Secrecy and the Hermeneutic Potential in *Beowulf*

BENJAMIN A. SALTZMAN

Ne sceal þær dyrne sum.

Nothing shall be secret. (*Beowulf*, line 271b)[1]

BUT THERE ARE SECRETS IN *BEOWULF*—OR AT LEAST SOME SEMblances of secrecy. One could, for instance, point to the reticent elements of the poem's style, as does Fred C. Robinson's seminal study of the poem's use of apposition, which is "especially rich in implicit meaning" and creates "the impression of restraint and reticence in the poet's voice" (4, 18).[2] One could point to the poem's numerous digressions and implied backstories, which, according to James W. Earl, haunt the poem with "unconscious meanings that the text represses" and form "its deep, uninterpretable silences" ("Forbidden *Beowulf*" 303; "*Beowulf*" 260). Or in a more traditional approach, one could point to the way scholars since the nineteenth century have embarked on what John D. Niles regards as the "quest for secret meaning" in the search for mythological and historical analogues and sources (216). One could point to scholars like Margaret E. Goldsmith, whose exegetical readings are interested in the "different kinds of hidden meaning latent in the poem" (3), or to the much more recent work of Helen Damico, who reads *Beowulf* as a political allegory, which "often does not reveal its hidden meaning" (23). Or we might just conclude with Andy Orchard that the "poem's mysteries" are somehow "beyond criticism" (*Critical Companion* 264). Yet in spite of our inevitable scholarly attraction to those mysteries, silences, secrecies of the poem, little do we actually understand how secrecy itself, as a culturally contingent concept, functions in the poem, let alone in the Anglo-Saxon society that produced it.

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Nowhere in the poem is secrecy as fraught as when Beowulf arrives on the Danish coast. "No her cuðlicor cuman ongunnon / lindhæbbende" ("Never have warriors come here more openly"; 244–45a), proclaims the coast warden to the Geatish troops, and yet he remains suspicious of their motives and intentions, demanding that they disclose their lineage lest they be considered "leassceaweras" ("spies"; 253a): appearances can certainly be deceiving ("næfne him his wlite leoge" ["unless his looks belie him"]; 250b). Beowulf responds diplomatically, describing his lineage as requested and then volunteering his purpose but not before assuring the coast warden of his commitment to transparency: "Ne sceal þær dyrne sum / wesan, þæs ic wene" ("Nothing shall be secret, I should expect"; 271b–72a). But Beowulf's journey itself is already tinged with some uncertainty, a venture undertaken on mere rumors of a monster. Looking to the coast warden for confirmation, Beowulf continues:

> [Þ]u wast, gif hit is
> swa we soþlice secgan hyrdon,
> þæt mid Scyldingum sceaðona ic nat hwylc,
> deogol dædhata deorcum nihtum
> eaweð þurh egsan uncuðne nið,
> hynðu on hrafyl. (272b–77a)
>
> You would know if it is truly as we have heard tell, that among the Scyldings some enemy (I know not what kind), a secret evildoer, appears through horrible, unknown violence in the dark nights, disgrace and slaughter.

Working backward, we see one thing clearly: little is known about this monster, other than that he manifests his terrible, secretive, unknown violence in the darkness of night. We also learn that news of this "deogol dædhata" ("secret evildoer") has spread abroad and that Beowulf assumes the coast warden would have more reliable, perhaps even firsthand knowledge ("þu wast"). The shuffle between the secrecy of the monster, Grendel, and the various ways human beings might come to encounter him—through the spread of news ("secgan hyrdon"), through the monster's violent manifestations ("eaweð"), through personal experience ("þu wast")—is a contorted reflection of the coast warden's interactions with Beowulf, who appears on the shore so openly and yet must still renounce any possibility of secrecy. As we will see, openness and concealment are frequently pitted against each other in the course of the poem: here, Beowulf's open arrival ("cuðlicor") and Grendel's unknown violence ("uncuðne nið") make that opposition especially apparent. Openness becomes clearly valued; concealment, clearly intolerable.

However, sometimes such concealment is treated as inevitable and beyond the control of human agents. In those instances, we find strategies of examination and discovery in the poem's narrative that admit and even embrace the limits of human interpretation. Fully realized, these strategies challenge our methods of reading the poem (whether the formalism of Robinson or the psychoanalytic approaches of Earl, to take two starkly different, but influential, examples that posit some kind of textual concealment or reticence) and erode the agency required in laying claim to its hidden meanings. Given the recent concern in literary studies over the virtues and reliability of textual surfaces and depths, as well as the preoccupation with the relative closeness and distance of analysis, a turn to how the poem represents secrecy and hermeneutic examination adds another dimension to these shifting views on the task of literary criticism. Ultimately, recognizing these hermeneutic strategies and the modes of concealment that they address allows us to ask an important question: How can we—as scholars reading texts from the past, texts that to us carry their own secrets by virtue of their temporal distance and cultural alterity—take into account the interpretive logic built into the literatures that we encounter?[3]

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Epistemological Limits and the Vocabulary of Secrecy

Beowulf begins with a funeral. As Scyld Scefing, the ancestral and honorable king of the spear-Danes, is ceremonially sent off to sea, the poet finds an opportunity to reflect on our collective ignorance:

> Men ne cunnon
> secgan to soðe, selerædende,
> hæleð under heofenum, hwa þæm
> hlæste onfeng. (50b–52)
>
> Men do not know how truly to tell—neither hall advisers, nor heroes under the heavens—who took hold of that cargo.

By acknowledging from the start what cannot be known, *Beowulf* posits a past against the limits of human knowledge and the limits of its own narrative. The poem glances back to "geardagum" ("the days of yore"; 1b) and sparks a persistent negotiation between a pagan past, the Christian present of the poem, and an unknowable future.[4] Epistemology, among other things, undergoes a drastic change in the poem's present moment of Christianity, a change that bears on the past and the future: if those who sent Scyld's vessel out to sea could not know who might receive it, then at least (from the poet's perspective) Christianity might afford us the language to imagine and narrate the various eschatological possibilities of his journey (Osborn 974).[5] But even if we understand death as a profound unknown, what is unknown—at least to anglophone readers of the twenty-first century—is not necessarily secret. To us, secrecy tends to imply a deliberate act of epistemological concealment, an act of keeping certain knowledge from others.[6] But to the Anglo-Saxons, there was greater semantic fluidity between the unknown and the secret, fluidity intensified by their belief in God's omniscience: if God knows all human secrets and those secrets are fundamentally unknowable to human beings, then whatever is unknown to human beings (such as the afterlife) must be known and concealed in some way by God.[7] To be sure, this description oversimplifies the theology and, more important, the ways this theology penetrates into the human experience of concealment during the period (for instance, in the possibility that one's secrets could be revealed by God at any moment up to and including the Last Judgment, at which point they would be revealed to everyone).[8] Part of our assumption is, I think, informed by modernity's separation of public and private that Michael McKeon charts in his magisterial study of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century emergence of domesticity, which seems not to have been as influenced by contemporaneous beliefs about divine omniscience. If it was, he makes no mention of it.[9] Even in its simplest form, therefore, this Anglo-Saxon theology of divine omniscience breaches that boundary between public and private, concealed and unconcealed. It requires us to readjust our assumptions about how secrecy works, which we can do by looking briefly at two particular Old English terms.

