9

Men into monsters: troubling race, ethnicity, and masculinity in *Beowulf*

Catalin Taranu

Sometimes we find the deepest intimacy not in sex, friendship, communal joy, or grief, but in shared anxiety. It is a subtler, though no less powerful, kind of togetherness, communed less overtly through sideways glances, heavy silences, nervous laughter. As such, it subtends 'emotional communities' that are harder to trace in texts such as *Beowulf*, notorious for how opaque their emotional language has become to us.[1] Perceiving anxiety in others is difficult primarily because the people subjected to it can often find it hard to articulate it, or may even be unaware that they are experiencing it. At times, the strongest clue to its existence is the effort people make to deny it.

Anxiety is protean, too: it can take forms as mundane as being ashamed or embarrassed and as vivid as full-blown panic or inexplicable bursts of rage. It can coalesce into cultural anxieties or moral panics or it can take the shape of a brief, individual episode.[2] Yet I suggest that, apart from the joy of reading and listening, it is anxiety that gathered so many audiences around *Beowulf* for so long a time. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to probe some of the points in the poem that trouble certain audiences in order to understand the ways in which these communities function emotionally in relation to the text. In particular, I pursue this work of emotional archaeology by tracing anxieties around masculinity, ethnicity, and race that found their expression in *Beowulf* – and that different audiences have projected on to it, first in Beowulf's sexualized encounter with Grendel's mother and then in the Grendelkin's broader connection to tensions between Anglo-Saxons and indigenous Britons and, later, the Danes.

Gender, race, and ethnicity are too intimately entwined to focus on any one of these aspects in isolation, for as Geraldine Heng remarks, 'the ability of racial logic to stalk and merge with other hierarchical systems – such as class, gender, or sexuality' allows

race to function as class, 'ethnicity', religion, or sexuality.[3] In the following, I fix my gaze particularly on emotional communities made up of men, not because I assume that *Beowulf* is in any way fit reading for men only, or that its audiences were or are made up mostly of men.[4] Yet it is in the ways in which men read the poem through the ages that I find a fascinating and hitherto unexplored pervasive pattern of conjoined anxiety and aspirational projection, which in its turn provides significant clues to cultural and social change in the twenty-first as much as in the eighth or eleventh centuries, especially with regard to how gender, race, and ethnic belonging are constructed.

My chapter begins with two central premises: 1) we can detect anxieties related to masculinity, race, and ethnicity in the ways men behave in and read *Beowulf*, and 2) these anxieties are almost always interconnected in complex ways, so that our focus needs to be intersectional. This is why Critical Race theory (CRT) and Indigenous Studies can help us see that *Beowulf* could be read as relating to both the racialized Britons and Danes at different historical moments. Indeed, whether or not we fix a date, I argue that we need to account for the emotional life of the poem as it circulated before, within, and beyond its early eleventh-century manuscript. Who would have read *Beowulf* at different points in time and space? How would they have related and reacted to it? What made successive textual and emotional communities come back to the same text again and again?

If reader-response theory has taught us anything, it is that different audiences do not read the same text.[5] Thus, even if *Beowulf* were to remain a stable text for three hundred years, it is unrealistic to presume that, say, a Mercian 720s audience and a 1030s Wessex one would have read the poem in the same ways. The cultural horizons, the social and political circumstances, the textual expectations of these audiences differed greatly, no matter how much the label 'Anglo-Saxon England' that we use for both settings and for everything in between might elide the discrepancies. As Stephen Harris reminds us, the 'Anglo-Saxon' of the age of Bede is not the same as the 'Anglo-Saxon' of the age of Alfred, and 'whenever we speak of their stories, we are actually talking about two different theys'.[6] Reconstructing the emotions felt in each of these cases provides a fuller understanding of intimacy in anxiety that I argue was an important, though largely overlooked, dimension of *Beowulf* in its early medieval socio-emotional context. This involves allowing

oneself to become troubled by the poem and by the ways it is read, while perhaps troubling the readers of this chapter in the process.

Indeed, the social and emotional mechanics of these anxieties are similar across a millennium-wide expanse of time, as seen in the current resurgence of medievalism in new nationalisms, racism, men's rights activism, and the involvement of medievalist scholars in or against these movements.[7] The different groups of men gathering around *Beowulf* at different points in time and space have quite a bit to say to each other, and in this chapter I place the anxieties which these very different audiences project on to and find expressed in the poem in a dialogue where they can productively illuminate each other. *Beowulf* has always been a site of both utopia and anxiety for communities of men who desire an ethnically pure, hypermasculine mythical origin, as well as the dangers inherent in such a project.

Despite the historical, ethnographic, or sociopolitical data *Beowulf* may contain, it makes sense to treat it as a collective fantasy. *Beowulf* thus exists in a ludic space in which the anxieties, beliefs, and desires of different textual and emotional communities are toyed with, allowed to measure against each other, and brought to their ultimate consequences within the safe space of a mythical past that is always just out of reach.[8] Emotionally, the poem acts as a distant screen on which the anxieties and desires of the audiences were projected, worked through, and thus potentially exorcised. Adopting Derek Neal's argument about high medieval romance, I argue that *Beowulf* functions like a dream that 'solve[s] problems and deal[s] with conflicts that are too difficult for conscious life', or, to use John Niles's terms, as 'a form of play' that 'not only gives voice to a given mentality or worldview, but is also in which issues of worldview are precisely what are at stake'.[9]

