and the dragon are "demonized [...] setting up a spiritual polarity");[10] Beowulf's role as an agent of God; and the portrayal

[6]On the dating of *Beowulf* see Neidorf, ed. *The Dating of Beowulf*. For recent identifications of new Germanic analogues, see, for example, Xu, "Grendel's Lupine Mother"; Grant, "Beowulfian Echoes"; Grant, "*Hrolfs saga Gautrekssonar*"; Neidorf, "On *Beowulf* and the Nibelungenlied"; Neidorf, "Hrothgar and Etzel"; and Vowell, "Grendel's Mother."
[7]For an overview of early scholarship on Christian elements in *Beowulf* see Irving, "Christian and Pagan Elements," 175–92. See also Cavill, "Christianity and Tradition in *Beowulf*," 15–40; Cabaniss, "*Beowulf* and the Liturgy"; and McNamee, "*Beowulf*: An Allegory of Salvation." See fn. 3 for recent studies on hagiographic resonances in *Beowulf*.
[8]Leneghan, "The Haunting of Heorot"; Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon*.
[9]Ramey, "St. Beowulf."
[10]Ramey, "St. Beowulf," 13. See also his "Problems with the Dramatic Irony Theory of *Beowulf*." For examples of the dramatic irony argument see esp. Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*; see also Neidorf, "Dramatic Irony and Pagan Salvation in *Beowulf*."

of his death as triumphant.[11] Such studies outline how hagiography left an imprint upon both narrative and characterisation within *Beowulf*, reminding us of the diverse nature of the narrative influences available to the *Beowulf* poet and deepening our understanding of the dynamism and narrative innovation of the poet.

Such recent work advances earlier studies that identified hagiographic resonances within *Beowulf*. Dorothy Whitelock's observations of verbal parallels and narrative echoes between *Beowulf* and Felix's *Life of St Guthlac* are often cited, in particular her note that both texts include references to demons as the progeny of Cain: *semen Cain* (XXXI) ("seed of Cain") in Felix's *Life* and *Caines cynne* (l. 107a) ("Cain's kin") in *Beowulf*.[12] In 1971 Margaret Goldsmith, building upon Whitelock's study, outlined further similarities between *Beowulf* and Evagrius's Latin translation of Athanasius' *Life of Saint Anthony*: of particular note for this study are the similarities Goldsmith observes between Anthony's battles with demonic foes and Beowulf's with the Grendelkin, as well as the appearance of a heavenly light to aid Anthony in his struggles.[13] While scholarship has moved on from Goldsmith's allegorical reading of *Beowulf*, her observations on hagiographic impressions upon *Beowulf* are still worthy of attention. Indeed, Eric Stanley, in 1979, observed that "it is likely that the poet could have derived his narrative mode from saints' lives with their balance of panegyric and edification".[14] Although Whitelock concluded that many of her observations on such "resemblances are probably accidental", this view now needs reconsideration in light of the more recent scholarship cited above which has identified further hagiographic sources and analogues for *Beowulf*.[15]

That the *Beowulf* poet drew upon hagiography, one of the most popular narrative modes throughout early medieval England, should not be surprising. Given their early circulation and—if we accept that the poet was working within a Christian literary culture—the poet's familiarity with these narratives, it would be surprising if hagiography did not influence the *Beowulf*-poet, even if unconsciously.[16] Coupled with the long-established understanding today of a predilection for heroic and steadfast saints in vernacular hagiography, consideration of hagiographic influence on *Beowulf* can further illuminate the permeable nature of hagiographic and heroic literature.[17] Renewed attention to Beowulf's apparent saintly motivations in relation to his first and third fights, in addition to his Christ-like cleansing of both Heorot and Grendel's mere, lends support to a reappraisal of Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother along

[11]In an article published contemporaneously with Ramey's, Leneghan also argues that Beowulf functions as a wrathful agent of God during his battle against Grendel: see Leneghan, "*Beowulf*, the Wrath of God and the Fall of Angels."

[12]Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, 80. References to Felix's *Life* are taken from Bertram Colgrave's *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac*. Translations are from Colgrave with minor amendments. Other parallels noted by Whitelock include references to darts of temptation (found in Hrothgar's so-called "sermon" and in relation to Guthlac's attack by devils); that the monsters in both texts are provoked by Christian song; and the inclusion of a hero who saves human habitations from monsters which dwell in marshy fens (80–1).

[13]Many similarities with Felix's *Guthlac* can ultimately be traced back to the *Life of Saint Anthony*. Goldsmith also notes a potential structural parallel between *Beowulf* and the *Life of St Anthony*: Anthony also battles demons in the first part of his *Life*, while a large portion of the second half is an account of Anthony recounting his battles to others.

[14]Stanley, "The Narrative Art of *Beowulf*," 170–91, at 173.

[15]Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, 81. Leneghan makes this point in "The Haunting of Heorot,",16.

[16]As Leneghan notes, given how readily we accept that secular heroic traits influenced vernacular English hagiography, it would be surprising if the influence did not also go in the other direction ("The Haunting of Heorot", 17).

[17]For a recent overview of scholarship on the apparent preference for "iconic" and steadfast saints in vernacular English hagiography see Niamh Kehoe, "Unsaintly Behaviour?"

hagiographic lines. Drawing on earlier and contemporary texts including Evagrius' Latin translation of Athanasius's *Life of St Anthony*, and Felix's Latin *Life of St Guthlac*, as well as later texts, such as the anonymous Old English *Passion of St Margaret* (the Cotton Tiberius version), the following discussion reveals motifs found in these popular and influential hagiographic texts are also present in Beowulf's intrusion to Grendel's mother's mere and in their ensuing fight.[18]

