

Æschere's head, Grendel's mother and the sword that isn't a sword: Unreadable things in *Beowulf*

When Grendel's mother attacks Heorot, her victim, Æschere, is described by Hrothgar as 'min runwita ond min rædbora' [my rune-knower and advice-bearer] (1325).¹ Later, when Beowulf returns to Heorot, having slain Grendel's mother, he hands the hilt from the giants' sword he used to kill her over to Hrothgar, who looks at the artefact before issuing a warning to Beowulf about becoming monstrous and foreshadowing the hero's later encounter with the *wyrm* (1677–784). By examining this passage in *Beowulf*, this chapter highlights connections between Grendel's mother and the giants' sword found in her underwater hall, arguing that they are both riddle-like things that resist the kind of reading that Æschere was meant to offer King Hrothgar. Indeed, Æschere's death provokes an anxiety in the text about 'things' that defy human interpretation and convey monstrous, marginal or altogether unknowable messages instead. While *Beowulf* is sensitive to the fact that a range of artefacts, including swords, have always been legible, the text also reveals that certain enigmatic things exceed the community of readable objects. Through their liminal status, these things carry alien stories and histories into the safety of the mead hall, unsettling the shared body of knowledge held within reading communities.

The first part of this chapter reconsiders Grendel's mother's slaying of the counsellor Æschere, examining the significance of both figures. The poem refers to Grendel's mother in a variety of ways: she is both a noble lady (OE *ides*) and a monstrous or warrior woman (OE *aglæcwif*); she is of the kin of Cain and linked to a race of giants but is still in the likeness of a woman (*idese onlicnes*) and dwells in a roofed hall (*hrofsele*). Well known, also, are the critical debates about who or what Grendel's mother is: from Klaeber's glossing of *aglæcwif* and its influence on later translators to arguments that she is a warrior woman or a valkyrie figure.² Since

Grendel's mother ultimately eludes efforts to name and identify her, it is significant that, unlike her son who randomly grabs thirty men, young and old, in his raids, her one victim is the counsellor Æschere. He has been carefully selected, for he is a rune-knower and advice-bearer, and Grendel's mother is therefore killing Hrothgar's reader. Nicholas Howe traces the etymology of the Old English *rædan* to show that it gives the meanings 'to give advice or counsel' and 'to explain something obscure' but also 'to exercise control over something'.³ Therefore, even though Grendel's mother says no words in the text, in her slaying of Æschere she is making a clear statement that she will be neither explained nor controlled by the community of Heorot.

What is more, acts of reading – giving advice and solving riddles – were a means of 'creating and then enlarging the bounds of a textual community'.⁴ While not literate in the modern sense, the community of Heorot is nonetheless bound together by 'reading' in this way. The second part of this chapter focuses on the giants' sword to argue that, even as Grendel's mother threatens a community through her refusal to be read, the sword hilt also enters Heorot from the outside and has the ability to destabilise its set of beliefs and knowledge. In both cases, this power is linked to the elusive or riddle-like nature of a 'thing' that exists on the margins of a human community. As Grendel's mother refuses to be named, identified and objectified, we can similarly see the giants' sword transforming from a functioning blade into *something* else.

In the absence of his *runwita* and *rædbora*, Hrothgar is confronted by the thing that the giants' sword has become and must try to read its runes himself. But when he looks at the rune-engraved hilt he cannot entirely make sense of it and what he does see is a historical narrative of giants, which is more closely connected to the Grendelkin than to the Danes. Hrothgar 'reads' that hilt all the same and, urged by an alien history, warns Beowulf through the figure of Heremod against becoming monstrous to future generations. Thus, the hilt might be seen as a self-reflexive literary device; it asks whether *Beowulf* itself is the story of an alien, monstrous past. The hilt embodies a concern over how stories of the present are conveyed to future audiences and, specifically, how histories may be transformed by the kinds of artefacts that carry them. Unreadable things can disrupt a longstanding human reliance upon legibility, altering the way we interpret that which has come before us.

Killing the reader

Readers of *Beowulf* do not really encounter Æschere (he is not singled out as a recognisable individual, nor is he named) until he is dead. In line 1251, there is this allusion to him: ‘Sum sare angeald / æfenræste’ [one paid sorely for his evening-rest]. Here, Æschere is merely ‘a certain one’ among the retainers who has been chosen to pay a penalty. Although not mentioned by name, we are given the sense that this ‘one’ has been marked out for death beforehand, at least by the narrator. And yet a mere eighteen lines earlier we are told that the sleepy hall-thegns ‘Wyrð ne cuþon, / geosceaft grimme’ [did not know the grim shape of formerly-fixed fate] (1233–4). Tricky to translate in this line, *geosceaft* essentially means ‘that which has been shaped of old’, thus adding to the notion that Æschere has been chosen for death from the start. The other brief reference to Æschere, before his name is mentioned, tells us that ‘Se wæs Hroþgare hæleþa leofost / on gesiðes had be sæm tweonum’ [He was to Hrothgar the most beloved of men among the retainers he had between the two seas] (1296–7). It is telling that, after ravaging Heorot for twelve years, seizing thirty men at a time, night after night, Grendel somehow misses the king’s most beloved thegn; but in her one attack, Grendel’s mother’s single victim is this trusted counsellor, Æschere. This is no coincidence: Æschere’s death is a very deliberate statement.

Why Æschere? Perhaps his name will provide a clue, or perhaps Æschere is not a name at all. The narrative context would suggest that it is, or at least it is used as a name when Hrothgar tells Beowulf that ‘Sorh is geniwod / Denigea leodum: dead is Æschere, Yrmenlafes ylðra broþor’ [Sorrow is renewed for the Danes: Æschere is dead, Yrmenlaf’s older brother] (1322–4). Yet it is not commonly used as a name elsewhere in Old English. The online Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (PASE) informs us that there is only one Æschere (male) recorded in Domesday Book m xi.⁵ In the poetry, ‘æschere’ appears not as a name but as a noun in *The Battle of Maldon*, meaning a (Viking) army in ships. In this instance, *æsc* is used as a metonym for ships in the same manner as it is often used as a poetic metonym for spears, both being made from ash wood.