Angling for anxieties: a method

One need not go very far to find anxiety in *Beowulf*. It is present throughout the text, expressed in Old English words ranging from general terms from the semantic field of sadness or trouble such as *cearu* (sorrow, anxiety), *sorh* (care, anxiety, sorrow, grief, affliction, trouble), *murnan* (to be sad, be anxious, to mourn), and *meornan* (to care, feel anxiety, trouble oneself about anything) to the more specific or contextually connoting anxiety-words such as *bysgu* (business, labour, care, toil, difficulty, trouble, affliction, anxiety) and *wea* (woe, misery, evil, affliction, trouble, anxiety). 'þæt ys sio

fæhðo ond se feondscipe, / wælnið wera, ðæs ðe ic [wen] hafo / þe us seceað to Sweona leoda' (such is the adversity and the enmity, / the slaughterous hate of men, which is why I am anxious / that the Swedish folk will seek us) (2999–3001). Here Wiglaf, the lone faithful retainer who returns to Beowulf's side during his fight with the dragon, provides an example of one of the great causes of anxiety in the poem, and more specifically, to the Geats who were the audience for the unfolding drama of Beowulf's demise: tribal and personal enmity and their accompanying causes and effects – choosing loyalty to one's kin over one's lord, the compulsion towards vengeance, rash words, the hot-headedness of young warriors' unmanly (or too manly) behaviour, monsters. Indeed, it seems that the general mood in the heroic world of the poem is that of anxiety interrupted by brief calms and timid celebrations of victory (during which, however, gloomy songs foreshadowing future anxiety are often sung).

Nonetheless, this is not the kind of anxiety that is the primary object of this chapter. In the example above, 'anxiety' is used to translate a range of words with loosely connected meanings, ranging from 'distress' to 'trouble', 'woe', and 'fear' proper. Yet just as 'sadness' is not equivalent to 'depression', (localized) 'fear' or (generalized) 'apprehension' is not the same as 'anxiety'. In psychology and psychiatry, anxiety has been defined as 'an unpleasant state of inner turmoil, often accompanied by nervous behaviour, such as pacing back and forth, somatic complaints, and rumination', or as 'a feeling of uneasiness and worry, usually generalized and unfocused as an overreaction to a situation that is only subjectively seen as menacing'.[10] While I am not claiming to diagnose anxiety disorders in Old English texts, it is in this more precise sense that I will use anxiety henceforth. Furthermore, I am more interested in the anxieties experienced by the poem's diverse audiences than by its characters. These anxieties can be reconstructed from clues within *Beowulf* corroborated with the different sociocultural horizons and constellations of texts in which the poem was read.

Nervous laughter: wrestling with monsters

Indeed, some anxieties might have been less context-dependent and more pervasive for early medieval audiences of *Beowulf*. Rather than the straightforward anxiety occasioned by the pervasive doom and gloom in the poem, I will now consider a moment that is troubling in a more oblique fashion. During Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother, an embarrassing episode occurs. After he has

pulled her to the floor and she has grabbed him, he falls on his back while Grendel's mother sits astride him, having pulled her short sword: 'Ofsæt þa þone selegyst, ond hyre seaxe geteah, / brad ond brunecg, wolde hire bearn wrecan, / angan eaferan' (then she sat on the hall-guest and drew her short *seax*, broad and burnished, she wanted to avenge her son, her only child) (1545–7a). For Beowulf this is a position that is at once dangerous and embarrassing, and for my purposes, one that makes not only him, but, as Fred Robinson noticed, scholars and students alike uncomfortable.

In a 1994 article, Robinson asked the question 'Did Grendel's Mother Sit on Beowulf?', and argued that this was not the only way that the Old English of the passage could be construed. His motivation for reconsidering the translation is that 'like the students in our classes, the translators of the poem … are often uncomfortable with the meaning which the glossaries stipulate for *ofsittan*. To avoid the comic indignity of Beowulf's being sat upon, they fudge the verb's meaning in artful ways.'[11] Yet, as Dana Oswald argues, in order to use her weapon effectively, Grendel's mother must be on the same level as Beowulf, and since he is on the floor, the choreographic logic of the scene requires her to be on top of him.[12]

What reactions would men in an Anglo-Saxon audience have had to this scene? Vicarious fear for the hero's life is one possible response, comic embarrassment would have been another, or both emotions at the same time. Oswald suggests that Beowulf's passive posture, however temporary, is alarming because of the resulting gender instability, which is what makes students and translators uncomfortable.[13] Thus, Beowulf being topped by Grendel's mother is not so much comic, as Robinson suggests, but alarming, and the nervous laughter it can provoke in audiences (both modern and medieval) is a response to a deeper anxiety that this situation brings out in men, especially men who define themselves according to the scripts of hegemonic masculinity. In Oswald's terms, 'Beowulf is at the mercy of a phallic woman who … symbolically castrates [him] … even if her blade never pierces his body.'[14] Whether one agrees with the psychoanalytical description of the situation or not, it is clear from Robinson's account of modern reactions to this disquieting situation (the first time in the poem when Beowulf's life seems to be genuinely endangered) that it has been perceived at least by some audiences as uncomfortably comic. The scene is certainly narrated in such a way as to resemble sexual intercourse, as other scholars have previously remarked, and as such, it 'plays out anxieties about female sexuality' while also illustrating anxieties

about Beowulf's own sexual identity.[15] While rolling around on the floor of Grendel's mother's cave, Beowulf is described as 'beadwe heard' (battle-hard) (1539a) and 'þa he gebolgen wæs, / feorhgeniðlan' (then he was swollen [or enraged] by the life-enemy) (1539b–1540a). Although these also work as combat metaphors, the whole episode has been described as 'a lengthy erotic *double entendre* riddle fused into a longer narrative poem', employed purposefully to paint Beowulf as full of a very masculine vigour, but also as a sexually engaged combatant.[16]

