



Exploring the Object in Medieval Literature How the Object Moment functions in Medieval Texts

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Introduction

This dissertation will explore ‘abjection/the object’ in medieval literature. Before I can continue to discuss the objectives of my discussion, I need to first define ‘abjection’. Auslander describes abjection/the object as encompassing that which does not fit within the social and symbolic order of things, and which therefore must be excluded from that order, declared unclean or impure and pushed outside the boundaries’. The object thus appears to be different, it has no place in society and thus is rendered the ‘other’. It is then excluded by ‘boundaries’ which reinforce the otherness of the object. By setting up such boundaries, the object is kept at a distance from society - this distance separates the object from what is deemed ‘clean’ and which fits in the ‘social and symbolic order of things’. This in turn determines a border between the internal and the external, whereby the object comes to represent the outsider. Boundaries eventually hide the object from society and it thus becomes that which is unfamiliar or unknown, perpetuating its position as the outsider.

On the other side of these boundaries, within society, an order is established which keeps it functioning well; this order demarcates what is accepted and included, and what is not. As an ‘unclean’ and unfamiliar entity, the object must be kept away from society as this exclusion ensures that the established order remains intact and whole, and that society is kept pure. The object is then a constant threat to the stability of social order, and as an oppositional force to society, it then manifests through forms of transgression and disorder. For those who want to preserve social order, abjection thus induces negative responses: fear, hostility and revulsion.

In inspiring revulsion through being unclean and the ‘other’, the object is also found in waste products: bodily fluids such as blood and sweat, as well as general dirt and decay. These are object because they threaten to contaminate the clean - and as such, the healthy - human body. Again, the border between the internal and the external are transgressed by blood and sweat, reinforcing the abjection of the bodily fluids. For Kristeva, ‘refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death’. The object stands for that which threaten us with death, and thus it is so feared as it reveals to us our own mortality.

Continuing the idea of contamination, Kristeva notes that ‘[a]bjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution’. If the object breaches boundaries, society cannot allow such defilement to remain and it must cleanse itself of the object as it seeks to reestablish order. It is then this which makes me believe that a discussion of the object can be particularly resonant in medieval literature where the preservation of medieval societies was key to the survival of a people.

Medieval literature was often preoccupied with the maintaining of stability and harmony. Mead halls and courts marked out a medieval community, establishing clear insider-outsider boundaries. Being included in a community was of great significance to a

people who often relied on patronage, or the protection of those such as knights, to survive. Modes of order were instituted through various social codes such as those of the heroic and chivalry, reinforced by the prevalence of hierarchies or other governing bodies which placed importance on role and responsibilities. Invasion and warfare were prolific in many societies as people sought to capture land and expand kingdoms. The active protection of society was thus an integral part of medieval life.

As such medieval literature provides us with societies which are constantly challenged by 'outsiders' and transgression. The outsiders' status as being exclusive from the community that they have intruded upon renders them the enemy, an opposing 'other'. Their challenges threaten to unsettle social order, which in turn threatens human life, and their presence thus inspires hostility and fear. At the same time, transgression can come from within as we must remember that although society endeavours to keep itself pure and to preserve the social and symbolic order, it ultimately cannot overcome the imperfection of humanity. In this way, the outsiders and transgressors of medieval literature become potential manifestations of the abject as that which does not fit within the social and symbolic order of things'. The survival of various medieval societies and cultures then depends on the defeat of these abject entities. It is in this action that the attempt to eradicate ... abjectness ... often leads to violent results' which produce further abject moments through the reference of blood, wounds and corpses.

Thus, I will explore the abject by looking at episodes where the abject occurs in a selection of medieval texts - I will refer to these episodes generally as 'abject moments'. As the notion of the abject is essentially defined by society and social codes, I aim to determine the function(s) of the abject moments in relation to the society portrayed in the respective text as a whole, i.e. why do these moments occur and what do they say about the society and social codes of the text? In the process of my discussion, I will also look at how these episodes may then complicate and problematise the notion of the abject.

