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**Aspects of Allegory in Medieval Literature: Monstrous Punishments and Monstrous Women as Symptoms of a Decaying Society / Social Structure in Tristan, Beowulf, and Piers Plowman**

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Title: Aspects of Allegory in Medieval Literature: Monstrous Punishments and  
Monstrous Women as Symptoms of a Decaying Society / Social Structure in  
*Tristan, Beowulf, and Piers Plowman*

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I. “A Fair Field Full of Folk”: Piers Plowman and the Economy of Good  
and Evil

Evil is behavior that is aberrant by definition. In a Judeo-Christian context, it involves sin, which can be defined as any action, whether physical or psychological, that violates various rules of the Church, as for example outlined in the Ten Commandments and the writings of biblical scholars, such as Aquinas. In *Piers Plowman*, William Langland presents evil as having an actual location, as if on a map, but which is also not the familiar hell or anything resembling a Dantesque Inferno:

And the Erdome of Envye and [Yre] togideres,  
With the Chastelet of Chest and Chater yng oute of resound,  
The Counte of Coveitise and alle the costes aboute,  
That is Usure and Avarice – alle I hem graunte  
In bargaines and in brokages with al the Borghe of Theft,  
[With] al the lordship of Lecherye in lenthe and in brede,  
As in werkes and in words and waitynges with eies,  
And in [wenes] and in wisshynges and with ydel thoughtes,  
There as wille wolde and werkmanship failleth. (Langland lines 84-92)

Langland’s tale also locates specific sins such as Envy, Ire, Quarreling, Gossip, Stealing, in locations that would have been familiar to his medieval audience,

such as a small castle or “castelet”, an earldom, a county, and a borough. These are not just medieval sites, but specifically English places. In the Prologue, the narrator of the story, Will, who dresses as an English shepherd (“I shope me in shroudes as I a shepe were”) starts his walk in the Malvern Hills with a view of London (3). There he becomes enchanted and falls asleep. The narrator offers his readers a view of what he sees in his dreams: if evil can be found on a map, so can good. Will’s visions introduce him to a site of evil much like a dungeon, and a site of good where people toil, one better than everything else, or more like Heaven:

[Ac] as I bihelde into the est, an hiegh to the sonne,  
 I seigh a toure on a toft, trielich y-maked,  
 A depe dale binethe, a dungeon thereinne,  
 With depe dyches and derke and dredful of sight.  
 A faire felde ful of folke fonde I there bytwene,  
 Of alle maner of men, the mene and the riche,  
 Worchyng and wandryng as the worlde asketh. (1.13-19)

Evil is to be found in all locations south of this highest point, where the tower sits atop a hill. The most obvious place where evil is to be discovered, the dungeon, seems ominous because of its location in the dikes, whose darkness seems structurally loathsome.

Evil also exists within each person. It can be found among hardworking laborers who till the land. Langland makes it clear which of his characters are

sinners and which are good. He defines good people as those who use the land and exert themselves in plowing and sowing. Such people will reap their just rewards. As Piers Plowman puts it: “Ac whoso helpeth me to erie or [any thinge swynke] / Shal have leve, bi owre Lorde, to lese here in hervest, / And make [him] mery theremydde, maugre whoso bigruccheth it. / And alkyn crafty men that konne lyven in treuthe” (6.65-68). The crafty man who can show “werkmanship” will receive the fruits of the land, sent by God. Society depends on men who work and produce – without them it cannot run. As Elizabeth D. Kirk observes, “The Prologue had pointed to the labor of the commune, epitomized in plowmen, as the undergirding support of civilized society”.<sup>1</sup>

Evil characters are also those who are reluctant to farm the land. Piers Plowman must contend with the lazy, such as Waster, who adamantly refuses to work. Waster has spent his life living off of other people’s hard work. He refuses to change: “‘I was nought wont to worche,’ quod Wastour, ‘now wil I nought bigynne!’” (6.167-168). Piers Plowman captures the nature of his character when he contrasts the output of corrupt, lazy men with the good and hardworking: “Ye wasten that men wynnyn with travaille and with tene” (6.133).

Still other evil characters earn their living by unnatural means. They steal or sell rather than do honest work. Their names are connected to their vice. For

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see Kirk, “What is This Woman? Langland on Women and Gender”, *Piers Plowman*, Norton 619.

example, instead of having a first and last name, as does Piers, they are known for their sins:

I shal fynden hem fode that feithfulliche libbeth,  
 Save Jakke the jogeloure and Jonet of the stues,  
 And Danyel the dys-playere and Denote the baude,  
 And Frere Faytoure and folke of his ordre,  
 And Robyn the rybaudoure for his rusty wordes. (6.69-73)

Those that live the good life and are faithful to God and work (“feithfulliche libbeth”) are to be rewarded. The rest will be forsaken because their actions – whether as gamblers or whores, distance them from God.

Langland picks up on the importance of names in a manner similar to that of St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas emphasizes that people need names to understand one another. God is also given a name, but the words connected to God are associations bound to his divinity. As Aquinas makes clear, they all fall short: “He can be named by us from creatures, yet not so that the name which signifies Him expresses the divine essence in itself” (Kreeft 124). God is also invisible. Aquinas points out that people are made of a certain fabric, or a “corporeal matter”: “God cannot be seen in His essence by a mere human being, except he be separated from this mortal life...But our soul, as long as we live in this life, has its being in corporeal matter; hence naturally it knows only what has a form in matter, or what can be known by such a form” (*ibid* 120).

People can understand only those things which are like themselves, or made of the same fabric. We are limited to earthly knowledge, or indentified by our choices as men. Langland's characters, too, have names which show their natures – good men are known by a first and last name or title, as is Piers Plowman or Sir Inwit, and bad men by their vices.

Langland also includes many sinners from the aristocratic classes. Though they may be the most refined, so to speak, they do not share their wealth, which leads to their and others' destruction. Langland compares such wealthy and well-trained people to peacocks; the male peacocks, for example, are beautiful, with striking, intricate patterns and colors on their feathers. Such characters may be well dressed and well-fed, but they probably do not contribute to society:

Thus the poete preves the pecok for his fetheres;

So is the riche [reverenced] bi resoun of his godis.

The lark that is a lasse foule is more lovelich of ledne,

And wel away of wenge swifter than the pecok,

And of flesch by fele folde fatter and swetter.

To lowe-lybyng men the larke is resembled. (12.262-267)

The men of lower status ("lowe-lybyng"), on the other hand, are valuable to society because they do the hard labor which makes life possible. The upper classes, by contrast, are often like poison to lesser men:

And though the riche repente thane and birewe the tyme



That evere he gadered so grete and gaf thereof so litel,  
 Though he crye to Cryst thanne with kene wille, I leve  
 His ledne be in owre Lordes ere lyke a pyes [chiterynge].  
 And whan his caroigne shal come in cave to be buried  
 I leve it flaumbe ful foule the folde al aboute,

And alle the other ther it lyth envenymed thorgh his attere. (12.252-258)

The rich may have a surplus of food and drink, but their gluttony leads them into other sins. Langland includes a reference to Sodom and Gomorrah to emphasize that cities, created by human ingenuity and labor, are prone to collapse as a result of sinful acts. The Devil, for example, preys on men who are greedy: “For [men] mesured nought himself of [mete] and [drynke], / Diden dedly synne that the Devel lyked, / Vengeaunce fel upon hem for her vyle synnes; / [So] thei sonken into helle, tho citees uchone” (14.78-81). If Sodom and Gomorrah were cities that fell because of man’s sins, evil can indeed be located on a map.

Langland’s narrative thus serves as a warning, or seems intended to do so. Morton Bloomfield, for instance, characterizes *Piers Plowman* as an apocalyptic work. In other words, while *Piers Plowman* may be difficult to classify, it fits in among other apocalyptic tales, description, and accounts. The author provides a story meant as a warning: “A simple answer to the question of the genre of *Piers Plowman* would be to say that it is an apocalypse. The classic Judeo-Christian apocalypse is cast in dream form, or consists of several dreams, is a revelation

from some superior authority, is eschatologically oriented, and constitutes a criticism of, and warning for, contemporary society” (Bloomfield 508).

Although Langland uses many biblical passages and makes up names to represent sinners, readers can relate to the challenge of living a good or bad life. The religious leaders are sinful, which leads their congregations to make mistakes. For example, Langland repeatedly refers to the blind leading the blind; he also explicitly attacks friars. During the feast of Clergy, Clergy (now a cleric), Conscience, and a Friar eat better quality food (“wilde brawen”) than Will and Patience, who eat at essentially the children’s table (“side borde”). Friars were supposed to sacrifice and live modestly, following patient poverty or Dowel. Will, however, is exactly the right narrator to reveal to readers that friars do not seem to be living as they should. As Anna Baldwin observes in her *Guidebook to Piers Plowman*, “Will is struck as so often in the poem by the hypocrisy of the friars...because they do not practice the life of Christ, the life of pain and discomfort (‘mischeffe and malaise’, 77) which their Order set out to follow” (170). When Will, the narrator, awakes in Passus XIII, he summarizes all the bad characters he has seen in his dream, including priests who damage their followers: “And how this coveitise overcome clerkes and prestes, / And how that lewed men ben ladde, but owre Lorde hem helpe, / Thorough unkonnyng curatoures to incurable peynes” (11-13). Male leaders sin, the flock sins, and all men, regardless of rank, must face the penalty in the afterlife. Langland emphasizes the

communal aspect of salvation. Although people sin individually through their choices and actions, salvation is a shared goal: “One of the major themes of the poem is that true salvation is not only personal but social. The Gospel preaches a Kingdom, not a conglomeration of individually saved souls; and the Middle Ages, with its strong corporate sense, understood this message” (Bloomfield 4). I will explain later how the “corporate sense” of medieval people transformed from a feudal system to a wage based system, essentially ending the old ways, because of the Black Plague.

The Holy Trinity is described in Passus XVII in comparison to the triad of sinful and corrupt king, the clergy, and laity. One of the tenets of the Christian religion is the trinity, consisting of inseparable Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Although each is distinct in its own way, all are divine. Langland compares the Holy Trinity to a hand; the fingers cannot be useful without the fist:

Thus it is – nedeth no man to trowe non other –  
 That thre thinges bilongeth in owre [Fader] of Hevene  
 And aren serelepes by hemself; asondry were [thei] nevre;  
 Namore [may a hande] meve withouten fyngeres.  
 And as my fust is ful honde y-folde togideres,  
 So is the Fader a ful God, formeour and shepper. (165-170)

The Father, Holy Ghost and Son each serve as a model for our behavior. Langland makes it clear that fathers – whether they are paternal, biological fathers or church

fathers such as monks and other clergymen – must exhibit the good behavior that follows from Christian teachings, or the Ten Commandments. If fathers are sinful, they will damage their offspring: “Ac I fynde if the fader be false and a shrewe / That somdel the sone shal have the sires tacches”(150-151). Evil is a contagious disease; parents can infect their children, who then grow up to be faulty, sinful adults. Langland cites unmarried people who produce bastard children as a prime example of how children are damned by their parents’ mistakes:

That othergatis ben geten for gedelynges ben holden,  
 As false folke, fondelynges, faitoures and lyars  
 Ungracious to gete goode or love of the poeple,  
 Wandren [as wolves], and wasten [if] thei mowe;  
 Ayeines Do-Wel thei don yvel and the Devel [plese],  
 And after her deth-day shulle dwelle with the same,  
 But God gyve hem grace here hemself to amende. (195-201)

These bastard children may grow up and be able to transform their lives, at God’s discretion. However, Langland’s writing makes them seem doomed to be excluded from God’s grace and the promise of Heaven. They wander as wolves, their behavior instinctual and based on disregarding others. In fact, in the *Visio*, Langland presents readers with the difficulty of being able to reform and reach Heaven in the afterlife. According to Morton Bloomfield, the people in *Piers Plowman* are distanced from God by repeatedly making mistakes through sin.