This takes us to the two elements that comprise the name: *æsc* and *here*. As well as referring to warships and battle-spears, *æsc* also carries connotations of obscure, or runic, knowledge. For example, the TDOE gives us (1) ash tree; (2) a light, swift ship, especially

a Viking ship; (3) in poetry: a spear; but then (4) ash, the name of the runic letter (cf. *æ*). An example of *æsc* being utilised in this latter capacity can be found in Exeter Book Riddle 42, where the riddler claims that he can reveal the names of the creatures through *runstafas*: ‘þær sceal Nyd wesan / twega oþer ond se torhta Æsc / an an linan’ (8–10). It is also interesting to note that, as a noun, *æ* has the meaning (1) law (divine and secular), statement of law (written or customary), code of behaviour.⁶ This could well be significant when we consider that, in her slaying of Æschere, Grendel’s mother adhered to the heroic ethic of the blood feud.⁷ And yet, as an *aglæca*, she is also one who violates some natural or moral law.⁸ Evidently, the first element of Æschere’s name identifies him as a fitting victim for her. The second element of the name, *here*, is glossed by Klaeber as ‘army’ and is used many times in *Beowulf* to form compound words such as *here-grima* (war-mask or helm), *here-net* (war-net or mail shirt) and *here-sceaft* (battle-shaft or spear).⁹ It is apparent that in the name ‘Æschere’ there is the simultaneous combining and opposing of knowledge (both lore and law) and violence (warfare).

This is also the case when one considers Æschere’s role in the narrative. At around line 1320, Beowulf asks if Hrothgar is well rested, and the king tells him about Grendel’s mother’s attack. He describes Æschere as follows:

‘Ne frin þu æfter sælum! Sorh is geniwod
Denigea leodum: dead is Æschere,
Yrmenlafes yldra broþor,
min runwita ond min rædbora,
eaxlgestealla ðonne we on orlege
hafelan weredon, þonne hniton feþan,
eoferas cnysedan. Swylc scolde eorl wesan,
æþeling ærgod, swylc Æschere wæs. (1322–29)

[Don’t you ask after well-being! Sorrow is renewed for the Danes: Æschere is dead, Yrmenlaf’s elder brother, my rune-knower and advice-bearer, my shoulder-companion when we guarded heads in war, when in battle the troops clashed, the boars crashed together. So should a nobleman, a good prince, be, so Æschere was.]

Here, then, Hrothgar describes Æschere as ‘min runwita ond min rædbora’ (1325). *Runwita* is glossed by Klaeber as ‘confidant, trusted adviser’ and *rædbora* as ‘counsellor’.¹⁰ Translators of the poem usually opt for similar terms: Michael Alexander has Hrothgar describe Æschere as his ‘closest counsellor’ and ‘keeper

of my thoughts'; Heaney has him as a 'soul-mate' and a 'true mentor'; Dick Ringer, in a more recent translation, still has 'counselor, confidant, and closest friend'.¹¹ Although 'counsellor', 'adviser' and 'confidant' are all acceptable modern translations, more is revealed about Æschere's role in Heorot if we look back at the Old English: in particular, the pairing of *run* and *ræd*.

Run carries the sense of secret consultation, of words that must not be overheard. It is used early on in *Beowulf* (again paired with *ræd*) when Grendel is ravaging the hall and 'Monig oft gesæt, / rice to rune; ræd eahtedon' [Many powerful ones often sat at secret counsel; they deliberated advice] (171–2). The word *run* also, of course, carries the related meaning of 'mystery' or 'a secret', as well as 'that which is written, with the idea of mystery or magic'.¹² As a noun, *wita* primarily means 'wise man' or, more literally, 'one who knows'. Yet the word also carries legal connotations. The plural form, *witan*, 'remained the technical term for the national assembly from the seventh to the twelfth century' and so a *wita* was a member of the national assembly, or *witan*. In most cases and 'as far back as the seventh century' the *witan* 'are king's counsellors'.¹³

The first aspect of Æschere's role is thus 'rune-knower'. He is one who knows mysteries and can keep secret counsel. Yet he is also a *rædbora*. Howe usefully explains that 'most uses of *ræd* and related forms in Old English texts refer to the giving of advice', while a 'significant number of others denote the more specific act of explaining something obscure or solving a riddle'. Howe links these (interconnected) uses of *ræd* to a 'culture unaccustomed to the written text' in which an 'oral dimension' remains and whereby something obscure becomes meaningful 'when read aloud by those initiated in the solution of such enigma'.¹⁴ Æschere's role as *run-wita* appears to be bound up with his role as *rædbora*: he knows mysteries and keeps secrets but also has a duty to share and explain those secrets aloud to a community. This side of his role is reinforced by the second element of the compound *rædbora*. *Bora* (from the Old English *beran*) implies that Æschere bears or carries his advice, therefore embodying that knowledge. But at the same time his body is vulnerable, underscored by the association of knowledge with violence that we get from his name and description. Indeed, as soon as Hrothgar has referred to Æschere as his *runwita* and *rædbora*, he goes on to refer to his other duty as *eaxlgestealla* in battle 'ðonne we on orlege / hafelan weredon' [when we guarded heads in war] (1326–7). It is not in battle, though, that Æschere is slain, but in the safety of the hall: 'Wearð him on Heorote to hand-banan

wæl-gæst wæfre' [He was hand-slain in Heorot by a wandering slaughter-guest] (1330–1).

Why does Grendel's mother kill Hrothgar's reader and, by extension, Heorot's as well? And why is it the mother who does so and not her son, despite Grendel's more prolonged raids and reckless killings? Although there is undoubtedly an ambiguity about Grendel, who straddles the boundary between man and monster,¹⁵ he has generated less critical confusion over his status and role in the text than his mother has. For a start, we at least have a name for him. 'Grendel' was a name bestowed on the monster by humans (1354–5). The same humans seem to have been unable to name the mother, or any name she might have had has been forgotten by Hrothgar and his men and is not communicated to the audience of *Beowulf*. In addition to not having a name, Grendel's mother has a history of not being 'read' by critics of the poem.¹⁶ Jane Chance points out that the episode involving Grendel's mother 'has been viewed as largely extraneous, a blot upon the thematic and structural unity of the poem'.¹⁷ But herein lies her agency – an agency that is linked to her killing of Æschere. In her namelessness and in her disappearances from the poem, Grendel's mother eludes our efforts at reading her. Thus in early *Beowulf* criticism, she is not so much glossed as glossed over.¹⁸ Even in more recent attempts to read and explain her, however, we are left with a variety of contradictory views.