A key point to note is that abjection is 'a universal phenomenon; one encounters it as soon as the symbolic and/or social dimension of the man is constituted... But abjection assumes specific shapes and different coding according to the various "symbolic systems"'. Indeed, medieval literature encompasses a number of different 'symbolic systems' and as such, exactly how the abject manifests in a text depends on the social model of that text (by social model, I mean the model through which a particular society lives, such as the chivalric code). Thus, I will explore how the abject manifests in a selection of texts which each concern a different model of society.

The 'social and symbolic order' of each text will inevitably vary as each society has its own concerns. Accordingly, the conditions which determine what is acceptable or not acceptable in society - and thus defines what is abject - will also differ from narrative to narrative. For the purpose of my dissertation then, I will first and foremost use features of Auslander and Kristeva's theoretical frameworks which I have outlined above to define what constitutes an abject moment. These features are namely: not fitting in and/or undermining 'the social and symbolic order' and thus being an outsider and threat to society; transgressing a boundary that violates a social code; bodily fluids such as spit and blood.

The texts, and their corresponding social codes, that form the basis of my discussion are: *Beowulf* and the heroic code, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the chivalric code, *Njaf's Saga* and the honour code, and Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* in which we see how the abject manifests in one social code's interpretation of another. I have chosen these texts as exemplary narratives for each social code, however, my dissertation is of course not a completely definitive exploration of the abject in medieval literature, or indeed even of the abject in a particular social code. My observations are thus limited to the texts that I specifically analyse in this dissertation.

The Abject in *Beowulf*

The Abject as 'Other' (Grendel)

In *Beowulf*, the abject as an opposing other is best exemplified in Grendel and Grendel's mother, who are both clearly abject entities. They are descended from Cain whose terrible deed of killing his own brother meant that he *13a fag gewat* ('he then went outlawed'). Cain's fratricide already alludes to the abject as this act can be seen as an assault on the social order established in *Beowulf*. The text places great importance on lineage and kinship, opening immediately with the foundation myth of the legendary progenitor of the Scyldings, Scyld Scefing, which is then reinforced as the poem continues to develop this bloodline through Scyld's descendants. In killing his brother, Cain undermines a key value of the social order as he damages the sanctity of kinship, making him and all those who spring from him, *'geoscaftgasta'* ('being sent by fate', I. 1266a), unacceptable in society. Indeed, in a culture where one's identity is partly founded upon one's ancestors, Cain's act is detrimental to his own lineage. His fratricide thus represents abject pollution, and as such Cain and all his descendants must be cast out to cleanse society and reestablish the social order. Consequently, they are separated from *'mandream'* ('human joy', I. 1264b) to occupy the wilderness.

Grendel and his mother are thus born into exile, forced to dwell outside of Heorot's limits where they live initially hidden away in a hellish marsh, a place that Heaney calls an 'archetypal site of fear'. The fear that stems from such exile is reinforced through the status of Grendel and Grendel's mother as outsiders and their otherness is repeatedly emphasised in the poem as they are described as *'heorowearh hetelic'* ('hateful, savage outcast', I. 1267a) and *'n6 hie feeder cunnon'* (they know of no father', I. 1355b). Again, lineage is called into question as not knowing who their father was may have been regarded as particularly appalling in a patriarchal society where parentage was often a way in which one could determine who to trust or who wasn't. Beowulf himself is accepted by Hrothgar due to Hrothgar's longstanding friendship with Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow. The uncertainty surrounding the fathering of Grendel and his mother, coupled with their ancestry, thus renders their existence sinister and untrustworthy to the Scyldings and the Geats.