But there is more at work here than discomfort about forbidden erotic impulses. Beowulf's masculine authority in this sexually charged battle is called into question not only by his near-defeat by Grendel's mother, but also by his problematic relationship to swords.[17] The possession of weapons, especially swords, is closely related to masculine identity in Anglo-Saxon culture.[18] One of the main Old English terms for 'man', *wæpnedmann*, and a variety of compounds signifying the male sex attested copiously from royal wills to vernacular poetry testify to the understanding of 'weapon' as a metaphorical penis in the most pragmatic sense: *wæpnedcild* (male child), *wæpnedhealf* (male line) etc.[19] Hence, taking up Stacy Klein's question, in a world in which 'masculinity hinges so crucially on martial exploits, what happens when a woman takes up arms and subsequently acquits herself with great élan?'[20] By taking up weapons, Grendel's mother is 'appropriating and revising masculine identity and acting as phallic mother, which demands a response similarly laden with sexual overtones'.[21]

On the other hand, what happens to the masculinity of a man when his sword fails in a medieval honour-based culture constructed around war making? Anxiety ensues, especially when the hyper-masculine hero has his weapons repeatedly break down – most disastrously in his final fight with the dragon. The first instance is in his attempt to stab Grendel's mother (though Grendel himself being impenetrable to weapons can be counted as the first time his sword is useless), when his sword completely fails him – it is simply unable to penetrate her flesh. This forces Beowulf to take up 'a phallus that belongs not to men, but to giants', which Oswald sees as an 'ephemeral and external excess that demonstrates his own profound impotence', since the masculine authority by which he eventually manages to kill Grendel's mother is not his own, but instead is prosthetic.[22]

It is understandable why this scene in particular would have provoked the anxiety of early medieval men, and why it continues

to trouble students and scholars alike to this day. The male protagonist (and in their identification with him, male audiences, too) finds himself 'at the mercy of a "phallic woman", monstrous because overstepping the boundaries of gender and of sexuality'.[23] The nervous laughter that it might have provoked may be seen as both a sign of deep-seated anxieties about masculine identity and an occasion for deeper male bonding in the intimacy of a shared anxiety. Recent research on the cognitive science of emotions argues that laughter is an essential behaviour for helping to de-escalate negative emotional experiences as well as a social emotion that increases the willingness of people sharing a laugh to disclose intimate information.[24] While the cause for this nervous laughter lies in the uncomfortable recognition of the eroticism of the encounter between the hero and the monster, the anxieties it points to are deeper than that. This reasoning can and should be extended to racial alterity. The Grendelkin were conceivably the focus of anxieties about race and ethnicity, which connect to those about gender in troubling ways.

Ellorgæstas: guests in their homeland

The *Beowulf* poet calls Grendel and his mother *mearcstapan* ('borderwanderers') (104a and 1348a). While metaphorically they straddle the boundaries of gender and humanity, they also occupy a liminal space in the fens.[25] It is a marshy place not suited for agriculture or animal rearing and hence a space for which the people ruling the land would have no use. The two monsters are also described as *ellorgæstas* (1349a), usually translated as 'alien ghosts'. In virtually all editions of *Beowulf* the aesc (æ) on *ellorgæstas* has been interpreted as a long vowel, making *gæst* mean 'ghost' or 'spirit' rather than 'guest', as a short aesc would make it. Of course, there is no way of telling from the manuscript – the Anglo-Saxons did not use macrons to mark long vowels in vernacular manuscripts. Neither is the context always helpful – sometimes the monstrous enemies are ironically called 'guests' (thus the water monster at 1441a or the dragon at 2074b). At the same time, *gæst* can also mean 'stranger', if not 'enemy' – a guest is, of course, a stranger and can easily turn out to be an enemy, and the anxiety about this potential of guests to turn inimical is pervasive in *Beowulf*. It is significant that two of the three examples from the Bosworth-Toller entry showcasing this second (apparently contradictory) meaning of short-aesc *gæst* (basic meaning 'guest') are taken from *Beowulf*, where it is used to describe Grendel (102a) and the dragon (2312a). It is not hard to

imagine that an oral performer could have played on the quasi-homonymy of *gæst* and *gāst* as well as the semantic sliding between the threatening and the benign senses of the former word to underscore the blurring of the lines between them in everyday life.[26]

My point is that Grendel and his mother would have been seen not necessarily as demonic, but as troublesome guests populating the edges of the territory inhabited by the Danes. She is, after all, 'idese onlicnes' (in the likeness of a woman) (1351a), while he is 'on weres wæstmum' (in the form of a man) (1352a). She also avenges her son as any human kinsman would, and they are the descendants of Cain, who was, however evil, a human. Thus, *ellorgæstas* could be translated as 'guests from elsewhere'. There is some irony in that they are acknowledged as indigenous to the land ('land-dwellers in days of old' had seen them, 1354a–1355a), and yet they are now dwelling on its edges, discursively pushed to the margins of humanity and gender in the process and described as 'guests from elsewhere'.[27]

More precisely, I suggest that Grendel and his mother could have been the focus for Anglo-Saxon audiences projecting anxieties about their relationship to the autochthonous Britons and, at a later stage, to the Danes. As Stephen Harris reminds us, in 'literary negotiations of communities', foreigners and outsiders are often depicted as monstrous or as 'fearsome variations on existing creatures', being somehow recognizable by the very 'terror of fear' that 'they strike in humankind' ('quae maximum formidinis terrorem humano generi incutiunt', as the author of the eighth-century *Liber monstrorum* puts it).[28] This can happen just as readily when it comes to a conquering population negotiating its relationships to indigenous people.

