***Hrinde Bearwas*: The Trees at the Mere and the Root of All Evil in *Beowulf***

**Abstract**

This article argues that the “hrinde bearwas” (frost-covered trees) overhanging Grendel’s mere in *Beowulf*, which have long been linked with the poem’s proposed sources and analogues, have for too long been represented as little more than an ominous element of the mere’s setting. Although these connections are important in their own right, these trees should also be understood in the context of Grendel’s descent from Cain, whose murder of Abel entwined human lineage with the “branches of sin” – a motif identified in Aldhelm’s *Carmen de uirginitate* and elsewhere in Old English poetry. If these branches of sin are understood as offshoots from the fruit of the Tree of Death, planted in Eve’s heart in Eden in the composite Junius *Genesis*, the mere’s frosty trees serve as a reminder to the attentive reader of the continuing grasp of evil over humankind.

**Text**

*Beowulf* is uncommonly treeless for an Old English poem.[[1]](#endnote-1) Aside from the Ravenswood episode, and the “leomum and leafum”(limbs and leaves, 97) described in the song of creation, the only trees which have not been transformed into timber buildings, ships, spears, and the like, are the “hrinde bearwas”(frost-covered trees, 1363) that adjoin and overhang the waters of Grendel’s mere.[[2]](#endnote-2) These trees have seldom been discussed in any detail, and are generally treated as part of the furniture inherited from one or other of the proposed analogues for the mere as a whole; commentators are perhaps naturally more drawn to its fantastical or apparently irreconcilable elements.[[3]](#endnote-3) This tendency to treat trees and other vegetation as part of the backdrop is understandable given the distance that exists between many modern readers of the poem and the trees and forests that contribute to our lives in various ways. It would be an oversight to treat the “hrinde bearwas”of *Beowulf* in this way, however, especially given the poet’s use of nuanced terminology to describe the landscape that was demonstrated by Margaret Gelling.[[4]](#endnote-4) Wood in early medieval England, as Jeffrey Cohen has described it, was the “raw material of community,” and trees made their presence felt in various aspects of daily life, providing shelter, tools and weapons, food and drink, heat and light, and material necessary to numerous craft activities, including the production of pottery, glass, metalwork, and so on.[[5]](#endnote-5) As Tom Williamson writes, “woodland constituted an economically valuable environment, used in a host of ways, not an under–utilised wilderness.”[[6]](#endnote-6) With the fundamental material importance of trees in in mind, this essay will demonstrate the ways in which the mere’s frosty trees are not merely ominous set-dressing, but an important aspect of the mere’s symbolism that is well integrated into the thematic concerns of the poem. Their looming presence, inscrutable to the Danes and Geats unlearned in the Old Testament, serves for the poet’s audience to underscore Grendel’s descent from Cain, the sin of Eve and Adam, and the powerful and enduring grasp of evil over humankind.

The trees in question are referred to twice in the poem: once during Hrothgar’s description of the mere before Beowulf’s expedition, and once by the narrator after we have arrived at the mere. Hrothgar tells *Beowulf* that:

Nis þæt feor heonan

milgemearces þæt se mere standeð;

ofer þæm hongiað hrinde bearwas,

wudu wyrtum fæst wæter oferhelmað.

Þær mæg nihta gehwæm niðwundor seon,

fyr on flode. No þæs frod leofað

gumena bearna þæt þone grund wite.

Ðeah þe hæðstapa hundum geswenced,

heorot hornum trum holtwudu sece,

feorran geflymed, ær he feorh seleð

aldor on ofre, ær he in wille,

hafelan beorgan; nis þæt heoru stow.

It is not far from here

in a measure of miles that the mere stands;

over it hang frost-covered trees,

a wood fast in its roots overshadows the water.

There, every night, a dreadful wonder may be seen,

fire on the flood. There is no wise one living

amongst the sons of men who knows the bottom.

Though the heath-stepper, harassed by hounds,

a hart with strong horns put to flight from far

seeks that holt-wood, he will give up his life,

his spirit on the bank, before he will

therein hide his head; that is no happy place. (ll. 1361–72)

We see the same wood first hand once Beowulf, the Geats, and the Danes arrive at the water’s edge:

He feara sum beforan gengde

wisra monna wong sceawian

oþ þæt he færinga fyrgenbeamas

ofer harne stan hleonian funde

wynleasne wudu; wæter under stod

dreorig ond gedrefed.

He (Beowulf) went before with a few

wise men to scout the landscape

until that he suddenly found mountain trees

leaning over the grey rock,[[7]](#endnote-7)

a joyless wood; the water beneath stood

bloody and stirred up. (ll. 1412–7)

The poet’s use of “fyrgenbeamas” (mountain trees) to describe this patch of woodland reminds us of Beowulf’s *beot* that he will hunt Grendel wherever the monster chooses to hide, whether it be in the earth or in a “fyrgenholt”(mountain forest/wood, 1393).[[8]](#endnote-8) From Hrothgar’s speech, from Beowulf’s explicit understanding of the woodland local to Heorot, and from the poet’s description, a few fairly robust conclusions can be drawn about the nature of the *hrinde bearwas* at the mere. As Neville notes, the “physical conditions” of early medieval England “contributed to the representation of ‘the natural world’ in Old English poetry” as well as literary influences, and it is only right that we should consider this work as a product of the author’s understanding of the material world, as much as that of a literary tradition.[[9]](#endnote-9) Firstly, the use of *fyrgen* in two contexts would suggest that they are conifers, given the more clearly defined distribution of upland coniferous and lowland deciduous woodland in early medieval England. There are three species of conifers native to Britain: the yew (*Taxus baccata*), the juniper (*Juniperus communis*), and the Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*). Of the three, yews are fairly common in charters and place names, where they appear in decidedly unmountainous landscapes.[[10]](#endnote-10) This suggests that *fyrgenbeamas* are more likely to have been understood as Scots pine or juniper. Both Scots pine and juniper are well equipped to flourish on heathland, moorland, and in rocky environments appropriate to the *hæðstapa*.[[11]](#endnote-11) However, whereas juniper tends to grow closer to the ground, in the form of shrubs and small trees, Scots pine often reaches heights of more than 35 metres.[[12]](#endnote-12) For this reason alone, Scots pines would be a far more imposing presence in this context, and more likely to *hleonian* over, or to *oferhelmian*,the waters below. More definitively, since work by Carole Biggam has drawn attention to the wider distribution of juniper in (lowland) early medieval England, where it was more prevalent than it is today, Scots pine seems the more likely of the two to have been understood as a ‘mountain’ tree.[[13]](#endnote-13) Speculation aside, and being conscious of the fact that the poet did not care to identify the species of these trees, there is more that can be said with some certainty. Both Hrothgar and Beowulf describe this wood as a *holt*, which is usually a smaller, defined area of woodland rather than a sizeable tract, dominated by a single species of tree.[[14]](#endnote-14) Finally, this holt is described as a *wudu wyrtum fæst*, which (leaving aside symbol and metaphor for the moment)implies it is mature woodland that has not often experienced human intervention, if at all.[[15]](#endnote-15) If the trees in the holt/wood surrounding the mere are understood as mature conifers, this would contribute significantly to the scene’s sense of darkness and foreboding. Furthermore, they are perfectly suited to locations like this, being naturally adapted to strong winds and colder temperatures.

