Sleeping in *Beowulf*

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Abstract

"Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." As this well-known little prayer suggests, during actual sleep—while the conscious faculties are inoperative—the soul is at risk. Indeed, during sleep the body is also in danger, as the unconscious man is not alert to threat. Apparently sleeping can be a dangerous (in)activity.

In the Old English poem Beowulf, *actual sleeping occurs at critical points in the narrative, but always at night, or at least in darkness. Moreover, the traditional literary uses of sleep as a simulacrum of death also occur. But correlations among these concepts are not consistent. Beowulf usually fights at night, without sleep; he is, at least once, saved from death by his ability to stay awake. But he also fights during the day, though with different results. The monsters attack at night, in the darkness, so apparently they, too, do not sleep at night. But the dragon sleeps night and day until awakened, in the night, when he attacks regardless of the hour, though he is a night flyer. Thus much of the activity in Beowulf occurs at night, or in the dark, but the results are revealed only in the light of dawn.*

This paper investigates the different occurrences of sleep, in their various contexts, as well as in their relationships to light and darkness, and analyses their contributions to larger meanings within the poem. It concludes that sleep is a representation of inattentiveness, the result of which is usually fatal, physically as well as spiritually.

Keywords

Beowulf, Old English literature, sleep, darkness, night

For decades, scholars of *Beowulf* have commented on the various uses in the poem of the words for and themes of light and darkness and day and night. It is also quite common to find discussions of the use of the term "sleep" for "death," as this is a common *topos* throughout literature. But what does not seem to have attracted as much attention are the literal uses of "sleep:" a time for resting in a non-conscious state.[1] As I looked into

1 With the exception of Hanchey, discussed at the end of this note, the use of sleep seems to have attracted critical commentary only in the context of the feast/sleep nexus. In "*Swefan ćfter Symble*: The Feast-Sleep Theme in *Beowulf*," *Neophilologus* 65 (1981): 120-128, Harry E. Kavros argues that "themes in oral-formulaic poetry are traditional but not necessary" (p. 120), and focuses on the aesthetic impact of the "feasting-sleeping" theme in *Beowulf* and other Old English poems. Hugh Magennis focuses on lines 1004-1008, especially line 1008a (*swefen*), to argue that "sleep after feasting" means death after life. Hugh Magennis, "*Beowulf*, 1008a: *Swefen*," *Notes & Queries* 29 (1982): 391-2. Marilynn Desmond investigates the MAH (monster attacks the hall) motif in the poem, focusing on Grendel's attack, but does not analyze the implications of the connections (which I develop in my paper). Marilynn Desmond, "*Beowulf*: The Monster and the Tradition." Oral Tradition, 7, 2 (1992): 258-83. See also Joanne De Lavan, "Feasts and Anti-Feasts in *Beowulf* and the *Odyssey*," *Lord*, 191, 235-261, in which she focuses on the feast-sleep motif, arguing for the pattern of order (ritual) > disorder (anti-ritual) > order (ritual). Ginger Suzanne Fielder Hanchey, "*Beowulf*, Sleep, and Judgment Day," M.A. Thesis (May 2008, Texas A & M University) presents an extended discussion, as the title indicates. Her argument seems to me weak, however, for two basic reasons: she assumes, first, an 8th century date of composition for *Beowulf*; second, she assumes that the poem is Christian, following in a context of Christian tradition. These assumptions are not uncommon. However, the comparative analysis she presents is with specifically Christian sources, both poetic and otherwise: "texts which share the Christian themes present in Beowulf." (p.9). Thus "sleep, like any other kind of crime or moral failing, results in unfortunate consequences." (p. 27). And the unfortunate consequence in *Beowulf* is, by analogy, Doomsday. Her analysis is both structural, based on the alliterative half-line, and thematic. Thus sleep "functions as

this concept, therefore, I discovered that, in *Beowulf*, when they sleep, characters suffer - not only humans, but unnatural and mythological beings as well. Further, with one exception, the fights in the poem - or those referred to by the poet – occur at night. These two observations suggested an inter-play among the concepts of sleeping/waking, night/day, darkness/light, and fighting. Thus I looked at how these inter-weavings might function and what they might reveal. This essay presents some of the conclusions I drew when I followed the threads of this interweaving in the following instances:

- In his swimming contest with Breca, Beowulf fights the *nicors* at night, staying awake for five nights.[2]
- In Beowulf's three fights in the poem, two are at night, one during the day. Significantly, it is the daytime fight which he loses - as does the dragon, himself a creature of the night. In fact, except for the fight with the dragon, Beowulf's fights are repeatedly and emphatically presented as, if not at night, then in darkness.
- Beowulf, Grendel, Grendel's dam, and the dragon all share this common feature: they all fight at night.[3] Grendel and the dragon are repeatedly referred to in connection with the night: the dragon is a night-flyer; Grendel stalks only at night; his dam attacks at night, and lives in a kind of eternal twilight.
- Handscio is asleep, unaware, when snatched by Grendel. So is Ćschere, when killed by Grendel's dam. So too is the dragon, when robbed by the thief.
- The result of the night contests is always seen in the morning.
- On only one occasion does the poet state that Beowulf sleeps: a well-deserved rest after the victorious fight with Grendel, before which he had deliberately feigned sleep in order to catch the creature off guard.
- The poet also asserts that vulnerability while sleeping extends beyond the physical, and beyond the context of the poem.

In order to demonstrate the interlacing of these elements, the structure of the essay follows the progression of the poem, although there are breaks in the chronology to indicate flashback, foreshadowing, and echo.

