Descended from Cain: The Biopolitics in *Beowulf*

Jia-Ying Liu

*National Taiwan University*

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Descended from Cain: The Biopolitics in *Beowulf*

Jia-Ying Liu

Grendel and his mother are especially noticeable for their notorious ancestry, which can be traced back to the biblical figure of Cain. To be specific, Grendel is referred to as “Caines cynne” [Cain’s clan], only a few lines after his name is first mentioned (Heaney l. 107). Later, Cain’s lineage is mentioned again when Grendel’s mother takes revenge for her son. Readers of *Beowulf* may be puzzled by the emphasis on Cain’s kinship to Grendel, and biblical allusions concerning Cain’s sin have received a significant amount of scholarly attention. Many studies examine the reference to Cain from a religious perspective. J.R.R. Tolkien, for example, notes that *Beowulf* is a blend of Norse tradition and Christianity, while James Phillips emphasizes the significance of Cain to the Christian tradition and mentions that, like their ancestor, Cain’s descendants represent a “dismemberment of the fraternal bond in which they come to stand over against human beings” (41). From Phillips’s perspective, the fractured bodies of victims and riven communities, which result from the violence of Grendel and his mother, could be associated with Cain’s sin of fratricide. Robert Stevick also examines references to Cain, arguing that “God gave requital for their strife against Him” to Cain’s descendants (85). Since Cain committed the sin of fratricide, Stevick deems that the curse on Cain and his clan is retaliation for their departure from God.
While the lineage of Cain has been interpreted from religious perspectives by many scholars, there has been little discussion concerning the performance of biopower in this poem. Biopolitical theories offer an explanation of Grendel and his mother’s marginalized status in Danish society and the political tension between them and the sovereign power. Such a reading also explains why Hrothgar needs to banish and even pursue the elimination of Grendel and his mother. The rivalry between the Grendelkin and the Danes is examined from the theory of biopolitics by Adam Miyashiro, who applies Giorgio Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer*, which refers to a person expelled from society and deprived of civil rights, to the poem. From Miyashiro’s perspective, the Grendelkin are *homo sacer* in a biopolitical settler colonial context since they are presented as “‘proto’-Indigenous people,” who threaten settler sovereignty (385). As Miyashiro parses *Beowulf* from a biopolitical perspective, he elaborates how the settler sovereignty of the Danes expands through violent actions that target marginalized and abnormal individuals, exemplified by the Grendelkin. However, Miyashiro makes no direct mention of Cain in his discussion of *Beowulf*. Instead, Miyashiro confines his discussion to the runic character ᚩ [œþel], which refers to an ancestral homeland and indicates “a cultural identity, one rooted in specific foundational narratives, and also defined by genealogy[,]” the suspension of which is a biopolitical state of exception that situates the Grendelkin as a threat to sovereignty (386-87). In this paper, I will extend Miyashiro’s

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1 Miyashiro indirectly mentions Grendel’s relation to Cain within a citation of Peter Clemoes, who argues that Grendel is simultaneously presented as a cursed spirit “descended from Cain, who had been outlawed by God for fratricide,” and a “hateful savage outcast” (qtd. in Miyashiro 386).
biopolitical approach to *Beowulf* by relating the significance of Cain’s lineage to the theme of biopolitics and biopolitical colonialism.