There is a constant pull; the society that the Dreamer, Will, describes longs to break free of sin, which yet seems unavoidable: “He describes his contemporary world, which is full of sin and yet in a confused way longs to be free of sin. In this introduction, Langland also shows how men fail in their attempt to find salvation and perfection because they are fooled by Meed (cupidity) and because, even if cleansed of sin, they cannot find the way to the Saviour and fall into sin again” (5).

Among the many foul male characters, are female characters who may also be found to sin. Prostitutes such as Jonet and Pernel appear throughout *Piers Plowman*. Langland in fact draws a line between the good and bad women. The good are shown as mothers or helpless and in need of support from the Church. For instance, Piers Plowman’s wife’s name is “Dame-Worche-Whan-Tyme” which illustrates that her work ethic matches her husband’s. Furthermore, her children are known by their many revealing names; their daughter is “Do-Righte-So-Or-Thi-Dame-Shal-The-Bete” and their son is “Suffer-Your-Sovereigns-To-Have-Their-Will-Condemn-Them-Not-For-If-You-Do-You’ll-Pay-A-Deer-Price-Late-God-y-Worthe-Withal-For-So-His-Worde-Techeth” (pages 98-100). Piers is a man of integrity, and his wife is characterized by her hard work and the way she brings up their children. Another woman who can be called good is Sir Inwit’s wife, who has produced five sons, all worthy heirs, with names such as Sir See-Well and Sir Work-Well-With-Your-Hands (131). A good woman, therefore, is to

be understood as married and showing the fruits of her labors by raising well-mannered children who work for what they have. The children reflect positively on their parents. The unmarried are also included, however. Both widows and the never-married are not seen as necessarily bad or evil, but to be pitied. They should also be supported by the Church.

Langland has much to say about a bad woman who bribes and seeks pardons. Meed is identified straightaway as the most vile slut: “Meekness was a master and Meed a cursed slut” (4.160). I plan to discuss Meed’s role in more detail toward the end of this essay, in relationship to her resemblance to King Edward III’s mistress. The only exception to Langland’s idea of bad and good women is Malkin. She is good because she is virginal; she is bad because she is so loathsome that no one has ever wanted to marry her, which might well have been considered sinful. Langland extends this idea of the good and bad conjoined in one person when he includes information about his characters’ varying degrees of goodness or badness. It is possible, in other words, for a person to be both good and evil. For example, the thief crucified beside Christ had sought forgiveness for his misdeeds and was pardoned and allowed to enter Heaven in the afterlife. The ranking system of Langland’s concept of Heaven, however, may allow the thief in, but not at the highest level because of his track-record of sin while alive: “Ac though that thef had Hevene, he hadde none heigh blisse, / As Seynt Johan and other seyntes that asserved hadde bettere”(196-197). He is at the bottom of

Heaven: “For he is in the lowest of Hevene, if owre bileve be trewe”(line 213).

The hierarchy itself forms a motif that Langland uses at the beginning of the poem, with his dungeon and high hill.

With the introduction of this biblical character, the thief on the cross beside Jesus, we can focus on how Langland uses biblical passages to construct his poem. Much of it uses sayings, almost like lessons at school: “an apple a day.” These sayings become instructions in how Christians should live, helpful reminders in how to stay on the right path. St. Thomas’s *Summa* is one of the texts that medieval people would have referred to in order to define their Catholic faith. Langland’s own text includes biblical verses and explanations of what rules Christians should follow; it is meant not only to entertain, but also to instruct readers, just like Morton Bloomfield asserts when he describes the apocalypse genre that *Piers Plowman* falls into. For instance, in Passus IX there are numerous references to events from the beginning of Christianity such as Noah and the flood. Passus IX also includes a reference to the gospel of John in which rules regarding marriage are set down: “For goode shulde wedde goode though hij no good hadde. / It is an oncomely couple, bi Cryst, as me thinketh, / To yyven a yonge wenche to [a yolde] feble, / Or wedden any widwe for welth of hir goodis” (136). There is an emphasis here that people should avoid marrying disingenuously: “For some as I se now, soth forto telle, / For coveitise of catel unkyndeliche ben wedded” (*ibid*). Young men and young women should marry.

Old men should not snatch up young women for wives and widows should not be courted for their money. Couples who have joined together in an unequal marriage, such as when a person marries to inherit another's money, do not have a solid marriage and they will bear the consequences of a bad match: "Many peire sithen the pestilence han plight [hem] togideres. The fruit that thei brynge forth aren foule wordes; / Have thei no children but cheste [and choppes] bitwene" (ibid). Marrying the right person is a way to stay on the righteous path, following the rules of the Bible. These rules regarding marriage reveal Langland's allegorical tone throughout his poem.

At the beginning of the poem, as Will searches to meet the persons who are Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best, he forms an initial definition of what they are. Langland makes these characters symbolize a hierarchy of good behavior. For example, at the bottom or lowest level is Do-Well, whose aim is to follow the law and harm no one. Obeying the rules and being a moral person is what most people will want to do as Christians: "patient poverty is Do-Wel – the best way to lead the Christian life in the world, the lowest but by no means unworthy way of Christian perfection, which, perforce, must embrace the vast majority of Christians" (Bloomfield 5). Next is Do-Better, who is more charitable and willing to love and lend assistance to others. Lastly, there is Do-Best who will protect and provide for people, healing and helping them.



Do-Best has a big task; like Jesus, he must chase away evil: “[Thanne is] Do-Wel to drede, and Do-Bet to suffer, / And so cometh Do-Best [aboute] and bryngeth adoun Mody, / And that is wikked wille that many werke shendeth / And dryveth away Do-Wel thorough dedliche synnes” (207-210). In Passus XVIII, Will wakes and retells the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He has been sleeping throughout the season of Lent: “I wex wery of the worlde and wylned eft to slepe, / And lened me to a Lenten, and longe tyme I slepte, / Rested me there, and rutte faste, tyl *Ramis-Palmarum*” (302). When he wakes on Palm Sunday, he is still in his dream and he sees that humanity has turned cruel. People have turned against Jesus, including Judas who was one of his followers. Also, in court Pilate and the Jews concur on Jesus’s fate: “*Crucifige!*” quod a cacchepolle, “[he kan of wicchecraftel]” / “*Tolle! Tolle!*” quod another, and toke o kene thornes / And bigan of [grene] thorne a gerelande to make, / And sette it sore on his hed” (304). They succeed in killing Christ, which results in visible effects such as an earthquake: The daye for drede withdrowe and derke bicam the sonne; / The wal wagged and clef and al the worlde quaved. / Ded men for that dyne come out of depe graves / And tolde whi that tempest so longe tyme dured”(ibid).

Things are so disorientated that a blind man, Longinus, stabs Jesus’ corpse, which is hung on the cross: “this blynde bachelor [that] bar hym thorough the herte” (306). This leads to Longinus’ repentance. For example, by spilling Christ’s blood, his eyes are opened and he sees his mistake: “The blode spronge

down by the spere and unspered [his] eyen. / Thanne fel the knyghte upon knees  
and cryed [Jhesu] mercy. / “Ayeyne my wille it was, Lorde, to wownde yow so  
sore” (306). Christ’s pure blood cleanses Longinus and leads to his awakening.

However, Longinus is not the only one who has sinned. Faith berates the Jews,  
whom he calls “false”, blaming them for Jesus’ murder and telling them that they  
will be punished:

For be this derkenesse y-do, Deth worth [y-vanquished],  
And ye lordeynes han y-lost, for Lyf shal have the maistrye;  
And yowre fraunchise that fre was, fallen is in thraldome;  
And ye cherles and yowre children chieve shal ye nevre,  
Ne have lordship in londe ne no londe tylye,  
But al bareyne be and [by] usurye [lybben],  
Which is lyf that owre Lorde in alle laws acurseth.  
Now yowre good days ar done as Danyel prophecyed;  
Whan Cryst cam her kingdom the croune shulde [lese]:  
*Cum veniat sanctus sanctorum cessabit unxio vestra.* (306)

Faith states that the Jews’ days of prosperity are over; they will be among the  
servant class, without land or property to reign over. They will lead a “lyf that  
owre Lorde in alle laws acurseth”(ibid). In other words, they will behave in  
opposition to what God wants. This contradicts with the beginning of *Piers  
Plowman* because Langland emphasizes the value of hard work, yet these Jews

will not be included in society or the afterlife and promise of Heaven the way that hardworking Christians will. Clearly, only Christians will benefit from the spiritual and economic tasks that Langland calls for and outlines throughout the narrative.

As we have seen, Langland focuses on showing us good and bad people in his poem. The good are the laborers and the bad are lazy, unproductive, and prone to sin. It is important to note that Langland includes a variety of characters. As noted above, different symbolic sites are described in the poem, from high hills to low dunes. A variety of jobs are performed in Langland's world as well, especially noticeably in the Prologue. According to Emily Steiner, Langland has set up his poem to include diverse characters, who differ not in some modern, purely social sense, but in terms of skills and jobs:

[Langland's poem] proposes that a totality, the social real or *universitas civium*, is constituted by variety in multiplicity and, more specifically, by a diversity of functions, estates, and crafts...It proposes that the view of a whole, the totality in its immediacy and entirety, depends upon the fact of dissimilarity (as opposed to similarity, for example, or geography.) It depends, in other words, on whether we visualize the whole comprising or broken down into preachers, tailors, cardinals, minstrels, merchants, and bakers. (13)

Although we do read about characters with dubious backgrounds such as the prostitutes Jonet and Pernel as well as the gamblers, Langland depicts a large group of workers who contribute in diverse ways to their society and economy. As Steiner adequately notes, “[Langland] satirizes the faults of individuals and occupations” (14).