Typically glossed as "secret," *digol* and *dyrne* are semantically versatile words; they move between various senses of secrecy and concealment, from the unknown and invisible to the mysterious and cloaked to the obscure and remote.[10] Their semantic territory is further enlarged by corresponding words in other parts of speech (such as the verbs *bediglan* and *dyrnan*). Although *digol* is the only term used to describe divine aspects of secrecy, such as the mystery of God (perhaps generally implying a stronger form of secrecy), it can be difficult to discern the discrete senses of these terms, especially when they are paired alliteratively ("Dīgol, Adj.," defs. 3.c and 3.d). The poem *Maxims II*, for example, ends with an anticipation of the Last Judgment:

> Metod ana wat
> hwyder seo sawul sceal syððan
> hweorfan
> . . . . . .

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Is seo forðgesceaft
digol and dyrne; drihten ana wat.
(*ASPR* 6: 57b–58, 61b–62)[11]

The Ruler alone knows where the soul must subsequently go. . . . The future is secret and concealed; the Lord alone knows it.

From this unequivocally Christian perspective, the poetic word *forðgesceaft* ("future") describes the secret and concealed future after death (though known, certainly, to God); in *Beowulf*, the same word describes the fate that greedy rulers tend to "forgyteð ond forgymeð" ("forget and disregard"; 1751a) when they hoard worldly wealth. A difference of perspective leads to the same conclusion: the future is unknown whether divinely concealed or regally ignored. Indeed, that future is the same future that Scyld journeys into at the start of the poem and that Beowulf faces at its end.

What comes after death is clearly unknowable (*uncuð*), but in Old English poetry death takes on three distinct forms of secrecy.[12] The first is biblical: the arrival of death is secretive, for it will come as a "þeof þristlice, þe on þystre fareð, / on sweartre niht" ("terrible thief, who fares about in the dark, in the black night"; *Christ III* [*ASPR* 3: 871–72a]).[13] The second emphasizes the silence that death demands of its victims, as in the *Soul and Body* poems where savage worms tear apart the body's tongue ("Bið seo tunge totogen on tyn healfe" ["the tongue is torn in ten pieces"]; *ASPR* 3: 108) so that it can no longer "wordum wrixlan" ("exchange words"; *ASPR* 3: 110a). And the third communicates the fact that graves conceal the bodies of the dead. To us, this connection is apparent in the etymology of *encryption* and *crypt* (both from Greek κρύπτω).[14] In Old English, the connection is implied, for instance, by *heolstor*: a covering that often connotes darkness, especially the darkness of an earthen grave, two prominent examples of which occur in *The Wanderer* (*ASPR* 3: 23a) and *Judith* (*ASPR* 4: 121a). This secrecy of tombs is distinctly confirmed by the description of Christ's resurrection in *The Panther*:

[O]nd þy þriddan dæge
of *digle* aras, þæs þe he deað fore us
þreo niht þolade. (*ASPR* 3: 61b–63a)

On the third day he arose from the *secret* [i.e., place of concealment, tomb], because he suffered death for us three nights before.

Christ's state of death and his tomb are metonymically characterized as a secret ("digle") from which he has broken free.[15] This odd usage of the word works here because the scene of resurrection is so familiar. In *Beowulf*, the link between entombment and secrecy is merely anticipatory. Before his fight with Grendel, Beowulf thus announces:

Na þu minne þearft
hafalan *hydan*, ac he me habban wile
dreore fahne, gif mec deað nimeð.
(445b–47)

There will be no need for you to *hide* my head, but he will have done so to me, gory and bloodstained, if death takes me.

Beowulf survives, of course. And Grendel is the one who becomes concealed:

Deaðfæge *deog* siððan dreama leas
in fenfreoðo feorh alegde,
hæþene sawle; þær him hel onfeng.
(850–53)[16]

The one fated to die *has been concealed* when, without joys, he laid down his life in his fenlair, his heathen soul; there hell seized him.

In both passages, death (or hell) seizes (or has the potential to seize) its victims: *niman* (the infinitive of "nimeð") and *onfon* (the infinitive of "onfeng") are verbs often associated with theft. In this way, death thus conceals (*hydan* and *diglian*, the infinitive of "deog") its victims.

From the start, then, the poem grapples with the limits of human knowledge through

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various scenes of death, anticipating Beowulf's eventual demise and the building of his funerary monument in the final lines of the poem: the barrow that would contain the hero's ashes would be "heah and brad, / wegliðendum wide gesyne" ("high and broad, widely visible to sailors along the way"; 3157b–58).[17] As a "becn" ("beacon"; 3160a) for those who journey by sea, the distinctly visible barrow thus inverts the unknown destination of Scyld's posthumous sea journey. But this beacon of visibility is preceded by several other unknowns. Scyld's journey is only the first (Orchard, *Critical Companion* 238–39).

Another comes with the introduction of Grendel: "men ne cunnon / hwyder helrunan hwyrftum scriþað" ("men do not know whither such demons roam around"; 162b–63). As with Scyld's posthumous destination, men likewise cannot know the whereabouts of those "helrunan" (hellish and secretive creatures, or perhaps creatures privy to the mysteries of hell: it is an ambiguous term) who inhabit the "mistige moras" ("misty moors"; 162a) and who are so peripherally central to the poem. *Run*, as Christine E. Fell has demonstrated, often implies *mysterium* in a Christian sense of sacred knowledge (211–14).[18] Here it is compounded with *hel-* to invert that sense: a *helrune* is a hellish creature who escapes the intellectual grasp of men and is at odds—both violent and rhetorical—with the hall counselors who sit "to rune" ("in confidential council"; 172a) yet cannot shed light on the mystery.[19] In considering "ræd" ("advice"; 172b), the counselors share with Scyld's "selerædende" ("hall advisers"; 51b) a struggle to discern what cannot be known. The emergence of monsters from their misty hiding places only gives the counselors a more urgent reason to try.

Monstrous Secrecy

The *Beowulf* poet would have likely appreciated Kant's maxim that "heimliche und hinterlistige Feind erscheint weitniederträchtiger, als die offenbahre Bosheit" ("secret and cunning enmity appears far baser than open malevolence"; *Vorlesungen* 436; *Lectures* 194), for the poet apparently knew the terror that such a concealed enemy—each of the poem's monsters embodies some form of secrecy—could wreak on the imagination of his characters and his audience.[20]

We have just seen how Grendel is associated with those "helrunan" who inhabit the moors in "sinnihte" ("perpetual darkness"; 161b). We have likewise seen Beowulf regard Grendel as a "deogol dædhata" ("secret evildoer") whose "uncuðne nið" ("unknown violence") manifests in the "deorcum nihtum" ("dark nights"). Indeed, Grendel's raids are always nocturnal—"sweartum nihtum" ("dark nights"; 167b), "wanre niht" ("dark night"; 702b), and so forth—concealed by darkness that accentuates their terror and contributes to their sense of criminality, especially if we hold them to the early medieval legal distinction between murder and manslaughter: murder is committed in secret; manslaughter, openly.[21] This distinction later arises, for instance, in *Egils Saga* when King Eirik refuses to have Egil killed at night, "því at náttvíg eru morðvíg" ("because night-slaying is murder-slaying"; Nordal 181). Obviously, Grendel has no such reservations, each night committing more slaughter than before: "*morð*beala mare" ("a greater murder"; 136a). Attempting to disentangle secrecy from the definition of *morð* ("murder"), Bruce R. O'Brien argues that the term generally refers either to a killing that cannot be compensated (*botleas*) or to one that entails treachery. But far from ruling out the connection to secrecy, the uncompensated or treacherous nature of *morð* links it directly back to secrecy in the poem. Not only does the system of compensation depend on the manifestation of a crime, but we are also told that from Grendel "nænig witena wenan þorfte / beorhtre *bote*" ("none of the counselors needed to expect bright compen-