Beowulf and Breca

If we begin, then, with Unferđ's challenge to Beowulf, we can see the emphasis on night and darkness. In questioning Beowulf about his exploit with Breca, Unferđ asks whether he is the same man who "on wćteres ćht / seofon niht swuncon" ["toiled in the broiling sea for seven nights" (515b – 516a)].[4] It may be mere convention to mark time by night, as it is to mark years by winters. But when Unferđ asks Beowulf whether he has the

a structural and thematic tool to illustrate Anglo-Saxon cultural preoccupations with vulnerability and justice." (p.14) Specifically, "The many verbal and structural echoes in the two works make the application of *Christ III* to *Beowulf* a logical choice. The two may have used a shared source, or they may have drawn from a broader common tradition, or *Christ III* may have drawn directly from *Beowulf*." (p. 11) My argument agrees with the fact that sleep often results in "unfortunate consequences." It does not, however, go so far as to equate *Beowulf's* "unfortunate consequence" with Doomsday. Unfortunately, the structural argument of the thesis suffers as well, as it omits several sources dealing with the pattern of feast/sleep/death which she proposes (e.g. those cited *supra*). In addition, she does not consider the connections with light and darkness which I include.

2 Although presumably it was five days and five nights, the poet is specific in emphasizing night.

3 Though there is a time disjoint (outside/inside), it seems that the fight with Grendel's dam is at night. This position is argued below.

4 Out of considerations for ease of access as well as accuracy, I have chosen the electronic version of the poem. Thus all quotations from the text are from Kevin S. Kiernan, *Electronic "Beowulf."* 2 CD-Roms.

courage to fight Grendel, he asks specifically whether he dares to abide an encounter at night ["gif ţu Grendl(es) dearst / nihtlongne fyrst nean bi(dan)." (526b-527)]. Again, this may be an Old English idiom. But mere conventionality seems less likely when, in his response, Beowulf echoes Unferđ's characterization:

"Đa wit ćt|(s)omne on sć wćron
fif nihta fyrst, (543-544a)
[Then we strove together on the sea five nights long,]

* * *
Ac on mergenne, mecum |wunde,
be yđlafe uppe lćgon,
swe(o[r]dum) aswefede, […].
(Leoht) eastan com,
beorht beacen Godes, brimu swaţredon,
ţćt ic scńćssas geseon mihte,
windige weallas.
[…]
No ic on niht gefrćgn
Under heofones hwealf heardran feohtan,
Ne on egstreamum earmran mannon.
(564-571a, *passim;* 574b-576)
[But in the morning, wounded by the sword, (the creatures) lay on the bank, sleeping the sleep of the sword, (…). Light came from the east, bright beacon of God, the waves were calm, that I might see headlands, windy cliffs. (…) I have not heard tell of any man fight harder under heaven's roof, at night, nor on the sea more desperate.]

In addition to the fact that the results of the encounter are revealed in the light of day, we see here that, in his response, Beowulf introduced the aspect of sleeping in a metaphoric sense, as he does later, when he shames Unferđ, asserting that Grendel has nothing to fear from the Victory-Scyldings:

ac he lust wigeđ,
swefeđ ond sendeţ, secce ne weneţ
to Gar-Denum. (598b-600a)
[on the contrary, he carries out his lust, puts to sleep and sends (them) off, expects no quarrel at the hands of the Spear Danes.]

But it will be different the next night, as Beowulf suggests (ironically?), and the brave will appear only in the morning:

Ac ic him Geata sceal
eafođ ond ellen ungeara nu
guţe gebeodan. Gćţ eft, se ţe mot,

London: British Library; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. Line numbers of future quotations will be given in the text and, unless otherwise indicated, the translations are my own.

to medo modig, siṭṭan morgenleoht
ofer ylda bearn oṭres dogores,
sunne sweglwered suṭan scineđ. (600-605)
[But I will soon now show him the might and valor in battle and fight of the Geats. Then let him who might, go, bold, to the mead hall, after the morning light dawns over the dwellings of men, the sun shines from the south, the sun, clothed with radiance.]

Beowulf, unlike his thanes, will remain awake, feigning sleep, watching for the appearance of Grendel. This, the first connection between night and sleep, seems rather incidental. But when we see that, for sleeping, Hondscioh[5] pays with his life - as, later, will Ćschere – we suspect something more deliberate. It is apparent also that only the courageous will endure the night; those who dare venture out only in the safety of the morning will merely see the results of Beowulf's prowess.

Beowulf and Grendel

After the feasting, when night approaches, Hrođgar retires to seek his bed, well away from Heorot, with his consort,[6] knowing that, under cover of darkness, and only so, will Grendel stalk. Beowulf and the others remain in the hall, advised by the king (not surprisingly) to be vigilant (661b-662). And in preparing himself for the encounter, specifically at night, under the shades of darkness, Beowulf vows to spurn weapons (ll. 682b-684a).

As expected, Grendel creeps into the hall, in the darkness. Dorothy Carr Porter asserts that the ravages of Grendel must be stealthy, as the very first slaughter of thirty men (15 mostly eaten, 15 carried off) was not discovered until the morning.[7] And after the feasting, drinking, and general celebration, it is not unexpected that the thanes would sleep: "Sceotend swćfon, / ţa ţćt hornreced healdan scoldon" (702b-703) [The shooters slept, those that should have held the horn-adorned hall.] But, as the poet

5 For an interesting take on this episode see Charles Hamilton Wallace, "Re *unwearnum*: A Digression," at http://www.cichw.net/RuAD.htm. [accessed 2007.06.19] Wallace focuses on the word *unwearnum*, which occurs only twice in the corpus of Old English poetry: here, and in *The Seafarer*, where the context is quite different. Renderings of the word in *Beowulf* have been controversial. Before the publication of Klaeber's massively influential edition (1921), most readers took the word to mean something like "unaware," seeing it in adverbial relation to Hondscioh. Once Klaeber presented it in adverbial relation to Grendel, meanings changed - and matched those suggested in the context of *The Seafarer*. Lately, however, readings have reverted to the pre-Klaeber suggestions (with the notable exception of Seamus Heaney). I read the term as meaning "unaware," and apply it to Hondscioh, which application is necessary for the argument I develop below. Wallace's tracking of the various translations is thorough and informative.