The Dreamer is the perfect person to relate this world to readers because in his altered state, as he moves from sleep to wakefulness, he can see and meet the varied characters of this Medieval society, people who support an agricultural and goods-based exchange economy. Steiner writes that the Dreamer can see everything: “For example, the list of occupations that follows the poem’s initial statement of diversity, together with the list that concludes the Prologue, further persuade us that the dreamer sees the whole world because the poetic field encompasses a total vision, whose lens is both critical and wide”(14). Langland is not describing a fantastical world; instead, he is commenting on his own time period - a medieval world that is being impacted by the diversity of the labor force: “We might even say, if we were to take diversity to be a historical condition, that Langland is recording the upheavals resulting from the increasing diversification of medieval society”(ibid). If this is true, then Langland is accomplishing something much like what Chaucer does in the prologue of the *The Canterbury Tales*; there are diverse roles and occupations for each member of society in the middle ages.

Steiner hints at the changes that are occurring at the time Langland writes, but I feel she does not go far enough. Steiner's article focuses on the meaning of diversity, defined as the variety of skills among laborers. She calls diversity "Langland's political aesthetic" which she combines with her discussion of his poetic style and his reliance on alliteration to spell out the types of jobs that workers are capable of (19). She also gives readers a glimpse of the larger political changes occurring in the fourteenth century: "Langland is deeply interested in good governance, monarchical power, and the role of counsel, topics explored in the three kingship allegories that occupy the middle of the Prologue" (17). However, her description is lacking. Steiner does not address the social problems that inform *Piers Plowman*, events such as the succession of boy king Richard II from King Edward III, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, and the threat of the Plague, which not only decimated the population but changed the economy from a feudal economy to a wage based economy.

As Langland moves from the First Vision to the Second, he shifts his focus from how a kingdom should be governed to how people should govern themselves and their actions through penance. The title character Piers Plowman makes his appearance in the poem as Will wakes and falls asleep. In Passus 6, Piers Plowman assigns jobs to everyone around him. Their options are to work the land or gather food. However, some people are not cooperating with this system of labor. They are not earning their daily bread and tensions are rising between

employers and laborers, something which in medieval England also occurred.

These tensions were exacerbated by the onslaught of the plague.

Disease was considered to be a divine punishment for society's wrongdoings, errors and sins, as can be seen from the topmost classes (the king and clergy) down to the workers. The year 1348 was one of the most difficult years of the medieval period. As Peter Lewis Allen notes, the spreading plague affected vast areas and slashed the population to pieces: "a third to a half of the population of Europe and the Middle East died" (61). Furthermore, in the face of plague, a disease which seemed clouded in mystery, society itself started to unravel. Allen states that the "civil bonds that normally held society together ruptured completely" (*ibid*). People who contracted the disease acquired numerous symptoms which were both devastating and lethal:

The symptoms of the disease were terrifying: the infected were tormented with painful boils "the size of an apple or an egg"; they coughed until they could not breathe; they vomited green and black fluids, or even pure blood. They lost consciousness. Their eyelids turned blue, their faces the color of lead, their eyes red and swollen. Had the disease not been fatal, perhaps these "signs" or "tokens" might have troubled the victims less, but in fact the death sentence was swift and sure. (*ibid*)

With symptoms like these, it is no wonder that people were fearful. Even worse was that families turned on each other, refusing to help their sick loved ones in

fear of contagion. Boccaccio noted that, “Fathers and mothers refused to visit or tend their very children, as [if] they had not been theirs” (ibid). Plague victims also had to be buried separately, away from church graveyards.

Allen focuses on how the religious in the medieval period believed that disease was a way by which God had chastised humankind. Although the plague was not considered a punishment for sexual sins, as was leprosy, it was feared as a penal and ethical sentence from God. Allen connects a series of diseases throughout time (Lovesickness, Leprosy, Plague, Syphilis, and AIDS). History (and society’s ideas about religion) tends to repeat so much that Allen compares the revulsion people had about the plague to the way modern people feel about diseases like AIDS. Medieval society (especially the upper class) was repulsed by the poor who were often the victims of plague and subsequently, they desired to push them out of their communities. According to Allen, “Expelled from society in life by their sickness, the victims of plague were permanently banned from the community in death. This extreme level of revulsion and fear paralleled the fearsome rituals to which medieval society had subjected lepers and Jews, and foreshadowed the cruelest recriminations twentieth-century American fundamentalist ministers would issue about people with AIDS” (75).

With the population dwindling, workers had to take on more work to maintain agriculture and the economy. As a result, the variety of characters that Langland sets up in his Prologue serves to teach readers about the changes sweeping the

economic system of England in his time. Anna Baldwin terms this kind of allegory “venality satire”:

This kind of allegory is known as venality satire, that is to say, satire against the unscrupulous acquisition of money. Contemporary satire of this kind can be seen as a response to an economic change in society – the emergence of a wage economy where services and labour were paid for in money, as distinct from a feudal economy where they were paid for in land that the peasants were allowed to work (though not to own). As England’s feudal economy waned, accelerated by the reduction of the population in the Black Death from 1348, lords were increasingly having to pay their servants in wages rather than land. (40)

It is as if the familiar feudal symbols, such as knights and armor, were becoming passé. As citizens demanded more rights and payment for work, the power of landowners and clergy was increasingly challenged with their transgressions becoming more visible.

Tensions had also increased between royalty and the general population. For example, Edward III was becoming known for his overspending and abusing his position as king. The most visible example of Edward’s misdeeds involved his mistress Alice Perrers, a woman who became a great liability to the kingdom. She was known for the huge amounts spent keeping her as Edward’s mistress. As Anna Baldwin describes, Alice Perrers was “said to cost the Treasure over £2,000



a year – an enormous sum at the time” (28). Clearly, the presence of Alice Perrers at Court not only cost a lot monetarily but also caused additional strife because members of Parliament tried (unsuccessfully) to banish her from England.

The king’s mistress reveals cogent similarities to Meed in Langland’s poem. Although she appears only in the First Vision (Passus 1-4), there seem to be numerous ways to understand her role. One is that Meed may have been based on Alice Perrers as a symbol of royal vice: “Royal corruption is epitomized by a character who could have been modeled on Alice Perrers: Lady Meed” (Baldwin 29). Furthermore, Meed’s story is seen as “a window on late-fourteenth-century misgovernment” (40). Edward and his supporters wanted to maintain and build his wealth and power. King Edward III’s son, John of Gaunt, helped to diminish Parliament’s growing powers and keep Edward’s policies intact, while also protecting Alice Perrers. With the presence of this corruption, it is easy to see why poets such as Langland were picking up on the dichotomy that existed between the rich and poor. Edward III, after all, was busy adding to his coffers and flagrantly showing off his expensive mistress who taxpayers were supporting.

The King’s successor, Richard II, was also involved with controversies, notably rising tax costs which led to the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. As the power shifted from the older King Edward III to the boy king Richard II, not much changed because the king and lords were still building their resources despite what was best for the people. As Anna Baldwin notes, royals were “building up

retinues of their own” (42). In the wake of the change in leadership, lords were paying people off and Lady Meed can be seen as an allegorical symbol of the economic breakdown that was occurring: “her retinue of administrative and judicial figures becomes an allegory of the recent breakdown in justice and public order” (*ibid*).

Richard II became king when he was ten so in addition to other corrupt activities that were being carried out by the upperclass men, the king’s Councillors used illegal methods to raise money. In particular, the Poll Taxes of 1377-1380 sparked the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. Other egregious acts such as “the dispossession of tenants from royal lands” and “the raising of forced loans” became habitual (57). Many penalties were placed on the middle class because of the absence of an adult king. When Richard became a teenager, he started to act as a king but it was too late and his reign was already known for corruption.

Alastair Dunn remarks that all ranks of society had good reason to rebel during the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381. The revolt was labeled the Peasant’s Revolt by historians in the centuries after the events transpired (13). Working class members of society in England considered themselves in relation to their occupation or family connections rather than labeling themselves as a peasant class. For example, Dunn states that the rebels “would have supplied a self-description from his or her occupation, social status, or relationship to a superior” and that the word peasant “is better suited to the rural societies of medieval France and Germany”

(12-13). England is a very different society and must be taken into consideration exactly as Langland set up in *Piers Plowman*. The lower class was the target of tax raising schemes in which the king would launch wars and overseas squirmishes. In addition, the poor would be hit hardest by natural disasters like poor weather patterns and diseased animals: “periods of dearth and poor harvests accentuated the divisions between wealthier and poorer village families, which were well-established before the advent of the Black Death” (Dunn 21). But it was even more complex than a divide between rich and poor; the lowest in society were exposed to the worst living conditions but still expected to labor: “the English peasantry had endured almost a century of instability in its living standards , and an existence that was, at best, precarious, and, at worst, verging on starvation” (Dunn 29).

Added to this strain was the impact of the Black Death, which decimated the population and transformed the English countryside. There were not enough workers to complete tasks: “Many settlements lost such a high proportion of their population that there were not enough resident labourers to sustain minimum levels of cultivation” (*ibid*). However, workers began to feel their bargaining power and worth. There were many jobs available and now workers sought mobility and better pay. For example, landlords had to deal with new concerns:

For landlords, the most noticeable , and painful, consequence of the epidemic was the keen awareness among labourers of their own rising

value. Henry Knighton, the cellarer of Leicester Abbey, recorded with horror the sudden escalation in wage demands that his own house faced: 'In the following autumn (1350) no one could get a reaper for less than 8d with food, a mower for less than 12d with food'. (Dunn 30)

Some employers, in particular the Church, were less forthcoming with wages. Dunn notes that "religious corporations were among the most conservative and cost-conscious employers", a fact that contributed to the public's ire and inflamed the uprising (24). The Church failed to keep up with the pace of modern life; wages stayed low and living costs rose. For instance, abbeys offered many people jobs but "on the manor of Hinderclay (Suffolk) Westminster Abbey had raised its wage rates by only 5% in the period 1270-1320, whereas prices for basic commodities had risen by twenty-five per cent" (Dunn 24). The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379, and 1380, with the third tax being the most inflammatory, caused the Peasant's Revolt of 1381.

There were groups opposed to corruption and unjust taxes. For example, rebels and common folk looked to Wat Tyler, John Wycliffe, and others for leadership. As civilians looked to leaders who were not clerics or a king, it became clear that men were going to rebel and put their leaders on trial. Chaucer and Langland were able to pick up on the straining social tides in England of the time. Lillian Bisson classified Medieval society into three distinct categories; there are "those who pray" (the clergy), "those who fight" (the nobility), and "those who work" (the

commoners and peasantry). However, when considering the injustices that the former two groups placed on the latter, it is no wonder Langland chose to illustrate these tensions in *Piers Plowman*. The lower classes were forming an identity; although they would never equal the power held by the clergy or the rich, they had power of their own, something which startled the upper classes: “Trade and commerce in the city was systematically rigged for the benefit of entrenched monopolies, and internal protectionism was inherent to the structure of guilds and crafts. Therefore, it should not be surprising that many inhabitants of London felt that they had more in common with the labourers and artisans at their gates, than with their more privileged fellow denizens of the city” (Dunn 84).

However forceful this burgeoning group of workers and common folk, they were not able to complete the revolt on which they had embarked. To further enforce their power and control of the populace, Parliament passed the Act of 1381, making rioting an act of treason (Mortimer 235). The poem thus concludes without a solution to the problems plaguing ordinary people, thus advocating an economic system based on good, hardworking common people and the evil and unjust treatment and conditions they had to live with – a true economy of good and evil that has endured prominently in the literature of the Middle Ages and has had lasting effects to this present day.

