Beowulf : The Monsters and the Tradition

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Grendel's attack on Heorot and the resulting battle with Beowulf is undeniably the most vivid and memorable scene in *Beowulf* and quite possibly in all of Anglo-Saxon narrative. Arthur Brodeur has commented on its narrative power (1959); Stanley B. Greenfield has analyzed the style of the passage on more than one occasion (1967, 1972); Alain Renoir has called the scene "one of the most effective presentations of terror in English literature" (1968:166); George Clark has described this scene as a version of the theme he calls "The Traveler Recognizes His Goal" (1965). Almost every book on *Beowulf* touches on the narrative qualities of this scene,[1] and many an article on *Beowulf* will include some discussion of it.[2] Thus Grendel's attack on Heorot is not only the most memorable scene in the text; it is also one of the most heavily glossed.

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[1] Modern scholars quite frequently use this passage to exemplify the narrative qualities of the poem as a whole. For instance, see Niles (1983:147-48, 167-68), who discusses this scene as an example of "barbaric style," especially what he terms the "narrative principle of contrast" (168). This scene is also discussed in Irving 1968:20-28, 101-12; and 1988:1-35, and Renoir 1988:125-27.

[2] For example, see Harris 1982, on the scene as exemplifying the techniques of "variational pattern and effect" (105); Kavros 1981, on the feast-sleep theme; Hanning 1973, on the "images of division, usually involuntary or compelled division, which can be said to control our response to Grendel's last visit to Heorot" (206); Storms 1972, on the effectiveness of this scene in presenting terror; Lumiansky 1968, on the scene from the point of view of the "dramatic audience" (77); Ringler 1966, on the idea that "the *Beowulf* poet's reiterated assertions that his hero will triumph over Grendel, as well as his concentration during the fight on Grendel's state of mind . . . are in fact premises of an elaborate structure of ironies" (66); Evans 1963, on Grendel's approach to the hall as an example of the way a story in Germanic epic "unfolds, not in a continuous action but in a series of vivid 'stills'" (117); and Culbert 1963, on the contention that "the poet is most effective at precisely the wrong points in the poem. Greater narrative skill was employed in the depiction of the fight with Grendel than was displayed in the narration of either of the other combats" (58-59).

The other two occasions on which a monster attacks the hall have engendered much less discussion. The first, a fairly colorless passage that summarizes Grendel's first attack on Heorot (and his seizure of thirty thanes), consists of a mere fourteen lines (115-129a). The attack of Grendel's mother (1279-1304a) is somewhat more vivid than Grendel's first attack, but much less fully realized than the scene in which Grendel meets Beowulf,[3] though it has been characterized as a scene that imposes "a sudden dreadful fear" (Brodeur 1959:95). Yet all three scenes aptly fit their context: their quality as scene or summary is exactly suited to whatever slowly developed terror or sudden fear the narrative requires at that moment. The differences among these scenes are obvious, but their similarities much less so; indeed, they are all variations on one scene. These three scenes— including the most frequently discussed one in the text—are all manifestations of a single traditional episodic unit found in oral and oral-derived narratives.

The surviving corpus of Anglo-Saxon poetry shows considerable evidence of an oral tradition, attested to by repeated phrases (formulas) and episodes (themes and/or type-scenes) discernible within the relatively small number of texts available to modern readers. Though some contemporary scholars remain skeptical that such demonstrably oral-formulaic elements in Anglo-Saxon poetry testify to a predominantly oral poetics and a pre-literate cultural context within which Anglo-Saxon poetry was composed and transmitted, such skepticism perhaps results from the fact that modern print culture—and to some degree the scholarship it generates—privileges the written text produced to circulate as a material artifact among literate readers, especially in the construction of a literary tradition. Through the ethnographic efforts of modern folklorists and students of oral cultures, however, a sizeable body of data now makes it possible for the Anglo-Saxon scholar to argue not only for the highly sophisticated, literary qualities of oral traditional narratives, but also for the Germanic cultural context that such oral poetics represent, particularly in contrast to the written, manuscript-based culture of the monastic Latin tradition of Anglo-Saxon England.[4] In addition, contemporary cultural studies provide Anglo-Saxon scholars with entirely new models and categories for the study of language and culture beyond authorship, such as Bahktin's notion of

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[3] Perhaps the undeveloped qualities of this scene account for the priority of the battle with Grendel rather than that with Grendel's mother. See Nitzsche 1980 and Irving 1988:70-73.

[4] See Olsen 1986:550-57, 1988:141-57.

"heteroglossia" (1981) or Brian Stock's "textual communities" (1983).

Nonetheless, a significant amount of contemporary scholarship still addresses the topic of oral-formulaic poetics from a quantitative perspective. That is, theoretical discussions of the oral tradition in Anglo-Saxon poetry are often framed by questions of measurement: does the oral-formulaic texture of Anglo-Saxon poetry amount to an oral tradition, a "mixed tradition," or a written tradition derived from an oral tradition? Though such "quantitative" questions often generate valuable discussions concerning the methodological basis of oral-formulaic studies and thereby assist the modern *reader* in characterizing the nature of an oral tradition, such emphasis on the quantity of oral vs. written tends to reify the single written text in our possession as the product of a single (though almost always unkown) author and a frozen historical moment. The rhetorical poetics of anonymous, Ango-Saxon poetry, however, suggests that we conceptualize the cultural context of such poetry in larger terms; indeed, we might look at the written texts we have as the material record of cultural forces, transformed over centuries of complex interactions between various traditions, for which written and oral are simply two possible categories. In such a theoretical context, we might look to the oral features of an Anglo-Saxon poem for traces of dominant concerns of Anglo-Saxon culture, mythically represented. The fact that the narrative of *Beowulf* revolves around a structurally central, repeated episode, "The Monster Attacks the Hall" (MAH), as we shall see, has implications not only for our understanding of the poetics of the narrative, but also for our appreciation of *Beowulf* as a manifestation of culturally powerful themes.