Although there are biblical approaches to Cain’s lineage and studies on biopolitical themes in *Beowulf*, the significance of Cain regarding biopolitics is rarely analyzed. In light of the limitation of previous studies, this paper, by employing the theories of biopolitics and biopolitical colonialism, examines Cain and his posterity with the concept of *homo sacer*. I first argue that due to their blood relation with Cain, Grendel and his mother are innate *homo sacer*, born without protection from God or a sovereign. Next, this paper argues that Cain’s descendants not only innately embody *homo sacer*, but also are reduced to bare lives under Danish sovereignty because of biopolitical settler colonialism and Cain’s transgression against the patriarchal order. The formula from ancient Roman law in which Agamben locates the origin of biopolitics, *vitae necisque potestas*, denotes the father and the sovereign’s power of life and death over sons and citizens respectively. I propose that Cain’s fratricide is a usurpation of a father’s *potestas*, since the authority of killing sons is only granted to fathers, and due to the close relationship between the *potestas* of the father and sovereign in ancient Roman law, Cain also transgresses the sovereign’s authority. Consequently, Cain’s descendants deviate from both a patriarchal and a sovereign order. These deviations shed light on why his progeny are reduced to a state of bare existence, revealing the underlying political tension between *homo sacer* and Danish sovereignty. Furthermore, this paper extends the biopolitical theme to the whole poem, providing an explanation for the near total absence of a culture of feuding between Cain’s descendants and the Danes, whereas feud
is a recurrent theme of Scandinavian history as shown in other parts of the poem. This paper concludes that, similar to *homo sacer*, who are deprived of political and social lives, Cain’s descendants exist in a liminal space between the Danes and the non-human monster—the dragon—at the end of the poem.

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben takes up Michel Foucault’s theory of biopolitics and focuses on how lives are exposed to sovereign power with biopolitical means. He proposes that *homo sacer*, a concept borrowed from Roman law, is someone present within a society but paradoxically excluded and reduced to a bare life,\(^2\) which is, as Agamben puts it, a life “excluded […] from all political life” to the extent that “anyone can kill him without committing homicide” (183). Nevertheless, a person being excluded from the political realm does not result in his or her peripheral relation to the sovereign authority. Instead, *homo sacer* is included in the realm of the sovereign by existing “in a continuous relationship with the power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditioned threat of death” (183). In other words, being reduced to a bare life, *homo sacer* is still vulnerable to the violence of sovereignty.

Within this framework, Cain’s descendants are *homo sacer*. After relating Grendel to Cain, *Beowulf* briefly brings up Cain’s sin, “þæs þe he Abel slog” [the killing of Abel] (Heaney l. 108), and God’s punishment for

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\(^2\) In Agamben’s discussion, the concept of bare life is derived from the two terms used by the ancient Greeks to denote life. The ancient Greeks made a distinction between bios, referring to the mode, manner, and existence of life, and *zōē*, pertaining to the biological dimension of life. Agamben’s concept of “bare life” presents a life stripped of all positive attributes that connect it to a social existence, existing solely as bios.
him, namely his exile. Cain’s situation makes him similar to the expelled and restless *homo sacer*. However, God’s mark upon Cain protects him from people’s homicide lest they suffer sevenfold vengeance, while *homo sacer* may be killed with impunity by anyone. Thus, although being outlawed by God and set apart from His land, Cain is essentially not *homo sacer*. Cain’s descendants, nonetheless, carry the characteristics of *homo sacer*. The “geoscæft-gasta” [misbegotten spirits] (l. 1266) descended from Cain are innate *homo sacer* as they are born without protection from anyone, neither God nor Danish sovereignty. Being referred to as “heoro-wearh hetelic” [the banished and accursed] (l. 1267), Grendel serves as an example. Moreover, similar to *homo sacer*, Grendel and his mother are isolated from Danish society yet at the same time subject to its sovereign power. On the one hand, Grendel and his mother are presented as outcasts occupying marginalized roles in Danish society; on the other hand, they are significant enemies of the sovereign and victims of political violence. Thus, Grendel’s incursion into Heorot, a place that “embodies the achievement of civilization” (Hallowsen 600), not only troubles the Danish kingship and jeopardizes people’s lives, but also represents *homo sacer*’s transgression of sovereignty and civilization. The clash between the Danes and Grendel also resembles the expulsion and banishment of *homo sacer* by biopower.

