

# Melting blades, perilous fluids

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*Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* both contain occasions in which a blade melts, and a related motif of the perilous qualities of the fluids of monsters. In *Beowulf* these motifs serve to develop a pervasive set of associations and oppositions, in which light, day and mortal men are linked, and oppose dark, night and monsters, respectively. The perilous fluids, and the contexts in which they occur, highlight these elements, in particular emphasising the monsters' estrangement from men. Tolkien consciously adopts this matrix and extends it, using the same motifs to do so. Where fire and heat in *Beowulf* are almost invariably associated with destruction and death, in *The Lord of the Rings* they are a point of tension between the clearly delineated correspondences of light and the warmth of day and goodness on the one hand, and darkness, evil and cold on the other; they are, or can be, both boon and bane.<sup>1</sup> This ambiguity is not wholly new, however: Tolkien has taken as a point of extrapolation the ice simile of *Beowulf* (1605–1611), describing the melting of the sword that slays Grendel's mother.<sup>2</sup>

Hot bodily fluids are a characteristic of almost all of the monsters in *Beowulf*, and emphasise both their inimical nature and their shared inhumanity. It is indeed a large part of what distinguishes them from mortal men and heroes. The discussion on the titles of Grendel and his mother in the appendix of [Tol97a] demonstrates these creatures' likeness to human form and the use of terms which also apply to normal men and women. Even in their superhuman qualities, Grendel and Beowulf have a curious similarity: where Grendel seizes thirty thanes in his first attack on Heorot, Beowulf has the strength of thirty men in his grip (122–123, 379–380). There are differences, of course, and no doubting that Grendel is of a different sort than mortal men. However, within the action of the story, rather than in the narrator's description of and commentary on it, Grendel's blood clearly distinguishes him as a monster.

Of the creatures which are killed only the *nicras* and *eotena cyn* are not given hot blood or the like, if we assume that Grendel, rather than they, is the

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<sup>1</sup>Water is also handled differently by Tolkien. In *Beowulf* the sea and the mere are the abodes of monsters, and warriors thank God for an easy journey across the depths (227–228). In *The Lord of the Rings*, and more so in the tales of the First and Second Ages and earlier, the Sea is tied to Aman, and water is the bane of evil and another opposite of ill flame (as in Galadriel's phial and the King's Fountain in Gondolin; and the waters of Bruinen are adorned with white flames during the flood). Only the Watcher in the Water defies the power of Ulmo (and that through the unnatural damming of the Sirannon). However, this element is sadly outside the scope of this essay.

<sup>2</sup>All *Beowulf* line references and quotations are from the text given in [Kla50].

source of the *hātan heolfre* at the mere.<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, Grendel’s mother is not described as having the hot blood or poison of her son (*wæs þæt blōd tō þæs hāt, ættren ellorgæst*, 1616–1617); however, as the mother of Grendel she is already clearly a monster, and her blood is also on the sword when it melts (*sweord wæs swātig*, 1569).<sup>4</sup> The dragon slain by Sigemund is consumed by heat (*wyrm hāt gemealt*, 897), though no indication is given as to whether the heat was from an external or an internal source.<sup>5</sup> The dragon slain by Beowulf and Wiglaf is constantly linked with fire: it *ongan glēdum spīwan* (2312); its breath is *hāt hildeswāt* (2558); the wound it inflicts on Beowulf burns, the poison welling up with a deadly evil in his breast (2711–2715); and Wiglaf’s hand is burned in striking the belly of the beast (2697–2702).

Not only are hot blood and breath distinctly unnatural traits in their own rights, but they are also part of a consistent portrayal of heat and flame in contexts of ferocity, destruction and death throughout the poem. Fire *ealle forswealg, gæsta gīfrost* (1122–1123), and it occurs in descriptions of the dragon (not only of its breath), the lair of Grendel (*fȳr on flōde*, 1366), the funeral pyres, and the destruction of both Heorot and Beowulf’s hall.<sup>6</sup> This metaphor of fire as a devouring entity is extended in *Beowulf* by the digestive meanings of *meltan* ([Bos72]). Forms of this word occur both in the melting of the blade (1608, 1615) and also in the burning of halls (2326) and funeral pyres (1120, 3011), and significantly too in the description of Wiglaf’s bravery: *[n]e gemealt him se mōdsefa* (2628, joined with the statement that his blade too did not fail). Where the imagery is not directly of destruction, it is brief and ambiguous, as in the fire-hardened helmets (305) and the fire-forged bars on Heorot’s door (which Grendel makes short work of, 721–722).

