

OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE
AND THE WORK OF GIANTS

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Phantoms, what have you left? What underground?
What place in which to be is not enough
To be? You go, poor phantoms, without place
Like the silver sheathing of the sight,
As the eye closes...

—Wallace Stevens, "Esthétique du Mal"

In the most celebrated essay in Anglo-Saxon studies, J.R.R. Tolkien liberated Old English literature from its monsters. By declaring that Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon are really orthodox Christian allegories, he removed a then-troubling impediment to the serious academic study of *Beowulf*.¹ Whereas Tolkien believed that the literary remnants of Anglo-Saxon culture may be studied in spite of its monsters, I will argue here that the Old English corpus deserves critical analysis because of its monstrous content. This essay examines the cultural function of the giant, the most familiar and frightening monster of the day. His body a living incorporation of Germanic and Latin tradition, pagan folklore and Christian belief, the work of the giant was to serve as a powerful expounder of dominant contemporary myths, from how the world was formed and where linguistic difference originates to why stone ruins dot the British countryside, and what comprises heroic male identity.

The monster dwells at the limits of knowing, enticing that inquiry which it arose to rebuke or repel, becoming intricately entangled in theories of knowledge, and then with theories of causation. Because it

inhabits an epistemic margin, the monster is a useful tool for explaining phenomena which at a given historical point defy human comprehension. Without a geophysics-based meteorology, how can wind and lightning be understood? Without a knowledge of plate tectonics and glacial erosion, how can we know how mountains arise, why earthquakes rumble, why the topography of one region differs so markedly from that of a neighboring expanse? We might say that a god is responsible; we might invent a pervading animism; we might implicate the monster.

Strange designs appear in English wheat fields, circles and arcs and intersecting lines, so we imagine alien intelligences to account for them, and try to decipher the message written there. When we know that Saint George's dragon made this hill eternally barren with his pestilent breath, or that a Frost Giant sent this blizzard hurling over our village, or that Pele in her volcanic haunts has consumed our huts with fire to register her displeasure at our licentious conduct—then we have pinned anthropomorphic causation onto random nature, and we think we understand why things are. We affix a mantle of etiology to the monster because when we allow that it caused something to occur or be, we can start to possess that phenomenon by controlling its origin—even if this control is nothing more than simple knowledge of *how*.

To know the monster, then, is to possess it—to disperse its terrible power, or better, to harness it. The monster again becomes a vehicle of prohibition, demarcating the borders not to be crossed. Lycaon is transformed into a werewolf: his howl sanctifies the host-guest relationship, his bristly hair and lupine shape naturalize a strict societal hierarchy (god-king-man-beast). As an illustrative antithesis, the monster dramatically breaches the Law in order to validate its promulgation. Saint Guthlac banishes a legion of wild demons from their mountain home because their abandon embodies everything hermitic Christianity is not supposed to be; his struggle against them valorizes control, denial, and pious individualism. The saint and the devil, the hero and the monster: contrastive pairs struggle in a carefully constructed drama of mutual identification. The climax is a staged rejection, always public but presented as personal. The demons shriek and fly away, and Saint Guthlac, his biographer, and the reader rejoice; the hero severs the giant's head and holds it aloft for all to see in an extraordinary moment of textual and extra-textual assertion.

The monster and his history (myth, hagiography, epic, artwork, elegy) become exhibits, demonstrative.

The Work of Giants

Most cultures have recognized and made use of the explanatory power of monsters, but this use gained a particular ascendancy in early Germanic mythology, including that lore imported by invading tribes into England. The figure of the giant especially attracted these etiologic legends, and in Anglo-Saxon England gathered an unparalleled body of causative myth that combined Germanic popular culture with mainstream Latin learning to produce a surprisingly coherent world history in which giants played a recurrent, enabling role. We turn, then, to the giant in early medieval England.

Old English contains four nouns carrying the modern signification of "giant": *ent*, *eten*, *eoten*, and *gigant*. *pyrs* could be used, but has the wider denotation of "large monster."² The etymology of most of these words is unclear, though *eten* may be related to *etan* ("to eat"), and *eoten* is probably cognate with Old Norse *jotunn*.³ *Gigant* is taken directly from the oblique forms of Latin *gigas*, which in turn was borrowed from the Greek term for the earth-born race guilty of rebellion against the Olympian gods. *Ent* is by far the most common designation. The glossary in Ælfric's *Grammar* supplies *ent* for Latin *gigas*,⁴ and Aldhelm provides it for *ciclopum*;⁵ the word also appears repeatedly in Old English literature as part of the poetic set phrase *enta geweorc* ("the work of giants").

With so many synonyms available, one might expect that the various words for giant would have become increasingly specialized in their use; such, however, appears not to have been the case. *Ent*, *eten*, and *eoten* are employed interchangeably in Old English to represent giants of both Latin and Northern tradition, indicating that the two conceptions were accepted as essentially compatible from a very early date. Because of its status as erudite borrowing, *gigant* continued to be employed almost exclusively of biblical giants such as Nimrod and Goliath; the term is found only in the psalters, homilies, and biblical paraphrases—and in *Beowulf*. Indeed, the *Beowulf* poet may perhaps have been distinguishing between two of the terms in order to re-separate the two mythologies of the giant, one learned (Latin) and one more popular (Germanic). The passage describes how the fratricidal Cain was exiled by God, and at the margins of the earth became the progenitor of its monsters:

þanon untydras ealle onwocon,
 eotenas ond ylfe ond orneas,
 swylce gi[ga]ntas, þa wið gode wunnon
 lange þrage (111-114a)

From Cain arose all the misbegotten: giants [*eotenas*] and
 elves and evil spirits, also [*or such*] giants
 [*gigantas*] who fought against God for a long time.

If *soylce* is to be taken as "also" rather than "such," the author is distinguishing between what are perhaps the traditional, Germanic giants (*eotenas*, etymologically tied to Old Icelandic *jötunn*), whom he catalogues together with another Norse monster (*ylfe*, the elves, ON *álfr*); and those giants described in the Bible and its exegesis, the proximate cause of the Flood and the recurrent foes of the Israelites (*gigantas*, derived from the Latin word used in the Vulgate). These second giants then form a Latinate doublet to contrast with the Germanic one preceding by a pairing with *orcneas*, a word of uncertain meaning etymologically related to Latin *orcus* (the god of the underworld, or his demesnes). This distinction is likely, but not certain. In either case the author is conjoining two traditions of giants by linking those from the Hebrew Bible with creatures of Germanic provenance; such easy mingling characterizes the Anglo-Saxon giant, and illustrates how quickly the giants of pagan tradition were synthesized with purely biblical manifestations. Not surprisingly, separating the component conceptions in order to reanalyze them is no easy task.

Old English retains so much of its Germanic character (case endings, verb conjugations, vocabulary differences) that specialized training must be undertaken to read works like *Beowulf* in the original. The medieval culture we label Anglo-Saxon is really the product of the blending of the many Northern peoples who began to settle in Great Britain from the fifth century onward, eventually building thriving countries there. This "new" culture is, of course, a transplanted Germanic one, so that we might reasonably expect that the giants of Old English literature should reveal a close affinity to more purely Germanic giants. The expectation is not wholly born out. French influence had not yet saturated the literary culture, as it would later, but the scant remains of this literary epoch are almost thoroughly Christian and erudite, yielding only occasional glimpses at the original paganism and its conception of the monstrous.⁶ What Old English manuscripts survive record a learned, primarily ecclesiastical tradition, created and preserved in the monasteries. Control of the recorded vernacular was mainly in the hands of a pre-selecting elite whose responsibility it was to promulgate mainstream Latin learning over a popular culture rejected as heathenism. The Germanic heroes and their adversaries did not, of course, simply disappear in England; an enjoyment

of their exploits seems to have been perennial, to the dismay of the more conservative members of the religious communities. Alcuin famously rebuked the monks at Lindisfarne for reading popular heroic tales at their meals rather than sermons by the church fathers. His rhetorical question "Quid Hiniieldus cum Christo?" ("What has Ingeld to do with Christ?")—that is, why should Christians be interested in deeds of heroes rather than traditional homilies—indicates that Germanic interests were never wholly supplanted by Latin erudite traditions. Yet no matter how popular Ingeld's deeds were for continued oral recital, even at monastic dinner tables, nothing survives of this hero today besides some scattered and fragmentary references which together can only hint at a once widespread fame.⁷ The bulk of indigenous tradition, transmitted primarily by mouth, was rendered mute by a deliberate omission of recording. Further, manuscripts and codices were primarily preserved by monastic communities and could at any point be destroyed or reused.