## II. *Beowulf* and *Tristan*: Monstrous Threats and Monstrous Punishments

I wish here to examine the similarities between *Beowulf* and Beroul's *The Romance of Tristan*. In particular, both stories feature crumbling societies in which their leaders are plagued by inner turmoil and discontent among the upper class as well as what may be termed larger social diseases, such as monsters and leprosy. It is possible to think about these stories in terms of a duality – that various events occur in the higher ranks of society at the same time as parallel social problems emerge in the lower classes. On the inside, or in the inner circle, are characters who attempt to destroy their king. For instance, in Beroul's *Tristan* there appear three barons, as well as the dwarf Frocin, who seems to be a figure much like a court jester and an advisor to the king. In *Beowulf*, there similarly appear useless knights who fail to uphold their promises to fight for their aging king, Hrothgar. Unferth, for instance, becomes a character who sets out to undermine Hrothgar and Beowulf. On the outside, excluded from characters who possess high rank, appear monstrous characters who seem abnormal and sick, as for example, Grendel and his mother, as well as lepers, who also remain on the outskirts. These damaged figures, contaminated by illness or greed, taint society and eventually cause the destruction of an entire way of life.

*Beowulf* begins with a call for readers' and listeners' attention: "Hear me!". The narrator focuses on the long history of "Danish heroes, / Ancient kings"

amongst which Shild is regarded as one of the most legendary. The story defines manliness as strength. Shild has demonstrated his skill and power:

How Shild made slaves of soldiers from every  
 Land, crowds of captives he'd beaten  
 Into terror; he'd traveled to Denmark alone,  
 An abandoned child, but changed his own fate,  
 Lived to be rich and much honored. He ruled  
 Lands on all sides: wherever the sea  
 Would take them his soldiers sailed, returned  
 With tribute and obedience. There was a brave  
 King! And he gave them more than his glory,  
 Conceived a son for the Danes. (Raffel 3)

Strength as a ruler is defined by one's ability to make others obey, to own land, to conduct sea travel (it is important to be able to visit the land one owns as well as to conquer other lands), to lavish gifts on followers (as for example with the "ring-giving lord"), and to produce male heirs (Raffel 4). Shild is an orphan able to create his own success, as for instance, by producing male progeny with his son Beo. The Danes, who were previously "kingless and miserable", have a male heir to the throne and have now evolved into a happy, thriving, culture or country, confident in their authority and position in the world. Shild is also a generous King, who shares his treasure with his followers to ensure their loyalty to him and

to their prince: “His father’s warriors were wound round his heart / With golden rings, bound to their prince / By his father’s treasure” (3). Furthermore, Shild is so successful as a ruler that he is able to manipulate the seas. Instead of being an impotent leader, unable to take action to defend his land as we see later with Hrothgar, Shild’s soldiers travel “wherever the sea would take them” (3). His power is also evident by the type of burial he is given. He has managed sea and land for his lifetime, and when he is dead he is handed back to the power of the ocean and the unidentified god who controls it: “[His followers] Sadly let / The water pull at the ship, watched it / Slowly sliding to where neither rulers / Nor heroes nor anyone can say whose hands / Opened to take that motionless cargo” (4). Shild and his descendants are strong Danish rulers.

In contrast to this definition of manliness is the weakness of King Hrothgar’s court. Hrothgar is impotent: although he has a wife and sons, he lacks the ability to defend his country. Herot, built at Hrothgar’s direction, is a massive castle, just right for his followers to socialize. It is the perfect place to eat, drink, and be merry: “Day after day the music rang / Loud in that hall, the harp’s rejoicing / Call and the poet’s clear songs” (6). However, it is like a sink hole, literally a building awaiting its destruction: “That towering place, gabled and huge, / Stood waiting for time to pass, for war / To begin, for flames to leap as high / As the feud that would light them, and for Herot to burn” (*ibid*). The feud in this story takes place between Grendel and the inhabitants of Herot. Initially, Grendel is the



perpetrator and victor of their feud. As the narrator states, Grendel, *not* Hrothgar, “ruled, fought with the righteous, / One against many, and won” (line 144-145). Hrothgar is a failure as king, despite his victories as a younger king, he is now gray haired and powerless to prevent future attacks. He can only mourn his losses:

Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless  
 In Herot, a mighty prince mourning  
 The fate of his lost friends and companions,  
 Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn  
 His followers apart. He wept, fearing  
 The beginning might not be the end. (8)

Clearly, Hrothgar is caught in a never ceasing cycle of violence, of which he is neither perpetrator or victor. Furthermore, it seems as though Hrothgar is not certain about who his enemy is. The narrator calls Grendel “some demon” – which relates to how Grendel is described as one of the ancestors of Cain; he is one of “a thousand forms of evil” (7). To Hrothgar, Grendel’s name does not matter – the villain is known by its animalistic strength, “its tracks”, not by his name because Hrothgar has never faced Grendel in battle. Hrothgar has not fought back against Grendel, so he cannot compel his followers to stay in Herot and fight. Hrothgar’s men are only gifted at running away from the monster: “Distance was safety; the only survivors / Were those who fled him” (lines 142-143).

The “feud” introduced during the description of Herot also relates to the problems in Hrothgar’s court. For example, Hrothgar is a failure as a King, but his men are also incompetent. A King should be able to rely on his advisors, also known as the comitatus; together they should form the backbone of their government and compose a course of action. However, Hrothgar’s cabinet members are indecisive and scared to act:

The best and most noble  
 Of his council debated remedies, sat  
 In secret sessions, talking of terror  
 And wondering what the bravest of warriors  
 could do. (9)

In an attempt to be useful, Hrothgar’s men looked to their roots in pagan religion to solve this feud with Grendel. They “sacrificed to the old stone gods” and “made heathen vows” (9-10). However, this was ineffectual because only the right warrior can solve their problems and return peace to Herot.

Beowulf fits the definition of a warrior, and he becomes a hero just like Shield. Specifically, he is able to command his men and handle the perils of ocean travel in order to assist the Danes:

So Beowulf  
 Chose the mightiest men he could find,  
 The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen

In all, and led them down to their boat;  
 He knew the sea, would point the prow  
 Straight to that distant Danish shore. (11)

Beowulf has a reputation. He has heroically exterminated a race of giants, “I drove / Five great giants into chains, chased / All of that race from the earth” (lines 419-421). He has also battled sea creatures. He knows that he can cure Herot of its plague – Grendel: “Death was my errand and the fate / They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called / Together, and I’ve come” (lines 424-426).

Hrothgar is grateful for Beowulf’s help. He explains his past examples of leadership; when he was younger and knew Beowulf’s father, Hrothgar settled disputes and maintained peace between nations: “I bought the end of Edgetho’s / Quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean’s / Furrows to the Wulfings” (lines 470-472). Now he is weak and unable to fix the problems the Danes have with Grendel. He admits his failure to maintain an army and protect his people:

My tongue grows heavy,  
 And my heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel  
 Has brought us, the damage he’s done, here  
 In this hall. You see for yourself how much smaller  
 Our ranks have become, and can guess what we’ve lost  
 To his terror. (22)

Hrothgar discusses the sense of loss that pervades his people, something that is not in concordance with the rich history of victorious Dane warriors.

Every male leader in *Beowulf* can look back on a glorious past. For example, Shild, Hrothgar as a young king, Beowulf, Beowulf's father, and other paternal ancestors are important in the development of the Danes' and Geats' cultural centrality, which is built upon the strength of its leader. More importantly, for all these stories of brave warriors to be told, there must be present a speaker to share the information. Throughout *Beowulf*, there are poets at every gathering who act as scop, storytellers who narrate stories of great kings and earlier warriors. Beowulf himself acts as a scop when he recalls past experiences and victories in warfare.

Unferth, however, acts as a foil to Beowulf and to Hrothgar's court. As a courtier, Unferth is near Hrothgar; in fact he "sat at Hrothgar's feet" (24). However, it is well known that he has a controversial past because he has killed his own family members. Unferth, jealous of Beowulf's military prowess, speaks out "harshly and sharp":

You're Beowulf, are you – the same  
 Boastful fool who fought a swimming  
 Match with Brecca, both of you daring  
 And young and proud, exploring the deepest  
 Seas, risking your lives for no reason

But the danger? All older and wiser heads warned you

Not to, but no one could check such pride. (*ibid*)

Unferth emphasizes two things in his speech. First, he stresses the importance of leadership. He calls leaders those “older and wiser heads”, who know better than to start “a swimming match” in the dangerous ocean, which is exactly what Beowulf has done. Older men are there to guide younger men’s actions. Secondly, Unferth draws attention to Beowulf’s reckless streak. Beowulf may be guilty of what Unferth calls “such pride”. Unferth questions whether Beowulf won the swimming match, because at the end of the competition, Brecca rode the current back to his homeland and Beowulf was caught in chilly ocean waves, in which he “struggled seven long nights / To survive” (lines 517-518). Unferth attributes Beowulf’s reputation as a victorious competitor to pure chance: “You’ve been lucky in your battles, Beowulf, but I think / Your luck may change if you challenge Grendel” (25).

Beowulf responds by making use of his abilities as a storyteller. He is a master of language and is able to answer Unferth’s claims in two ways. First, he describes what he has achieved as a warrior, focusing on his skill at killing life-threatening sea monsters. He has brandished his sword against unnamed creatures, leaving “their blood spilled out / on the sand” (27). He also dismisses Unferth’s claims that his success has been due to luck: “Lucky or not, nine was the number /

Of sea-huge monsters I killed”( *ibid*). Second, he scoffs at Unferth’s lack of abilities and shows listeners how weak Unferth is:

I’ve heard  
 No tales of you, Unferth, telling  
 Of such clashing terror, such contests in the night!  
 Brecca’s battles were never so bold;  
 Neither he nor you can match me – and I mean  
 No boast, have announced no more than I know  
 To be true. And there’s more: you murdered your  
 Brothers,  
 Your own close kin. Words and bright wit  
 Won’t help your soul; you’ll suffer hell’s fires,  
 Unferth, forever tormented. Ecglaf’s  
 Proud son, if your hands were as hard, your heart  
 As fierce as you think it, no fool would dare  
 To raid your hall, ruin Herot  
 And oppress its prince, as Grendel has done.  
 But he’s learned that terror is his alone,  
 Discovered he can come for your people with no  
 Fear  
 Of reprisal; he’s found no fighting, here. (28)

Beowulf places an emphasis on his ability to narrate a true story. In particular, he says, “I mean / No boast, have announced no more than I know / To be true” (lines 585-587). As he defends himself from Unferth’s critique of his character, Beowulf begins to act as a scop or storyteller. He tells the story of Unferth’s misdeeds, how he has committed fratricide. Furthermore, Beowulf states that Unferth has become so involved in being duplicitous, that he must suffer punishment in hell when he dies. He will be “forever tormented” and never experience the type of renown that a hero receives (line 590). Thus Beowulf illustrates the difference between Unferth’s character and the heroes of their society, himself included. Perhaps Unferth has also been preoccupied with himself; he has let fear prevent him from protecting the Danes and acting as a courtier should. Manly strength and warrior nature only belong to the monster Grendel – the “terror is his alone” (line 595). Beowulf declares that among the two of them, only Unferth has been a “proud son”. Instead of acting with dignity, he has taken credit for strength he does not possess: “if your hands were as hard, your heart / As fierce as you think it, no fool would dare / To raid your hall” (line 591-593). Beowulf insinuates that Unferth has allowed Grendel to raid Herot.