Despite the paucity of texts, Old English literature displays a significant number of formulaic episodes, known either as "type-scenes" or "themes," depending on the context in which they occur and the methodology used to characterize them. Scholars have already unearthed, labeled, and described a large number of formulaic narrative units.[5] However, as a type-scene, MAH does not represent just any formal unit embedded in the text that invites description and commentary, but constitutes the central organizing unit from which and around which the

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[5] For a thorough survey of themes in Old English poetry, see Foley 1980:51-91; Olsen 1986:577-88; and Foley 1990:331-33. Among the most significant themes classified and discussed by these scholars are themes of death (Taylor 1967); sleep-feast themes (Kavros 1981; DeLavan 1980); the hero on the beach (Crowne 1960; Fry 1967); the theme of exile (Greenfield 1955); the theme in which a traveler recognizes his goal (Clark 1965); themes for the presentation of sea voyages (Ramsey 1971); and the beasts of battle theme (Magoun 1955; Bonjour 1957).

first two-thirds of *Beowulf* develops.   This particular type-scene is the structural and thematic unit that represents the narrative itself; its deployment in *Beowulf* illustrates the narrative logic of the epic.

There is no single accepted definition or description of the type-scene (or theme) or of its smaller unit, the motif, nor is there any agreement about how these units are located in Anglo-Saxon poetry. The past few decades, however, have produced increasingly rigorous and thus increasingly useful definitions of these terms and their function in Anglo-Saxon narrative. In the investigation of the type-scene as an episodic unit in narrative, the most promising avenues have been mapped by Donald K. Fry and John Miles Foley. However, since these two scholars do not use the same terminology, my own working definition of "type-scene" and my examination of MAH must distinguish between Fry's and Foley's contributions to the field. According to Fry (1968, 1969) the type-scene is the building block of narrative ("a recurring stereotyped presentation of conventional details used to describe a certain narrative event" [1968:35]); non-narrative clusters of images are, according to Fry, best considered themes (*ibid.*). As a narrative unit, a type-scene[6] is discernible because it consists of smaller units—or details—termed "motifs" that recur in the same order, and which, taken together, function as the unit that advances the plot by presenting a stock situation in the narrative. To Fry's description of the type-scene as a narrative element, we must add Foley's argument that this "recurring stereotyped presentation" must exhibit some form of verbal correspondence, though not necessarily the strict or simple repetition of formulas.[7]

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[6] Fry's work has clarified and focused much of the discussion of oral-formulaic composition in Anglo-Saxon poetry. However, his terminology, especially his preference for the term "type-scene," has not been universally accepted. For other theoretical discussions, see Magoun 1955; also Creed 1959 and Diamond 1961.

[7] Foley asserts that the repetitive element of the Anglo-Saxon theme—the linguistic representation of each motif—is the "stave root." He defines this term as "principally the roots of alliterating words although non-alliterating words may at times be included" (1976: 221). He stresses that verbal correspondence can be found in the roots of words: "single words will constitute thematic resonance in the verbal dimension" (1980:131). And again:

> we cannot expect a large proportion of whole-line or half-line formulas as verbal correspondence in Old English poetry, since that expectation presupposes a colonic formula. . . . Old English prosody tends away from colonic phraseology . . . what we *can* expect as thematic data are highly variable half-lines which may have in common only their stressed cores (*ibid.*).

Type-scenes are identifiable as narrative units that betray a similar sequence of narrative details, and these details should ideally display some verbal correspondence.[8]   Most studies of oral-formulaic units in ancient, medieval, or modern literatures present the results of theme- or type-scene-hunting in a variety of texts in order to illuminate the occurrence as a traditional element in any one context.   However, *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon poetry provide only a small territory for type-scene comparison, and in the area of monsters we are particularly limited.[9]   MAH occurs in only

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See further Foley 1990:chs. 6, 9.

[8] All discussions of oral-formulaic "themes" or "type-scenes" depend to some extent on finding "verbal correspondence" among motifs.   However, the technical requirements for this "verbal correspondence" range from Greenfield's "verbal echoes" (1955:7) to Foley's stave root.   My own approach is to give priority to verbal correspondences that include some sort of formulaic repetition, as well as semantic and syntactical parallels; such motifs exemplify the formulaic formation Anita Riedinger calls thematic: "a verse which signifies a recurrent image, idea, or event" (1985:295).

[9] Attempts have been made to connect Grendel, and thus the "Grendel-Story," to several literary and folkloric traditions that record or depict monsters; however, *Beowulf* is the only extant poetic narrative text in Anglo-Saxon that includes monsters. Grendel has been linked to the Latin prose texts that catalogue monsters, especially as represented by the Anglo-Saxon versions of the *Mirabilia* ("The Wonders of the East"), which, along with a prose Anglo-Saxon version of the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, are found in the *Beowulf* codex (MS. Vitellius A xv; for a full description of the codex, see Sisam 1965:65-82).   For a skeptical consideration of *Beowulf* and the prose texts with which it survives, see Kiernan (1981), who argues that the *Beowulf* manuscript first existed as a distinct codex, and who cautions against considering the manuscript as a whole to represent an Anglo-Saxon anthology of monsters, since "even the dullest anthologist would realize that Grendel outmonstered anything *The Wonders of the East* had to offer, much less *Alexander's Letter* on St. Christopher's curious pedigrees" (140).   On the connection, frequently made, between another Latin prose text on monsters, the *Liber Monstrorum*, and *Beowulf*, see Whitbread (1974), who explores the implications of the possible connections often noticed between two texts. These connections are also discussed by Whitelock (1951:52-53), Sisam (1965:6), Goldsmith (1970:90-99), and Chadwick (1959:171-203); see further Brynteson (1982), who discusses the manuscript tradition of monster lore and the *Beowulf* codex. The Latin texts, including reproductions of manuscript illuminations, are found in Rhodes 1929 and Porsia 1976; the text of the Anglo-Saxon translations in Rypins 1924. On the place of monsters in medieval literature, see Friedman (1981), who sees Grendel in the context of a literary tradition of "the universally condemned figures of Christian history" (106), through which the poet has produced "the most interesting monster of the

