

*Essays in Medieval Studies 11*

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**3. Bodies, Buildings, and Boundaries:  
Metaphors of Liminality in Old English and Old Norse Literature****Joyce Tally Lionarons**

That the human body may be figured as a building erected to house the spirit is a commonplace of medieval literature: the metaphor recurs in poems and sermons, legends and sagas. It is lexically reinforced in Old English by compounds which refer to the body as a *banhus* "bone-house" or *bansele* "bone-hall";<sup>1</sup> a kenning in the Old English *Exodus* personifies the mind as *banhuses weard*, "the guardian of the bone-house" (523).<sup>2</sup> Conversely, a building may itself be figured as if it were the body of an animal or a human being: its internal spaces may be seen as analogous to body cavities, its windows may be eyes, its door a mouth or other orifice, its roof-pole a back that can be ridden by monsters or ghosts.

Living bodies are thus the houses of souls; buildings house living beings. Both are naturally permeable: a building allows ingress and egress through its doors, windows, chimneys, and vents, a body through its various orifices. To enter a house or hall by the doors is quite literally to cross a liminal boundary; metaphorically, however, the distinction between the inside and outside of a building, or by extension the internal and external zones of the body, may be interpreted as a distinction between separate or even opposed psychological, societal, or ontological states. When such symbolic liminal boundaries are crossed or destroyed, the order of the inner world is upset and "the shape of fundamental experience is altered."<sup>3</sup> The dangers of such border-crossings are obvious; they are accordingly often figured in myth and literature as attacks on buildings by otherworldly forces by monsters such as trolls and giants, or by ghosts and other types of supernatural figures. When figured corporeally, the crossing of a liminal boundary can take the metaphorical form of a body ingesting foreign objects, receiving wounds, or undergoing what is usually presented as violent sexual penetration.

Perhaps the most familiar instance of a building portrayed in medieval literature as if it were a living body is the example of Hroðgar's hall in *Beowulf*.

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The name of the building, *Heorot* or "hart," suggests that we see the hall as analogous to the animal; in addition, it is quite literally a *bansele* or "bone-hall" because it is *banfag*, "adorned with bone" (780), most likely a reference to its being decorated or marked with a stag's antlers.<sup>4</sup> As a dwelling-place for human beings, *Heorot* is also a metaphor for the world, an equivalence emphasized by the poet's linking of the building of the hall to God's creation of the world in the first song the *scop* sings in the new hall. Its walls are thus the boundaries between the civilized human world of Danish society and the uncivilized, monstrous world outside what Edward B. Irving has called the worlds of *humanitas* and of *draconitas* respectively.<sup>5</sup> In his description of *Heorot*, the *Beowulf*-poet has therefore set up multiple metaphoric correspondences: as a building, the hall is symbolic of the world of humanity; as a living being or body, it is symbolic of both the "hart" (O.E. *heorot*) its name proclaims it to be and the "heart" (O.E. *heorte*) the center and life-blood of Danish civilization.

All of these meanings resonate in the poet's description of *Beowulf*'s defense of the hall against Grendel. Grendel is one of several liminal figures within the poem, a marginal character who is seemingly able to cross, or straddle, the boundaries that contain and define other characters: he is a monster, yet he has a human shape; he is an outcast from humanity, yet he is involved in the most basic human relationship, that of a child to its mother; he both is and is not a part of the human world of Danish society; he is thus a *mearcstapa*, "a wanderer in the borderland" (103) both literally and metaphorically. He comes to *Heorot*, a hall built to be a place of feasting, in order to feast himself on the sleeping warriors. To do this he must first force open the "building's mouth" (*recedes muþan*, 724) and enter its body; he is ingested, so to speak, by the building so that he may in his turn ingest its inhabitants. His actions may represent a destructive and futile attempt to enter Danish society, for, as anthropologist Mary Douglas points out, "the processes of ingestion [can] portray absorption. Sometimes bodily orifices seem to represent points of entry or exit to social units."<sup>6</sup> But though Grendel may be "ingested," he cannot be "digested"; that is, as a representative of *draconitas*, the

monstrous world outside of human civilization, he can never be assimilated into the world of *humanitas*. He is described as *atol*, "terrible, repulsive" (732); he may also be a type of *attor*, "poison," in a pun reinforced by references to Beowulf's promise to "purify," *fælsian* (432) the hall.

