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Elemental intimacies: agency in the Finnsburg episode

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Beowulf – both the poem and its eponymous hero – is inextricable from the monsters that structure its plot. The young Beowulf fights the *mearcstapa* (border-stepper) Grendel in the hall at Heorot; after the creature's mother attacks in an uncomfortably human scene of revenge, he travels to her watery abode. There, Beowulf kills Grendel's mother with a sword made by giants and returns with Grendel's head to prove his victory. Later, when he is an old man, Beowulf will fight one more monster – a dragon – and that fight ends his life. Indeed, for all that scholarly readings of the poem have pushed back against this perception, *Beowulf* is inextricably identified with the monsters that form the core of its heroic action. And yet interspersed between these larger scenes, the poem subtly deploys other stories – often called 'digressions' – that, while diverging from the main action of the poem, serve to highlight its themes and structure.

One of the most moving of these digressions occurs between Beowulf's initial fight with Grendel and the creature's mother's attack. Hildeburh, a queen who has married outside of her own kin group in order to secure peace between Frisians and Healf-Denes, witnesses the breakdown of the peace that her marriage was supposed to ensure. In one of the most striking moments in this striking narrative, Hildeburh sets her own deceased son ('selfre sunu') (1115a) on her brother Hnæf's funeral pyre, 'banfatu bærnan, ond on bæl don / eame on eaxle' (to burn the bone vessel, and give to the fire, his uncle at his shoulder) (1116–17a).[1] As a number of critics have remarked, it is the only active moment that Hildeburh has in the poem: unable to otherwise remedy the violence she witnesses, she orders that her son's body be burned. After the momentary command, her actions change dramatically: 'ides gnornode, / geomrode giddum' (the lady mourned, mourned with songs) (1117b–1118a). Both descriptions – Hildeburh's command

('hatan') to burn her son on the pyre next to her brother and the observation that she mourns ('gnornian') with songs – are ultimately connected to mourning and its attendant work. Hildeburh, despite her prominence in the conflict between the Healf-Denes and the Frisians, takes her only real actions when she stands before the pyre. Even here, the actions she does take highlight her utter lack of power. She commands that the pyre burn her son and brother, but she has no agency in the conflict that brought them to the pyre, nor can she change the fate of either her family of origin or the family she produced in Frisia.

Yet if we focus our readerly attention differently in this digression – which is traditionally known as the 'Finnsburg episode'[2] – the scene of the funeral pyre highlights more than Hildeburh's brief moment of agency. Rather, the poem stresses the insistent agency of the elements that come together on the funeral pyre. In a description as moving as it is ghastly, the poem describes the scene: 'Hafelan multon, / bengeato burston ðonne blod ætspranc /, laðbite lices; lig ealle forswealg, / gæsta gifrost þara ðe þær guð fornam / bega folces' (The heads melted, wound-gates burst, and then blood sprang forth from the hateful-bites of the body. The flame swallowed [it] all up, that greediest of ghosts, all of those ones that battle seized from both of the peoples) (1120b–1124a). The scene of the funeral pyre emphasizes bodies reduced to objects that can be broken and consumed by the fire. The central words of the passage are 'gæsta gifrost' (greediest of ghosts), a personification that refers to the flames themselves. Implicitly, the use of the term 'gæsta gifrost' posits spirits that animate the element of fire, which accords with the *Dictionary of Old English* definition of the term *gast*.[3] On the one hand, this is clearly a poetic technique, part of the sheer beauty of this haunting moment in the poem. On the other hand – what if we took this moment of personification more seriously? What would it mean if the fire were itself an actant in the poem, creating its own kind of community – or more appropriately, collectivity – out of the failure of human beings to do the same?[4]

This chapter re-reads the Finnsburg episode of *Beowulf* as a monument both to the failure of human community and to the human interconnection with outside forces (both human and non-human) that presage and condition that failure.[5] Throughout the episode, we encounter scenes that foreground certain kinds of objects, such as lifeless human bodies and the gold meant to ensure that such corpses will be forgotten. However, the poem also foregrounds the ability of narratives, when circulated, to change the reception

of both corpses and treasure.[6] The interrelationship between the bodies of the dead and the stories told about them creates a configuration of influence and agency larger than any singular human agent or intent. Put another way: this reading of the episode suggests that sometimes the poem can know what its characters cannot – that the kinds of connections, interrelations, and even losses that are the premise of human community also condition its eventual demise.