one surviving Anglo-Saxon text, but its occurrence and deployment in *Beowulf* illustrate the narrative properties of oral-formulaic type-scenes, since this type-scene presents the narrative problems that the plot must solve.   As such, MAH illustrates the basic structure of the text as a production of narrative units that generate the series of episodes that constitute the narrative itself.

When a monster attacks the hall in *Beowulf*, he or she does so quite predictably.   As already noted, the *Beowulf*-poet narrates three attacks directly: Passage I (115-29a) depicts Grendel's first attack, Passage II (702b-828a) Grendel's last attack on the Hall—the central and most fully developed use of MAH—and Passage III (1279-1304a) the attack by Grendel's mother.   These three passages vary considerably in length.   The long, central attack by Grendel is framed by the two short versions of the type-scene (see diagram) that pre-cede and follow it by several hundred lines.   In addition, all three examples occur early in the text, well within the first half of the poem, and spaced at comparable but unequal intervals: 573 lines separate the first two attacks, and the third attack follows after 451 lines.   The relatively short space between presentations of MAH results in a noticeable balance in the overall movement of the poem.   MAH structures and dominates the first half of *Beowulf*.

A glance at the schematic versions of Passages I and III show the four recurring motifs, the skeleton of this stereotyped narrative unit (see diagram): 1) The monster approaches and enters the hall when its occupants are asleep; 2) the monster seizes one or more sleeping men; 3) the monster departs to his or her home in the fen; and 4) the men respond to the attack.   All four elements occur each time a monster attacks the hall, yet each episode is distinct, its features dependent on its context and participants.   MAH itself is flexible in length and treatment; this sort of flexibility within such a stock outline demonstrates the potentials of an individual type-scene to structure and generate traditional narrative.

The outline of Passages I and III demonstrates the basic properties of MAH.   The contrast between these two short passages and Passage II shows the poet's manipulation and expansion of this type-scene, which is—like the monsters—at the center of the poem.   Although we do not quite find simple repetition of lines or formulas in Passages I and III, there do exist striking verbal and imagistic echoes in the parallel motifs of each passage.   Such echoes provide a form of "verbal correspondence" necessary for the type-scene, according to Foley.

Middle Ages and the most extreme statement of hostility toward monsters generally" (107).

The Monster Attacks the Hall

Motif	Passage I	Passage III
1.	Gewat ða neosian, syþðan niht becom, hean huses, hu hit Hring-Dene æfter beorþegne gebun hæfdon. Fand þa ðær inne æþelinga gedriht swefan æfter symble; (115-19a)	Com þa to Heorote, ðær Hring-Dene geond þæt sæld swæfun. Þa ðær sona wearð edhwyrft eorlum, siþðan inne fealh Grendles modor. (1279-82a)
2.	ond on ræste genam þritig þegna; (122b-123a)	hraðe heo æþelinga anne hæfde fæste befangen, (1294-95a)
3.	þanon eft gewat huðe hremig to ham faran, mid þære wælfylle wica neosan. (123b-25)	Heo wæs on ofste, wolde ut þanon, (1292) þa heo to fenne gang. (1295b)
4.	þa wæs æfter wiste wop up ahafen, micel morgensweg. (128-29a)	Hream wearð in Heorote; (1302a)

Motif 1—The Monster Approaches the Hall While Its Occupants Are Asleep. The verbal correspondence of the words *swefan* (119a) and *swæfun* (1280a), both in an a-verse, delineates the first motif of the type-scene. Since all three versions of this type-scene directly follow themes of feasting, the sleeping men are logical and appropriate transitional devices, and their vulnerability heightens the terror and doom of the monster's attack.[10] The first line of each passage describes the monster's approach. Although the verbs for the monster's action (*gewat*, *com*) are semantically parallel, they obviously do not correspond on a morphemic level; nevertheless, *com* in Passage III verbally echoes the *becom* of Passage I, and the *Hring-Dene* are mentioned by name in each passage (116b, 1279b). Likewise, the adverb *inne* occurs in each passage, though not in parallel constructions ("Fand þa ðær inne," 118a; "siþðan inne fealh," 1281b[11]); this innocuous word is suggestive, in both passages, of the penetration of the hall by the monster. In each version of the first motif, the action is described in similar if not corresponding language, and both instances of the opening motif emphasize that the monster approaches while the men sleep. These two formulaic events—the movement of the monster and the simultaneous paralysis of the men in sleep—represent the most basic, most formulaic, and yet most dramatic features of motif #1 as a narrative element.