This verbal sparring between Unferth and Beowulf may be an example of a Germanic flyting. Robert E. Bjork explains that many scholars have tried to explain Unferth’s role in Beowulf. They study the meaning of his name as well as his job as a *pyle* in Hrothgar’s court. Unferth’s name may mean “unpeace”,

referring to his role as an opponent to Hrothgar and Beowulf and his sordid past as a murderer. However, Bjork emphasizes that much about Unferth is uncertain. He says that Rosier believed that Unferth is a villain in the story, but he is not entirely convinced. Bjork believes that many researchers are biased for or against Unferth. He states, “Those with a bad opinion of Unferth find a perjorative meaning for the term; those with a good opinion find a good one” (Fulk 207).

The key to uncovering the truth about Unferth’s role in the poem may involve looking at its Germanic origins, or as Bjork says, “the cultural underpinnings of the epic” (*ibid*). In comparison to other approaches, Bjork insists on its cultural meanings: “Interesting and useful as such studies are, those with a broader focus – the Germanic context of the episode – seem to offer more complete explanations for Unferth’s role in the poem. Many critics, such as Rosier (1962) and Eliason (1963), have observed that the Beowulf-Unferth exchange is an example of a Germanic flyting, a verbal battle traditional in heroic verse” (Fulk 208). Carol J. Clover has written about the flyting in *Beowulf*. Bjork writes, “Clover’s study has clarified much about the Unferth episode. It explained Unferth’s seemingly rude behavior that receives no reprimand and occasions no apology. It accounted for ‘the unusual rhetorical features of the speeches’ (*ibid*).

Unferth may pose another threat to Hrothgar’s court because he wants to interfere in the succession. Unferth acts as a disruption to the plot – challenging whether Beowulf can take on the monster enemy Grendel. He is also at



Hrothgar's feet, near Hrothgar's beloved cup bearing wife and two young sons. He may be like Judas, in which his past as a fratricide may make him a threat waiting to erupt. Unferth seems to disappear in the plot, only to be replaced with bigger threats in the form of the monsters Grendel and later his mother and also a dragon. One threat replaces another.

Beowulf can fulfill the tasks that Unferth cannot. He strips his armor and will face Grendel unarmed, "with our Lord's / High favor and his own bold courage and strength. / He stripped off his mail shirt, his helmet, his sword" (Raffel 31). Furthermore, Beowulf is determined and does not need weapons. He has heard that Grendel fights with "his claws and teeth" and "his clumsy fists", so it is better for him to fight without tools. Beowulf declares, "I will / meet him / with my hands empty" (*ibid*). Beowulf's hands are significant a few lines later because he will match Grendel's strength. Their hands meet during the battle, and Beowulf is able to defeat Grendel with one arm: "[Grendel] clutched at Beowulf with his claws, / Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper / – And was instantly seized himself, claws / Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm" (lines 746-749). Furthermore, Beowulf disables Grendel by cracking his claws: "But Higlac's follower remembered his final / Boast and, standing erect, stopped / The monster's flight, fastened those claws / In his fists till they cracked" (lines 758-761). There is a battle in which man and monster meet. Beowulf's hands represent all men, and man is able to kill the evil monster.

Although their fight becomes a picture of humankind's battle with monstrous threats, not all men can do what Beowulf does. In particular, Hrothgar's followers, the Danes, are "helpless people" who cannot respond to Grendel's attacks (37). In comparison Beowulf's men appear much stronger and are willing to help Beowulf defeat Grendel: "All of Beowulf's / Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral / Swords raised and ready, determined / To protect their prince if they could" (36). Even though the Geats will try to assist him, Beowulf is the only one to hurt the monster because Grendel has "bewitched all men's weapons" (*ibid*). He has rendered them impotent as warriors because his spells have affected the efficacy of their blades: "[Grendel] laid spells / That blunted every mortal man's blade" (*ibid*). Nothing will pierce Grendel's "sin-stained" skin. Perhaps Grendel has made his human opponents impotent in other ways; he takes away their ability to retaliate and, in turn, they are emasculated. A mournful Hrothgar explains how unequal the match is between men and a monster like Grendel: "[our people] despaired as deeply, found hope no easier, / knew nothing, no way to end this unequal / war of men and devils, warriors and monstrous fiends" (41). Hrothgar and his people remain despondent and unable to act.

Unferth enters the plot again when he witnesses Beowulf's heroism at firsthand. Upon seeing evidence of Beowulf's victory in the form of Grendel's claw hanging from the ceiling at Herot, he becomes silent, unable to critique the rescuer of their land: "Unferth grew quiet, gave up quarreling over / Beowulf's

old battles, stopped all his boasting / Once everyone saw proof of that prince's strength" (42). He no longer challenges Beowulf verbally (he also never poses a physical threat); he gives Beowulf his sword, Hrunting, after Herot is attacked by Grendel's mother, who seeks revenge for her lost son. Unferth becomes less important as other monsters emerge.

Hrothgar seems to withdraw from the situation. His country has been devastated by Grendel for so long, and just when he is no longer a threat, they are once more plagued by a female monster, Grendel's mother, who seeks revenge for her son's death. The "female horror" hurts Hrothgar on a personal level when she seizes his best friend and advisor, Esher, and runs away: "[She] took a victim and fled from hall / Running to the moors, discovered, but her supper assured, sheltered in her dripping claws. / She'd taken Hrothgar's closest friend / ... No Geat could have stopped her" (63). Once more, Hrothgar and his men are powerless to defend themselves. Not only has she seized Esher, but she has ripped him apart (Esher's bloody head" floats in the lake) (*ibid*). She has also retrieved Grendel's claw, the one sign that the Danes had of Beowulf's victory over Grendel. This makes it impossible for either side to revel in their success; as the narrator of *Beowulf* says, "No one had won, / Both had lost" (line 1305).

With this new, female threat to his society, Hrothgar becomes further handicapped and impotent as a leader. He shows his anguish physically – his losses are piling up and he is aging quickly as a result: "The wise old King

trembled in anger and grief, his dearest Friend and adviser dead” (lines 1307-1309). He only has his memories of Esher, and he reminisces about the times he fought side by side with him: “Esher is dead, my comrade, when we went into battle, who’d beaten back enemy swords standing at my side” (59).

Hrothgar discusses the monsters who have been plaguing his people; he states that there are two and “one of the devils was a female creature” (Raffel 60). Grendel’s mother is considered an aberration because she defies her role as a woman. Although she is a mother, she is not a typical Medieval woman, one who exists as a King’s wife and bedmate, mother of male heirs, or cup-bearer. According to Jane Chance, in her article “Grendel’s Mother as Anti-Type of the Virgin and Queen”, women in the Middle Ages were primarily seen as peacemakers. For instance, they pass cups in the mead hall to ensure loyalty to their husband the King, they act as mothers who bear sons, and they marry (or are married off) strategically to unite opposing nations. However, Grendel’s mother is monstrous by these standards; as Chance says, she cannot be a Virgin Mary figure or a Queen, because she is unmarried. The *Beowulf* poet also maintains Grendel’s status as a bastard son and his mother an unwed woman: “If he had a father no one knew him” (Raffel 60). Grendel’s mother becomes a monster who plagues Hrothgar’s country. She is monstrous because she takes revenge on them, and men are traditionally revenge-seekers. Not only is she acting out but she is going against her gender role in society and trying to be a man: “she arrogates herself

the masculine role of the warrior or lord". As Chance describes, Grendel's mother's "unnatural behavior" rests in her belief that "avenging is more important than peace making".<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Chance explains that Grendel's mother's attachment to her son and need for revenge may also be symptoms of their too close, even incestuous, relationship.

Hrothgar is so desperate to solve this problem that once again, Beowulf is the only man who faces the threat. Hrothgar dares Beowulf to go find Grendel's mother in her underwater den: "Seek it, if you dare!" (Raffel 61). It is a close call, but Beowulf is ultimately the victor of their fight. All seems at peace in the world, but the world Beowulf lives in is never truly peaceful. Later, a pauper steals treasure from a dragon's den and brings the dragon's fury on Beowulf's country. However, this time Beowulf is not successful. With each subsequent monster, the end of their society draws near.

In *Beowulf*, the appearance of the dragon marks the entry of a mythical creature who presents a genuine threat to the Geats. The dragon is stirred into action when he is disturbed by a thief who steals from his horde of jewels. This collection of jewels and fine items originated with people who came years before Beowulf and his kingdom existed. The dragon indicates the end of Beowulf's rule, for he dies during combat with the monster. Additionally, it marks the end of

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<sup>2</sup> For an interesting analysis of Grendel's mother, see Chance "Grendel's Mother as Anti-type of the Virgin and Queen", p. 257.

the Geats as a civilization. Unless Wiglaf is able to take Beowulf's place as ruler and organize his men to defend their territory, other civilizations will race to conquer them. As the herald declares to the Geats, "And this people can expect fighting, once / The Franks, and the Frisians, have heard that our / king lies dead. The news will spread quickly" (Raffel 118). Therefore, the monster which is in the form of the dragon becomes a sign of impending changes to their leadership and the readying demise of their country.

Ironically, the dragon at first is not a threat. He is guarding the treasures of a lost race of people. The last survivor of the race hoarded the treasure, which became a symbol of the end of an era and the end of his civilization:

That tower was heaped high with hidden treasure, stored there Years before  
by the last survivor Of a noble race, ancient riches Left in the darkness as  
the end of a dynasty Came. Death had taken them, one By one, and the  
warrior who watched over all That remained mourned their fate, expecting,  
Soon, the same for himself, knowing The gold and jewels he had guarded  
so long Could not bring him pleasure much longer. (93)

The narrator builds a sorrowful tone as he describes the last survivor of the ancient race who hides the treasure in a seaside tower. He knows his days are numbered and he will be the last to remember his people.