In order to make these connections, I will utilize Actor-Network theory (hereafter, ANT). By taking a complex structure – in this case, a society – and understanding it as a 'heterogeneous system',[7] ANT posits the interrelations and interdependencies of what might otherwise be understood as independent entities; consequently, 'there is no reason to assume, *a priori*, that *either* objects *or* people in general determine the character of social change or stability'.[8] By reorienting the presumed subject of analysis and granting that objects can, in certain senses and situations, have agency, ANT breaks down artificial bifurcations between the 'social' world and the 'natural' world. By deploying ANT analyses, the attentive reader can therefore better understand how non-human agents might have clear effects on the world formerly understood to include only human agents. In the case of the Finnsburg episode, ANT allows us to reconceptualize the types of groups that the poem describes. By paying special attention to the elemental intimacies of Hildeburh's plight, we can recover some of the enmeshments that condition social life – enmeshments that exceed the purely human relationships so often privileged in *Beowulf* criticism.[9] In so doing, this also allows us to recover Hildeburh's fuller context, beyond her loss of agency and beyond her mourning.

A short summary of the Finnsburg episode serves to contextualize my analysis, and to place it within the larger frame of studies of peace-weaving marriages and feud culture. By peace-weaving marriages, I refer to those marriages meant to secure political alliances with former enemies; such marriages were integral to feud culture.[10] Regardless of whether early England was a place of endemic feuding, there can be little doubt that *Beowulf* as a poem is particularly interested in the stakes of revenge-based aggression, and nowhere is that theme so prominent as in the Finnsburg episode.[11] After an unprovoked attack in which a group of Frisians (Hildeburh's family-in-law) attack the Healf-Denes (her family of origin), Hildeburh's brother Hnæf is among the dead. Her son has also died, and Hildeburh orders him placed on the pyre beside her brother, consigning them both to the fire as a measure of her grief as well as an

indication of her power as queen. Because the winter has trapped the Healf-Denes in the Frisian court, Hildeburh's husband Finn (the Frisian leader) offers a place at his hall for the fugitive Healf-Denes for the duration of the long season. He promises that he will treat both Frisian and Healf-Dene equally, and from the poem's report he very much does so, as he distributes treasure to Hengest's men 'efne swa swiðe' (just as often) (1092a) as he does to his own.[12]

These rings are meant to bind together a community. Although the poem makes clear that Hengest (the leader of the Healf-Denes after the death of Hildeburh's brother) is already thinking about revenge, we have reason to believe that this network of Frisians and Healf-Denes might still hold together; however, Oslaf and Guðlaf, two of the Healf-Dene retainers, speak of the battle that took the lives of their kin, and as a result, the enmity between the Frisians and the Healf-Denes resumes. The story ends with Hildeburh mourning the death of her husband and being returned to her people by Hengest. That Hildeburh herself is accorded object-like status at the close of the episode is unsurprising. However, her role in the poem provides the episode's first indication that its interest is larger than the realm of human beings. The connection between humans and the objects they putatively use has a devastating effect on the feeble attempt made to mend a community rent by violence.

One core difference between my approach here and other readings of the Finnsburg episode is my framing of Hildeburh. Most readings of the narrative suggest that Hildeburh's most important attribute is as a 'freoðuwebbe' or peace-weaver: her role is to secure peace between rival kingdoms through marriage, but it is also doomed to failure in a way that highlights her lack of agency in the episode itself.[13] As a result, Hildeburh's actions in the poem run the risk of being interpreted as a stereotype of Old English poetic narrative, reinforcing the idea that women are always 'potentially, if not actually, the victim'.[14] Although there are multiple ways in which critics have rehabilitated Hildeburh's actions in the poem, the most crucial is by examining her role as a woman who mourns. Joyce Hill (although she does not think Hildeburh's agency is restored in what she calls 'the viewpoint of "story"') suggests that the poem reveals Hildeburh's centrality to the episode through the 'sophistication' of its response to marginalizing legendary materials. Moreover, she argues that the poet creates 'a position of ethical and imaginative importance' for the mourning queen as she puts her son and her brother on the same funeral pyre.[15] Helen Bennett extends Hill's

point to examine the figure of the female mourner in *Beowulf*, a figure that she deems both 'strong and enduring', inhabiting an active rather than a passive role.[16] Although I broadly agree that reading Hildeburh as passive ignores the very real import of the actions she *does* take, my goal in reading her as a figure of reduced agency is not quite so straightforward. Although her lack of agency is partially the result of her being a woman in a patriarchal culture, I would argue that its significance is as a limit case of the poem's ongoing negotiation of the limits of human agency per se. Her lack of agency, along with that of other characters in the poem, is the result of human imbrication with agentic forces that exceed both their knowledge and their power to control.