Motif 2—The Monster Seizes One or More Sleeping Men. The attack itself is formulaically organized around verbs for seizing. In Passage I, the force of the statement lies in the verb *geniman*: "ond on ræste genam, / þritig þegna" (122b-23a) ["and he seized thirty thanes from their bed"]. In Passage III, the emphasis falls on the verb *befon*: "hraðe heo æþelinga anne hæfde / fæste befangen" (1294-95b) ["quickly she had firmly seized one of the men"]. However, the phrase *on ræste* also occurs in Passage III as part of a statement that amplifies the first statement of the motif: "þone ðe heo on ræste abreat" (1298b) ["he whom she killed in bed"]. In Passage III, the six lines' separation between the verb that denotes seizure and the occurrence of the phrase *on ræste* separates the motif into two elements: the seizure of the thane(s) and the fact that this seizure occurs when the victims are asleep. Such separation enhances the dramatic potential of the motif, since the summary of the monster's attack in Passage I becomes a slightly more developed scene in Passage III. Likewise, the second element of the

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[10] See Kavros 1981, DeLavan 1980, and Riedinger 1985.

[11] All quotations are from Klaeber 1950, without diacritics.

motif—the repetition of the term *on ræste*—is linked to the second element of the first motif, the verb that describes the men as sleeping (*swefan*, *swæfun*). Indeed, the skeletons of motifs 1 and 2 are parallel: in the first motif, the monster approaches while the men are asleep; in the second, he or she seizes a thane (or thanes) from his (their) rest. Thus, the semantic correspondence of the two verbs in the second motif (*genam*, *befangen*) provides the organization for the second motif within the type-scene. The depiction of both attacks illustrates the extreme economy made possible by the brevity and flexibility of each motif.

Motif 3—The Monster Departs to His or Her Home in the Fen. The departure of the monster is treated somewhat differently in each of these two passages, a difference that demonstrates the expansion of a motif within a type-scene. Passage I straightforwardly notes Grendel's return to his home, but in Passage III the monster's desire to leave is noted before her actual departure. The two statements together constitute the motif: "Heo wæs on ofste, wolde ut þanon" (1292) ["she was in haste, she wished to be gone"], followed a few lines later by "þa heo to fenne gang" (1295b) ["when she went to the fen"]. In the absence of verbal correspondence, the parallel structure of the two phrases suggests parallel ideas: "to ham faran" (124b) and "to fenne gang" (1295b). The expansion of passage III makes possible the representation of a tension between the monster's desire and her actions, a tension that makes Passage III far more dramatic than Passage I.

Motif 4—The Men Respond to the Attack. The final motif generates a form of closure for the type-scene: the inhabitants' response to the attack, described by the terms *wop* (128b), *morgensweg* (129a), and *hream* (1302a), shifts the focus of the narrative from episode to emotion, from action to reaction, from event to realization of that event. The two occurrences cohere semantically, given the similar meanings of these nouns. The fourth motif acknowledges an awareness of the significance of the event for the characters in the narrative. MAH even stripped down to its skeleton, or perhaps especially when so simply expressed, effectively evokes the shock and horror of what is, in *Beowulf*, a stock situation.

The attack by Grendel's mother (Passage III) illustrates the potential for expansion and manipulation of a basic type-scene. Though its twenty-five lines represent a significant expansion of the fourteen lines of Passage I, the elements of the type-scene—the individual motifs—nevertheless occur quite densely in Passage III. In addition, the second and third motif each break into two separate units. Passage III illustrates the poet's ability to repeat, interlock, amplify, and vary the motifs and the order of the motifs in any given type-scene. For example, the first statement of motif 2 (the

attack), is sandwiched between two statements of motif 3 (the monster's desire to depart and the actual departure):

> Heo wæs on ofste,   wolde ut þanon,
> feore beorgan,   þa heo onfunden wæs;
> hraðe heo æþelinga   anne hæfde
> fæste befangen,   þa heo to fenne gang.
>
>   (1292-95b)

> [She was in haste, she wished to be gone to preserve her
> life, when she was discovered. Quickly she had firmly
> seized one of the nobles, then she went to the fen.]

Then, once the monster has departed, the poet reiterates the second motif when he identifies the seized thane and observes that he had been taken from his bed:

> Se wæs Hroþgare   hæleþa leofost
> on gesiðes had   be sæm tweonum,
> rice randwiga,   þone ðe heo on ræste abreat
> blædfæstne beorn.
>
>   (1296-99a)

> [To Hrothgar, he was the most beloved noble in the
> position of retainer between the two seas, a powerful shield
> warrior, that one whom she seized from his bed.]

Likewise, the "seizure" itself is elaborated and emphasized after the closure of the fourth motif, when another seizure comes to light—the theft of the "well-known hand":

>   heo under heolfre genam
> cuþe folme;   cearu wæs geniwod.
>   (1302-3)

> [She seized that well-known hand, covered in blood. Care
> was renewed.]

The final elaboration of the last motif—the response of the men to the attack ("cearu wæs geniwod") completes this instance of MAH and varies the basic statement of motif #4.   The traditional poet is able to repeat, in an interlocked pattern, the elements of the action, represented by each motif, that are dramatically important to the context of the type-scene. Passage I

contains a single statement of each of the three motifs; Passage III intensifies the dramatic possibilities of the type-scene through amplification and repetition of the motifs in the interlocked pattern. But the most intensified and amplified version of MAH is the 126-line version in which Grendel attacks Heorot (702b-828a), hereafter referred to as Passage II.