Contemporary Christianity's attitude toward Germanic paganism was not, however, one of reflexive or unthinking condemnation. As Larry Benson has pointed out in the course of his argument in "The Pagan Coloring of *Beowulf*,"⁸ a growing interest in and tolerance of the heathen world existed within English Christianity, and this curiosity was successfully incorporated into an ongoing Christian literary tradition. Even Alcuin's exhortation to substitute patristic sermons for pagan songs demonstrates the fact that the two cultures were cohabitating in 797, and not very uncomfortably at that, at least at Lindisfarne. Further, the adaptability of Christianity to native Anglo-Saxon tradition in England had been immense, especially in its earliest days; new content was being fitted to old forms, but the substitution could not wholly eradicate the pagan elements. What relics of Germanic culture remain, then, are generally imbedded in a Christian amber which paradoxically ensured their survival.

The recovery of this anterior tradition is of necessity a comparative process. It is generally conceded that the bulk of the earliest recoverable Germanic literature is written in Old Norse, specifically in Old Icelandic, for on that remote island Christianity and its attendant mainstream Latin learning were slow to penetrate, and never in fact displaced local pride in the rich antecedent heritage. The survival of eddic writing and *sögur* was possible, however, only after Christian missionaries provided an alphabet of connected letters and parchment by which these originally oral forms could be preserved, the runic system being insufficient for such an

undertaking. Thus if we use Icelandic literature as the basis of our Germanic reconstruction, we are dealing with manuscripts contemporaneous with the Middle English period in England; the works themselves may date back as early as 700 A.D.,⁹ but most of them are considerably later. The Old Norse corpus evolved over a span of several centuries and indicates a tradition in flux rather than a static "moment"; because its compositional chronology can be difficult to determine, moreover, even the description of that fluctuation is far from easy.

The quick appearance of continental, ecclesiastical, Celtic and classical influences upon Norse literature compounds the difficulty of extracting a Germanic tradition from it. Donald K. Fry has pointed out the speed at which the cyclops Polyphemos migrated from Homeric epic into Icelandic literature; by the early fourteenth century, he was living incognito on an island in the chilly North, still herding goats and being blinded by a clever hero disguised as a ram (*Egils saga einhenda ok Asmundar saga berserkjarbana*).¹⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth's creation, the fearsome giant of Mount Saint Michael whom King Arthur fights in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, influenced the depiction of the unbeatable foe Ogmund in *Orvar-Odds saga*, like Geoffrey's giant, the fearsome Ogmund weaves a garment from the beards of vassal kings and wrestles with his opponent.¹¹ Moreover, like the giants of orthodox Christian literary tradition, Ogmund is the product of miscegenation: King Hárekr is tricked into sleeping with an ogress very like Grendel's mother, who fights Orvar-Oddr on her son's behalf. Tracing the origin of monstrous births to interracial (or inter-genus) relations is a patristic favorite, centered upon exegesis of an enigmatic passage in Genesis which linked the birth of giants with a mysterious but divinely forbidden kind of sexual mingling (Gen. 6:4). *Orvar-Odds saga* has clearly been deeply influenced by Christian thought; its protagonist is even baptized, and in no less a river than the Jordan. Yet in this same work the hero also visits the land of the giants and has sexual intercourse with a giantess, producing an exceptional son who is large without being gross. Clearly this rendition of inter-genus procreation is closer to the pagan tradition, in which both gods and men freely associated with female giants and engendered offspring more extraordinary than monstrous.¹² Like the Celtic *Culhwch and Olwen*, Norse literature holds that a giant can be the object of love (as in the *Skírnismál*, a celebratory song of fertility in which the god Frey longs for the giant Gymir's daughter), rather than a symbol of transgressive eroticism (Geoffrey's giant of Mount Saint Michael murders women with his lust; the idea of offspring is abhorrent rather than intriguing). Perhaps

implicit in this more ethically complex depiction of human-giant sexual relations is a gentler, less xenophobic attitude toward interracial (or inter-tribal) mingling than that made necessary by adopting the strict prohibitions of the Hebrew Bible.¹³

In the course of insisting upon the difficulty of reconstructing a Germanic tradition, we have established that Old Norse literature reveals just that obvious and varied mixture of Germanic and Christian elements we might have expected to find readily apparent in Old English writings but, for a variety of reasons ranging from the early penetration of Christianity to the conditions of manuscript production and survival, do not so easily perceive. This is not to say that the early insular conception of the giant was uninfluenced by its Germanic ancestry; quite the opposite. The question is mainly of degree. The cultural components of the Scandinavian giants are more easily precipitated than their English counterparts because in general the mixture is less stable, a confluence arrested in motion rather than something closer along to a resultant solution. It will be worthwhile to offer some generalizations on the conception of the figure of the giant within this Northern tradition, but again it must be stated that we are dealing with a literature in a complicated state of removedness and adulteration.¹⁴

Like their counterparts in mainstream Latin writings, the Germanic giants are characterized by temporal anteriority and a monstrous appetite and strength; these traits in turn tie them to a certain primitivism that sometimes suggests they are outmoded, while always linking them to the rough, early (larger-than-life) days of the world. According to surviving cosmogonies (*Voluspá*, *Gylfaginning*), they predate the material universe, which itself was fashioned from the corpse of the giant Ymir. Giants live at civilization's periphery, often in a specially realized geography.¹⁵ As creatures of the world's ancient order, they are so close to nature that they are linked to meteorological phenomena—storms, fog, blizzards, thunder. As elemental representations they are repeatedly connected to earth and stone, and so gained an explanatory function as creators of landscape, ruins and architecture; these elemental associations also explain their pervasive presence in the cosmogonies. Because they are more human than their Christian counterparts (where they are always gendered masculine), these giants are occasionally represented as female. They marry freely with gods and men, at times representing a middle step between the human and the divine rather than an inferior genus between man and animal; the Aesir, the most powerful gods of the Norse pantheon, are descended from giants.¹⁶ Norse giants are inclined toward evil without being evil by

definition. Simply put, they are more ambiguous and ethically complex, less definable and predictable than the giants of Latin culture, mainly because the relationship of the gods to the giants is one of antagonism, but not of binary opposition. That is, because Odin does not represent the order and statesmanship of the allegorized Zeus or the paternal guardianship of Yahweh, the Norse giants have no precise antitheses to represent; the giants in biblical and classical tradition are evil in order to contrast and promulgate the positive valence of their divine foes.¹⁷ Even if the *jötnar* generally represent anarchy, chaos, and subversion, the Aesir and Vanir themselves could hardly be said to represent order, obedience to hierarchy, or absolute lawfulness.

For the most part, however, the medieval Latin and the Norse traditions of giants are not radically dissimilar. Both are capable of embodying the same negative attributes; the differences are of degree, not of fundamental essence. This surprising similarity between the traditions made their conjoining both natural and inevitable. And yet we may still rightly wonder what precisely reveals the Northern parent in the Anglo-Saxon giant's genetic makeup, and how this Germanic inheritance was affected by the unique environment of early England.

In the long history of scholarship which has grown up around the giants of Germanic provenance, a link has been repeatedly explicated between the *jötnar*¹⁸ and etiology; made popular by Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* of 1818 and promulgated by Ludwig Laistner's connecting them again to meteorological phenomena in 1860 in his *Nebelsagen*,¹⁹ this conjoining of the giant to causality is being continued today by Lotte Motz in her numerous reappraisals of the Norse giants' significance. Carl von Sydow in his "Jätterna i mytologi och folktrö" used the Eddic and folkloric linking of giants to the explanation of topography and architecture in order to invent a creation myth of his own for them;²⁰ John Broderius compiled vast catalogues of their traditional causative ascriptions in his dissertation at the University of Chicago, *The Giant in Germanic Tradition*. Echoing von Sydow's theory, Broderius writes:

In Germanic popular tradition giant tales which explain the origin of various topographical phenomena, such as boulders, mountains... and ancient buildings of great size, occur by far the most frequently and have the widest distribution... [T]hese tales represent the earliest beginnings of popular belief in giants. The naive imagination of primitive man in his search for an explanation of the world about him could conceive of these phenomena only as the work of a

race of men of extraordinarily great size and strength. Since no one had ever seen a giant, there developed the notion that giants no longer existed. When men settled in the land, they succeeded by means of greater cunning in driving the giants out. The giants withdrew, they said, to the unfrequented wastes and mountains where they gradually died out (p.190).

Much of this scholarship is rather dated, full of the shortcomings endemic to the early folkloric approaches in general, but all of it demonstrates a recurrent Germanic phenomenon: the connection of giants to etiologic function. Their place in etiology is the distinguishing attribute of the Northern giants; from the pantheon of gods to the raw matter of the physical world, all derives from the giant's body, "stopped" forever and rendered omnipresent. The extraordinary permutations of this etiologic link in Anglo-Saxon England can, in fact, be used to reapproach the problematic question of Germanic tradition in Old English literature.