The distance that is enforced by the boundaries separating Heorot from Grendel and his mother's swamp intensifies the notion of them coming from the unknown. The swamp is called an alien creature's abode, *'2eliArihta eard'* (I. 1500a), and it is covered by *'water-egesan'* ('fearsome water', I. 1260a). Increasing the abjectness of their home, the swamp is often described as 'infested' - it is both an unclean, impure place and filled with threatening 'weird creatures' (*'1Arundra'*, I. 1509b): *'sellice sE-dracan'* ('strange sea-dragons', I. 1426a) and violent sea beasts who attack with their 'warlike tusks' (*'hildetnxurn'*, I. 1511a). The swamp is a treacherous place and its unfamiliarity is alarming - you cannot trust what you do not know. It is truly the home of the abject 'other', but as Kristeva notes: 'from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master', and we will soon see that the swamp harbours a menacing peril that will transgress the established boundaries and usurp order.

The reason for this transgression again marks out how Grendel and his mother are an opposing 'other' to Heorot. Grendel is made angry by the celebrations in Heorot hall:

IA se elle ngast ea rfoOlice
 rage gOolode, se j)e in j*strum bad,
 poet he dbgora gehwrim dream gehyrde
 hladne in healle; pair woes hearpan swig,
 swutol sang scopes.

Then the fierce creature with difficulty
 suffered the time, he who dwelled in the darkness,
 that he each day heard joy
 loud in the hall; there was the sound of the harp,
 the clear song of the poet.

(II. 86-90a),

he is incited by what is an integral part of the mead hall culture, and indeed the established traditions of feasting, music and poetry recital distress Grendel to the extent that he steps over the threshold that had for so long restrained the monstrous from the human in Heorot.

Grendel thus brings pollution again to the community and his intrusion means that the Scyldings are no longer safe from the abject. He retaliates against these cultural traditions by first destroying the physical symbol of social order in ripping open the hall doors and forcing his way into the Scyldings's sanctuary. These doors also serve as a representation of the boundary that separated the outcast Grendel, the 'mearcstapa' ('wanderer of the borderland', I. 103), from the accepted and included members of the community. With these boundaries no longer in place, Grendel commits horrific acts of slaughter on the Scyldings, leaving droves of butchered corpses in his wake.

It is then this slaughter that produces more abject moments. Kristeva observes that '[e]xcrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death' and this is demonstrated in *Beowulf* as the poet describes Grendel's attack:

ac he gefeng hraðe forman sTeie
 slEpendne rinc, sin unweamum,
 bat ban locan, bled edrum dranc,
 synsdum swealh; sane hede
 unlyfigendes eal gefeormod,
 fet and folma.

and he seized quickly at the first opportunity
 the sleeping warrior, he tore unrestrainedly,
 bit the muscle, drank blood from the veins
 swallowed the sinful morsels; soon he had
 consumed all [of the] lifeless [warrior],
 his feet and hands [also].

(II. 740-5)

The wounds, blood and corpses that Kristeva declares abject are all thrust upon us through Grendel's actions. For the Scyldings, their identity is rooted in Heorot, mead hall culture and the heroic code; Grendel's attack on the warrior is thus a very visual depiction of 'the danger to identity' presented by his abjectness as it contaminates the hall. Indeed, 'excrement and its equivalents' are found in the very corporeal punishments inflicted by Grendel. His aggressive and vicious handling of the human body which is torn apart, and the consumption of the entire body (including the hands and feet) demonstrate the animalistic hunger of this abject creature. Indeed it is this animalistic quality that clearly distinguishes Grendel from the social order, as Kristeva notes, 'by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or

animalism'. For the Scyldings, Heorot and the traditions of the mead hall, such as that of feasting, are these 'precise area[s] of their culture' that Kristeva refers to. Grendel's eating habits transgress these areas, where 'Mood seems to be in important means for the Beowulf-poet to portray a lack of civilisation. Lee notes that 'Grendel's habits are furious and voracious. The monster does not eat but gorges himself on the flesh of his adversaries' – thus Grendel's 'otherness' is further reinforced by his wildness as he tears 'unwearnum' ['unrestrainedly'] through the warrior's body.