Unlike the hagiographic parallels identified in Beowulf's first and third fights, however, the motifs that I argue are present in Beowulf's contest with Grendel's mother function in a much less straightforward manner. As outlined below, due to the coalescence of motifs it is not always clear who is cast in the role of saint and who is the antagonist.[19] Although any potential confusion may be simply the result of a poet employing popular motifs without regard for further implications, given that Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother has long been recognised as structurally and narratively enigmatic, and that her character still defies straightforward categorisation, it is worthwhile considering whether such role inversions are in keeping with the poet's narrative presentation of this episode. The poem itself prompts considerations regarding Grendel's mother's nature (human, demonic, monstrous, troll), and whether her (and Beowulf's) behaviour is to some extent justified. Germanic, Norse, Icelandic, and folkloric traditions have been scrutinised to discern how the poet may have purposefully invoked well-known stories and characters to contribute to Grendel's mother's complex narrative role.[20] This is the first study to suggest that the poet also drew upon hagiographic motifs in their presentation of Grendel's mother, and that they did so in a decidedly non-straightforward manner. The hagiographic motifs outlined below can be read as intentionally flipped, toyed with, or seemingly at odds with Beowulf's role as hero, prompting a readjustment of how we read this poem's artistry.

Hagiographic motifs in Beowulf's second fight

1. A saint voluntarily enters a demonic abode and/or rids a landscape of demons

Scholars have long noted the hostile, hellish, demonic, or evil descriptions of Grendel and Grendel's mother: terms used for Grendel's mother include *wælgæst* ("slaughter-spirit", l. 1331), *mānscaða* ("evil-spirit", l. 1339), *ellorgæstas* ("alien-spirit", l. 1349), and *sinnigne secg* ("sinful man/warrior", l. 1379).[21] While not explicitly marked as an enemy of God in

[18]Felix's Latin *Life of St Guthlac* is generally dated to c. 730–740 (Colgrave, *Felix's Life of St Guthlac*), while the Old English *Passion of St Margaret* I refer to here is collated in the eleventh-century manuscript, British Library, Cotton Tiberius A. iii. A later, and quite distinct, Old English version of Margaret's Life survives in the mid-twelfth-century manuscript Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 303. A third version survives in the now burnt London, British Library, Cotton Otho B. x. Mary Clayton and Hugh Magennis, in *The Old English Lives of Saint Margaret*, note the earliest Old English witness to Margaret's *Vita* is found in the ninth-century *Old English Martyrology* (although under her Greek name, Marina), and that a copy of her Latin *passio* (BHL 5303) survives in a tenth-century manuscript of English origin, Paris manuscript, BN lat. 5574 (from 41). See also Magennis' entry, "Margareta" in Frederick M. Biggs *et al* (eds), *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture Vol 1*.

[19]While Beowulf's potential motivations and temporary success with Grendel and the dragon may lead us to question the straightforward use of hagiographic motifs within his first and final fight, the role of Beowulf himself as a hero (and Grendel and the dragon as antagonists) are more clearly delineated in these fights than in his second fight.

[20]For recent works that also account for earlier scholarship see Vowell and Xu.

[21]See Ramey, "St. Beowulf," 12.

the way that Grendel is, it is clear that the poet presents both antagonists as hostile entities who are not fully human. Ramey has further observed that the terms used to describe the Grendelkin bear similarities to demonic foes in later hagiographic narratives (notably *Guthlac A* and *B*, and *Andreas*), and that Beowulf's triumph over both demonic foes holds clear resonances with saintly battles against demons.[22] In particular, the poet's presentation of Beowulf's actions as cleansing or restoring dwellings and landscapes from demonic, or monstrous, habitation has been recognised as recalling hagiographic commonplaces.[23] In Beowulf's ascent from the lake after defeating Grendel's mother, the verb *gefælsod* ("cleansed", l. 1620) is repeated, having previously been used to describe Beowulf's purging of Grendel from Heorot.[24] As with its earlier use, this verb carries with it implications of saint- or Christ-like actions of cleansing or purification:

Sona wæs on sunde se þe ær æt sæcce gebad
wighryre wraðra, wæter up þurhdeaf;
wæron yðgebland eal *gefælsod*,
eacne eardas, þa se ellorgast
oflet lifdagas ond þas lænan gesceaft. (ll. 1618–22)

[Soon he was swimming, he who before had endured in battle the downfall of enemies,
dove up through water; the sea-waves were completely *cleansed*, the vast regions,
when the alien spirit gave up life-days and this loaned world.] (emphasis added)

In addition to his actions, Beowulf's determined mindset and, as Ramey notes, the self-sacrificial nature of his actions, is also suggestive of hagiographic action.[25]

Prior to Beowulf's descent into the mere, and following his cleansing of Grendel from Heorot, the poet presents us with an image of a hero eagerly willing to battle again:

Gyrede hine Beowulf
eorlgewædum, nalles for ealdre mearn (ll. 1441b–42)

[Beowulf girded himself with armour,
did not care for his life]

Following this, Beowulf declares:

"ic me mid Hruntinge
dom gewyrce, *oþðe mec deað nimeð*."
Æfter þæm wordum Weder-Geata leod.
efste mid elne,[26] nalas andsware.
bidan wolde (ll. 1490–95a)

["I shall enact judgement with Hrunting, *or death take me*." After these words the
man of the Wether-Geats *hastened boldly*, did not wish to wait for an answer.] (emphasis added)

In such moments, Beowulf's desire to battle his foes, and his lack of care for his own life, are reminiscent not only of Germanic heroes—as is well documented—but also of saintly figures embarking on similar life-threatening quests.[27] Beowulf's eagerness to seek out

[22]See Ramey for an overview: "Beowulf's monstrous foes are demonized in a way characteristic of hagiography, setting up a spiritual polarity" ("St. Beowulf", 13). See also Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 171–72; Leneghan, "Wrath of God," 9–10, 13–16. For a reading against Grendel's mother as monstrous or demonic, see Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster."
[23]Such resonances were noted in 1951 by Whitelock. For a recent discussion see Ramey, "St. Beowulf."
[24]"*Heorot is gefælsod*" ("Heorot is cleansed") l. 1176b. Ramey outlines the parallels between Beowulf's acts of cleansing Heorot, Grendel's mother's mere, and the dragon cave to similar acts of cleansing spaces (or exorcising demons) in Old English verse hagiography (*Guthlac A*, *Andreas*, Cynewulf's *The Fates of the Apostles*), and in Latin hagiography with reference to Bede's *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*. He notes that this verb *fælsian* "appears to designate acts of specifically spiritual purification" ("St. Beowulf," 14).
[25]Ramey, "St. Beowulf," 19.
[26]A verbal parallel (*efstan elne*) is used in relation to Christ in the *Dream of the Rood* (l. 34a), while a *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* search reveals that variations of the phrase *mid elne* occur predominantly in religious prose and verse.
[27]See Ramey, "St. Beowulf."