The Relics of Northern Influence

To read the giant into the landscape as creator of topography or builder of strange architecture is to partake of that philosophical category called the Sublime, in which the (male) human body is projected onto the world. The landscape becomes corporal as

the male individual makes over aspects of himself—particularly the bodily component he fears may be alienable, the phallus—to nature. Horror deprives one of speech, transforming one into a helpless onlooker; one loses one's power of speech as one's words undergo translation into *images*. The process is like the dream work that takes 'figures of speech' literally, objectifying—but also alienating—language into pictures.²¹

The giant, projected into the earth, throws it into tumult by smashing its mountains or making toys of its stones; or the giant erects huge and mysterious structures which dwarf human achievement, that threaten to overwhelm with their size and power. The giant's spatial and temporal passing is registered only in the aftermath of the Sublime, in the cery ruins of his achievements, when his footprints have filled with water and become lakes—when words have returned to the observer, emotion can be harnessed, and speech can describe his path through the landscape, or through time. The earth and its altered features (mountains, lakes, ancient cities) are the giant's story, a source of quiet wonder and contemplative sadness after sudden, cosmic fear.

Giants retain their etiologic association with the earth and stoneworks

throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, so that it is in a constant linking of giants through the Sublime to vanished architects that the Germanic tradition is most evident in Old English literature. The speaker of the Old English poem known today as *The Wanderer* laments the impermanence of humanity and its achievements by pairing the wreckage of a city with the ruin of its inhabitants:

swa nu missenlice geond þ isne middangeard
 winde biwaune weallas stondaþ
 hrime bihrorene, hry ðge þa ederas.
 Woriað þa winsalo, waldend licgað
 dreame bidrorene; duguþ eal gecrong
 wlonc bi wealle.²²

A silent testament to the destructive inevitability of time, these windswept remains are "the old work of giants, standing abandoned": *cald enta geweorc idlu stodon* (1.87). For all of its stock character, the allusion fits remarkably well into the poem's theme of unrecoverable loss. Associated with a race defined simultaneously by its terrible power and its ancient vanishing, the fragmented architecture becomes a living elegy:

Se þonne þisne wealsteal wise geþohte
 ond þis deorce lif deope geond þenceð
 frod in ferþe, feor oft gemon
 wælsleahta worn ond þas word acwið...
 Stondeð nu on laste leofre duguþe
 weal wundrunn heah wyrmlice fah (88-91; 97-98)²³

At least four time frames are evident here: the distant past when the city was constructed out of stone; a nearer past when men lived and died; the bitter present of an exiled narrator (the *earthstapa*, or "earth-walker"), whose state of mind seems to find a reflection in the ruins; and the timeless moment of the wise observer who moralizes on the remains. The city's giant builders are conflated with eulogized warriors who perished in a bloody past; they in turn are linked with the recent plight of the *wrecca* ("exile"), and his fate provokes a consideration of universal end. The poem is a condensed narrative of cycles of fall in which the passing of the giants (the Old Order of the world) is linked with the necessary passing of humanity.

Another poem from the Exeter Book, *The Ruin*, opens with a similar apostrophe to the time-blasted leavings of giants: "Wraetlic is þes wealstan, wyrde gebraecon; burgstede burston, broснаð enta geweorc."²⁴ Something of a ruin itself because of the poor condition of the manuscript, the poem describes what appear to be Roman remains²⁵ with images of fallen stone and vanished inhabitants. As in Norse writings, the

giants here suggest that which predates contemporary man and has vanished long before the poet's epoch; in the uncertain past invented by the Norse *sögur*, the giants are encountered only in their race's waning, knowable in the author's present from their traces alone. Anthropologically speaking, then, the passing of the giants is the displacement of anterior culture; giants represent the unconquered remnant of a past which eludes the complete historical memory of the recorder. The giants are also here associated with a culture of idolatry (1.25ff.), a connection derived from the Book of Enoch, an apocryphal book of the Bible which seems to have exerted great influence on Anglo-Saxon gigantology.

Enta geweorc ("the work of giants") and its variants (*enta ærgeweorc*, *giganta geweorc*²⁶) are somewhat formulaic descriptions, useful for completing a poetic half-line quickly, especially during an oral recital. These phrases are fairly widespread in Old English literature, nearly always referring to ancient stone buildings or walls;²⁷ a cognate phrase (*wrisilic gewerc*) even appears in Old Saxon, a related language. Neither *The Wanderer* nor *The Ruin* necessarily presuppose that giants were historically responsible for the fragmented architecture that spurs the elegy; the former inhabitants are envisioned as departed men in both poems. In admitting the phrase's formulaic nature, however, I do not intend to dismiss it as a mere stock half-line. The resonance momentarily established by realized Germanic giants fits perfectly the poems' cycle of loss and vanishing at the hands of *wyrde* ("Fate") and time. The phrase is attracted to these descriptions because of its rich allusiveness. From a less literary viewpoint, stone ruins are logically *enta geweorc* not only because of the great size of the ruined architecture, but also because of the elemental connection of giants with the earth and stonework masonry in Northern mythology.²⁸ The Anglo-Saxons built almost exclusively in perishable wood and lacked the technology to construct the tremendous stone edifices such as those still visible at Bath. After the Romans disappeared and the memory of their occupation retreated into scholarly histories, it is no wonder that their already ancient monuments, along with pre-Celtic stone rings and dolmens, should be considered *enta geweorc*. Keep in mind, too, that our own century has variously argued that the Egyptian pyramids, pre-Columbian ruins, and geometric patterns in English wheat fields are the work of strange and teleologic aliens, carried from the margins of space in their chariots of the gods. The monster (alien or giant), born in that epistemic turmoil when categories and systems of knowledge collide, arrives ready to explain where perception fails.

Giants, Gods, and Other Pagans

Some time around the middle of the ninth century, King Alfred the Great translated Boethius' sixth century philosophical treatise *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (*The Consolation of Philosophy*) into Old English, the first of two English monarchs to do so. His Anglo-Saxon contemporaries may have found the *consolatio* promised by the title as they read the popular work in its new vernacular edition; modern scholars are apt to value it more highly, however, for the insights contained in its numerous incorporated glosses to what Alfred considered difficult or obscure Latin passages. A short meter connecting the transformations worked by Circe with inner morality and outward appearance speaks of *dux Neritii* (Ulysses) and *pulchra dea solis edita semine* (Circe); in the course of explaining the latter allusion, Alfred writes:

þa wæs þær Apollines dohter Iobes [Jove's] suna; se Iob was hiora cyning, and licette þæt he sceolde bion se hehsta god; and þæt dysige folc him gelyfde, forþaðe he was cynecynnes; and hi nyston na nænne oðerne god on þæne timan, buton hiora cyningas hi weorþ odon for godas. þa sceolde þæs lobes fæder bion eac god; þæs nama wæs Saturnus; and his suna swa ilce ælcne hi hæfdon for god. þa was hiora an se Apollinis þe we ær ymb spræcon. þæs Apollines dohtor sceolde bion gydene, þære nama wæs Kirke.²⁹

This linking of the deities from classical mythology to mortal or demonic impersonators is commonplace in early medieval theological writing. Justin Martyr in the *Apologia* and Augustine in his *De civitate dei* were among the many to reiterate the belief. Isidore summarized this interpretive tradition in his influential *Etymologiae*, Book VIII.xi (*De diis gentium*):

Those whom the pagans worship as gods were once human and lived among men, such as Isis in Egypt, Jupiter in Crete, and Faunus in Rome... They were formerly mighty heroes (*virī fortes*), founders of cities; when they died, images were erected to honor them ... Persuaded by demons, posterity esteemed these men gods, and worshiped them.³⁰

These deceiving *virī fortes* were first described by the Church fathers as fallen angels, then with a shift in the exegetical tradition they became powerful, evil men, often said to be descended from either fratricidal Cain or Noah's mocking son, Cham. Taking this tradition as a starting point, Emerson argues that the early Christian writers, building on Josephus' conflation of the giants of Genesis 6 ("*Entas wæron ofer eor þn on pam dagum*") the classical stormers of Olympus,

pointed to the Greek myth [of the Gigantomachia] as not only confirming Scripture, but explaining in a simple manner the whole basis of the heathen mythologies. The giants who warred against Jove were the giants of Scripture, who opposed God and wrought wickedness. They and their descendants became heathen gods, who were thus not gods at all, but wicked men or devils (p.905).

In fact, however, none of the Western patristic writers connect the giants to the "wicked men or devils" whom they name as the specious deities of heathendom; traditionally in the Latin church, wicked men were thought to be those *tyranni* responsible for the promulgation of idolatry. Even though the three groups of deceivers (giants, demons, evil men) figure in the history of a single tradition of exegesis, and even though the giants of classical mythology were in fact connected repeatedly to the biblical giants, none of the Latin writers whom Emerson himself quotes to support his argument assert that it was the giants who deluded various credulous races into a belief in their divine nature; that connection is made by him for them as he works backwards from later tradition.³² Giants were, in fact, intimately linked to the origin of the pagan deities in Christian thought; this etiologic coupling, however, originates in Anglo-Saxon England, and not (as Emerson would have it) in earlier patristic exegesis.