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sation"; 157–58a). The concealed and nocturnal nature of Grendel's crimes contrasts with the metaphorically bright compensation the counselors could have expected had Grendel acted in daylight. As for treachery, Beowulf himself refers to treacherous killing as something done "dyrnum cræfte" ("with secret cunning"; 2168a)—something we might compare with the insidious enmity that Kant perhaps had in mind. Grendel's deeds, concealed by darkness, thus evoke the terror of the unknown and a category of violence disruptive to the social order because the violent deeds can be neither anticipated nor redressed insofar as they remain concealed.

This criminality of concealment is further evident in Grendel's lineage from "Caines cynne" ("the kin of Cain"; 107a), which many scholars read as a Christianized explanation of Grendel's exile.[22] After all, the poet explicitly states that "metod for þy mane mancynne fram" ("for that crime, the Ruler [forced] him far from mankind"; 110). Cain, however, is also "morþre gemearcod" ("marked by murder"; 1264a), and that epithet reflects not only the treacherous nature of his crime and punishment but also his secrecy. In his commentary on Genesis 4.8, Bede thus emphasizes the location of Cain's fratricide:

> [P]erfidia uero cain, in eo quod occisurus fratrem foras ducit, quasi in loco secretiori diuinam possit declinare praesentiam, non recogitans neque intellegens quia qui occulta cordis sui quae redarguit nouerat, etiam quo ipse secederet quid ue in abdito gereret posset intueri. (*In Genesim* 76–77)
>
> Cain's treachery is in fact that he leads his brother, whom he is about to kill, outside to a more remote place, as if he might be able to avoid the divine presence, without recognizing or understanding that He who knew the secrets of his heart had observed those things which he denied, and could also observe the place where he withdrew himself and what he was carrying out in secret.[23]

By this logic, Cain's crime is undergirded and exacerbated by his fundamental misunderstanding of the divine presence and his fruitless attempt to conceal the deed from God. Not only is Grendel similarly pitted against God—he is "Godes andsacan" ("God's adversary"; 786b), in one of many instances—but his secrecy is also characterized by a similar emphasis on its location. In response to Cain's attempt to withdraw "quasi in loco secretiori," God punishes Cain with exile; inheriting the consequences of Cain's deed, Grendel must in turn inhabit a remote place, a *locus secretus*.

Throughout *Beowulf*, the poet emphasizes the secret places held by monsters. Men do not know "hwyder" ("where"; 163a) they roam about; Grendel flees in defeat to his dark hiding place ("heolster"; 755b); he and his mother inhabit a "dygel lond" ("secret land"; 1357b).[24] Similarly, the dragon—Beowulf's final adversary—resides in a "dryhtsele dyrnne" ("secret hall"; 2320a), and he likewise raids during the "deorcum nihtum" (2211a). Traditionally, serpents and *wyrmas* (the Old English word for dragons, snakes, and worms) tend to occupy *loci secreti* ("remote places").[25] For example, in the *Liber monstrorum* ("Book of Monsters"), a text with several connections to *Beowulf*, the serpentine Chelydri are said to "glaream ruris pro latebris . . . sectantur" ("search the gravel of the countryside for hiding places"; "*Liber monstrorum*" 312). And for Isidore of Seville, snakes earned their name (*serpens*) from the way they "occultis accessibus serpit" ("slither in hidden approaches"; *Etymologiarum*, vol. 2, bk. 12, ch. 4, par. 3).[26]

These creatures are defined by the spaces they inhabit. Both Bede (in depicting Cain) and the *Beowulf* poet (in depicting the monsters) draw on a prevalent Anglo-Saxon assumption that criminals tend to behave secretly in forests, fields, and other remote places. Take, for example, law 20 from the code of Ine, king of Wessex (688–726): "Gif feorcund mon oððe fremde butan wege geond wudu gonge 7 ne hrieme ne horn blawe, for

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ðeof he bið to profianne: oððe to sleanne oððe to aliesanne" ("If a foreigner or stranger travels beyond the road, through the forest, and he does not ring a bell or blow a horn, he is to be proved a thief to be slain or put to ransom"; "Ine" 98). Regardless of whether this particular law had prescriptive force when *Beowulf* was written and circulated, its underlying logic would have resonated: that furtiveness alone could prove (*profian*) someone a thief seems extreme (especially when punishable by death), but such a law rests on a strong cultural link between theft and secrecy. Isidore of Seville thus defines theft (*furtum*) as "rei alienae clandestina contrectatio, a furvo, id est fusco vocatum, quia in obscuro fit" ("the secret handling of another's property, derived from 'black' [*furvus*]—that is, 'dark' [*fuscus*], because it takes place in secret"; *Etymologiarum*, vol. 1, bk. 5, ch. 26, para. 18).[27] Or as *Maxims II* gnomically puts it, "Þeof sceal gangan þystrum wederum" ("A thief must go about in dark conditions"; *ASPR* 6: 52a). With his characteristic "dyrnan cræfte" ("secret craft"; 2290a), a thief awakens the dragon at the end of *Beowulf*, as he steals from the secret hoard of treasure, "gehydde" ("hidden"; 2235b, 3059b) there by the last survivor and guarded by the dragon.[28] Yet no matter how concealed they once were, the treasure and the dragon's secret hall will eventually be discovered, breached by the thief's stealthy exploit.

Hroðgar's Secret Longing

We know that Anglo-Saxon poets often imagined the mind as a figurative treasure hoard of thoughts (Mize, "Manipulations" and "Representation"). But if such a hoard was also thought vulnerable to discovery (as the case of the dragon in *Beowulf* suggests), then the mind's capacity to conceal and contain its thoughts must be similarly vulnerable. As Beowulf departs from Denmark, Hroðgar, the Danish king, seems to experience that mental vulnerability:

> Gecyste þa cyning æþelum god,
> þeoden Scyldinga, ðegn betestan
> ond be healse genam; hruron him tearas
> blondenfeaxum. Him wæs bega wen
> ealdum infrodum, oþres swiðor,
> þæt hie seoððan no geseon moston,
> modige on meþle. Wæs him se man to þon leof
> þæt he þone breostwylm forberan ne mehte,
> ac him on hreþre hygebendum fæst
> æfter deorum men dyrne langað
> born wið blode. (1870–80a)
>
> Then the king, good with respect to his nobility, the lord of the Scyldings, kissed that best thane and held him by the neck; tears poured out from him, the gray-haired one. For the old and very wise man, there was an expectation of both possibilities—but one was greater—that they might not see each other after this, noble-minded in council. That man was so dear to him that he could not restrain his breast welling. However, in his heart, fastened with the bonds of his mind, his secret longing for the dear man burned against his blood.[29]

As he bids farewell to Beowulf, Hroðgar puts on a powerful display of affective and psychological agitation. The internal experience of his "secret longing" somehow becomes externalized. This sense of movement between the internal and the external is energized by the wrenching series of prepositions that runs throughout the passage—"be," "on," "to," "æfter"—culminating in the ambiguous "wið," which could just as easily mean "into" (e.g., Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies* 82) or "against" (as I maintain below). The intensity is magnified by the verbs of force and resistance: "hruron" ("fell"), "forberan" ("resist"), and "born" ("burned"). And the force of those verbs is suspended by two central instances of "wæs" ("Him wæs" and "Wæs him"), which fortify the otherwise chaotic scene. But underlying these rhetorical manifestations of Hroðgar's agitation is a profound tension between the king's secret longing ("dyrne lan-

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gað") on the one hand and his externalized tears ("hruron him tearas") on the other.