The semantic linkage between 'native Briton' and 'slave' is unsurprising for any student of Anglo-Saxon England: both meanings are equally well exemplified in the Bosworth-Toller for the Old English word *wealh*, and often it is not clear at all that the Anglo-Saxons writing, reading, or hearing the word would have cared to make a distinction. As John Tanke points out, 'the violence which makes a slave out of a Welsh person parallels the violence in language which makes one say "slave" when one means "Welsh" and "Welsh" when one means "slave"', thus making *wealh* a word 'whose usage dramatizes its meaning: it is a word from whose otherness there is no escape'.[29] Nina Rulon-Miller brought to light the constellation in which the few Welsh personae to appear in the Exeter Book riddles are placed – it consists of oxen, the concepts of yoking or fettering, dark skin, and the borderland.[30] For instance, in Riddle

72, an ox tended by a 'sweart hyrde' (dark herdsman) – compare the 'sweart ond saloneb' (black and dark-faced) servant in Riddle 49 – is 'bunden under beam' (bound under yoke) and treads the 'mearcpaþas Walas' (the paths on the Welsh march). In Riddle 12, swarthy Welsh men are tightly fettered with ox-leather bonds, and a dark Welsh woman works on an object made of ox-hide. Rulon-Miller proposes as the most likely solution to Riddle 52 'yoke of oxen led by a female slave', since the riddle subjects are associated with binding as well as with a female Welsh slave or 'Wale'.[31] The association with oxen is thus quite transparent: both Britons and oxen are perceived in the riddles as servile creatures, physically or socially fettered, even if not all *wealhas* are slaves. But their description as 'dark-skinned', coupled with their association to animality, points to their essential otherness, with the potential of sliding into something that is so different to the ideal audience of the riddles as to be almost inhuman.[32]

The derogatory connotations attached to *wealh* or the adjective *wilisc* are plentifully attested, from 'shameful person' to 'bad servant', while Ælfric equates *weala win* with *crudum uinum* (rough, inferior wine) and has a sinner speak *wealode mid wordum* ('strangely', 'impudently').[33] These associations survive in present-day British slang words such as 'to welsh' (to cheat) and 'welsher' (an untrustworthy person).[34] As Ryan Craig and Victoria Davis demonstrate, such discursive practices are not divorced from material realities and are often used to reinforce and sustain material inequity by creating 'a reality in which it is reasonable for a few to control and to possess the material at the sacrifice of the well-being of others'.[35]

The first written occurrence of *wealh* is already a juridical one, appearing in the seventh-century *Laws of Ine*, where the 'inferior social position' of the Britons in Anglo-Saxon England was made law.[36] In Ine's laws that deal with *wergeld*, the free *wealh* is 'accorded only half the value of his English counterpart', while in laws concerning oaths, 'a man charged with stealing or harbouring stolen cattle had to produce an oath of sixty hides if he were accused by a *wealh*, whereas if the accuser were English the oath required was doubled'.[37] In what Alexander Woolf describes as a 'long drawn-out process of economic decline', individual Britons would have 'found themselves drifting into Anglo-Saxon households, as slaves, hangers-on, brides and so forth, but they would have come into these communities as one among many'.[38]

In this society, the assimilating Britons may well have been seen as 'guests from elsewhere' (while obviously indigenous) in the

Anglo-Saxon households or communities that integrated them as people belonging to a different category – socially and ethnically, but also perhaps racially. Indeed, the Britons are treated as racial others in both Felix's *Vita Guthlaci* and *Guthlac A*. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, 'Guthlac's colonization of the demons' cherished home' (the Fenlands, much like the home of the Grendelkin) not only 're-enacts in miniature the dispossession of that very territory' by the Germanic tribes settling there in the fifth century but also enacts a border war taking place on the other side of the kingdom, in which Guthlac himself had been involved as a young warrior.[39]

In a chapter entitled in the Old English translation 'Hu þa deofla on brytisc spræcon' (How the devils spoke in Brittonic), the *Vita Guthlaci* narrates that just as the Welsh are invading Mercia from the west during the reign of King Coenred, in the Fens a crowd of demons 'impersonates a band of British marauders and sets fire to Guthlac's dwelling, attacking him with spears'.[40] Guthlac chants a psalm and the demon-Britons vanish 'velut fumus' (like smoke), potentially a symbolic parallel to the 'powerful and attractive group fantasy' of a Mercian 'manifest destiny' entitling it to conquer British lands while their inhabitants simply vanished.[41]

It is not too great a stretch of the imagination to think of early audiences of *Beowulf* perceiving the interactions of its protagonist and the Grendelkin in very similar terms. Felix reports that Guthlac himself listened to what was probably heroic poetry in seventh-century Mercia; so, adapting a thought experiment of James Earl, if we imagine him as a reader of *Beowulf*, the othering of the Britons as demons in his hagiographies can be understood as participating in an already extant discourse in which the indigenous population was represented symbolically as monstrous fen-dwellers.[42] By the time the Exeter Book riddles were inscribed in their extant forms, when the Welsh kingdoms no longer posed an immediate military threat and the Britons on Anglo-Saxon territories had been integrated as slaves, servants, or brides, this discourse could have developed into a condescending (rather than outright monsterizing) linkage of the *wealhas* with animality, bondage, and dark skin.

Of course, Guthlac probably did not actually read *Beowulf*, but his life realistically was one of the social trajectories an Anglo-Saxon nobleman's life could take. Audiences in 730s Mercia could perhaps have related to *Beowulf* and *Vita Guthlaci*, and their understanding of and emotional reaction to either of them would have been coloured by the other.[43] If, as Cohen argues, both lives of Guthlac are 'suffused

with colonial desires, displacing into religious history a version of the engagement that was then occurring as martial history',[44] then so is *Beowulf*; only here the colonial desire is projected on to a narrative that probably began its life as folktale conjoined to legendary histories of pre-migration time, rather than on to hagiography.

