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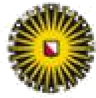

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Monstrosity in *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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Abstract

The present study aspires to demonstrate the function of the monster in early and late medieval literature through a multi-layered study of monstrosity in *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Much of the previous research that has analysed monstrosity in these texts has focused on the physical shape and body of the monsters. Therefore, a more culturally contextualised reading is offered, arguing that the monsters, when they appear in heroic epics or courtly romances, reflect profoundly on the culture that created them. It is analysed whether Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" applies to *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and whether a comparison of these two analyses reveals a change in medieval identity over time. By examining how the monster is portrayed in both *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this study clarifies the development from shame culture to guilt culture, and the transition from heroic code to chivalric code.

Table of Contents

Introduction……………………………………………………………………………..6

Chapter 1: Monster Culture…….……………………………………………………………..8

Chapter 2: *Beowulf*…………………………………………………………………….....13

Chapter 3: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*………………………………………………..22

Chapter 4: From *Beowulf* to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*...…………………………….30

Conclusion………………………………………………………………………………33

Works Cited……………………………………………………………………………..35

Introduction

The first records of man's fascination with monsters can be traced back five thousand years ago to the depictions of the monstrous found in the murals of Ancient Egypt. Ever since, monsters have been a pervasive figure in the breadth of cultures and across diverse media forms. The last few decades have seen an explosion in popularity in the study and analysis of the monster. In his "Seven Theses," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen sets the tone for much of the discussion of monster theory, by initially categorising the monster as "pure culture" (4). The same notion is shared by other commentators of the monstrous discourse. Niall Scott states that "[t]he monster is perhaps one of the most significant creations serving to reflect and critique human existence" (1). Peter Dendle writes about the monster from a similar premise; the monster "can be read as tracking a wide range of cultural, political, and economic anxieties of [ ] society" (45).

The role of the monster figure in the Middle Ages has been addressed by Michael Camille, who discusses the role of monsters in the margins of many medieval manuscripts. Camille observes that the monster acts as a visual mirror of a culture's anxiety about identity (9). Dana Oswald, author of *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*, also asserts that "monsters are depositories for all kinds of human fears and anxieties" (8).

The present paper aims to build on previous analyses of monsters in the Middle Ages by exploring the concept of monstrosity in *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Much of the previous research that has analysed monstrosity in these texts has focused on the physical shape and body of the monsters, as though their materiality really matters in a literary context (Oswald, Mittman and Kim). After all, those monsters never really existed, except in the human imagination. Therefore, I would like to suggest a more culturally contextualised reading, arguing that the monsters, when they appear in heroic epics or courtly romances, reflect profoundly on the culture that created them. I explore whether Cohen's seven theses apply to *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and whether a comparison of these two texts

reveals a change in medieval identity over time. The chosen texts cover a broad time span that is representative of both the early and late Middle Ages. This timeframe allows for a comparison between these two texts to analyse whether a change in medieval identity occurred. In addition, *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are representative of the most emblematic genres of the early and late medieval periods, that of the epic and courtly romance, respectively.

The theoretical approach of this thesis has been divided into four parts. First, I will present the theorisation of the cultural notion of the monster. Here, I draw particularly on Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" as a cultural concept. In chapters two and three I analyse whether Cohen's seven theses apply to *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, respectively. Chapter four outlines a comparative analysis that aims to determine whether the differing treatment of monsters in *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reflects a change in medieval identity over time. In exploring how the monster is portrayed in both *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is my intention to demonstrate the development of shame culture to guilt culture, and the transition from heroic to chivalric code.

1. Monster Culture

1.1 Teratology: The Study of Monsters

Teratology, the study of monsters, crosses many disciplinary boundaries, developing in and adapting to the multiple areas in which it is inserted. Medicine characterises teratology as the domain of "studying the development of physical abnormalities during the foetal or embryonic stage," whilst biology assigns to the term the study of "abnormal formations in animals or plants." Literature, in turn, defines this term as "a type of mythmaking or storytelling in which monsters and marvels are featured" (Picart and Browning 1).

Although they are different, the definitions above essentially have two components in common. First, the monstrous as equivalent to the uncommon or defective, and second, the creation and growth of something abnormal.

1.2 The Origins of Monster Theory

Cohen's *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, published in 1996, can in some ways be seen as having inaugurated the field of Monster Studies. Cohen states that monsters in medieval European literature embody a paradox of otherness and intimacy that allows authors and readers to test definitions of cultural identity. In "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Cohen broadly debates and examines monsters in connection with the cultures that produce them. He begins with "a sketch of a new *modus legendi*: a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender." Cohen claims that monsters "ask us to re-evaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression" (20).

During the 1990s scholars in many areas of Medieval Studies made significant contributions to the growing field of teratology. For instance, Camille discusses the role of the hybrid figures who populate the margins of many medieval manuscripts as visual mirrors of

anxiety about identity in the cultures that created them (9). Oswald also asserts that “monsters are depositories for all kinds of human fears and anxieties” (8).

However, the study of monsters can hardly be said to have started in the 1990s. Beginning as early as five thousand years ago, with the records of entities such as clubfoot and achondroplasia in Egyptian murals, the profound interest in deformed individuals, human beings as well as animals, has spanned over centuries. Primitive tribes throughout the world have left proof of their fixation for abnormalities in their carvings and reliefs. Giants, dwarfs, one-eyed monsters, and mermaids have existed in the tales of many peoples. The Babylonians believed that the future was foretold by the stars. Infants with deformities were thought to be representations of stellar constellations, and therefore predicted the future since they determined the stars’ positions. This belief was carried into the Greek and Roman civilizations. Thus the Latin word *monstrum*, from *monstrare*, to show, or *monere*, to warn, originates in this idea of a monster’s ability of predicting the future (Barrow 18).

