

## GRENDEL AND CAIN'S DESCENDANTS

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The epic of Beowulf has long been subjected to severe Christological scrutiny with scholars tending either to strong commitment to it as Christian allegory, or to equally strong opposition, regarding it instead as thoroughly pagan though lightly touched by the Old Testament. One of the best means of resolving that controversy lies in the internal evidence afforded by the interpretation of the Epic's names and major terminology. Part of that evidence is offered now in this analysis of the names surrounding the kinfolk of the villainous cannibal, Grendel, who was descended from Old Testament Cain, but had numerous non-Biblical relations of significant onomata.

Whether viewed as pagan epic or Christian allegory, the social basis of Beowulf rested on the comitatus, the pre-urban warrior-society of thanes which held their lord's authority and the obligations of kinship as dual sacred trust. The adoption of Christianity strengthened these beliefs all the more. Hence, the figure of Cain, the first rebel against the Lord and murderer of kin, acted as a particularly significant link in

identifying ancient belief with the new faith through his descendant Grendel. As the ravager of Lord Hrothgar's Hall and murderer of his thanes, he was logically regarded by the newly converted Anglo-Saxons as descended from Cain, that arch-enemy of the social order.

Yet, Grendel's line of descent does not run direct from that son of Adam either, for he derives also from the fifelcyn (104), evil spirits and figures of Germanic origin. Although Christian belief had its own share of devils and spirits, there were crucial differences between these and those of pagan belief. An investigation of these differences seems to make it evident that the fifelcyn were owing entirely to their ancient pagan sources rather than to any Christian analogues. The investigation of these will also help clarify the nature of Grendel's ambiguous character, particularly as to whether he was wholly or in part man or devil, or simply a monstrous configuration of fantasy.

It is true, certainly, that Grendel behaves most monstrously and even diabolically, but one must make the all-important distinction between his behaving monstrously and his being a monster, especially since the poet himself tells us that Grendel is a wer, a "man."<sup>1</sup> Even so distinguished a scholar as Tolkien, while noting that Grendel was human, nevertheless argued that he was an "ogre," a "physical monster" and his human

aspect was only a "parody of human form,"<sup>2</sup> While, the fifelcyn are such ogres, monsters and devils, his own terminology, also demonstrates that Grendel himself is not substantively so. While his behavior has been contaminated by his, ogriſh, Germanic kin, he remains in essence a descendant of Old Testament Cain, a man, albeit a vicious, feral, degenerate, who murders men and cannibalizes them in their Hall.

In contrast to the Germanic fifelcyn, the scriptural descendants of Cain remained entirely human, and gifted even, in that they laid the basis for civilization,<sup>3</sup> Cain himself, though a notorious exile in the land of Nod, of "Wandering," nevertheless raised a normal family. His son Enoch founded a city, while a later descendant Tubal Cain developed metallurgy and thus began technology. Another, Jubal, initiated culture by inventing the harp and organ. In Beowulf, Cain, too, remains human, the biblical outcast in the wilderness, an abhorrent rebel against the Lord, and the "sword-slayer" of his brother. However, Enoch and the rest are forgotten and, instead, dubious descendants of Cain are introduced, the Germanic fifelcyn. These probably amalgamated with the notion of rebel Cain because they, too, suggested forces opposed to the established order of the comitatus, particularly Grendel. Instead they moved, in the opposite direction of Cain and his family in threatening civilization. Thus, to dismiss these fifelcyn

vaguely as "monsters" or "devils" is therefore to ignore the complex nature of these forces and of Grendel, especially insofar as his behavior is vitiated in large part by his relation to them.

In an important preliminary study on the terminology of Beowulf, Signe Carlson found that while cyn obviously means "kin," the term fifel is unique to Beowulf in O.E., and is one which the dictionaries generalize as "sea monster," or, simply, as "monster" or "giant."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, some of these were very large marine beings. However, the Icelandic and Scandinavian dictionaries derive the term more pertinently from O.N. fifl, "fool," "clown," and even "madman," and include a significant list with the same root, all containing the notion of "folly."<sup>5</sup> Hence, the fifelcyn are precisely interpreted as a "race of fools" and even "simpletons." But it is an Old Icelandic proverb which defines most perceptively the nature of that simple-mindedness, "No wonder one is a fool (fifl), if one has never been taught." If so, then such a fool may be a shrewd being, yet who does not know how to behave because he is untutored and, indeed, "brutish." This certainly describes Grendel's own condition. It was his unredeeming ignorance, not feeble-mindedness, which led to his monstrous, anti-social behavior. All that uncontrolled folly and madness which he inherited from his northern fiflcyn took the form of frightful barbarism against the

contemporary civilization of the comitatus. Grendel is in essence the rebellious offspring of Cain, but one turned vicious by association with his northern kin.