Grendel's abjection is perpetuated furthermore with the reference to him drinking the warrior's blood, where Jack notes that '[b]lood-drinking was specifically proscribed in OE writings; and since blood could be understood as signifying the soul, to consume blood was to consume the soul'. Taking Jack's observation, Grendel's act reinforces his abjectness in a number of ways. Grendel commits an act that is forbidden and he is once again undermining the social order. Next, blood itself is a sign of the abject firstly as a bodily fluid that is considered unclean and can contaminate, where Meens observes: 'bodily secretions are considered to be polluting because they do and at the same time do not belong to the body. They are 'both me and not me', and are therefore viewed as universal objects of taboo'. Blood can therefore be seen as a sign of the liminal, of what evades concrete classification and is therefore alien; as such, the presence of blood here reflects Grendel's own alienness and liminality.

Furthermore, blood transgresses the boundary of the flesh and signifies what one 'thrust[s] aside in order to live'; blood-drinking in *Beowulf* thus reveals the fears of a warrior culture whose survival is dependent on the strength of their men and the sanctity of their hall, yet they face constant attack from an outsider, a monstrous entity that they do not understand and cannot overcome themselves. Finally, although I do not wish to draw too much focus on the role of religion considering the confines of my discussion, it is worth noting that Grendel's slaughter reaches further than the flesh and the material in that he also consumes the soul of the warrior where Robinson observes that 'to imbibe the blood of any creature was worse than merely to kill it; to do so was to consume life itself, which is reserved properly to the Lord'. In having Grendel ingest the abject, he is no longer that which has been cast out by society, declared a monster and abject because of his ancestry; instead Grendel is now truly a monstrous force as he willingly takes on and embodies that which is unacceptable and condemned in society. His blood-drinking breaches so many borders, and the huge destructive impact on the 'social and symbolic order of things' of Grendel's acts thus entrench Heorot in a state of abject disorder.

This disorder is intensified when we remember that these savage attacks are all occurring in the mead hall, a place that reinforces social order through its tradition of feasting. Indeed, Lee observes that 'If]easting creates bonds and therefore regular meetings are important to keep dissent at a minimum... Feasting was seen as an appropriate means of creating social cohesion, however it is Grendel's own acts of feasting which turn the tradition on its head. Instead of mead, he drinks the blood of the warriors, and his feast is made up of their bodies. His violent consumption of the Scyldings (members of the community) is thus a very physical attack on the social bonds and cohesion that are meant to be upheld through feasting. In subverting the mead hall rituals of drinking and feasting, Grendel then obliterates the 'border between two distinct entities or territories. A boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the non-human' and in doing so, he makes fundamental aspects of the mead hall culture abject. This abjection then pervades further through the history of the Scyldings as Grendel's destruction of Heorot, the 'healwra mġest' ('greatest hall', I. 78), is also the destruction of what represents a culmination of Hrothgar's successes as both a warrior and a king. Thus the abject is not only a danger to the people of Heorot, but to the very culture and livelihood of the society itself.

The Subversion of Warrior Culture (Grendel's Mother)

The abjection of the Scyldings' culture continues to be found in Grendel's mother. Again, the first acts of Grendel's mother (now that Grendel has been killed by Beowulf) damage the social order of Heorot as in her own delivery of savage attacks, she undermines another aspect of the Scyldings's livelihood - its warrior culture:

Hream weary in Heorote; heo under heolfre genam
cube folme; cearu woes geniwod,
geworden in wicun. Ne woes beet gewrixle til,
beet hie on ba healfa bicgan scoldon
freonda feorum.

There was uproar in Heorot; she took away
the well-known hand covered with blood²⁰; sorrow was renewed,
came about in the dwelling-place. That was not a good exchange,
that they on both sides should pay for
with the lives of friends.

(II. 1302-6).

Grendel's mother takes away her son's hand, which Beowulf had taken as a trophy for his victory against Grendel. As such, she removes the physical symbol of Beowulf's success, echoing her son's earlier assault on Hrothgar's legacy, and her act is thus a direct defiance of warrior culture.