The appearance of these trees makes for interesting comparison with the supposed sources (and analogues) for this aspect of the mere, well known in *Beowulf* scholarship, which include the *Visio Sancti Pauli* present in Blickling Homily XVI, and potentially *Alexander’s Letter to Aristotle*. Andy Orchard notes that Richard Morris was “the first” to point out the similarity between the mere and the landscape of Blickling Homily XVI (numbered XVII by Morris), “where Saint Paul has a vision of Hell”:[[16]](#endnote-16)

Swa sanctus paulus wæs geseonde on norðanweardne þisne middangeard þær ealle wætero niðergewitað 7 he þær geseah ofer ðæm wætere sumne harne stan 7 wæron norð of ðæm stane awexene swiðe hrimige bearwas 7 ðær wæron þystrogenipo 7 under þæm stane wæs niccra eardung 7 wearga 7 he geseah þæt on ðæm clife hangodan on ðæm isigean bearwum manige swearte saula be heora handum gebundne 7 þa fynd þara on nicra onlicnesse heora gripende wæron swa swa grædig wulf 7 þæt wæter wæs sweart under þæm clife neoðan 7 betuh þæm clife on ðæm wætre wæron swylce twelf mila 7 ðonne ða twigo forburston þonne gewitan þa saula niðer þa þe on ðæm twigum hangodan 7 him onfengon ða nicras.[[17]](#endnote-17)

So Saint Paul was looking upon the northern reaches of this world where all the waters go down, and he there saw overhanging that water cetain grey stone, and there were to the north of that stone very frosty trees growing, and there were also dark clouds, and under that stone was the dwelling place of seamonsters and evil things, and he saw that on that cliff hung on those icy trees many black souls bound by their hands, and their enemies, in the likeness of seamonsters, were biting at them just like greedy wolves, and the water was black underneath that cliff, and between the cliff[top] and the water was a distance of twelve miles, and when the branches snapped, then those souls went down that hung upon those branches, and the seamonsters seized them.

Summarising discussion of the similarities between *Beowulf* and the homily, Orchard supports Charles Wright’s argument, initially put forward by Klaeber, that the *Beowulf* poet and the homilist were probably drawing independently on a “third, intermediary, and vernacular” version of the *Visio Sancti Pauli*.[[18]](#endnote-18) There are a number of parallels between the two passages,[[19]](#endnote-19) but there are also some obvious differences; the trees in *Beowulf* are *fyrgenbeamas*, the wood is fast in its roots, and the water below the trees is not *sweart*, but *dreorig ond gedrefed*, presumably with the blood of Æschere, if his headless corpse has been carried into its depths. Noting these similarities, Orchard writes that if the *Beowulf* poet was drawing on a vernacular version of the *Visio Sancti Pauli*, as seems likely, “he has overlaid the original with a number of extra details which lend extraordinary vividness, both physical and psychological, to his own particular description.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

Beyond the *Visio Sancti Pauli*, Orchard also notes the similarity between the description of the mere and a passage in *Alexander’s Letter to Aristotle* in which Alexander and his army “find a cliff edged with huge and towering trees.”[[21]](#endnote-21) Attempting to ford this river, Alexander’s men are attacked and torn apart by a pod of water monsters (probably hippos).[[22]](#endnote-22) This infuriates Alexander, who blames all one hundred and fifty of his guides, and has them thrown into the river as punishment, where they are killed. Though naturally less hellish than the trees in Blickling Homily XVI or the *Visio Sancti Pauli*, the trees in *Alexander’s Letter* do have some things in common with *Beowulf*’s *hrinde bearwas*:

Ond þa mid þy þe þæt min werod gehyrted 7 gestilled wæs, þa ferdon we forð þy wege þe we ær ongunnon ða næs long to þon in þæm westenne þæt we to sumre ea cwoman. On þære ea ofre stod hreod 7 pintreow 7 abies þæt treowcyn ungemetlicre gryto 7 micelnysse þy clyfe weox 7 wridode.[[23]](#endnote-23)

And when my troop had been encouraged and calmed by this, then we went forth by the route that we had previously taken, and we had not gone too far in that wilderness before we came to a certain river. On the river bank stood reeds and pine trees and fir trees of excessive size and greatness upon the rock (or cliff) growing and flourishing.

The trees are conifers, and appear on the edge of the river, i.e. in the same position, but as far as the trees are concerned this is where the similarity ends.[[24]](#endnote-24) They are decidedly more useful to the local people than the frosty grove in *Beowulf*, and we subsequently discover that both reeds and trees have been used for building boats and constructing buildings situated on an island in the middle of a river.[[25]](#endnote-25)

One further potential source for *Beowulf*’s trees that has often been considered is Virgil’s *Aeneid*.[[26]](#endnote-26) Though there remains no direct evidence to show that this work was available to the *Beowulf* poet, studies of the poem by Andersson, North, and others, have suggested that portions of the *Aeneid* may have influenced episodes such as the sea voyage to Denmark and the journey to Grendel’s mere.[[27]](#endnote-27) The “most famous” passage from *The Aeneid* to have been connected with *Beowulf*, describing the mouth of the underworld, is of a type identified by Daniel Anlezark as an “‘Avernian’ place, a location so poisonous that no bird, or any other creature, could venture there”:[[28]](#endnote-28)

spelunca alta fuit vastoque immanis hiatu,

scrupea, tuta lacu nigro nemorumque tenebris,

quam super haud ullae poterant impune volantes

tendere iter pinnis: talis sese halitus atris

faucibus effundens supera ad convexa ferebat

unde locm Grai dixerunt nomine Aornun.