Most of the references which Emerson gathers to support his claim instead refer, like Alfred's gloss in the *Consolation*, only to the mainstream Christian tradition which does not presuppose gigantic ancestry for the pagan deities at all.³³ His quotation from the verse homily *De falsis deis* ("Of False Gods"), however, is unmistakable proof of the Anglo-Saxon connection of beguiling giants with the specious divinities of classical mythology. A similar, more succinct passage occurs in an unrelated homily by Ælfric, the *Passio Apostolorum Petri et Pauli*, as an explanation of why Peter should have called Jesus "son of the living God":

[Petrus] cwæð 'þæs lifigendan Godes,' for twæminge ðæra leasra goda, ða ðe hæðene ðeoda, mid mislicum gedwylde bepæhte, wurðodon. Sume hi gelyfdon on deade entas, and him deorvur ðlire enlicnyssa arærdon, and cwædon þæt hi godas wæron for ðære micelan strenede e hi hæfdon; was deah lif swiðe manfullic and bysmurfull (Thorpe, p.366).

The giants here are an ancient, vanished race whose fossilized remains are not mysterious bones or odd topography, but the lingering worship of their own iniquity. The references to constructing idols and deifying the sun and moon which follow make it clear that Ælfric has

both biblical and classical deities in mind. By describing the genesis of the false, mortal divinities of the Greeks and Romans (along with those of the Babylonians, Canaanites and wayward Israelites), Ælfric is in part repeating the fairly frequent connection made in Old English literature between the opprobrious giants of Christian tradition and the gods of classical mythology ("Erculus se ent,"³⁵ "Mercurius se gigant,"³⁶ etc.). The descent of these giants was traced from demons, from Cain, or from Nimrod, the supposed builder of the Tower of Babel. It is obvious enough that we are dealing primarily here with the linking of biblical exegesis to classical literature, a propensity of erudite Latin culture; we may rightfully wonder, then, how this tradition is connected to more indigenous giant lore, especially since the linking of giants with specious divinity seems to have been forged or repeated in Anglo-Saxon England but not elsewhere, or in any later period.

In the course of one of the many Old English homilies collected by Napier, a discourse on the early power of the devil over humanity leads to an interesting excursus amounting to a full creation myth for all the gods of old:

Feorðhealf gear se deofles man rixað on middanearde, and swa lange he winð ongean god and godes þeowas; and he ahefð hine sylfne of er ealle, þa ðe hæðene men cwædon, þæt godas beon sceoldan on hæðene wisan; swylc swa wæs Erculus se ent and Apollinis, þe hi mærne god leton; Eor eac and Owðen, þe hæðne men heriað swiðe.³⁷

Apollo and the classical pantheon, then, are not the only pseudo-divinities originated by megalomaniacal giants; Thor (þor) and Odin (Owðen), the most familiar gods of Northern provenance, are also said to be *entas*. In few other traditions do giants play so large a role as in the ancient Scandinavian mythos which has served as our basis for reconstructing early England's Germanic culture. Even after the pantheon of Vanir and Aesir had been replaced by Christian monotheism, traditions of giants would have lingered, compatible as they were to the not radically dissimilar ecclesiastical conception. As erudite culture displaced the more indigenous, heathen tradition, this Old Order of giants became conflated with the vanished gods whom they had aided and battled, so that both could then be denigrated as deceivers and impersonators, validating the superiority of Christian over popular ("heathen") culture. In this notion that the giants were promulgators of their own specious divinity, the origin of the pagan gods, we see the synthesis of Germanic, ecclesiastical, popular and erudite traditions—further proof of this mythic figure's continued agglutinative power. The northern, folkloric propensity to

utilize giants in a scheme of etiology has thus been adapted to the formation of a new scholastic myth, revealing in an extraordinary new way the influence of the Germanic inheritance on Anglo Saxon culture.

The promulgation of this story in learned circles seems to have been enabled by familiarity with yet another source of giant lore in this period, the Book of Enoch, where giantism, transgression, and idolatry had been unforgettably linked.

Cannibal Herbalists

The ubiquity of learned discourse in Anglo-Saxon England on the subject of giants can be attributed to the pervasive presence of the figures in Northern tradition; this popular heritage must have influenced even the most strictly ecclesiastical writers, no matter how submerged they were in the mainstream Latin thought which ensured that any such topical discourse would be almost wholly Christian in its expression. The biblical treatment of giants and its exegetical history has already been discussed; writers in Old English were very much aware of these orthodoxies, and referred to them repeatedly as they sought to extend the tradition. Interest quickly arose in lore concerning biblical giants connected to the Vulgate but not examined specifically or at length there. Extra-biblical treatments of these giants rapidly found their way to England, often as fragments or textually embedded references. The most important and perhaps the most complete of these works is the ancient Book of Enoch, or I Enoch.

In the course of an intriguing article arguing the influence of Enoch on the composition of *Beowulf*, Kaske provides the best-documented account we have of the pseudepigraphical work's status in Anglo-Saxon England. Written as much as a thousand years before the composition of the Old English poem, I Enoch had been widely popular in the early church, but "[because it] contained much of a questionable character... from the fourth century of our era onward it fell into discredit; and under the ban of such authorities as Hilary, Jerome, and Augustine, it gradually passed out of circulation."³⁸ The case, Kaske argues, was different in early England, where "books of this kind [i.e. the-pseudepigraphia] seem to have had some currency..., presumably in early Latin translations that perished during the Viking period and were never replaced" ("Enoch," pp.421-2). The text as we know it today survives completely only in Ethiopic, with small portions preserved in Greek and Aramaic—and, in a serendipitous eighth-century English fragment of twenty-five lines, Latin.³⁹ Kaske tries hard to prove the

book's insular influence, citing as evidence Bede's "fairly detailed discussion" of Enoch⁴⁰ along with a less convincing allusion in *Solomon and Saturn* (p.423); he might have buttressed his argument further with the fact that in an intriguing conjunction, the Old Saxon *Genesis* (the close relation of which to the Old English *Genesis* is well known) follows a narration of the birth of the giants by a consideration of Enoch, the dreamer and supposed author of the pseudepigraphical book. Even taken alone, however, the existence of the Latin fragment is compelling evidence of direct English knowledge of the work.

As far as the study of giants is concerned, the most important portion of the Book of Enoch is a group of ten chapters which, building on the cryptic reference of Genesis 6:4 to primal miscegenation, describes the intercourse of angels with "daughters of men" and their consequent engendering of giant offspring (chapters VI-XVI; pp. 13-38 in Charles' translation). Two hundred of these angels or Watchers, as they are called in the text, selected human wives,

and they began to go in unto them and to defile themselves with them, and they taught them charms and enchantments, and the cutting of roots, and made them acquainted with plants. And they became pregnant, and they bare great giants, whose height was three thousand ells: who consumed all the acquisitions of men. And when men could no longer sustain them, the giants turned against them and devoured mankind. And they began to sin against [nature] ... and to devour one another's flesh, and drink the blood. And Azâzêl [one of the giants] taught them to make swords, and knives, and shields, and breastplates, and made known to them the metals of the earth and the art of working them (p.18).

The product of an illicit mingling of the spiritual with the physical (and living proof of a divinely ordained dualism), these giants function only to devour, symbols of an uncontained hunger both sexual and material. God's wrath eventually destroys their bodies, leaving them as "evil spirits... [who] afflict, oppress, destroy attack, do battle...: they take no food, but nevertheless hunger and thirst, and cause offenses" (36-7). Their spiritual nature becomes a curse, activated because their human inheritance is a *mélange* of vices textually condemned as in conflict with divinity. The expression of sexual drive by the angels is exaggerated into a libidinous violation of nature which in turn produces gigantic symbols of appetite, all-devouring cannibals. Through their destruction and punishment the giants validate Christian denial and restraint.

The giants of the Book of Enoch are characterized by the same attributes which define the figure for all of the mainstream Western Latin tradition: temporal anteriority (they predate the Flood), exaggerated appetite (they are defined by their ingestive destruction, the opposite of God's creative function), violence (resulting in cannibalism, the ultimate expression of aggression), perverse sexuality (in their engendering), an inherently evil nature, and uncontainability (they nearly destroy the earth with their boundary-breaking). Surprisingly, they are also teachers who instruct humanity in herbalism and metallurgy—by coincidence, just the sort of ancient lore and magic often associated with the Norse giants. These giants of Enoch are no Prometheus figures, however. Like the Greek Titan, they are punished by God for imparting their skills to mortals, but these newfound crafts are a second Fall from innocence, precipitated again by forbidden knowledge. The teachings of the giants are useful for dark magic and for war rather than the Greek myth's attainment of a desirable proximity to the divine.