The contexts in which the monsters’ fluids occur reveal the links between monsters and darkness, and their antipathy to daylight. There are many instances where this is made clear, and though of course most are not connected with fluids at all, on two significant occasions they are. A light as if of the sun

<sup>3</sup>The *nicras* are encountered on two occasions, described at 549–581 and 1422–1441. The *eotena cyn* occur at 419–421 and 883–884. The hot blood is part of the description of the mere, 1422–1423, the words repeated from the description of that place the morning after the wounded Grendel fled there (847–849).

<sup>4</sup>The mother–son relationship is made more of, and is a closer one, than simply being a descendant of Cain, which the *eotenas* are also.

<sup>5</sup>In *Vǫlsunga Saga* ([Fin65], 18–19) Fáfnir *fnýsti eitri alla leið fyrir sik fram*, but his blood is curiously handled. Sigurðr worries about getting in the way of *sveita ormsins*, is given a scheme by Óðinn to avoid contact with it, and after all that ends up *hefir allar hendr blóðgar upp til axlar*, to no ill effect! The blood seems not even to be hot, as Reginn happily drinks it straight away. However, when Sigurðr cooks the heart, he is burned by it and tastes of the now hot blood when licking his wound, which does have a significant effect.

The dragons in *Gull-þóris Saga* (4) breathe fire and poison, and their blood kills (passage included in [GSD68], 326–327).

<sup>6</sup>In *The Lord of the Rings* the latter two appear together, linked by Denethor’s despair, his madness “a light like flame” in his eyes. He lights his funeral pyre, after declaring:

“[Faramir] lies within. . . burning, already burning. They have set a fire in his flesh. But soon all shall be burned. The West has failed. It shall all go up in a great fire, and all shall be ended. Ash! Ash and smoke blown away on the wind!”

(V, 7, 834)

His end, like that of the warriors of the Finn episode, is in the “greedy roaring of the fire” which claims also the House of the Stewards (V, 7, 836–837; references to *The Lord of the Rings* are of the form book (appendix), chapter, page, and refer to the [Tol97b] edition).

marks the end of Grendel’s mother who, like her child and the dragon, hates the day (1570–1572). In an analogous episode in other works this light occurs earlier, while the monster is alive, and plays a part in its death;<sup>7</sup> even in the form encountered here, the connection is made clear from the blood on the blade.

While the context is sufficient in itself to proclaim the positive nature of sunlight, this attribute has already been established in the poem. The song which first enrages Grendel tells in part how the Almighty

gesette sigehrēþig      sunnan ond mōnan  
 leoman tō lēohte      landbūendum  
 (94–95)

In using the word *sigehrēþig*, light and triumph in battle are joined, a sure echo of God’s victory over the giants and all of Cain’s kin. Further, the dawn light is *beorht bēacen Godes* (570).

The second instance of this opposition between light and a monster’s fluids occurs is the dragon’s rampage. Setting forth at night, it *ongan glēdum spīwan* (2312) and the *brynelēoma* is clear far and wide, a dire parallel to the light of the sun.

The series of linked oppositions found in *Beowulf* is also used in *The Lord of the Rings*, but with a prominent addition and alteration. Tolkien introduces coldness as a characteristic associated with darkness and evil, and in response heat becomes its opposite, associated with light and goodness.<sup>8</sup> This realignment is not total, for heat (and particularly flame) can also be marks of evil. The ambiguity exists in the concept of heat as a whole, not within any individual instance: a given flame is either good or evil, not both at the same time.<sup>9</sup> “[O]pposing the fire that devours and wastes” is the “fire that kindles, and succours in wanhope and distress” ([Tol82], 391). As in *Beowulf*, dissolved blades and perilous fluids are used extensively to develop and support this and other elements of the symbolic framework.

The first melting sword in *The Lord of the Rings* illustrates this shift of values: the blade is a Morgul-knife, wielded by a Nazgûl, and the wound has “a pain like a dart of poisoned ice” (I, 11, 191). The knife melts not in Maura’s blood (which is not hot) but in the light (and presumably the warmth) of dawn (I, 12, 193).<sup>10</sup> While this episode may at first seem only minimally related to the

<sup>7</sup>*Þorsteins þátttr uxafóts*, 11, has the light and the vile fluids occurring in combination as the old hag Skjaldvör retches after being struck by the ray of light. Other examples, including those from later Icelandic folkstories, (and a likely basis for *teryg* turning into stone in *The Lord of the Rings*) are in *Gullbrá og Skeggi* ([GSD68], 330), *Helgaqvíða Hiovarðzsonar* ([Kuh62], 30) and a number of the troll stories in [Sim72].