As Agamben states, *homo sacer* lives in a “zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture” (109). Similarly, Grendel and his mother also simultaneously exhibit animalistic, monstrous, and human-like characteristics. Grendel’s remarkable brutality and bestial strength are fully shown during his fight with *Beowulf* in Heorot,
where he kills people in a monstrous and primitive way, such as grabbing, mauling, and gorging on the Danes in lumps and limbs (Heaney l. 740-45). While Grendel’s ruthless and maniacal behavior makes him similar to a menacing beast, another notable and aberrant feature is his invulnerability to weapons, which makes him even more monster-like: “þone syn-scădan / ænig ofer eorþan irenna cyst, / guð-billa nan gretan nolde, / ac he sige-wæp-num forsworen hæfde, / ecga gehwylcre” [that no blade on earth, no blacksmith’s art / could ever damage their demon opponent. / He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge / of every weapon] (l. 801-05). Grendel’s formidable and unnatural ability contributes to his monstrous and fiendish attributes. Similarly, Grendel’s mother could not be harmed by Unferth’s sword as it “bitan nolde” [refused to bite] (l. 1523) and fails Beowulf.

Nonetheless, Grendel and his mother by no means manifest pure bestiality and inhuman power. Grendel and his mother bear certain human traits and can be loosely identified as a male and female entity, respectively: “ðæra oðer wæs, þæs þe hie gewislicost gewitan meahton, / idese onlicnæs; oðer earm-sceapen / on weres wæstmum wræc-lastas træd, / næfne he wæs mara þonne ænig man oðer; / þone on gear-dagum ‘Grendel’ nemdon / fold-buende” [One of these things, as far as anyone ever can discern, looks like a woman; the other, warped / in the shape of a man, moves beyond the pale / bigger than any man, an unnatural birth / called Grendel by the country people / in the former days] (Heaney l. 1349-55). Moreover, Joseph Baird states that due to Grendel’s consanguinity with human society, Grendel is related to humans, yet to the most sinful part of humanity because he is Cain’s offspring (381). Thus, Cain’s descendants are also described as
marginalized and woeful beings. For example, Grendel suffers from enforced isolation: “Ða se ellen-gæst earfoðlice / þrage geþolode, se þe in þystrum bad, / þæt he dogora gehwam dream gehyrde / hludne in healle” [Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark, / nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him / to hear the din of the loud banquet / every day in the hall] (Heaney l. 86-89). Since Grendel is unable to join the feasts like the Danes, who are not excluded from political life as he is, the bustling Heorot distresses Grendel and he is consumed with “envy of the happiness and mirth” that presides there (Storms 428). The lonesome state of Grendel evokes a sense of his societal abandonment, positioning him as an outcast. Grendel’s mother also appears to possess human-like features as she is referred to as “ides, aglæc-wif” [monstrous hell-bride] (Heaney l. 1259) and “Wif unhyre” [ghastly dam] (l. 2120), indicating her deviant status within the human community rather than her being completely disconnected from social contexts.

Although Cain’s clan possesses contradictory and ambiguous characteristics that make them resemble not only beasts and monsters but also humans, they are separated from Danish sovereignty, and this separation is reflected in their dwelling and Grendel’s exclusion from the throne. The dwelling of Cain’s descendants, namely “mistige moras” [misty moors] (Heaney l. 162), reflects that Grendel and his mother are creatures who are left out and segregated from Danish society. Despite the presence of symbols of civilization within their abode, exemplified by “fyr-leoht” [firelight] (l. 1516) and “maðm-æhta” [treasure] (l. 1613), their dwelling starkly contrasts with the illustrious Heorot, which stands as a symbol of human achieve-
ment. Moreover, even after Grendel brutally intrudes into Heorot, “no he þone gif-stol gretan moste, / maþðum for Metode” [the throne itself, the treasure-seat, / he was kept from approaching] (l. 168-69). Grendel’s exclusion reflects the fact that he is God’s outlaw as well as a marginalized figure banished from the political center.