In addition, as Sarah Lynn Higley has argued, when the struggle between Grendel and Beowulf threatens to destroy Heorot, the hall itself seems to "absorb the affliction into its vitals ... and feel ... pain":<sup>7</sup>

it is not hard to imagine Heorot with a skeleton and a nervous system. The sound, which presumably Grendel is making, is three times attributed to the building in a striking use of pathetic fallacy; it is Heorot that seems to howl: *Dryhtsele dynede ... Reced hlynsode ... Sweg up astag* (767a, 770b, 783b).<sup>8</sup>

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Like a poison, or food gone bad, Grendel must be purged from the afflicted body of the hall if it is to survive; he must be pushed over the *limen* or threshold of Heorot, back into the darkness of the world outside the hall, so that the structured human society inside may continue. Even more, he must be expelled beyond the ultimate boundary, the *limen* separating the living from the dead, so that human life in this world can proceed unthreatened.

This distinction between the inside and the outside of a building as delimiting two distinct worlds occurs in the analogues of *Beowulf* as well. Grettir's fight with the *draugr* Glámr in the Old Norse *Grettis saga* is a case in point. Both Grettir and Glámr are liminal figures: Grettir is of course an outlaw, a human being who both is and is not part of civilized human society;<sup>9</sup> he can also be seen, as Kirsten Hastrup asserts, as "*blendingr*," i.e., "(half man, half giant), associated with trolls."<sup>10</sup> He is thus a boundary-figure, able to move and function both in and outside of society, both in and outside of the human world. Glámr is a *draugr*, the corporeal ghost of a once surly and violent human being; he too is able to cross the boundaries between worlds, here between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Like Beowulf, Grettir defends a building the farmhouse at Þórhallsstaðr against the monster. Glámr has been coming to the house at night to "ride" its roof; the saga describes him *farit upp á húsin ok riðit skálanum ok barit hælunum svá at brakaði í hverju tré*,<sup>11</sup> "going up onto the building, riding above the hall and kicking with [his] heels until the timbers cracked" (ch. 35, p. 119). Then he enters the house by its doors and destroys whatever and whomever he finds within, breaking the bones of his victims just as he breaks the timbers of the house.

Riding the roof of a building, while clearly presented as a form of supernatural terrorism, is nonetheless exceedingly odd behavior, even for a ghost. It seems to constitute a symbolic display of power, in which the *draugr*, by mounting the rooftop so that he is physically above the building's inhabitants, shows his disdain for those below by threatening to bring the roof down on their heads. His "riding" motions, moreover, tend to equate his spatial dominance with a kind of sexual dominance as well, especially given the commonplace metaphoric correspondence between buildings and bodies. I would argue, in fact, that riding a roof may be interpreted in the saga as a symbolic act of *níð* against the house's male inhabitants that is, it is an aggressive act of sexual dominance that calls the courage, strength, and virility of its victim into question. *Níð* renders its object *argr* or *ragr*, terms which may be translated as "cowardly," "effeminate," or "emasculated,"<sup>12</sup> and which strongly imply that the one who is *argr* plays the passive role in homosexual intercourse, an implication considered a deadly insult in Icelandic society.<sup>13</sup> Riding the house, then, becomes tantamount to a symbolic act of rape, with the building itself, and by extension those inside it, in the position of victim. That Glámr is then able to literally murder and mutilate his victims is merely one more proof of his masculine sexual dominance.