However, this is problematised when we consider that at the same time as opposing warrior culture, Grendel's mother also engages in warrior-like behaviour herself. Marsden notes that '[t]he poet has not mentioned this second monstrous creature before [this passage]'²¹ and it seems that she only enters Heorot to retrieve a part of her son and to seek revenge for his death:

... mihtig manscaoa, wolde hyre rinE-g wrecan,
ge fear hafao fEthoe gestfeled...'

... the mighty wicked ravager, wanted to avenge her kinsman,
and has gone far in taking vengeance for that hostile deed...'

(Hrothgar, I. 1339-40).

Revenge is a quality that is found in the warrior code, and even Beowulf tells Hrothgar that revenge should be their course of action after Grendel's mother seizes Hrothgar's dearest retainer, fEschere:

'Ne sorga, snotor gumal Slre bid EWPWRrn
peat he his freond wrece panne he fela mu rne...'

'Do not grieve, wise man! It is better for each man
that he avenges his friend than he greatly mourns...'

(11.1384-5).

The link between Grendel's mother's and the Scyldings's culture can also be found in her

abode, which although hellish, is itself a 'hrOfsele' ('roofed hall', I. 1515). Furthermore, it could be argued that there are parallels found between Beowulf, Scyld Scefing and Grendel as they all bring destruction to mead halls: Beowulf who 'explores the dwelling from above' (I. 1500) before killing Grendel's mother in her hall, and Scyld Scefing whose 'courageous deeds', (I. 3) include the subjugation of his opponents by 'depriving them of the mead-benches—i.e. the hall', 'Often Scyld Scefing took away the mead-benches / from bands of foes, from many races' (II. 4-5).

Human Qualities in the Abject

This problematic likeness is not only found in the actions of these characters, but also in the physicality of the monstrous manifestations of the abject. The forms of Grendel and his mother, although still ambiguous, resemble the human to the extent that they have gendered identities:

DE1Ta rider 'ewes,
 [Does pe hie gewisllcost ge' Aritan meahton,
 idese onllcn[e]s; 6aer earmsceapan
 on weres weestmum wrzecelestas treed,
 ntefne he wms m5ra [Donne Elnig man rider

... One of these was,
 as they were most certainly able to discover,
 the likeness of a woman; one wretched creature
 in the form of a man traversed the path of exile,
 except he was bigger than any other man

(II. 1349-53).

At the same time, both Grendel and Grendel's mother also seem to experience human emotions or senses, and we see this through Grendel's pain and fear of Beowulf and the aforementioned warrior-like behaviour of his mother. Furthermore, where we can find human qualities in these two entities, we can also find aspects of Grendel in Beowulf:

and on raeste genam
 prltig l3egna...

... and in the resting-place he seized
 thirty thanes...

(in reference to Grendel, II. 122-3)

poet he pr.-I-Nes
 manna mzegecraeft on his mundgripe
 heaPorOf heebbe.

... that he had the strength of thirty
 men in his hand-grip brave in battle.

(in reference to Beowulf, II. 379-81).

So what does it mean to find similarities between the antagonist and the protagonist of *Beowulf*?

It is here where abjection is complicated and the abject itself is not always that which is situated outside of boundaries, the 'jettisoned object' which Kristeva observes 'lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated'. Instead, although the abject has been rendered the 'other', it is also a part of our human selves. The defiling blood, excrement and other bodily fluids which signify the abject are taboo, but they are also fundamentally human, found *within* the body, and as Douglas notes '[d]irt is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter'; thus, in constituting the borders of social order and human mortality, the abject can be seen as coming from within ourselves, an essential part of our identities.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: The Abject and Identity The Abject as Ambiguous

The ways in which the abject functions from within ourselves and in relation to our identities is best demonstrated in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

As with *Beowulf*, the notion of the abject is introduced to the narrative through an outsider. Again, the outsider's entrance disturbs the social order by interrupting a tradition of Camelot, as Arthur and his people are in the midst of celebrating the New Year, when:

Ther hales in at the halle dor an aghlich mayster,
On the most in the molde on mesure hyghe,
...
Half etayn in erde I hope that he were;
Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene,
And that the myriest in his muckel that myght ride,
...
For wonder of his hwe men hade,
Set in his semblaunt sene;
He ferde as freke were fade,
And overal enker-grene.