Grendel's mother—an indeterminate entity—alone, finds parallels in numerous hagiographic narratives, which ultimately can be traced back to the *Life of St Anthony* and, in the Anglo-Latin tradition, Felix's *Life of Guthlac*. In the Latin *Vita Antonii*, after the saint has been physically beaten by the devil and his demons, Anthony asks a friend to return him to the same tomb where the attack occurred so that he may once more engage with the (corporeal) demons:[28]

> Relatus ergo, iuxta consuetudinem solus iterum permanebat: [et] stare quidem propter recentes plagas non poterat, orans vero prostratus, post orationem clara voce dicebat: Ecce hic sum ego Antonius, non fugio vestra certamina: etiamsi maiora faciatis, nullus me separabit a caritate Christi.[29] (p. 123)
>
> [Therefore, having been brought back, he was again alone: and he was not able to stand because of his recent wounds, so he prayed lying down. After his prayer, he called out with a loud voice: "Here am I, Antony: I do not run from your blows, and even though you should give me more, nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ."]

Anthony's eagerness to engage in spiritual (and physical) battle with demons within remote tombs was reimagined by Felix in his Latin *Life of Saint Guthlac*, in which the saint is presented as actively desiring to seek out demons in remote and hidden landscapes:[30]

> Contigit ergo, cum a proximantibus accolisillius solitudinis experientiam sciscitaretur, illisque plurima ipsius spatiosi heremi inculta narrantibus, ecce quidam de illic adstantibus nomine Tatwine se scissealiam insulam in abditis remotioris heremi partibus confitebatur, quam multi inhabitare temtantes propter incognita heremi monstra et diversarum formarum terrores reprobaverant. *Quo audito, vir beatae recordationis Guthlac ilium locum monstrari sibi a narrante efflagitabat.*[31] (p. 88, XXV)
>
> [It happened accordingly that when he was questioning those who lived near as to their knowledge of this solitude and they were telling him of many wild places in this far-stretching desert, a certain man among those standing by, whose name was Tatwine, declared that he knew a certain island in the more remote and hidden parts of that desert; many had attempted to dwell there, but had rejected it on account of the unknown portents of the desert and its terrors of various shapes. *Guthlac, the man of blessed memory, on hearing this, earnestly besought his informant to show him the place.*] (p. 89, XXV) (emphasis added)

Upon finding the remote dwelling-place of the demons, Guthlac, eagerly and without thought for his own life, makes ready for battle; unlike Beowulf, however, Guthlac girds himself not with physical but with spiritual armour in the mould of Saint Paul.[32]

[28]The physicality of Beowulf's battles has often aligned him more with secular heroes than with saints, but we see a number of physical battles against demonic foes in hagiography. Goldsmith, for example, noted that Anthony's battles are both spiritual and physical (*The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf*, e.g. p. 261) and, as discussed below, both Juliana and Margaret are themselves physically violent towards corporeal demonic foes.

[29]All references to the Latin are from, "Vita Auctore S. Athanasio Episc", *Acta Sanctorum Volume 2: Jan. II,* (Antwerp, 1643), 121–41.Translations are mine.

[30]In the Old English prose rendition of Guthlac's life, the desert is reimagined as fenland. For recent discussions of this reimagining see, for example, Britton Elliot Brooks, *Restoring Creation*, and Jane Roberts and Alan Thacker, eds., *Guthlac: Crowland's Saint*. See also Taro Ishiguro and Jane Roberts, eds. *Felix's Life of St Guthlac and Its Two Old English Versions* (forthcoming in 2026).

[31]All references to the Latin are from Bertram Colgrave (ed. and trans), *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956). Translations are also from this edition.

[32]Deinde praecinctus spiritalibus armis adversus teterrimi hostis insidias scutum Jidei, loricam spei, galeam castitatis, arcum patientiae, sagittas psalmodiae, sese in aciem firmans, arripuit. Tantae enim fiduciae erat, ut inter torridas tartari turmas sese contemto hoste iniecerit. (90, XXVII) [Then, girding himself with spiritual arms against the wiles

Beowulf's willingness and eagerness to act against Grendel's mother, to seek her out alone, the use of malevolent terms to describe her, and her association with the more explicitly demonic Grendel, may have resonated not only with secular legend, but with stories of saints preparing to battle demonic foes in tombs and other remote landscapes.[33]

If such parallels did resonate, they may further support recent arguments that view Beowulf as a righteous avenger of God.[34] Moreover, the moralising in Hrothgar's "sermon" that follows Beowulf's victory over Grendel's mother (ll. 1700–84) suggests that the poet did expect his audience to pause and reconsider Beowulf's actions along hagiographic (or at least Christian) lines.[35] Yet, if the poet did consciously employ this motif from hagiographic tradition, it is complicated by the knowledge that Beowulf eagerly seeks out Grendel's mother in order to avenge her killing of Æschere rather than specifically to cleanse a space of monstrous or demonic foes, or to reclaim a space for human habitation. Unlike potential saintly exemplars, Beowulf's motivations are bound by earthly concerns and the demands of societal customs—the latent dangers of which are stressed in Hrothgar's "sermon". Whether or not we infer from this disparity that the poet intended to throw into relief potential shortcomings, or faults, in Beowulf's character (and by extension, the world he inhabits), it seems plausible at the very least that the poet borrowed this popular motif from hagiography—a saint eagerly seeking out remote places inhabited by demons—, aware of the disharmonious chord it could strike, to create an engaging, dynamic, and entertaining story.[36] Our own division today between saint and secular hero may not have been so starkly delineated, as suggested by the copying of *Beowulf* alongside the *Life of St Christopher* and *Judith* as well as secular heroes in the Nowell Codex. It should not be ruled out that the ambivalence generated by the employment of hagiographic motifs in conjunction with Germanic tropes probably contributed to the poem's artistic and narrative appeal.[37]