In the Roman period, the philosopher Pliny the Elder, who was interested in learning about the curiosities at the edges of the known world, as well as others closer to civilization, could be considered a scholarly practitioner of Monster Studies. Pliny claimed that everything created by nature was intended to have a purpose, and it was the aim of the natural scientist to identify this purpose in the most ordinary things as well as in wonders. Pliny based his encyclopaedia on the work of Herodotus, in addition to two influential sources by Megasthenses, Greek ambassador to India, and the work of Ctesias of Cnidus, a Greek writer of the fifth-century BCE, who probably journeyed to the East, where he claims to have seen wondrous people and animals (Mittman and Dendle 3).

In the European tradition, many of the most influential scholars of the early Christian and medieval periods contemplated the definition and etymology of *monstra*, and the issue of the existence of monsters within God’s perfect creation. Significant passages by, for instance, St.

Augustine and Isidore of Seville, are mentioned in many works that cover the subject of the monster. Both Isidore and Augustine agree upon the fact that these monstrous races, if they exist, are a part of God's creation and therefore cannot be understood as failures (3).

These naturalists of the ancient and medieval periods not only offered a physical account of these wonders of the East, they also provided a reliable explanation for their existence and their purpose in the world. However, these descriptions did not account for the interest monsters inspired or their significance to the cultures that created them, as the modern field of Monster Studies attempts to do.

1.3 "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)"

Among the authors who have addressed this issue, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's work best summarises all the possible ways we have approached the monstrous. In his essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Cohen lists seven theses about the monster that remain as accurate now as they might have been in Prehistoric Egypt or Ancient Rome.

The first thesis holds that, as a cultural body, a monster represents something other than itself; it is a symbol or representation of a culture. It is brought into being because of certain places or feelings of a certain time period. Cohen states that monsters essentially combine the elements of "fear, anxiety, desire, and fantasy," offering them an unusual independence. They are "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment" (4).

The second thesis demonstrates that monsters are able to disappear entirely only to resurface someplace else. Over time, they have found their place in society repeatedly. They can never be caught, or if they are, they will come back, be it in a different form or guise. When a monster is defeated, there are always some traces of it left behind; a small glimpse of the monster that makes people uncertain of its destruction. Monsters can be analysed by following the social and historical characteristics of the culture that created them. It is vital to reconsider

the social relations of a culture every time the monster resurfaces, since the circumstances that create monsters constantly evolve (4-6).

In the third thesis, Cohen claims monsters defy classification because they are able to disappear and reappear, therefore making it hard to understand their condition. Monsters can be half-human, half-animal, which excludes them from either category, or they can have some sort of disfigurement or social characteristic that keeps them from being defined. The monster's body does not conform to the standards and expectations of society. The main argument of the third thesis is that monsters are diverse and therefore difficult to comprehend. In addition, monsters conform to the needs of the culture that spawned them (6-7).

The fourth thesis suggests the existence of the monster at "the gates of difference." Monsters are born out of the things that are thought of as different. They do not conform to the norm culturally, sexually, racially, economically, or politically. They have aspects outside the standards of traditional thought. When society believes something to be correct, the monster always assumes the opposite (7).

In the fifth thesis, Cohen asserts that the monster "polices borders of the possible." The monster is an advocate against possible investigations, delimiting intellectual, geographical, and sexual mobility. The monster confines the societal space in which humans can move as it enforces the law of exclusion. Essentially this means that monsters are signals of the unknown. They represent the ideas that frighten people so that they will stop searching. For instance, when the ocean was being explored, sea monsters were invented to dwell at world's end. Sailors would be scared and not want to explore what may be beyond their understanding. Monsters keep us away from the unknown (12-16).

The sixth thesis analyses societal concerns about monsters as a kind of desire. The same monsters who frighten and destroy can stimulate forceful escapist fantasies. The connection of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary

departure from society and its rules. People create monsters so that they can explore what would normally be taboo. Monsters can freely cause ruin and evil, yet not care about consequences or guilt. These coexisting feelings of disgust and attraction are the main reason for the continued cultural fascination with the monster (16-20).

Cohen's seventh and final thesis implies that monsters encourage people to re-evaluate their cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality and their perception of difference, and question these assumptions. Monsters invoke people to search their minds and find their true beliefs. They challenge society's perception of the world (20).

Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" will comprise the basis of the analysis provided in the present paper.

2. *Beowulf*

2.1 Thesis I: The Monster's Body is a Cultural Body

In relation to the first thesis, "the monster's body is a cultural body," the monsters in *Beowulf* represent a broad collective reaction to the transformations that affected a complex society during a period of major crisis and change (Cohen 4). To note only the most obvious of these changes; by the time that this poem was put down in writing, the English-speaking peoples of the British Isles had given up pagan beliefs and had adopted the teachings of Christianity.

Though set in pagan times, *Beowulf* eventually came to be told by a Christian poet. Since the poet was a Christian, the poem necessarily became the product of a Christian worldview (Blackburn 205). Yet, claiming the total form of *Beowulf* is Christian, does not mean that the pagan elements symbolise or imply Christian elements; only that, for the poet and his audience, the pagan matter of the poem would have necessarily been viewed in light of Christian doctrine.