The Book of Enoch influenced the Hellenic Judaism which in turn informed early Christian thought and the Christian Bible.⁴¹ If the complete book never arrived on English shores, the story of the fall of the angels and the creation of the giants was available nonetheless in numerous derivative sources. Even Jerome, who condemned Enoch as uninspired, still seems to have been inspired by it himself.⁴² Kaske has persuasively argued, however, that the author of *Beowulf* knew the relevant portions of Enoch well enough to suggest the complete text's late availability in Great Britain. His elaboration of the book's implications for the Old English poem is at times rather stretched, especially in linking Grendel's mother with the sirens, an attempt which finds itself simultaneously arguing both for and against a classical interpretation of the figure.⁴³ The less believable portions of his thesis spring from his attempt to prove the Book of Enoch's account of the giants a palimpsest for the Grendel episode; it would have been sufficient to conclude that Enoch lurks suggestively in the background of the story, informing the text rather than manipulating it. As Kaske has argued elsewhere,⁴⁴ the depiction of Grendel owes much to the Hebrew Bible's revered tradition of giants; the cannibalism Grendel shares with some interpretations of them, however, ultimately derives from Enoch, as does his confusing dual epithets that label him both giant and demon ("Enoch," p.424). The name "Grendel" itself may owe something to the names of the angels in Enoch (425); in addition, he, like them, is linked to the worship of idols (429).

It is difficult to determine the influence of the Book of Enoch out-

side of *Beowulf*, again mainly because of the paucity of surviving Old English literature. The few parallels which the giants of the pseudoepigrahical work offer to those of Germanic tradition are intriguing; a more widespread interest in the book than we are now aware of is likely, for its contents could have been seen as elaborating upon or even to a degree synthesizing the Norse and Christian traditions of giants.⁴⁵ In the absence of further evidence, however, we must be content to conclude that the creation of Grendel indicates a strong Anglo-Saxon interest in the tradition of giants deriving from the Hebrew Bible and reconfigured in the Book of Enoch. The adaptation of these figures from religious tradition and their synthesis with a story of Germanic provenance indicate a remarkable contemporary proclivity toward conflation of elements of distinct origin; this penchant in turn suggests the fate in England of the giants we know from Norse tradition: a slow fading after a long series of diluting combinations.

The Tower of Nimrod

As Dante prepares to descend into Malebolge, the ninth circle of hell, he sees in the distant fog what he takes to be enormous towers placed around the central pit. He discovers from his guide Vergil that they are actually giants, buried in the earth from the navel down. The fiercest of these bellows at them: "Rafel mahee amek zabi almit"—enigmatic, indecipherable sounds which lead Dante's guide to declare

His very babbling testifies the wrong
he did on earth: he is Nimrod, through whose evil
mankind no longer speaks a common tongue.⁴⁶

Medieval exegesis held that Nimrod had been the architect of the Tower of Babel, "the first great collective effort of pride against God," so that his punishment is the reification of his traditional sin (Stephens, p.86). Nimrod's giant body becomes that transgressive architecture which he aspired to build, a living and speaking *enta geweorc*. Dante finds in him a combination of "intelligence / ...added to brute power and evil will" (55-6); Nimrod is as deadly, transgressive, and anarchic as the classical giants Ephialtes, Briareus, Tityos, Typhon, and Antaeus—the other warding "towers."

Nimrod is the most important of the Hebrew Bible giants around whom a rich tradition of extra-biblical associations arose. Finding him at the verge of the deepest pit of hell in the *Inferno* is actually no surprise, considering the variety of pernicious deeds with which the commentators credited him. He resides at hell's mouth with the most famous giants of

classical derivation because none of his biblical brethren were as important to Christian traditions of exegesis as he became, mainly because he attracted all the negative qualities of giantism early on, and consequently dwarfed the importance of the other biblical monsters. The unnamed giants of Genesis 6:4 ("*Entas wæron ofer eorþan on*") remained nebulous signifiers of a primordial evil intense enough to cause God's sending of the Flood to destroy them; this almost allegorical function would have lost much of its suggestiveness had it been more vividly realized. The Old English *Genesis* calls them simply "gigantmæcgas, Gode-unleofe, / micle mansceaðan, metode laðe" ("the race of giants, unloved by God, great mankillers, hateful to the Lord," 1268-9), and the brief characterization is evocative and sufficient. Og, giant king of Basan, has a more extended physical presence in the Bible, but not in Anglo-Saxon culture. Described in Deuteronomy as the last of the giant race, he has been connected with the mysterious Weallende Wulf of *Solomon and Saturn* (see Menner, pp122-3), but was seldom mentioned in Old English literature. Even the celebrated Goliath never attained the popularity of allusion which Nimrod enjoyed, at least not among the Anglo-Saxon theological writers. Ælfric nonetheless mentions *Goliam se ent* several times; the description he offers of David's victory even repeats the familiar fate of the conquered giant, a beheading and subsequent ritualized display of the remnant:

& mid his liðeran [David] ofwearp þone geleafsean ent, þæt he læg geswogen & sloh him of þæt heafod & on fleame gebrohte þa Philisteos ealle.⁴⁷

One of the Blickling Homilies allegorizes this same battle, transforming the defeat of Goliath by David into the overthrow of the devil by Christ:

Wel geheowede David þæt, þa he wolde wiþ Goliaþ gefeohtan, þa nam he fif stanas on his herdebelig, & þeah hweþ ere mid anum he þone gigant ofwearp; swa Crist oferswiþ de þæt deofol mid þisse cyþnesse.⁴⁸

The association between giants and devils was easily made, considering the giant's diabolic origin and defining attributes in Christian myth. It is nonetheless interesting to see the weight of this tradition brought to bear on Goliath, a giant who is more historically realized than the transgressors of Genesis with whom he is linked. Even in the Hebrew we are dealing with two separate categories of giants, the Nephilim and the Raphaim; Goliath of Gath belongs to the second group, and is more monsterized Philistine than mythic symbol of anarchic primitivism. One of the propensities of Old English gigantology,

however, is the combining of disparate traditions as if they were one continuous history of giants.

Besides the Raphaim and the Nephilim, among the traditions of giants in the Hebrew Bible are the Anakim, Emim, Zamzummim, and the inhabitants of Basan. Surprisingly, the formidable Nimrod belongs to none of these biblical genera. In fact, the Hebrew Genesis makes no reference to his size at all, labelling him during his brief appearance in an extended genealogy only a "mighty hunter before the Lord," a grandson of Cham, and the founder of the kingdom of Babel, in Shinar (Genesis 10: 8-10). The Plains of Shinar are, by chance, the very place at which the Tower of Babel was constructed (Gen. 11:2), so that Nimrod eventually became its putative builder in various exegetical works, both Jewish and Christian.⁴⁹ The Septuagint had used the Greek word for giant to describe Nimrod; Philo, Augustine and Orosius followed suit, promulgating the idea. It was Augustine, according to Stephens, who "bequeathed to the Latin Middle Ages this idea that Nimrod was... a 'mighty hunter *against* the Lord' ('gigans uenator *contra* Dominum Deum')," mainly because of his use of a pre-Vulgate text drawn from the Septuagint (p.358); further, the word *venator* ("hunter") for Augustine signified "deceiver, oppressor, and murderer of the earth's animals."⁵⁰ Dean concludes that "Nimrod's name in medieval writings is synonymous with perversion, that is, with a turning away from old paths toward something novel, with a change for the worse" (567); as dark as his accomplishments are, however, Nimrod is an extension of the evil giants who caused the flood, an intrusive remnant of the antediluvian Age of Giants, more atavistic than innovative.

The received tradition was amplified in Old English literature, so that Nimrod became a leader of a group of giants who built the Tower and not its sole giant architect; the idea of giants as a race of ancient builders was already a component of Northern myth, so that the biblical and Germanic traditions nicely interlocked. The homily *De falsis deis* declares that "Nembroð and ða entas worhton þone wundorlican stypel æfter Nohs flod" ("Nimrod and the giants constructed a marvelous tower after Noah's Flood").⁵¹ Ælfric's homily *For the Holy Day of Pentecost* gives a fuller account, in order to balance the speaking with tongues awarded the apostles at the descent of the Holy Spirit and the moment of linguistic unity it created:

Hit getimode æfter Noes flode, þæt entas woldon aræron ane burh, and ænne stypel swa heahne, þæt his hrof astige oð heofon. þa was an gereord on callum mancynne, and þæt

weorc wæs begunnen ongean Godes willan. God eac forði hi tostencte, swa þæt he forgeaf ælcum ðæra wyrhtena selctuð gereord, and heora nan ne cuðe oðres spræce tocnawan. Hi ða geswicon ðære getimbrunge, and toferdon geond ealne middangeard; and wæron sið ðan swa fela gereord swa ðæra wyrhtena wæs.⁵²

Proto-Saussurian harbingers of linguistic difference, the giants become responsible for rupturing an initial integrality of the world. The old language given by God loses its pure signifying power under their influence, replaced by a gibberish which has to be reanalyzed as new languages in order to reachieve communication. *Rafel mabee amek zabi almit*—in a drama which would make Derrida applaud, words are separated from their meanings in this myth, leaving a chaotic system of arbitrary signification and linguistic difference where unmediated understanding once had reigned. The function of speech is inclusionary, but after the giants it only excludes—and it must necessarily retain that changed function to a degree forever. By precipitating this scattering and its attendant punishment, the giants have engineered another Fall. The association reminds of the typology of the earlier Blickling Homily on David and Goliath; the giants here once again replace the devil.