The Finnsburg episode, appropriately, begins with the queen herself, suggesting that 'ne huru Hildeburh herian þorfte / Eotena treowe' (Nor did Hildeburh have any reason to praise the faithfulness of the Jutes) (1071–2a). By emphasizing Hildeburh's lack of action here – she does *not* have a reason to praise ('herian') the people who killed her family, and we assume she does not – the poem subtly sets up her later lack of agency in matters related to the deaths that the Jutes' untrustworthiness causes. Indeed, the poem is careful to note that she 'unsynnum wearð' (was guiltless) (1072b) in the feud. Whatever tragedy she has to endure, the poem wants its readers or listeners to know that it is not her fault.

This introduction to Hildeburh, which focuses poetic attention on both her lack of guilt and the death of her kinsmen, stands in stark contrast to her clear command before the funeral pyre later in the digression. Hildeburh's actions as a mourning queen begin to demonstrate the kinds of connections that will emerge as inherently problematic in the final parts of her story. 'The only initiatory act attributed to her' and a 'powerful but ultimately futile gesture', as Joyce Hill describes it,[17] the scene of the funeral pyre is the first – and only – indication that Hildeburh has any kind of agency in the Frisian court. Indeed, Dorothy Porter argues that the funeral pyre scene is Hildeburh's moment of resistance, her attempt to break free from the domination of the men in her life.[18] That she alone chooses the pyre for her son asserts her role as a mother and her position as guardian of her child. Yet the poem does not linger on Hildeburh's command at the pyre. Rather, it expends its force on the active role played by the fire that swallows ('forswealgan') (1122) the bodies, breaking them down to their component parts. In a powerful reading of this scene and its centrality to the Finnsburg episode, Stacy Klein suggests that the intensity of the flames and

their destructive power signify the most basic lesson that the Finnsburg episode imparts. Violence begets violence:

> The melting heads, so securely trapped within the grasp of the fire and so clearly removed from their possible functions as trophies for signifying a clear battle-victor, emphasize that the winner in blood feud is neither Dane nor Frisian, but the fire itself, symbol of an ethos of insatiable violence that feeds on the destruction of men and their treasures.[19]

If we take Klein's analysis of the poem's exposition at face value, we can argue that the fire and the ethos of violence it symbolizes become active participants in the kinship feud. By suggesting that the only 'winner' in blood feud is the fire, Klein emphasizes the way in which cyclical violence becomes the condition of humans enmeshed in kinship feud. This ethos of violence works against stabilizing the relationship between the Healf-Denes and the Frisians.[20]

The fire – that *gæsta gifrost* – performs the work that Hildeburh and her husband Finn could not. It brings together both Frisian and Dane with ruthless efficiency. The two lines of descent intermingle in the destruction of the bodies, in which 'Hafelan multon, / bengeato burston ðonne blod ætspranc' (Heads melt, wound-gates burst, and then blood sprang forth) (1120b–1121). Making a distinction between the blood of the Frisians and that of the Healf-Denes is as impossible as it would be to separate Hildeburh's grief for her brother from her grief for her son. The two are enmeshed with and by the fire – and the pyre itself highlights Hildeburh's shared loyalty to both Frisian and Healf-Dene.

Indeed, the pyre seems almost to be a grotesque parallel to the other place in which the Healf-Denes and the Frisians are meant to be seen as equal – the hall where Finn distributes treasure over the long winter during which the two groups must learn to coexist. Finn promises to give out gold in his hall to both the Frisians and the Healf-Denes, treating his erstwhile enemies to the same kind of generosity that his own men expect from their king. Finn uses gold and its distribution to try to reinterpret the enmity that lingers on account of the unfinished battle between the two groups. He gives out treasure 'efne swa swiðe sincgestreonum / fættan goldes swa he Fresena cyn / on beorsele byldan wolde' (even as much treasure, worked gold, as he would give to embolden the Frisians in the beer-hall) (1092–4). The gold in question is, based on these lines, usually given only to the Frisians, in order to embolden them as they fight for their lord. Yet here the malleability of the gold's

distribution highlights the way in which it harbours very different meanings based on who is associated with it. Treasure can ensure loyalty when given to Frisian thanes, but here it is meant to make the tentative truce between Frisian and Dane more legible and, we assume, less fragile. In another sense, the gold replaces the violence that otherwise links these two opposing groups in the scene with the pyre, much as Hildeburh herself once might have done in her marriage. That the poem moves from enmity, to attempted community building, to the pyre underscores the relationship between these entities and actions through juxtaposition. That is, the gold stands in for both the violence and the fire, which are the only other things that can effectively unite Frisian and Healf-Dene. Moreover, the gold fails to adequately stand in for the value of the human lives it is meant to replace. Its proximity to the pyre, then, underscores the fire's elemental indifference to human concerns – the human lives that gold cannot bring together find final (and horrifically effective) union in flames.