Klaeber's glossing of the term *aglæcwif* in line 1259 as 'wretch, or monster of a woman' has influenced many translations of Grendel's mother, so that Michael Alexander, for example, has her as a 'monstrous ogress' while Chickering opts for 'monster-woman' and Heaney has 'monstrous hell-bride'.¹⁹ Yet the revised fourth edition of Klaeber's *Beowulf* has *aglæcwif* as 'troublemaker, female adversary', and similarly, in 1994 the TDOE updated the same noun to 'female warrior, fearsome woman'. In the criticism, Grendel's mother likewise hovers between monster, woman and warrior. That she should be interpreted as 'monstrous' is unsurprising given that she is associated with the kin of Cain as soon as she comes on the scene (1258–65). There is, therefore, a case for seeing Grendel's mother as monstrous on account of family ties. Moreover, as Andy Orchard points out, Grendel's mother is linked both structurally and thematically to the other two monsters in the poem. Grendel and his mother are 'closely connected not simply by the family relationship between the monsters, but by their human shape, their cannibalistic acts, their shared dwelling,

and their decapitation' while narrative parallels also 'connect the episode of Grendel's mother and the dragon'.²⁰

On the other hand, one should be wary of reading the mother through the son who 'owns' her. Christine Alfano warns us against this, claiming that 'a large part of her reputed monstrosity lies not in Grendel's mother, but in Grendel himself' so that she 'finds herself implicated in her child's monstrosity, as unchallenged assumptions subsume her maternal role within a son's identity'.²¹ According to Alfano, the numerous monstrous translations of Grendel's mother, such as those based on Klaeber's early glossary, have diminished her claim on humanity. As such, Alfano attempts a more human reading of this enigmatic figure. In doing so, she tends to side with Kuhn's earlier reading of her as a 'female warrior' with the conclusion that it 'is time to relieve Grendel's mother from her burden of monstrosity and reinstate her in her deserved position as *ides*, *aglæcwif*: "lady, warrior-woman"'.²² Gillian R. Overing comments on the very 'complication' of Grendel's mother to the extent that she 'is not quite human, or, rather, she has her own particular brand of otherness; her inhuman affiliation and propensities make it hard to distinguish between what is monstrous and what is female'.²³

In addition, Grendel's mother hovers on the threshold between human and animal in a number of critical readings. An instance of this can be found in what Orchard refers to as her 'lupine' aspect. Orchard remarks on the description of her as a 'she-wolf of the depths' (*grundwyrgen*) and as a 'sea-wolf' (*brimwylf*).²⁴ But Alfano again steers such descriptions towards the human, and especially the warrior-woman, contending that *brimwylf* 'does not imply Grendel's mother's literal resemblance to a female water-wolf; it could function as an epithet such as those applied to warriors and figures in battle'.²⁵

These arguments demonstrate the enigmatic or riddle-like nature of Grendel's mother.²⁶ Through her ability to signify as more than one thing, Grendel's mother generates a variety of contradictory readings – and the contradictory character of such readings means that she is not, in the end, read at all. She remains unsolved. As Shari Horner argues, 'we will probably never come to a definitive understanding of such fundamental characteristics as her gender and species' so we should consider instead the effect of not defining them.²⁷ Similarly, Overing reassesses the significance of Grendel's mother and asserts that the 'complication' that she brings to the narrative, 'this line-crossing, this cross-identification,

this identity flux as it is imbricated with bodies and genders, this depth-charge of uncertainty that is Grendel's mother, this omission, my omission, I have come to believe, is the "argument". That is to say, she produces an uncertainty and indeterminacy that 'explodes preconceived categories of gendered identity, and is a means to imagine the poem's shifting and fragmented situating of the self, male or female, human or otherwise'.²⁸ Renée R. Trilling likewise takes up the issue of the critical silence and confusion surrounding Grendel's mother, concluding that, although she is far from the only ambiguous figure in *Beowulf*, she is 'unique in that the poem embodies so many of these tensions in one character, and she is defined by her ability to transgress the boundaries that ultimately limit the agency of other characters'. Grendel's mother 'stands in for that which exceeds representation – and hence exceeds the totalizing grasp of criticism as well'.²⁹

In this manner, Grendel's mother is not unlike one of the Exeter Book riddles for which we have no solution. A crucial difference, however, is that whereas many (but not all) of those riddles invite the reader to 'say what I am called' Grendel's mother makes no such invitation. Her very silence is her power. She is unwilling to participate in verbal play, and yet does engage in a different kind of play – the battle play. Although a number of the Old English riddles make a challenge to 'wise' or 'thoughtful' (*þoncol*) men, to those shrewd or 'crafty' in mind (*hygecræftig*), and especially to rune-knowers (*rynemenn*),³⁰ the riddle that is Grendel's mother comes out of the dark, snatches Heorot's 'rune-man' away, and severs his head, silencing him. Again, we should see this not as reckless but as deliberate violence.

As with a number of the riddles, however, we need to be alert to visual as well as verbal signs. In the aftermath of her raid, Beowulf, Hrothgar and his retainers continue to try and read Grendel's mother by following the tracks and trails she has left behind:

Lastas wæron
 æfter waldswaþum wide gesyne,
 gang ofer grundas, heo gegnum for
 ofer myrcan mor, magoþegna bæ
 þone selestan sawollesne
 þara þe mid Hroðgare ham eahtode. (1402b–7)

[The tracks were widely seen along the forest trails where, going over ground, she fared onwards over the murky moor, bearing away the lifeless body of the best thegn in Hrothgar's household.]

I connect this passage to the process of reading because the terms *lastas* (tracks) and *swaþu* (tracks or trails) are also found in Riddle 51 of the Exeter Book to describe the black marks left behind by the pen: ‘swarte wæran lastas, / swaþu swiþe blacu’ (2–3). Moreover, in his Preface to the Pastoral Care, Alfred speaks in similar terms:

Ure ieldran, ða ðe ðas stowa ær hioldon, hie lufodon wisdom, ond ðurh ðone hie begeaton welan, ond us læfdon. Her mon mæg giet gesion hiora swæð, ac we him ne cunnon æfter spyrigean, ond for ðæm we habbað nu ægðer forlæten ge ðone welcan ge ðone wisdom, for ðæm ðe we noldon to ðæm spore mid ure mode onlutan.³¹

[Our ancestors, who formerly held these places, they loved wisdom, and through it they obtained wealth and left it to us. Here one may yet see their tracks, but we cannot follow after them, and therefore we have now lost both the wealth and the wisdom, for we would not bend down to their tracks with our minds.]

Hrothgar and his men follow Grendel’s mother’s tracks across the moors as a reader might follow lines of ink across parchment. Those tracks do not lead the men of Heorot to wisdom but to further sorrow, as they meet Æschere’s head on the cliff by the water (1417–21). More than a heartbreaking sight for Hrothgar, the severed head is also another visual statement left by Grendel’s mother. First, it is a sign of payback in the escalating and deadly swapping game between the Grendelkin and the Danes, where one body part is (both literally and symbolically) exchanged for another: Hondscioh (glove) for Grendel’s hand; Grendel’s hand for Æschere’s head; Æschere’s head for Grendel’s head.³² As the poet says, ‘Ne wæs þæt gewrixle til’ [That was not a good exchange] (1304). Wordless though she may be, Grendel’s mother is nevertheless demonstrating that she knows the rules of this game. According to Leslie Lockett, extant Anglo-Saxon law codes ‘do not prescribe the display of corpses, but they do preserve the distinction between the legitimate killing of an offender and secret murder’. Lockett notes that whereas Grendel’s killings are without just cause and are therefore kept concealed, his mother’s ‘slaying of Æschere is – at least from her perspective – a legitimate requital of her own son’s death, for which reason she prominently displays the head at the entrance of her own home, on high ground at the edge of the mere’.³³ Earlier, I noted that the Æsc- element of Æschere’s name links him to law or a code of behaviour. In her beheading of him, Grendel’s mother is making the statement that she recognises the laws of the feud, and is capable of participating in them, and

yet by slaying the namer, knower and reader, she is also showing that she stands outside those laws and defies the men who devise and recall them.