He seeks more seclusion on the cliff – a "sealed fortress with no windows, no doors, waves in front of it, rocks behind" (94). The nameless last survivor, like

Hrothgar at the beginning of the poem, is left to spend his last days reminiscing about the glorious society he was once a part of. For instance, he emphasizes the enormity of his loss when he says, “No one is left / To lift these swords, polish these jeweled / Cups: no one leads, no one follows” (*ibid*). The very foundation of medieval life – the court – has died, because the leaders have been killed. There will be no envoys to make agreements with distant countries: “None of these treasures will travel to distant / lands, following their lords” (*ibid*). In addition, the artisans have passed away; the people who make and care for helmets, swords, and mail shirts no longer exist: “Helmets, worked with gold, will tarnish / And crack; the hands that should clean and polish / them Are still forever” (*ibid*). The political power and force of the survivor’s kingdom is also lost, which is indicated by the once sharp blades which now rust because no warfare can take place: “these mail shirts, worn / In battle, once, while swords crashed / And blades bit into shields and men, / Will rust away like the warriors who owned them” (*ibid*). His kingdom is powerless and emasculated because it has no men to wage war, something which almost happened to Hrothgar when he could no longer command his men until Beowulf rescued them. The fact that the last survivor can remember the power his society once had because of their ability to wage war makes the passing away of his entire race more tragic and reminds readers that the same can happen to any society that exists.

The ending of *Beowulf* therefore supports an allegorical tone. Time repeats itself because the Geats become like the older society of the last survivor. When he is disturbed by a thief, the dragon becomes virulent and attacks the Geats openly. Wiglaf is the only man who is at Beowulf's side throughout the battle against the dragon. As he declares his loyalty to Beowulf: "My sword will fight at your side!", the dragon coats them in a breath of flames. The dragon is unnamed whereas Grendel has a name because he is a descendant of Cain, and thus is a human being, although an aberration of one. The dragon, called "dragon" throughout the end of the poem by the Beowulf narrator, is a true monster. He is terrifying because he is the enemy of all humankind; for instance, he is called "the man-hating monster" during his altercation with Beowulf and Wiglaf (109).

The dragon is not as easily defeated as the previous monsters, Grendel and his mother. Although Beowulf is at the forefront of his people's minds, he cannot escape the effect of time and he is now an aged king. By the end of the poem, Beowulf has become a leader reminiscent of Hrothgar: "He was old / With years and wisdom, fifty winters / A king" (92). His age makes him even more susceptible to the dragon. Unfortunately, Beowulf's experience as a king for fifty years makes it impossible for him to run from his duty to defend his people. Even though he understands the threat he is facing from the dragon, he continues his mission to defend his kingdom. He dies and all that is left is the funeral pyre as



well as a group of twelve men on horseback left to continue their civilization. His tomb is “as great and lasting as his fame” (125).

In Beroul’s *Tristan* various characters also attempt to destroy their king. The lovers, Yseut and Tristan, carry on a love affair that negates their social responsibilities as queen and nephew of king Mark. This not-so-clandestine relationship awakens three barons who are determined to tell Mark about the scandal as well as use it as an impetus to seize power from their king. Furthermore, these attacks on the king come with visible signs of trouble. First there is the problem of Yseut’s lost virginity; something that becomes recreated when Brangane steps in for Yseut on the king and queen’s wedding night. This lost purity becomes a tactile object that haunts the characters of this story, especially when Tristan’s wound bleeds. Second, there is the problem of leprosy which comes up in the Tristan story, both as a possible punishment for Yseut’s infidelity and as a disguise when Tristan disguises himself as a leper. Leprosy is usually associated with the lower class, but here it becomes something that affects people regardless of social rank. I believe a brief look at Henryson’s “The Testament of Cresseid” will build my opinions about how leprosy works in the Tristan tale, as a punishment or jail sentence and as a symptom of society’s inevitable destruction.

At the beginning of Beroul’s work, Tristan demonstrates bravery and honesty. He wishes to become a knight, but he does not use his relation to King Mark to

achieve his position. Instead, he shows his abilities and steps in to fight their enemy from Ireland, Morholt. His self-initiative is similar to that of Beowulf. None of King Mark's knights offered to fight; Tristan differentiates himself from these cowards: "He concealed his identity, preferring to serve the king on the same footing as the other knights-bachelor. But his prowess and his accomplishments cause him to stand out above the rest, and he quickly becomes a favorite of the king's and is liked and admired by all the courtiers" (Fedrick 39). Although Tristan's identity as Mark's nephew is revealed, it is clear that Tristan would be well-loved by Mark even if he were not his relative because of his talent as a warrior. For example, Tristan demonstrates his fearlessness by insisting that only one boat will be docked near the shore of the location of their fight, St. Samson. Clearly, only one person will be the victor of this duel:

"Why do you do that?" asked Morholt.

"Only one of us will need a boat when this combat is ended," said Tristan.<sup>3</sup>

Although both men are struck during the battle, Tristan intensifies Morholt's swift demise: "Both knights were wounded many times in the struggle, until finally Tristan struck Morholt so hard that the blade of his sword pierced Morholt's helmet and split his skull. The blade broke as Tristan withdrew it, leaving a splinter lodged in Morholt's head" (*ibid*).

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<sup>3</sup> Tristan and Morholt's exchange seems similar to that of Beowulf and Unferth. See Fedrick, p. 41.

Tristan escapes, but is left with a mark of his encounter with Morholt.

Morholt's poisoned spear has wounded Tristan to the extent that the wound reeks of his illness: "That wound became worse, and a smell began to issue from it which drove everyone away from his bedside, except the faithful Governal" (*ibid*). Tristan does not respond to the medical treatments in his land, so he leaves his fate up to God and forges a quest to find a cure. He is drifting at sea for a long time; the sea is the intermediary separating him from his homeland of Cornwall and the cure that he seeks in a foreign place. Playing music is the only way Tristan can be free of this no-man's-land of the water and attract attention to himself. Additionally, Tristan changes after he receives his wound. It is as though Morholt has infected Tristan and made him become a liar. For example, he disguises himself as a harp-playing minstrel: "He began to play his harp and attracted the attention of the Irish king, who came to speak to him. Tristan pretended to be a minstrel called Tantris, on a voyage in a merchant ship which had been attacked by pirates, who had given him a bad wound" (Fedrick 42). Tristan's infection is a visible sign of his illness. The King's daughter Yseut will cure him.

Tristan and Yseut never intend to fall in love. When he first meets her, she is treating his wound. He is concealing himself as Tantris to avoid being captured and punished for murdering Morholt. In fact, Tristan has no intention of getting to know Yseut because he is in a rush to return to his Uncle Mark in Cornwall. Just

as Tristan lies about his name, Yseut figures it out and is outraged; she also wants revenge for her uncle's murder. Here, she hates lies and sees Tristan as a liar but later, under the influence of the love potion, she also resorts to lies.

The barons have instigated the need for King Mark to get married because of their valid concerns for the heir to the throne. They want to preserve Mark's line and not have Tristan in power: "The barons at Mark's court were making efforts to persuade the king to take a wife, for they were jealous of Tristan and feared that he would gain the inheritance if Mark died without children" (42). Tristan travels to Ireland to search for the ideal woman, the woman whose hair matches the one in the bird's beak, for King Mark. Ironically, almost exactly like what happens in *Beowulf*, Tristan learns that a dragon is threatening the Irish people: "Soon after their arrival they learned that the country was being laid waste by a dragon, which was doing so much harm that the Irish king had offered his daughter as a prize to the man who killed it" (43). Tristan kills the dragon and protects the Irish people, but collapses because the dragon's tongue, which he kept as a token, poisons him. Humorously, the Irish king's seneschal assumes the dragon's slayer is dead, so he takes credit for killing the dragon and he goes to accept Yseut's hand in marriage. However, the Irish king is doubtful of the "unexpected prowess of his cowardly seneschal" and he delays the marriage (*ibid*). Yseut takes initiative and finds Tristan, proving that he killed the dragon

and in return the King grants Tristan Yseut's hand in marriage. Tristan, however, maintains his disinterest and procures her for King Mark.

On their journey to King Mark the two young people are still indifferent about each other. Even more so on Yseut's part, because she despises the fact that Tristan dealt her uncle Morholt a fatal blow. However, with the ingestion of the love potion (originally intended to bond Yseut to King Mark) the two jump from partners to lovers, as in a kind of a chess game. The love potion is fast-acting and within four sentences, the two have consummated their love:

While Tristan and Yseut were playing chess he called for a drink. By mistake, Brangain brought the love potion and handed it to Tristan, who drank and passed it to Yseut. Both thought it was good wine: neither knew that it held for them a lifetime of suffering and hardship and that it was to cause their destruction and their death. After some hesitation Tristan and Yseut confessed their love, and it was soon consummated. (44-45)

They are joined together by the love potion, but their proximity to each other allows them to act upon their desire. Tristan is always around the court because of his position as one of his uncle's knights. Yseut, although well-admired by her husband King Mark, also finds it easy to get away with Tristan with help from her maid, Brangain.

Tristan and Yseut are not supposed to be together because Yseut has been handed over to Mark as a way to unite two countries of Cornwall and Ireland.

According to Alan S. Fedrick's introduction to Beroul's poem, it was common in the medieval era for daughters to be married to far away kings; marriage had a political consequence. In particular, noble women were expected to bear male heirs so the queen was expected to be monogamous: "the fidelity of the king's wife was essential both for the king's honour and to ensure the unquestioned succession of his heirs to his lands and titles; and Mark had taken a wife for the explicit purpose of begetting heirs" (Fedrick 15-16). This makes it an even bigger sin on both their parts, because not only is Tristan betraying his uncle, but he is also disrupting the course of politics (the succession of kings) in his country. The lovers are violating their roles in society; they "cut across the moral code and the social and family obligations which are the framework of their existence" (9).

Yseut is no longer a virgin, which poses a risk to her upcoming marriage. Tristan and Yseut decide to recreate Yseut's virginity by using her maid Brangane as a stand in for her wedding night. Mark will never know that his bride has been switched because Tristan once again lies: "Tristan conducted them to their chamber and extinguished all the lights, explaining that this was an Irish custom" (45). After Morholt's wound to Tristan as well as the ingestion of the love potion, Yseut and Tristan become entangled in their lies. Nonetheless, they are still committing adultery and this does not go unseen, especially by the scheming barons.

Yseut's lost virtue haunts them throughout the story. As a consequence, Yseut and Tristan are more susceptible to outside threats and are prone to sin. For instance, Yseut worries that Brangain knows too much about her affair with Tristan, so she arranges to have her maid murdered by two of her male servants. When Brangain conceals Yseut's lost virtue – instead telling the hit men her only fault was “to lend Yseut a clean white tunic when Yseut's was soiled” – Yseut realizes the depth of her mistake and is “overcome with remorse” (46). Although Brangain forgives Yseut, the couple cannot get away from their sin and Yseut seems to be morally declining.

The two lovers are open to outside forces, in particular threats from other people. Here, the barons are momentarily not included in the story and Beroul introduces a new character. For instance, Beroul's chapter called “The Harp and the Rote” contains a story in which a “strange knight” visits Mark's court and plays music. His music is spell-binding and Mark offers the stranger any gift he wants. He chooses Yseut as his gift and runs off with her. King Mark, in a similar weak position as Hrothgar in *Beowulf*, lacks men to defend his wife: “None of the Cornish barons dared fight in her defence” (*ibid*). Tristan, who had been hunting, returns to face the musician. He plays music for him in order to gain his trust and get Yseut back. Ironically, as soon as they are safely in Mark's court, Tristan “warn[s] Mark to take better care of Yseut” (*ibid*). Mark is another powerless king, and Beroul seems to humorously point that out, especially because

comparatively Tristan is in no position to teach other men how to behave morally or with strength.