One group of the fifel are further described as the untydras (lll) which, if deriving from tydre, a term meaning "frail," "weak," and, when negated by un-, certainly befits these terrifying fifel. Along with the alternative form, untyd, meaning "unskilled" and "ignorant," we have precisely the essential nature of these fifelcyn. Yet, the untydras of Beowulf have been repeatedly designated by scholars as not only "monsters" (a meaningless epithet actually), but worse, as "evil progeny" or "bad breeds," thus falsely damning their physical, mental and cultural limitations as evil or sinful. Yet in no single other instance is either untyd or untydre used in O.E. with such moral connotations. This affords one example, among many, of the double standard of interpretation about which Fred Robinson, and Merritt before him, have warned the O.E. scholar regarding the prejudicial limitations of lexikons that have so falsely colored our reading of Beowulf with Christological, moralistic overlay.<sup>6</sup> Bosworth and Toller, the standard O.E. Dictionary, is too often contaminated by such 19th and 20th century moral misinterpretations of Beowulf which have no analogous usage in any of the other examples of contemporary literature.

The poet of Beowulf defines these fifelcyn further, in terms of size, and more, which in turn defines the nature of Grendel. In describing them as eotenas ond ylfe (112) it is misleading generalization to dismiss these simply as "giants and elves." For one, these elves were not the playful little creatures of fairy-tales, but a vile dwarfish Germanic breed which produced certain diseases, caused nightmares and sometimes acted as succubi and incubi.<sup>7</sup> The alternate of the pair, the eoten is a cognate of O.N. iotunn and Swedish jätte, both meaning "giant." But eoten is more precisely traced to the O.E. and Icelandic verb etan, "to eat," which implies that these giant "eaters" among the fifel were either corpse-eaters or cannibals, as some madmen might well be; and, Grendel certainly was the latter, at least.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, this great, savage image associated with eoten seems also to have suggested the inclusion of the gigantas in line 113, along with these other descendants of Cain. That term, unique in O.E. to Beowulf, is retained from the Greek, curiously, in transliterated form. Most scholars believe these particular gigantas refer to the "giants" of Genesis 6:1-18. However, these latter were the "men of old on the earth," such as Noah, who were neither gigantic nor supernatural any more than they were cannibals. Moreover, the gigantas of Beowulf "warred against God for a long time" (113-114) while the

biblical ones were simply "mighty men who harbored evil thoughts." These epic gigantas were akin rather to the Germanic breed of rebellious giants driven by Thor from Asgard, or to the ancient Titans of Hesiod's Theogony (617-735), defeated by Zeus so that he could assert his Olympian dominance. Similarly in the Aeneid (6,577-84) the ancient Titans are hurled into Tartarus where, significantly, they writhe near faithless men who had betrayed their brethren, smote a parent, entangled a client in fraud, or had given nothing to their needy kin. Furthermore, these Titans lay next to those who had fought against their own country or broken faith with their lords. Ancient accounts are rife with such titanomachies against rebellious forces, which are necessary before the authority, order and justice of the chief deity is secured.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, universally, any mortal similarly threatening that established order, as well as its interdependent network of kinship and obligations, commits the gravest of sins. Thus, Grendel is naturally the kin of such gigantas not only because he is big and "well-known of old," but because he carried within him the Cainite seeds of rebellion against the authority of the Lord as well as of kings. He is openly termed the andsaca (786, 1682), the "enemy" of God. The poet of Beowulf accepted the concept of biblical Cain and

amalgamated him with his own familiar world of giants insofar as they all conveyed the dominant notion of rebellion against authority.

That Classical branch of gigantas is reinforced further, and differentiated from Germanic or Christian origin, in being paired in the phrase orcneas swylce gigantas (112-13), for the orcneas are associated by O.E. glossators with Orcus, the Roman God of Death.<sup>10</sup> These were underworld demons of a sort long familiar to the ancient world. For example, in Etruscan tomb paintings of the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. these demons, prototypes of the Christian devils, were depicted with big, hooked noses, ugly blue flesh, and as threatening with hammers and serpents the unhappy souls fallen from heathen grace.<sup>11</sup> Polygnotos, the great muralist of the 5th c. B.C., depicted in his painting, the "Underworld," just such a blue demon, a cannibal who ate those punished in Hades for their maltreatment of a parent, or worse, for rebellion against the gods.<sup>12</sup> There are important differences, however. There is no evidence that O.E. orcneas, though demons, ever punished men for their behavior or went after men's souls. These Northerners were not punitive moral forces like the devils of Christendom or even the Greco-Roman demons.