Even beyond the tit for tat feud, the severing and displaying of Æschere's head is noteworthy in itself. Bill Griffiths, for instance, finds evidence for a cult of the head in Anglo-Saxon tradition, and what lies behind this cult (and similar ones elsewhere in time and place) is the 'importance of voice, as messenger between different levels of existence, in combination with a practical recognition of the head as the source of hearing, speech and sight (and perhaps intelligence)'.³⁴ A beheading episode also occurs in Ælfric's *Life of St Edmund*.³⁵ Here, the Vikings attempt to sever the dead king's head from his body in an act of control:

Hwæt ða se flot-here ferde eft to scipe and behyddon þæt heafod þæs halgan eadmundes on þam þiccum bremelum þæt hit bebyrged ne wurde.³⁶

[So then the floating-army fared back to their ship and hid the head of the holy Edmund in the thick brambles so that it might not be buried.]

But when the folk of the region go searching for that head, so that they may reunite it with the body, the head itself continues to function as a source of hearing and speaking beyond decapitation and death:

Hi eodon þa secende, and symle clypigende, swa swa hit gewunelic is þam ðe on wuda gað oft, 'Hwær eart þu nu, gefera?' and him andwyrde þæt heafod, 'Her! Her! Her!' and swa gelome clypode, andswarigende him eallum swa oft swa heora ænig clypode, oppæt hi ealle becomen þurh ða clypunga him to.

[They went on seeking and always calling out, as is usual with those who often go to the woods, 'Where are you now, friend?' and the head answered them, 'Here! Here! Here!' and so it continually called, answering them all, as often as any of them called, until they all came to it through the calling.]

Of all the body parts that Grendel's mother could have chosen to display, therefore, the head is most closely associated with the human ability to perceive and to make sense of the world. Grendel's mother does leave tracks and trails behind for Hrothgar's men to follow and read, and yet what these tracks lead to is a warning against the very act of reading. Unlike those who go searching throughout the forest in the *Life of St Edmund*, Hrothgar's men do

not find a speaking head but a silent object now unable to perceive, interpret or explain anything.

I want to take a moment to clarify what the term ‘reading’ means in an Anglo-Saxon context and so gain a sounder understanding of why Grendel’s mother refuses to be read by the community of Heorot. The Old English usage of *ræd* refers generally to the giving of counsel and, more specifically, to the explaining or solving of something obscure, like a riddle. This, in turn, is connected to controlling that obscure or elusive *something*. Howells looks to the store of conventional sayings and knowledge collected in *Maxims I* to show that reading in the sense of offering counsel is a public act that, in an oral culture, is ‘of necessity to speak and thereby to create community’. Old English gloss writers used *ræd* and its derivatives to translate the various forms of the Latin *consulere*, ‘to consider, take counsel, consult’. This means that the Old English word could often have the same sense of counsel as a public act as did the Latin word. One such instance is the use of the Old English *rædbora* to gloss the Latin *consiliarius* (counselor) and also *jurisperitus* (one skilled in law).³⁷ A *rædbora* such as Æschere held a key role as an individual that ‘reads’ publically on behalf of his community and indeed creates that very community by so doing.

Seth Lerer points out that the word ‘literacy’ can be ‘invoked to determine an individual’s place in society and to assess the social norms against those distant in geography or time’. In these terms, the power of the literate ‘is the power to include and exclude: to distinguish the self from the other, the civil from the savage, the mainstream from the subversive’.³⁸ The community of Heorot is evidently ‘literate’ in its ability to exclude and control that something that does not belong within its bounds; and it is this kind of control that Grendel’s mother resists.

The power of unreadable things

Although the giants’ sword is strongly associated with Grendel’s mother and her function within *Beowulf*, it is too often read as the weapon that brings an end to any threat she might have held for the community of Heorot – for not only does Beowulf use the sword to slay her, but he is also able to bring it, bladeless, safely back into the hall where it can be read and thus contained and controlled by Hrothgar. However, I want to consider exactly why and how

Hrothgar ‘reads’ the hilt and so ask what his reading of it tells us about the power that a sword-becoming-something-else can have in shaping the way a literate community reads itself across time. The power of the giants’ sword can be linked to that of Grendel’s mother inasmuch as they both defy interpretation and threaten to destabilise Heorot’s shared body of knowledge.

Traditional Western ontological systems would categorise Grendel’s mother and the giants’ sword as distinct entities. Grendel’s mother is a living being whereas the sword is an inanimate artefact. While Grendel’s mother and the sword hilt are not necessarily ontologically equivalent, we cannot say for certain what the nature of their existence is. The point is that they both deny the readers within the world of *Beowulf* and us, as readers of the *Beowulf* manuscript, the ability to know what kinds of entities they really are, recalling Graham Harman’s proposition that ‘things’ infinitely withdraw.³⁹ Grendel’s mother seems to be humanoid (a mother, in the shape of a woman, capable of emotion, who seeks revenge) but cannot be pinned down as such (a monstrous mother, dwelling beyond the bounds of civilisation, who does not speak). The hilt is like an ordinary weapon (it has a cutting edge, brings victory in battle) but it is also unlike the other swords in the heroic world (it is unnamed, is too big for any man to wield, its blade melts).

Grendel’s mother’s very namelessness and indescribability give her an agency, allowing her to stand out from other female figures in the text. In this poem we also have an instance of an object breaking out of a passive, background role and asserting its thingness. Brown describes how we look through objects, as they circulate through our lives, whereas we begin to confront the ‘thingness’ of an object when it does not behave how it is meant to behave, does not carry out the role it was made and intended for, and suddenly exerts its own power – a power to disrupt human activity, custom or ritual and to assert its own presence.⁴⁰ Bennett similarly expresses ‘thing-power’ as the refusal to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge, a moment of independence from human subjectivity.⁴¹

Such thing-power can be identified in a sword that melts, failing to fulfil its function as a weapon yet transforming into some other kind of thing. It is no coincidence that this thing should be found in the underwater hall of the text’s least controllable female. Even as Grendel’s mother refuses to be contained by the customs

of Heorot, the hilt that emerges from her dwelling likewise enters the mead hall as an irresolvable enigma.