Bearing in mind the *Beowulf* poet was Christian, it could therefore be argued that the monsters in the poem represent the flaws of Germanic culture. According to Roy Liuzza, from a Christian perspective, rebellion against God is the essence of paganism. Liuzza states that "Grendel can be regarded as a monstrous embodiment of the principle of fratricide, his mother a manifestation of the harsh economy of revenge [ ], and the dragon a kind of perverse king hoarding his wealth in a morbid anti-hall" (17). All three monsters are driven by revenge that perpetuates the never ending feuding and blood loss, like Germanic society itself. The monsters in *Beowulf* represent the Germanic values that threatened Christianity.

To the Anglo-Saxons, the worst crime a person could commit was the crime of fratricide, the killing of one's own brother. Anglo-Saxon society and culture was deeply structured around themes of brotherhood and kinship. Nevertheless, fratricide was an occupational hazard in ruling Germanic families, since succession was not by birthright but by choice of the strongest.

In the heroic age of the north, sons were often fostered out, partly to reduce conflict and risk, but fraternal rivalry remained a significant problem (Alexander 32).

The figure of Grendel very much embodies the savage spirit of fratricidal envy; he is identified as a descendant from Cain, the first murderer. When Grendel is first introduced, the audience is told that he is enraged at the festivities in the hall and the sound of laughter that he hears while he is alone in his mere. In *Beowulf*, Heorot is the symbol of peace; it is the place where the warriors gather in a spirit of brotherhood and harmony to celebrate (Pollington 19). Grendel represents a monstrous outsider enraged by the joys of brotherhood and society from which he is forever banished. His enmity towards Heorot is grounded solely in this moral perversion. Grendel exhibits his envy as Cain once did to his brother.

Feuding and revenge are central to the theme and structure of *Beowulf*. The poet portrays a society built upon revenge and shows how this system collapses under its own weight. While he does not criticise heroic achievements, the poet ultimately illustrates how their social system, based on Germanic ideals of reciprocity and revenge, destroys itself, which suggests the preferable route of Christian forgiveness. Arthur Du Bois observes that the poem begins with Beowulf's fight with Grendel when the Geats are at their strongest, and ends with the dragon and the fall of the Geats (379). The monsters in *Beowulf* are a key element in this representation of feuding because they complicate the threats of vengeance and feud. Just as Beowulf exacts revenge upon Grendel for killing Hrothgar's men, so too must Grendel's mother seek to purge her grief by slaying her son's murderer.

The dragon is a literal threat to the safety of Beowulf's people, but its behaviour also represents a moral danger. Earlier in the poem, Hrothgar makes a lengthy speech warning against the dangers of greed (*Beowulf* 1709-57), and he rewards Beowulf generously with gifts and weapons in return for killing Grendel and his mother (1019-55, 1866-99). This, the poet tells us, is what a good leader does (20-21). But the dragon, in contrast, does not behave like

this at all. The chaos it wreaks on an entire kingdom is provoked by the theft of a single cup from its hoard (2293-2310). Greed is a real concern in *Beowulf*: in Anglo-Saxon society, society's basic social contract called for warriors to be loyal to their kings and for kings to generously redistribute the wealth that warriors brought in. If a king began to hoard instead of share, warrior loyalty was strained and uncertainty entered the picture.

2.2 Thesis II: The Monster Always Escapes

The second thesis states that "the monster always escapes" (4). At first, it might seem that this does not apply to the monsters in *Beowulf*, since all three of them are eventually killed. However, this thesis should not be subject to such a limited interpretation. Cohen states that "[n]o monster tastes of death but once. The anxiety [ ] can be dispersed temporarily, but the revenant by definition returns. And so the monster's body is both corporeal and incorporeal; its threat is its propensity to shift" (5). *Beowulf* reveals with all possible clarity that the fight against monsters is a continuous battle; when the hero has defeated one monster, a new one appears. We see Beowulf involved in a series of fights against monsters, but these fights are not just a repetition of great deeds in which the hero easily conquers his enemies. Instead, according to Manuel Aguirre, "Beowulf's three fights are stacked along a gradient (of increasing difficulty)" (367). The fights become harder to overcome, as the monsters reveal themselves as more and more powerful and morally legitimated to overcome.

In addition, Cohen claims that when the monster vanishes, "[w]e see the damage that the monster wreaks, the material remains" (4), which is manifested in the trophies that Beowulf acquires for his victories. War trophies and booty play a vital role in the celebration of heroic deeds. When Beowulf fights Grendel, Grendel's shoulder begins to tear, and eventually his arm comes off. The displaying of the severed arm, whether inside or outside the hall, under the roof or over it, has been a matter of debate (Bremmer 122). When the severed arm is hung outside Heorot, it serves as a warning for all who have bad intentions. When Grendel's arm is displayed

inside Heorot, it functions as a representation of the victorious hero by metonymically evoking the strength and terror of his defeated adversary. The uncertainty surrounding the location of the arm is consistent with the idea of monsters being a continuing threat.

The warriors parade Grendel's head around in a similar way; as a celebration of Beowulf's victory. Indeed, the severed head is a clear indication that the monster's threat has been quashed and this fact is celebrated by those that look upon it. Yet, at the same time, the Danes face a daily reminder of the disruptive power Grendel had. The trophy thus signifies not only Beowulf's victory, but also the terrifying agency of the horrible Other. The possibility of signification outside the symbolic order jeopardises the very structures of meaning on which Hrothgar's kingdom, Beowulf's fame, and the poem itself depend (Trilling 18).