Similarly to how Felix offers up the Britons as a common enemy against which he defines a presumably homogeneous Anglo-Saxon race (Angles and Saxons are not differentiated in the *Vita*), the *Beowulf* poet creates a sense of superior moral solidarity among its readers and listeners who share the political values of Hrothgar and Beowulf, regardless of ethnicity or regional sense of identity, as long as they oppose the descendants of Cain, who are radically dehumanized. As Craig Davis argues, in *Beowulf*, the primal ethnic dichotomy is not 'between Dane and Heathobard or Geat and Swede, but between royalist and renegade, human and monster, Sethite and Cainite'.[45]

I suggest that this is about more than ethnic difference, however: while the poet conveys a keen sense of ethnic differences among tribes which to us are mere names, there is an uncrossable gulf between all of these ethnicities taken together (however inimical to each other) and the *cyn* of the Cain-descended ghost-guests. Thus, Anglo-Saxon audiences of *Beowulf*, whether in early eighth-century Mercia or tenth-century Wessex, would have conceivably read this monsterization of the indigenous dwellers of the Danish fens as an opportunity to transcend ethnic and regional differences through their own cultural experience (however dim) of othering the Britons as inhuman enemies against which a pan-racial Anglo-Saxon identity could emerge. This need not have been a self-conscious judgement, but an affective response consonant with an entire discourse that was itself part of a network of power relations legally expressed in the apartheid instated by the *Laws of Ine*.

In this respect, *Beowulf* fulfilled not just a need for a search for origins, but also a desire for a trans-ethnic or even (as I argue in the next section) racial sense of identity. Those whom we are accustomed to call 'Anglo-Saxons' (itself an anachronistic concept levelling a five-century period and a region with significant local specificities into an ahistorical notion) were definable primarily by their military allegiance and by regional identity, and early medieval English sources themselves seem to be uncertain how to define their ethnic belonging.[46] Until the emergence of early West Saxon as a literary language (most probably in the decades around AD 700), even among the Germanic-speaking groups, 'there was no cohesive

sense of shared English identity and significant dialect variation',[47] until Alfred the Great and his successors started referring to themselves as kings of the *Angli Saxones*, *Angolsaxones*, *Anglosaxones*, or *Angulsaxones*.[48] The only position afforded to the Britons in this uncertain but wished-for sense of trans-regional and trans-ethnic identity was that of abject Other. Reactions to *Beowulf* and *Vita Guthlaci* would have fed on this uneasiness about ethnic and racial identity.

These anxieties about indigeneity and establishing an opposing trans-ethnic (almost racial) sense of identity always intersected with anxieties about masculinity: after all, *Beowulf* is not a poem about all Danes, Geats, or, obliquely, Anglo-Saxons or even Mercians, but about a particular class of men, associated by their aristocratic rank and their lords. What unifies the male war-bands of different ethnicities is 'a certain ethic of warrior behaviour', or in other terms, a hegemonic masculinity.[49] Hence, regional or ethnic difference is not an issue if you are a male aristocrat fighting the monsterized ancient dwellers of the land.

And yet, just as Guthlac's recognition of the *brytisc* language and his haunting by the Welsh-speaking demons point to troubling internal differences, so does Beowulf's participation in monstrosity haunt the poem, so that his final mutilation of the bodies of the Grendelkin brings to mind a history of violence against the Britons. At least some members of the Anglo-Saxon male audiences of *Beowulf* would have shared these conjoined anxieties about gender, race, and ethnicity in the intimacy of listening to the poem together. Their emotional reactions could have included a sense of cathartic jubilation at the erasure of the monstrous bodies and an anxiety that they were able to exorcize by projecting it on to figures of abjection such as the Grendelkin or the demonic Britons.

Crushing the *laðan cynnes*: on Anglo-Saxon race, again

When the dragon comes spewing flames over the land of the Geats at the end of the poem, the poet remembers how Beowulf 'æt guðe forgrap Grendeles mægum, / laðan cynnes' (in battle crushed Grendel's kin, the hated race) (2353–4a). As Oswald remarks, this use of the plural recalls Beowulf's use of the plural *feondum* (foes) in his first telling of the fight, and that not just Grendel is exterminated, but his whole 'race': 'the feud can only be ended when the audience is absolutely assured that no grendelkin remain'.[50] I have so far used the term 'race' to describe both the Britons in the

imaginary of Anglo-Saxon ethnic difference and the Grendelkin, but in this section I focus on the issue of how productive the use of this word is, considering its problematic baggage as well as its connection to gender.[51]

In his doctoral thesis investigating the Old English vocabulary of ethnic and racial belonging, Christopher Roberts finds two different concepts of identity, one based on physical or generic similarities – usually denoted with the lexemes *cynn* (sort, kind) and *mægð* (family) – and one based on social categories, consisting of the terms *leode* (people, tribe) and *þeod* (people, nation), each of which are frequently related to social concepts such as place, authority, and collective name.[52] *Leode* seems to have originally connoted 'a smaller group tied to an abstract sense of place and generic leadership', while *þeod* probably connoted 'a group under the power of a larger authority in control of a named territory'.[53] Both are used in *Beowulf* for naming all the tribal or ethnic groups (for instance, 'Geata leode' at 1213b, or 'fremde þeod' at 1691b). *Cyn* is reserved for families ('cynnes Wægmundinga') (2813b–2814a), the species of animals that God created (97b–98a), humanity ('moncynn') (164b *et passim*) and the grouping made up of Grendel, his mother, and Cain (107a). When the Danish coast guard asks Beowulf for his group's identity (244a–257b), he responds by saying first that they are 'of man-kind' ('we synt gumcynnes') (260a), secondly that they are of the tribe or people of the Geats ('Geata leode') (260b), and only then that they are Hygelac's hearthmates and that his father is Ecgþeow (261a–263b).

There is no clear taxonomy here, and at times metrical and alliterative reasons could have led the poet to use one of them rather the other. Roberts's model still applies, but the translation of *cyn* in the case of Cain's *cyn*, of which Grendel and his mother are the last survivors, needs to be problematized. It is not conceived simply as a family or a lineage, although that, too is part of the concept. They are certainly not a *leod* or *þeod* – the separation between them and any other tribal or ethnic grouping in the poem is greater than any difference among the latter. Still, they are not simply unthinking beasts, like the water monsters that Beowulf fights on his way to Grendel's hall. They are human, descended from Cain and separated from humanity because of sinfulness. Still, the Grendelkin look like humans, are intelligent, feel rage at being left out of the human community of Heorot, have human-like social structures that predicate revenge for one of their own, and live in a hall (an inversion of Heorot though it may be).