At first glance, it may not be obvious why the giants' sword should be a thing alien to the community of Heorot. After all, swords are conspicuous in the poem. Some of them are even named and given their own histories. The sword Hrunting is one such instance, but of course Hrunting fails Beowulf in his battle against Grendel's mother: 'Ða se gist onfand / þæt se beadoleoma bitan nolde, / aldre sceþðan, ac seo ecg geswac / ðeodne æt þearfe' [Then the guest found that the battle-light would not bite, nor harm her life, but the edge let down its lord in his need] (1522–5). Although Hrunting gets its own name and history, it is bound up with the social rituals of Heorot, a gift exchanged between warriors, an artefact that remains within circulation, binding one man to another. It is very much the sort of powerless object that cannot claim independence from the human subject.

Considering Grendel's mother's power of resistance, it is perhaps unsurprising that this named and circulated weapon should fail to cut her out of the narrative. Allen J. Frantzen's work on the relationship between writing instruments and their carving action examines the key words *writan* and *forwritan*, 'words which pun on "to write" and "to carve" and represent analogues for "to interpret"'. He notes that in *Beowulf* both words are 'linked to weapons' and that the acts of hewing and carving 'align these weapons with instruments for engraving and writing, in the sense of inscribing'.⁴² Hrunting's failure against Grendel's mother is therefore further evidence of her ability to disrupt the literate community of Heorot: the sword that cannot cut or carve her is also the pen that cannot write her. As the poet says, 'Ða wæs forma sið / deorum madme, þæt his ðom alæg' [That was the first time for the fine treasure that it failed in its destiny] (1527–8). As an heirloom circulated from man to man, the sword is a sort of story-bearer; but this time it fails to fulfil its destiny and thus the accumulated narrative it carries is broken off by Grendel's mother.

Despite this moment of resistance, she is soon thereafter cut through and killed by Beowulf. In order to slay Grendel's mother, the hero cannot use any circulated, named heirloom from Heorot but must instead turn to an unknown, unnamed blade that he finds within his enemy's dwelling:

Geseah ða on searwum sigeadig bil,
ealdsweord eotenisc ecgum þyhtig,
wigena weorðmynd; þæt wæs wæpna cyst,

buton hit wæs mare ðonne ænig mon oðer
to beadulace ætberan meahte,
god ond geatolic, giganta geweorc. (1557–62)

[He saw there among the armour a victory-blessed blade, an old sword of giants, strong in edges, worthy to warriors; that was the choicest of weapons, but it was more than any other man might bear into battle-play, good and glimmering, the work of giants.]

This initial description of the giants' sword immediately sets up its ambivalent qualities. It is, on the one hand, a praiseworthy weapon. It is 'sigeeadig bil' (a victory-blessed blade) and 'wæpna cyst' (the choicest of weapons). On the other hand, it is an 'eald sword eotenisc' (old sword of giants) and 'giganta geweorc' (the work of giants). The sword's ornate visual aesthetic and the skill or craft involved in its making are thereby linked to a distant time and an alien race. The beauty and power of the sword is such that the poet can praise it and the audience can, by extension, perceive and appreciate it. And yet it is still the work of an older age and as such remains at a remove from both poet and audience.

The description of the sword also sheds a strange light on our hero, Beowulf, for we are told that 'hit wæs mare ðonne ænig mon oðer / to beadulace ætberan meahte' [it was more than any other man might bear into battle-play] (1560–1). Beowulf's feat of doing what no other man can do may set him above other men in the heroic sense, but at the same time such superhuman strength aligns him with the giants who made the sword and distances him from his fellows in the mead hall. Even from this initial description of the sword, we can see that it is a self-reflexive literary device, intended to remind the audience that we are reading a highly crafted text about (and maybe from) a different time, featuring a hero who is 'not one of us'.

Then again, it is not Beowulf's superhuman power alone that allows him to wield the giants' sword and defeat Grendel's mother. When the outcome of battle looks most dire for the hero, the narrator intervenes to tell us that God has intervened on Beowulf's behalf (1553–6). It is only after this statement that Beowulf sees the *sigeeadig bil* hanging among the other armour. And then, once Beowulf has swung the deadly blow and Grendel's mother lies defeated on the floor, we are told, 'Lixte se leoma, leoht inne stod, / efne swa of hefene hadre scinedð / rodores candel' [The light gleamed, a radiance stood within, even as heaven's candle clearly shines from the

sky] (1570–2). Beowulf himself brings God even more forcefully into his victory when he retells the battle to Hrothgar:

Ic þæt unsofte ealdre gedigde
 wigge under wætere, weorc geneþde
 earfoðlice; ætrihte wæs
 guð getwæfed, nymðe mec God scylde. (1655–8)

[I did not easily endure that underwater battle, but did the deed with difficulty; the fight would have ended right away, had God not saved me.]

Particularly, Beowulf credits God with granting him the sight of the sword (1661–4). How are we to read this? Why did he need God to intervene here and highlight this weapon? The giants' sword is an artefact from an age beyond human memory, an unnamed thing that has survived across an inhuman stretch of time – *giganta geweorc*. A known and named sword like Hrunting does not need divine intervention in order to be seen and used, since it has remained within circulation, exchanged between the warriors of Heorot who have said its name time and again. Yet the giants' sword defies this mnemonic way of knowing, and its history cannot be measured through the generations of men who have owned it. Therefore, God – as a transcendent and extratemporal entity – is the only agent with the ability to bring this sword to light.

In order to reveal the sword, though, God too must enter from the outside. So can the killing of Grendel's mother really be read as a victory for Heorot over the monsters lurking beyond its bounds? I think, rather, that it undermines the control that that community has over the unknown and unknowable. That is, it undermines their ability to read the obscure. For God's entrance into the poem is not invoked by the community of Heorot as a way of dealing with the threats they are under. On the contrary, the poet explicitly told us early on that the community did not know God and so turned to heathen shrines for help:

Monig oft gesæt,
 rice to rune; ræd eahtedon,
 hwæt swiðferhðum selest wære
 wið færgryrum to gefremmanne.
 Hwilum hie geheton æt hægtrafum
 wigweorþunga, wordum bædon
 þæt him gastbona geoce gefremede
 wið þeodþream. (171b–78)

[Many powerful ones often sat at secret counsel, deliberated advice, what it might be best for the strong-minded Danes to do against these sudden attacks. Sometimes they made sacrifices at heathen shrines, prayed with words that the soul-slayer would send help to them for the pain of their people.]