6 ll. 661-663a. Although unrelated to the argument here, an unusual analysis of this and other "bedroom scenes" is proposed by Brian McFadden, "Sleeping after the Feast: Deathbeds, Marriage Beds, and the Power Structures of Heorot." *Neophilologus*, 84, 4 (2000): 629-46. Abstract available at http://ingentaconect.com/content/klu/neop/2000/00000084/00000004/00260723?crawler=true. [accessed 2007.06.19] He argues that shifts in power are indicated "by the word bed, *rćst*, or a compound containing one of the words." But he does not deal otherwise with "sleep."

7 Dorothy Carr Porter, "The Social Centrality of Women in *Beowulf*: A New Context." *The Heroic Age* 5 (Summer/Autumn 2001), at http://mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/porter1.html draws an insightful comparison between Grendel and his dam.

hints, it does seem somewhat reckless, or, as Wallace suggests, "heedless," given past history and Hroðgar's admonition. But if their duty required that they "hold the horn-adorned hall," then perhaps heavy drinking before-hand is not surprising. Although the "should" implies not only an inherent criticism, but a grim foreshadowing.

Grendel enters Heorot, creeping in the darkness, and sees the men sleeping.
Geseah he in recede rinca manige,
swefan sibbegedriht samod ćtgćdere
magorinca heap. Ţa his mod ahlog,
mynte ţćt he gedćlde, ćr ţon dćg cwome (727-730)
[He saw in the hall many a warrior sleeping, the band of kinsmen, together, a band of warriors, encamped together. Then his spirit rejoiced, and he intended that he would sever (life from body) before the coming of day.]

To reinforce the point, the poet repeats that it is Grendel's intent to seize sleeping warriors, and to finish before daybreak, although this time his intentions will be thwarted:

Ne wćs (ţćt) (w)yrd ţa gen
ţćt he ma moste manna cynnes
đicgean ofer ţa niht. […]
Ne ţćt se aglćca yldan ţohte,
ac he ge|feng hrađe forman siđe
slćpendn(e) rinc, slat unwearnum (734b-740, *passim*)
[But that was not then his fate, that he might devour more of mankind during that night. (…) Nor did the monster consider delay; indeed he immediately attacked, seized a sleeping thane, slashed (him) unaware.]

What makes this night unlike any other is that Beowulf is awake, watching:

Ac he wćccende wraţum on andan
bad bolgenmod beadwa geţinges. (707-708)
[Indeed awake, hostile in horror, enraged; he awaited the result of the onslaught.]

Grendel snatches the first man, specifically described as sleeping (740a), devours him, and seeks another who is defenseless (rinc on rćst), as, we have been told, is his wont:

(Ge)wat đa neosian, syţđan niht becom,
hean huses, hu hit Hring-Dene
ćfter (b)eorţege gebun hćfdon.
Fand ţa đćr inne ćţelinga gedriht
swefan ćfter (sy)mble. […]
Wiht unhćlo,
grim ond grćdig, gearo sona wćs,
reoc ond reţe, ond on rćste genam
ţritig ţegna. Ţanon eft gewat

huđe hremig to ham faran,
mid ţćre wćlfylle wica neosan.
Đa wćs on uhtan mid ćrdćge
Grendles guđcrćft gumum undyrne.
Ţa wćs ćfter wiste wop upahafen,
micel morgensweg.
[…]
Nćs hit lengra |(f)yrst,
ac ym(b) ane niht ef(t gefremede)
morđbeala mare, ond no mearn fore
fćhđe ond fyrene. (115- 129a; 134b-137a)

[Then, after it became night, [Grendel] went to the high hall, to seek out how the Ring Danes had settled in after their beer drinking. He found in there a doughty company of retainers, sleeping after the feast. (…) The evil creature, grim and greedy, straight away was eager, savage and cruel, and seized, at rest, thirty thanes. Immediately afterwards he left, exulting in the slaughter; went to his home with the spoils, to seek his dwelling place. Then, just before break of day, with the dawn, Grendel's war strength was exposed to men. After it became known, lamentation arose to heaven, great morning mourning. (…) It was not a longer space of time than the next night when he again carried out great manslaughter, and did not mourn for the feud and wretched deed.]

But Beowulf is not defenseless, as Grendel immediately discovers, and they fight throughout the night; Beowulf's retainers attempt to help, but are ineffective against the charmed monster. And again, morning reveals the results:

Nihtweorce gefeh,
ellenmćr(ţum).
[…]
ĐA wćs on morgen mine gefrćge
ymb ţa gifhealle guđrinc monig.
Ferdon folctogan feorran ond nean
geond widwegas wundor sceawian,
laţes lastas. (827b-828a; 836-840a)

[(Beowulf) rejoiced in his night's work. (…) Then it was in the morning, as I have heard tell, that many warriors gathered around the gift hall. Chiefs journeyed from far and near, throughout the wide stretching ways, to see that wonder.]

By now it is clear that night is not merely a literary convention for the passage of time; it is specifically night: for men, the time of darkness is the time for feasting, and sleeping - and thus the time of vulnerability; for Grendel, night is the time for feasting as well - though in a macabre sense - and for fighting. If night, for humans, is a time for death, for Grendel (and other creatures of the night, as we shall see) it is a time for life. But such correspondences between men and creatures of the night are ambiguous at best with respect to Beowulf, as we shall also see.