The three barons, who previously entered the storyline to encourage King Mark to wed, are now suspicious of the marriage. Tristan and Yseut have managed to “deceive Mark but not the others at court” (47). As Beroul succinctly puts it: “Who can be in love for a year or two and not reveal it? For love cannot be concealed. Often one lover would wink at the other, often they would speak together both alone and in the sight of others” (60). They cannot hide their connection and, shamelessly, do not attempt to. Both flaunt their romance everywhere, including the king’s bed. For instance, the barons “had often seen them lying together, naked, in Mark’s bed” (*ibid*).

The barons encourage Mark to take action about the rumors: “A group of barons hostile to Tristan, succeeded in arousing the king’s suspicions concerning the relationship between his wife and his nephew” (47). The barons are described as “wicked men”<sup>4</sup> who demand things from their king. Although it is not unusual for subjects to request certain protections from the king, the barons become a blatant threat, making specific demands. One demand is that Tristan leaves Cornwall or else they will wage war: “They had sworn that, if King Mark did not make his nephew leave the country, they would tolerate it no longer and would

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<sup>4</sup> The barons can be compared to other “wicked men” such as Unferth in *Beowulf* and the corrupt men in *Piers Plowman*.



retire to their castles to make war on the king” (60). They push their aggressive agenda by declaring that unless Mark takes a stand, they will encourage other citizens to abandon their loyalty:

You know all about this extraordinary thing. What are you going to do about it? Now be advised! If you do not banish your nephew from court so that he never returns, we shall no longer support you nor keep peace with you. We shall make our neighbours leave the court, for we cannot put up with this.

We can set out the problem for you quickly. (61)

They are powerful and can influence Mark’s judgment. They “will not consent” to Mark’s foolish blindness; they even hint that Mark is allowing the affair to take place in the public eye (“we know it is true that you are conniving at their wickedness”) (*ibid*). Because of their pull and persuasion in the court, the three barons are similar to the comitatus in Hrothgar’s court mentioned previously in my discussion of *Beowulf*. Mark relies on his council for political advice. He pleads with them, “Give me your advice, I beg you. You must advise me well, for I do not want to lose your service” (*ibid*). King Mark is similar to king Hrothgar, because he is at a loss for what course of action to pursue. His body language betrays his uncertainty: “[Mark] sighed and bent his head. He walked up and down, not knowing what to say” (*ibid*). He has already lost his wife as well as his nephew due to their disloyalty, so Mark is in an unenviable situation in which he is susceptible to the evil barons.

The barons wish to prove Yseut's adultery to Mark and what is more, they wish to overthrow him as king so they resort to using a Dwarf's trick. The dwarf, Frocin, is "extremely cunning" and Beroul calls his actions in the flour scene "a very underhand thing" (62). Frocin is adept at laying a trap for Tristan and Yseut to be discovered: "He went to a baker and bought four pennyworth of flour and tied the bags to his tunic. (Whoever would think of such a low trick?)" (*ibid*). The night before Mark asks Tristan to deliver a letter to King Arthur, the king purposely leaves his bed and waits for Tristan to sneak into Yseut's bed. Fortuitously, for the three barons and Frocin, Tristan has received a wound on a hunting trip: "The wound had bled very much and it was not bound up, to his misfortune" (63). Because Tristan sees that Frocin has poured flour onto the floor, he jumps from his bed near the king's side to Yseut's. For instance, Tristan "put his feet together, judged the distance, leaped and landed on the king's bed. His wound opened and bled a great deal; the blood which came out soaked the sheets. The wound was bleeding but he did not feel it, for he was too intent on his pleasure" (*ibid*). Tristan's wound is his second in the course of the novel. His first is from Morholt's blade and the second is because he has been injured by a boar.

Tristan's bleeding wound becomes another tactile reminder of Yseut's lost virginity when he bleeds all over the king's sheets and the flour-coated floor. For example, blood soaks the white flour which Frocin has placed: "on the flour the warm blood could be seen" (*ibid*). Ironically, Mark is the person who sees

Tristan's blood in his sheets – the sheets where he and Yseut, as a married couple, should lay: “The king noticed the blood in the bed, the white sheets were red with it” (64). Perhaps this is Beroul's method of reminding readers of Yseut's lost maidenhead. Yseut should have bled on her wedding night, but could not because she was not a virgin.

Mark banishes Tristan from court, but the two lovers keep meeting in the orchard. Although Mark is now highly suspicious, he even hides in a tree to listen to the couple, they conceal their relationship by artfully using their words. After they ingest the love potion, the couple cannot stop from embroiling themselves in more lies. For example, their dialogue in the orchard demonstrates Beroul's crafty double entendres. Yseut, aware that Mark is hiding in a tree to overhear the lovers, manages to avoid implicating herself by choosing her words carefully. She says to Tristan, “The king thinks that I have been wicked enough to love you. But before God I swear I have been loyal: may He scourge me if anyone has ever had my love except the man who had me as a maiden” (48). She explains her love for Tristan as love for a member of her husband's family: “I am sure the king does not realize that I have loved you for his sake; I loved you because we were related” (49). Apparently, Yseut plays on the word related – she can be related to Mark by marriage at the same time she is related to Tristan through sexual relations. She frequently calls Mark “the king” in order to reaffirm his position as leader over her as both her husband and political leader, while at the same time

reaffirming her love for Tristan, who after all, is the man who had her as a maiden.

Beroul uses the flour scene to remind readers once again that Yseut has lost her virginity and has been lying ever since. Mark sees Tristan's blood on the floor near his bed and is angered. He wants to put the lovers to death without a real trial. Tristan is sentenced to death by burning, which he avoids by jumping out the church window down the cliff and surviving with help from Governal. Mark also condemns Yseut to be burned. Dinas steps in to plead on Yseut's behalf because no crime has been proved through a trial. Burning the queen would be scandalous, so Dinas asks Mark to hand Yseut over to him. Mark, triggered by the barrons, is adamant about having her burned. The crowd hates the barrons (the "King's traitors") for encouraging this (Fedrick 73). Mark gives Yseut to the lepers, which is an even worse fate than being burned alive because the eager leper leader wants to use her as a sex slave and as a servant.<sup>5</sup>

Leprosy was a fearsome disease in the Middle Ages, so it is no coincidence that it permeated the literature written at the time. Leprosy was misunderstood because people did not know the causes and ways to prevent contagion. Peter Lewis Allen describes the mistreatment lepers received; lepers were an unwanted minority group, comparable to other despised groups of people: "Tolerance for all minorities (lepers, homosexuals, heretics, Jews) was declining, but another strong

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<sup>5</sup> See Fedrick 73-75 for an account of the lepers in *Tristan*.

motivation was greed. By this time, centuries after their foundation, some leper houses had amassed property and income, and, in order to lay their hands on these revenues, rulers announced that lepers had poisoned municipal wells – and then burned the alleged perpetrators alive” (Allen 37). In four chapters (Medical Understandings of Leprosy, The Leper and Society, The Ecclesiastical Tradition, and Leprosy in Literature) Saul Brody gives readers an understanding of the way leprosy was considered during medieval times, in particular as a punishment for sins which required a separation of the leper from society. The leper is thrown out of his or her community, forever relegated to its outskirts and dependent on charity. Leprosy and sinfulness have always been associated, even predating the Bible. Medieval people believed that leprosy was “divinely inflicted punishment” (Brody 121). Therefore it is not surprising that medieval readers and audiences loved the “Gesta Romanorum”<sup>6</sup> or allegorical stories in which poetic justice occurs and the sinful characters get leprosy as their punishment (Brody 146). Similarly, John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* tells the story of emperor Constantine’s leprosy, which is cured by his conversion to Christianity (Brody 158). Leprosy becomes a tool for the storyteller who can use it as a symbol of moral guilt (*ibid*).

Robert Henryson’s “The Testament of Cresseid” shares much in common with Beroul’s *Tristan*. In particular, both stories feature women who reach a state of

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<sup>6</sup> See Brody 144.

degradation when they are punished by characters who have authority. Their punishment involves leprosy, which means that their wrongdoings are not ones they can make reparations for; instead, they are condemned to incurable illness. Ironically, their male counterparts (Tristan and Troilus and Diomeid) avoid such extreme, disfiguring, and sadistic punishments. Just like *Tristan*, Henryson's poem is meant to instruct readers, especially women, to avoid the sins of Cresseid: "Now, worthie wemen, in this ballet schort, / Maid for your worschip and instructioun, / Of cheritie, I monische and exhort, / Ming not your lufe with fals deceptioun"(447). The fact that Henryson seems to have intended the poem to teach women implies that this story is to be read as an allegory. Cresseid falls from a lady admired by all the town (she is the "flour of luif"), into a spurned lover (she enters the court as a "common" woman or whore), and finally a detestable leper. Her sin is that she spoke against the gods Venus and Cupid. She is so forlorn after being discarded by Diomeid that she cries out: "Allace, that ever I maid yow sacrifice!" (436). By rescinding her loyalty and worship of Venus and Cupid, Cresseid brings their punishment upon herself. This is clearly not a story in which people have the freedom to say what they want; words have consequences and the gods are incensed by her libel of them.

Cresseid falls into a dream; the dream vision, also similar to the one in *Piers Plowman*, shows Cresseid's trial – the seven planets are her judge and jury. No human is able to contend with the gods. Venus is untrustworthy and two-faced:

“Under smyling scho was dissimulait” (438). Cupid, her son, is vocal and presents their case against Cresseid to the commune of gods. These gods seem like a more powerful version of the comitatus seen in *Beowulf* and *Tristan* because they can control both their own affairs and those of humanity. Cupid says to them, “quha will blaspheme the name / Of his awin god, outhir in word or deid, / To all goddis he dois baith lak and schame, / And suld have bitter panis to his meid” (439). He urges the gods to get revenge on Cresseid: “Me think with pane we suld mak recompence; / Was never to goddes done sic violence: / As weill for yow as for my self I say, / Thairfoir ga help to revenge, I yow pray!”(440). Mercury bestows Saturn and the Moon with the ability to set the terms of Cresseid’s punishment. Saturn touches Cresseid with his wand and says words that will forever change her. Her identity will not be the beauty she was before: “Than lawfullie on this wyse can he say, / “Thy greit fairness and all thy bewtie gay, / Thy wantoun blude and eik thy goldin hair, / Heir I exclude fra the for evermair” (*ibid*). Her punishment is that she will instantly become a leper and die a beggar woman. The sentence of leprosy is extreme, especially when considering the non-existent punishment of Diomeid who has forsaken Cresseid. Also, in comparison to the *Tristan* story, in which Tristan is condemned to death by burning – a relatively quick and instant death – it seems that women in these medieval stories are receiving harsher punishments. Although Yseut is rescued before she is taken by the lepers she has been condemned to join, Cresseid carries out her punishment

and dies a shameful death, as a leper completely scorned by society and unrecognizable to her ex-lover.