Much like the fifelcyn, though not descended of Cain, was the term thyrs, one unique to Grendel (426). The Icelandic

dictionary, while retaining the meaning of "giant" for thurs, defines the term more explicitly as "surly" and "stupid."<sup>13</sup> Similarly the Danish form tosse is also associated with "fool." Thus, the image of Grendel as big, surly, stupid and unruly keeps literally emerging from his northern roots.

Furthermore, as Whitelock points out, in O.E. the thyrs inhabited the fens and marshes.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it appears that these Anglo-Saxon descendants of Cain and their other relatives were much more at home by waters on earth than by the hell-fires of the underworld. Lastly, but importantly, the term thyrs also suggests the verb thyrstan, "to thirst," which evokes a vision of Grendel quenching his thirst by the blood of his victims, like some vampire precursor who needs human blood to stay alive. Thyrs as applied to Grendel himself seems to connote that he is more a blood-thirsty cannibal than a genuine devil.

There are devils and devils and the distinction must be made clear as to whether Beowulf's O.E. poet is dealing with Satanic Hellish devils or with evil spirits of pagan earthly fears. The northern demons were the latter. They stayed above ground haunting lonely and wild places and plaguing men in life. While threatening humans physically, they never pursued their souls or had any moral concerns whatsoever.

Other demonic terms in Beowulf relate to Grendel which are pertinent, however, because they involve the question as to

whether he was a fiend or devil touched by Christian notions of hell. In one case of the term feond, unfortunately the conventional assumptions regarding this serve more to denigrate Grendel than to clarify our understanding of him; in fact, the double standard of interpretation particularly vitiates Grendel's case. The dictionary of Bosworth and Toller, for example, for most usages of feond in the epic render it properly as "foe" or "enemy," but for Grendel alone qualify it as "fiend."<sup>15</sup> The term itself derives of course from O.E. feogan/feon, "to hate," and means simply "one who hates," which certainly befits Grendel's misanthropy, but which does not make him a "fiend."

Grendel is a particular kind of traditional epic "foe," who commits the crime of damaging both the Hall, Heorot, and King Hrothgar's reputation by putting him in the position of a chief who has failed to defend his hearth and thanes, a humiliation which Hrothgar feels more keenly than anything (475). In so doing, Grendel commits a major syn(n). But since he is not a Satanic devil or Christian malefactor, then what is the nature of the "syn" he is said to commit? Tolkien understood that as "sin," and as "cosmic," that is, as Chaos opposed to Light and Christendom.<sup>16</sup> But in Grendel's case syn can scarcely be understood as "sin," as personal, moral behavior, because he is too ignorant a fifel to understand ethical behavior either

toward his soul or anyone else's. As "sin" with cosmic connotations, that is a belief held by most primitive societies, in which Tolkien's so-called "light" is understood as "Natural Order" and "sin" or "evil" anything that opposes and actually disrupts it. In that broad sense Grendel is evil insofar as he violates that primitive, pre-Christian Order. But in Beowulf syn is used, rather, in a narrower sense, to connote an act hostile or injurious toward man-made laws and society: "Syn," therefore, means legal wrong-doing or "crime" against others, but not a "moral sin," injurious to the soul of anyone. For example, between the Swedes and Geats there were synn ond sacu (2472), "wrong-doings and strife," not "sins and strife." Such hostile acts were immoral, but in a social and legal sense, not a spiritual.<sup>17</sup> So, cannibal Grendel the synscatha (801), the "malefactor," is synnum geswenced (975), "burdened with crimes." Syn in Beowulf is not quite yet part of the theological terminology, even though it will soon be called upon for that service, just as the ancient Greek term hamartia, "failure," became the New Testament term for "sin."<sup>18</sup> Thus modern scholars must be careful not to overreach and anticipate; unfortunately the O.E. ones have done just that in applying a Christian veneer of sin over the original ancient surface of the epic's social and legal concept of syn.