This unstable relationship foregrounds the uneasiness of the truce while simultaneously highlighting the ways in which the new, temporary community of the Frisians and Healf-Denes might be destroyed. They pledge 'on twa healfa' (on both sides) (1095b) a 'fæste frioðuwære' (firm truce) (1096a), a truce that the rings and treasure Finn promises to distribute should secure. Yet the compact is based, first and foremost, on a premise of silence:

> þæt ðær ænig mon
> wordum ne worcum wære ne bræce,
> ne þurh inwitsearo æfre gemænden,
> ðeah hie hira beaggyfan banan folgedon
> ðeodenlease, þa him swa geþearfod wæs;
> gyf þonne Frysna hwylc frecnen spræce
> ðæs morþorhetes myndgiend wære,
> þonne hit sweordes ecg syððan scede. (1099b–1106)
>
> (That no man would break, by words or works, the treaty, nor through evil craft ever complain, although they followed the killer of their ring-giver, leaderless, through grievous necessity. If then any Frisian by horrible speech were to remind (them) of the murderous feud, then thereafter it would be determined by the edge of the sword.)

These lines make it clear that what can undo the work of the gold that Finn wishes to use to secure the uneasy peace is not just works, which would probably include the revenge killing of those who were part of the feud. The poem lingers on 'wordum ne worcum'

and 'ne þurh inwitsearo', which respectively refer to 'words or works' and 'evil craft'. Moreover, the word *gemænan* incorporates two different semantic registers: both complaint and violation.[21] The word *gemænan* can gloss both *plangere* (which means to lament or mourn) and *coinquinare* or *violare* (both of which carry connotations of defiling and violating) in the Latin.[22] That the poem conflates the register of complaint with the register of defilement and violation suggests that words, in this context, have extreme power. In this instance, even speaking of the past as a way to complain of one's condition can violate a fragile peace. Put another way: words can undo what treasure is meant to ensure. They can do so because they change the nature of the thing they describe – as a result, they have force in the world.

That words can themselves have agency is hardly a new observation.[23] Their ability to break an alliance through circulating a competing, violent narrative is a repeated concern of *Beowulf*. Take, for example, the story that Beowulf himself tells about the young warrior who sits at a banquet with an old warrior, after the conclusion of a feud. The old warrior reminds his younger companion of the losses that have been suffered in the past, and the fact that those losses are still legible in the present. He points out the very weapon that 'þin fæder to gefeohte bær' (your father took to the fight) (2048), which is now possessed by the descendant of the warriors who killed him:

> Nu her þara banena byre nathwylces
> frætwum hremig on flet gæð,
> morðres gylpeð ond þone maðþum byreð,
> þone þe ðu mid rihte rædan sceoldest. (2053–6)
>
> (Now here, the child of one or another of those slayers goes boasting with ornaments on the floor, boasts of murder and bears the treasures that you, by rights, should have possession of.)

The presence of the weapon, in Beowulf's story, does not itself incite violence. When the story of how it came to its present owner circulates, however, the sword accrues a different meaning. No longer simply a sword belonging to another warrior, this weapon becomes *weaponized* – it becomes part of a larger and longer narrative of hostility that exists across time in part because of the memories that this old warrior continues to relate.[24] The past is, in a sense, reactivated through the old retainer's words. That this sequence takes place only in Beowulf's mind does not diminish its importance;

rather, the fact that Beowulf can predict such a sequence of events highlights how deeply ingrained in the culture it is.

Moreover, the poem foregrounds the power of words to change the characters' relationship to the material objects they use in the specific vocabulary used to describe the old retainer's speech: 'Manað swa on myndgað mæla gehwylce / sarum wordum' (He complains so and brings [it] to attention each time, with evil words) (2057–8a). Both *gemænan* and *searu* recur here, as they did in the description of the prohibition meant to secure peace between the Frisians and the Healf-Denes. *Searu* carries a range of connotations including 'craft, artifice, wile, deceit, stratagem, ambush, treachery, plot'.[25] What matters most in this usage, however, is the sense of deliberateness with which the old retainer incites his junior to violence. The *craft* with which he deploys his memory of the past ensures the continued enmity of the young retainer towards his counterpart in the other group. This same mechanism of remembrance is at work in the Finnsburg episode. Finn specifically forbids speaking of the violence that has conditioned this particular alliance, commanding that no one 'þurh inwitsearo æfre gemænden' (through evil craft ever complain) (1101). Both *searu* (as part of *inwitsearo*) and *gemænan*[26] are present in this injunction. The presence and deployment of 'evil craft' and 'evil words' are part of how speech mobilizes memory. The action that resurrects such losses is *gemænan*, and the complaint it signifies. Although the time period is far shorter, therefore, both the mechanism and the result are the same.