How, many have wondered, could Hroðgar maintain some "secret longing" if that longing is betrayed by the visibility of his tears?[30] I suggest that this tension reveals another important distinction between Anglo-Saxon ideas about secrecy and our own. Indeed, we tend to assume that secrecy is governed by the individual, that a secret is a possession one can effectively "keep," and this assumption has interfered with our understanding of Hroðgar's lamentation. We assume that because Hroðgar has a "secret longing" he must also have complete control over that longing; we assume, in other words, that Hroðgar succeeds at concealing his longing despite his tears: hence, the contradiction.[31] What if secrecy, for the *Beowulf* poet, was a much more passive category of experience? What if the tears are simply a physiological manifestation of that secret longing? What if Hroðgar's control over both is limited?[32] What if, like the treasure in *Beowulf*, hidden secrets cannot forever remain hidden? And what if an exposed secret is still ontologically a secret?

Let us begin from the outside—with the tears that betray Hroðgar's secret. The shedding of those tears is expressed with the verb *hreosan*, which generally describes movements of descent. But in poetic contexts it also tends to connote natural and inevitable descents, particularly with respect to bad weather and death. In *The Wanderer*, storms cause "hrið hreosende" ("falling frost"; *ASPR* 3: 102a), while in the opening lines of *The Phoenix*, paradise is where "ne hægles hryre" ("hail never falls"; *ASPR* 3: 16a). The storm metaphor evoked by Hroðgar's tears seems appropriate enough, if only to emphasize the tempestuousness of his feelings. But in *The Phoenix*, *Guthlac B*, and *Andreas*, the formulaic phrase "lices hryre" also describes a different kind of fall: death as the "falling of the body" (*ASPR* 3: 645a; 3: 829b, 1093a; 2: 229a). This sense is clearly favored by the *Beowulf* poet, for whom the dragon's defeat is marked by his "hreas on hrusan" ("fall to the ground"; 2831a): death paradoxically exposes his secret hoard of treasure. Furthermore, in the Finn episode, warriors "hie on gebyrd hruron" ("fell in accordance with their fate"; 1074b), and in a nearly identical construction, when Beowulf's troop appears at the mere, the swarming monsters are forced to "hie on weg hruron" ("fall back [i.e., retreat] according to their way"; 1430b).[33] *Hreosan* is a fairly common word, but these examples suggest that it extinguishes Hroðgar's command over his tears, which are as naturalistic as a storm and as fateful as death. Either way, the grammar of the line is in agreement: he does not weep; rather, tears fall from him.

Hroðgar's tears have been variously interpreted as a reason to "widen our conception of the pattern of feelings in heroic life" (Chickering 348), as a "sign of his authority in Heorot" (Mills 172), and inversely as a symptom of his "distinctly non-heroic" impotence compared with Beowulf's "masculine power and status" (Dockray-Miller 19, 16). The peculiar reference in the passage to his "secret longing" has played a central role in these discussions. Part of Mary Dockray-Miller's argument, for example, depends on emphasizing "the emotion of the scene" (23), which she does by placing Hroðgar at the center of the action and reading "langað" as a verb ("longed") rather than a noun ("longing").[34] Dockray-Miller suggests that "the usual grammatical construction de-personalizes the 'longing' and lessens the emotional effect: 'the longing burned.' The more active, immediate translation of 'the warrior desires' conveys a more subject[ive], emotional intensity" (23). Yet no matter how often critics attempt to take Hroðgar as the subject of these clauses, the grammar refuses to comply. In the eight lines after he kisses and embraces Beowulf, Hroðgar is the grammatical subject only once: in the negatively constructed

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subordinate clause "he þone breostwylm forberan ne mehte" ("he could not hold back his breast welling"; 1886). Indeed, in that clause we see Hroðgar's explicit lack of control. In every other clause, Hroðgar is the grammatical object being acted on by forces such as his "tearas" and his "dyrne langað." The instances of the verb "wæs," mentioned above, likewise place "him" in the dative: for him, there was an expectation; to him, Beowulf was so dear. Perhaps this grammar only further confirms Hroðgar's dwindling authority (as king, he should be directing the actions not receiving them),[35] but it also reveals something about secrecy as a psychological phenomenon in the Middle Ages: that it was often thought to act on the individual.

This belief is why Hroðgar's secrecy burns against his blood ("born wið blode"). The burning manifests itself in the tension between the breast welling Hroðgar cannot resist ("breostwylm forberan ne mehte") and the secret longing that he holds fast in his mental bonds ("hygebendum fæst"). These two psychological dimensions force a seemingly impossible paradox, emphasized poetically by the contrastive conjunction ("ac") that separates the two. Leslie Lockett has offered a sophisticated resolution. In her reading, Hroðgar's "breostwylm" does not refer to his tears but rather is an example of what she explains as a hydraulic model of mental activity, which was fundamental to the way Anglo-Saxons understood emotion. According to this model, the "breostwylm" is thus not an outpouring of tears; it is an embodied form of emotion, which can go on boiling while Hroðgar's "hidden longing remains firmly tethered in the breast" (*Anglo-Saxon Psychologies* 83). Although Lockett argues that his longing remains "willfully constrained" (83), I propose one adjustment: the "breostwylm" along with the "tearas" (for the tears must be externalized) are the mechanisms through which Hroðgar's "dyrne langað" becomes legible from the outside, making his secret longing unconcealable in spite of his attempt to conceal it. Even if the tears are separate from the "breostwylm" (the separation is ambiguous), it is still possible for both the tears and Hroðgar's physical self-presentation to betray his secret longing.

An image thus emerges in which Hroðgar's body and secret are subject to a kind of affective torment; his secret works against his own blood in a process visible to those around him as well as, extradiegetically, to the audience of the poem. Here there is a faint, yet illuminating, echo of the logic of the judicial ordeal, a method for extracting testimony in Anglo-Saxon law when the usual methods (such as an oath) were unsatisfactory.[36] This convenient, albeit extreme, practice involved persons whose testimony could not be trusted (such as slaves, thieves, or perjurers); they would undergo a physical test (such as having a wound inflicted, bandaged, and opened three days later to reveal infection or health) designed to reflect the proband's guilt or innocence, respectively.[37] The practice relied on a divine form of juridical intervention, which I do not believe is necessarily operating in Beowulf's farewell scene; however, the practice of the ordeal does make the body present its own innocence or guilt against itself, rendering outwardly visible that which the voice of the proband was likely to conceal. The way Hroðgar's body—his *tearas* and *blod*—forces the revelation of his inner secret recalls the way a criminal's body might reveal that criminal's guilt. In both cases, the psychological secret is made—against one's will—physiologically legible.