2. A saint in an enclosed space is attacked from without by an antagonist, followed by some form of physical and/or verbal struggle

The poet's continued employment of hagiographic motifs during Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother functions to deeping the ambivalence in this episode. Without denying the widely held view that a variant of the "Two-Troll" folktale lies behind

of the foul foe, he took the shield of faith, the breastplate of hope, the helmet of chastity, the bow of patience, the arrows of psalmody, making himself strong for the fight. So great in fact was his confidence that, despising the foe, he hurled himself against the torrid troops of Tartarus.] (*Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac*, 91, XXVII).

[33]This hagiographic parallel may have also resonated when Beowulf seeks out the dragon, and in his eagerness to battle Grendel. The Old English reimaging of the desert as the marshy fens for the dwelling place of demons further strengthens potential resonances and has been noted before (see Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, 80). See also works in fn. 30.

[34]See especially Leneghan, "The Wrath of God."

[35]See, for example, Anlezark, *Water and Fire*; Eric Stanley, *Beowulf: In the Foreground* and Orchard, *Critical Companion*. Although scholars have sometimes argued that this passage is an interpolation (see Michael Lapidge, "Archetype of *Beowulf*"), for a recent defense of its integrity, see Neidorf, "The Language of Hrothgar's Sermon."

[36]For discussions on whether the poem critiques Beowulf's actions and the heroic world, see Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, and Scott Gwara, *Heroic Identity*. By contrast, for a recent study which sees Beowulf as a faultless hero, see Neidorf, *The Art and Thought of the Beowulf Poet*.

[37]That *Beowulf* in turn was used by later writers has generated much discussion: for example, see Richard North and Michael Bintley's "Introduction" to *Andreas: An Edition*, and Andy Orchard's chapter, "Both Style and Substance: The Case for Cynewulf" in *Anglo-Saxon Styles*, 271–306. The *Beowulf* poet's use of hagiographic motifs may have been noted and adapted by later writers of hagiographic verse.

Beowulf's first two monster battles, it is possible—and, I shall argue, probable—that the *Beowulf*-poet also utilised hagiographic motifs, consciously or unconsciously.[38]

The close parallels between Beowulf's first two fights and the common "Two-Troll" folktale are well noted, especially as the tale manifests in the Sandhaugar episode of *Grettis saga* (chapters 64–66).[39] There are distinctions, of course, and no analogue is an exact parallel: in the Sandhaugar episode, a female rather than a male troll is the aggressor who first attacks the hall before escaping into a waterfall. Later, Grettir discovers a male troll in a cave behind the waterfall, who subsequently attacks Grettir first (unlike Beowulf, who attacks Grendel's mother first, once in her cave). Within iterations of this common folktale, there appears to be no exact parallel for the hero consciously intent upon battling a *female* troll in an underwater cave; moreover, once in the cave, the adversary is often the one to strike the first blow.[40] In *Beowulf*, by contrast, we are made aware of Grendel's mother's gender and that she resembles a woman in appearance (*ides āglæcwīf*, "a lady, female agitator": l. 1259a).[41] Beowulf's hostile intent is also clearly relayed.[42] In Beowulf's descent to Grendel's mere, then, we see our protagonist potentially slip from saint-like figure who has defended and cleansed a haunted building, to the role of an aggressor intent on assaulting, female occupant of a circumscribed space. Moreover, it is clear that Grendel's mother regards Beowulf's actions as an intrusion:

Sona þæt onfunde	se ðe floda begong
heorogifre beheold	hund missera,
grim ond grædig,	þæt þær gumena sum
ælwihta eard	ufan cunnode. (ll. 1497–1500)

[Immediately she perceived, she who held that expanse of water, fiercely ravenous,
for a hundred half-years, grim and greedy, that some man was exploring
that alien home from above.]

In addition to a familiarity with folktales akin to the "Two-Troll" tradition, it is not unreasonable that some members of a Christian audience, in particular those well-versed in hagiography, may well have been alert to resonances with this common motif in female martyr lives: the female saint, imprisoned, is attacked from without by a hostile male aggressor.

Examples of this motif are widespread in Latin and Old English female martyr lives. A representative example is found in the *Vita S. Agneti* (BHL 156), a fifth-century passion narrative, a version of which was known to Bede, Aldhelm, and Ælfric.[43] In Ælfric's tenth-century Old English translation, Agnes's would-be suitor attempts to enter the

[38]On folktale analogues to Beowulf's first two monster fights see *Klaeber's Beowulf* (3rd edition), xiii–xxi; Shippey, "The Fairy-Tale Structure of Beowulf"; Stitt, *Beowulf and the Bear's Son*; Anderson, "Sources and Analogues"; and Fjalldal, "*Beowulf* and the Old Norse Two-Troll Analogues."

[39]For an outline of these parallels see Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 111–13, and for a recent reassessment of the parallels, and further evidence of links between the two works, see Richard North, *Beowulf and Grettis Saga*.

[40]In *Samsons saga fagra* (c. 1300; chapters 3, 7–8), Samson, while standing at the edge of a waterfall is grabbed by a she-troll and, as they grapple, they sink to the bottom whereupon she attempts to tie him with ropes. In *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar* (c. 1300; chapters 6–9), Ormr enters Brúsi's cave (a male troll) and is attacked by his mother, a she-cat.

[41]See also ll. 1349b–51a.

[42]See ll. 1383–96.