That Beowulf and Finn can both imagine worlds where such memories bring about further bloodshed highlights how commonplace it must be.[27] Indeed, the narrative notes that it is not simply the memory of past slaughters that undermines the truce. Rather, it is the inability of a few of the warriors involved to keep their memories silent. When 'wæs winter scacen, / fæger foldan bearm' (winter was gone, fair the earth's expanses) (1136b–37a), the Healf-Denes should be prepared to return to their home. Yet Hengest, leader of the Healf-Denes, 'to gyrnwræce / swiðor þohte þonne to sælade, / gif he torngemot þurhteon mihte' (thought more quickly to revenge than to a sea-journey, and whether he might bright about a bitter encounter) (1138b–40). These thoughts are specifically positioned as questions of *wræce* or vengeance.[28] Yet without the words that the truce explicitly forbade, the memories of slaughter and the longing for recompense lack force.

By mobilizing speech, Oslaf and Guðlaf provide the necessary incitement to violence: they 'æfter sæsiðe sorge mændon / ætwiton

weana dæl' (complained of their grief after the sea-journey, blamed a measure of their sorrows [on it]) (1149–50a). The recurrence of *mænan*, even without the collocation of *searu*, harks back to precisely what neither man was meant to do: complain, and in complaining, violate the truce that held through the long winter. In the Finnsburg episode, as in Beowulf's story of Freawaru's marriage, the result is resumed enmity; that Oslaf and Guðlaf complain of their grief pushes Hengest into action, and he finds that 'ne meahte wæfre mod / forhabban in hreþre' (he could not his restless mind contain in his spirit/breast) (1150b–1a). The words of the two retainers, that is, have force, force that is made apparent in Hengest's violence. Neither a peace-weaving marriage nor a truce held in trust through the giving of gold could abate this violence for long.

The complaint of Oslaf and Guðlaf, and the speech that spurs Hengest to violence, is capable of creating such effects in part because of the intimacies that the Finnsburg episode generates between humans and non-humans; these intimacies alter the meanings assigned to the various non-human agents in the poem. Central to the agency of such intimacies is the mobilization of corpses to rewrite meaning. When brought into relationship with the corpses of the dead and the treasure meant to ensure community, these stories transform objects into reminders. The gold meant to buy off the memory of the violent deaths of kinsmen is qualitatively altered by its association with Oslaf and Guðlaf's angry speech. The explosive violence of the association attests to what Julia Kristeva terms the 'abject', that which the subject must forget or reject in order to maintain a coherent identity.[29] Because it defies seemingly rigid categories, the corpse highlights the capacity of the human body to be utterly non-human and yet subject to human action, memory, and interpretation. The influence of the corpses – implied by the 'sorg' of which Oslaf and Guðlaf speak – subtly modifies entities such as treasure that now serve as memorabilia of death rather than facilitators of alliance: the intimacy they signify becomes violent and unstable. Corpses may be rejected or ejected from community but remain associated with humans in collectivity. Their presence, in fact and in memory, marks a past that not only endures but also threatens the possibility of a peaceful future.

Rings and corpses thus become the ground on which the entire Finnsburg episode rests; the poem repeatedly emphasizes that these objects are unstable in meaning. Their very instability conditions the action of the poem; put another way, humans do not simply fight over the corpses of the fallen or the treasure that is meant to

circulate in the hall. Rather, they fight because these objects have influence, and their unstable meanings are deployed to determine the futures that they will allow to come to pass.

In the background of each of these connections that draws together a collectivity there is another actor that needs to be accounted for. Although the poem is clearly invested in the human cost of the fighting that the Finnsburg digression describes, it also observes – however tangentially – the larger forces to which the human is connected within the poem. By carefully tracing these connections, another actor in the digression comes to the fore, one that otherwise seems a mere backdrop to the human drama of feud. Weather, it would seem, is a vital avenue of connection between the human actants in the Finnsburg digression and the natural world:

> eard gemunde,
> þeah þe ne meahte on mere drifan
> hringedstefnan –holm storme weol,
> won wið winde, winter yþe beleac
> isgebinde– oþ ðæt oþer com
> gear in geardas, swa nu gyt deð,
> þa ðe syngales sele bewitiað,
> wuldortorhtan weder. (1129b–1136a)
>
> (He remembered his land, although he could not drive forth on the sea his ring-prowed vessel; the waves welled with storms, fought against the wind, locked the waves, bound with ice, until that other [season] might come, the year in the enclosure, as it now still does, the seasons still go in the hall, the glory-bright weather.)