Passage II further illustrates the repetition and elaboration of the same four motifs that structure the type-scene in Passages I and III. Even the core words or phrases of the motif are repeated; the approach of the monster (motif #1) is described in four separate assertions. Three of these statements include the verb *com*:

> **Com** on wanre niht
> scriðan sceadugenga. (702b-3a)
>
> Ða **com** of more   under misthleoþum
> Grendel gongan. (710-11a)
>
> Wod under wolcnum   to þæs þe he winreced. (714)
>
> **Com** þa to recede   rinc siðian
> dreamum bedæled. (720-21a)

This passage is structured around four straightforward statements of motif #1. Each statement deepens the tension of the narrative simply by varying the initial motif—the smallest element—of the type-scene as a narrative unit. The formulaic quality of this motif is suggested by the repetition of the verb *com* in three of these four statements as well as the first half-line of Passage III ("Com þa to Heorote" [279a]). Indeed, echoes of this motif can be found elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon poetry, in other formulaic combinations of *com*-plus-infinitive, most specifically in the metrical charms and riddles.[12]

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[12] The parallelism of this passage has been frequently discussed. Of particular note is its identity as an example of an   "envelope pattern" (Bartlett 1935:9-11): "the last phrase 'ofer þa niht' [736a] echoes the opening phrase 'on wanre niht' [702b] and rounds off the whole" (50). She describes the repetition thus: ". . . the narrative proceeds by a series of more or less parallel steps which have a cumulative force . . . while each of the three, four or five members is a step marking progress in the whole, each succeeding step also repeats, with variation and amplification, the first one" (49). See the analogous phrases in metrical charms: "Nine Herbs Charm": "wyrm com snican, toslat he man," 31; and "Against a Dwarf": "Her com in gangan, in spiderwiht," 9; "þa com in gangan dweores sweostar," 13.   The formulaic structure is made even more visible in its use to introduce riddles: "Wiht cwom æfter wege wrætlicu liþan," "Riddle 33"; "Hyse cwom gangan, þære he hie wisse,"

The sleeping men, the second element of motif #1, are mentioned twice in Passage II. First the poet makes a general observation, then distinguishes the one exception:

> Sceotend swæfon,
> þa þæt hornreced   healdan scoldon,
> ealle buton anum. (703b-5a)

[The warriors slept, they who had to guard that house, all but one.]

The sleeping men have frequently disturbed and dismayed modern readers of this poem, not without reason, since their sleepiness at such a critical time does seem difficult to explain (as Klaeber put it, "How is it possible for the Geats to fall asleep?" [154]).[13] Nonetheless, the stock element is retained despite such apparent inappropriateness: in this passage, the poet makes the traditional statement of motif #1 ("Sceotend swæfon") and then contradicts it to fit the context ("ealle buton anum"). In terms of the type-scene, the sleeping men are an essential detail, no matter how incongruous. Twenty-six lines later, the sleeping men—as Grendel sees them—are mentioned again:

> Geseah he in recede   rinca manige,
> swefan sibbegedriht   samod ætgædere,
> magorinca heap. (728-30a)

[He saw in the hall many warriors, a band of kinsman,

"Riddle 54"; and "Wiht cwom gongan þær weras sæton," "Riddle 86." See also Foley 1990:209-12. I am grateful to Geoffrey Russom for suggesting this line of inquiry and bringing these specific passages to my attention.

[13] Klaeber's question has been answered in a variety of ways, from Swanton's hypothesis (1978:192)—"possibly they had been entertained too well"—to Niles' attempt to view the sleeping thanes as an abstract representation of a literary style: "The hero manifests whatever qualities are necessary for success in a certain situation—vigilance and self-discipline, here—and his companions show the opposite traits" (1983:168). Other scholars attempt to account for the sleepiness of the thanes by reference to traditional or "source" material: see Puhvel (1979:94), who comments: "With all due allowance for travel fatigue and the effects of the beverage served in Hrothgar's hall, it is not easy to account for such *sang-froid*, fatalism, or simply apathetic lethargy on the part of every single member of Beowulf's elite band of Geatish warriors." Puhvel explains this episode by reference to the Celtic "Hand and the Child" folktale, which accounts for the sleeping thanes as the "incongruous survival of source material" (97).

sleeping all together, a band of young warriors.]

This variation in motif #1 develops the narrative potential of the type-scene through repetition or elaboration of its basic elements. Likewise, the monster's penetration into the hall, merely noted in Passages I and III, is vividly depicted in this scene through an expansion of details. The monster opens the door and moves across the floor; the hall is described carefully. Each element of MAH is given more attention here than in either Passage I or III, and through such repetition, variation, and elaboration, the type-scene acquires the dramatic qualities of a fully developed narrative scene.

The second motif—the seizure of a thane—is developed in three parts. Grendel first anticipates the attack he is about to make:

> mynte þæt he gedælde, ær þon dæg cwome,
> atol aglæca anra gehwylces
> lif wið lice. (731-33a)

> [The terrible fiend thought that, before day came, he would
> sever the life from the body of each one of them.]

He then seizes one thane, and finally makes his ill-fated attack on Beowulf. In spite of the drama and detail of this episode, the formulaic qualities of motif #2 provide the structure and language of these narrative details. Grendel's seizure of Hondscioh echoes the corresponding motif from Passage III: "ac he gefeng hraðe forman siðe / slæpende rinc" (740-41a) and "hraðe heo æðelinga anne hæfde / fæste befangen" (1294-95a). Grendel's attempt on Beowulf, who is described by the formulaic expression as a "rinc on ræste" (747a [see motif #2, Passages I and III]), echoes the core elements of motif #2: "he onfeng hraþe" (748b). Except for the use of *geniman* in Passage I, the expression of motif #2 depends on variations of the core verb *fon*, to grasp or seize (*befangen*, *gefeng*, *onfeng*). The heavily articulated elements of motif #2 are evident in this highly elaborated version of the type-scene. In addition, the motif requires that the monster seize one or more of the thanes; thus, the type-scene dictates that Beowulf must lose at least one man in the monster's attack. Beowulf's recalcitrance in this scene, his delay in challenging Grendel until after Hondscioh has been killed, invites all sorts of questions. As the editors of *Explicator* suggest, "the question which naturally comes to mind is why

Beowulf did not intervene in an attempt to save his retainer's life?" (1942).[14] Hondscioh, however, is sacrificed to the demands of the type-scene as the traditional narrative unit; consequently, the poet fulfills the demands of the type-scene when Grendel seizes Hondscioh. Like the statement that all the men are asleep, the seizure of a thane constitutes a traditional stock element around which the poet structures the narrative.