The day is then given over to restoring Heorot, so that, in the evening, the court can once again feast in the great hall - now that Grendel has fled, is presumably dead, and the company can rejoice. It is at this point of released tension that the poet takes the occasion to offer a gnomic observation:

No ţćt yđe byđ
to befleonne - fremme se ţe wille -
ac gesacan sceal sawlberendra,
nyde genydde, niţđa bearna,
grundbuendra gearwe stowe,
ţćr his lichoma, legerbedde fćst,
swefeţ ćfter symle. (1001b-1007a)
[It is not easy to escape - endeavor who will - but bearers of souls must seek, compelled by necessity — the children of men, earth dwellers — a ready place, where his body, fast in the bed of death, will sleep after the feast.]

Is this simply one of the poet's gnomic interjections, or more? Can it not also be a specific reflection on the events of the evening past and/or a foreshadowing of events to come? His style allows for any possibility. But in the complex interweaving I am attempting to untangle, I read it as a specific foreshadowing of what is yet to come in the context of the poem, as well as a general admonition about life.[8] For throughout these passages, it seems to me, the intersections among darkness and light, day and night, sleeping and watching, feasting and fighting are subtle but too frequent to be either accidental or conventional. Further, with the appearance of Grendel's dam, the interplay becomes even more intriguing.

What is thus noteworthy in the next passage, in addition to the emphasis on sleeping, is the suspense created by the poet's (deliberate?) ambiguity. Hrođgar retires to his quarters, still in an outbuilding, but the retainers return to their posts, as in the past, making bivouac in the hall. And one man, we are told, will pay dearly for that night's sleep.

Sigon ţa to slćpe. Sum sare angeald
ćfenrćste, swa him ful oft gelamp,
siţđan goldsele Grendel (w)arode,
unriht ćfnde oţ ţćt ende becwom,
swylt ćfter synnum. (1253-1257a)
[They went then to sleep. One sorely recompensed that evening rest, as very often happened to them whence Grendel occupied the gold hall, unrightly did so, until the end came, death after sin.][9]

The suspense is over who that unfortunate man will be. We are told that the man "at rest" is one dearest to Hrođgar:

8 Cf. line 1257a, below. It is clearly also a use of the "sleep after feasting" theme referred to by Maginnes as metaphoric. Cf. note 1, *supra*.

9 Although not part of this essay, I must note the ambiguity surrounding whose death and whose sin is intended. I also consider this remark a reinforcement of my contention that the gnomic warning earlier be seen in a larger context. The use of the word "sin" also reinforces the general gist of my conclusion, stated at the end of the essay. But it does not equate sin with sleep, as does Hanchey's.

Se wćs Hroţgare hćleţa (l)eofost
on gesiđes had be sćm tweonum
rice randwiga, ţone đe heo on rćste abreat,
blćdfćstne beorn. (1298-1301a)
[To Hrođgar that one was the most beloved hero, best of comrades between the two seas, brave warrior, stout-hearted spear-man, that she slew at rest.]

This feels like a worrisome hint, as Hrođgar had earlier likened Beowulf to his own son, close to his heart (945b-948); the poet has also neglected any mention of Beowulf's whereabouts until he reveals rather casually, if somewhat dramatically, that Beowulf was not there, and had to be summoned to the hall from the separate quarters which he had been assigned (1312-1313a):

ac wćs oţer in ćr geteohhod / ćfter maţđumgife mćrum Geate.
(1302-1303)
[But he was in another (building), assigned earlier, after the treasure giving, the glorious Geat.]

But the warriors who had remained in Heorot, the poet emphasizes, slept there, a sleep which again turned out to be fatal.

The Raid of the Hag

In anticipating the raid of the hag, a raid necessitated by her obligation for revenge, the poet reminds us of Beowulf's earlier strategy: remaining awake, watchful, the opposite of the others the hag is about to encounter [se ćt Heorote fand / wćccendne wer wiges bidan – 1269b-1270, quoted *supra*].

As Porter noted, the entrance of Grendel's dam is much different from that of her son.[10] The hag simply makes her way into where the men are sleeping, only less powerfully as the strength of a woman is less than that of a man. Some readings, including Porter's, suggest that she broke down the door, others that she is simply discovered, which is what the text indicates [1295]; but soon every warrior is grabbing for his sword, and the hag, in panic, races out [1294-5]. But not before snatching a retainer who, we are explicitly told, is sleeping, still! [1300] Ćschere, who believes that Heorot is safe, might be excused, unlike Hondscioh, who slept, "inattentively," (Wallace) while Grendel

10 I cite her lengthy comment here as it is ancillary to, though not essential for, my own argument. "Although when she approaches the hall Grendel's mother is frightened and wishes to leave as soon as possible her presence has a stronger influence on the sleeping thanes than does Grendel's (1279-1295). When Grendel first enters Heorot (115-125) he takes 30 men, and yet his work is not discovered until the next morning. In his second entry (720-749), he tears the door open and walks into the middle of a room filled with sleeping warriors. Not only were they able to sleep despite their knowledge that he was coming, they also apparently sleep through the destruction of the door. Grendel is able to grab one man and almost grab another before Beowulf begins their battle. It is only then that the sleeping thanes awake. When Grendel's mother enters, however, her mere presence awakens the men. There is no warning, they did not know that she was coming (as far as they knew, danger died with Grendel), and the poet gives no indication that she made any noise when she came into the hall. The warriors, however, wake immediately. 'She reached Heorot, where the Ring-Danes slept throughout the building; sudden turnabout came to men, when Grendel's mother broke into the hall'" (1279-1282). [In a perhaps inadvertent contradiction to her analysis, Porter has the hag break into the hall. How stealthily can a monster, one wonders, 'break into' anything?] Porter, *op. cit*.

was still at large. However, the fact of Hondscioh's being asleep, emphasized by the poet, will be omitted when Beowulf delivers his report to Hygelac. This is curious, making me wonder: was it a simple omission, considered unimportant? Surely including it might have highlighted Grendel's cowardice in his practice of stalking and snatching only those unable to defend themselves. Omitting it, however, might have been to conceal some fault on Hondscioh's part.