Although earlier in the digression the poem takes pains to elaborate that 'wig ealle fornam / Finnes þegnas nemne feaum anum, / þæt he ne mehte on þæm meðelstede / wig Hengeste wiht gefeohtan' (the battle took them, few alone remained among Finn's thanes, so that he could not in the mead-hall conclude the battle with Hengest at all) (1080b–1083), it had heretofore been less clear why it was that Hengest and his men remained in the hall with Finn's thanes after the battle. In these lines, however, a larger background to the actions of humans comes into finer focus. The weather itself is the reason that Hengest finds himself stuck in Finn's hall over the long winter; waves are driven by storms and the ocean is locked in ice (*isgebinde*), until spring – noted here as 'ðæt oþer … gear'[30] – arrives, and presumably breaks the quite literal ice. The winter itself keeps Hengest and his men in a position that will eventually lead to them rekindling the feud.

In the background, then, non-human actors are consistently modifying the behaviour of the human characters in *Beowulf* – their intimacies and conflicts – whether or not they are aware of their influence. Fire melts heads, stories modify the meaning of corpses and treasure, and even the winter's lingering effects keep Hengest and his men from escaping the fight when they cannot conclude it. What does this mean, then, for the central figure of the digression? How does this awareness of Hildeburh's connection to a network of dispersed agency help us reinterpret her actions in the narrative? Finally, is she, or is she not, made into an object by the men who surround her?

Hildeburh's strength is deeply compromised by her final appearance in the poem, and this is the crux of the question that serves as the engine for this chapter. Her final actions in the poem are not really actions at all:

> Hie on sælade
> drihtlice wif to Denum feredon,
> læddon to leodum. (1157b–1159a)
>
> (On the sea they carried the lord-like woman to the Danes, they led her to [her] people.)

In *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf*, Gillian Overing argues that it is precisely this final moment at which Hildeburh becomes the object rather than the subject of action in the poem. Overing notes, however, that Hildeburh-as-object is not allowed the same kind of agency and transformation accorded to other objects in the text. In a poem where the exchange and possession of objects is a primary way of recalling histories and cementing group identity, as a peace-weaver, Hildeburh is not readily available for definition, by herself or others: 'the sword may recall the boast that may assure the deed … but even the gold adorning the queen will not translate *her* … her meaning as a peace-weaver is *untranslatable*'.[31] Overing's invocation of the term 'translate' raises an important point: Hildeburh's meaning, her status, and her possibilities are all irretrievable to readers of the poem precisely because her role as a facilitator of peace fails so spectacularly. Rings can promote alliances, and swords can renew revenge, but Hildeburh's work is not as active as these objects. Rather, she is seemingly moved only by the actions of others, and as the poem's audience 'we watch her as she is moved across the chessboard, given, and then taken'.[32] This reading of the role of the peace-weaver in Finnsburg removes Hildeburh from a

position of agency much as her relatives remove her from the Frisian stronghold at the end of the digression.

Indeed, Hildeburh's return to the Danes after the death of her husband is neither remarkable nor unexpected. Her ties to Frisia are gone, her husband and son dead. An editorial intervention might help us better understand the stakes of her loss; earlier in the digression, the poem notes that:

> Nalles holinga Hoces dohtor
> meotodsceaft bemearn syþðan morgen com,
> ða heo under swegle geseon meahte
> morþorbealo maga, þær he[o] ær mæste heold
> worolde wynne. (1076–80a)
>
> (Not at all in vain did the daughter of Hoc mourn the decrees of fate when morning came, when she under the heavens had to see the deadly murders of men, there where [she] before held the greatest of the world's joy.)

If we accept an earlier editorial emendation,[33] then we are given a set of conditions that describe Hildeburh's relationship to her family of marriage. On the one hand, she was a peace pledge, married to secure an alliance between Frisians and Healf-Denes. Yet here, in Frisia, she 'ær mæste heold / worolde wynne' (before held the greatest of the world's joy) (1079b–1080a). Whatever her relationship to her family of birth, Hildeburh's *joy* is in Frisia. Taken from Frisia by the Healf-Denes, 'læddon to leodum' (led [. . .] to [her] people), she is removed from those skies under which she knew both joy and grief. For all the attention critics have paid in the past to Hildeburh's sorrow and her command of the pyre, they too often forget that that sorrow plays out against a backdrop of very real joy, without which it would have no *pathos*, and really no meaning. The shift in meaning for Hildeburh – her agency and then utter lack by the end of the poem – is similar to this initial shift in her relationship to the bodies of her son and her brother. She mourned (*bemurnan*) after they died. It is the condition of these bodies – and her connection to them – that causes mourning for Hildeburh.

Indeed, then, it is the corpses, Frisian and Dane both, that animate feud and loss throughout the episode, that spark both Hildeburh's agency and her being led, object-like, back to her people. No longer the agent of her own action, she cannot participate in the life of the community because that community has failed. Put another way, 'her meaning as peace-weaver is untranslatable' – quite literally,

it cannot be carried over past the violence that destroys her people.[34] When she looks at the dead bodies that remain 'where [she] before held the greatest of the world's joy', these bodies and her association with them have changed utterly.