There comes in at the hall door a fearsome lord,
the very biggest in the world in his tall stature,
...
that I believe he may have been half giant indeed,
but at any rate I consider him to be the biggest of men,
and the handsomest of his size who might (ever) ride a horse,
...
Men wondered at this colour,
plain to see in his face;
he bore himself like a man of battle,
and he was bright green all over.'

Although the Green Knight does not wreak the same violence that Grendel does when he enters Heorot, he is still a stranger to the court. His huge size is the first sign of his otherness (a characteristic that is also found in Grendel), but it is his colouring which is more startling and intriguing. Marked out by being entirely green, the knight is clearly a figure to be wary of and we see this in the reactions of Arthur and his knights where Putter observes, 'for if

Arthur's knights, who are after all used to strange adventures, are taken aback by the Green knight, then something extraordinary must indeed be at hand'.

However, what makes this stranger truly alarming is that whilst his greenness renders him 'other', this weirdness is compounded by the fact that in almost any other respect, the green knight is entirely normal²⁸. Indeed, nearly all of the knight's other physical aspects are acceptable, and even highly regarded in a court such as Arthur's. He is repeatedly described as very handsome, a feature often attributed to good and heroic characters, and which is applied to Arthur himself: 'And he the comlokest kyng that the court haldes' (I. 53). His clothes – although entirely green – are also courtly and of high fashion, their richness complementing his beauty:

A strayt cote ful streght that stek his sides,
 A mere mantile abof, mensked withinne,
 With pelure pu red apert, the pane ful clene,
 With blythe blaunner ful bryght, and his hod bothe,

(he wore) a straight coat, very tight, that fitted his sides,
 a splendid cloak over it, adorned on the inside,
 with close-trimmed fur exposed, the edging most elegant,
 very bright with beautiful ermine, and his hood as well
 (II. 152-5);

and the poet does not fail to also extend this fine attire to the knight's horse as well'. This contradictory display of both the formidable stranger and the courtly knight is then further reinforced by the objects borne by the Green Knight: 'Bot in his on honde he hade a holyn bobbe ... And an ax in his other, a hope and unumete' ('But in one hand he had a holly spray ... And an axe in his other [hand], huge and monstrous', II. 206-8) - he carries symbols of both conflict and of peace, and as such, the court cannot decipher his intentions.

The Green Knight then confuses Arthur and his people in being both ordinary and extraordinary, both familiar and alien. He evades meaning and returning to Kristeva's theoretical framework, the Green Knight represents another version of abjection. Rather than being abject because he 'does not fit within the social and symbolic order of things, and [is therefore] pushed outside the boundaries', the Green Knight is made abject because he is a liminal character and 'neither knight nor supernatural creature but a fusion of both'. His abjectness already begins to undermine social order because the Green Knight's liminality confounds our understanding of what is outside and inside of borders. In occupying the status of both belonging and not belonging to the social order, the Green Knight is thus an ambiguous figure and Kristeva notes that '[i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'. This then problematises the world of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* because his liminal state calls into question the identity of the knight, and as such, the abject is not just a threat to Camelot, but to the chivalric code as a whole.