The English attribution of the building of the Tower of Babel to Nimrod and the giants rather than to Nimrod and errant humanity again reminds of the Anglo-Saxon fascination with the explanatory power of that ancient race. The multiplication of transgressing giants may owe something to the influence of the Book of Enoch where a cohort of giants introduce a lore and technology that serve to increase the evil prevalent on earth. The building of earthly cities is, as we know from Augustine, morally condemnable, the symbolic opposite of spiritual endeavor;⁵³ the building of the Tower becomes a large scale perversion of the good and natural longing for closeness to divinity. The constructors at Babel also have something in common with the giants of Norse tradition, whose architectural feats in stone were unrivalled. Like the giant erector of the Aesir's citadel Asgarðr or the rebellious giants who in Greek myth piled Pelion on Ossa to attain Olympus, Nimrod is stopped just as his subversive architecture nears completion; the act is always memorialized in its incompleteness, to testify to some final, monstrous inadequacy.

Nimrod traditions remained popular in England well after the Anglo-Saxon period had given way to the Norman kings and a sharply changing language. The encyclopedic Hereford mappamundi (1290), for instance, depicts dog-headed giants near Babylon, where the rubric announces "Nimrod the giant built it." Connecting Nimrod to the

giants began to grow rather rare by the thirteenth century; however, his evil nature tended to receive more attention than questions of his humanity. Even though Augustine, Hrabanus Maurus, and Peter Comestor all asserted that Nimrod had been a giant, theological interest in his gigantic nature dwindled as the days of Anglo-Saxon England and its cultural mania for giants came to a close.

Grendel and the Giants

No discussion of Old English literature as culture would be complete without examining *Beowulf* and the celebrated monster Grendel. In his conclusion to "*Beowulf* and the Book of Enoch," Robert Kaske writes that "the world of *Beowulf* itself has long been a puzzle—not precisely Germanic, not precisely Old Testament, and not precisely Christian, though evidently it embraces all three;" he then offers that the "poet's very synthesis of these worlds and their differing outlooks is accomplished in part through the catalyst of yet another cosmic backdrop," the Book of Enoch (431). Kaske here arrays the very conjunction of traditions which gave rise to the figure of the giant in Anglo-Saxon England. It seems logical, then, that we should turn to *Beowulf* to find the embodiment of the giant in Anglo-Saxon times. Without repeating Kaske's substantial conclusions, some brief observations can be offered.

Grendel intrudes into the narrative just as Hrothgar's scop is singing, Cædmon-like, of the creation of the world—a bright song which begins with the shaping of the earth (11.91-2) and ends at its populating (11.97-8), before the introduction of sin. Hrothgar's warriors are by conjunction immediately brought into this prediluvian Golden Age ("Swa ða drihtguman dreamum lifdon," "So the men lived in joy," 1.99), until Grendel suddenly intervenes; the monster hates their music, the metaphor of their communal harmony. The parallel to the biblical advent of the giants and their promulgation of evil among humanity in the days before the Flood is subtle but unmistakable here. Grendel is immediately linked with Cain, who is in turn the progenitor of the very giants of Enoch and Genesis whose deeds Grendel is repeating ("swylce gigantas, þa wið Gode wunnon / lange þrage, such giants, that fought against God for a long time," 11.113-4);⁵⁴ Grendel as a result seems to exist in a narrative temporality which is simultaneously before the Deluge (in its biblical time frame) and after it (in its historical / Germanic setting). The attachment of Northern monsters to the genealogy as Grendel's brethren further conflates the two frames, merging them into some uncertain, vanished past which they all suddenly share. This manifold past is quietly

defined against the Christian present of the poet throughout the work; its point of vanishing is the interlocked deaths of Beowulf and the dragon at the close of the poem.

Grendel's relation to the *comitatus* of Heorot is one of illustrative antithesis. He disperses the unity of the war band with an eruption of misdirected violence; he supplants Hrothgar as ruler of the hall through senseless, jealous slaughter. The maintenance of order in a warrior society is achieved only by the repression of those impulses Grendel embodies. *Wergild*, for example, the system which disallows blood vengeance when a set sum of appeasing gold has been offered to a victim's family, works well at defusing violent action only so long as a people can be made to abide by its strictures. Grendel represents a cultural Other to whom conformity to societal dictates is an impossibility because those dictates are not comprehensible to him; he is at the same time a monsterized version of what a member of that very society can become when those dictates are rejected, when the authority of leaders or mores disintegrates and the subordination of the individual to hierarchy is lost. Grendel is therefore an uncontained version of the *wræcca*, the banished speaker of *The Wanderer* who in his exile turns not to elegiac poetry but to subversive violence.⁵⁵

Beowulf's triumph over Grendel becomes a fantasy of the triumph of *comitatus* (a homosocial society held together by metaphorically fraternal bonds under a hierarchal system of allegiance) over individuality (necessarily associated here with anarchy and atavism). Grendel's ingestion of the sleeping man in Heorot and the numerous references to the power of his grasp are the signifiers of his uncontrolled, destructive appetite; Beowulf's balancing grip and remedial rending of this very arm are its antidote: subordinated service which results in ataraxic unity for society and, to make the action attractive, a celebrated personal glory for its enactor. By the end of the long episode this arm has been replaced with a more powerful emblem, the retrieved head of the giant:

þa wæs be feaxe on flet boren
 Grendles heafod, þær guman druncon,
 egeslic for eorlum ond þære idese mid,
 wliteseon wrætelic; weras on sawon. (1646-9)⁵⁶

David and Perseus enacted a similar display; Geoffrey of Monmouth will later immortalize a similar moment, describing how Arthur's men stared in amazement at the fearsome head of the tyrant of Mount Saint Michael. Here, too, *weras on sawon*: the gruesome remnant of Grendel becomes the totemic embodiment of Beowulf's own power, and in

turn a public validation of the control and acceptance of structured society whose antitheses Grendel represents. The ritualized display of the severed head is public theatre within narrative theatre: the highly charged exhibit validates the conservative, nostalgic ethos of the poem's imaged culture and unambiguously announces Beowulf's full status as hero, as a man to be revered as vehicle of a cultural ethic. This validation is not complete until the emblem has been changed from a hand to a head; after his dismemberment, Grendel crawls back to his mother and unleashes another tide of condemnable violence, this time spawned of retribution.

Grendel's unnamed mother suggests a spectrum of negative attributes not very different from her son's, but centered around improper revenge rather than individualism and destructive nonconformity. I used the importance of communal acceptance of *wergild* earlier in this discussion as an example of a societal control measure which was created in order to minimize disruptive violence; Grendel's mother is a representative of that which *wergild* and the *Männerbund* seek to contain, embodying as she does a wrathful vengeance necessarily associated with primitivism and chaos. As Kaske has shown, Grendel's status as member of the Old Order is made clear by associating him with the biblical giants; the poet achieves the same effect by associating his mother with the giants of the North. She lives in a cave like the Norse *jötnar*;⁵⁷ her submerinal existence and the entire episode of her encounter even have a close analogue in the Old Icelandic *Grettis saga*, indicating the entire Grendel story's Germanic provenance.⁵⁸ The treasure she hordes is also suggestive of her Northern roots, as is the mere fact that she is a female. Both she and her son are *micle mearcstapan* (1358), great walkers in the wasteland; like all giants, their habitation defines the periphery of civilization. These remote demesnes are elemental in their associations, full of wind, water, frost, and dark hills—even "fyr on flode" (1357-66); one is reminded of some eddic realizations of Jotunheim, or of the Celtic Otherworld. Grendel's mother abandons her victim Aeschere's head on a cliff near her den. What she leaves for Beowulf to read is a sign not only of the giant's severing of action from authority, but also of her disregard for Law (both in her cannibalism and her illicit revenge).

This combination of disparate giant lore leaves a fog of ambiguity (overdetermination) lingering around Grendel and his mother, for they are tied to so many different traditions at once that it becomes impossible to say exactly what has influenced their creation most. Of Grendel's descent Hrothgar tells Beowulf, *no hie fæder cunnon, hwæþr him anig wæs ær acenned dymna gasta* ("no one knows of his father, whether any was ever

begotten for him among the dark shapes," 1355-7);⁵⁹ this inability to name a father nicely reflects the impossibility of the determination of origin on an extra-textual level. Thus when Beowulf defeats Grendel's mother in her lair by means of a conveniently discovered *ealdsweord eotenisc* ("old giants' sword," 1558), a weapon so large that it is *giganta geweorc* ("the work of giants," 1562), it is impossible to say exactly which tradition of giants is supposed to be responsible for having forged the blade. The fact that this "enta ærgeworc" ("the ancient work of giants," 1679) is also "wundorsmiþa geworc" ("wrought by wonder smiths," 1681) points to an association with the giants of Norse provenance, or (less likely, considering what follows), the giants of the Book of Enoch. Yet Hrothgar sees that depicted on the hilt is "fyrngewinnes, syð þan flod ofsloh, / gifen geotende giganta cyn, / frecne geferdon" ("that ancient strife, when the flood, the rushing sea, slew the giants, who suffered terribly," 1689-91); if the story here is that of the biblical Deluge, sent by God to destroy the giants, who, then, made the sword? The same giants it depicts being destroyed? Could it be that the flood referred to is that caused by the letting of the giant Ymir's blood by the Norse gods, an act which was supposed to have drowned all the the giants of the world except Bergelmir and his spouse? In either case, what is the relationship of metalsmith to depicted subject, and how are these giants in tum connected to Grendel and his mother?