Hermeneutic Potential

If secrecy has its own kind of agency, then what heuristic methods might human agents apply when encountering instances of concealment? Sometimes discovery is deliberate, but sometimes it is inadvertent. In *Beowulf*, inadvertent discovery is often represented by *un-*

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dyrne: a rare adjective that appears in *Beowulf* five times—more frequently than anywhere else in the Old English corpus (*Dictionary*). The word seems to mean "not hidden, discovered, revealed, manifest" ("Un-dirne"). But like the passive concealment implied by *dyrne* (as in Hroðgar's "dyrne langað"), *undyrne* also tends to imply passive manifestation by some external force, such as the morning light that reveals Grendel's violence against Heorot:

> Ða wæs on uhtan mid ærdæge
> Grendles guðcræft gumum *undyrne*. (126–27)
>
> Then in the twilight just before dawn, Grendel's war might was made unsecret to men.

Or the tales of that violence spread by seafarers, which are

> ylda bearnum, *undyrne* cuð,
> gyddum geomore. (150–51a)
>
> to the sons of men unsecretly made known, transmitted in sad tales.

This passive manifestation—as formerly unknown violence becomes known to a collectivity of men—is the precondition for hermeneutics as a communal endeavor.

The spread of tales and news is characteristically associated with *undyrne*, as when Beowulf returns to Hygelac and reports his victory over Grendel, whose terrors are by then "undyrne . . . monegum fira" ("unsecret to many men"; 2000a–1b). Even before he defeats Grendel, Beowulf informs Hroðgar that the monster was "on minre eþeltyrf undyrne cuð" ("known, unsecret, to me in my own land"; 410), despite Beowulf's earlier reference to Grendel's "uncuðne nið" ("unknown violence"; 276b). Finally, at the end of the poem, news of Beowulf's death becomes "underne" to the neighboring Franks and the Frisians (2911b). With the spread of news, not only does *undyrne* highlight the communal mode of manifestation (like Hroðgar's "dyrne langað," the secret is always disclosed to a group or multitude), but it also demonstrates the unavoidable nature of that manifestation. The Franks and Frisians would learn of Beowulf's death regardless of whether it was somehow concealed by his people, just as we would learn of Hroðgar's longing regardless of his attempt to contain it.

Even before the spread of news becomes possible, however, a more fundamental, naturalistic, inevitable form of revelation must take place. That such revelation usually happens at dawn is a tendency enriched by a tantalizing pun. On the banks of the Grendel-kin mere, Beowulf's comrades await his return and observe a foreboding number of sea monsters, who

> on *undernmæl* oft bewitigað
> sorhfulne sið on seglrade,
> wyrmas ond wildeor. (1428–30a)
>
> in the morning time often make a sorrowful journey on the sea road, serpents and wild beasts.

Morning is the time when these nocturnally concealed and secretive creatures (a classification noted above) become visible; it is also the time when the affairs of night are uncovered, producing the same "micel morgensweg" ("great morning sorrow"; 129a) that accompanies the discovery of Grendel's slaughters as they become "undyrne" (127b). But here, as a technical term for the time between sunrise and noon (Tupper 160–64; "Undern"), *undernmæl* conjures a subtle pun between its root *undern* ("morning") and *undyrne* ("unsecret"), evoking the morning in its opposition to the night's secrecy and reflecting what may have been an assumed and profound connection between dawn and revelation.[38]

If *undyrne* represents such passive forms of manifestation over which human agents have little control, then the verb *sceawian* ("to look, examine"), which occurs nineteen times in the poem, represents a more active form of

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scrutiny. This active scrutiny becomes the central mode of human engagement with mysterious and hidden objects: it is the hermeneutic agency we have been looking for. Between the morning light that reveals the aftermath of Grendel's violence and the spread of news abroad (both represented by *undyrne*), Grendel's footprints are closely "sceawedon" ("examined"; 132b). The prints are clearly visible, but they remain mysterious, demanding investigation. Similarly, investigation is needed the morning after Grendel has been defeated:

> [F]erdon folctogan feorran ond nean
> geond widwegas wundor *sceawian*,
> laþes lastas. No his lifgedal
> sarlic þuhte secga ænegum
> þara þe tirleases trode *sceawode*. (839–43)
>
> Folk leaders journeyed from far and near throughout the wide ways to examine that wonder, the tracks of the hated one. His parting from life did not seem sad to any of the men who there examined the tracks of the inglorious one.

Here, as elsewhere (983b, 1391b, 1440b, 1687b, etc.), *sceawian* describes the examination of remains (e.g., tracks, pathways, body parts, or treasure) left behind by monsters. What unites these objects of examination is that they are wondrous and mysterious, yet manifestly visible.

If, according to Patricia Dailey, the wondrous invites responsiveness on the part of the observer (452–61), then these objects invite that responsiveness in the form of scrutiny. Grendel's arm is thus a "tacen sweotol" ("clear sign"; 833b) in the morning light, and yet it is later examined as a wonder ("wundor sceawian"; 840b): what changes is not its mysteriousness but the way the community studies it. Unlike the passive manifestation of Grendel's violence evinced by *undyrne*, the examination of his arm and his tracks happens when people travel ("ferdon") to see them in person instead of passively receiving news from abroad. Only once the aftermath is manifest (*undyrne*) can the evidence be subject to such examination (*sceawian*). Once subject to examination, then tales of it can again spread, making the story *undyrne* to others, to those abroad or later generations, perhaps even to those who might someday come to write something along the lines of the following:

> Hwæt, we Gar-Dena in geardagum
> þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon. (1–2)
>
> Listen, we have heard of the glory of the kings of the spear-Danes in days gone by.

The cycle of dissemination and examination (*undyrne* to *sceawian* to *undyrne*) invites hermeneutic scrutiny across geography and history, but that scrutiny at once depends on and enables the passive antithesis of secrecy (*undyrne*). If literature, and particularly narrative forms of it, often rely on tactics of concealment (whether those elucidated by, say, Frank Kermode or Fredric Jameson), then for the *Beowulf* poet, whatever is concealed must—before examination—undergo a natural and inevitable kind of revelation much like the arrival of dawn.

By the end of the poem, instances of *sceawian* proliferate even further. Mortally wounded by the dragon, Beowulf asks to examine the formerly hidden, now unguarded treasure. The examination is triply emphasized, as Beowulf urgently commands Wiglaf, his sole companion, to "hord sceawian" ("examine the hoard"; 2744a) and expresses his desire to "sceawige" ("examine"; 2748b) the ancient treasure himself; just before his death, he "gold sceawode" ("examined the gold"; 2793b). The examination then turns back onto the hero, as Wiglaf urges his cowardly comrades to "sceawian" ("examine"; 3008b) their dying lord. They find him soulless and "wundur sceawian" ("gaze on that wonder"; 3032b), just as they had gazed on the wonder of Grendel's morbid arm (840b) and

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just as they will gaze on the treasure grimly gained: Wiglaf proclaims that the "hord ys gesceawod" ("hoard is inspected"; 3084b) and then invites the warriors to "sceawiað" ("examine"; 3104b) that "wundur under wealle" ("wonder under the wall"; 3103a), as the wonder of the treasure coalesces with that of their dead lord, likewise "wealle beworhton" ("enclosed by a wall"; 3161a).