The Beheading Game

We can see how the abject begins to undermine the chivalric code when the Green Knight engages in a 'Crystemas gomen' (I. 283) with Gawain. Although the Green Knight insists (swearing by the holly branch) that he does not seek trouble from Arthur's court, and he continues to treat his challenge as a game, we come to find that the knight is actually

asking for one of Arthur's people to attempt to behead him. The court cannot understand why the knight wants to engage in an act that should ultimately result in his death and as such, his challenge emphasises the threat of ambiguity. It perhaps comes as no surprise then, that through this beheading 'game' the poem is subject to the first violent act of the abject:

Gawan gripped to his ax and gederes hit on hyght,
 ...
 Let doun lyghtly lyght on the naked,
 That the sharp shalk schyndered the bones
 And schrank thurgh the schyire grece and scade hit in twynne,
 ...
 The fayre hede fro the halce hit to the erthe,
 ...
 The blod brayd fro the body, that blykked on the grene.

Gawain gripped onto his axe and lifts it high,
 ...
 Let it come down swiftly on the naked flesh,
 so that the sharp blade shattered the bones
 and sank through the white fat and cut it in two,
 ...
 The fair head from the neck hit on the earth,
 ...
 The blood spurted from the body, shining on the green (flesh and clothes).
 (II. 421-9)

In having Gawain strike the Green Knight with his own axe, we are first reminded of the ambiguous manner and intentions of the knight, and the fact that Gawain is now embroiled in this ambiguity by accepting the challenge. The mention of greenness again points back to the Green Knight's abject state, and it may seem that Gawain's strike will eliminate the abject from society. There is a focus on the corporeal, the 'excrement and its equivalents' that signify danger: flesh, bones, fat and blood. The poet's precise detailing of these substances in the scene underlines the danger that the court believes had been implicit in the Green Knight's challenge, seemingly depicting the vulnerable mortality of the body. However, we soon find out that this is not the case and the knight proves his liminality, transcending what would be a blow of death for a human when he picks up his now decapitated head and continues to address the court. It is because the Green Knight also possesses the state of being 'other' and supernatural that he survives Gawain's strike and this raises tensions in regard to Gawain, who must accept the same act from the Green Knight a year later. It is here that we can explore to what extent Gawain takes on the abject so that he too may survive the axe blow.

Gawain, the Chivalric Code, and Morality

To be able to understand Gawain's relationship with the abject, we must first look at his relationship with what the abject threatens to undermine: the chivalric code. Indeed, this has already been established in the poem when the Green Knight tells the court that it is their reputation for 'cortaysye' (I. 263) that has compelled him to come to Camelot. As courtesy is 'regarded as [one of] the classic virtues of good knighthood', the Green Knight's presence seems to be a direct challenge to the social order at the heart of Arthur and his knights - the

chivalric code. In being the foundation of a knight's livelihood, the code plays a crucial role in shaping a knight's actions and beliefs, and as such, the threat to chivalry is also a threat to Gawain's identity. Gawain thus becomes a symbol for chivalry and we see the visual representation of this in his ceremonial arming before he leaves for the Green Knight's castle, in which the ritual 'establish[es] the character of the hero, not as an individual but as a representative of chivalry whose moral values are symbolically represented by different pieces of equipment'TM. For Gawain, these values are signified by the pentangle on his shield, of which each of its five points represents his five senses, his five fingers, the five wounds of Christ, the five joys of Mary, and most significantly, the five knightly virtues: 'fraunchyse', 'felawschyp', 'clan nes', 'lcortaysyel and 'pite (II. 652-4). The entire pentangle itself symbolises 'trawpe: "fidelity to others, to promises, to principles; faith in God; moral righteousness and personal integrity", and the perfection of the shape instils the heavy burden of perfection on its bearer. As such, Gawain's relationship with the chivalric code means that the abject will be found in a breach of the moral values of knighthood, which, as they are to be upheld by himself, designates the abject as coming from within. As Douglas observes, 'pollution has indeed much to do with morals', and in exploring the boundary set up between the moral and the immoral, the abject is returned to the internal as the choices Gawain makes during his journey to the Green Knight's castle will call into question his identity, and in turn, the viability of the chivalric code.

