



# From Ogre to Woodlouse: A Journey through Names

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I sipped my pint and waited for the onslaught of the dark. 'Do you get any trouble here?', I asked the girl behind the bar, ready to dodge when a great clawed hand ripped through the door marked Staff Exit. 'No', she said, 'it's a quiet neighbourhood'. Grendel's Gate was not living up to my expectations. Like so many North London districts, it seemed to have lost some of its raw authenticity when it went upmarket.

Sunday afternoon traffic was humming down the Watford road. One or two families pulled in for lunch at the Gate, as it is now known: a crossroads which has forgotten even the name of its most famous one-time inhabitant, ever since *grendeles gatan* of the old charter (written in 975 or thereabouts) gave way to the more colourless Barnet Gate. The autumn sun, still warm, shone on fenced front gardens and suburban hedges. I thought of the stiff, bleak trees that overhang Grendel's frozen mere in the poem, their knotted roots reflected in the black water.

Hrothgar is telling Beowulf how to find a path to the haunted depths (lines 1345–75). Already Grendel has made his raids on Heorot, has faced the hero and been broken, limping off to his death; his mother has come to the hall, bent on vengeance, and carried out another victim; now Beowulf must venture into the moors and face her in her own lair. We know where these hellish creatures come from: it is barren and cold, a banished place where the progeny of Cain are punished endlessly for murder at the beginning of time. Under cover of night and mist they lumber down from the high wastelands, transgressing the boundaries, breaking ravenous into the human world.

There is something ominously Northern about the haunted landscapes in *Beowulf*. Long nights, mist-covered hills, cold streams, bare crags: I don't think it really works in Middlesex, however hard I try to remind myself that the eighth-century province of the Middle Saxons was not suburban, not even agrarian as we understand it, and that thickets and quagmires sprawled where there are now trim hedged fields. I still can't see the haunted mere being imagined by a poet anywhere south of Yorkshire. It belongs to regions of fell and moorland, where dark hills look down enviously on the little specks of light in the valley farms.

Of course the action of the poem doesn't really take place in England at all. Tradition placed Heorot, greatest of halls, near Lejre in Sjælland, which is the island between mainland Denmark and Sweden. And Sjælland, with the soft undulating contours of its wealthy farmland, is as unlike the bleak moors of the *Beowulf* poet as anything can be. But that might not have been common knowledge across the sea, centuries later, and even if they knew they might not have cared. Grendel's mere is a composite of many imaginative landscapes, including that chilling Northern Hell where damned souls clutch onto the twisted trees that overhang a cliff, and fall, and fall into the black waters below.

The storyteller's gaze moves from one vivid detail to another, indifferent to contradictions. Earlier in the line of transmission, when the story of Beowulf was still folktale rather than epic, the pool must have been fed by a waterfall, with Grendel's cave hollowed out behind it. The scene is described quite clearly in the analogous episode of *Grettir's Saga*, but that was written by an Icelander who knew a waterfall when he saw one. In *Beowulf* the thundering mountain-stream is still there with its hanging mists, but at the same time it has the darkness and corruption of a bog, lit by flickering marsh gas: a Mercian landscape superimposed on one from Northumbria.

And the mere is vast. When Beowulf arrives at its edge, it is swarming with water-monsters; they squirm on the rock shelf below the cliff, until one of the retinue blows a horn, then at its bright sound they all scatter (lines 1422–41). These are sea-creatures, the kind that launch themselves from the rocks at morning and threaten ships. Earlier, in the flyting with Unferth, Beowulf has told how he battled with things like this when swimming in the open ocean, and killed nine of them; they are called *nicoras* (lines 559–75). Now these horrors of the sea have got themselves into a mountain lake, it does not matter how; at some symbolic or mythical level, all sinister waters join into a single deep.

So it is not strange that other epic landscapes should have dark waters haunted by these monsters. Layamon, who stands at the end of the alliterative tradition of heroic verse as *Beowulf* does at the beginning, describes an uncanny mere, stretching unmeasured between reed and fen, where the *nicoras* roll in their elfin play (lines 10848–52). 'Play' is unexpected until we remember that in Old English it meant a gathering of animals as well as people; as for the elves, they are keeping the same unwholesome company here as they do in the passage of *Beowulf* which lists them among Grendel's folk, Cain's kin (line 112).

What is surprising, when we turn from Layamon to his exemplar Wace, is to find that this mere is no imaginary poetic creation: it is Loch Lomond. Admittedly the *nicoras* are as unknown to Wace as they are to the Scottish Tourist Board, but their monstrosity has found its home in the largest body of fresh water in the British Isles. Elsewhere, however, they seem to have been cramped into much less expansive accommodation.

The work of the English Place-Name Society is largely unsung outside philological circles, but for the last hundred years they have been patiently culling names of all sorts – villages, roads, rivers, fields – from local archives. It's a gift for supernatural tourists, and it lets us flit from a *Nykarpole* 1409 in Lincolnshire through *Nikerespole* 1309 in Cheshire and *Nikerpole* 1272 in Wiltshire to a *Nikerpoll* 1263 somewhere in Sussex. Not all the field-names can be pinned down on the map, but there are enough of these to give some geographical context.