<sup>8</sup>In *Beowulf* the ocean weather when Beowulf is attacked by *nicras* is *cealdost* (546), the waters Grendel’s mother must dwell in are *cealde* (1261), and expeditions of mortal vengeance are similarly cold (2396); there is an association here, but it is a weak one.

A few examples of cold in a positive, or at least non-evil context, can be found in *The Lord of the Rings*: Sting and Andúril are both described, in part, as having a cold light (II, 3, 269–270), while “Glamdring gleamed, cold and white” (II, 5, 322). Again, the association is weak and can be seen as an opposition to evil fire; see also footnote 13 for more on Andúril.

<sup>9</sup>The source of the split nature of fire, within the mythology of Tolkien’s sub-creation, is Melkor’s treachery, and it is particularly significant that many Maiar associated with fire were drawn to or corrupted by him.

<sup>10</sup>The name Maura is not given in Appendix F of *The Lord of the Rings*, but occurs in [Tol96], 50.

melting blade in *Beowulf*, the reversal of elements is in fact anticipated there, in the ice simile:

Ðæt wæs wundra sum,  
 þæt hit eal gemealt      īse gelīcost,  
 ðonne forstes bend      Fæder onlæteð,  
 onwinded wælrāpas,      sē gewæld hafað  
 sæla ond mæla;      þæt is sōð Metod.  
 (1607–1611)

The hot blood of the monster is likened allusively to the warmth of spring, and the *onwinded wælrāpas* is surely still in the listener’s mind when the flood by which the Lord destroys the *gīganta cyn*, written on the hilt of the melted sword, is described some eighty lines later (1687–1693). Given that the blade is *ealdsweord eotenisc* (1558) and *enta ærgeweorc* (1679), there are in *Beowulf* already the elements of an ill blade, connected with ice and cold, melted by a good force.

The parallels do not end there, leaving no doubt that Tolkien deliberately adapted the scene in the poem he knew so well. Strider keeps the hilt of the weapon, and Glorfindel’s elvish eyes read evil writings on it (I, 12, 205), just as Beowulf takes the hilt and shows it and its *rūnstafas* to Hroðgar (1677–1698). Twice a form of the verb ‘to melt’, modern counterpart of the Old English *meltan*, is used of the blade’s dissolving, once for the blade proper and again for the splinter extracted from Maura’s arm (II, 1, 215–216).<sup>11</sup>

The same verb occurs in a different form in the conflict between Mithrandir and the Valarauko. In the single clash of blades, the Valarauko’s sword “flew up in molten fragments” (II, 5, 322). The cause of the melting in this case is the fire of Mithrandir and Glamdring, “a stab of white fire”. Throughout this encounter the ambiguous nature of heat and fire in *The Lord of the Rings* is at the fore, and reaches its apex in the sword melting, when good fire meets evil fire and proves the mightier. Prior to this we have seen Mithrandir work with fire, but here he reveals much more of his connection with flame: “I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor.” This is a step beyond beautiful fireworks and lighting fires, and reveals the associations of this fire with goodness and daylight. The first reference is explained in *The Silmarillion* ([Tol77], 25) (where it is also called the Flame Imperishable among other names), which shows it to be the source of Being, the creative spirit of Ilúvatar. The flame of Anor is not referred to elsewhere, but as Anor is Sindarin for sun,

<sup>11</sup>On the second occasion the phrasing is unusual: “It has been melted.” No hint is given as to the agent. Compare this with another significant agentless passive, when Mithrandir says that “[n]aked I was sent back” after dying upon Celebdil (III, 5, 491). It is likely that in the latter case the agent is the divine in the form of the Valar who originally sent the Istari to Middle-earth ([Tol82], 388–402, gives the almost complete history of Tolkien’s writings on the Istari); the former is then perhaps the divine in another form (even simply the sun; see footnote 12).