2.3 Thesis III: The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis

With regard to the idea that the monster is the harbinger of category crisis, Cohen states that "[t]he monster always escapes because it refuses easy categorisation" (6). Monsters are "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (6). This is true of the monsters in *Beowulf*. Although we can determine Grendel's social status, it is difficult to understand his physical appearance. Hrothgar states that Grendel is bigger than men (*Beowulf* 1353). Even more telling is the weight of his head; four men struggle when carrying his dismembered head from the mere (1637-9). Michael Lapidge argues that "the *Beowulf*-poet carefully avoided giving his readers any descriptive details concerning Grendel that would enable them to visualise him within categories familiar from their external world" (152). The fact is, as Lapidge rightly suggests, readers cannot put together a coherent image of Grendel, at least not one based on the text. Although many critics see him as a more bestial figure than human, his form seems to be that of a man, not an animal. We can surmise some basic facts from the action of the text. Grendel

must walk on two legs, rather than going on all four as a beast; the nature of his tracks, the way he grabs his enemies, and his ability to flee with only one arm suggest that he must be upright and walk like a man. However, little evidence of his appearance resides in the poem.

Grendel's body receives only two explicit, descriptive passages in the poem. First we learn that his eyes shine like fire (*Beowulf* 726-7). Second, after Beowulf has ripped Grendel's arm off, his hand is described as having fingers with nails as hard as steel (985-7). What is most surprising here is not that the nails are frightening, but the fact that the formation of the hand itself seems human; it has fingers and nails and only the nails' steel-like strength seems remarkable. There is no mention of the hand's skin being scaly or green or even rough. What is most striking about the hand is how it cannot be damaged, not how it looks. In many ways, this hand is just a familiar appendage whose appearance signals Grendel's status as a creature whose body is similar but not identical to that of a human. These moments of description reveal a body that carries some of the traditional markers of a monster, but a body that is also undeniably human in formation.

The physical appearance of Grendel's mother is just as amorphous as that of her son, if not more so. Grendel's mother is described in human and monstrous terms (Staver 69). She is specifically called a *wif unhyre* "monstrous woman" and an *aglaeca wif* "monster woman" (*Beowulf* 2120, 1259). *Ides* in *Beowulf* denotes "lady" and connotes a woman of high social rank. In addition, the poet stresses her maternal role; she is referred to usually as *modor*. There is an emphasis on characterising her as a grieving mother who wants to "avenge her son's death" (1278). It seems clear from these epithets that Grendel's mother inverts the Germanic roles of the mother or lady. She has the form of a woman: *ides onlicnæs* "likeness of a woman" (1339). Yet, unlike most mothers and queens, she fights her own battles.

Because the poet wishes to stress this specific inversion of the Anglo-Saxon ideal of woman as both monstrous and masculine, he occasionally uses a masculine pronoun in referring

to Grendel's mother. Instead of using *hēo* and *shēo* "she," Grendel's mother is referred to as *hē* and *sē* "he." Other epithets applied to her are usually used to describe male warriors: *secg* "warrior" and *mihtig mānscaða* "destroyer" (Nitzsche 288).

The poet constantly contrasts the monstrous and masculine behaviour of Grendel's mother with that of the female. These different characterisations together are hard to see as a unity. Is Grendel's mother a bestial female, like an animal robbed of her offspring, or is she a regal figure demanding justice in a feud?

The dragon in *Beowulf* is quite dissimilar from his monstrous foregoers. In fact, the dragon is neither so monstrous nor so human as Grendel is. True, he destroys the land of the Geats with ruthless violence and evident contempt for the enemy, however he never actually eats anyone. There are no gory details in this portion of the poem; the terror, though no less real, is less corporeal. Although he is not a predator, the dragon does not project the image of a warrior either; he lacks a comitatus, does not appear to be a member of a tribe or clan, and boasts no genealogy. Furthermore, he is serpentine, and therefore "conspicuously non-anthropomorphic," in physical appearance (Parks 14). These are the characteristics of a monster truly alien to human kind.

2.4 Thesis IV: The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference

It is important to note that monsters who live on the outskirts of the human domain do not acknowledge the laws that a society is based on. They do not respect the social bonds that are created, for instance, when a ring-giver presents his warriors with gifts and in return expects them to fight for him. The monsters are therefore a threat to social hierarchy.

In *Beowulf*, this is best exemplified in Grendel and Grendel's mother, who are both abject entities (Hien 3). They are descended from Cain, whose killing of his own brother meant that he was exiled. The poem places great importance on lineage and kinship, opening immediately with the myth of the legendary progenitor of the Scyldings, Scyld Scefing, which is then

reinforced as the poem continues to develop this bloodline through Scyld's descendants. In murdering his brother, Cain subverts a key value of the social order as he damages the inviolability of kinship, making him, and all those who descend from him, not suitable for society. As such, Cain and all his descendants must be cast out to re-establish the social order. Consequently, they are separated from human comfort to occupy the wilderness.

Grendel and his mother are thus born into exile, forced to live outside of Heorot's borders where they dwell hidden away in a hellish marsh. The fear that stems from such exile is reinforced through the status of Grendel and Grendel's mother as outsiders and their otherness is repeatedly emphasised in the poem as they are described as outcasts and fatherless creatures (*Beowulf* 1275, 1355). Lineage is called into question, as not knowing who their father was would have been regarded as particularly appalling in a patriarchal society where parentage was often a way in which one could determine who to trust. The uncertainty surrounding the fathering of Grendel and his mother, coupled with their ancestry, thus renders their existence sinister and untrustworthy to the Scyldings and the Geats.