Thus, if race is usually used to describe 'a group whose boundaries are relatively difficult to cross', and ethnicity 'a group with relatively porous boundaries', then both the Grendelkin and the Britons of the Anglo-Saxon imaginary of Beowulf and the lives of Guthlac form a race.[54] The use of the term 'race' in any pre-modern context has been criticized, for Anglo-Saxon England in particular.[55] Of course, modern terms such as 'race' and 'ethnicity' do not correspond exactly to the variety of Latin and Old English words they are used to translate. But in the case at hand, to translate the *cyn* to which Grendel, his mother, and Cain belong to as either 'family'/'kin' or 'tribe' would be disingenuous because it would erase the possibility that is certainly present in the text for Anglo-Saxon audiences to relate to the Grendelkin as their culture did to the Britons. As Geraldine Heng argues, the refusal to use 'race' when discussing medieval phenomena

> de-stigmatizes the impacts and consequences of certain laws, acts, practices, and institutions in the medieval period, so that we cannot name them for what they are, nor can we bear adequate witness to the full meaning of the manifestations and phenomena they install. The unavailability of race thus often colludes in relegating such manifestations to an epiphenomenal status.[56]

Used in this understanding, 'race' does not have to be equated to any presumably biological difference between groups of people (in the way it is popularly used). Rather, in Heng's definition, 'race' is 'a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content', or in other words, 'a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups'.[57]

According to this definition, the Britons are clearly racialized in the Anglo-Saxon imaginary, belonging to a system of racial categorization in which several categories intersected: bodily distinction (Britons described repeatedly as *sweart* [dark]), language (Welsh as demonic speech in Guthlac or as incomprehensible gibberish in Ælfric), and social status (according to the *Laws of Ine* and the economic consequences thereof, also evident in the very term *wealh* and its entire lexical field of derogatory connotations). While I am not claiming that the Grendelkin are present in the poem due to a self-conscious choice of the poet to represent the indigenous people the Germanic tribes found in England, I suggest that some

Anglo-Saxon audiences would have perceived them (emotionally, if not discursively) as monstrous echoes of their real-life relationships with both the Britons and, later, the Danes.

Critical Race theory (CRT), from which I derive my frame of interpretation here, was originally developed to address the specific needs of the African-American community along a 'black–white' binary, which, while not similar to the relationship between the Britons and the invading Germanic tribes, is useful for understanding how groups are constructed discursively 'within a social space and held there by institutional practice'.[58] As other race theorists have recently proposed, the dynamics of racialization are protean and work differently, for instance, for Native Americans than for African-Americans. Thus, a framework such as TribalCrit, developed by Bryan M. J. Brayboy, is meant to emphasize Indigenous peoples' racialized experience of colonization, which 'is not just an experience of racial oppression', but 'primarily an experience of territorial oppression'.[59] In the light of the devolution of the sociopolitical and economic status of the Britons, this offers a particularly helpful model through which to understand the indigenous experience of the colonized *wealhas*.

Ryan Craig and Victoria Davis argue that 'the practices to bring Indigenous peoples into the fold of Whiteness' (being sent to boarding schools, converted to Christianity, forced to switch from collective to individualized forms of land ownership) were in fact strategies for acquiring their land and resources.[60] While no similar concerted effort to turn the Britons into Anglo-Saxons took place in early medieval England, this seems to have happened over time due to the racialization instated legally, economically, and discursively, as well as symbolically through such texts as *Beowulf* and *Vita Guthlaci*.

Giant women and haunting Danes: race and gender around *Beowulf*

As I have argued throughout this chapter, novel anxieties could be projected on to what was already a focus for racialized abjection, namely, Grendel and especially his mother, in new sociopolitical (and manuscript) contexts. As we have seen, connections to sociopolitical developments in Anglo-Saxon England may serve as clues to layers of emotional response to the poem. Consider Helen Damico's interpretation of Fitt II of *Beowulf* (characterized by Klaeber as 'Grendel's Reign of Terror') as a poetic rendering of the series of Danish attacks on England in the early eleventh century,

paralleling the more poetic account of the same events in the C-text of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.[61] Putting other kinds of dating aside, Damico's argument details one possible act of reception, wherein an element of the poem (Grendel as a terrifying character rampaging around the Danish countryside) could provide a screen on to which early eleventh-century audiences projected their own anxieties about Danish attacks on England. If Grendel and his mother could become a focus for anxieties about Welsh indigeneity, they could certainly fulfil a similar role for Danish invasion. What is more, Kathryn Powell argued that the *Beowulf* manuscript as we have it, probably written during the latter part of the reign of Æthelred the Unready, displays a new preoccupation with the tension between (not always good) rulers and foreigners, which would have been particularly relevant in the context of the Viking raids.[62]

Indeed, for an early eleventh-century audience, *Beowulf* was now part of a novel textual constellation, which included *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and *The Wonders of the East*. Many of the clashes with foreigners depicted in the other works in the manuscript would have been reminiscent of recent events in England such as the St Brice's Day massacre of 1002. This was when, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 'the king [Æthelred] commanded that all the Danish men who were among the English be slain'.[63] A necessary caveat is that the order was probably directed only against those Danes who had recently settled in various parts of England, whether as traders or mercenaries, not against those with Danish ancestry.[64] Yet, as Eileen Joy remarks, this was not an isolated event, the racialized violence of the attacks being part of a larger discourse seeking to instate 'bodily purity through the elimination of supposedly impure elements'.[65] A charter of 1004 from the monastery of St Frideswide at Oxford records that a group of Danes,

> who had 'sprung up' in England like 'cockle amongst the wheat,' had been forced to flee to the barred church, the doors and bolts of which they broke by force to get inside, and once securely settled there, an angry mob of their neighbors set fire to the church, apparently burning the Danes inside, along with 'its ornaments and books'.[66]

Anglo-Saxons reading with these recent events in mind might have reacted differently to *Beowulf* as a result. In the senses proposed above, the Danes became racialized, if not as part of a long history of structural oppression, at least in the Anglo-Saxon imaginary at the turn of the eleventh century. In reading and listening to this new *Beowulf*, Anglo-Saxons would have celebrated (and been haunted

by) the erasure of the racialized abjected bodies of the race of Grendel, who once again became the focus for shared anxieties about race, ethnicity, and masculinity.