This is easiest when the names survive into the 18th century, like *Nikerpole* / Nickamoor, which is a field by the Kennet. The river runs past Mildenhall – not the findspot of the Roman treasure, which is in Suffolk, but the village in Wiltshire, pronounced *Mine-All* by purists. Wiltshire is safely within the lowland zone: no steep, stony ways to be traversed, no cliff tracks climbing to the haunted mere. A short walk down the road from Marlborough and there is the outline of the pool, now drained and split into feeder streams for Werg Mill, with the church and village looking placidly down on its waters. You couldn't fit much of a monster into them.

Of course if the *nicor* was a goblin creature, an apparition not a beast, then the gravelly bed of the Kennet would be as good a home for it as the illimitable ocean: any pool with unseen depth can hold the imagination. But the mere-monsters in *Beowulf* are not like that.

As the story presents them, they are big animals, substantial enough to be pinned by an arrow-shot and hooked onto land with boar-spears (lines 1432–41). Like every dark creature encountered by Beowulf, they belong to this physical world, and may be shadowy and horrifying, but are never demonic. This is true of Old English and Scandinavian saga in general, and it is one of the unspoken rules that distinguishes it from the corresponding Irish stories: that heroes should fight with flesh and blood, not with phantoms.

In the hands of a master-poet, these tales of hideous strength can still hint at the uncanny without overstepping the boundaries of this world; though Grendel is a descendant of Adam like the rest of us, that is not how it feels when he descends on Heorot in the misty night. Strip away the mist, though, and the presentation of alien beings can be very prosaic indeed. When the *Letter of Alexander* was rendered into Old English, they used *nicor* as a synonym for 'hippopotamus', something that doesn't seem very likely to be found wallowing in the Kennet beneath the cowsheds of Church Farm.

How can such eerie, powerful beings make their home in our ordinary world of farms and fields? As long as we locate our monsters deep in the peaty waters of the loch and our hairy giants on the lonely high fells, we can easily imagine their existence without having to say whether it is natural or supernatural: there is room enough for either option. But as soon as you place a *nicor* in the Kennet – or in the bend of the River Weaver not far from Middlewich, or at the junction of the Great Gowt and the Sincil Dyke just outside Lincoln, or at any of the other locations which topographical analysis has recovered – then their real-world status is liable to be questioned, if only in the clear voice of the awkward child who asks, 'Well, if they're there, why can't I see them?' That must be because they're magical. Very tricky creatures, *nicoras*. Only appear when they feel like doing it. They are elfin, after all.

There is a division of ideas here, a split in the ways of telling a story. One path leads to the world of high myth, of Asgard and Olympus and also Dante's Celestial Rose, in which the corporeality of the divine is not really an issue, for everything happens in lofty, distant places far removed from the mundane. But the other track leads us down into the land of popular superstition, in which bogles and hobgoblins must fit themselves as best they can into an essentially human landscape. To be credible, they must find places for a possible existence in the interstices of this world – beneath the hearthstone, behind the crack in the wall, below the pond-weed of the horse-pool. They will be shapeshifters and deceivers of the eyes, because that is the only way to evade uncomfortable questions about whether they are really there at all.

It is this world which is so plentifully illuminated by place-names. Thanks to its long history of archives, and of toponymic study based on them, England has a uniquely detailed timeline of the local supernatural: over a thousand years of elf hills and dragon dells and bug barrows and puck pits. This is the subject of a new project by Simon Young and myself. I have long been interested in fairies and local legends, and Simon needs no introduction to readers of this journal. Between us, taking advantage of the increased digitisation of the primary records, we hope to compile a corpus of supernatural names out of every available source, from Anglo-Saxon charters to the Ordnance Survey. Once we have the data mapped over place and time, we will be able for the first time to see exactly how the fairy and human worlds interacted in local lore as the land took shape, from the early days of fell and fen to the dense populations of today.

And where does that leave Grendel, as the homegoing traffic spills down the A411 from Barnet Gate? As a place-name element, *grendel* is rare (and disputed) but it is not the only designation for the invader of Heorot. When Beowulf steps forward to give an account of himself in the great hall, he speaks of the men and monsters he has overcome, and then says he will take on single combat with Hrothgar's enemy, the *thyrs* (lines 419–26). This was a word with a long history: cognates in the different language groups suggest that it went back to Common Germanic \**thurisaz*, and later reflexes of the term all retain a sense of something huge, inimical, ogreish. Old English word-lists link *thyrs* with Latin *Orcus* and the biblical *hel-deofol*, the same range of reference that is found in *Beowulf*.