The distance that is highlighted by the boundaries separating Heorot from Grendel and his mother's swamp intensifies the notion of them coming from the unknown. The swamp is called an outlandish lair, full of fearful waters (1500, 1260). Increasing the abjectness of their home, the swamp is often described as an unclean, impure place and filled with threatening sea-beasts, who attack with their tusks (1510). The swamp as a treacherous place, its unfamiliarity alarming, is truly the home of the abject Other.

2.5 Thesis V: The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible

In connection with the fifth thesis, Cohen states that "the monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot-must not-be crossed" (13). As mentioned above, Grendel and his mother are the descendants of Cain, who murdered his own brother. This is the reason

why his descendants have been driven to the outskirts of the human world. Grendel terrorises the Danes many nights, killing them and defeating their efforts to fight back. The Danes suffer years of fear and death at the hands of Grendel. Grendel, and after his death Grendel's mother, therefore "prevents mobility" (12); his domain is a place where people will fear to go; it is the land of those who have committed terrible crimes. In this way the monster becomes an embodiment of the taboos of a culture. It is only after a young Geatish warrior named Beowulf hears of Hrothgar's plight that the Danish countryside is saved from its treacherous monsters.

2.6 Thesis VI: Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire

The sixth thesis holds that "fear of the monster is really a kind of desire," and in relation to this thesis Cohen writes that "the same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies" (17). Even though the monsters we meet in *Beowulf* are manifestations of threats to human community, it is possible to admire or envy their extraordinary power, autonomy and freedom from the restrains imposed by society. This is quite literally the case in the fight between Beowulf and Grendel's mother. In the passage describing their battle, the poet exploits the basic similarities between sexual intercourse and battle. This is achieved in three ways:

> first, the emphasis upon clutching, grasping, and embracing while they fight; second, the contest for a dominant position astride the other; and third, the use of fingers, knife, or sword to penetrate clothing or the body, the latter always accompanied by the implied figurative kinship between the sword and the phallus and between decapitation and castration (Nitzsche 294).

2.7 Thesis VII: The Monster Stands at the Threshold...of Becoming

Finally, the seventh thesis proclaims that "the monster stands at the threshold of … becoming" (20). This reveals a lot about both Beowulf and Grendel. First, Grendel is a means by which Beowulf can further reify his name and achieve wealth. However, more generally, and more

importantly, Grendel, and his function in the text, allows us to ask questions about the cultural values that exist in the text and allows us to, as Cohen writes, "bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but [ ] self-knowledge, *human* knowledge – and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside" (20).

Cohen further notes that "monsters are our children" (20). This observation seems to be in accordance with the idea that monstrosity in *Beowulf* is not only concerned with what attacks from the outside, but that monstrosity can also arise from within. This again ties in with the idea that the monsters in *Beowulf* represent all that is flawed about Germanic culture; they represent what is wrong with the humans in society. When people fail to meet the challenges of monstrosity, this is monstrous in itself, and when humans stop defending their community, they risk becoming like the creatures that lurk in the periphery of the world.

3. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

3.1 Thesis I: The Monster's Body is a Cultural Body

The Green Knight substantiates Cohen's hypothesis that monsters are the "embodiment of a certain cultural moment" (4). This is certainly true in the case of the Green Knight. Chivalry, as the chief society-forming ideology of Western medieval culture, was already in decline by the time *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written.

Cohen states that *monstrum* etymologically derives from "that which reveals" and "that which warns" (4). The Green Knight, first of all, reveals the corruption and conceitedness of King Arthur's court. For instance, the Knights of the Round Table are defined by a chivalrous code, in which loyalty, courage and courtesy are essential to a man's character and stature, and cowardice is considered a weakness. The confrontation with the Green Knight is therefore not just a challenge to each individual knight, but to the very soul of the Arthurian chivalric code. That code is shown to be worthless when none of the knights dare to agree to the conditions of the Green Knight's challenge until Gawain, who considers himself the lowest knight present, eventually does. However, more important is the Green Knight's assessment of Gawain's moral sense through the beheading game. The question arises as to what extent a knight can stay virtuous and what Gawain's own limitations are. In addition, indirectly, Gawain's adventure with the Green Knight highlights the failings of King Arthur's court. Gawain returns to Camelot ashamed that he withheld the green girdle from the Green Knight out of self-preservation and that he has failed a test of honour. Gawain explains to Arthur and the court that he plans to wear the girdle as a reminder of his failure, "[f]or man's crimes can be covered but never made clean; once sin is entwined it is attached for all time" (*Sir Gawain* 2511-2). Yet, instead of being properly sobered, Arthur dismisses Gawain's words and proclaims that the entire court is to wear a similar girdle for Gawain's sake. King Arthur's misguided understanding of and

response to the story warns Gawain, and the audience, against the dishonesty of Arthur's court, and, by extension, the chivalric code.

It is also suggested that "the monster signifies something other than itself" (4). In this respect, the Green Knight and the façade of Bercilak's castle represent the conscience of Gawain, a knight of the Round Table, and, as a result, the knightly order itself. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a sequence of events comes to pass, each event indicating a different part of the human consciousness. The Green Knight's challenge, for instance, tests whether the knights can live up to the standards they have set themselves. The game's revised rules, caused by the Green Knight's immortality, call into question the acceptance of divine judgement, as God ultimately predestined these events. Gawain's journey is a trial of physical hardship and of spiritual endurance through exile, which was a common motif in Anglo-Saxon poetry (Frey 293). The wealth in the castle is a test of constraint and the game of kisses a trial of loyalty.