The type-scene also demands that the monster depart (motif #3), although when Grendel leaves Heorot this time, he leaves behind his arm and shoulder. The poet effectively depicts the slaying of Grendel without sacrificing the traditional exit of the monster. Grendel's desire to leave the hall is also noted several times before he departs, once at line 735 and again at line 761. Of course, the tug of war goes on for 56 lines, until Grendel actually departs, once again to seek his home in the fen. In Passage I he goes off "wica neosan" (125b).   Passage II represents the departure similarly:

> scolde Grendel þonan
> feorhseoc fleon   under fenhleoðu,
> secean wynleas wic. (819b-21a)

> [Mortally wounded, Grendel had to flee thence, to seek his
> joyless abode under the marshes.]

This fifty-six-line sequence amplifies the sort of dramatic tension evident

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[14] Beowulf's behavior in this scene has provoked a variety of explanations from modern readers. The editors of *Explicator* provided the most ingenious explanation—based altogether on a modern sensibility: "When Beowulf, after boasting to slay Grendel, saw the monster burst into Heorot . . . it is remarkable that the hero did not spring forward to attack him. . . . And Beowulf continued to watch while Grendel sprang on a sleeping thane. . . . This behavior . . . may be explained as the earliest example in English literature of the use of the scientific method. Beowulf watched the attack upon the sleeping thane in order to learn Grendel's tactics well enough to defeat him later." This quite "natural" question and answer effectively illustrate how modern readers seek to understand motivation in narrative, though in this case, the answers to such questions lie in the narrative tradition, not the characters themselves. Niles much more recently tries to negate the propriety of such questions: "The principle of contrast, together with a desire to magnify terror, calls Handscioh into being and insists that he be handed over to the monster without the least outcry of protest" (1983:168).   See also Chambers' explanation based on the folktale the "Bear's Son" (1959:63-64); likewise, see Lawrence 1928:178-79. That the narrative invites the modern reader to ask such questions is obvious; in finding the answer in the traditional episodic unit—the type-scene—we may understand more specifically the sorts of questions that we may meaningfully ask of the narrative.

on a much smaller scale in the deployment of motif #3 in Passage III when Grendel's mother wishes to be gone (1292). In both passages, the type-scene allows the poet to expand the basic motifs by including the point of view of the monster. In this passage, the conflict between the monster's desire to depart and his inability to do so provides a traditional narrative tension, with motif #3 developed here in its fullest form.

The closing motif (#4—the response of the men to the attack of the monster) must be different in this passage, for although the hall has been attacked, it has also been purged. Obviously, the outcry that concludes Passages I and III would be inappropriate here. Instead, Beowulf rejoices (827b-28a):   "Nihtweorce gefeh, / ellenmærþum" ("He rejoiced in his night's work, his heroic deeds"). In addition, there is an ironic reversal of the expected outcry: Grendel's response "sounds through the hall," "reced hlynsode" (770b). The terms *sweg* (782b) and *wop* (785b) in this passage echo the closing motif of Passage I ("wop up ahafen / micel morgensweg" [128b-29a]). The last motif in this type-scene is flexible enough to allow the poet to assign the terrible lament to Grendel, and to close the passage with Beowulf's rejoicing.

Passage II—the central manifestation of the central type-scene of *Beowulf*—demonstrates both the artistry of the poet and the traditional qualities of his narrative language. The often-noted vividness of the scene, especially the dramatic development of point of view and narrative tension, depends on the poet's manipulation of traditional elements. The contrast between the skeletal narrative summary of Passage I and the fully realized scene of Passage II demonstrates the narrative properties of oral poetry. A highly developed, striking scene such as Grendel's attack on Heorot consists of a series of variations, elaborations, and amplifications of the same four basic motifs found in Passages I and III.

The three occurrences of this type-scene, "The Monster Attacks the Hall," dominate the first third of the narrative of *Beowulf* (lines 1-1306a). The central representation—Grendel's battle with Beowulf—occurs roughly in the center (702b-828a) of the lines that span the narrative between the monster's first attack (115-29a) and the last (1279a-1304a). The narrative is structured around these attacks. In addition, other traditional narrative units, such as sleep-feast themes[15] and arrival scenes,[16] provide transitions; episodic and digressive narrative material, such as the Unferth episode,

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[15] See Kavros 1981 and DeLavan 1980.

[16] See Clark 1965:168.

elaborates the significance of Beowulf's character and of the events in the narrative.[17]   The structure of the first third of *Beowulf* emerges from the steady accumulation, variation,[18] and elaboration of type-scenes, especially the central type-scene for this particular narrative, "The Monster Attacks the Hall."   In fact, MAH appears to be the central narrative unit—the core or skeleton of the narrative—that organizes and focusses the first 1300 lines of the text.   The most essential unit comprises the 126 lines that chronicle Grendel's final attack on the hall: this episode presents the most dramatic and developed version of the type-scene.   It justifies all the episodes that occur before it and closes off the possibility of additional repetitions, at least with Grendel as the agent in the attack.   Grendel's mother, of course, provides the agency for the third occurrence of MAH, and this passage, like Passage I, generates more narrative: Passage III poses a problem for which the characters in the narrative must find a solution.