[43]For an overview of the circulation of Agnes' passion narrative in early medieval England, see "Agnes", in Frederick M. Biggs et al, *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture,* 57–9. See also Phillips, "St Agnes of Rome: A Review of the Latin Sources Employed for her Entry in the *Old English Martyrology*." 177–81. On the cult of Agnes in early medieval England see McDaniel, "Agnes among the Anglo-Saxons," 217–48. See also Bethurum, "The Form of Ælfric's Saints' Lives." Agnes appears in Aldhelm's *De virginitate*, Bede's *Martyrology*, the *Old English Martyrology*, and in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*.

brothel, within which she is imprisoned (and which she had cleansed and converted into a house of prayer). He is immediately struck down:

> Arn þa him sylf inn mid sceandlicum willan.
> ac he feol astreht, ætforan þam mædene adyd.
> þurh ðone deofol þe he dwollice gehyrsumede (ll. 170–3)[44]
>
> [Then he ran in himself, with shameful intent, but he fell prostrate in front of that girl, struck down by the devil who he foolishly obeyed.]

Agnes reiterates to the young man's father that the cause of his son's death was his aggressive and sexual intent, rather than any *dry-cræft* ("sorcery") (l. 183) on her part:

> þin sceamleasa sunu mid sceandlicum anginne.
> arn into me, ac se encgel hine afylde.
> and ðam deofle betæhte þe hine adydde þær-rihte.
>
> [your shameless son with shameful intent ran towards me, but the angel felled him and handed him to the devil, who killed him straightaway] (ll. 189–91).

Although the *Beowulf*-poet is not explicit in conveying sexual aggression during Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother, the implicit suggestion of sexual union, aggression, or play has been much discussed: attentive audiences, alert to the potential hagiographic resonance just outlined, may have been primed to expect the sexual language and imagery which has been detected during their ensuing fight.[45] Moreover, if this hagiographic motif did resonate, it may have functioned to maintain narrative engagement: the dialogue between popular elements from distinct literary traditions (folklore and hagiography) functions to revitalise tropes that may have, in other contexts, appeared predictable. Indeed, the poet quickly turns this motif on its head as Grendel's mother, perceiving an intruder, snatches him and drags him down into her hall—unlike female saints, who are typically passive and protected by God, Grendel's mother is here the active agent.[46] As soon as Beowulf enters her cave, hagiographic expectations continue to be subverted: Grendel's mother is as eager as Beowulf to partake in physical aggression. Just as she seems to invert the social expectations associated with the roles of mothers and women in the poem, so too does she immediately subvert the expectations of chastity and passivity associated with female martyr saints.[47] By drawing on both

[44]References to *Agnes* are from Mary Clayton, and Juliet Mullins, eds. and trans. "Agnes" in *Old English Lives of Saints, Vol. I: Ælfric*. vol. 1 p. 230. The Latin is similar although Ælfric has abbreviated to sharpen the antagonist's sinful intent: Et irridens eos, locum, in quo Virgo orabat, audacter ingressus est. Et videns tantum lumen circa eam, non dedit honorem Deo: sed irruens in ipsum lumen, priusquam vel manu eam contingeret, cecidit in faciem suam, & præfocatus a diabolo, expirauit ("and, mocking them, he boldly entered the place where the virgin was praying. And seeing much light around her, he did not honour God but hastening into the light, before he could touch her with his hand, he fell down, and having been struck by the devil, died") ("Vita S. agnetis", auctore S. ambrosio, *Acta sanctorum volume 2: Jan. II* (Antwerp: Society of Bollandists 1643), pp. 351–4, chp. 9). In Aldhelm's late-seventh/early eighth-century *De virginitate*, Agnes' suitor also attempts to enter the brothel and is struck down dead (although as Phillips notes, in Aldhelm's versions he is struck down by the blade of celestial anger, rather than the devil: "St Agnes of Rome", p. 179, fn. 10).

[45]Gwendolyn A. Morgan notes that unlike female saints, Grendel's mother embodies concupiscence rather than chastity ("Mothers, Monsters, Maturation", p. 58): she does not consider how hagiographic motifs may be employed or flipped. On a similar reversal of roles in *Judith* (sexual predator and passive victim), see Nitzsche, "The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*." For recent discussions of the sexual overtones apparent in Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother, see Vowell "Grendel's Mother" and Xu "Grendel's Lupine Mother."

[46]Not all female saints are passive, although their agency is typically rooted in following God's orders: see below. Grendel's mother's act of snatching Beowulf is also similar to Guthlac's demons taking hold of him and bringing him to hell, and to certain Old Norse analogues (see fn. 40 above).

[47]See Nitzsche, "The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*"; for a discussion of certain exceptions, see below.

Germanic and hagiographic material, the poet is able to create suspense and tension in his narrative by casting Grendel's mother—momentarily—in the role of heroine and Beowulf as aggressor. By bringing these two contradictory yet familiar narrative threads together,[48] the *Beowulf*-poet denies any easy assignation to Grendel's mother. Her characterisation as concurrently human, non-human, aggressor, and victim is sharpened by the employment of these two narratives, ultimately serving to further Beowulf's extraordinary status as a hero *sans exemple*: his ability to overcome an enemy inexplicable not only within the narrative of the poem, but across contemporary narrative traditions outside the poem ensures Beowulf's diegetic (and possibly extra-diegetic) legacy. At the very least, recognition of the motif of a female saint being attacked by an (always unsuccessful) aggressor in *Beowulf* may have signalled to an audience that Beowulf would soon be confronted with a particularly challenging struggle.