3.2 Thesis II: The Monster Always Escapes

Cohen asserts that "we see the damage that the monster wreaks, the material remains" (4), meaning that when a monster is killed, there are always some traces of it left behind; small glimpses that make people doubtful of its extinction. The Green Knight is never actually killed in the poem. There is, however, evidence of the monster's presence even when it is absent. According to the rules of the game laid down by the Green Knight himself, the volunteering knight is entitled to keep the axe as his own, seemingly as a keepsake and a reminder of the deadly importance of the adventure thus undertaken. However, after the Green Knight leaves Camelot, with his head in his hand, the whole matter is gaily laughed off by Arthur's court. The impressive green axe is hung as a trophy, where all men can admire it, and the merry and carefree feast is continued. However, the presence of the Green Knight's axe makes Sir Gawain subconsciously aware of the graveness and inescapability of the following half of the beheading game. In addition, after the challenge Sir Gawain decides to wear the green badge of disgrace

on the outside of his armour. The green girdle, which now forms a permanent part of Gawain's equipment, is taken from the Green Knight himself; more precisely, from his gown. The green lace, as a stain on the golden armour, thus signifies Gawain's true nature, but will also serve as a reminder of his failure (Sadowski 104-5).

The Green Knight also supports the thesis which argues that "the monster itself turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear somewhere else" (Cohen 4). This is certainly true of the Green Knight. When Gawain asks to know who the Green Knight really is, the knight tells him that his name is Bercilak of Hautdesert. Bercilak explains that he has learned his supernatural abilities from Morgan Le Faye, the old woman who lived at the castle with him. It was this sorceress who sent Bercilak to Camelot. Morgan wished to test the reputation of Arthur and his knights and to scare Guinevere to death with the carnage of the axe stroke. Bercilak was transformed by magic, turned as immaterial as Morgan wished him to be, and simply could not be grasped or killed. The fantastic and sudden presence of the Green Knight's castle is also noteworthy; it appears just as Gawain prays for harbour. Also, Bercilak himself has to direct Gawain to the Green Chapel, as nobody knows were the Green Knight dwells.

Cohen further states that "[n]o monster tastes of death once." He always comes back and has the "propensity to shift" (5). Again, the Green Knight is only partly subject to this specification. As mentioned previously, the Green Knight does not die when he is beheaded; there is no doubt that he is still alive after the stroke. There is no act of the monster being dead, or a magical reanimation. Gawain's adventure solves the mystery of the Green Knight, and he has not come to attack Arthur's court, yet the danger that the monster might come back in violence is still present. As there are no tidings of the Green Knight or his household after Gawain is released, there is always the possibility that he could appear again. According to Karl Fugelso, the possibility that a monster might return is "a quiet part of the medieval literary tradition that follows he *Historia Regum Britanniae*" (72). The monster as Other must be dealt

with whenever it is found, lest it endanger the current social-political paradigm.

3.3 Thesis III: The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis

Referring to the previous thesis, Cohen explains that the monster always escapes "because it refuses easy categorisation." He continues by explaining that monsters "are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration, [ ] a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (6).

According to Joseph Glaser, Arthur and his knights are caught in "dichotomous thinking" (xxviii). They understand the world by dividing it; friend or foe, honour or shame. Yet as a combination of nature and culture, the Green Knight forces dichotomies together in ways that impede simple interpretation. Superficially, the Green Knight is supernatural, manifesting qualities alien to the courtly community; he is giant-like and otherwise superhuman. The fact that he is green marks his alien nature; but precisely what nature is never revealed, not even by himself. The Green Knight is, moreover, gruff and contentious, which does nothing to weaken the threat of the huge axe he handles. Yet, the Green Knight is also handsome and well-dressed, his rustic green meaningfully accentuated with gold. As Greg Walker observes, his "disturbing, monstrous aspects are contradicted, [ ], by the perception of a humanity" (112). This then problematises the Arthurian world because the Green Knight's liminal state calls his identity into question, and as such, he is not just a threat to Camelot, but to the chivalric code as a whole.

At the poem's beginning we see Arthur struggling to put the mysterious Green Knight into a category. Is he there to issue a challenge to battle or is he there as a form of light entertainment before the feast? Is he human or monster? At first, despite the Green Knight's stated challenge to a friendly Christmas game, Arthur sees his weapon, not his festive garments, and responds in a hostile way. Later, however, the game turns into a disaster, with the Green Knight's severed head being kicked around the floor of the hall by flinching courtiers, only to open its eyes and mouth and address Gawain with what seems to be a promise of certain death.

Still, Arthur dismisses the bloody encounter, downplays it as a playful merriment, well-fitting a Yuletide feast. There seems to be no nuanced interpretation available. From the beginning to the end of their encounter with the Green Knight, the Knights of the Round Table are caught in an interpretive dilemma that entrances and silences them. Yet, the problem is more than just Arthur, the idealising and dichotomising reflexes of romance itself as a genre are at stake as well. In effect the poet uses characters within a genre to question the cognitive assumptions of that genre. According to Glaser, "at question are courtly romance habits of organising the world. Readers are left to supply the interpretive flexibility that Arthur's court lacks and deal with the quandary of the Green Knight with whatever resources they can muster" (xxix).

3.4 Thesis IV: The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference

In the fourth thesis, Cohen states that "the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond and "for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual" (7). The fortress of the Green Knight lies outside in many respects: geographically, socially, ethically, and, as it turns out in the end, in the way of being real. Gawain sets forth from Camelot to find the green chapel where he is due to meet the Green Knight for the second time. However, in the proceedings of Gawain's adventure, the poem's landmarks become progressively vague, so that having taken unfamiliar paths, Gawain finds himself in strange countries. Gawain will probably never be able to find Bercilak's castle again, should he ever want to (Rudd 53).