In reading the Finnsburg episode as a case study in Actor-Network theory, several things emerge that a more traditional critique might not foreground. First and foremost, the attention paid to human action in the poem can be usefully distributed to include non-human actors as well. The resulting reading demonstrates the imbrication of the human in a world larger than the human communities that so often dominate readings of *Beowulf*. Second, surfacing these connections allows for a deeper understanding of the poem's operation; although Old English poets might not have known about the variations in agency that characterize the New Materialism, they were not strangers to the intimacies between human beings and the environment, nor to the unstable meaning of objects meant to forge human community. Indeed, that instability is rather the point of *Beowulf*. Finally, when we fully understand the networks within which Hildeburh participates, she becomes simultaneously less than and more than the object or subject of human action. She becomes a participant in a complex network made of both human beings and the living world: the stories humans tell, the materials they help to circulate and eventually, as corpses, even become. If we can remember that Hildeburh's sorrow moves her to action not in isolation from the bodies of her kin but *because* of them, we can resurrect a fuller picture of this legendary lady. No longer simply the 'ides gnornode', she is also a woman who, for too brief a span, held joy.

Notes

1 All citations from *Beowulf* are from R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (eds), *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) and cited in the text by line number. All translations from the Old English are my own.

2 For the most traditional reading of the digressions and their importance to the poem, see Adrien Bonjour, *The digressions in Beowulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950). For a thorough reading of the Finnsburg episode in the poem, see Gale Owen-Crocker, *The four funerals in Beowulf* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). For an overview of the roles available to women in the poem, see Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, 'Gender roles', in Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (eds), *A Beowulf handbook* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), pp. 311–24.

3 Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (eds), *Dictionary of Old English: A to H*, online (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2016), s.v. *gast*, *gæst* 13, 'a natural phenomenon (fire, frost, tempest, etc.) personified as a living spirit'.

4 My interpretation of the Finnsburg episode owes much to Actor-Network theory and its understanding of collectivity as one way in which human and non-human entities might associate with one another in ways that supersede traditional ideas about agency. For a comprehensive study of collectivity and its relationship to human ideas of community, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the social: an introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Michel Callon, 'Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay', in John Law (ed.), *Power, action, and belief: a new sociology of knowledge?* (New York: Routledge, 1986), pp. 196–233; and John Law, 'Notes on the theory of actor-network: ordering, strategy and heterogeneity', *Systems practice*, 5.4 (1992), 379–93.

5 Major readings of Hildeburh's role in the Finnsburg episode include Jane Chance, *Woman as hero in Old English literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986); Gillian Overing, *Language, sign, and gender in Beowulf* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990); and Stacy Klein, *Ruling women: queenship and gender in Anglo-Saxon literature* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

6 On community formation via storytelling, see also Benjamin A. Saltzman's chapter in this volume, pp. 31–53.

7 Law, 'Notes on the theory of actor-network', 381.

8 Ibid., 383.

9 This project bears thematic and critical similarities to Jeffrey Cohen and Lowell Duckert's recent work in *Elemental ecocriticism*. See their 'Introduction: eleven principles of the elements', in Cohen and Duckert (eds), *Elemental ecocriticism: thinking with earth, water, air, and fire* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), especially p. 5.

10 On this point, see John D. Niles, who defines feud culture as 'a culture of self-perpetuating, revenge-driven cycles of violence', in 'The myth of the feud in Anglo-Saxon England', *JEGP*, 114.2 (2015), 163–200, at 164.

11 Indeed, John D. Niles has recently argued (with others) that feud culture in Anglo-Saxon England itself has been overstated. Most importantly, he notes that, 'While only some critics have argued that the *Beowulf* poet aims to undermine the ideal of heroic vengeance, all readers are likely to agree that the poem gives a powerful account of the disasters that can accompany acts of either unprovoked or retaliatory violence' (ibid., 166).