Since Grendel and his kin betray a preponderantly pagan

tradition and action rather than a Christian, it is to be expected that their realm of hel would also. Only once is Grendel unquestionably associated with hell, and rightly, for the murders he had committed. In line 852 the spelling is indisputably hel, "hell." But . . . whether the pagan or Christian is intended, is open to question. Since hel received his haethene sawle (852), presumably a Christian hell was intended, to which Grendel was assigned because he did not acknowledge -- indeed, did not even know of God the Father. But in Beowulf there was also a hel for pagans, one to which in ancient times Anglo-Saxon chiefs had consigned anyone plundering that treasure which eventually was taken by the Dragon. For that crime the violator was fast-bound with "hell-bounds" hellbendum (3072) and doomed. Thus, punishment in hell, whether for Grendel or the plunderer of the hoard, is applied for social offenses against the code of the comitatus. In Grendel's case, in addition, because he did not recognize the Lord.

In any case, if Grendel's ambiguously Christian and pagan sawle was condemned to hel of one kind or another, he must have been conceived of as a human being, truly a wer, for neither demons nor monsters of fantasy, even anthropomorphic, were regarded as possessing souls or were consigned to the underworld for punishment. This, surely, is the most incontrovertible

evidence of all for regarding Grendel as a man and descended of Cain. He was not a monster or creature of fantasy as critics have so often regarded him in view of his monstrous behavior.

As revealed in the onomastic terminology of Beowulf, it seems that the nature of Cain's Germanic descendants, the fifelcyn including Grendel, derived from the broadest range of pagan antecedents. There is nothing Christian about them, and very little Judaic beyond the references to Cain himself. Yet Old Testament Cain is integral to this epic because in both the Anglo-Saxon and Hebraic cultures he represented the primal violator of civilizations which respected sacred authority and the bonds of blood kinship. As such, Cain in the North seems to have attracted as his descendants that pagan, uncivilized, cannibalistic and demonic even, horde of fifel.

In compounding rebellion with murder, Grendel committed arch-villainy; he committed the sin of Cain. That link of biblical Cain was particularly reinforced by the fifelcyn, the pagan inhabitants of both the Northern fens and the Classical Underworld. Moreover, Beowulf draws together Celtic beliefs (not cited here) regarding the social traditions of the Germanic peoples, and links these tentatively to the newly accepted figure of the Old Testament. (It is significant in this regard that that epic ignores any mention of Christ or any

other figure of New Testament faith.) In any case, all these other sources provided the poet with a literary and cultural heritage unique in its composite nature. In Beowulf there is closely reflected this coalescence of profoundly meaningful ideologies which make it an incomparable cultural document of the 8th century beliefs of the Anglo-Saxon comitatus.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Gründel as wer, Beowulf 105, 120, 1352.

<sup>2</sup>Critics such as Malone, Kaske, N. Chadwick, Ker, and Girvan have regularly dismissed Gründel as an anthropomorphic "monster." J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," in An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, ed. Lewis Nicholson (Notre Dame, Ind., 1963), pp. 88-91.

<sup>3</sup>Genesis 4:16-22. Umberto Cassuto, Commentary on Genesis (Jerusalem, 1961), pp. 216, 221-25, 228-29.

<sup>4</sup>Signe Carlson, Journal of American Folklore, 80 (1967), p. 360.

<sup>5</sup>Cleasby, Vigfusson and Craigie, Icelandic-English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1957), s.v. fifl. Also, Christopher Holmboe, Det Norske Sprog, oasentligsté Ordforraad, sammenlignet med Sanskrit og andre Sprog af samme Art (Wien, 1852); Erik Jonsson, Oldnordisk Ordbog ved det kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab (Kjøbenhavn, 1863); G. T. Zoëga, Islenskenesk Ordabók (Reykjavik, 1904). B. and T., also citè O.N. fifl.

<sup>6</sup>H.D. Merritt, Fact and Lore about Old English Words. (Stanford, 1954), p. viii. Fred C. Robinson, "Lexicography and Literary Criticism: A Caveat," in James L. Rosier, Philological Essays: Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature in Honour of Herbert Dean Merritt (The Hague, 1970), pp. 99-110.

<sup>7</sup>Jakob Grimm, Deutsche Mythologie, ed. Elard Hugo Meyer (Berlin, 1878), vol. iii, p. 133 (s. 385). James Stallybrass, transl. of 4th edition, Teutonic Mythology (New York, 1966), vol. iv., pp. 1418-19 (s. 465).