A deep cave was there, yawning wide and vast, of jagged rock, and sheltered by dark lake and woodland gloom, over which no flying creatures could safely wing their way; such a vapour from those black jaws was wafted to the vaulted sky, whence the Greeks spoke of Avernus, the Birdless Place.[[29]](#endnote-29)

As Anlezark notes, “the dark lake and woodland are shared” with the description of the mere in *Beowulf*, but he suggests that the poisonous emanations of the lake better parallel Wulf’s field in *Solomon and Saturn II* than anything in *Beowulf*.[[30]](#endnote-30) If not known directly from Virgil, Anlezark points out that the thick forest in this description is likely to have been familiar from Isidore’s *Etymologiae* (13.19.8), which was well known in early medieval England.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Another connection between *Aeneid* VI and the mere might be found in the Sybil’s account of the approach to the underworld. She says that:

tenent media omnia silvae,

Cocytusque sinu labens circumvenit atro.

In all the mid-space lie woods, and Cocytus girds it, gliding with murky folds.[[32]](#endnote-32)

On the face of things this fits *Beowulf* quite well, and any reader familiar with the underworld lying beyond the river is likely to have understood the comparison with Grendel’s mere. However, these elements can also be found in other, unconnected traditions involving journeys to an underworld or otherworld. For example, the journey of the hero Kwasi Benefo to the underworld through the forest of the dead, a story from the religious traditions of the West African Asante people, invokes a similar landscape:

One night he could not sleep and thought that he should go to Asamando, the land of the dead, to see the four young women whom he had married. So he left his village and went to the forest place called Nsamando where the dead are buried. When he got there, he found no paths. There were no lights. All was nothing but darkness. He kept walking until he found a village with dim lights. The place was strange. There were no sounds, no voices, no birds and no animals. He finally came to a river. When he tried to ford the river, he could not because the water was too high.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Here, as in *Beowulf*, *Alexander’s Letter*,and *The Aeneid*, the hero encounters a gloomy or otherwise impressive stretch of woodland, connected with death or violence, which borders a body of flowing or otherwise moving water. However, there is of course no direct connection between the traditions of the Asantes and those either of Augustan Rome or early medieval England, and analysis of the common elements found in these traditions may be better suited to the study of comparative mythology.

Therefore, although the trees and woodland of the Classical Avernian tradition identified by Anlezark may well have influenced the depiction of Grendel’s mere, I would suggest that whereas the woodlands that appear in these works contribute principally to their horror, in *Beowulf* they can be more firmly connected with the poem’s moral concerns. It is surprising that the *hrinde bearwas* have not been considered in conjunction with Grendel’s descent from Cain, despite the frequency with which this legacy is raised in *Beowulf* scholarship.[[34]](#endnote-34) Here, I adopt the same position taken by Leonard Neidorf, that “the poet possessed an informed understanding of exegetical traditions concerning the origins of evil, the perpetuation of Cain’s curse, the pedigree of the monstrous races, and the varieties of demonic creatures who struggle against God.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Though the Danes seem to know nothing about this ancestry, the poet foregrounds it in the first description of Grendel, in which it is clear that Grendel occupies this place as a direct consequence of Cain’s deeds:

Swa ða drihtguman dreamum lifdon,

eadiglice, oð ðæt an ongan

fyrene fremman feond on helle;

wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten,

mære mearcstapa, se þe moras heold,

fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard

wonsæli wer weardode hwile,

siþðan him scyppend forscrifen hæfde

in Caines cynne – þone cwealm gewræc

ece drihten, þæs þe he Abel slog;

ne gefeah he þære fæhðe, ac he hine feor forwræc,

metod for þy mane mancynne fram.

Þanon untydras ealle onwocon,

eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas,

swylce gigantas, þa wið gode wunnon

lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald.

So that lord of men lived in joys

happily until that one began

to perform violence: a fiend in hell.

That grim spirit was named Grendel,

infamous march-stepper who held the moors,

the fen and fastness. That unhappy man ruled

the homeland of monsters for a time,

for the Lord had marked him

as Cain’s kin; the eternal Lord

avenged that killing, when he slew Abel.

He did not prosper in that feud, but the Lord drove him far away

from mankind for that crime.

From thence all evil progenies were born:

giants and elves, and orcs –

such giants that contented with God

for a long time. He repaid them for this loan. (99–114)

Grendel’s descent from Cain is reaffirmed on one further occasion, after his fight with *Beowulf*, and immediately preceding the attack by Grendel’s mother on Heorot. Cain is not named directly, but the poet tells us that Grendel’s mother “wæteregesan wunian scolde cealde streamas”(had to inhabit the dreadful water, the cold streams, 1260–1) as a consequence of the first murder, for which Cain was driven away from humankind to “westen warode”(occupy the wilderness, 1265).[[36]](#endnote-36) The recapitulation of this information makes plain the fact that the connection between the Grendelkin and the place they inhabit is not incidental; the Danes may not know who Cain is, but the poet presumes that his audience do. This alone invites further probing of the Old English corpus for connections between the mere’s landscape Cain’s punishment.

Cain does not appear often in Old English poetry – once or twice in *Beowulf*, once in *Maxims I* (line 197), and in the composite *Genesis* poem of the Junius manuscript.[[37]](#endnote-37) Heide Estes notes that the place to which Cain is banished in *Genesis* – outside of human community – is one area of “poetic expansion of the biblical text using conventions of Old English heroic verse.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Unfortunately, *Genesis* does not say much about the *kind* of landscape into which Cain is driven. At the moment of Abel’s murder, the poet of *Genesis A* writes that:

Æfter wælswenge wea wæs aræred,

tregena tuddor. Of ðam twige siððan

ludon laðwende leng swa swiðor

reðe wæstme. Ræhton wide

geond werþeoda wrohtes telgan,

hrinon hearmtanas hearde and sare

drihta bearnum, (doð gieta swa),

of þam brad blado bealwa gehwilces

sprytan ongunnon.[[39]](#endnote-39)

After that slaughtering blow woe was raised up,

the fruit of miseries. From that twig there afterwards

sprouted malignancy, and the longer the more violently,

cruel fruit. They reached out widely

amongst the nations of men to entrap them cuelly

these harmful fronds, hard and sore,

the sons of men – as yet they still do –

and from them widely fruits of every sort of evil

began to sprout. (*Genesis A* 987–95)