This passage in fact demonstrates the failure of Heorot's reading – it is as a result of secret counsel (*rune*) but bad advice (*ræd*) that they seek aid from the Devil, or soul-slayer (*gast-bona*). In seeming contradiction to this passage, there are moments when Beowulf and Hrothgar do recognise that a higher power has helped them, as when Beowulf says that the *ylða waldend* (lord of men) granted him the sight of the sword (1661–4) or when Hrothgar claims that God favours mankind with the gift of wisdom (1725–8). God hovers between the known and unknown from Heorot's perspective, and his power is not summoned by Hrothgar and his men; rather, God's movements into and out of their world are beyond their ken. From their standpoint, the role of God is not so different from that of Grendel's mother. As lines 171–8 show, God is at times forgotten, much like Grendel's mother. Also like Grendel's mother, God's absence actually empowers his presences, his intrusions, into the poem. The eternal lord can see and reveal those things that dwell outside of Heorot in time and space, things like the giants' sword that would otherwise elude that community.

Yet the narrator is at pains to cite God when the sword blade melts. For the *Beowulf* poet, the melting of the blade indicates God's presence, not God's disappearance:

þæt wæs wundra sum
 þæt hit eal gemealt ise gelicost,
 ðonne forstes bend fæder onlætēð,
 onwinded wælrapas, se geweald hafað
 sæla ond mæla; þæt is soð metod. (1607b–11)

[That was a wonder, how it all melted like ice when the father loosens frost's bonds, unwinds the water-fetters, he who watches over the time and seasons. That is the true ruler.]

The poet's perception of God as an ever-present father, watching over time and seasons, stands in contrast to Heorot's more limited perspective, whereby God shifts in and out of view. Much like Grendel's mother stealing into the hall, killing and then fleeing again before she is found, the community of Heorot's partial

knowledge of God sees him making his entrance into the underwater lair before going out again. As well as revealing the sword, God also has the ability to destroy, or, more accurately, transform it into some other thing; and the ancient sword illuminated by divine intervention can no longer function as a weapon.

It is this ‘weapon’ revealed by God that, unlike its named counterparts, has the power to slay Grendel’s mother. However, while the giants’ sword may put an end to her physical threat in the poem, it does not extinguish the anxieties Grendel’s mother brought into the narrative in her slaying of Æschere: anxieties about ‘things’ that resist human interpretation and the way they unsettle human reliance upon legibility. On the contrary, the bladeless hilt actually continues this threat in her absence and connects it even more clearly to the acts of reading and writing.

Seeing many treasures around him in Grendel’s mother’s hall, Beowulf nevertheless elects to take nothing away with him ‘buton þone hafelan ond þa hilt somod / since fage’ [but for the head and also the hilt, the shining treasure] (1614–15). What does Beowulf think he is taking back to Heorot, and why would he take such a thing back with him anyway? The retrieving of Grendel’s head makes sense in the context of the swapping game. But the giants’ sword is no longer a sword. Even before it melted, the blade was too great for anyone but Beowulf to wield, and now that it has withered away it is surely useless as a weapon. It must be its status as decorated or ‘shining treasure’ (*since fage*) that appeals to Beowulf. Archaeological evidence has long shown that richly decorated sword hilts, not unlike the one described here, with twisting and serpentine patterns, complex motifs and sometimes runic inscriptions displaying personal names, would be buried in early English and Scandinavian graves – the blades themselves kept for another generation, perhaps.⁴³ The Staffordshire Hoard similarly turned up an extraordinary quantity of pommel caps and hilt plates – but no blades (see Figure 1). These highly decorated artefacts, featuring beautiful garnet inlays, detailed scrolls, animals executed in filigree or geometric and zoomorphic interlace, were no doubt prized and taken as treasure – yet there is little, if any, evidence that blades were valued in the same way.

In the poem, however, the blade is not simply discarded or even kept and reused; it vanishes from sight. The poet here reiterates that ‘sweord ær gemealt, / forbarn brodenmæl; wæs þæt blod to þæs hat, / ættren ellorgæst se þær inne swealt’ [the sword had melted, the patterned blade burnt up; the blood of the



1 Gold hilt plate from the Staffordshire Hoard (© Birmingham Museums Trust).

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venomous fiend, the one who died therein, was too hot] (1615–17). Although there is some ambiguity as to which *ellorgæst* (Grendel or his mother) has destroyed the blade with their hot blood, the fact that it is the one who died therein (*se þær inne swealt*) suggests that it was the blood of the recently slain Grendel's mother that melted the weapon. A transferral of power has taken place. The riddle-like resistance that made Grendel's mother so hard to read and control can now be seen in the sword that can no longer be classified as a sword. Overing remarks that, notwithstanding her lack of definition, Grendel's mother is very much on the scene: 'when Hrothgar famously expounds upon the remaining sword hilt, this dismembered object so present in the text remains a function of, and testament to, her capacity to rend asunder'.⁴⁴

This takes us to the presentation of the hilt to Hrothgar. In his speech, Beowulf first introduces the hilt as a sword. Immediately after relating how well it worked *as a sword*, though, Beowulf reveals how the battle-blade burned up (1666–7). When Hrothgar receives the hilt from Beowulf, then, what is it he thinks he is receiving, and why? It is true that the familiar treasure-giving ritual is invoked

here, but the enigmatic, thing-like element to the artefact (is it a sword to be wielded, a decorated hilt to be admired, or a text to be read?) means that Hrothgar's reaction to this gift is anything but straightforward. The thing itself seems to communicate a variety of somewhat contradictory functions to the king, and the king reacts in a variety of ways, looking at the hilt and recognising its intricate decoration, seeing a history of violence consistent with its former role as a battle-blade, and yet also endeavoring to 'read' what he sees and say what he reads:

Hroðgar maðelode; hylt sceawode,
 ealde lafe. On ðæm wæs or wripen
 fyrngewinnes; syðþan flod ofsloh,
 gifen geotende giganta cyn,
 frece geferdon; Ðæt wæs fremde þeod
 ecean dryhtne; him þæs endelea
 þurh wæteres wylm waldend sealde.
 Swa wæs on ðæm scennum sciran goldes
 þurh runstafas rihte gemearcod,
 geseted ond gesæd, hwam þæt sword geworht,
 irena cyst ærest wære,
 wreoþenhilt ond wyrmfah. (1687–98a)

[Hrothgar made a speech; he looked at the hilt, the old remnant, on which was written the origin of ancient strife, when the flood, the surging sea, slew the race of giants, a dreadful event. That race was estranged from the eternal lord: the wielder rewarded them through the water's welling. So too it was stated on the bright gold cross-guard, through rune-letters rightly marked, set down and sealed, for whom that sword was first made, the finest of iron, spiral-hilted and serpent-stained.]