Apart from the physical segregation and restriction, there is a social demarcation between Cain’s clan and the Danes. Dale Spencer approaches the inclusion and exclusion of *homo sacer* with regard to one’s biological existence and social, political, and legal standing within a community. In Spencer’s words, even though a bare life is “physically in the community,” it is “constituted as not of the community” (223). In *Beowulf*, similarly, Grendel is treated as an outcast physically and socially. Being *homo sacer*, who must be banished from the political realm, Grendel has to be repelled once he violently enters into Heorot since this encroachment, besides imperiling the Danes’ lives, is a transgression of the domain of sovereignty and a disturbance of the boundary between people within the community and outcasts. Thus, there is political tension between the biopower of the Danes and the marginalized *homo sacer*, and it is imperative that Grendel and his mother be banished or, if necessary, eliminated from society. This political struggle might also explain the “hynďo” [humiliations] (Heaney l. 475) that the Danish king faces when he fails to cast the monsters out because Grendel’s intrusion is a violation of his sovereignty. On the other hand, *Beowulf*'s triumph over Grendel and his mother is an exemplification not only of an ideal fighter, but, more significantly, an ideal sovereign.

I now turn to examine how Cain’s descendants are not only innate
*homo sacer* but are reduced to *homo sacer* under the dominion of settler sovereignty. According to Miyashiro, this poem is value-laden in ways that impact the Anglophone world’s understanding of itself and of its race and lineage: “*Beowulf* has been central to race-thinking in Anglo-settler-colonialism” (385). Miyashiro discusses the relationship between Grendel and Danish sovereignty through the biopolitics of settler colonialism, and the power relations between the Danes and Grendel can be translated into that of the settler and Indigenous people, so that Grendel and his mother are presented as *homo sacer* in Danish society (385). Apart from being marginalized and erased from the settler community, according to Tomonori Sugimoto, Indigeneity is also incorporated into settler narratives and the national imaginary. Sugimoto takes Taiwanese Indigenous peoples as an example for how the incorporation of Indigenous people “center[s] settler experience and naturalize[s] settler dominance” (284). To extend Sugimoto’s idea to the poem, similarly, Indigenous people are not wiped out from the Anglo-settler history but are incorporated in historical narratives, only to be subjugated by the Danes and serve as an enemy.

Cain’s sin is significant to both Miyashiro’s perspective, which considers the Indigenous Grendelkin as *homo sacer* reduced to bare lives, and Sugimoto’s concept of an incorporated Indigeneity reflected in the poem. From a colonist’s perspective, being Indigenous people, Grendel and his mother “unsettle the Danes’ territorial and political stability” (Miyashiro 385), yet it is through the lineage of Cain that the Grendelkin are described as fiendish, resulting in banishment and subsequent elimination. Thus, the Grendelkin’s existence as Indigenous people explains the Danes’ hateful and
demonic recounting of Grendel and his mother as well as their human-like and pitiful descriptions. On the one hand, they are vulnerable Indigenous people, exposed to sovereign violence. On the other hand, they are Cain’s offspring, and thus diabolic and pitiless, as when Grendel is referred to as a “feond on helle” [fiend out of hell…], a “fyrena hyrde” [captain of evil] (Heaney l. 101, 750).

The Grendelkin’s existence as homo sacer could be further extended through the significance of Cain’s sin with respect to an ancient Roman formula, vitae necisque potestas. In ancient Roman law, “the first time we encounter the expression ‘right over life and death’ in the history of law is […] the unconditional authority […] of the pater over his sons” (Agamben 87). In other words, fathers are endowed with absolute power regarding their sons’ lives. Moreover, Agamben states that “the registries of the ius patrium and of the sovereign power [are] tightly intertwined” (88). Thus, he asserts that there is such a close relationship between the patriarchal power and the sovereign power to the extent that “the magistrate’s imperium is nothing but the fathers’[’] vitae necisque potestas extended to all citizens” (89). In this way, patriarchal consanguinity greatly influences and even shapes the political power of life and death.