In the poem's final moments, the dizzying perspectives (Beowulf looks this way; the warriors look that way) leave almost nothing concealed from the human eye. And yet at the center of this scene, Wiglaf reflects on why it has taken so long to discover the hidden treasure in the first place. A vaguely pagan curse had protected the hoard—hidden there by the last survivor, guarded by the dragon—and the poet translates that curse into Christian logic:

> [I]umonna gold galdre bewunden
> þæt ðam hringsele hrinan ne moste
> gumena ænig, nefne God sylfa,
> sigora soðcyning sealde þam ðe he wolde
> —he is manna gehyld— hord openian,
> efne swa hwylcum manna swa him
> gemet ðuhte. (3052–57)
>
> The gold of the ancients was bound with a spell so that the ring hall might not be touched by any man, unless God himself, true king of victories—he is the protector of men—should allow whomever he wished to open the hoard, only the person who seemed right to him.

Regardless of whether we are meant to understand the curse as lifted by God's will or paid for by Beowulf's life, we are not meant to ignore the place of God in this process of opening and examination, a process reconfigured according to the Christian perspective of the poet. *Sceawian* is thus a hermeneutic form of examination, as when "hæl sceawedon" ("omens were inspected"; 204b) to see whether Beowulf should travel to Heorot or when Hroðgar examines the engraved hilt of the sword used to kill Grendel's mother (1687b). But *sceawian* also becomes a crucial process that approaches the mysterious without trying to uncover the meaning beyond what is already manifested (as is sometimes assumed in Hroðgar's reading of the hilt) and instead strives for a humbling kind of interpretive awe over the object itself (the hilt is etched, its texture and design are examined, though its meaning—a scriptural history of the Flood—is only cursorily supplied by the poet).[39] It is a form of examination, in other words, that still partially lies outside the control of the practitioner. For the poet, God becomes the explanation for why *sceawian* sometimes fails and sometimes succeeds. The heroic investigator only has so much say over how it turns out. While other Old English poems might make this point more forcefully (such as Cynewulf's *Elene*, in which Judas may know the secret of the True Cross and Elene may interrogate the Jews ferociously but only God can reveal the precise location of that ultimate treasure [*ASPR* 2: 66–102]), *Beowulf* negotiates the distance between a divinely governed mode of hermeneutics and a heroic one, just as it negotiates the historical and epistemological distance between the Christianity of the present and the paganism of the past.

No Secrets

We can now return to where we began. When the coast warden suspects the Geats of being "leas*sceaweras*" ("spies"; 251a), he unwittingly anticipates the very practice of examination that will later govern interactions between the human beings and their monstrous adversaries. So when Beowulf quells the coast warden's suspicion by insisting that "[n]e sceal þær dyrne sum" ("nothing shall be secret"), he implicitly vows not only to forgo his own secrecy but also to examine and resolve that unknown violence ("uncuðne nið") wreaked nightly on Heorot. However, it is only after the darkness of the night has subsided and the morning has revealed the effects of Grendel's violence

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(making them no longer "uncuðne" but now "undyrne") that such active examination can ensue: of Grendel's arm, of the path to Grendel's kin, of the sword hilt, of the dragon, of the treasure, and finally of Beowulf himself. Despite his keen skills of examination and despite our desire to see Beowulf as a kind of heroic investigator, our hero has little effect in making those secrets manifest. His fight with Grendel takes place amid a darkness so dark we can barely tell the two figures apart: "lað wið laþum" ("foe against foe"; 440a). If Beowulf's vow against secrecy is somewhat impracticable, then perhaps the vow is rather a gnomic statement about the impossibility of secrecy itself,[40] a statement that anticipates the inevitable revelation of Grendel's violence as well as the scene of Beowulf's departure from Heorot. His departure is in many ways an inversion of his arrival, but it also witnesses his denial of secrecy ("ne sceal þær dyrne sum") fulfilled in Hroðgar's failure to contain his own secret longing ("dyrne langað"), as tears fall from his eyes: "nothing shall be secret."[41]

And yet scholars have often tried to uncover *Beowulf*'s secrets, framing our understanding of the poem—its style, its relation to history, its date, its manuscript lacunae, and so forth—either as a heroic task waged against latent referents and mysteries or, more recently and dangerously, as an aggressive calculation of probability against various philological uncertainties. But the secrets of a text—if it has any (and we tend to talk about *Beowulf* as though it does)—must in some way be governed by the logic of secrecy located in the text.

This suggestion brushes up against the issue of historicism, which Anglo-Saxon studies has tended to approach differently from later fields (Howe; Smith). In some ways, this difference reflects the failure of the new historicism in the 1980s to influence scholars of Anglo-Saxon studies the way it did scholars of the later Middle Ages, many of whom remain among its most vigorous and illuminating critics (e.g., Justice, "Literary History"; Strohm; Nolan; Holsinger; Orlemanski). The difference also arises from the nature of the Anglo-Saxon literary corpus, the vast majority of which (like *Beowulf*) is anonymous and of debatable date: these factors are major obstacles to the kinds of historicism we find in early modern or Middle English literary studies. At the same time, few fields are as attuned to the historical nuances of a period as Anglo-Saxon studies has been over the past half century: the expectation is that scholars know the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* as well as they know *Beowulf*, while remaining aware that these are in many ways just as much literary texts as they are sources of historical knowledge. However, if we did have a distinct historicist moment, it came not in the 1980s but a few decades earlier in the form of a historicized approach to interpretation itself (Fulk xvi).

In one of his later essays (still a decade before the advent of new historicism proper), D. W. Robertson, Jr., advocates that texts of the past should be approached "in terms of conventions established at a time contemporary with the works themselves" without denying that such works are still "just as much a part of the present" ("Some Observations" 29–30). Robertson's approach was caricatured and criticized by later historicists for its insistence that medieval texts should be read through a kind of Augustinian exegesis to enable the critic to come as close as possible to the mindset of a medieval reader. Emboldened by this brand of Robertsonianism, many students of *Beowulf* attempted the seemingly impossible technique, plying the poem with distinctly medieval (e.g., allegorical or symbolic) hermeneutic methods.[42] But those methods, we now realize, were too generically medieval. As Steven Justice incisively puts it, Robertson's "disqualification of nonmedieval concepts paradoxically produced generalizing explanation of a peculiarly imperial kind. . . . [I]f you can only talk about the medieval cultural system in medieval terms, the conditions of

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thought become identical with its content and the system with its governing discourse—in this case, Augustine's" ("Who" 611). He argues further that when subsequent historicisms superficially criticized this approach, they fell into the same trap without realizing it; already in 1972, Stanley B. Greenfield had made a similar point, listing its "tendency towards reductiveness" as the most troublesome feature of "the historical approach" (by which he meant Robertsonianism) (9). In the interpretation of *Beowulf*, as elsewhere, exegetical (i.e., medieval, historical) criticism was inevitably displaced by more modern approaches—gender studies, deconstruction, psychoanalytic criticism.[43] We were temporarily liberated from its constraints but remained somewhat paralyzed by Robertson's correct yet often unnoticed recognition that the critic has a burden to account for both past conventions and present attitudes. Despite their connection, the past and the present tend to obfuscate each other, producing the shadows where scholars have tended to locate much of *Beowulf*'s "hidden meaning." Indeed, the poem even seems to anticipate our challenge: much like the poet who speaks of characters oblivious to the poet's Christian perspective and its epistemological tools, we cannot now be expected to dispense with our sophisticated critical methods, distant as they are from the objects on which we put them to use. In fact, the limits of a poem like *Beowulf*—the limits of what we can know for certain about its historical context—offer us a unique opportunity to find not only a germane approach to interpreting the poem but also a link between past and present.