In the morning Hroðgar simply appears, aware of the events, and mightily grieves the loss of his dear friend.[11] Beowulf is missing, the poet tells us, and had to be summoned. When he does appear, with his comrades, at the dawn of day [ćrdćge – 1313], (in a brilliant instance of dramatic irony, if not black humor) he asks whether the night had been peaceful [1321b]. Of course it had not, as Hroðgar promptly retorts.

Beowulf in the Mere

Having determined their response the entire company - both nations - prepares to pursue Grendel's dam which, we can assume, takes place apace. The poet does not tell us how long the journey lasted, although the implication is that the mere is far from Heorot; but we do know that there is an engagement at the mere with sea beasts who often emerge at sunrise [on undernmćl – 1430] and that Beowulf shoots one - an indication that it is still day.[12] But there is no suggestion of the time.

Once in the mere Beowulf, armed, descends for the better part of a day [Ða wæs hwil dæges,/ ær he ţone grundwong ongytan mehte – 1497b-1498]. He then spends some time groping for the dam (presumably in the dark), when she suddenly realizes [Sona ţćt (on)funde – 1497] that she is being sought. Grendel's dam is clearly not asleep.[13]

The first combat is hand-to-hand, as she grasps him and drags him farther down, down to the bottom to her den. Here, protected by a kind of roof, the room is dry, dimly lighted by firelight [(Fyrleoh)t geseah / blacne leoman beorht(e)[scinan] – 1518b-1519]. The sword among the war-gear which Beowulf spies in the nick of time provides the means by which he slays the hag. And at the moment of her death, "the gleaming radiance shimmered and shone as the candle of heaven shines clear from the sky." [Lixte se leoma, leoht inne stod, / efne swa of hefene hadre scineđ / rodores candel. -1572-1574a] Now in this light Beowulf is able to survey the spacious hall (1559).[14] And having with this marvelous sword avenged the death of Hroðgar's man, the one slaughtered while sleeping (1583), he turns his attention to Grendel, whom he finds *on rćste* (1587b), *ealdorleasne* (1589a) - at rest, lifeless - and cuts off his head. Here the equation is clear:

11 Given the description of Grendel's first visit after Beowulf's arrival, when the evidence of the raid was discovered only in the morning, we might assume that Hroðgar's bower (and the other outbuildings) lay some distance from the hall. Perhaps. But not this time, however, as he is aware of the disturbance. Was he now sufficiently close to hear the męlée - in a different building, doing nothing? Or has he been awakened and informed by others? It is clearly quite early in the day - before daybreak - so we might assume this latter to be the case. But again, the evidence is revealed in the morning.

12 It is interesting that Beowulf uses a weapon here, not his hands, as he does in his more usual combat - moreover a weapon used from a distance, and during the day, when the target would be visible. He also uses a weapon during his daytime fight with the dragon, though that is at close quarters.

13 This scene bears echoes of the hag's earlier appearance in Heorot, where she is simply discovered (l. 1295).

14 Without discussing here the possible symbolic meanings of this light/darkness imagery, I simply note that it is the illumination of the sword which provides the light, suggesting once again that the fight has been taking place in darkness.

sleep (whether or not after the feast) is death. And Beowulf, like the monsters, attacks a defenseless foe.

Further, the poet is quite deliberate, yet vague, in describing the time.[15] But, on the surface, Hrođgar and his men see the gore swirling in the mere at around 15:00 (the clerical *nones*) [Đa cwom *non* dćges – 602a, italics mine]. In despair, they depart; only Beowulf's Geats remain. The question here is whether there is a disjoint between the time in the mere and the time on the shore. Given that Beowulf descended through the mere for the better part of a day (1497b-1498, quoted *supra*), and on the basis of what takes place once he is in - the long descent; the second descent (being dragged to the den at the bottom); the massive struggle; the appearance of the sword; the decapitation of Grendel - it ought to be at least night, if not the next day, when Beowulf resurfaces through the water - water now cleansed.[16] Is it possible that they have waited through the night, awake, watching, while Beowulf (and Grendel's dam) were also awake and fighting, and that it is now the next day? Whether it is actually night on the shore does not affect my argument, however, because the salient point is that Beowulf's fight with Grendel's dam occurs in the darkness of her cave, in a kind of eternal night.

Back to Heorot

On returning to the great hall the warriors rejoice in the victory and the ceremonious presentation of Grendel's head; and Beowulf assures Hrođgar that he can henceforth sleep in Heorot without sorrow (1673b-1674). In his lengthy reply, Hrođgar reflects on Beowulf's achievements, and muses on their dangers (1727b-1770a). Such moralizing is a part of this poet's style, as we saw earlier; it is also a part of Hrođgar's manner. But the caution here of being vulnerable while sleeping, extended to a spiritual sense, cannot be dismissed as a platitude, or merely one of the poet's gnomic interjections.

He ţćt wyrse ne con.
Ođ ţćt him on innan oferhygda dćl
wea(xeđ) ond wridađ. Ţonne se weard swefeđ,
sawele hy(rde). Bić se slćp to fćst,
bisgum gebunde(n), bona swiđe neah,
se ţe of flanbogan fyrenum sceoteđ.
Ţonne bić on hreţre under helm drepen
biteran strćle (him bebeorgan ne con),
wom wundorbebodum wergan gastes.
Ţinceđ him to lytel ţćt he to lange heold;
gytsađ gromhydig, nallas on gylp seleđ
fćdde beagas, ond he ţa forđgesceaft
forgyteđ ond forgymeđ, ţćs ţe him ćr God sealde,
wuldres |(Wal)dend, weorđmynda dćl.
Hit on endestćf eft gelimpeđ
ţćt se lichoma [lćn]e gedreoseđ,
fćge gefealleđ. (1742b-1758)

15 Although there are no other references to time, or time passing, during the encounter, we must suppose that the entire episode was not a brief one. And the fact remains that the scene is one of darkness or semi-darkness.