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the greenness of the Green Knight, along with the wildness of his dwelling place, probably represents his connection to the natural world. The wilderness through which Gawain rides as he departs from Arthur's court, and later to the Green Chapel, present a stark contrast between the civilised world of Arthur and Bercilak's courts. Whereas this civilised world is one ruled by codes of chivalry and love, the natural world is a more chaotic place where the animal instinct for survival dominates. If we take the Green

Knight to stand for Nature, then he indeed is well outside the world so to speak, outside civilised life, and by extension he is unchristian.

3.5 Thesis V: The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible

"The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual) delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself" (Cohen 12). This is true of the Green Knight, but also true of Sir Bercilak. The Green Knight, as the embodiment of nature, at once compromises civilised life, curtailing it to the relatively well-protected cities and castles. Simultaneously, he manages to deceive the knights of the Round Table and strips them of their free will, their mobility. Arthur's court is averse to the Knight's challenge, yet they cannot ignore his request without losing their honour and disregarding the chivalric code. Should one of the knights accept the challenge, he is to face the immobilising unknown.

Bercilak, on the other hand, forces nothing new upon Gawain, but the comfortable and mundane rules of chivalry he has long been accustomed to. The Green Knight, although now in the form of Bercilak, again removes Gawain's chance to act intentionally. Gawain must withstand Lady Bercilak out of honour, and he would be required to give up the green girdle out of honesty. However, that would deny him the only way of saving his life. The Green Knight corners him into a situation out of which only ill roads lead.

3.6 Thesis VI: Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire

According to Cohen, we hate and distrust the monster, but at the same time we experience feelings of attraction (17). "The habitations of the monsters [ ] are more than dark regions of uncertain danger: they are also realms of happy fantasy, horizons of liberation" (18). Monsters serve as secondary bodies through which people can explore what would normally be taboo. For instance, Bercilak's castle is situated somewhere distant and isolated, but his court is similar

enough to a regular European high medieval court to be startling. The welcome, happiness and seemingly careless merriment of the castle form indeed a “realm of happy fantasy,” and the girdle might even hint at the possibility of liberation from certain death (18).

In addition, Cohen mentions Kristeva’s concept of abjection:

> It lies there quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, fascinates desire, which, nonetheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects... But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned (19).

We must bear in mind that the Green Knight is described as exclusively beautiful. Giant-like with an enormous green beard, the stranger nevertheless carries an air of handsome civility, wearing sumptuous green and gold clothes and armour. His horse is equally decked in ornate green, and the knight himself holds a branch of holly in one hand and a formidable battle-axe in the other. As mentioned before, Bercilak’s castle is also depicted as the perfect chivalrous court. Neither the Green Knight, nor Lady Bercilak let themselves be tamed and reinstated into the normal, chivalric ethos, yet both are alluringly fair and exotic.

3.7 Thesis VII: The Monster Stands at the Threshold...of Becoming

“[Monsters] can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse [ ] but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, *human* knowledge - and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside” (20). The fact that Gawain has now a more thorough understanding of his allotted place on earth due to the Green Knight’s schemes is clear. Despite the fact that there is no explicit promise of return from the Green Knight’s part, presumably, there shall never be another Christmas without someone dreading his reappearance, or someone mentioning his exploits. Also, the question is whether

the Green Knight needs to return, if his actions already have been engrafted in the minds of the entire court. Gawain, now armed with a fuller knowledge of himself might become something of a monster himself. Arthur, for all we know, might actually try to deemphasise such an implication by his suggestion that they should all wear a green girdle.

Cohen also assert that monsters “ask us why we have created them” (20). The Green Knight proposes many different questions about its own existence: why was man ever severed from nature? Why has man repressed his own nature, by aspiring to tame himself? Why has the aspiration turned into shameless hypocrisy and self-righteousness? Why do we fear death? To what extremes can the fear of death take us? Why does Mankind wall itself in tiny strongholds instead of embracing the whole world? And most importantly, why do we mistrust God?

4. From *Beowulf* to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

4.1 From Shame Culture to Guilt Culture

The division of societies ruled by the inherent threat of public shame and those relying upon feelings of personal guilt and an inmost sense of morality was first made by the anthropologist Margaret Mead in *Cooperation and Competition Among Primitive Peoples*, in which she labelled these societies as "shame cultures" and "guilt cultures," respectively.

Beowulf adopts and expresses the values of a "shame culture," a moral universe whose vital principle is the pursuit of honour and the prevention of shame. The poem belongs to a world that rewards correct conduct with honour and punishes inappropriate conduct with shame. This mirrors the idea of the comitatus, the mutually beneficial relationship between a lord and his people where warriors "in return for the wealth, protection and guidance offered by their leader, are prepared to fight to death in defence of – or revenge for – their lord's life." These warriors "committed themselves to [their leader] with public vows of loyalty" (Allard and North 368). The conclusion of Wiglaf's speech to Beowulf's followers, who valued their lives above their moral obligations, illustrates the dynamics of this ethical system based on shame and honour (*Beowulf* 2890-1). The cowards who abandon Beowulf in his final fight are described as *scamiende* "bearing shame" (2850). The monsters in *Beowulf* highlight the importance of the social bond between a lord and his retainers. When one fails to acknowledge the laws a society is based on, one risks being banned to the wilderness of the monster.