This correlation explains the Danes’ hostility towards Grendel. Following the logic of Agamben’s argument, Grendel’s ancestor, Cain, violates a patriarchal order by killing his father’s son with a sword (Heaney l. 1261-63). As Agamben emphasizes, the power of life and death “follows immediately and solely from the father-son relation” (88), and Cain oversteps the authority granted only to fathers by murdering his brother. This
act of fratricide disrupts the traditional father-son relationship as he seizes a father’s authority over his sons’ lives and deaths. Given that the power of the sovereign derives from the father’s *vitae necisque potestas*, Cain’s violation of the father’s prerogative can be seen as an encroachment upon the authority of the sovereign to exercise the power of life and death over its citizens. This act of fratricide by Cain not only profoundly disrupts the established patriarchal order but also unsettles the very foundations of kingship. Furthermore, Cain’s transgression extends beyond his earthly father, Adam, as he also defies and disrespects God, who holds the position of Father to all within the Biblical framework. Notably, Cain’s defiance is primarily directed towards God’s admonition rather than Adam’s, and he is later punished and banished as a wanderer by God. Hence, Cain emerges as a defiant son to the divine Father, rendering him a figure of rebellion from a religious standpoint and a violator within the sovereign order. As descendants of Cain, the Gren-delkin disrupt both paternal and religious order as well as sovereign power. In addition, as stated in the text with the phrase “no hie fæder unnon” [they are fatherless creatures] (Heaney l. 1355), Grendel and his mother represent irksome consanguinity, deviating from patriarchal social norms. Thus, the descendants of Cain not only encapsulate the unsettling legacy of Cain as a defiant son but also emerge from his fatherless lineage, thereby posing a threat to Danish kingship. The expulsion and extermination of Cain’s progeny, in this context, assumes an additional layer of political significance. It becomes imperative for Danish sovereignty to confront and eliminate these sinful beings to prevent the Danes from deviating from the established patriarchal and sovereign order, and the failure to adhere to
these norms could result in a loss of citizenship, transformation into *homo sacer*, and becoming subject to the very same miseries inflicted upon Cain’s offspring.

The biopolitical approach may also be applied to the theme of blood feud, which plays a central role in the Scandinavian history contained in *Beowulf*. Hrothgar effectively resolves the feud between Ecgtheow and the Wulfings by adhering to the principle of wergild, commonly known as “man-price.” This is demonstrated by Hrothgar’s statement, “Siððan þa fæhðe feo þingode” [Finally I healed the feud by paying] (Heaney l. 470).

In addition to the past and settled feud, the poem also alludes to a feud that will take place in the future. Although Hrothgar “þæt he mid ðy wife wæl-fæhða dæl, / sæcca gesette” [hopes this woman will heal old wounds / and grievous feuds] (l. 2028-29), *Beowulf* predicts that the marriage between Freawaru and Ingeld will be a futile attempt to end the feud between the Heathobards and the Shieldings.

While blood feud is a severe and indelible theme with reference to Scandinavian historical narratives, it loses its relevance regarding fights between Cain’s descendants and the Danes. Although Grendel’s mother, who is referred to as the “wrecend” [avenger] (Heaney l. 1256), seeks revenge for *Beowulf*’s killing of Grendel, the conflict between Cain’s descendants and the Danes does not end after the death of Grendel’s mother. How the Danes manage their relationship with Cain’s descendants is different from how they have attempted to end other feuds, exemplified by the “man-price” that Hrothgar pays for the Wulfings and the marriage between Freawaru and Ingeld. From the Danes’ perspective, they hold no
expectation of Grendel making peace with them and ending the retaliation, which is captured in the following line, “ne þær nænig witena wenan þorfte / beorhtre bote to banan folmum” [no counsellor could ever expect / fair reparation from those rabid hands] (l. 157-58). One possible explanation is that the poem is composed of “two complementary frames of reference, one heroic and one cosmetic,” namely one Germanic world and one Christian world (Osborn 973). Thus, the theme of feuding only appears in Germanic and pagan history and is almost absent from stories of Cain’s descendants, who are related to Christian elements. Nonetheless, this inconsistency of feud can be explained from the perspective of biopolitics. As mentioned before, “anyone can kill [homo sacer] without committing homicide” (Agamben 183). As the killing of homo sacer does not fall under the category of murder, Beowulf’s acts of violence against Grendel do not constitute a transgression against another individual or community. Consequently, the conflict between Beowulf and Cain’s descendants cannot be translated into the culture of feuding, and the elimination of Cain’s lineage evokes little retaliation or vengeance. In other words, existing as homo sacer, Grendel and his mother are essentially different from other Danes so that the banishment of them, regardless of the means taken, is permitted in Scandinavian society. Moreover, the one who kills them is not deemed a murderer, but a hero, and any reparation for the death of Cain’s descendants is unnecessary.