16 It is also possible that, in the Scandinavian setting of the poem, it is dark at 15:00.

[(The successful man) knows not the worst. Until a bit of overweening grows and flourishes. Then the watchman, the guardian of the soul, sleeps. The sleep is too fast, bound in distractions, the slayer very near, who, with the arrow-bow, shoots wicked deeds. Then the breast is hit beneath its cover, a more bitter arrow (it cannot protect itself), crooked, strange commands from the accursed spirit. He thinks too little what he held for a long time; he becomes niggardly, angry minded, does not at all honor the boast, give ornaments, things of value, and he forgets and neglects the future, for the things which God previously gave him, the glorious Ruler, a portion of glory. It often happens at the end that the loaned body declines, falls, doomed to death.]

The moralizing here is precisely because Hondscioh was specifically noted as being *unwearnum* (740), not just sleeping, but unaware, heedless. And he was devoured. Here Hrođgar acknowledges the belief that moral devastation can also result from heedlessness: pride attacks the man who is not vigilant, who is imprudent; and the result of pride is also death. Later Christians will count pride as primary among mortal sins, leading to further corruption and death. Hrođgar here anticipates that recognition.[17] Night approaches and Hrođgar encourages Beowulf to retire, to enjoy the rest he has deserved; and so he does. And, the poet tells, "his sleep was sound." [Gćst inne swćf / oţ ţćt hrefn blaca, heofones wynne / bliđheort bodode. (1795b-1805a)]. His troop apparently bivouac as well, as they all return to the great hall in the morning, eager to depart (1805b-1809).

At the Court of Hygelac

Back at Hygelac's court, Beowulf recounts the monstrous encounters, and does so with the same emphasis on darkness/night. Beowulf is, at times, a man of few words, at times man of many. Here, in a lengthy account, he does not report that Hondscioh was sleeping, or heedless, only that he was wearing armor [gyrded cempa (2081a)], but hardly girded for battle. As I asked above, is this a simple oversight, or a misrepresentation, an effort to secure the reputation of Hondscioh? But why would his reputation be in question? With no reason to be on guard, the warriors had stacked their gear, as usual, and, we were told, had to grope madly for their useless weapons. And remember,

17 Of the many scholars who see parallels with *The Seafarer* Andrew Galloway focuses on the well-known passage in which the soul is likened to the sea flyer which ventures out and returns (58ff), and links it to the exhortation of St. Peter to be vigilant, a point I independently reached in my study of *Beowulf*, and which forms a part of my conclusion. However, in *The Seafarer* there is no mention of an emphasis on danger, or that the venturing occurs only at night, or that the seafarer's spirit, or the seafarer himself, is specifically heedless, as almost every reader of the poem takes "*unwaernum*" (with clear reference to the spirit) to mean "greedily," "hungrily," "excitedly," or some such similar concept. [Were we to take "*unwaernum*" here, too, as indicating "unwary," it would necessitate a new interpretation certainly of these lines, if not the entire poem.] In *Beowulf*, moreover, there is no suggestion that the soul is in fact leaving the body, venturing out anywhere. Only at the end of the poem when Beowulf is dead is he characterized as "soulless." *The Seafarer* does proceed to warn against the vicissitudes of life, as does Hrođar, and in a later line against being "heedless" with regard to them; but such general expression is frequent and conventional in Old English poetry. See Andrew Galloway, "I Peter and *The Seafarer*," *ELN*, XX, 4 (June 1988): 1-10. [This is also referenced by Wallace.] In her argument Hanchey equates sleep with sin, and extends this exhortation to imply Doomsday. My conclusion does not reach that far.

Hondscioh was even wearing his armor. Thus why report the death as one involving disgrace, devoured while asleep: a guardian caught off-guard? Neither Grendel nor any of his kin, Beowulf tells Hygelac, had reason to boast of that battle by night [uhthlem (2010b)]. Is this because of its nature and result? What valor is proven by stealth, sweeping away an unarmed man, sleeping? Unless it adds to Grendel's horror: that he can devour a man wearing armor. This surely was not part of the Anglo-Saxon heroic code. But it was Grendel's *modus operandum*.

Beowulf marks the time of the contest, at night (2075b-2078), as well as its conclusion, in the morning (2106b-2107). He does the same with the second encounter, the ravage of Grendel's dam (2118-2120); and the evidence of its result (2127b). Again, even in his terse report (2096) - the entire combat with Grendel's dam has been condensed to six lines (2138-2144) - Beowulf emphasizes the fact of fighting at night (2106b): the nexus again of light/dark, day/night, watching/sleeping, and fighting.

Beowulf has fought in the darkness, at night, as I hold, and emerged victorious. Grendel's mother, like her offspring a creature of the darkness, has not. Beowulf, in addition to his armor and his own strength,[18] unlike the hag, had supernatural assistance, without which, as Beowulf himself acknowledges, he could not have won, bringing light into the darkness, order out of chaos, purifying the evils which constitute the dark environments of these demons.

Beowulf and the Dragon

Supernatural assistance will not come, however, in his third, and final, battle: with the dragon - denizen of his dark cave, the night-flyer:

> Ligegesan wćg
> hatne for horde, hioroweallende
> middelnihtum (2781b-2783a)
> [The fire-terror carried on, hot for treasure, welling fiercely in the middle of the night]

A night-foe, flying in darkness (2226), the dragon is wont to hunt under the earth for treasure, heathen gold, though it does him no good; and once, haunting the barrows, the fire-drake did find a hoard unattended [opene standan – 2272]. Content to guard it for centuries (which is what dragons do), it was not until disturbed by a thief (in the night?) that the dragon awoke [onwoc – 2288] and became enraged. He sought the man who had wronged him while sleeping [on sweofote – 2296]. And when day had passed (2304b) he worked his will (2307b-2308a), returning to his barrow while it was still night (2320b-2321).[19] After the second maraud he scours the fields for all the thieves,

18 Interesting in the preparation for the dragon fight is a hint of a progression in Beowulf's increasing reliance on means other than the strength of his own arm. It also provides opportunity for the traditional description of armor, whose construction Beowulf carefully directs - unlike in his earlier boast, before the battle with Grendel, when he proudly eschewed both weapons and armor.