This scene has been much discussed by critics in recent times. For example, Lerer is keen to highlight the 'vagueness' of the hilt which renders it 'all the more ambiguous and alien'. He points out that the 'maker of the sword is unnamed, and the sword and patron remain equally anonymous'; nor is the sword 'christened with a meaningful identity like Hrunting or Nægling'. This leads Lerer to describe this scene as 'a kind of riddle whose expected solution now rests not with Hrothgar and his men, but with the reader of *Beowulf*'.⁴⁵ The hilt itself, and the scene it produces, is indeed a kind of riddle, making this a self-conscious literary passage that extends the role of reader to those who are outside of the text. Lerer goes on to state:

The text is made accessible, in part, to Hrothgar and to us so that we may together try to understand the mythic origins of the terror we have seen and to realize that, in the end, we can only live with monsters and their kin in writings: works that are as impotent as a bladeless sword or a bodiless head. Those monsters now are like the hilt itself. Both come as a written tale, able to enter the hall and hurt no one, to sit silently like a souvenir of an alien kingdom.⁴⁶

Yet the ‘impotence’ and ‘silence’ of the hilt and the monsters it shows us are no less a threat than the silent resistance, the elusive agency, of Grendel’s mother. For a start, Hrothgar has been *forced* into the role of reader due to the absence of Æschere. Let us not forget this, for the hilt is said to be incised with runic letters (OE *runstafas*): Æschere was both *runwita* and *rædbora* within Heorot; now that these runes have been brought into the hall, his absence is felt even more strongly, as the cryptic signs on the thing that was once a sword challenge Hrothgar to stand in for the deceased rune-knower and to interpret and explain them himself. Even though Beowulf has killed Grendel’s mother and ‘avenged’ Æschere’s death, the threat that the unreadable outsider carried has not been removed. The dissolving of the gigantic blade after it cut through her body does not, therefore, signify the impotence of the thing itself so much as the impotence of the community of Heorot, their inability to resolve that which is mysterious and elusive now that their reader has gone.

Hrothgar’s verbal response to the rune-marked hilt demonstrates not only that he cannot readily interpret what he sees there, but also that he does perceive the power of the thing he holds in his hand. The runic letters on the hilt tell us for whom that sword was made without actually relating a name. Thus Hrothgar does not have all the knowledge he needs to make sense of the thing and neither do we, the audience. We might imagine that if he still lived, Æschere would be able to read the runes on our behalf. But that is only a fantasy. As such, the hilt must remain a mysterious thing and the story it tells must remain alien to us.

What Hrothgar – and we – do see is a historical narrative of giants, more closely connected to the Grendelkin than to the Danes (1688–91). This sight incites Hrothgar to make a speech in which he offers counsel (*ræd*) to Beowulf. The counsel both is and is not a reading of what is borne on the hilt. The poet uses the Old English verb *sceawian* to describe Hrothgar’s interaction with the hilt, but this merely means that the king ‘looked at’ or

‘inspected’ the thing. Beyond this, there is no evidence to suggest that he reads anything that we, as readers of *Beowulf*, do not read; no evidence that he gathers any extra or hidden knowledge that we do not have access to. The hilt, I would argue, does not actually grant Hrothgar any knowledge to withhold (beyond what is made clear to us, reading along with him). He looks at its surface, but cannot penetrate it.

And yet in another sense Hrothgar does read the hilt, or at least tries to. It is an act of reading in its communal, counsel-offering form. It is reading in the sense of giving advice to those listening. It cannot, however, be a true act of reading in the way that the Anglo-Saxons conceived of the term, for in the absence of the rune-knower Hrothgar is unable to decode the runic text borne on the hilt. There is no evidence that Hrothgar has the skill (as *Æschere* may have had) to solve the riddle posed by the hilt; but in his speech he intends to offer counsel anyway. Therefore what the king expounds upon is the very impenetrability, the otherness, of the thing he is gazing upon. From this, he constructs advice and gives warning to the hero *Beowulf*. Particularly interesting is Hrothgar’s invocation of the ‘bad’ king *Heremod*. Immediately following a passage of praise for *Beowulf*, Hrothgar says:

Ne wearð *Heremod* swa
 eaforum *Ecgwelan*, *Ar-Scyldingum*;
 ne geweox he him to willan ac to wælfæalle
 ond to deaðcwalum *Deniga leodum*;
 breat bolgenmod beodgeneatas,
 eaxlgesteallan, oþ þæt he ana hwearf,
 mære þeoden mondreamum from.
 Deah þe hine mihtig *God* mægenes wynnum,
 eafepum stepte ofer ealle men,
 forð gefremede, hwæþere him on ferhþe greow
 breosthord blodreow, nallas beagas geaf
 Denum æfter dome; dreamleas gebad
 þæt he þæs gewinnes weorc þrowade,
 leodbealo longsum. Ðu þe lær be þon,
 gumcyste ongit; ic þis gid be þe
 awræc wintrum frod. (1709b–24a)

[*Heremod* was not so to the sons of *Ecgwela*, the noble *Scyldings*: he did not bring gladness but gloom to them, destruction and death to the Danes. Swollen-minded, he would slaughter friends at the table and allies at his shoulder, until that mighty lord, alone, turned away from the joys of men – even though almighty *God* had furthered him, exalted him in strength above all other men. Yet bloodthirstiness

grew in his breast-hoard. He did not in his judgement deal out rings to the Danes. Joyless he dwelt, endured this distress, for the long-lasting hurt he'd inflicted. You must learn from this, recognise the right way! I, wise in winters, have recited this speech about you.]

Having examined the hilt and seen an alien history that he cannot rightly read or resolve, Hrothgar is warning Beowulf against becoming monstrous to future generations who will read his story. It is no coincidence that 'Heremod's fate, to turn away in lonely exile from the joys of men, recalls that of Grendel himself, the more so since his exile takes place among giants'.⁴⁷ The warning looks forward in time, as well as back, since Heremod's refusal to deal out rings to Danes foreshadows the *wyrm* Beowulf will encounter, which likewise hoards gold and other things to the benefit of no one (2275–7). This is not the only way in which the speech seems to stand outside of time, for the very thing that Hrothgar is advising Beowulf against has, in fact, already occurred. Beowulf has already become excessively monstrous to those who read him, as exemplified by the numerous 'intimate links' between the hero and his inhuman foes.⁴⁸ Perhaps this is what Hrothgar means when he says that he makes the speech 'for' or even 'about' him (*ic þis gid be þe awræc*). Thus Hrothgar is warning Beowulf against becoming monstrous to future readers within a text that has already carried out this work.