Grettir, of course, is not so easily dealt with. Having "ridden" the building,

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Glámr enters the hall to find Grettir lying on a bench, apparently asleep, and reaches to pull off his cloak in a gesture that could, in the context of the roof-riding, suggest either sex or violence. A wrestling match ensues that, much like the struggle between Beowulf and Grendel, threatens to destroy the house once and for all.

Grendel, from the moment he attacks the sleeping Beowulf, is intent on escaping: he is described as *hinfus* "eager to

be hence" (755) because he knows that Beowulf will prove the stronger wrestler; thus he *wolde on heolster fleon, / secan deofla gedræg* "wanted to flee into the darkness, to seek the company of devils" (755-56), far from the human world. Beowulf defeats him by gripping him until the monster rips off his own arm in his desperate struggle to get away. Escaping the house is also foremost in Glámr's mind throughout his fight with Grettir, but he wants to drag Grettir out with him, out of the building that is, out of the indoor human world where Grettir is strongest and into his own world outside, where he has a better chance of prevailing:

ttu þeir þá allharða sókn ví at þrællinn ætlaði at koma honum út ór bænum; en svá illt, sem at eiga var við Glám inni, á sá Grettir, at ó var verra at fásk við hann úti, ok ví brauzk hann í móti af llu afli at fara út. (ch. 35, p. 120)

(Then a terrific struggle began, the thrall trying to drag him out of the house, and Grettir saw that however hard he was to deal with in the house, he would be worse outside, so he strove with all his might to keep him from getting out.)

Glámr does in fact succeed in dragging Grettir outside and, once there, in his own world, he is indeed "worse." He seems able to call on some sort of magical power that was unavailable to him inside the house and that is in some way related to the moonlight outside, a power that allows him to curse Grettir with ill luck and a fear of the dark. Nonetheless Grettir wins the battle by cutting off the *draugr's* head. Significantly, Grettir places the severed head between the monster's thighs in a move which, though ostensibly calculated to keep Glámr from rising again, also provides symbolic sexual retribution.

Grettir's later encounter with the *trollkona* the more direct analogue to Beowulf's fight with Grendel parallels his fight with Glámr, first in that the troll-woman, like the *draugr*, is more powerful outdoors, with the house once again providing a boundary, a literal *limen* or threshold, between the world of humans and the world of monsters; and second in that her wrestling match with Grettir takes on the almost inevitable sexual connotations of male-female wrestling. Her near victory also carries with it a sexual threat, since defeat in battle by a woman automatically renders the defeated male *argr* in the eyes of his contemporaries.

Another, less obvious parallel occurs in Grettir's defense of Þórfinnr's house at Haramarsey. Left to maintain the household while Þórfinnr attends a Yule-

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festival, Grettir feigns a friendly welcome for twelve berserkr, who publicly announce their intention to loot the house and rape Þórfinnr's wife and daughter. Grettir allows the berserkr into the farmhouse to eat and drink their fill, then orders the terrified women to their beds to await the men. But neither a rape nor a battle immediately ensues. Instead, the threatened rape is displaced from the literal bodies of the women to the metaphorical "body" of an *útibúr*, a combination "outhouse" and "storehouse" in which Þórfinnr keeps clothing and other valuable items on one side of a thin wooden partition and a *salerni*, "privy" on the other an interesting and unusual arrangement, so unusual, in fact, that Guðni Jónsson found it necessary to include a map of the floorplan in his edition of the saga.<sup>14</sup> The *útibúr* is a metonymic extension of Þórfinnr's house in its symbolic function as a delimiter of boundaries, in this case the boundary between the world of civilized society and the criminal world of the berserkr; it is this building that the monstrous intruders must fight to escape. But at the same time, the *útibúr* is also substituted metaphorically for the sexually threatened bodies of the farmstead's women. Instead of violating the bodily integrity of Þórfinnr's wife, the berserkr violate the structural integrity of the *útibúr*, which is made analogous to a woman's body by its double set of doors, one (vaginal) opening leading to Þórfinnr's *gripr*, "treasure," the other (rectal) opening leading to the privy.