Notes

1 Frances McCormack, Jonathan Wilcox, and Alice Jorgensen (eds), *Anglo-Saxon emotions: reading the heart in Old English language, literature, and culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015). For emotional community, see Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional communities in the early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 2, 24–5.

2 For discussions on the ways in which anxiety recombines with shame, and on how crucial shame is to the experience of homosociality, see Adam Frank and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (eds), *Shame and its sisters: a Silvan Tomkins reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 6, 147–60; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching feeling: affect, pedagogy, performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 35–121. I am grateful to Daniel Remein for pointing me towards this illuminating work.

3 Geraldine Heng, 'The invention of race in the European Middle Ages I: race studies, modernity, and the Middle Ages', *Literature compass*, 8.5 (2011), 258–74, at 262. See also Heng's magnum opus, *The invention of race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

4 For a classic refutation of this masculinist approach to *Beowulf*, see Clare Lees, 'Men and *Beowulf*', in Clare Lees (ed.), *Medieval masculinities: regarding men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 129–48.

5 Wolfgang Iser, *From reader response to literary anthropology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

6 Stephen Harris, *Race and ethnicity in Anglo-Saxon literature* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 35.

7 The issues are vast, interconnected, and wide-reaching – for a few points of entry see https://www.chronicle.com/article/Prominent-Medieval-Scholar-s/235014; https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/09/19/one-professors-critique-another-divides-medieval-studies; and https://www.salon.com/2017/11/30/alt-right-catches-knight-fever-but-medieval-scholars-strike-back/ (all accessed 5 June 2019).

8 Catalin Taranu, 'The making of poetic history in Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia', PhD dissertation, University of Leeds, 2016, p. 4.

9 Derek Neal, *The masculine self in late medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 10; John D. Niles, 'Reconceiving *Beowulf*: poetry as social praxis', *College English*, 61 (1998), 143–66, at 146. See also James W. Earl's view of *Beowulf* as a dream screen in

his *Thinking about Beowulf* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 129–36.

10 Martin E. P. Seligman, Elaine F. Walker, and David L. Rosenhan, *Abnormal psychology* (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 275; Chrissoula Stavrakaki and Yona Lunsky, 'Depression, anxiety and adjustment disorders in people with intellectual disabilities', in Nick Bouras and Geraldine Holt (eds), *Psychiatric and behavioural disorders in intellectual and developmental disabilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 113–30, at 113.

11 Fred C. Robinson, 'Did Grendel's mother sit on Beowulf?', in Malcolm Godden, Douglas Gray, and Terry Hoad (eds), *From Anglo-Saxon to Early Middle English* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1994), pp. 1–7, at 2.

12 Dana Oswald, *Monsters, gender and sexuality in medieval English literature* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), p. 95.

13 Ibid., p. 96.

14 Ibid.

15 Jane Chance, *Woman as hero in Old English poetry* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), p. 102; Shari Horner, 'Voices from the margins', in Eileen Joy and Mary Ramsay (eds), *The postmodern Beowulf: a critical casebook* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2006), pp. 467–500, at 485; Oswald, *Monsters*, p. 94.

16 Glenn Davis, 'The Exeter Book riddles and sexual idiom', in Nicola McDonald (ed.), *Medieval obscenities* (York: York Medieval Press, 2006), pp. 39–54, at 50; Oswald, *Monsters*, p. 94.

17 Oswald, *Monsters*, p. 95.

18 See Gillian Overing's chapter on swords and signs in *Language, sign, and gender in Beowulf* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), pp. 33–67.

19 Edward Christie, 'Self-mastery and submission: holiness and masculinity in the lives of Anglo-Saxon martyr-kings', in P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (eds), *Holiness and masculinity in the Middle Ages* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), pp. 143–57, at 152.

20 Stacy S. Klein, 'Gender', in Jacqueline Stodnick and Renée Trilling (eds), *A handbook of Anglo-Saxon studies* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 39–54, at 41.

21 Oswald, *Monsters*, p. 93.

22 Ibid., pp. 84, 99.

23 Ibid., p. 96.

24 Sophie Scott, 'The social life of laughter', *Trends in the cognitive sciences*, 18 (2014), 618–20; Oriana Aragón, 'Dimorphous expressions of positive emotion', *Psychological science*, 26 (2015), 59–273.

25 For further discussion of their place in the fens, see Christopher Abram's chapter in this volume, pp. 120–46.

26 Carolyn Anderson argued for the semantic indeterminacy of the two words in her '*Gæst*, gender, and kin in *Beowulf*: consumption of the

boundaries', *The heroic age*, 5 (2001), www.heroicage.org/issues/5/Anderson1.html (accessed 5 June 2019).

27 See also Alfred K. Siewers, 'Landscapes of conversion: Guthlac's mound and Grendel's mere as expressions of Anglo-Saxon nation-building', *Viator*, 34 (2003), 1–39.

28 Harris, *Race and ethnicity*, p. 12; Andy Orchard, *Pride and prodigies: studies in the monsters of the Beowulf-manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), pp. 87–8.