Not all female saints are physically passive, however, and as Beowulf begins his fight with Grendel's mother, the poet may have drawn on further hagiographic conflicts, once again positioning Beowulf in the role of saintly hero or agent of God. Two female saints' lives, and one Biblical narrative, are relevant here: each describes the actions of violent *fæmnan*. The Old English *Life of St Margaret* includes a violent episode containing elements that are remarkably similar to Beowulf's fight against Grendel's mother. Unlike many other Old English female martyr saints' lives, Margaret's aggressors are demonic. Moreover, where saints do vanquish dragons and demons, they often use the power of the word of God, rather than their fists.[49] Not so with Margaret. Following the *Life of St Anthony*, Margaret first defeats a dragon which appears in her cell; as with Beowulf, she then must contend with a second demon in quick succession. This second demon is associated with the sin of lust (in a potential resonance with *Beowulf*) and, as with Grendel's mother, is in a more recognisably human form.[50] In the shape of a man, this demon appears in Margaret's cell and grabs her hand, upon which:

> Se halga Margareta *gegrap þa deofol be þæm locce* and *hine on eorþan awearp* and his swyþran ege ut astang, and ealle his ban heo gebrysde and sette hire swiþran fott ofer his swyre.[51] (p. 362, c. 21)
>
> [The holy Margaret *seized the devil by the hair* and *threw him to the ground* and struck out his right eye, and she broke all his bones and placed her right foot on his throat] (emphasis added)

Resonances with *Beowulf* are clear: when Beowulf's sword fails him, he once again relies on his physical strength:

[48] A hero seeking out a non-human foe in order to destroy them and reassert order; and an antagonist intruding upon a female saint intending to enact bodily violence, only for the saint to establish a new order.

[49] This belief in the power of the word of God is a commonplace of hagiography and Christian thinking more generally: see, for example, Horner "Gender, Humor and Discourse," and Bjork's *The Old English Verse Saints' Lives*.

[50] Unlike in *Beowulf*, the connection between the demon and the sin of lust is made explicit in *Margaret*, clearly drawing upon the *Life of St Anthony*.

[51] All references to the Old English *The Passion of St Margaret* are to the eleventh-century Cotton Tiberius A iii version and are taken from Johanna Kramer, Hugh Magennis and Robin Norris (eds. and trans), "Saint Margaret' in *Anonymous Old English Lives of Saints*, 351–78. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. The Old English follows the Latin here, although Margaret is presented as more violent in the Old English than in the Latin source. On the transmission of Margaret's lives in England, on the potential Latin sources, and for editions of the Latin, see Clayton and Magennis, eds., *The Old English Lives of Saint Margaret*.

Gefeng þa be feaxe (nalas for fæhðe mearn)
Guð-Geata leod Grendles modor;
brægd þa beadwe heard, þa he gebolgen wæs,
feorhgeniðlan, þæt heo on flet gebeah. (ll. 1537–40)

[The man of the War-Geats *grabbed* Grendel's mother *by the hair*—he had no regret for that feud; battle-hardened, enraged, he swung her around, his deadly foe, *so she fell to the ground*.] (emphasis added)

Following the emendation of *eaxle* ("shoulder") to *feaxe* ("hair") adopted by most editors,[52] both narratives relay how the protagonist grabs a demon or demon-like opponent by the hair in order to swing them, or throw them, to the ground. Rather than being an "ungentlemanlike" action, pulling Grendel's mother's hair may once more align Beowulf with saintly action, this time female saintly action:[53] physically grabbing demonic enemies seems to have been largely the preserve of female saints.[54] In Cynewulf's *Juliana*, for example, just as the text breaks off in the manuscript, the saint, imprisoned in a cell and instructed by God, *þæt deofol genom* ("grabbed that devil", l. 288b), in order to force it to reveal its true nature and to confess its sins.[55] The devil itself is described by Cynewulf in terms similar to Grendel: *wræcca wærleas* ("faithless wretched one", l. 351a) and *earm aglæca* ("wretched fierce opponent" l. 429a).[56] Although Cynewulf's works are typically dated after *Beowulf*, the Latin source, identified by Michael Lapidge as the *passio S. Iulianae*, includes this example of Juliana grabbing the devil and was widely known in England from ca. 700 onwards.[57] It is not improbable that the *Beowulf*-poet, and perhaps the poem's audience, were familiar with Juliana's narrative. Judith, of course, is the ultimate heroine who grasps her—very human—foe by the hair before beheading him. Although the Old English *Judith* post-dates *Beowulf*, it is possible the poet was familiar with the Vulgate Book of Judith, which also includes the detail of Judith grasping Holofernes by the hair.[58] Beowulf's grabbing of both Grendel's mother and Grendel may have stronger hagiographical resonances that previously acknowledged. Moreover, such physical acts of female saintly violence are unusual enough that they warranted comment within both narratives: the demonic victims of Margaret and Juliana both marvel at the saints' actions precisely because of their gender. Such remarkable (seemingly gendered) behaviour for a saint perhaps rendered such narrative moments more memorable. Once more, then, the *Beowulf*-poet shifts the narrative ground. In grabbing Grendel's mother by the hair, Beowulf's alignment with saintly action is reinscribed, and Grendel's mother's designation as the enemy is similarly reasserted—yet, the reversal of gender roles (as witnessed in hagiography), maintains the ambivalence of this episode, as well

[52]Stanley, "Did Beowulf Commit *Feaxfeng* Against Grendel's Mother?" 232–3.
[53]Stanley, "Did Beowulf Commit *Feaxfeng*," 233. Grendel's head is also later "*be feaxe | on flet boren*" ("dragged by the hair across the hall floor", l. 1647) by the Geats.
[54]Saint Dunstan grasps a demon's nose with hot tongs: this episode seems to have been introduced in Osbern's late eleventh-century Latin *Vita S. Dunstani* (*BHL* 2344) and is not recorded in his source material dating from the late-tenth century (M. Winterbottom and Michael Lapidge, *The Early Lives of Saint Dunstan*, p. cliii).
[55]She later seizes the demon, binds it, and drags it: ll. 534b–36a.
[56]Paul Cavill discusses many similarities between the presentation of Grendel and the demons and antagonists in *Juliana* in "Christianity and Theology in *Beowulf*."
[57]Lapidge, "Cynewulf and the *Passio S. Iulianae*," 147–71. Cynewulf's works are generally dated between the mid-eighth and late tenth centuries (see Bjork, *The Old English Poems of Cynewulf*, x).
[58]Book of Judith, 13: 9. The Old English *Judith* is now generally dated the late tenth century. See the introduction to Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*.