Each occurrence of this type-scene echoes all the possibilities of repetition or cessation, illustrating a principle of traditional narratives so effectively characterized by Foley: "The ritual nature of the theme [or type-scene]... may prove to be of considerable importance in successfully interpreting traditional poetry.   For echoes of one occurrence of a given theme reverberate not simply through the subsequent linear length of a given poem, but through the collective, mythic knowledge of a given culture" (1976:231).   MAH and its narrative possibilities exemplify the single most mythic element in *Beowulf*—the nocturnal attack of a monster

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[17] See Clover 1980.

[18] On the rhetorical properties of variation, see Brodeur 1959:39-70, Greenfield and Calder 1986:127-28, Greenfield 1972:65-66, and Harris 1982. Greenfield and Harris both quote Fred C. Robinson's definition of variation from his unpublished thesis. Harris attempts the most complete definition of variation: "The definition of variation adopted here is that of Professor Robinson: 'Its [variation's] essence, then, is structural and semantic repetition, with a variety of wording.'   Accordingly, I define variation as parallel words or groups of words which share a common reference and occur within a single clause (or, in the instance of sentence variation) within contiguous clauses" (98). Harris wishes to draw firm distinctions between variation and parallelisms: "Variation depends on repetition of form and meaning: parallelisms... stress syntactic, not semantic, parity" (105). He comments that the triple "*com-þa*-infinitive of Grendel's approach to Heorot . . . stresses Grendel's steady advance, but it simultaneously pauses to let the poet insert additional information—a type of variational pattern and effect, but one stretched far beyond the formal limits of variation" (105). The central presentation of this type-scene, "The Monster Attacks the Hall," depends heavily on the rhetorical expansion, through parallelisms and variation, of the skeleton of the scene. See further Robinson 1985.

on sleeping men in a communal hall.[19]   Furthermore, the outline of MAH represents the structure of the first third of *Beowulf*. Such a structure—the sequence of traditional narrative elements dominated by the type-scene that represents the monster's attack on the hall—is more difficult to chart schematically than other structures, such as ring composition,[20] that have been perceived in the poem. The traditional structure is a fluid narrative logic consisting of type-scenes and themes, interconnected, expanded, and developed as the context demands.

As the narrative moves away from the first 1300 lines, the focus of the story shifts. The monster no longer attacks the hall; rather, Beowulf seeks out Grendel's mother and attacks her in her "hall." As James Rosier noted three decades ago, Beowulf's attack on Grendel's mother in her abode is narrated as the inverse of Grendel's attack on Heorot. He commented on the transference of the terminology in this fashion (1963:12):

> The mere-dwelling is called *niðsele*, "hostile hall," and *hrofsele*, "roofed hall." Just as Grendel is ironically referred to as a "hall-thane," so Beowulf is here called a *gist* (1522) and then *selegyst* (1545). The word, *aglæca*, "monster," is a common name for Grendel and his mother is called an *aglæcwif* (1259); as he approached the mere-hall, Beowulf likewise is referred to as *aglæca* (1512) in the transferred sense, "warrior or terrible one".... Even the famous *þa com* pattern delineating Grendel's progress from the mere to Heorot recurs in a varied form to depict the movement of Beowulf and his thanes as they return from the mere to the hall. . . .

Rosier's analysis demonstrates the traditional inversion of the monster's attack, which becomes the hero's attack. While Beowulf's battle with

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[19] See Hume 1974 and Irving 1989:134-67.

[20] Several highly articulated formal patterns have been proposed for *Beowulf*. Niles, for instance, finds a rather tight example of ring composition, "a chiastic design in which the last element in a series in some way echoes the first, the next to last the second, and so on" (1983:152; 1979), and provides a careful diagram of the way in which ring composition accounts for the formal pattern of the poem (1979:914). See also Andersson (1980:90-106), who has proposed another pattern that would account for the "inventory of conventional situations." As he describes this pattern, "The poet drew his settings from the scenic repertory of the older heroic lay" (105), which results in a "thematic design . . . a kind of *memento mori* dwelling insistently on the transitoriness of earthly things" (104). Andersson suggests that this design constitutes a formal pattern of rising and falling episodes. For a discussion of the formal qualities of *Beowulf* in Proppian terms, see Barnes 1970 on the formal patterns of folklore in the structure of *Beowulf*. See also Rosenberg 1971.

Grendel's mother does not develop in ways as predictable and "formulaic" as the three manifestations of "The Monster Attacks the Hall," this section of the narrative develops out of, inverts, and fulfills the earlier structures generated by the type-scene itself. The type-scene can generate narrative episodes that are more complex than the simple elaboration of a core unit.

When Beowulf returns to Hygelac's court, he narrates his exploits in the battles against Grendel and his mother. Of the 152 lines in this section of direct discourse, about half (73 lines) narrate the two attacks of the monster and the battle with Grendel's mother. The Grendel story itself is introduced with a direct comment by Beowulf: "Ic sceal forð sprecan / gen ymbe Grendel" (2069b-70a) ["I must speak forth then about Grendel"]. As a storyteller, Beowulf actually relies on a stripped-down, shorthand version of MAH when he narrates the two attacks on the hall. Yet he also edits the tale; he makes no mention of the sleeping thanes, a standard element of motifs #1 and #2 in earlier versions of the type-scene. He summarizes Grendel's approach:

> gæst yrre cwom,
> eatol æfengrom   user neosan
> ðær we gesunde   sæl weardodon. (2073b-75)

> [The angry demon came, terrible in the evening, to attack
> us where we unharmed occupied the hall.]