<sup>8</sup>B. and T., s.v. etan, "to eat," "consume." It means the same in all its cognate forms, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Germanic and Scandinavian. Carlson, pp. 360-61 and n. 15. Nicolas Kiessling, "Grendel: A New Aspect," Mod. Philol. 65 (1968), pp. 200-201. Tolkien, p. 90. In regard to eoten as "giant," it is questionable whether the legendary Etionas, [for Oxionas], in Tacitus Germ. 46, are not also the same breed. Grimm, p. 159 (s. 460). Stallybrass, p. 1437 (s. 520).

<sup>9</sup>That such titanomachies may also be regarded as struggles between forces of Good and Evil is of secondary and later importance; nor are they on the moral level as yet of Genesis, or of the Manichaean or ancient Zoroastrian struggle of the Father of Greatness versus the Prince of Darkness. Even a god such as the Babylonian Marduk undertook to defeat Tiamat's army of monsters and demons, forces of chaos, only if the gods would grant him supreme authority. M.J. Dresden, Mythology of Ancient Iran, in Kramer, pp. 341, 357; on p. 201, Cyrus Gordon states that this dualism between Good and Evil "was deeply entrenched in Canaan from pre-Hebraic times." In India their counterpart in the Sanskrit Rigveda, c. 1000 B.C., is Vitva who is associated with other demons, the rakshas, while the Adityas represent Good and take Indra as their champion in the strife.

<sup>10</sup>Grimm, p. 141 (s. 403). Stallybrass, vol. ii, p. 486. For the etymology of orcneas and its derivation from Orcus see the discussion in Johannes Hoops, Beowulfstudien (Heidelberg, 1932), pp. 17-20.

<sup>11</sup>Charu threatens thus in the fresco painting in the early 1st century B.C. Francois Tomb at Vulci. Massimo Pallottino, Etruscan Painting (Geneva, 1952), pp. 115-19, including illustrations. In the Tomb of the Typhon, probably 1st century B.C., similar demons escort the Pumpu [Pompey] family to the Underworld, pp. 125-28, including illustrations. Elsewhere, in the Tomb of Orcus, Theseus is rendered as menaced in the Underworld by the Etruscan demon, Tuchulchas, "A horrific winged creature with the face of a bird of prey, asses' ears and snakes rearing above its head. The monster is brandishing a huge green serpent . . .", pp. 112-13. See also the tomb painting of the Hellenistic period, p. 123. Henrietta Groenewegen-Frankfort and Bernard Ashmole, Art of the Ancient World, ed. Horst Janson (New York, N.D. [1971?]), p. 50.

<sup>12</sup>Pausanias, X, 28, calls the corpse-eater a Σαίμων, named Eurynomus.

<sup>13</sup> Cleasby, Vigfusson and Craigie, s.v. Þurs.

<sup>14</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf (Oxford, 1951), pp. 66, 72-73. Nora Chadwick, "The Monsters and Beowulf," in Anglo-Saxon Studies for Bruce Dickens, ed. P. Clemoes (London, 1959), p. 173 and n. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Hall and Merrit, s.v. feond: "adversary, foe, enemy; "fiend" [Life of St. Guthlac]. Jember, s.v. feond, renders it indiscriminately as "enemy, fiend, Satan" for all periods. Stephen Barney, Word-Hoard: An Introduction to Old English Vocabulary (New Haven, 1977), s.v. feond, p. 59, notes that feond had the unique meaning "devil" only later. Carlson, p. 359, finds that of twenty-two translations and adaptations of the epic, only two translate feond in lines 101 and 725, as "enemy" or "foe," while sixteen retain, "demon," "devil," "spirit." Tolkien recognized that feond in reference to Grendel meant "enemy," Tolkien, p. 89.

<sup>16</sup> Tolkien, pp. 69-72, 87-89. He gives "malefactor" for synscatha (801) but lapses into the conventional "afflicted with sins" for synnum beswenced (975), thus giving prejudicial coloring to the term, influenced by the fact that Grendel was a descendant of Cain.

<sup>17</sup> Winifred Lehmann, "On Reflections of Germanic Terminology and Situations in the Edda", in Edgar Polomé, Old Norse Literature and Mythology (Austin and London, 1969), pp. 227-43, esp. p. 231 for synn in relation to kin.

<sup>18</sup> Gerhard Kittel, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1972), Vol. I, pp. 296-97, s.v. ἀμαρτία; Liddell and Scott, Greek-English Dictionary, New ed. by H.S. Jones and R. McKenzie (Oxford, 1940), s.v. ἀμαρτάνω. Ernst Rohde, Psyche (New York, 1925), vol. I, p. 319.