But *thyrs* was not limited to heroic speech: it also makes its appearance in place-names, in fact as one of the commonest supernatural elements in medieval names. Simon and I have counted about fifty instances so far, almost all of them from the north and east of England. Like Grendel, the *thyrs* of toponymy can be found in a fen, a pool or a mere. The element evidently remained current for many years after the Viking conquests of the North, for it is compounded with words that entered the language from Old Norse, and again most of these are wet places: mire, carr, and gill. But the most common generic in the *thyrs*- names, accounting for a third of the total, is *pytt*, a word also favoured in places named after other supernatural beings. Is this yet another variant on the wet, stagnant places which seem to have attracted haunting? Modern English *pit* would suggest so, and *puteum* is the standard word in medieval Latin for a well dug in the ground, as opposed to a natural well-spring. But as you soon find when following the landmarks listed in charter boundaries, the Old English *pytt* was much larger and drier than its modern reflex. It could be a little valley or large hollow; what marked it out was its interruption of an otherwise functional landscape. Later, in almost all place-names referring to supernatural beings, Old English *pytt* gives way to Modern English *hole*, but the sense is the same; a scruffy dip or corner in an otherwise organised landscape.

The *thyrs* imagined in these place-names did not haunt some lonely fen or pool, miles away over wolf-haunted moors. His home was in the neglected margins of the village fields, a corner abandoned to goblins, beggars and the parish drunk. Thruskell Well in the West Riding is a hybrid name, with the Norse-derived *kelda* explained by its synonym *well*, 'spring'; it lies east of a little beck, on the edge of the hills that look down on Hebden, and can never have been very remote. Not all *thyrs*-haunted places were shunned: to the contrary, many of them feature in early records precisely because access to them was worth quarrelling over. In 1256 Geoffrey and Roger went to law about lands north-east of Newcastle which included *Therspettes*, a watering-place in the Seaton Burn between Mason and Weetslade. In the end it was adjudicated that both men should have free rights to water their beasts there.

Neither Roger nor Geoffrey would have been so keen to drive their cattle to the Seaton Burn if there was any risk of a hairy hand reaching out and pulling them down. The first naming of the valley after a savage spirit had been followed, perhaps at no great distance of time, by its clearance for livestock, a contradiction which tells us something about the birth and life of place-names. They are not just stories in miniature. When we hear a story, we expect things to be clear and unquestioned; Grendel is a *thyrs*, Grendel is a threat. But when supernatural labels are pinned onto the landscape, their believability is a matter of choice.



You might talk about *Therspettes* quite literally, as if the presence of the *thyrs* was as unquestioned as that of the harvest in *Wheat Croft* and the trees in *Oak Coppice*. Or you might understand the name, dismiss the content, but accept that this was a place where other people had said that a spirit lived, perhaps in the older days when they believed so many strange things. Or again, you could interpret the name fictively – allowing that this was the kind of flat black pool where the poetic imagination might easily glimpse a *thyrs* beneath the waters. And all of these possibilities are present from the moment that the name is coined. A supernatural place-name does not necessarily pinpoint a belief in particular beings, only a readiness to talk about them.

There is always something that does not quite fit about creatures of the goblin world, who will not stand questioning; pits and pools are measurable things on the map, they pose no difficulty of classification, but their supernatural occupants are always just out of view when the dictionary-makers want to define them. So the terminology for otherworldly beings shows a great deal of semantic variation, and not always along the lines we would expect. Our first instance of the *thyrs* was *Grendel*, and *Grendel* is huge, a creature of the giant race, smashing into the fortified hall and clutching thirty thegns in his murderous rampage. But if we continue expecting every *thyrs* to be large, we will be disappointed. Great size is one motif, but so is menace, so is wildness, so is a kind of brute hairy strength, and all these motifs are separable and can be recombined at will.

By the 14th century, we know that the untameable, wild nature of the *thyrs* had got him mixed up in another genre of stories, that of the uncanny servant, in which a strong rough spirit agrees to do household labour until something offends him. Old Master Rypon told a tale, amongst the many improving stories with which he peppered his sermons, about the naked demon called *thrus* who ground the corn until they left out a tunic for him, and then he was so proud of his newfound dignity that he never did honest work again.

It is a long way from the bane of Hrothgar to a brownie, but the descent is not complete yet. In a twist of meaning which seems curious to us, but was obviously natural in earlier days, spirits which flourished ubiquitously and secretly about the house swapped names with creepy-crawlies which did the same. In this way *bug* ceased to be the name for a formless horror and became confined to a class of insect. And the same semantic exchange applies to the little armoured shapes which used to march so determinedly across our floor to a dry death under the sofa, and which I knew in those days as chiggys, although I have since learnt to call them woodlice. These indoor crustaceans have more regional names than almost any other creature – our West Dorset version was only one of dozens – and amongst these we find *hobthrust*, *thrushlouse* and earlier still, *thurse-lowse*. Already reimagined as a shape-shifting domestic goblin, the *thyrs* has evidently been taken a stage earlier and identified with the mysterious crawling things of damp places. Poor Grendel! If I'd looked under a carpet in the bar at Barnet's Gate, I might have found him in residence after all.

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### Sources

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