Metonym and metaphor merge once the berserkr enter the dark first chamber of the *útibúr*: the drunken berserkr are so intent on their "rape" of Þórfinnr's property that they fail to notice Grettir's locking the outer doors. Like the monstrous intruders discussed earlier, the berserkr must fight desperately to escape what they now perceive as a trap. Unable to reopen the first set of doors, they break through the partition into the privy and emerge, one by one, through the second set of doors only to be slain by Grettir. The horror of rape and bodily mutilation is thus suggested and then displaced into what becomes the grimly (and scatologically) comic scene of Grettir's victory over the berserkr as they emerge from the privy.

These episodes, taken together, illustrate an intertextual collocation of images that a medieval Germanic writer could draw upon to signify any threat to the settled social order. On the one hand, the living body is a natural image

for human society; as an exceedingly "complex structure" in and of itself, "[t]he body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious." [15](#) On the other hand, society is an artificial construction, an edifice built by human beings to serve human needs, and is thus equally easily equated with physical constructions such as houses and halls. These two tropes combine to produce an equation between buildings and bodies that allows for the metaphors of ingestion and excretion, rape and *níð*, that I have been exploring here.

Most of the literature employing these tropes involves predatory monsters or other dangerous supernatural beings invading the human world. It is, however, possible for the situation to be reversed: the same sort of imagery can be employed to describe the intrusion of a hero into the world of the monsters.

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Beowulf's expedition beneath the Grendelmere and Grettir's raid behind the troll-woman's waterfall come immediately to mind. More interesting, perhaps, are the examples out of Norse mythology, where, as Margaret Clunies Ross points out, one may find a well-defined pattern "in which divine protagonists journey away from *sgarðr*, over some kind of *limen* ... and beyond to the other world where their giant antagonists and the objects they seek are to be found." [16](#) Most often the divine protagonist in question is Þórr, for he is

above all that deity in the Norse pantheon who is concerned with the confirmation of order against the ever-present threat of disorder. Most extant myths about *çrr* show him as maintaining order by means of the active definition of boundaries, whether in the domestic sphere or between the worlds of gods and giants. [17](#)

I would like to conclude by looking more closely at one of Þórr's journeys to the giant-world, his visit to Geirrøðr's house as it is told by Snorri Sturluson in the *Prose Edda*. [18](#) The first liminal barrier confronting Þórr on his journey is not the threshold of a house or building *per se*, but rather the river Vimur, which separates the giant's house from the rest of the world. As Þórr tries to ford Vimur, the river swells and overflows its banks, owing to the fact that Geirrøðr's daughter Gjálpr is straddling the river upstream and urinating into it. Like Glámr's roof-riding, Gjálpr's urination may be interpreted as "a type of symbolic *níð*, whose import is that the god is to be considered *ragr* if he fails to assert himself in a situation in which his female opponent has assumed a dominating posture." [19](#) Þórr's response, of course, is both assertive and violent:

Þá tók Þórr upp ór ánni stein mikinn ok kastaði at henni ok mælti svá: "At ósi skal á stemma." (p. 107)

(He picked up a great boulder from the river and flung it at her with the words: "A river must be dammed at its fountainhead!")

As in the examples from *Grettis saga* discussed earlier, the penetration of one world or society by a member of another is figured here in the form of a sexual threat; the boundaries of the body and the boundaries of the worlds are once again equated.