These questions are not, of course, answerable; the fact that so many critics have come to so many differing conclusions is proof enough of that. It is sufficient to observe that the *Beowulf* poet discerned no incongruity in his treatment of the weapon's origin and artistry, in the agglutination of what we would today be prone to label independent traditions. This *ealdsweord eotenisc* in fact serves well as an emblem for the composition of all the giants in Old English literature. Like the forged metal of the sword itself, Grendel and his mother are a liquid confluence arrested in motion. The Old Norse tradition was likewise described as a confluence, but there we saw two elements frozen at various stages of tumultuous mixing, resulting in the formation of variously unstable products. That same process in England had gone much farther by the time of the composition of *Beowulf*, resulting in a close bonding of the traditions, in the formation of an alloy whose slight imperfections hint at its material composition. As cultural artifacts Grendel and his mother reveal glimpses of a complex literary and cultural tradition which cannot be completely reanalyzed into its components without destroying the integrity of the whole. This intriguing difficulty of separation is part of

the beauty of the poem.

Giants and the Text of History

The giants we have examined so far can be said to be historical in as far as the Bible was accepted as history. The chronicles of Nimrod, Goliath, and other biblical giants were accepted pages of fact, even as an allegorical interpretation helped to make their somewhat incredible existence easier to incorporate into learned discourse. What giants signify in the bible (proud men, idolaters, great sinners) was always more important to the theologians than what the real effects of their existence would be; it had to be. The fact that giants once walked the earth, however, was not debated in Anglo-Saxon tradition. Classical, Germanic, biblical and apocryphal stories indicated a cross-cultural shared memory of their transgressions, while material remains attested to their immense size and ancient vanishing. In Anglo-Saxon times this historicity of the giants was expressed through repeated linkage back to the Bible, from which discourse proceeded mainly in theological terms. In the earliest years of the Middle English period, however, this tradition was being reworked into secular historical writings, engaging the figure of the giant for new ends. As biblical history was reshaped into national histories, the giant became part of a literary call to expansionism, and an aid to the promulgation of nationalism.

The giant could not be used for these historical ends until it was fully possessed, the accomplishment of the Anglo-Saxon period. Now its power could be fully directed to prohibit whatever actions were felt necessary to limit, to validate specific cultural constructions of heroism, chivalry, and right conduct. The monster, a vehicle of causation, became an admonition against transgression of the Law and its makers. This rebuke, when originating in patriarchal culture, is usually directed against women, and so the persecution of women by the monster begins.

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NOTES

1. J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Monsters and the Critics," *The Proceedings of the British Academy*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1936, 1960) vol. XXII.

2. See Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "'Thurs' and 'Thyrs': Giants and the Date of Beowulf," *In Geardagum: Essays on Old and Middle English Language and Literature* 6 (1984), pp.35-42.

Any discussion of the Anglo-Saxon conception of the giant is necessarily indebted to a triad of scholarly works: Oliver F. Emerson, "Legends of Cain, Especially in Old and Middle English," *PMLA* 21 (1906), pp.831-929; R. E. Kaske, "The *Eotenas* in *Beowulf*," *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays* (ed. Robert P. Creed), Providence, RI: 1967; and "Beowulf and the Book of Enoch," *Speculum* 46.3 (July 1971), pp.421-31. I acknowledge them at the outset because the influence of their writing is pervasive in what follows.

3. Compare even the formulaic phrase for "race of giants": *iotna att* in the Edda and *eotena cyn* in *Beowulf*.

4. "Additional Glosses to the Glossary in Ælfric's Grammar: Dictionary of Old English Transcript." Citation taken from *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English* (compiled by Richard L. Venezky and Antonette Di Paolo Healey, University of Delaware 1980).

5. Aldhelm, "Ænigmata," in *Anecdota Oxiensia: Old English Glosses, Chiefly Unpublished* (ed. Napier, 1900)

6. The advent and extent of Celtic influence is problematic, but it does seem to have exerted at least some influence from early date, especially on Old English elegy.

7. Ingeld is mentioned in *Beowulf*, *Widsith*, Saxo Grammaticus, and some Old Norse sources.

8. In *Old English Poetry: 15 Essays* (ed. Robert P. Creed), Providence, RI: 1967.

9. Hollander writes that "More general considerations make it plausible that even the oldest of the lays could hardly have originated before the ninth century" (p.xviii); many other scholars, however, would place them at no earlier than 850 (see Joseph Harris' "Eddic Poetry" in Clover-Lindow's *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*).

10. Polyphemos appears also in the earlier Icelandic works *Mártu saga* (Kygri-Björn's thirteenth century compilation of Marian miracles, no.217) and *Hrólf's saga Gautrekssonar* (early fourteenth century). See Fry's "Polyphemos in Iceland," *The Fourteenth Century, Acta*, vol.IV (1977), pp.65-86.

11. See *Orvar-Odds saga* (ed. R.C. Boer, Halle, 1892).

12. The idea also enjoyed a brief vogue in medieval romance, mostly in the works connected to *Robert le diable* (such as *Sir Gowther* in English); these works are exceptional.

13. On the force of these Deutoronimic decrees, see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, The Johns Hopkins Press (Baltimore: 1978), pp.160-1.

14. The discussion which follows is based in large part upon the giants of the following texts: *Edda, die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel & Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: 1962); *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: 1931); *Fornaldar Sögur Norðlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: 1959); *Islendinga Sögur*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: 1968).

15. Geirrodstown, Glasisvellir or Jotunheim. Pálsson and Edwards point out that the author of *Samsons saga* rationalized the position of these mythic places: "Glasiir Plains are situated to the east of Giantland, which lies to the east and north of the Baltic and extends in a north-easterly direction. Then there is the land known as Jotunheim, inhabited by giants and monsters, and from Jotunheim to Greenland extends a land called Svabald [i.e. Spitsbergen]" (p.9).

16. The primordial cow Audumla creates Buri, whose son Bor marries the giantess Bestla; their sons are Odin, Vili and Vé, who in turn slay Ymir and begin war against the giants.

17. Cf. Hayden White's idea of "the technique of ostensive self-definition by negation": in the past, when were uncertain as to the precise quality of their sensed humanity, they appealed to the concept of wildness to designate an area of subhumanity that was characterized by everything they hoped they were not" (*Tropics*, pp. 152-3).

18 Other Germanic names for giants usually included in such studies are: *thurs*, *troll*, *risi* (Old Icelandic); *Jette*, *Rise* (Danish); *jätte*, *rese* (Swedish); *rise*, *bergtroll*, *jötul* (Norwegian); *Riese*, *Hüne* (Old High German); and of course *eoten* and *ent* (Old English). See Lotte Motz, "Giants in Folklore and Mythology: A New Approach," *Folklore* 93 (1982), pp.70-84 and n 1, p.81.

19. See John R. Broderius, *The Giant in Germanic Tradition* (dissertation), private edition distributed by the University of Chicago Libraries, p.4, n.12.

20. *Folkminnen och folktänkar* VI (1919), p.52-96.

21. Paul Coates, *The Gorgon's Gaze*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1991), p.84.

22. *The Wanderer* (ed. R.F. Leslie), 11.75-80. "Even as now, in many places, over the earth walls stand, wind-beaten, hung with hoar-frost; ruined habitations. The wine-halls crumble; their wielders lie bereft of bliss, the band all fallen proud by the wall," tr. Michael Alexander, *The Earliest English Poems*, Penguin Books (New York: 1977), p.72.

23. "A man who on these walls wisely looked, who sounded deeply this dark life, would think back to the blood spilt here, weigh it in his wit. His word would be this... There stands in the stead of staunch thanes a towering wall wrought with worm-shapes" (Alexander, pp.72-3).

24. "Wondrous is this stone wall, smashed by Fate; the city is broken to pieces, the work of giants has crumbled."

25. The poem alludes to *burnsele*, probably stone "bath-houses," 1.21. I do not mean to imply, however, that the author himself knew the Roman origin of these buildings.

26. *Beowulf* 1679 and 1562, respectively.