Compare also these lines from the Old English charm *Wið færstice*:

gif hērinne sȳ      īsenes dæġ,  
 hægtessan geweorc,      hit sceal gemyltan!  
 ([SW67], 18–19)

Here too the melting is caused by a positive force, though it is not clear just what that power is, and again the melted weapon is associated with dire forces.

the association is positive.<sup>12</sup> After breaking the sword, Mithrandir creates a “blinding sheet of white flame”, a fire of the sun rather than of the pit.<sup>13</sup> Later it is told that Mithrandir had long borne Narya the Great, the Ring of Fire, with which he “may rekindle hearts in a world that grows chill” (Appendix B, 1060).<sup>14</sup>

Opposing this beneficent fire is the demonic force of destruction that fire is in *Beowulf*, with the same connections to darkness and evil that occur there. Mithrandir faces a “flame of Udûn”, who wields “a blade like a stabbing tongue of fire”, a “red sword. . . flaming”.<sup>15</sup> The Valaraukar are, like Mithrandir, Maiar, and they are “scourges of fire” ([Tol77], 31), “their hearts were of fire” ([Tol77], 47) and they had “whips of flame” (*ibid.*). The reference to Udûn connects them to Utumno, the fortress of Melkor “deep under Earth, beneath dark mountains where the beams of Illuin were cold and dim” ([Tol77], 36).<sup>16</sup>

This quote from *The Silmarillion* raises a paradox that recurs in the final example in *The Lord of the Rings* of a melting sword, a paradox of destructive heat being linked with cold. After Kali stabs the Lord of the Nazgûl with the sword of Tyrn Gorthad

And behold! there lay his weapon, but the blade was smoking like a dry branch that has been thrust in a fire; and as he watched it, it writhed and withered and was consumed.<sup>17</sup>

(V, 6, 826)

Yet throughout the book the Úlairi are consistently associated with cold. Kali shivers before being overcome by the Black Breath in Bree (I, 10, 170), and both his, Éowyn’s and Maura’s arms are icy after striking and being struck by a Nazgûl respectively (I, 12, *passim*; V, 8, 849; V, 8, 841). The Black Breath (called by the Gondorians the Black Shadow) causes its victims to pass into “a

<sup>12</sup>The sun, in the published *Silmarillion*, is the last fruit of Laurelin, the Golden Tree, brought into being by the Valar Yavanna and Nienna, and is guided by a spirit of fire uncorrupted by Melkor ([Tol77], 99–100). The pedigree is thus impeccable.

<sup>13</sup>Light and positive fire are also often linked in swords. In this scene “Glamdring gleamed” and “glittered white in answer” to the Valarauko’s flaming sword (II, 5, 322), and other examples abound: Andúril, the Flame of the West (V, 6, 830), gleams “with white fire” (III, 7, 521), “flamed” and “gleamed” at Helm’s Deep (III, 7, 523 and 525) and cleaves an *orch*’s helm and head with “a flash like flame” (II, 5, 317); the writing upon Razar’s blade “glinted like fire” (V, 10, 874); Sting “flashed and glittered like a blue flame” in the presence of *yrch* (II, 6, 336); and Elessar holds up Andúril “glittering in the sun” (V, 9, 864), for “the light of sun shone redly in it, and the light of the moon shone cold” (II, 3, 269). The use of these gl-words, all having the sense of shining light, is of course deliberate. Similarly Éowyn’s sword, when it shatters, does so “sparkling” (V, 6, 824).

<sup>14</sup>Likewise Faramir speculates that Andúril “may rekindle [hope]” for the people of Gondor (IV, 5, 662).

<sup>15</sup>Tolkien is largely consistent in associating the colour red with destructive flame and white with positive flame. The quotations above about Glamdring and the Valarauko’s sword are typical examples out of many. When Mithrandir and Razar journey to Minas Tirith, the moon is “yellow fire”, and shortly thereafter Razar mistakes the “red fire” of the beacons of Gondor for dragons. When Mithrandir sets him straight, he says that “war is kindled” (V, 1, 731) — red fire is not always evil, but it is always tied to destruction.

<sup>16</sup>Udûn is Sindarin for Utumno ([Tol77], 365). Illuin was one of the Lamps of the Valar which first lit Middle-earth, and which Melkor destroyed in his hatred for all such divine lights.

<sup>17</sup>Here there is no telling use of ‘melt’, but the language matches the meaning of *meltan* exactly: to melt, become liquid, be consumed ([Bos72]). These meanings occur together in the description of dragon-fire as able to “melt and consume the Rings of Power” (I, 2, 59).

For another blade which withers, see footnote 20.

deadly cold” (V, 8, 842). Even their voices are cold and freeze listeners with fear (I, 4, 88; I, 12, 194; V, 1, 749; V, 4, 790–791).