The "scriðan sceadugenga" of Passage II (703a) who bore God's anger (711b), simply becomes "gæst yrre cwom / eatol æfengrom." Instead of the sleeping men, Beowulf mentions only that they occupied the hall, "gesunde." The second motif, the seizure of the thane, is particularized here into an elegiac statement about Hondscioh:

> þær wæs Hondscio   hild onsæge,
> feorhbealu fægum;   he fyrmest læg,
> gyrded cempa. (2076-78a)

> [Then was the battle fatal to Hondscioh, a deadly evil to the
> fated one; he fell first, an armed warrior.]

Since we now see this episode from Beowulf's point of view, we hear about the glove that Grendel used to carry off warriors and the monster's desire not to leave empty-handed, *idelhende* (2081b). Motif #2, the seizure of a sleeping thane, is reflected in these comments by Beowulf when he emphasizes the grip of Grendel and his intention to stuff thanes into his

glove.   Motif #3 is represented by Beowulf's comment that Grendel did depart and leave his hand behind in Heorot (2096a-2100).   The reaction to the event, motif #4, here becomes a summary of Beowulf's rewards, which he begins to enjoy the next day "syððan mergen com" (2103b).

Beowulf's narration of the attack by Grendel's mother, which immediately follows the account of the feast and celebration, is likewise patterned on the motifs of MAH.   When night falls, "oð ðæt niht becwom / oðer to yldum" (2116b-17a), Grendel's mother approaches: "Grendeles modor, / siðode sorhfull" (2118b-19a).   As Beowulf narrates the second motif, he again omits the sleeping men and names the victim, in a passage that parallels his naming of Hondscioh:

> þær wæs Æschere,
> frodan fyrnwitan   feorh uðgenge. (2122b-23)

> [There was Aschere, the wise old counselor, departed from life.]

Since Beowulf is not present at this attack, he has no eyewitness details to add to his narration of events.   Instead, he repeats a formula he has just employed twenty-one lines earlier ("syððan mergen cwom" [2124b]) to provide a transition to a compilation of motifs #2, #3, and #4: the seizure of a thane, the departure of the monster, and the response of the inhabitants. For in the morning, the death-wary Danes realize that

> hio þæt lic ætbær
> feondes fæðmum   under firgenstream. (2127b-28)

> [She carried that body in her fiendish arms under the
> mountain stream.]

Although the skeleton of MAH is employed twice in this short passage, Beowulf's narration differs from that of the early representation of these episodes in the poem.   He omits all details that specifically refer to the participants, except to name both victims, depict his own role in events, and add his personal version of the fight with Grendel.   Beowulf patterns his account as the *Beowulf*-poet does, but Beowulf the narrator attempts to explain the events, not to embellish them.   In the first-person, direct discourse of the account, the type-scene develops something of the tone and logic of elegy.   In Beowulf's hands, this type-scene serves a different purpose than it does in the hands of a *scop*-proper: the hero's manipulation of this type-scene effects closure, even though he uses the same traditional

elements that dominate the development of the narrative itself. In his version, he fixes the episodes, and the two attacks become history, recounted as history. As direct discourse within narrative, these two final versions of MAH form a retrospective version of episodes already represented by the traditional narrative of the poem. In producing his narrative account, Beowulf completes the first two-thirds of the narrative. As a storyteller, he demonstrates the relationship between event and narrative: his version of the monster's attack is reduced to recognizable, reductive narrative units that have lost the compelling dramatic quality they display in the earlier presentation of the poem.

Many traditions have been proposed to account for Grendel. The origin of the "Grendel Story" has been sought in folklore, in Irish and Scandinavian literature, and in the tradition of Latin prose texts that catalogue the monsters.[21] However, Grendel's presence in *Beowulf* is confined largely, though not exclusively, to his appearance in this highly articulated traditional type-scene. The type-scene itself bears little resemblance to the folklore analogues so often discussed, nor does it bear any affinity to the representation of the monsters in the Latin prose accounts of monsters. The tradition behind the pattern that represents the monster's attack on the hall need not be specifically sought in other literary or folklore texts. The type-scene itself, as a structural and structuring unit, suggests that the tradition that it represents is an ancient oral tradition, too ancient and too "traditional" to make the search for analogues, whether in folklore or literature, very meaningful. More than fifty years ago, J. R. R. Tolkien (1936/1968) asserted that the monsters in *Beowulf* are not an "inexplicable blunder of taste" (23), but an essential element in a poem that expresses the "northern mythical imagination" (31). Indeed, the mythical priority of the monsters is exemplified by their formulaic presentation in this type-scene. "The Monster Attacks the Hall" is a highly articulated formulaic unit that represents the central thematic episode of the poem. As a traditional narrative unit, it clarifies two "problems" in the plot of the narrative—namely, the fact that Beowulf's men fall asleep in Heorot and that Beowulf does not challenge Grendel until Hondscioh has been killed.

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[21] A longstanding critical discussion focusses on the possible connections between Grendel and the *Grettis Saga*; likewise, discussions frequently seek to connect the poem to the folktale "The Bear's Son." See Chambers 1959:173ff. and Lawrence 1928:182; on the possible connections with Irish folklore, see Puhvel (1979), who proposes a folktale, the "Hand and the Child," which he finds to be a more likely analogue than "The Bear's Son." For a skeptical consideration of the Latin tradition (*Liber Monstrorum*) in relation to *Beowulf*, see Whitbread 1974. See also note 9.

These are traditional stock elements of the monster's attack, and in *Beowulf* we have very traditional monsters indeed.[22]

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