27. *Andreas* 1492: "He be wealle geseah wundrurn fæstum under sælwege sweras unlytle, stapulas standan, storme bedrifene, eald enta geweorc." Maxims II 1: "Cæstra beoð feorran gesyne, orðanc enta geweorc, þaþe on þysse eorðan syndon, wrætlic weallstana geweorc." Elene 30: "Lungre scynde of er burg enta beaduþ reata mæst, hergum to hilde, swylce Huna cyning ymsittendra awear meahte abannan to beadwe burgwigendra" (All quotations are from the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, ed. Krapp and Dobbie)

28. To cite one familiar example, an unnamed hill-giant builds a stone citadel safe from the attacks of Jotunheim for the Aesir to inhabit in the popular tale told in the *Gylfaginning* of Snorri Sturluson (chapter XLII) and perhaps mentioned in the older Poetic Edda (but see J. Harris, "The Master Builder Tale in Snorri and Two Sagas," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 1972).

29. *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius' De Consolatione Philosophiae* (ed. Walter John Sedgefield), pp. 115-6; a portion of the quotation also appears in Emerson who points out that the Old English poetical version of the *Metres of Boethius* contains a similar gloss in its translation of the same verses (p.908). "Then there was a daughter of Apollo, son of Jupiter; this Jupiter was their king and had pretended that he was the highest god; and that foolish people believed him, because he was of royal blood; and they knew no other god in that time, but worshiped their kings as divine. Thus Saturn, the father of Jupiter, had likewise to be a god, as well as each of his sons. One of these was Apollo, whom we just mentioned. This Apollo's daughter had to be a goddess; her name was Circe."

30. *Patrologia Cursus Completus*, ed J.P. Migne, vol. LXXXII c.314. Cf. the explanation of idolatry found in the Book of Wisdom (Sapientia 14: 14-20).

31. Translated by Ælfric from the Vulgate (*gigantes erant super terram in diebus illis*—giants were on the earth in those days) in the course of a sermon; Bosworth-Toller, p.252

32. There are, in fact, two brief references connecting giants to pagan deities in the Eastern church: Justin Martyr's *Apologia* (I. 190) and *The Instructions of Commodius* (ch. 3). Because these works were available only in Greek and do not seem to have been influential in Anglo-Saxon England, it is most likely that this tradition and the Old English one were completely separate, both arising directly from independent knowledge of the Book of Enoch and its giants.

33. Among these are all his quotations from the *Metres of Boethius* and Alfred's *Boethius*; and Ælfric's *Homily on the Pentecost*.

34. "Peter said 'of the living God' to distinguish the lesser gods, who deceived the heathens with various heresies. Some believed in dead giants, and raised up precious images, and said that they were gods because of their great strength; nevertheless their lives were very sinful and unclean."

35. See the extended homiletic quotation which follows.

36. *Adrian and Ritheus. Salomon and Saturn* has "Mercurius se gigand." See Kemble's edition of *Salomon and Saturn* (pp. 192, 200) or Emerson for both.

37. *Homilies for Unspecified Occasions* (ed. Napier, 1883). No.42, p. 144. The reference is taken from the *Microfiche Concordance to Old English*. "For three and a half years the devil ruled men on earth, and he strove against God and God's people; and he raised himself over all, so that the heathens said that the gods were their heathen leaders; such a one was the giant Hercules and Apollo, who left the glorious God; Thor also and Odin, whom the heathens greatly praise."

38. *The Book of Enoch or I Enoch*, tr. R.H. Charles (Oxford: 1912), p. ix.

39. MS Royal 5.E.13 of the British Museum; see Kaske, p.423 and note. Full information about the surviving manuscripts and fragments of Enoch and their relation to each other can be found in the detailed introduction to Charles' translation.

40. "Bede, *Super Epistolas Catholicas expositio* (PL 93, cols.128-29)... It may be worth noticing that whereas Augustine denounces the Book of Enoch for containing simply 'istas de gigantibus fabulas...', Bede says that it 'multa incredibilia continet, in quibus illud est de gigantibus...'" (Kaske's note, *Enoch* p 422).

41. Among the Jewish commentators, Josphus was the most influential of those who knew Enoch; the Book of Jubilees was also very much informed by it. Patristic writers who show some influence include Tertullian, Lactantius, the authors of the *Clementine Homilies* and the *Clementine Recognitions*, Athenagoras, Justin Martyr, Commodianus, and Julius Africanus. In the Christian Bible, epistles by St. Jude and St. Peter reveal some knowledge of Enoch's fallen angel story.

42. Kaske provides a quotation from the *Commentary on Isaiah* which repeats the Enoch story that the spirits of the dead giants became demons ("Possumus mortuos simulacra appellare hominum mortuorum. et gigantes demones, qui simulacris eorum assident;" see *Enoch*, p. 425, note 19).

43. The *filiae hominum* of Genesis 6 are said by the fragmentary Greek text of Enoch to be turned into "sirens" after their bearing of giants. The Ethiopic text has "peaceful ones." Kaske wants to make Grendel's mother correspond to these transformed *filiae hominum*, as if *Beowulf* were a rewriting of the Biblical episode.

44. "*Sapientia and Fortitudo*," p.438; "*Eotenas*," p. 304, note 10.

45. I argued in the previous section, for example, that giants were continually linked with idolatry in Anglo-Saxon England, and that same connection also appears in the Book of Enoch (enabling the scholastic myth which described them as the *origin* of these idols); could the Book then be a source for the Anglo Saxon connection, even in *The Ruin*?

46. Dante, *The Inferno* (tr. John Ciardi), Canto XXXI.76-8 (p.260). Further references from this canto are by line number alone.

47. *Letter to Sigeward* ['On the Old and New Testament'], ed. Crawford, 476. "And with his sling David conquered the unbelieving giant, so that he lay

unconscious, and cut off his head and brought all the Philistines to flight." Additional references by Ælfric to Goliath include his *Lives of the Saints* 18;22 (ed. Skeat), and *Homilies* [Supplementary Collection] 23;39 (ed. Pope). Could this idea of the proper fate for giants be behind the beheading of Brytnoþ in the Battle of Maldon?

48. "David struck well when he fought against Goliath, when he took five stones in his shepherd's bag, and with only one overcame the giant: in such a way did Christ overpower the devil with ease." The quotation is taken from *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English*, s.v. "gigant."

49. Josephus (*Antiquities*), Augustine (*De Civitate Dei*), Orosius, and Isidore (*Etymologiae*) all mention the architect Nimrod.

50. *De civitate dei* 16.4, ed. Hoffmann, p. 134; quoted by Dean ("The World Grown Old and Genesis in Middle English Historical Writings," *Speculum* 57.3, 1982), p.565, who also points out that Comestor later interpreted Nimrod as a hunter of men. Dean provides an excellent overview of the appearances of Nimrod in Middle English literature, including a reference to the legend that Nimrod built the Tower because he suffered from hydrophobia and was afraid of another Flood (566).

51. A. Napier, *Wulfstan*, p.105; quoted by Menner, p.122 (where it is wrongly attributed to Ælfric). For an informed discussion on the abundant Old English variations of Nimrod's name, see the same author, p.124.

52. It happened after Noah's Flood, that the giants wanted to erect a city and a tower so high, that its roof would touch heaven. At that time all humanity had one language, and that work was undertaken against God's will. God therefore scattered them, so that each worker had his own language, and they did not comprehend each other's speech. Then they wandered away from their edifice, and dispersed throughout the earth; and there were then as many languages as there had been workers" Ed.Thorpe, p.318.

53. Following Genesis 4:17, Augustine has Cain found the City of Man, the symmetric opposite of the *civitas dei*.

54. The MS has *comes*, a reading which seems to be a confusion of Cain and Cham. A derivation from Cham is more logical, but descent from Cain fits the thematic associations better. It seems likely to me that an original reading of Cain was later imperfectly emended.

55. This definition *against*, it should be noted, is a wholly Christian aspect of the poem. A more typically Norse encounter with a monster occurs when Beowulf fights the dragon. This ethically complex episode allows both hero and monster a degree of rightness in their actions, making the easy condemnation inherent in the battle against Grendel impossible, and linking Beowulf to the dragon by complex and ambiguous threads.

56. "Then Grendel's head was dragged by its hair across the floor to where men drank, a terrible sight for the earls and the woman with them, a horrifying spectacle: the men gazed upon it."

57. "Everywhere on Germanic soil, giants live in the hills and mountains,

usually in caves" (Broderius, p.70).

58. Better proof that *Beowulf* partakes of a Northern tradition of giant encounters could not be asked for. See R.W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction* (3rd ed.), pp.48-53 for an overview of the parallels.

59. Cf. Avitus IV.88-93 ("*De diluvio mundi*"): "nor is it lawful to utter from what seed they were sprung. As to their mother, men spoke of an origin common to all [of the giants]; why this offspring, whence the fathers, mystery shrouds from disclosing. If you ask of their appearance, the face of mankind was theirs more than the figure. Thus an accurate outline of their limbs represented [the shape of] a man; an inaccurate one, his size" (in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi*, Berlin: 1883; cited by Kaske, "*Eotenas*" p.304.)