as narrative intrigue. Indeed, the much-discussed use of masculine pronouns and nouns for Grendel's mother (and the intentional ambiguity engendered by this use) lends support to the notion that the poet was interested in repeatedly inverting typically gendered roles for narrative effect.[59]

The Latin *passio Margaretae* circulated in England too late to be a source for *Beowulf*, yet its striking parallel with Beowulf's act of hair-pulling means that it ought to be acknowledged as an analogue for Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother: it provides an indication of the types of hagiographic narratives arguably available to the poet. The narrative motif of a saint battling a dragon, followed by a demon in human form is clearly derivative of the *Life of St Anthony*, but the hair-pulling appears to be particular to *Margaret*. Moreover, the presentation of Margaret's second demonic foe as a demon of lust (as with Anthony's) again finds some resonance in the sexual undertones between Beowulf and Grendel's mother. Margaret was exceptionally popular from around the ninth century in England, meaning that later audiences of *Beowulf* may well have picked up on this parallel. While Margaret successfully tramples her demon, in the manner of Christ trampling serpents, Grendel's mother once again comes out on top in *Beowulf*: but not for long.

3. A saint requires divine aid to strengthen their will

Weary (*werigmod*, l. 1543a) with fighting, and finding Grendel's mother sitting on top of him (*ofsæt þā þone selegyst*, "then she sat on the hall-guest", l. 1545a), Beowulf appears momentarily defeated, until his armoured shirt and God come to his aid:

Hæfde ða forsiðod	sunu Ecgþeowes
under gynne grund,	Geata cempa,
nemne him heaðobyrne	helpe gefremede,
herenet hearde,	*ond halig god*
geweold wigsigor;	*witig drihten,*
rodera rædend,	hit on ryht gesced
yðelice,	syþðan he eft astod. (ll. 1550–56)

[There the son of Ecgtheow would have ended his life under the wide ground, the Geatish champion, had not his armoured shirt offered him help, the hard battle-net, *and holy God brought about war-victory—the wise Lord, Ruler of heavens, decided it rightly, easily, once he stood up again*] (emphasis added)

Paul Cavill has drawn attention to these lines, arguing that the poet quite clearly presents Beowulf's ability to resume fighting, and to win, as granted by God.[60] Saints requiring the aid of God to fortify them in their spiritual, and at times physical, struggles against demonic, or human, enemies is a hagiographic convention, one that is unlikely to have gone unnoticed by the audience.[61] In the *Life of St Anthony*, for example, when the saint is physically beaten by demons but, like Beowulf, remains firm in his determination to conquer them, *non oblitus Iesus colluctationis serui sui, eidem protector est factus* (p. 123) ("Jesus was not forgetful of his servant's struggle, but became his protector"). Juliana, in both the Latin *passio* and Cynewulf's Old English poem, actively calls to God to strengthen

[59]Examples of masculine pronouns can be found in lines 1497b as quoted above, ll. 1392–4. The use of masculine nouns and pronouns for Grendel's mother is much discussed: for an example see Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster" and Renée Trilling, "Beyond Abjection."
[60]Cavill, "Christianity and Theology in Beowulf," esp. 17–18. See also Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster," 509.
[61]In doing so, saints are acting in *imitatio Christi*: see for example Christ calling to God, Luke 22.43.

her mind when the devil appears in the guise of an angel.[62] In receiving aid from God (whether explicitly asked for or not), Beowulf is thus once more aligned with saintly figures, supporting an interpretation of his actions as righteous—which is, potentially, undercut by his subsequent beheading of Grendel's mother.

4. The saint is beheaded, and the saint's body and/or head is revered as a relic OR the saint's head is brought to heaven by an angelic host

Beowulf's decapitation of both Grendel and Grendel's mother has received sustained critical attention, as has his decision to only bring back Grendel's head to Heorot:[63]

He gefeng þa fetelhilt,	freca Scyldinga
hreoh ond heorogrim	hringmæl gebrægd,
aldres orwena,	yrringa sloh,
þæt hire wið halse	*heard grapode,*
banhringas bræc.	Bil eal ðurhwod
fægne flæschoman	(ll. 1563–8)

[The Scyldings' champion seized its linked hilt, fierce and ferocious, drew the ring-marked sword despairing of his life, *struck in fury so that it caught her hard in the neck, broke her bone-rings*; the blade cut through the doomed flesh] (emphasis added)

While Grendel's head is presented as a bloody trophy and Æschere's head is intended as a warning to the men of Heorot, given the hagiographic motifs identified thus far, Grendel's mother's decapitation is more ambivalent, not least as it is left unremarked upon by the poet.[64] Her death perhaps reads more akin to martyrdom: it is possible that an audience may have registered the similarity between Grendel's mother's death and numerous female martyr saints. In the *Passion of St Margaret*, for example, *se cwylra þa mid gefyrhto genam his swurd and hire heafod of asloh* ("the executioner then took his sword and struck off her head", p. 374, c. 45). Just as with Judith's decapitation of Holofernes, a number of clear inversions unsettle Beowulf's act: unlike female martyr accounts, Grendel's mother is not presented as desiring martyrdom, nor does she receive assurance from God that she will be rewarded. Such ironic inversions support a reading of her as a demonic foe (as they do Holofernes), yet they also continue to disrupt a straightforward presentation of Beowulf. Unlike Grendel's head, hers is not enjoyed as a trophy (itself an ironic inversion of relic worship) or carried to heaven by an angelic envoy, but is immediately forgotten, its absence in the narrative perhaps a reminder of the enigmatic presentation of Beowulf as both defender and aggressor.

5. A heavenly light appears as a sign of the saint's victory

After Beowulf kills Grendel's mother, the hagiographic resonances continue as a bright light infuses her cave:

[62]For the *Passio* see Lapidge, "Cynewulf and the *Passio S. Iulianae*," 156–65, at p. 159. For the Old English, see ll. 272–282a in Cynewulf's *Juliana* (in Robert E. Bjork's *The Old English Poems of Cynewulf*).