Charles Wright, who described these lines as a “moralizing expansion of the biblical narrative,” has offered the most comprehensive discussion of this motif in Old English poetry so far.[[40]](#endnote-40) While allowing for the suggestion that the *Genesis A* poet may be alluding to “literal descendants of Cain,” Wright notes that the poet is clearly implying “a more universal conception of Cain’s fratricide as the spiritual root of malice and violence in human society.”[[41]](#endnote-41) There is, he argues, “ample precedent for this spiritual interpretation of Cain and his descendants” in works such as the Epistle of Jude I.11, the first-century Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians II.2–4, and the *Hamartigenia* of Prudentius.[[42]](#endnote-42) He also suggests the appearance of the motif in both *Maxims I* and *Beowulf*. In the former, concerning the blood of Abel, the poet writes that “næs þæt andæge nið of þam wrohtdropan wide gesprungon”(it was no one-day evil that sprang from those drops of crime, 193-4),[[43]](#endnote-43) whilst in *Beowulf* Hrothgar warns the hero against the hubris of those in whom “oferhygda dæl weaxað ond wridað” (a measure of pride grows and puts forth shoots, 1740–41).[[44]](#endnote-44)

Ultimately, Wright attributes the common source of this motif to Aldhelm’s *Carmen de uirginitate*, which uses vegetal symbolism “to describe how various manifestations of Pride spring up and flourish.”[[45]](#endnote-45) As I have suggested elsewhere, whether or not Alcuin was the source of the branches of sin motif in *Genesis A* (lines 1–234, 852–2936)*,* these lines may also be understood in the context of what takes place in the interpolated lines from *Genesis B* (lines 235–851) in the Junius manuscript. In his *Confessiones*, Augustinewrites that he asked himself this question: “ubi ergo malum et unde et qua huc inrepsit? quae radix eius et quod semen eius?”(Where then is evil, what is its origin, and how did it creep into the world? From what root or seed did it grow?).[[46]](#endnote-46) The composite *Genesis* poem identifies the origins of this evil: Eve’s consumption of the tree’s fruit and her offering to Adam. The tempter encourages her in this, saying:

…nim þe þis ofæt on hand,

bit his and byrige. Þe weorð on þinum breostum rum,

wæstm þy wlitegra.

Take this fruit in hand, bite it and taste. You will become unrestricted in your heart, and grow outwardly more beautiful. (*Genesis B* 518–20)

Here, asking her to *byrigean* the fruit of the tree, the poet may be using the same pun that Susan Irvine has identified in *The Dream of the Rood*, in which Christ’s ‘taste’ of death on the tree of the crucifixion offers an answer to the sin of Adam and Eve, and an end to death as the consequence of sin.[[47]](#endnote-47) The tempter goes further still in convincing her to corrupt Adam, saying that:

Gif þu him to soðe sægst hwylce þu selfa hæfst

bisne on breostum, þæs þu gebod godes

lare læstes, he þone laðan strið,

yfel andwyrde an forlæteð

on breostcofan, swa wit him bu tu

an sped sprecað.

If you to him say truly what you yourself hold in your heart as an exemplum, as you have followed the bidding of God in accordance with his teaching, he will abandon in his breast-coffer this hateful strife, this evil answer, as we two together will make a successful plea to him (*Genesis* B 570–5)

By referring twice to the changes that will take place “on [...] breostum” (519, 571) and “on breostcofan” (574) of Adam and Eve, the tempter draws attention to the fundamental shift they will undergo. After Eve has eaten the apple, she follows his instructions by taking another to Adam:

Sum heo hire on handum bær, sum hire æt heortan læg,

æppel unsælga, þone hire ær forbead

drihtna drihten, deaðbeames ofet.

One she bore in her hand, another lay at her heart, an apple unblessed, which previously the Lord of lords had forbidden her, the fruit of the tree of death. (*Genesis* B 636–8)

Eve’s intentions are doubly clear in these lines, which emphasise the connection between the physical fruit that lies “on handum” and the spiritual fruit and its consequences that lie “æt heortan”. Adam accepts the fruit and eats it:

He æt þam wife onfeng

helle and hinnsið, þeah hit nære haten swa,

ac hit ofetes noman agan secolde;

hit wæs þeah deaðes swefn and deofles gespon,

hell and hinnsið and hæleða folor,

menniscra morð, þæt hie to mete dædon,

ofet unfæle.

He from that wife received hell and death, though it was not yet called that, but it had the name of fruit; yet it was nevertheless death’s sleep and the devil’s artifice, hell and death, and men’s destruction, the murder of men, that they made their food – evil fruit. (*Genesis B* 717–23)

The consequences of the Fall are laid plain here; the connection between the fruit, hell, and death is explicit in the repetition of “helle and hinnsið”. This fruit is not fruit – it is death and perdition concealed by language. The implication in this sequence of events is that the fruit of the tree lies metaphorically at the heart of Eve, and physically in her hand, when she takes it to her husband. The sin that lies at Eve’s heart, confirmed by Adam’s acceptance of the forbidden fruit, leads to the expulsion from Eden, Cain’s murder of Abel, and ultimately to the world of the reader and the poem.[[48]](#endnote-48)

In effect, in the composite *Genesis* poem of the Junius manuscript, Eve is impregnated with the potential for evil that the fruit possesses.[[49]](#endnote-49) Recognising this, it is also important to reflect on the tree they come from, which is referred to as the Tree of Death, rather than the Tree of Knowledge. Following an extended description of the Tree of Life, which promises eternal life and eternal health, the poet introduces its counterpart. Both trees are featureless in the Book of Genesis, and neither is distinguished in any way in the Junius manuscript’s illustrations. Yet in *Genesis B* the Tree of Death is grim in the utmost:

Þonne wæs se oðer eallenga sweart,

dim and þystre; þæt wæs deaðes beam,

se bær bitres fela. Sceolde bu witan

ylda æghwilc yfles and godes

gewand on þisse worulde. Sceolde on wite a

mid swate and mid sorgum siððan libban,

swa hwa swa gebyrgde þæs on þam beame geweox.

Sceolde hine yldo beniman ellendæda,

dreamas and drihtscipes, and him beon deað scyred.

Lytle hwile sceolde he his lifes niotan,

secan þonne landa sweartost on fyre.

Sceolde feondum þeowian, þær is ealra frecna mæst

leodum to langre hwile.

Then there was the other, entirely black, dark and umbrous; that was the tree of death, that bore much bitterness. Everyone should know of both – of the difference between good and evil in this world. Whoever tasted the fruit that grew on this tree should ever after live in punishment, with sweat and with sorrow. Old age must rob him of deeds of courage, of joys and dignity, and death be his lot. For a little while he may enjoy his life, but then seek the blackest of lands, go into the fire. He must there serve devils, in the place where there is the greatest of horrors to men for all eternity (*Genesis B* 477–89).