That opportunity can come from a consideration of how the poem presents us with specific hermeneutic assumptions in the way it handles the mechanics of secrecy. If, as Michel de Certeau put it, "the secret is the precondition for hermeneutics" (99), then by reflecting on the text's treatment of secrecy we might come to understand its hermeneutic potential. To be sure, such reflection requires sensitivity to secrecy's cultural and historical contingency, for the notion of secrecy available to the *Beowulf* poet (or to Chaucer or Milton, if the portability of this approach were put to use) was in many ways different from our own and from those of other places and periods: a fuller investigation of Anglo-Saxon ideas about secrecy is certainly needed. Scholars of later periods have already begun to chart this history, whether, for instance, in late medieval approaches to confession (Lochrie, *Covert Operations*), the early modern theatrical tension between outward display and the interiority of truth (Maus), or the emergence of domesticity (McKeon). But until Anglo-Saxon notions of secrecy are also mapped—indeed, as a way to begin that mapping process while avoiding the insularity of New Criticism's self-reflective formalism; as a way, that is, to move from here to there in our literary and historical reading—we might start by prioritizing the gestures and other expressions of secrecy in the literary artifact as sources of hermeneutic guidance. In other words, historicizing interpretive method may be a problem (for it lands us with Robertson at the four senses of Scripture, important though they were); however, as literary criticism now finds itself reacting—and searching for alternatives—to the way historical arguments (whether in the mode of Robertson or, say, Jameson) tended to bestow texts with the very terms used to make sense of those texts, it might be useful to consider seriously the logic of concealment in the texts we study so as to arrive at a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the constraints and opportunities that a given text affords to interpretation.[44]

What we discover in *Beowulf*, then, is that the poem has its own hermeneutic logic that stakes out the limits of epistemological agency. On the one hand, the poem suggests that some things (like Scyld's destiny) are beyond human knowledge. On the other, it suggests that human agency is often

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inadequate both to the act of concealment (Hroðgar cannot conceal his secret longing, just as the last survivor cannot permanently hide his treasure) and to the act of discovery (Grendel is concealed by night; his traces can be examined only in the morning). At the convergence of these two limits, hermeneutic examination becomes possible only once something concealed has been made manifest, as by the light of day.

In the face of this realization, our interpretations of the poem—of any poem—teeter on the brink of insignificance, demanding we humbly accept that making the unknown known sometimes lies entirely out of our control.[45] But our current reactions to the generations of historicism and to symptomatic modes of reading more broadly—as we test alternative theories of, say, distant or surface reading—have inherited from our prey a silent conflation of any distinction between what a work knows but does not tell, what it tells that we cannot hear, and what is simply unknown.

When we speak of *Beowulf*'s secrets, therefore, the connotative influence of those conflated assumptions—which overlook the complex expressions of secrecy in the poem, obstructed as they are by our critical authority—intuitively and subtly shapes our relation to the poem and the outcomes of our readings. And yet the reversal of such assumptions only becomes possible through a rigorous and responsible mode of interpretation that takes up the poem's unfamiliar hermeneutics—which may arise as a governing discourse of the poem or as contested forms of belief in it, possibilities we cannot fully know—and produces enough critical discomfort to foster productive encounters with the inscrutable, not merely the larger inscrutability of God's omniscience but also the much more heterogeneous, immediate, and unquantifiable inscrutability of medieval beliefs and the ways they play out in the texts that we read. The mode of reading I propose is therefore one that systematically incorporates our ignorance and uncertainty by taking its bearings from how the works we study imagine the structure and genesis of ignorance and uncertainty. It invites a critical conversation about the limits of our analysis and changes the way we carry out our investigations. No one would suggest that we do away with the kind of examination and explication that depends on investigative (or, say, philological) skill and prowess, but as it turns out such prowess has only a modest place in relation to the secrets of the past and the future.

Notes

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1. Quotations of *Beowulf* are from the edition presented by Fulk and his coeditors, cited by line. Quotations of other Old English poems are from *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (*ASPR*), cited by volume and line. Unless otherwise noted, emphases and translations from these and all other works in the essay are my own.

2. See also Patterson; Duncan. But note Sisam's suggestion two decades before Duncan that the poem "depended on expression, not on silences, dark hints or subtle irony" (60).

3. Gadamer's hermeneutic that moves between the historical horizon of the text and the present moment of interpretation is similar, but it is not interested in the historically contingent meaning of interpretation itself (302–10).

4. Bolintineanu's "Declarations of Unknowing in *Beowulf*" further explores this theme in the poem.

5. This epistemological tension is famously rendered in Bede's simile of the sparrow: The appearance of the sparrow, which briefly escapes a winter storm by flying through a hearth-warmed hall, is like "this life of man," for "what follows or indeed what went before, we know not at all [*prorsus ignoramus*]" (*Ecclesiastical History* 182–84). According to the story, Christianity offers an opportunity for gaining that knowledge.

6. Bok defines secrecy as "intentional concealment" (5), though she admits an important relation between the unknown and the secret (9–10). Bull offers a helpful taxonomy of hiddenness with respect to various dimensions of perception and recognition: what is unknown is both

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imperceptible and unrecognizable; what is concealed is recognizable but imperceptible; what is disguised is perceptible but unrecognizable (13).

7. This theology is found, for example, in Gregory the Great's discussion of God's knowledge, the limits of human knowledge, and the deceptiveness of the leviathan in his *Moralia in Iob* ("Morals on the Book of Job"; bk. 35, commenting on Job 42.2–3).

8. E.g., *Christ III* (*ASPR* 3: 1045b–48).

9. Lochrie's study of secrecy during the later Middle Ages also makes no mention of God's omniscience (even in its discussion of confessional practices), though Lochrie does note the important correspondence between human forms of secrecy and divine mystery (*Covert Operations* 136). I am by no means implying that people stopped believing in divine omniscience after the Anglo-Saxon period (cf. Nuttall's intriguing study of God as a reader of George Herbert, John Milton, and Dante), but the experience of secrecy seems to have become less governed by that belief and its immediate consequences (as exemplified by the discontinuation of the judicial ordeal in the thirteenth century); Locke's famous statement that "[p]romises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist" suggests a strong argument for the social importance of God as an omniscient arbiter (93), but the fact that Locke had to make that argument hints at the deteriorating effect of the societal belief in divine omniscience.

10. In Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, *dyrne* often glosses Latin words such as *abditus*, *clandestinus*, *obscurus*, and *secretus*; *digol* glosses those and numerous others, including *absconsus*, *arcanus*, *latebrosus*, and *occultatus*.

11. See also *Christ II*, where Christ is a bird whose flight on earth is "dyrne ond degol" (*ASPR* 3: 640a).

12. The strands appear elsewhere in early medieval thought, but I have limited discussion to the Old English poetic corpus.