12 For an alternative configuration of who lives and who dies in this particular feud, see Alfred Bammesburger, 'Hildeburh's son', *Notes and queries*, 53.1 (2006), 14–17.
13 Notable recent exceptions beyond those mentioned here include Peter S. Baker, *Honor, violence, and exchange in Beowulf* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), and Leonard Neidorf, 'Hildeburh's mourning and *The Wife's Lament*', *Studia Neophilologica*, 89.2 (2017), 197–204. Baker in particular lodges a fascinating study of the genesis and understanding of the term *freoðuwebbe* – noting its absence in general from the OE corpus's discussion of various women in marriages in the midst of feud, he attributes its genesis to nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxonists' racist and sexist views of the proper role of women in the poem.
14 Joyce Hill, '"Þæt wæs geomuru ides!" A female stereotype examined', in Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (eds), *New readings on women in Old English* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 235–47, at 244.
15 Ibid., p. 244.
16 Helen Bennett, 'The female mourner at Beowulf's funeral: filling the blanks / hearing the spaces', *Exemplaria*, 4.1 (1992), 35–50, at 35.
17 Hill, '"Þæt wæs geomuru ides!"', 241.
18 'Through this action', Porter suggests, 'Hildeburh emphasizes that her son is *hers*, not her husband's.' See Dorothy Porter, 'The social centrality of women in *Beowulf*: a new context', *The heroic age*, 5 (2001), www.heroicage.org/issues/5/porter1.html (accessed 5 June 2019). Leonard Neidorf has recently suggested that, following Alexandra Hennessy Olsen and J. M. Hill, we can read Hildeburh as 'a woman whose suffering is in the end compensated by the murder of Finn, and whose experience parallels that of the Danes listening to the episode, who suffered at the hands of Grendel and have finally been compensated by his death' ('Hildburh's mourning', 203). Although Neidorf's point is well taken – indeed, Finn's death would compensate Hildeburh for the death of her son – two points seem important to raise here. First, Finn is also Hildeburh's husband, which suggests that her position in this matter is somewhat complex. Second, the Danes may well *feel* compensated by the death of Grendel, but it certainly does not bear out in the narrative that such compensation has lasting ramifications.
19 Klein, *Ruling women*, p. 94.
20 For a reading of Hildeburh's role as a peace pledge or peace-weaving woman who fails, see Chance, *Woman as hero*. See also Peter Buchanan's chapter in this volume, pp. 279–303, for a fuller discussion of Wealhtheow as a peace-weaver.
21 Joseph Bosworth, *An Anglo-Saxon dictionary: based on the manuscript collections of the late Joseph Bosworth*, ed. Thomas Northcote Toller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), s.v. *gemænan*, iii and iv.

22 R. K. Ashdowne, D. R. Howlett, and R. E. Latham (eds), *Dictionary of medieval Latin from British sources* (Oxford: British Academy, 2018), s.v. '*plangere*', *coinquinare*, *violare* 1.
23 See, for example, J. L. Austin, *How to do things with words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). Austin's approach privileges the linguistic function of perlocutionary and elocutionary force, focusing most prominently on the idea of the speech-act, which can only achieve its end if certain preconditions for its use are met. By contrast, the actor-network model of narrative circulation functions sociologically rather than linguistically, and posits stories as actants in the social world, and thus as capable of modifying the behaviour of human actors in a narrative.
24 For a variant view of the passage, see John M. Hill, 'Social milieu', in Bjork and Niles (eds), *A Beowulf handbook*, pp. 255–70.
25 Bosworth, *An Anglo-Saxon dictionary*, s.v. *searu*. For additional discussion of 'craft' in *Beowulf*, see James Paz's chapter in this volume, pp. 73–96.
26 For a fuller consideration of how we might understand this verb, see R. D. Fulk, 'Six cruces in the Finnsburg fragment and episode', *Medium Aevum*, 74.2 (2005), 191–204.
27 For readings of feud and violence in *Beowulf*, see Baker, *Honor, exchange, and violence*; Scott Gwara, *Heroic identity in the world of Beowulf* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); J. M. Hill, 'The ethnopsychology of the in-law feud and the remaking of group identity in *Beowulf*', *PQ*, 78.1 (1999), 97–123.
28 Bosworth, *An Anglo-Saxon dictionary*, s.v. *wræce*.
29 Julia Kristeva, *The powers of horror: an essay on abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). I am not the first scholar of *Beowulf* to make a connection between Kristeva's notion of the abject and *Beowulf* (or Old English literature more generally). For a different take on the relationship between the two, see Paul Acker, 'Horror and the maternal in *Beowulf*', *PMLA*, 121.3 (2006), 702–16. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen extends his meditation on the abject to *The Wanderer* and *The Ruin* in the first chapter of his *Of giants: sex, monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
30 Here, *gear* is used in the sense of 'season', a specific period of chronological time. This usage in *Beowulf* is one of the paradigmatic attestations of this sense of *gear*. See Cameron et al. (eds), *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. *gear* D.1.b.
31 Gillian R. Overing, *Language, sign, and gender*, p. 85. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), p. 85.
32 Ibid., p. 86.
33 The emendation is by the editors of *Klaeber's Beowulf*, but see the discussion in Overing, *Language, sign, and gender*, p. 189, n. 1079b. The editors make the emendation because the main point of the passage is the sorrow of the daughter of Hoc – Hildeburh herself.
34 Overing, *Language, sign, and gender*, p. 85.