As A. N. Doane noted, the function of these lines is to externalise what is known about the tree from the biblical account, and to expand on the consequences of eating its fruit: hard labour, old age, and mortal death.[[50]](#endnote-50) The composite *Genesis* poem thus presents us with the grim spectacle of the Tree of Death (*Genesis B*), whose fruit, taken by Eve to Adam, is in both her hand and heart (*Genesis B*). The shoots which spring forth from this fruit, nourished by the blood of Abel, are the source of the branches of sin which, according to the poet, have ensnared humankind ever since (*Genesis A*).

Though there is no direct evidence to suggest that the *Beowulf* poet knew this complete narrative from the composite Junius poem, as Wright has demonstrated, the “branches of sin” motif was well known from Aldhelm’s work, as well as the vernacular tradition. Knowledge of this tradition may also be reflected in vernacular homilies by Ælfric and Wulfstan that refer to evildoers as the limbs or branches of Satan, in opposition to images of the virtuous as those of Christ.[[51]](#endnote-51) Given that Cain inherited the potential for this sin from Adam and Eve, it is no stretch to suggest a connection between the Tree of Knowledge and the branches of sin. With this in mind, we can return to the *hrinde bearwas* of *Beowulf* to reconsider the ways in which the description of the mere brings together aspects of Grendel’s descent from Cain, the branches of sin nourished by the first murder, and the Tree of Death/Knowledge, with a view to understanding what these elements contribute to the poem when considered together. Robertson, who offered one of the most sensitive discussions of the trees surrounding the mere, suggested that Grendel’s mere can be seen as a type of the “evil garden” that is “repulsive on the surface,” and noted that the return of sunlight to the mere after Beowulf has killed Grendel’s mother is the return of “God’s justice.”[[52]](#endnote-52) Robertson saw the frost and ice covering the trees as “traditional symbols of Satan, whom God permits to tempt the human spirit to fall into cupidity,” and explained that the lack of specific reference to the Tree of Knowledge (and indeed Christ) is “in keeping with the principles of Augustinian literary interpretation” – that “intellectual effort is necessary to discern Divine truth in the arrangement of materials in the poem.”[[53]](#endnote-53) Typologically speaking, at the very least, this grove of trees can be taken to represent the Tree of Knowledge. Alongside the nearby mountain stream that plunges down beneath the earth, these trees can also be read as an inversion of the Tree of Life as it appears in heavenly Jerusalem in the Book of Revelations (22:1–2), in much the same way that Grendel can be seen as “obverse and reverse of the […] paradigm” presented in Beowulf:[[54]](#endnote-54)

et ostendit mihi fluvium aquae vitae splendidum tamquam cristallum procedentem de sede Dei et agniin medio plateae eius et ex utraque parte fluminis lignum vitae adferens fructus duodecim per menses singula reddentia fructum suum et folia ligni ad sanitatem gentium   
  
And he showed me a river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street thereof, and on both sides of the river, was the tree of life, bearing twelve fruits, yielding its fruits every month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

The appearance of the Tree of Life here at the end of all things serves as an answer to the sin engendered by the Tree of Knowledge, just as the promised redemption of Revelation corresponds to the Fall in Genesis. Given that the landscape of the mere is cleansed by Beowulf’s actions, we can read the trees beside the water as a sign to those readers and listeners who are aware of the promised salvation. Whether or not those aware of this would include Beowulf or any of the Geats and Danes depends on whether they have received this message.[[55]](#endnote-55)

There is no question that the *hrinde bearwas* overhanging Grendel’s mere are an important element of the dismal and oppressive picture painted by Hrothgar and the poem’s narrative voice. They are mature trees, likely conifers, firm in their roots, and bound by frost. That they are drawn from a vernacular version of the *Visio Sancti Pauli*, the same tradition that produced Blickling Homily XVI, seems highly probable. It also seems unlikely that the similarity between elements of this landscape and the hippo-filled river of *Alexander’s Letter to Aristotle* is purely coincidental. The Avernian tradition, if not the *Aeneid* directly, also seems to have left its mark. However, to go no further than these sources and analogues would be an oversight, and whatever the hellish and dramatic implications of their connections with these texts may be, the rich symbolic life of trees in early medieval English religious culture demands that we dig deeper. That this *fyrgenholt* is a *wudu wyrtum fæst* invites us to think about the earth in which these roots grow, and to consider the relationship between this waste land and the reasons why Grendel and his kind occupy it. There is a direct connection, both in this poem, and in the biblical and exegetical tradition, between Cain and farflung places like this. *Beowulf* is a poem deeply concerned with ancestry. Inherited debts and the sins of the fathers matter, whether they are those Beowulf inherited from Ecgtheow, or those Grendel inherited from Cain. The trees overhanging the mere are a reminder of the legacy of Adam and Eve, and though their significance is hidden from the heathen Danes, and perhaps the inattentive reader, it lies hidden in plain sight for the poet’s reflective Christian audience.[[56]](#endnote-56) In this sense, the trees might also be seen as a warning to the heedless against cupidity, and the sort of greed against which Hrothgar warns Beowulf after the Geats and their leader have returned from the mere.[[57]](#endnote-57) The cleansing of the mere and the redemption of this landscape is a foreshadowing, at the same time, of the promised establishment of a New Jerusalem after the cleansing violence of Revelation. But in so far as they evoke the sin of Cain, these trees also remind us of the origins of violence between humans, and its enduring grasp on humankind.[[58]](#endnote-58) Though *Beowulf* condemns Unferth directly for fratricide, damning him to hell, any of the violence in the poem may be seen directly or indirectly as a consequence of Abel’s murder.[[59]](#endnote-59) Effective as they may be as part of the dramatic backdrop of the mere, then, the symbolism of these trees is neither vague nor abstract, but deeply rooted in the thematic and didactic concerns of the poem.[[60]](#endnote-60)