Lastly, besides Grendel and his mother, there is another monster that Beowulf fights: the dragon. Interestingly, as in the case of Cain’s clan, the dragon is almost invulnerable to weapons, so Beowulf fails to mutilate him at once as “bat unswiðor / þonne his ðiod-cyning þearfe hæfde, /
bysigum gebæded” [the blow / was far less powerful than the hard-pressed king / had need of at that moment] (Heaney l. 2578-80). Besides being a monster, Jane Nitzsche notes that the dragon symbolizes “the avarice of the evil gold-king” (288); thus, the dragon also carries human-like characteristics akin to an antagonistic king in a Germanic context. Nonetheless, there remain differences between the dragon and Cain’s descendants. Marijane Osborn writes that among the three monsters, “each antagonist is more nonhuman than the last” (973). Although the poet narrates a story of how the dragon becomes the guardian of the treasure, there is little information regarding the dragon’s lineage. While Grendel and his mother are constantly linked with Cain, the dragon’s ancestry seems to be less important. Thus, unlike the Danes and Cain’s descendants, who live inside or on the edge of human society, the dragon is presented as a monster who is wholly separate from humankind. Compared to the dragon, Grendel and his mother are still human-like and could be vaguely recognized as man and woman respectively (Heaney l. 1349-55). The dragon, on the other hand, is described as a “wyrm” [serpent] (l. 2567) who shares little or no physical resemblance to humans. The dragon also appears to be less human-like and more legendary than Grendel and his mother, exemplified by his power of spouting “hilde-leoman” [deadly fire] (l. 2583). Furthermore, while Grendel’s rage against the Danes might result from his marginalized situation in the community, the dragon takes no interest in the social lives of the Danes. Based on the similarities and dissimilarities between the dragon and Cain’s descendants, it could be argued that Grendel and his mother are in-betweens—they are neither people in the Danish society nor animalistic and marvelous figures like
the dragon. This peculiar situation of Cain’s descendants illustrates why they simultaneously possess elements of both human and monster, and more significantly, Grendel and his mother’s in-betweenness make them resemble the marginalized *homo sacer*, deprived of social and political lives, yearning for recognition from the society yet expelled and expunged by the sovereign as if they are non-humans.

In conclusion, this paper has explored the significance of Cain in *Beowulf* through the lens of biopolitics, shedding light on the characteristics of Grendel and his mother as well as the power dynamics between the Grendelkin and the Danes. Firstly, owing to his blood relation with Cain, Grendel is innate *homo sacer*, who needs to be expelled from Danish society by the sovereign, and there is thus a political struggle between him and the Danish king. Moreover, from a settler-colonial perspective, the biopower of sovereignty shapes an asymmetrical power relation between settlers and Indigenous people. Since Indigenous people threaten to disrupt and unsettle the authority of the settlers, figures like Grendel and his mother are related to Cain, and they are only included in settler narratives to be reduced to bare lives, excluded from society, and constantly threatened with elimination. Then, the role of paternal authority in ancient Roman law is discussed, and since there is an affinity between violations of patriarchal social order and sovereign order, Cain’s fratricide makes him defiant of his father and God, violating the paternal norms and threatening sovereignty. Having established a biopolitical framework through an exploration of the significance of Cain, this study has expanded the biopolitical theme to other parts of the poem, shedding light on the absence of blood feuds between
Cain’s lineage and the Danes. Lastly, Grendel and his mother are situated in relation to the last monster in the poem, the dragon. Existing in the liminal space between the Danes and the dragon, Cain’s descendants are treated as merely quasi-human. By approaching Beowulf through a biopolitical lens, the descendants of Cain emerge as homo sacer, both dangerous and vulnerable.
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