There are, however, already indications of the emergence of a "guilt culture" (Clark 285). Beowulf's negative thoughts, brought about by the fears that some unknown fault of his own may have called upon the dragon's wrath, are evidence of the hero's sense of guilt.

When the Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity, their culture is assumed to have changed from a shame culture to a guilt culture. Indeed, the Christian notions of virtue and guilt are clearly embedded in chivalric conceptions of honour (Carroll 473). The emergence of this

guilt culture is apparent in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The Gawain Poet creates a shift from shame culture to guilt culture when the Green Knight, through his challenge, shows Gawain that he is trapped by the chivalric ideals he works to uphold. Gawain must either face his death, or confess his failures and repent. The green girdle, in effect, symbolises Gawain's externalisation of his internal guilt, ultimately serving as both a personal and public reminder of his own failure to adhere to the social ideals of courtesy and chivalry (Cook 5-6).

Nevertheless, the concept of shame persisted from the Anglo-Saxon period into the late medieval period; it continued to play an important role in contemporary society. According to Stephanie Trigg, "[t]he most extreme form of shame in courtly structure of discourse is degradation, the formal humiliating and public dismissal from the order of knighthood" (79). The main event of the story, the beheading game, also fits neatly within the framework of a shame culture. King Arthur's court is taunted by this strange monster that invades their home. Therefore, Gawain, acting as representative of King Arthur's court, accepts the challenge of the Green Knight in order to defend the honour of the court.

4.2 From Heroic Code to Chivalric Code

In Germanic societies, such as the one in which *Beowulf* takes place, there were heroic codes which defined how a noble person should act. In addition to strength, courage and honour, these codes also included loyalty, generosity, and hospitality. The heroic code was of great importance in warrior societies. In *Beowulf and Epic Tradition*, William Witherle Lawrence asserts that these codes were "defined with the utmost strictness, and were not lightly to be transgressed." Lawrence goes on to say that upon these codes "the whole motivation of the poem depends" and that "tribal law and custom [were] the rocks against which the lives of men and women [were] shattered" (28-29). All of the characters' moral decisions originate from the code's directives. Consequently, their actions can be seen only as either complying with the heroic code or contravening it.

As has become evident in chapter two, when figures are not able to conform to the heroic code, their transgressions are viewed in monstrous terms. Grendel's mother, for instance, functions as a critique, not only of the world of *Beowulf*, but of Anglo-Saxon society more generally; she is the embodiment of Anglo-Saxon cultural anxieties surrounding feud culture and heroic identity. If women can sometimes be warriors, and monsters can sometimes be human, then outsiders can become like us, and the foundational oppositions that form the basis of the heroic identity break down as a result of one individual's actions. With Grendel's mother's powerful assertion of an identity that is unspecified by conventional standards, heroic society itself comes under attack.

King Arthur's court is defined by a chivalrous code. This moral system went beyond the principles of battle and introduced the concept of chivalrous conduct; qualities idealised by the medieval knights. Chivalry included the ideals of honour, valour, courtesy, and purity, as well as loyalty to a lord or a noble woman. In addition, bravery and the notion of courtly love were important. The Green Knight's challenge is, at heart, a challenge to King Arthur's Court, a belligerent dispute in which the only issue at stake is which of the knights of the Round Table will prove the proudest, and so gain honour from the encounter.

This is a challenge which, in fact, would not have been out of place in the heroic world of *Beowulf*. The Knight deliberately engineers the encounter with Arthur to confront Camelot with an older, more brutally heroic form of honour culture and challenge Arthur's court to measure and define itself against that form (Walker 124).

In Gawain's response to the Green Knight, courtesy does not simply demarcate the battlefield; it deliberately offers an alternative to it, a means of re-negotiating honour and courtliness in terms of Gawain's own choosing, in order that the direct warrior-code challenge of the Knight might be deflected and neutralised (121).

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to apply Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Seven Theses" on Monster Culture to *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and, through comparison, analyse whether the differing treatment on monstrosity in these early and late medieval texts reflected a change in medieval identity. The analysis in chapter two suggests that the monsters in *Beowulf* represent what, according to the Christian poet, was wrong with Germanic culture. Like the humans in Germanic society, the monsters are driven by revenge, greed and jealousy. In chapter three it was suggested that, in the time that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was put down in writing, chivalric ideals were in decline and that the Green Knight's intervention highlights the failings of a chivalric society coming to an end. The Green Knight's challenge reveals the corruption and conceitedness of King Arthur's court.

A comparative analysis of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reveals two main changes. In relation to the first change - the change from shame culture to guilt culture - the monsters in *Beowulf* highlight the importance of loyalty between a lord and his retainers. When a warrior dismissed the rules of his lord, he was shunned and forced to live on the outskirts of human society, the domain of monsters. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, on the other hand, the challenge of the Green Knight shows that Camelot relies mostly upon feelings of guilt, or at least Sir Gawain does. The second change is that from heroic code to chivalric code. The heroic code was of great importance in warrior societies and was not to be transgressed lightly. When figures are unable to live by the heroic code, their transgressions become viewed in monstrous terms. King Arthur's court is defined by a chivalrous code, which included ideals such as honour, valour and courtesy. The Green Knight's challenge is, essentially, a test to see which of the knights is the proudest, and so gains honour.

The present text is naturally limited in that it focuses on two texts alone. Further research could look into the use of monsters in other narratives of the Middle Ages to see if a similar

pattern manifests; this could provide us with a clearer understanding of the way in which medieval writers used monstrosities to reflect on societal concerns.

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