19 As early as 1980, Raymond Tripp, in focusing on line 2781a, noted that "[t]he normal state of the dragon was sleeping inside his barrow during the day and flying about the sky during the night, engulfed in flame but not necessarily injuring anyone or anything. The dragon departs from these habits only when he has been robbed and seeks vengeance [….]. Even after the feud is openly renewed, each dawn the dragon darts back to the safety of his secret hall." See Raymond P. Tripp, Jr., "The Restoration of *Beowulf* 2781a: *Hat ne forghogode* ("Did Not Despise Heat"). *Modern Philology* 78 (1980): 153.

seeking revenge for his loss. He is not seeking treasure here, but demanding vengeance, because he discovered ([onfand]-emendation) that he had been robbed, while sleeping [slćpende – 2221a]. Though the manuscript is badly damaged at this point - more treasure lost to the ravages of fire and time - it is clear that the dragon was sleeping.

This marauding occurs after Beowulf had reigned well for fifty years (2211b-2212a). But it is only after his own hall has been badly scorched (and not before) that Beowulf resolves to take action. At this point, in a provocative parallel, the poet tells us that Beowulf, who has guarded his people, will face the end of his days, as will the dragon, who, likewise, has guarded his treasure. Not accidentally, this time they both fight during the day; and both, for the first time, lose.

Sceolde [li]ţenddaga,
ćţeling ćrgod, ende g(e)bidan
worulde lifes, ond se wyrm somod,
ţeah đe hordwelan heolde lan(ge). (2342b-2345)
[The ever-good warrior will endure the end of his transitory days,
of worldly life, and the serpent together, though he had long held
the hoarded wealth.]

The preparations for the encounter are quite elaborate; thus it is noteworthy that there is no mention of a "night fight." In fact, the presentation of the lead-up to the encounter specifies no time at all. But there is every indication that it is during the day[20] and initiated by Beowulf (2553b ff.). He is prepared and aggressive; so is the dragon. Beowulf charges the barrow; the dragon shoots forth flames (2557b ff.).[21] No slumbering here. Quite the contrary; each was prepared, and each anxious of the other: [Ćghwćđrum wćs / bealohycgendra (bro)ga fram ođrum. –*broga* meaning "terror," "horror" (2565b-2566)] And with good reason because, the poet has told us, each of the contestants is rushing to his doom.[22]

That this battle rages during the day is also supported by the fact that the retainers see what is happening, and flee to the forest. All save Wiglaf, of course, who rushes to Beowulf's side. Throughout the remaining passage - the description of the

20 Which Tripp had also assumed. Cf. note 19.

21 Tripp further observes about the dragon: "Apparently, he is not only disinclined but also unable to fight well during the day, as his impatient waiting for night to arrive and his fatal performance against Beowulf indicate." And in his own footnote here he references lines 2302b-4 and 2320b-23. "The dragon fights during the day only because Beowulf seeks him out. He is at a decided disadvantage on the ground as is Fafnir in the *Völsungasaga*." Tripp, p. 155. In note 12 (pp. 155-6) Tripp points out "that the dragon enjoyed fighting at night (3043b-4a) […] and that only by death was the dragon prevented from returning to his den (lines 3044b-46)." Tripp, p. 155.

22 In his synoptic article "Current General Trends in *Beowulf* Studies," John Hill includes Joyce Lionarons' "*Beowulf*: Myth and Monsters," in which she "notes that dragon slayings by heroes in Indo-European stories and myths are semantically marked; they are more than ordinary killings and thus the dragon is more than an ordinary adversary. That semantic marking is a periphrastic phrase in Old English – 'to bonan *weorđan*' - and is 'bi-directional,' setting up the destruction of the dragon or else of the hero by the dragon. That bi-directional quality suggests a deep similarity between hero and monster. The hero's destruction of the dragon usually confers upon him powers of civilization, of establishing order. But in *Beowulf* all of the historical material about feuds between people confers a different meaning upon the dragon fight, which achieves closure in the deaths of the opponents (who are in several ways identified with each other as enraged and as guardians) but cannot restore social harmony." In John Hill, "Current General Trends in Beowulf Studies," *Literature Compass* 4, 1 (2007): 66-88, available at http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2006.00390.x.?cookieSet=1. [Accessed 2007.06.19]

fight; Beowulf's and Wiglaf's dialogues; Beowulf's death speech; Wiglaf''s mission to bring items of treasure so that Beowulf can see them - there is no mention of the cover of darkness. The shamed retainers skulk back, and they can still see everything. In fact, it must be daylight for all the attention on what is and can be seen. Everything is clear and evident, except in the barrow, where - reminiscent of the hag's den - only the glow of a gleaming standard sheds light. And, in the barrow under the hoary stone, Beowulf tells Wiglaf, the dragon lies sleeping, (in Beowulf's words) sorely wounded, bereft of his treasure. [Nu se wyrm ligeđ, / swefeđ sare wund, (si)nce bereafod. (2746b-2747)] But Wiglaf does not see the dragon in the barrow because it lies under the hoary stone outside, dead - a fact which Beowulf apparently does not know.