Of course, this speech was itself provoked by a thing that is out of time and place within the community of Heorot. In a similar vein, Brown comments on how inanimate objects, released from their functionality, can make us rethink the temporality of the animate world. An example he uses is that of Oldenburg's Typewriter Eraser, and in particular the 'pleasure of listening to the child who, befuddled by an anachronistic object she never knew, pleads: "What is that thing supposed to be?" What is this disk with the brush sticking out of it? What was a typewriter? How did that form ever function?' This plea 'expresses the power of this particular work to dramatize a generational divide and to stage (to melodramatize, even) the question of obsolescence'. In a time when the typewriter eraser has disappeared into the delete function, Oldenburg's objects seem to ask how 'the future of your present' will ever 'understand our rhetoric of inscription, erasure, and the trace?'⁴⁹ The hilt in *Beowulf* carries with it a similar sort of power. The sword that has lost its blade, its cutting edge, comments on the anachronism and obsolescence of a bygone 'heroic' age: we may well ask how that form ever functioned.

But more than this, its very inscrutability (what is that thing meant to be, and what is it trying to say?) embodies a concern over how stories of the present are conveyed to future audiences and, specifically, how histories may be transformed by the kinds of artefacts that carry them. The suggestion here is that unreadable, irresolvable things can disrupt a longstanding human reliance upon legibility, altering the way we interpret that which has come before us. By killing the ‘reader’ in the form of Æschere, Grendel’s mother provoked an anxiety about things that resist human interpretation. The giants’ sword found in her underwater hall prolongs this anxiety. Its presence makes Æschere’s absence even more conspicuous. As an unnamed artefact, found outside of the circle of song and light, the hilt is a thing that dwells on the margins of a human community and fails to fulfil its role as either a weapon of war or a readable object. Instead, the hilt breaks out of the poem to work as a self-conscious literary device, inviting the reader of *Beowulf* to ask how the future of their own present will read and make sense of them. An answer may be detected in Hrothgar’s reading of the hilt: the future will look at the things we leave behind and read us, too, as alien, monstrous, other or even unknowable altogether.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this chapter appeared as James Paz, ‘Æschere’s Head, Grendel’s Mother and the Sword That Isn’t a Sword: Unreadable Things in *Beowulf*, *Exemplaria*, 25:3 (2013), 231–51.
- 2 See Sherman M. Kuhn, ‘Old English Aglæca–Middle Irish Oclach’, in Irmengard Rauch and Gerald F. Carr (eds), *Linguistic Method: Essays in Honour of Herbert Penzl* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), pp. 213–30; Helen Damico, ‘The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature’, in Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (eds), *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 176–89.
- 3 Howe, ‘Cultural Construction’, p. 61.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 62; see also Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).
- 5 ‘Æschere’, in Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England, www.pase.ac.uk.
- 6 According to the TDOE.
- 7 Kevin Kiernan, ‘Grendel’s Heroic Mother’, *In Geardagum*, 6 (1984), 13–33, at 24–5.
- 8 Alexandra Olsen, ‘The Aglæca and the Law’, *American Notes and Queries*, 20 (1982), 66–8.

- 9 See Klaeber's *Beowulf*, p. 395.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 423, 425.
- 11 Michael Alexander (trans.), *Beowulf: A Verse Translation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973); Seamus Heaney (trans.), *Beowulf: A Bilingual Edition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999); Dick Ringler (trans.), *Beowulf: A New Translation for Oral Delivery* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007).
- 12 Bosworth-Toller.
- 13 Felix Liebermann, *The National Assembly in the Anglo-Saxon Period* (New York: Franklin, 1961), p. 7.
- 14 Howe, 'Cultural Construction', pp. 63–4.
- 15 See, for example, Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), pp. 30–1.
- 16 Notably, J. R. R. Tolkien in 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', in Lewis E. Nicholson (ed.), *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963).
- 17 Jane Chance, 'The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel's Mother', in Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (eds), *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 248–61, at 248.
- 18 In addition to Tolkien, see Adrien Bonjour, 'Grendel's Dam and the Composition of *Beowulf*', *English Studies*, 30 (1949), 113–24.
- 19 Alexander (trans.), *Beowulf*, p. 90; Howell D. Chickering (trans.), *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition* (New York: Anchor, 2006), p. 121; Heaney (trans.), *Beowulf*, p. 89.
- 20 Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, p. 29.
- 21 Christine Alfano, 'The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother', *Comitatus*, 23 (1992), 1–16, at 12.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Gillian R. Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in "Beowulf"* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), p. 81.
- 24 Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, p. 75.
- 25 Alfano, 'Feminine Monstrosity', p. 8.
- 26 On the importance of Grendel's mother, see also John D. Niles, 'Ring Composition and the Structure of *Beowulf*', *PMLA*, 94:5 (1979), 924–35; Jacqueline Vaught, 'Beowulf: The Fight at the Centre', *Allegorica*, 5 (1980), 125–37; and, more recently, Paul Acker, 'Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*', *PMLA*, 121 (2006), 702–16.
- 27 Shari Horner, *The Discourse of Enclosure: Representing Women in Old English Literature* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), pp. 81–2.
- 28 Gillian R. Overing, 'Beowulf on Gender', *New Medieval Literatures*, 12 (2010), 1–22, at 3–4.
- 29 Renée R. Trilling, 'Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again', *Parergon*, 24:1 (2007), 1–20, at 20.

- 30 See Exeter Book Riddles 1, 2 and 42 for examples.
- 31 Text is taken from Dorothy Whitelock (ed.), *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 5.
- 32 Ringler usefully summarises these exchanges in the introduction to his translation, p. xxxix.
- 33 Leslie Lockett, 'The Role of Grendel's Arm in Feud, Law, and the Narrative Strategy of *Beowulf*', in Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe and Andy Orchard (eds), *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 368–88, at 372.
- 34 Bill Griffiths, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic* (Frithgarth: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1996), p. 41.
- 35 For an excellent discussion of the symbolic and political implications of the king's severed (and later restored) head, see James W. Earl, 'Violence and Non-Violence in Anglo-Saxon England: Ælfric's "Passion of St. Edmund"', *Philological Quarterly*, 78 (1999), 125–49.
- 36 Ælfric of Eynsham, 'Life of St Edmund', in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. W. W. Skeat, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 318–20.
- 37 Howe, 'Cultural Construction', pp. 63–4.
- 38 Seth Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 22.
- 39 Harman, *Tool-Being*, pp. 126–7.
- 40 Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 4.
- 41 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 3.
- 42 Allen J. Frantzen, 'Writing the Unreadable *Beowulf*', in Eileen A. Joy and Mary K. Ramsey (eds), *The Postmodern Beowulf: A Critical Casebook* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2006), pp. 91–129, at 107–9.
- 43 Cf. Leslie Webster, 'Archaeology and *Beowulf*', in Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson (eds), *Beowulf: An Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 183–94.
- 44 Overing, 'Beowulf on Gender', p. 20.
- 45 Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, p. 177.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- 47 Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, p. 48.
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 32–3.
- 49 Brown, 'Thing Theory', pp. 15–16.