The equation is strengthened once Þórr reaches the giants' house: given a goat-shed as a guest-room, he enters to find it furnished with a single chair; when he sits, the chair rises, and only his strength and the strength of his staff keep the god from being crushed against the ceiling. Forcing the chair back down, Þórr breaks the backs of Gjálpr and her sister Greipr beneath him. Only at this point, having defeated the giant's daughters, is Þórr allowed into Geirrøðr's hall to contend with the giant himself. Þórr's sexual dominance within the episode should be readily apparent; [20](#) in addition, at least one scholar has seen the god's trial in the shed before entering the hall as a passage "through

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a *vagina dentata*, represented . . . by the moving chair." [21](#) Once again the building itself may be interpreted as a metaphor for a sexually represented body; but because here the intruder is also the hero, it is the body/building, rather than the sexual intruder, that is portrayed as dangerous.

Medieval stories about monster- and giant-quellings, when they may be said to have thematic content at all, are for the most part concerned with threats to and problems of social order. As such, they tend to emphasize the setting and maintenance of limits and borders; the hero is one who often by virtue of his own marginal status can define and

enforce those societal boundaries. He guards the social order not only against the threat of violence as symbolized by monsters and predatory human beings like the berserkr, but also against any threat to the established social hierarchy. One of the most basic forms of social hierarchy is sexual dominance, whether of men over women, or of some men over other men. This is why suggestions of *níð* play such a large role in these stories: as the hero ejects the threatening violence of the monster from human society, he simultaneously reestablishes the social/sexual norms of that society. The human world is therefore simultaneously figured as a building holding order within its walls and disorder without, and as a living body bounded as the bodies of human beings always are, by the societal conventions that govern them.

## Notes

1. Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1988).
2. George Philip Krapp, ed., *The Junius Manuscript*, ASPR I (New York, 1931).
3. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966), p. 12.
4. All quotations from *Beowulf* are from Fr. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Lexington, MA, 1950). On Heorot as *banfag*, see also *hornreced*, "gabled/horned building" (704), and *horngeap*, "wide-gabled" or "with horn-shaped gables" (82).
5. Edward B. Irving, Jr., *Rereading Beowulf* (Philadelphia, 1989), p. 100.
6. Douglas, *Purity*, pp. 3-4.
7. Sarah Lynn Higley, "Aldor on Ofre, or The Reluctant Hart: A Study of Liminality in `Beowulf,'" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 87 (1986), 350.
8. Higley, "Aldor," pp. 350-51.
9. Kathryn Hume discusses the liminality of Grettir in "The Thematic Design of *Grettis saga*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 73 (1974), 469-86. See also Laurence De Looze, "The Outlaw Poet, The Poetic Outlaw: Self-Consciousness in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 106 (1991), 85-103.
10. Kirsten Hastrup, "Tracing Tradition An Anthropological Perspective on *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, ed. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense, 1986), p. 292.
11. All quotations from *Grettis saga* are from Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (Reykjavík, 1936). Translations are from *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, trans. G. A. Hight (London and Melbourne, 1972).
12. Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1957). (See the discussion of *níð* and *argr* by Sara Lynn Higley in this Volume.)
13. The best discussion of *níð* in the sagas to date is in Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society* (Odense, 1983). See also Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68 (1993), 363-87.
14. Jónsson, *Grettis saga*, p. 68.
15. Douglas, *Purity*, p. 115.
16. Margaret Clunies Ross, "Two of Þórr's Great Fights According to *Hymiskviða*," *Leeds Studies in English* 20 (1989), 21.
17. Margaret Clunies Ross, "An Interpretation of the Myth of Þórr's Encounter with Geirroðr and His Daughters," in *Specvlvm Norroenvm: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke, Guðrún Helgadóttir, Gerd Wolfgang Weber and Hans Bekker-Nielson (Odense, 1981), p. 387.
18. All quotations from *Snorra Edda* are from Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* (Akureyri, 1954). Translations are from Jean I. Young, trans., *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson: Tales from Norse Mythology* (Berkeley, 1954).
19. Ross, "An Interpretation," p. 377.
20. Cf. Ross, "An Interpretation," pp. 380-83.
21. Renault-Krantz, *Structures de la Mythologie Nordique* (Paris, 1972), pp. 146-47; cited in Ross, "An Interpretation," p. 372.