The solution lies in the two types of flame and their relationship to the sun. The destructive fire is associated with cold because both are the antithesis of the warmth of divine light, from the sun, the stars, the Two Trees, and the Lamps of the Valar.<sup>18</sup>

In the Khazad-dûm sequence we are presented with the only instance of hot blood in *The Lord of the Rings*, and while brief here too Tolkien has *Beowulf* very much in mind. For as in the poem, it is important to emphasise the monstrous nature of the servants of Sauron, and unnatural blood is the method used.<sup>19</sup> After Maura stabs the *torog* with Sting, “[b]lack drops dripped from the blade and smoked on the floor” (II, 5, 316).<sup>20</sup> This use of the motif is made more telling by two parallels with *Beowulf*. The *torog* appears only in part, from behind a door, and it is his “huge arm and shoulder” which thrust forward first. Here, surely, is Grendel’s own *hond. . . , earm ond eaxle* (834–835). Further, the *torog* is impervious to Boromir’s weapon, and only Maura’s Eldar-forged sword penetrates it, as later Razar’s “written blade of Westernesse” causes the black blood of the *torog*-chief to gush out (V, 10, 874). The similarity with Grendel and Grendel’s mother is clear.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup>‘Pale’ is often used in conjunction with evil fire and light, and likewise with coldness. In the wight’s lair “a pale greenish light” grows, a “cold glow” (I, 8, 137). The word occurs thrice more in the barrow episode, alongside many references to cold and the contrast between the glow and the warming daylight. The wight’s incantation tells of coldness and the failing of the Sun and the Moon. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that the word carries a connotation of coldness elsewhere in the work: Shelob’s eyes glow with “pale deadly fire” (IV, 9, 704); Grishnákh has “a light like a pale but hot fire behind his eyes” (III, 3, 445; compare Grendel, *[h]im of eagum stod ligge gelicost leoht unfaeger* (726–727)); Denethor gives a “pale smile, like a gleam of cold sun on a winter’s evening” (V, 1, 739); the knife and hand of the Nazgûl at Amon Sûl “glowed with a pale light” (I, 11, 191) and later their associations are spelled out within a few sentences:

Swords were naked in their pale hands; helms were on their heads. Their cold eyes glittered, and they called to him with fell voices. . . . A breath of deadly cold pierced [Maura] like a spear, as with a last spurt, like a flash of white fire, the elf-horse. . . passed right before the face of the foremost Rider. (I, 12, 208)

In contrast, those same eyes of Shelob are burned by the light of Galadrial’s phial, which “blazed suddenly like a white torch” and “flamed like a star” (IV, 10, 713) — and of course the light is indeed that of the star Gil-Estel, being the Silmaril borne by Eärendil.

<sup>19</sup>For all that there are Urulóki, wargs, the winged steeds of the Nazgûl, and Ungoliant and her descendents in Middle-earth, the great majority of monsters are of humanoid form, and need to be distinguished from the Free Peoples. The perilous fluids motif could not be overused (Grishnákh’s “foul breath” (III, 3, 445) is as close as *yrch* get), and other techniques are brought to bear (such as the mixing of *uruks* and Men by Saruman, which serves to increase the monstrosity both of the half-breed and regular Glamhoth).

<sup>20</sup>In the Nirnaeth Arnoediad it is told that Húrin’s “axe smoked in the black blood of the troll-guard of Gothmog until it withered” ([Tol77], 195).

<sup>21</sup>Most blades, even those of high quality, fail to hurt a monster, even when well-made and having proved potent in the past, as is the case with Hrunting (1457–1464). Grendel’s family is susceptible to no blade but the *wæpna cyst* (1559), and Beowulf’s *ærgod* sword Nægling shatters in the fight with the dragon. In *The Lord of the Rings* Maura’s blade manages only to cut the cloak of the Nazgûl on Amon Sûl, and later breaks at a gesture from that same monster (I, 12, 209).

Gimli’s axe being notched by the iron collar of an *orch* at Aglarond is a different matter, as the creature was killed by the weapon (III, 8, 530). This example is closer to those occasions when a blade is destroyed in its successful use, as with the sword with which Maura attacks

In all these uses of perilous fluids in *The Lord of the Rings*, *Beowulf* stands in the background as a source not only of the particular motifs but also the use to which they are put. In developing his symbolic framework of opposed forces of good and evil, even where it differs from that in *Beowulf*, Tolkien draws heavily on that poem and its language.

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the Barrow-wight (I, 8, 138), Éowyn's sword on slaying the Lord of the Nazgûl (V, 6, 824), Narsil in the overthrow of Sauron (II, 2, 237), and of course Kali's melting blade. In this fight in Khazad-dûm, Aragorn's praise of Maura and his weapon reinforces the point. The breaking of Mithrandir's staff when fighting the Valarauko may also be grouped with these — "The staff in the hand of a wizard may be more than a prop for age" said Háma when asking for the guests' weapons (III, 6, 500).

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