It is here that the poet brings Beowulf and the dragon together, for the last time, lying almost side by side, dead: Beowulf no longer able to fight or reign; the dragon to hoard or ravage (2822-2832). This all the shirkers observe when they return, anxious to ee whether Wiglaf might waken their king [gif he wćccende – 2842a]. But Beowulf, like the dragon, is beyond earthly awakening (2843b-2846a).[23]

The fact of this being a daylight struggle is confirmed when the poet tells us that Wiglaf has the news announced to those who had waited all morning long for the result (2895a). And he gives us the messenger's tableau: Wiglaf keeping a death watch over the bodies of both friend and foe (2901-2911a). Moreover, after a long "digression" about the future fate of the Geats, the men arise and go to the scene of battle, where they behold both king and dragon, stretched out as the messenger had described: on the bed of death, sleeping the sleep of death.

> Fundon đa on sande sawulleasne,
> hlimbed healdan, ţone ţe him hringas geaf
> ćrran mćlum. Ţa wćs endedćg
> godum gegongen, ţćt se guđcyning,
> Wedra ţeoden, wundordeađe swealt.
> Ćr hi ţćr gesegan syllicran wiht,
> wyrm on wonge wiđerrćhtes ţćr,
> lađne licgean. (3035-3042a)
> [They found on the sand, soulless, holding the bed of rest, the one who, in earlier times, gave them rings. So was the last day reached, when the good battle king of the Weder nation died a wondrous death. Before that they saw there a more wondrous creature, the dragon, the hateful one, lying on the ground opposite.]

Thus ends Beowulf's life, his victories and singular fatal defeat, his days and nights of light and darkness forever over.

Thus ends, too, the interplays of the themes of light/darkness/sleeping/waking. Thus it is time to consider what we can conclude from these emphases, intersections, and parallels.

23 Hill also cites the conclusions of Andy Orchard, who, in examining other works containing monsters in the *Beowulf*-manuscript, "finds many similarities of diction and theme between these works and *Beowulf*, such that all are concerned with 'the relationship between pagan past and Christian present, and with the tension between an age' praising heroic glory and 'an age in which vainglory was condemned […]. The heathen warrior and monster-slayers, such as Hercules, Alexander, Beowulf, and Grettir, have themselves become monsters in Christian eyes'. (169)." Hill, *ibid*.

Conclusions

First, Beowulf, like the unnatural and monstrous creatures he encounters (from the *nicors* to the dragon) is at his fighting best at night, in the dark, lightly or unarmed, occasionally aided by supernatural means: whether Beowulf's superhuman strength or the will of God or Wyrd; regardless of the monsters' massive strength, stealth, charmed scales, or poisonous fire. But unlike two of his foes, he is always victorious at night.

Moreover, in each of Beowulf's major contests the poet emphasizes the importance of remaining awake and the consequences of falling asleep: Beowulf's physical vigilance against monsters out to kill, and flaming marauders and intruders seeking vengeance; the monsters' awareness of intruders, thieves in the night, enemies seeking vengeance. For all of them: no sleeping after the feast.

Further, the poet, through Hrođgar, warns against spiritual inattention, spiritual slumber, which, after the 'feast,' leads to pride, and thus to a fall. So Hrođgar admonished Beowulf to beware of pride, and choose the better path, the path of eternal rewards. [(Be)beorh ţe đone bealonid, Beowulf leofa, / (s)ecg betsta, ond ţe ţćt selre geceos, / ece rćdas. (1758b-1760)]

Finally, the experiences the poet presents - through the life of Beowulf, the circumstances of Grendel, his dam, and the dragon, as well as through the stories of Heremod and others - mirror the ethos of Anglo-Saxon society, which was the moral exhorted in the poet's own gnomic interjections. Heedlessness is dangerous both physically and spiritually. Be vigilant. Be prepared. Stay awake. Especially in the dark. But it is not just Beowulf or the other warriors who must be vigilant; even unearthly creatures must be on guard. And so must we; for if we are not, we will end as the unaware man, doomed to a fated death:

He ţćt wyrse ne con.
Ođ ţćt him on innan oferhygda dćl
wea(xeđ) ond wridađ. Ţonne se weard swefeđ,
sawele hy(rde). Biđ se slćp to fćst,
bisgum gebunde(n), bona swiđe neah,
se ţe of flanbogan fyrenum sceoteđ.
Ţonne biđ on hreţre under helm drepen
biteran strćle (him bebeorgan ne con),
wom wundorbebodum wergan gastes. (1742b-750)
[(The successful man) knows not the worst. Until a bit of overweening grows and flourishes. Then the watchman, the guardian of the soul, sleeps. The sleep is too fast, bound in distractions, the slayer very near, who, with the arrow-bow, shoots wicked deeds.]

This caveat is not inconsistent with Biblical injunctions,[24] perhaps like those of St. Paul:

Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than

24 Galloway also observed this in connection with *The Seafarer*. Cf. note 17.

> when we first believed; the night is far gone and the day is at hand. (Romans 13: 11-12)

It may seem, in conclusion, that Hanchey's and my conclusions agree, especially the concept of sleep being followed by "unfortunate consequences." But they do not quite converge, as I do not see this caveat to vigilance as involving Doomsday.[25] And although I agree that sleeping is a natural bodily necessity - especially after the beer–drinking - I do not see the act of sleeping as involving guilt, and therefore a righteous punishment.[26] Further, the integration of this concept with the occurrences of light and darkness adds a further dimension, one not necessarily included in more specifically Christian texts - although these themes clearly have their own Christian resonances.

Thus I suggest that the interweaving of these traditional themes in perhaps new ways presents yet another example of the interface of harmonious Anglo-Saxon pagan and Christian values: be watchful, be vigilant, be wary of the dark. Inattention invites danger, and heedless sleeping invites inglorious death, both physical and spiritual.

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25 "By recognizing the parallels between the use of sleep in *Christ III* and these other texts and the use of sleep in *Beowulf*, [she] is able to define the three major episodes in the poem as individual representations of Christian judgment." (p. 11)

26 Hanchey asserts that "sleep is a marker of guilt in Anglo-Saxon texts," and thus also in *Beowulf*. (p. 10)

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