[63]On decapitation in *Beowulf* see Brodeur, *The Art of "Beowulf"*; Godfrey, "*Beowulf* and *Judith*"; Owen-Crocker, "Horror in *Beowulf*," 81–100; Appleton, "The Role of Æschere's Head"; Thijs Porck and Sander Stolk, "Marking Boundaries in *Beowulf*"; and Leneghan, "Dishonouring the Dead".

[64]We learn (more explicitly) that Beowulf beheaded Grendel's mother when he recounts his actions to Hygelac: "ic heafde becearf" ("I severed the head"), l. 2138b. Whether Beowulf is amending or embellishing his deeds is another matter.

heo on flet gecrong.
Sweord wæs swatig, secg weorce gefeh.
Lixte se leoma, *leoht inne stod,*
efne swa of hefene hadre scineð
rodores candel. (ll. 1568b–72a)

[she fell to the floor, the sword was bloody, the soldier rejoiced. The flames gleamed,
a light glowed within even as from heaven the firmament's candle shines clearly] (emphasis added)

Light as a heavenly signal of victory is a common hagiographic motif, further inflecting how we read Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother.[65] Anthony, after being assaulted by demons, remains fearless and is rewarded with a "beam of light" coming down to him, banishing the demons—God tells him he waited to test Anthony's resolve; now his fame will be known everywhere:[66]

> Antonius flagellatus atque confossus, sentiebat quidem asperiores corporis dolores, *sed interritus durabat mente peruigili* [...] Multa contra S. Antonium minitantes, fremebant dentibus suis, quod nullus eorum tentamenta consequeretur effectus [...] Non oblitus Iesus colluctationis serui sui, eidem protector est factus. *Denique cum eleuaret oculos, vidit desuper culmen aperiri, & deductis tenebris, radium ad se lucis influere.* Post cuius splendoris aduentum nec dæmonum aliquis apparuit, & corporis dolor extemplo deletus est.
>
> [Antony, scourged and pierced by them, felt even severer pain in his body; *yet he endured fearless with an alert mind* [...] They threatened many things against Saint Anthony, and gnashed their teeth, because none of their temptations would yield results [...] Jesus was not forgetful of his servant's struggle, but became his protector. *When he [Anthony] raised his eyes, he saw the roof above him opening, and darkness dispelled and a beam of light flowed to him.* After the arrival of this brightness, the none of the demons appeared, and the pain in his body was destroyed] (emphasis added)

Similarly, when being manhandled by demons, Guthlac is also saved by a dazzling light in the dark, this time in the shape of St Bartholomew:

> Illis vero veluti ad trudendum ilium in praesentium tormentorum gehennas sese praecingentibus, *ecce sanctus Bartholomaeus cum inmenso caelestis lucis splendore medias furvae noctis infuso lumine interrumpens tenebras* (XXXII, p. 106)
>
> [Indeed just as they were preparing themselves as if to thrust him into hell and instant tortures, lo! *St Bartholomew in boundless splendour of heavenly light broke into the midst of the swarthy darkness of night with outpoured radiance*] (emphasis added)

Saint Margaret, after she pummels the demon of lust and declares her faith in Christ, is also rewarded with a bright light penetrating her cell:

> And mid þy þe heo þus cwæþ, *þær scan swiþe micel leoht on þæm þystran quarterne* and Cristes rode wæs gesewen fram eorþan up oþþe heofen
>
> [And when she had said this, *a bright light shone in the dark prison* and the cross of Christ appeared reaching from earth up to heaven] (p. 362, c. 22) (emphasis added)

[65]There are also references to bright light signaling, or allowing for, victory in Germanic legends: þorsteins þáttr uxafots (c. 1300), chs. 10–11; Samsons saga fagra (c. 1300) chs. 3, 7–8; Gullorá og Skeggi, a trope perhaps borrowed from hagiography.

[66]Goldsmith has noted this parallel with *Beowulf* before (*Mode and Meaning*, p. 89, p. 261), and Hennequin notes that the light returning after her death may signal her evil nature, although she does not mention hagiographic connections ("We've Created a Monster," 512–3).

As the culmination of the hagiographic motifs mentioned thus far, it would be surprising if an audience did not take note of this heavenly signal of Beowulf's victory.

Conclusion

By continuing a hagiographic line of enquiry, this article has revealed how new insights into the poet's artistry can be garnered. If the poet did use such motifs consciously, they have a less than straightforward application. Yet, such ambivalence is very much in keeping with the poet's enigmatic presentation of Beowulf and Grendel's mother in this episode. The motifs listed above serve the poet's purpose of presenting Beowulf's dual roles: he is both attacker, intruder of the mere and defender of Heorot; he is the righteous arm of God yet he physically battles and kills a woman (although he struggles to do so). Grendel's mother is arguably justified in avenging her son and is also invested with motherly sorrow and anguish at his death. Yet, she also keeps the feud alive and is marked out by the poet as a fierce antagonist by the terms used to describe her and through her association with Grendel. Certainly, in terms of manuscript context we can assume an audience thoroughly acquainted with hagiography: for them, the motifs outlined above may have seemed more potent.[67] It would be wrongheaded to posit that in using hagiographic motifs the poet was attempting to cast Beowulf (or indeed, Grendel's mother) as a saint. Rather, this article suggests that the *Beowulf*-poet employed popular motifs not only from Germanic legend and folktale, but also from hagiographic narratives, often in surprising ways. This coalescing of the poet's literary heritage creates anticipation and subverts expectations to produce a narrative in which neither strand emerges as dominant, but rather the intrigue is found in their latent dialogue, and what remains unsaid.

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[67] On the intentional unity of religious and heroic literature in the Nowell Codex see, S. C. Thomson, *Communal Creativity*. That *Beowulf* seems to have been used by later writers of verse hagiography (Cynewulf and the *Andreas*-poet for example) supports a reading that contemporary and later audiences of *Beowulf* may have been attuned to the hagiographic motifs employed in *Beowulf*. See also fn. 37 above.

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