The conclusion of Beroul's *Tristan* makes clear that the lovers' adultery leads to a disastrous result, their separation and deaths. *Beowulf* and *Tristan*, although they differ widely, share in common the two weak kings Hrothgar and Mark. Their power is diminished by the actions of literal monsters (Grendel and the dragon) and humans who behave monstrously (Grendel's mother, Tristan, and Yseut). King Mark and King Hrothgar can be understood as good characters, but their morality makes them weak in comparison to the characters who lack integrity and morality. Furthermore, if we examine the characters more carefully, we can see that the appearance of females who forego their gender roles as wives, mothers, and cupbearers, such as Grendel's mother and Yseut, further illuminate the weakness of their male leaders and the ultimate ruin of their societies.



### III. Misplaced Cathedrals: Improper Women in *Beowulf*, *Tristan*, and *Piers*

#### *Plowman*

*Piers Plowman*, *Tristan*, and *Beowulf* have always been complimentary. All three works are set during different time periods within the Middle Ages, yet share the inherent juxtaposition of goodness and evil in the societies each author presents. Within the setup of each society – the Danes in *Beowulf*, the English peasants in *Piers Plowman*, and the royalty in *Tristan* – there is a lesson to be learned; more specifically, all three function as an allegory to warn readers about women who have betrayed their gender-based roles. In each work, there is a breach of gender roles, which reflects other problems within their societies and ultimately foreshadows the end of their cultures.

In *Beowulf* and *Tristan*, there are also literal and figurative cathedrals. The cathedral is important because it displays society's worship of God. As Macaulay writes, "The new cathedral would be built to the glory of God and it mattered little that it might take more than one hundred years to construct it" (Macaulay 1). Abbot Suger, who rebuilt San Denis cathedral, recognized that the architectural patterns of cathedrals are taken directly from the Bible. He emphasized the significance of these structures by calling cathedrals "God's house on earth" (Tiffany). Cathedrals are primarily a place of worship, but we can also consider a cathedral as a place of community in the medieval era. The royalty and religious leaders lived in vast areas of English cities: "Often a third of the whole area inside

the walls is given over to the royal castle, and a similar area for the parish churches, and it is clear that almost the entire population has to live in half the city – with most of the best sites occupied by the large houses of the wealthy” (Mortimer 48). Despite such large portions of land being allocated for royal and religious buildings, common people were also able to make use of the cathedral, drawing inspiration and learning from the depictions on the stained glass windows: “these vast spaces surrounded by towering walls of colored light lifted Medieval minds out of the dirt and darkness of daily life creating an otherworldly experience” (Tiffany). In each work, there are churches and locations that are forms of churches. To be more specific, I will direct this discussion to focus on the actual church described in Beroul’s *Tristan* (he denigrates the church instead of using it for worship) with the opposite, the impious churches – Hrothgar’s Herot and Grendel’s mother’s underwater cave in *Beowulf*, and the unforgettable Cave of Lovers as described in Gottfried’s *Tristan*.

Beroul’s *Tristan* includes a church, this time a chapel on a cliff. However, Tristan feigns to worship there. After he is convicted of adultery and sentenced to burn to death by King Mark for his indiscretion, he begs for a few minutes reprieve to go worship in the small church. He says, “My time is nearly at an end. I shall pray God to have mercy on me, for I have sinned greatly against Him” (Fedrick 68). Although Tristan puts on a good act, he only enters the church to make a daredevil, Hoodini-like escape through its window: “He went to the

window behind the altar, pulled it towards him with his right hand and leaped through the opening” (*ibid*). He has no intention of worshiping there; instead it is his escape hatch. Thus, Tristan takes the church and uses it for his own immoral ends much like other characters do in the texts of both *Tristan* and *Beowulf*.

The church in *Tristan* is a real place of worship, but other such places are to be found in *Tristan* and *Beowulf*. Specifically, as we see the female characters, Grendel’s mother and Yseut, defy their gender roles, false churches spring up. The poets create places for characters to congregate, but the aims of their actions are impious. Hrothgar’s cherished Herot is one such misplaced “church”. The very description of it piques a reader’s interest; Herot is called “that most beautiful of dwellings” (Raffel 6). It is a meeting hall, and since there are no references to churches in Hrothgar’s land it becomes a place similar to a church, with nothing much sacred about it. The Danes love their social gatherings at Herot, and it is the place where public honor is bestowed upon Hrothgar as well as other heroes like Beowulf. However, there is no religion there and the people are more concerned with secular enjoyment like the feast:

The keeper of the mead  
 Came carrying out the carved flasks  
 And poured that bright sweetness. A poet  
 Sang, from time to time, in a clear  
 Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats

Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced. (Raffel 23)

Beowulf also features a second misplaced cathedral, as I label it. Grendel's mother's cave is a location that is like a church – because for lack of a better word it draws “worshippers” from the depths of evil. Her cave is located underwater, so following the landscape of good and evil that Langland creates in *Piers Plowman*, we know that locations that are low are far from the heavens and therefore, the opposite of God. Grendel's mother lives in her own undersea hell, in the depths with dangers unseen by humans. Beowulf has to swim there alone, because all other men are too fearful to attempt reaching the fierce female threat – a “she-wolf” (Raffel 66). It is so deep that

The heaving water covered [Beowulf]  
over. For hours he sank through the waves;

At last he saw the mud of the bottom.

...

A creature from above had come to explore the bottom

Of [Grendel's mother's] wet world. (*ibid*)

A ferocious fight ensues; Beowulf and Grendel's mother engage in hand to hand combat, very much like what he experienced with Grendel when he ultimately earns Grendel's hand as a battle prize.

Their battle, however, may be understood in a different context. Perhaps their fight has sexual connotations, wherein Beowulf and Grendel's mother are

engaging in foreplay and sexual relations. There is also some support for the theory that Grendel's mother is Hrothgar's mistress. As Avary writes, "Though it's not in the poem, clearly, Grendel was Hrothgar's bastard son" (5). Grendel's mother is already an aberration in her society because she seeks revenge for her son's murder and is an unwed mother, as previously discussed in chapter two. This behavior, along with her sexual prowess and demands from Beowulf, distance her from virtuous women. Her appearance in the poem shows the threat of a powerful female; Beowulf swims away from their encounter, weak but alive, whereas Hrothgar is unable to even face this fierce female. This shows that Hrothgar's society is coming to an end, for leadership requires a younger man who has the stamina to contend with the out-of-bounds female.

Similarly, *Tristan* contains another instance of a church-like structure. This time, it is the infamous cave of lovers that Gottfried describes, a place where Tristan and Yseut distance themselves from the outside world, and from God, and choose to please each other as they indulge in the effects of the love potion. According to W.T.H. Jackson, the couple's "love at all costs" behavior is what has influenced almost everything written:

The enormous importance of romantic love in post-medieval literature, an importance so great that scarcely any work of imaginative literature ignores the subject completely, made these two figures into a symbol of that love which disdains all obstacles in attaining its ends, which suffers and

ultimately perishes because of its incompatibility with the commonplace and unimaginative world in which it finds itself, and which is such a law unto itself that it breaks all canons of social behavior and accepted morality in achieving its ends. (Jackson 136)

In the Cave of Lovers, Tristan and Yseut are violating their roles as members of the upper class and royalty; not only do they betray King Mark, who they feign loyalty towards, but they betray their society.

The cave is located in a wild wasteland where the lovers are exiled to. It even has ancient, pagan origins: “the cavern had been hewn into the wild mountain in heathen times, before Corynaeus’ day, when giants ruled there” (Hatto 261). As horrible as their exclusion from society seems, they find comfort in each other and are able to build a lover’s hideaway. Gottfried describes the cave in a geometrical manner, which helps to make sense of why Tristan and Isolde decide to stay there, despite being in the wilderness: “The story tells us that this grotto was round, broad, high, and perpendicular, snow-white, smooth, and even, throughout its whole circumference” (*ibid*). Medieval readers would immediately recognize the association between the perpendicular shape of the cave and the Medieval Model of the Universe. The cave, therefore, can be seen as the lovers’ own place of worship. Since their relationship is adulterous, it is only sanctioned by Tristan and Isolde’s personal choice. It feels right to them, so they unite in their cave: “They used to hide inside it when, desiring to make love, they needed privacy” (*ibid*).

W.T.H. Jackson wrote: “It is in the scene in the Minnegrotte or “Shrine of Love” that Gottfried reveals to the full his new religion of love” (149). This new religion they create differs from the established church of society. Tristan and Isolde’s actions mean that accepted values are challenged; in the wasteland where their cave is located, they return to pagan roots in which love and emotion are more important than conventions of society.

In *Piers Plowman*, Lady Meed is seen as a woman who, like Yseut and Grendel’s mother, has a contradictory role in medieval society. She is on one hand just a young woman who will be married either to Falseness or to Conscience, but on the other hand she may represent the worst of society, especially the greed of the clergy. If she marries the wrong man (Falseness), she may be a symbol of evil: “According to Yunck, the king recognizes the ambivalent nature of Lady Meed, which he attributes to positive and negative influences: “In the hands of evil men Lady Meed is barratry, simony, bribery, human venality; dispensed with conscience she becomes just rewards” (“The Wicked Age”). Furthermore, she perhaps is an allegorical symbol of the real Lady Alice Perrers, the courtesan of King Edward III. As huge sums were spent to maintain her presence at court, society became critical of this woman who was not married. She exemplifies the out-of-bounds female because she is not the cup-bearer or child-bearer and wife by the sacrament of marriage, yet she held a position close to the king. Ironically, *Piers Plowman* shows the importance of

pilgrimages; the pilgrims were expected to have a sense of devotion, which is lacking because Langland presents a whole menagerie of characters on a moral scale of good to evil.

Meed, Yseut, and Grendel's mother all defy the strict expectations that medieval society had for females. One of the biggest ways they break tradition is that each woman exhibits sexuality outside of marriage. Within marriage, sex is expected and should be done frequently. According to Mortimer, society based their sexual choices on Galen's teachings: "Medical knowledge...holds that women's wombs are "cold" and need constant warming by "hot" male sperm. In addition, if women do not regularly copulate, their "seed" (as Galen calls it) might coagulate and suffocate their wombs, thereby damaging their health" (55). Women were not supposed to act on sexual desires if they were unwed. Instead, to distract themselves from yearnings, they should try to marry quickly or "travel, exercise frequently, and take medicines" (55-56).

Characters in all three works exhibit a movement away from God and morality. More specifically, Meed, Grendel's mother, and Yseut are sensuous women who do not act on their desires in the prescribed, socially acceptable context of marriage in the Middle Ages. In an era in which many laws and practices were sexist and anti-female, if the men (fathers, husbands, landowners, and the king as authority figures) could not control the women – as shown



through their lustful behavior outside of marriage – the entire structure of society, as represented in these three medieval texts, was not built to last.

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