1. Trees appear throughout the poetic corpus in various ways. Some notable examples include: the dream tree of Nebuchadnezzar in *Daniel*; the tree of knowledge in *Christ and Satan*; the grove which springs from the blood and hair of Saint Andrew in *Andreas*; the wood where the hermitage is located in *Guthlac A*; the various woodlands and lone trees in *The Phoenix*; the blossoming woodland that appears in *The Seafarer*; the trees that parallel the lives of humans and the growth of faith in *Maxims I*; the wood wherein the woman is ordered to dwell, beneath an oak-tree, in *The Wife’s Lament*; the wood where the sons of Odda seek refuge in *The Battle of Maldon*; and the grove which offers a setting for the vision of the end times in *Judgement Day II*. This is not to mention the ubiquitous references to the cross as tree, as it appears in *The Dream of the Rood*, or the various Exeter Book Riddles which refer to the arboreal origins of things. See further discussion in Michael D. J. Bintley, Trees in the Religions of Early Medieval England(Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2015), pp. 91-152; Della Hooke, Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore and Landscape(Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer 2009), pp. 58-95; and Corrine Dale, The Natural World in the Exeter Book Riddles (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017), pp. 103-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ravenswood is referred to as *Hrefna Wudu* (l. 2925) and *Hrefnes Holt* (l. 2935) respectively. References to *Beowulf* from R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, 4th edn(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The trees are barely mentioned in W. W. Lawrence, “The Haunted Mere in *Beowulf*,” PMLA,27 (1912), 208-45; they are an insignificant aspect of the landscape in W.S. Mackie, “The Demons’ Home in *Beowulf*,” JEGP,37 (1938), 455-61; they are presented as the home of the stag (who is described as a *heaðstapa*, and presumably more at home on the heath), providing a “natural counterpart” to Heorot in Sarah L. Higley, “*Aldor on Ofre*, or the Reluctant Hart: a Study of Liminality in *Beowulf*,” Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 87 (1986), p. 350; Butts commented on the trees’ frost in juxtaposition with the water, but had nothing more to say about them, seeing them as part of a “landscape of dreams” – see Richard Butts, “The Analogical Mere: Landscape and Terror in *Beowulf*,” English Studies, 68 (1987), pp. 115-6; Anlezark mentions these trees in his comparison between the mere and *Solomon and Saturn II* (in which they do not appear), later comparing them with the woods of Avernus in the *Aeneid* (see discussion below); Daniel Anlezark, “Poisoned Places: The Avernian Tradition in Old English Poetry,” Anglo-Saxon England,36 (2007), p. 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Margaret Gelling, “The Landscape of *Beowulf*,” Anglo-Saxon England,31 (2002), 7-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Jeffrey J. Cohen, Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages, Medieval Cultures, 17 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 5. On the importance of trees, woodland, wood and timber in early medieval England, see essays in Michael D. J. Bintley and Michael G. Shapland, eds., Trees and Timber in the Anglo-Saxon World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); also Hooke, Trees in Anglo-Saxon England, and Bintley, Trees in the Religions of Early Medieval England. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Tom Williamson, Environment, Society and Landscape in Early Medieval England: Time and Topography(Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer 2013), pp. 213-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Hleonian* might equally be taken here to indicate that the trees are “resting” above the grey stone, which would contribute little to this description. However, the sense that they in fact *overhang* the grey stone of the mere is confirmed by the verb *oferhelmian* at line 1364. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Fyrgen* also appears in the compound “fyrgenstream”(mountain stream, 1359). It seems unlikely that, as Mackie thought, *fyrgen* should be used without thought on all three occasions; see Mackie, “The Demons’ Home in *Beowulf*,” p. 457. Definitions here from the Dictionary of Old English: A to I online, ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette dePaolo Healey *et al.* (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jennifer Neville, Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 27 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Hooke finds ten references to yews in charters recording land in the West Midlands, Southern and Eastern England, and South Wales, and thirteen references to yews in place names from the West Midlands, and Southern and Eastern England; Hooke, Trees in Anglo-Saxon England, p. 168, 207. Hooke tells me that “further research may have added seven other references to this tree in southern England where the OE wording is ambiguous” (*pers. comm.*). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. As Hooke notes, ‘there are no references to pine, fir trees or other conifers in pre-Conquest charters’; Hooke, Trees in Anglo-Saxon England, p. 275. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Paul Sterry, Collins Complete Guide to British Trees(London: HarperCollins, 2007) pp. 84, 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See recent discussion of native and exotic species of juniper in Carole P. Biggam, “Old English *Safene*: Untangling Native and Exotic Junipers in Anglo-Saxon England,” Leeds Studies in English, n.s. 44 (2013), 206-41. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Hooke, Trees in Anglo-Saxon England, p. 128; see also Margaret Gelling, Place-Names in the Landscape(London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1984), pp. 196-7; Williamson, Environment, Society, and Landscape, p. 220. Williamson draws the same conclusion about *wudu*, which whilst it may have been used “at an early date to describe very extensive tracts of afforested ground,” is generally used of “more restricted areas, many of which were apparently enclosed and owned or controlled by a single individual, for around a quarter have personal names as a prefix” (pp. 219-20). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Frey suggested a connection here with the wood, fast in its roots, and the *heort hornum trum*, that “each is cast in still posture overshadowing the depths, poised on the deadly brink.” There is a parallel here, but it is drawn to make a distinction between the hart, top heavy and ready to fall, and the wood, secure in its living foundations; see Charles Frey, “Lyric in Epic: Hrothgar’s Depiction of the Haunted Mere (*Beowulf* : 1357b-76a),” English Studies58 (1977), p . 299. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Richard Morris, ed., The Blickling Homilies of the Tenth Century, EETS o.s. 73 (London, 1880), pp. vi-vii; Andy Orchard, Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Text from Rowland L. Collins, “Blickling Homily XVI and the Dating of *Beowulf*,” in Medieval Studies Conference Aachen 1983, ed. W-D. Bald and H. Weinstock (Frankfurt: Peter Lang 1984), pp. 61-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, p. 38; Charles D. Wright, The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), pp. 116-36; F. Klaeber, “Die christlichen Elementen im *Beowulf*,” Anglia, 35 (1911-12), 111-36; 249-70, 453-82; 36 (1912), pp. 185-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. These are summarised in Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, p. 38, based on Carleton Brown, ‘*Beowulf* and the *Blickling Homilies* and Some Textual Notes’, PMLA, 53 (1938), p. 908. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, p. 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Ibid.* p. 