29 John W. Tanke, '*Wonfeax wale*: ideology and figuration in the sexual riddles of the Exeter Book', in Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (eds), *Class and gender in early English literature: intersections* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 21–39, at 24.

30 Nina Rulon-Miller, 'Sexual humor and fettered desire in Exeter Book Riddle 12', in Jonathon Wilcox (ed.), *Humour in Anglo-Saxon literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 99–126, at 117.

31 Ibid.

32 See also Heng, *The invention of race*.

33 Rulon-Miller, 'Sexual humor', pp. 115–16.

34 Ibid., p. 114; Debby Banham, 'Anglo-Saxon attitudes: in search of the origins of English racism', *European review of history*, 2 (1994), 143–56, at 155.

35 Ryan Craig and Victoria Davis, '"The only way they knew how to solve their disagreements was to fight": a textual analysis of Native Americans before, during, and after the Civil Rights movement', in Prentice T. Chandler (ed.), *Doing race in social studies: critical perspectives* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2015), pp. 89–125, at 100. On Welsh slavery, see David A. E. Pelteret, *Slavery in early mediaeval England: from the reign of Alfred until the twelfth century* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1995).

36 Margaret Lindsay Faull, 'The semantic development of Old English *wealh*', *Leeds studies in English*, 8 (1975), 20–44, at 20–1; quoted in Rulon-Miller, 'Sexual humor', p. 114.

37 Ibid.

38 Alexander Woolf, 'Apartheid and economics in Anglo-Saxon England', in Nick Higham (ed.), *Britons in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2007), pp. 115–29, at 129.

39 Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Medieval identity machines* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 142, 143.

40 Ibid., p. 143.

41 Bertram Colgrave (ed. and trans.), *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), pp. 109–10; and Cohen, *Identity machines*, p. 144.

42 Earl, *Thinking about Beowulf*, pp. 175–87.

43 Colgrave, in *Guthlac*, p. 19, argues for a date of 730–40 for the text.

44 Cohen, *Identity machines*, p. 144.

45 Craig R. Davis, 'Redundant ethnogenesis in *Beowulf*', *The heroic age*, 5 (2001), www.heroicage.org/issues/5/Davis1.html (accessed 5 June 2019).
46 Susan Reynolds, 'What do we mean by "Anglo-Saxon" and "Anglo-Saxons"?', *Journal of British Studies*, 24 (1985), 395–414, at 403–4.
47 Woolf, 'Apartheid', 127. See also John Hines, 'The becoming of the English: identity, material culture and language in early Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon studies in archaeology and history*, 7 (1994), 49–60.
48 Harris, *Race and ethnicity*, p. 10; Reynolds, 'What do we mean?', 398.
49 Cf. Lees, 'Men and *Beowulf*', p. 140.
50 Oswald, *Monsters*, p. 111.
51 See Cord Whitaker, 'Race-ing the dragon: the Middle Ages, race and trippin' into the future', *postmedieval*, 6 (2015), 3–11, the introduction to a special issue of *postmedieval*, 'Making Race Matter in the Middle Ages', where he argues that we need to take for granted that the Middle Ages were raced in complex ways, and to start unravelling them.
52 Christopher M. Roberts, 'The form, aspect, and definition of Anglo-Saxon identity: a study of medieval British words, deeds, and things', PhD dissertation, Arizona State University, 2013, p. 119.
53 Roberts, 'The form, aspect, and definition of Anglo-Saxon identity', p. 120.
54 Harris, *Race and ethnicity*, p. 1.
55 William C. Jordan, 'Why "race"?', *JMEMS*, 31 (2001), 165–74; and Asa Simon Mittman, 'Are the "monstrous races" races?', *postmedieval*, 6.1 (2015), 36–51. For other critiques of the use of race for the medieval period, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Race', in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (eds), *Critical terms for literary study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 274–87; Etienne Balibar, 'Election /Selection', keynote plenary for the University of California Humanities Research Institute conference *tRACEs: Race, Deconstruction, Critical Theory*, https://vimeo.com/album/1631670/video/25691025 (accessed 5 June 2019).
56 Heng, 'Invention of race', 265.
57 Ibid., 268, 267.
58 Craig and Davis, '"The only way they knew how to solve their disagreements"', p. 99.
59 Ibid. For TribalCrit, see also Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, 'Toward a Tribal Critical Race Theory in education', *The urban review*, 37 (2005), 425–46, and Brayboy, 'Tribal Critical Race Theory: an origin story and future directions', in Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixson (eds), *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in education* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 88–100. For CRT in general, see Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: an introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
60 Craig and Davis, '"The only way they knew how to solve their disagreements"', p. 99.

61 Helen Damico, 'Grendel's reign of terror: from history to vernacular epic', in Daniel Anlezark (ed.), *Myths, legends and heroes: essays on Old Norse and Old English literature in honour of John McKinnell* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 148–66, at 150.
62 Kathryn Powell, 'Meditating on men and monsters: a reconsideration of the thematic unity of the *Beowulf* manuscript', *RES*, 57 (2006), 1–15, at 6.
63 Harry August Rositzke (ed.), *The C-Text of the Old English Chronicles* (Bochum-Langendreer: Heinrich Pöppinghaus, 1940), pp. 55–6, quoted in Eileen A. Joy, 'The signs and location of a flight (or return?) of time: the Old English Wonders of the East and the Gujarat Massacre', in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.), *Cultural diversity in the British Middle Ages: archipelago, island, England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 209–29, at 222.
64 Simon Keynes, *The diplomas of King Æthelred the Unready, 978–1016: a study in their use as historical evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 204.
65 Joy, 'Signs and location', p. 222.
66 Dorothy Whitelock (ed.), *English historical documents I, c. 500–1042*, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 591, quoted in Joy, 'Signs and location', p. 222.