13. 1 Thess. 5.2 and Matt. 24.42–44 refer to the coming of a thief.

14. The Greek etymology was probably not familiar in Anglo-Saxon England, but the concept was commonplace; e.g., Aldhelm writes of "letiferum Romae draconem in clandistino criptae speleo latitantem" ("the deadly dragon of Rome hiding in the secret den of the crypt"; 303; ch. 25, lines 25–26).

15. Squires suggests "on digle" but does not emend it (66); see also "Dīgol, Noun," def. 2.a.

16. The form "deog" is obscure (Bammesberger proposes an unattested infinitive *dīegan* [137]), but it probably means "concealed" as a rare pluperfect form; see Wardale; Dietz 203–04.

17. On the "elliptical" structure produced by the poem's funerals, see Owen-Crocker 227–28.

18. *Run* has a predominantly Christian sense of mystery (Fell 215–16). Once *mystery* entered the English language, *run* (with the sense of *mysterium*) became semantically redundant and underwent slight pejoration, coming to mean "whisper" or "secret." Fell does not discuss the compound *helrune*; but Fulk and his coeditors do (126).

19. Variations are found elsewhere: *The Wanderer* (*ASPR* 3: 111b), *Andreas* (*ASPR* 2: 1161–62a), *The Gifts of Men* (*ASPR* 3: 72–73a), and *Juliana* (*ASPR* 3: 609b–10a).

20. On the poet's use of terror, see Renoir; Lapidge.

21. Lockett notes that Grendel kills in secret, but when Grendel's mother kills Æschere, she displays his head as a legitimate (because public) requital of her son's death ("Role" 372).

22. E.g., Crawford, "Grendel's Descent" (1928) and "Grendel's Descent" (1929); Mellinkoff; Estes; Williams; Orchard, *Pride* 58–85.

23. For an alternative translation, see Bede, *On Genesis*. Bede is often used to elucidate obscure aspects of the poem: e.g., Orchard, *Pride* 58–64 (on Cain); Harris (on Heorot); Wormald (on the poem's intellectual climate).

24. On the mere as a "poisoned place," see Anlezark, 106–07; on the relation between place names and the remoteness of the mere, see Gelling 8–10.

25. On *wyrm*, see Thompson 132–63; on the dragon's habitat, see Rauer 65.

26. For an alternative translation, see Isidore of Seville, Etymologies 255.

27. For an alternative translation, see Isidore of Seville, Etymologies 123.

28. Andersson considers concealed theft in Icelandic law but not the thief's "dyrnan cræfte" in *Beowulf* (496–98).

29. I follow Fulk and his coeditors in their reading of the text: "dyrne langað" is a noun phrase ("secret longing"; 1879b) and "born" ("burned"; 1880a) is the verb (221). The alternative (Dockray-Miller; Wright) is less widely accepted but has been recently replicated by, for example, Hill (62) and the indispensable *Dictionary of Old English* ("Dyrne"). Dockray-Miller translates it as "secretly the man [Hrothgar] longed with blood" (17) and argues that "beorn" (manuscript spelling) is commonly a noun ("man, warrior") while "langað" is commonly a verb ("to long, yearn") (22–23). Fulk and his coeditors emend "beorn" to "born" (a well-attested form of the verb *byrnan* ["to burn"]), but even without the emendation "beorn" (third-person-singular preterit of *byrnan*) is not unattested: the Old English version of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* translates "ardebat" with the word "beorn" (Bede, *Old English Version* bk. 4, ch. 27, p. 360). Likewise, examining all the variants of "langað" (e.g., "longað" and "langoðe") reveals five additional occurrences as a noun: *Deor* (*ASPR* 3: 3b), *The Wife's Lament* (*ASPR* 3: 53a), *Guthlac A* (*ASPR* 3: 316a, 330a, and 359a). Moreover, the preposition *wið* commonly accompanies the verb *byrnan* (e.g., *Beowulf* 2673a) but never *langian*.

30. The question began with Wright 42–43. See also Mills 174–75; Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies* 83.

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31. Mills, for instance, suggests that Hroðgar's sorrow "is not the passive, helpless grief he felt at Æschere's death; it is decorous, restrained" (175).

32. Clemoes suggests that Anglo-Saxons understood emotions as "essentially a force outside the individual, acting on him (or her) of their own accord or cooperated with by him/her as an act of will" (365).

33. The meaning is oblique: *weg* carries a literal sense of "footpath" but also the figurative sense of "a predetermined course" (in parallel with "gebyrd" ["fate"; 1074b]); see "Weg."

34. For philological details, see note 29 above.

35. Compare with Scyld Scefing, who was at first "feasceaft funden" ("found destitute"; 7a) but ultimately becomes a "god cyning" ("good king"; 11b) by actively conquering neighboring nations.

36. The poet's use of the term *bot* (see my earlier discussion of *botleas*) suggests familiarity with legal practice; for a general discussion of the Anglo-Saxon concept of *bot*, see Jurasinski.

37. On the ordeal, see Bartlett; O'Brien O'Keeffe, esp. 223–24.

38. The elegiac association between dawn and misery is often noted (e.g., Stanley 434–35; Lochrie, "Anglo-Saxon Morning Sickness"), but this pun remains neglected. *Undyrne* and *undern* have discrete etymologies (Holthausen), but the spelling of "under[ne]" ("unsecret"; 2912b) strengthens the pun.

39. Frantzen aptly notes that Hroðgar "offers no exegesis" of the hilt (347), but Lerer (158–94), Paz (247–48), and Christie see Hroðgar's engagement with the hilt as an explicatory form of reading; Near (323–25) sees it as a moment of subversive literacy.

40. This vow would not be Beowulf's only sententious statement; cf. "wyrd oft nereð / unfægne eorl" ("fate often spares an undoomed man"; 572b–73a) and "selre bið æghwæm / þæt he his freond wrece þonne he fela murne" ("it is always better to avenge one's friend than to mourn overmuch"; 1384b–85). On such gnomic statements, see Deskis.

41. *Sculan* (the infinitive of *sceal*) typically implies "necessity" (to be translated as "must"), but it "can also express what is customary" (Mitchell and Robinson, para. 210). It is often used in gnomic verse, as in the passage of *Maxims II* about thieves, cited above (*ASPR* 6: 52a).

42. Huppé; Goldsmith; even Robertson himself ("Doctrine" 32–36); see Lee for an overview.

43. Textual criticism and philology have nevertheless persisted as a central interest.

44. Best and Marcus offer a useful survey of these reactions and alternatives.

45. This interpretive humility can take various forms. Gadamer, for instance, was interested in the way philosophical hermeneutics is "not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing" (xxvi). Ricoeur arrives at a similar suggestion: that the hermeneutic enterprise requires a "vow of rigor" and a "vow of obedience" (27). More recently, Love has approached modern literature through a sociological mode of respectful observation and description that grasps the limits of interpretive agency ("Close but Not Deep" and "Close Reading"). Miller reflects elegantly on the critical impulse to look for "hidden pictures" in Alfred Hitchcock's films or what Miller calls "too close reading"; in the process, he humbly registers a kind of Gadamerian inadequacy to his own brilliant acts of reading: "I fell into my discovery by accident, but like all accidents this one had no sooner befallen me than it acquired the fatedness of a thing waiting to happen" (124).

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