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See discussion in Neville, *Representations of the Natural World*, pp. 33-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. References to *Alexander’s Letter to Aristotle* from *ibid*. pp. 225-53. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Orchard notes the Old English author’s “confusion and conflation of tree-types” in translating the Latin text, which does not actually feature pines or silver firs, but instead uses them comparatively to express the girth of the reeds: see also Andy Orchard, A Critical Companion to ‘Beowulf’(Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p. 30. “Nec longe mihi in desertis locis flumen apparuit cuius ripas pedum sexagenum arundo uestiebat, pinorum abietumque robora uincens grossitudine, qua Indi materia ad conficienda aedificia incolae utebantur” (Not far away in the desert there appeared to me a river, the banks of which were covered by reeds sixty feet high, surpassing in their girth the trunks of pines or silver-firs, and the Indians used that material to construct buildings); text and translation from Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, pp. 204-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. “Þa cwoman we to sumre byrig, seo burh wæs on midre þære ea in anum eglonde getimbred. Wæs seo burh mid þy hreode 7 treowcynne þe on þære ea ofre weox 7 we ær biwriton 7 sægdon asett 7 geworht” (Then we came to a stronghold; that stronghold was built in the middle of the river on an island. That fortification had been built and constructed using the reeds and kinds of trees that grew on the river bank that we previously told and wrote about). “Ða gesawon we men æfter þære ea feran, hæfdon of þæm hreode 7 of þæm treowcynne þe in ðære ea ofre stodon on scipwisan geworht þæt hie onufan sæton” (Then we saw men coming over the river, and they had made the forms of boats from the reeds and the kinds of trees that stood on the river bank, and were sitting on top of them’). Text from *ibid*., pp. 232, 234. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Orchard also notes the possibility (and unlikelihood) of other Classical works being available to the poet which may have influenced the representation of the mere, including Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, with its description of the pagan grove at Massilia, and “a dark and steaming lake at Aponus” in Claudian’s *Carmen* XXVI, and in his description of “a thick grove on the slopes of Etna” in *De raptu Proserpinae*; see Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, pp. 44-5, and also further discussion in Tom Haber, A Comparative Study of the Beowulf and the Aeneid(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1931) pp. 92-6; Alain Renoir, ‘The Terror of the Dark Waters: A Note on Virgilian and Beowulfian Techniques’, in The Learned and the Lewd: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature, ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 147-60; Schrader agreed that there are “striking similarities in theme and literal detail,” but concluded that “*Beowulf* is not Virgilian,”; Richard J. Schrader, “Beowulf’s Obsequies and the Roman Epic,” Comparative Literature, 24 (1972), 237-59 (pp. 238, 242); Magennis argues not for direct influence here, but suggests “Vergilian influences…in the overall formal disposition of the description,” making a convincing case for the mere as “an inverted locus *amoenus*” in Hugh Magennis, Images of Community in Old English Poetry(Cambridge, 1996), pp. 138-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Theodore M. Andersson, Early Epic Scenery: Homer, Virgil, and the Medieval Legacy(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp. 145-59; the journey to the mere is compared with the “ambush landscape in [*Aeneid*] 11.524-7,” which makes no mention of any wood such as the one found in *Beowulf*. Richard North, The Origins of Beowulf: From Virgil to Wiglaf(Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), pp. 90-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Anlezark, “Poisoned Places,” p. 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Virgil, Volume I: Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–VI, ed. and trans. H. R. Fairclough, revised by G. P. Goold (Harvard, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999): *Aeneid* vi.237-42 (p. 548). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Anlezark, “Poisoned Places,” p. 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *Ibid*. pp. 110-11, 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *Aeneid* vi.131-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama, ed., Encyclopedia of African Religion, Vol 1 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc., 2009), p. 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Most recently in Paul S. Langeslag, ‘Monstrous Landscape in *Beowulf*’, English Studies, 96 (2015), 119-38. See further discussion in Stephen C. Bandy, ‘Cain, Grendel, and the Giants of *Beowulf*’, Papers on Language and Literature,9 (1973), 235-49; Ruth Mellinkoff, “Cain’s Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*: Part I, Noachic Tradition,” Anglo-Saxon England,8 (1979), 143-62; Thalia Phillies Feldman, “Grendel and Cain’s Descendants,” Literary Onomastics Studies,8 (1981), 71-87; Ruth Mellinkoff, “Cain’s Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*: Part II, Post-Diluvian Survival,” Anglo-Saxon England,9 (1980), 183-97; Malcolm Andrew, “Grendel in Hell,” English Studies, 62 (1981), 401-10; David Williams, Cain and Beowulf: a Study in Secular Allegory (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Leonard Neidorf, “Cain, Cam, Jutes, Giants, and the Textual Criticism of *Beowulf*,” Studies in Philology, 112 (2015), p. 615. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Bandy, “Cain, Grendel, and the Giants of *Beowulf*,” pp. 239-41; see also more recent discussion of the connection between the mark of Cain and “the exilic space of the borderlands where Grendel walks” in Manish Sharma, “Metalepsis and Monstrosity: The Boundaries of Narrative Structure in *Beowulf*,” Studies in Philology 102 (2005), p. 266. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Neidorf has recently discussed the confusion/conflation of Cam (Ham, son of Noah) and Cain in *Beowulf* lines 107a and 1261b, noting that “the *Beowulf* poet is hardly unique among medieval authors for conflating Cain and Cam and using both names” (p. 607). In the case of the first reference, the first scribe’s *cames*, which Neidorf argues to be the “authorial” form,was later altered to *caines* “through the erasure of the ligature” (p. 601), potentially by Scribe B (p. 605). In the case of the latter, Cain appears as an editorial emendation of *camp*, “but scribal corruption is unmistakable in this case” (p. 606). The effect of this conflation is twofold, reflecting “awareness of the widespread idea, articulated in the writings of St. Augustine and Bede, that Cain and Cam are connected as the literal and spiritual progenitors of the reprobates of the world,” and that Cain and Cam were the progenitors of ante- and postdiluvian monsters (p. 610); Neidorf, “Cain, Cam, Jutes, Giants.” [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Heide Estes, “Raising Cain in *Genesis* and *Beowulf*: Challenges to Generic Boundaries in Anglo-Saxon Biblical Literature,” The Heroic Age 13 (2010), § 7, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. References to *Genesis A* and *Genesis B* from George P. Krapp, ed., The Junius Manuscript, ASPR 1 (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1931). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Charles D. Wright, “The Blood of Abel and the Branches of Sin: *Genesis A*, *Maxims I* and Aldhelm’s *Carmen de uirginitate*,” Anglo-Saxon England,25 (1996), p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Bennett Brockman, “‘Heroic’ and ‘Christian’ in *Genesis A*: the Evidence of the Cain and Abel Episode,” Modern Language Quarterly, 35 (1974), 115-28; Wright, “The Blood of Abel,” p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Wright, “The Blood of Abel,” p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. *Ibid*. pp. 12-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. *Ibid.* p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. *Ibid.* p. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Augustine: Confessions, Books 1–8, ed. and trans. by C. J. -B. Hammond (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014),vii.5 (p. 306). Niilo Peltola sees this human contention with evil as the ‘sublime theme’ of Beowulf in his discussion of Grendel’s descent from Cain; Niilo Peltola, “Grendel’s Descent from Cain Reconsidered,” Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 73 (1972), p. 284. On the Augustinian coherency of *Beowulf*, see Bandy, “Cain, Grendel, and the Giants of *Beowulf*.” [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. See discussion in Susan Irvine, “Adam of Christ? A Pronomial Pun in The Dream of the Rood,” Review of English Studies, n.s. 48.192 (1997), pp. 433-47. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. On the relationship between humans and the environment after the Fall see Neville, *Representations of the Natural World*, pp. 19-21, 38-9 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. See further discussion in Bintley, Trees in the Religions of Early Medieval England. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. A. N. Doane, The Saxon Genesis(Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 139. Notably, these lines suggest that all those who die will suffer the pains of Hell, which situates this description squarely before the Harrowing and the rescue of Adam and Eve (etc.) from Hell’s torments. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Ælfric, for example, writes of Satan that “yfelan men sint his lyma” (evil men are his limbs), while Wulfstan writes in De Anticristo that “to fela is þeah his lima þe man wide nu geseon” (too numerous is nevertheless his limbs that men widely now see). For Ælfric, see Dominica I in Quadragessima, in Peter Clemoes, ed., Ælfric´s Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text, EETS s.s. 17 (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 1997), pp. 267-74 (l. 35); for De Anticristo see Dorothy Bethurum, The Homilies of Wulfstan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 116-18 (ll. 13-14). Christians are more frequently the limbs of Christ; Ælfric writes explicitly that “ure lichaman sind godes lyma” (our bodies are God’s limbs), and Wulfstan that “hy sind his lima” (they are his limbs). See Ælfric, Decollatio Sancti Iohannis Babtiste, in Clemoes, Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies, pp. 450-8 (ll. 97-8); and Wulfstan, De Dedicatione Ecclesiae, in Bethurum, The Homilies of Wulfstan, 246-54 (l. 126). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. D. W. Robertson, “The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Literary Gardens: a Topical Approach through Symbolism and Allegory,” Speculum, 26 (1951), pp. 33-4. Magennis similarly takes the mere as an inversion of the *locus amoenus*, see Images of Community, pp. 138-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Robertson, “The Doctrine of Charity,” pp. 33-4. Fulk, et al. (Klaeber’s Beowulf, p. 201) also suggest that this frost is “suitable symbolically, or as a wonder,” but do not seem to take it literally. Henry Lotspeich saw in this frost one of the many parallels with *Grettissaga*, and thought the connection between “winter and the raids of fiends and trolls” sensible, if not intended as part of a “rationally convincing picture of an actual place,” in “*Beowulf* 1363, *Hrinde Bearwas*,” JEGP, 29 (1930), pp. 368-9. Walter Sedgefield’s reading of MS *hrinde* as *hringde* (“‘ring like,’ i.e. with gnarled boughs, or else arranged in a ring or segment of a circle,” p. 162), though interesting, has never found favour; “The Scenery in *Beowulf*,” JEGP, 35 (1936), 161-9. On Augustinian approaches to this and other landscapes in Old English poetry, see discussion in Michael D. J. Bintley, “Where the Wild Things Are in Old English Poetry,” in Representing Beasts in Early Medieval England and Scandinavia, ed. Michael D. J. Bintley and Thomas J. T. Williams (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2015), pp. 205-28; also Neville, Representations of the Natural World, pp. 26-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Ruth Waterhouse, “*Beowulf* as Palimpsest,” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed.Jeffrey J. Cohen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 33-4. This appearance of the tree of life refers back to Ezekiel 47:12, which describes the waters flowing out from the Temple of Jerusalem: “et super torrentem orietur in ripis eius ex utraque parte omne lignum pomiferum non defluet folium ex eo et non deficiet fructus eius per singulos menses adferet primitiva quia aquae eius de sanctuario egredientur et erunt fructus eius in cibum et folia eius ad medicinam” (Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing). All references to the Vulgate from Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem, ed. Roger Gryson et al., 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007); translations modernised from Holy Bible Douay-Rheims Version, with Challoner Revisions 1749–52 (Baltimore, MD: John Murphy Company, 1899). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Whether one sees the Danes (et al.) as pre-Christian or not, and how the many references to God by characters in the poem logically correlate with this, depends on how one reads the description of the Danes’ offerings at pagan shrines following Grendel’s first attacks. If one takes the poet’s assertion that “ne wiston hie drihten god”(they did not know the Lord God, 181) at face value, then the Danes show knowledge of God the father as part of their pre-Christian belief system (Christ never being named), in a similar fashion to the Israelites. Others, including Karl Wentersdorf, have taken these lines to suggest apostasy in a time of great need; see Karl P. Wentersdorf, “*Beowulf*: The Paganism of Hrothgar’s Danes,” Studies in Philology 78 (1981), 91-119; also general summary of these positions in Fulk et al., *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, p. 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. My thanks to Ciaran Arthur for suggesting this parallel between the Danes and inattentive readers, and noting the killing of Herebeald by Hæthcyn (see below). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. This sort of greed is typical of a hypothetical king who, as Hrothgar notes, “nallas on gylp seleð fædde beagas”(does not at all – in his pride – share out golden rings, 1748-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. As Lionarons writes of the death of Beowulf and the dragon, their mutually assured destruction *in history* does not “provide the restoration of social harmony that is the desired result of the killing of the monstrous double *in myth*” (emphasis mine). Instead, “the sublation of historical human violence into the superhuman heroism of myth that is the poem’s *raison d’être* thus remains incomplete in the relative past and stubbornly dialogic discourse of human history”; Joyce T. Lionarons, “*Beowulf*: Myth and Monsters,” English Studies,77 (1996), p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. “Þeah ðu þinum broðrum to banan wurde heafodmægum þæs þu in helle scealt werhðo dreogan” (nevertheless, you were the killer of your brothers, your close relatives, and for that you must suffer torment in hell, 587-8). Beowulf also recalls the fratricide of his uncle Herebeald by his brother Hæthcyn in the speech where he announces his intention to fight the dragon (a murder that took place whilst he was a young man in the house of his grandfather Hrethel (lines 2425-43)), and in his death-speech notes that he was never guilty of the murder of kinsmen (lines 2739-43). [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. I am grateful to Della Hooke, Ciaran Arthur, Simon Thomson, and Susan Irvine for their comments on drafts of this article. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)