It is through Gawain's pledge of *trawbe* that we see these moral conflicts. Gawain, having left Camelot and experienced 'all the perils which lie in wait for knights errant along the paths of romance', discovers the castle of Bertilak de Hautdesert and the lord invites him to stay, whereupon he asks Gawain to partake in an agreement of exchange during his time at the castle:

... Quat-so-ever I wyne in the wod, hit worthes to youres;
 And quat check so ye acheve, change me therforne.
 Swete, swap we so — swore with trawthe —
 Quether, leude, so lympe lere other better.'
 'Bi God,' quoth Gawayn the gode, 'I grant thertylle...'

... Whatsoever I win in the wood, it shall be yours
 And whatever fortune you gain, give it me in exchange for it.
 Good sir, let us swap in this way — answer on your honour —
 whether, sir, it turns our worse or better.'
 By God,' said good Gawain, 'I agree to that...'

(II. 1106-12).

This agreement immediately begins testing Gawain's chivalric qualities as the lady of the castle pursues him in his bedroom whilst Bertilak and his followers go hunting. Her actions thus call into contention the five knightly virtues and the notion of *trawe* that Gawain must ensure are all preserved. Gawain thus struggles with the moralistic dilemma of his bond of trust and loyalty to Bertilak, and the upholding of courtesy in regard to the lady. Indeed, in this effort, Gawain 'a famous romance hero with a long literary tradition,... refuses to speak about chivalric romances to her', and it is here that we start to see how Gawain begins to make aspects of his identity abject.

This is then reinforced when the lady questions Gawain's identity after he refuses to indulge her in her advances:

'So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,

And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymselfen
 Couth not lyghtly haf lenged so long wyth a lady
 Bat he had crave a cosse, bi his courtaisye...'

'A man as good as Gawain is rightly held to be,
 and one in whom courtesy is so completely embodied,
 might not easily have stayed so long with a lady
 without craving a kiss, through his courtesy...'

(II. 1297-1300).

It is this challenge to his identity - in which he is seen to embody the knightly virtue of courtesy - which finally leads to Gawain accepting a kiss from her. As such, Gawain's first immoral straying paradoxically stems from him adhering to, and wishing to preserve, a moral value of the chivalric code - although our condemnation of Gawain is perhaps withheld for the moment when Gawain stays true to his word and passes the kisses which he receives from the lady onto Bertilak. Yet, this is then complicated when Gawain is presented with the lady's green girdle. Although he initially refuses to accept this gift, amongst others that she proffers, the lady informs him that:

It would be a jewel for the peril that had been decreed for him,
 when he came to the chapel to meet his fate;
 if he might escape alive, that would be an excellent trick.

(II. 1856-8).

Considering that Gawain is now leaving the castle to finally meet the Green Knight again, the life-saving potential of the green girdle of course appeals to him. He thus accepts the lady's gift, but this time fails to pass it on to Bertilak. In contrast with his earlier preservation of knightly virtue, Gawain's immoral act is now found in his broken pledge of *trawPe*. In breaching an aspect of the chivalric code, Gawain thus seemingly becomes the abject entity which undermines the social order.

Indeed, this is strengthened by an earlier scene in the poem in which Gawain has an opportunity to absolve himself of this moral transgression when he goes to confession, as Douglas notes: '[t]here are two distinct ways of cancelling a pollution: one is the ritual which makes no enquiry into the cause of the pollution, and does not seek to place responsibility; the other is the confessional rite'⁴⁰. However, although

There he confessed himself fully and showed his misdeeds,
 The greater and the lesser, and begs for mercy,
 and calls on the man (i.e. the priest) for absolution.

(II. 1880-2),

Gawain's confession is problematic in that he ultimately fails to meet all the requirements of confession: in withholding the girdle from Bertilak, Gawain thus fails to make restitution and '[w]ithout restitution the confession is invalid'. The girdle then comes to represent Gawain's contravention of the chivalric code and moral goodness, and as such it can be seen to symbolise the abject. Thus, in keeping the girdle, Gawain keeps within himself the abject and it may be considered that he bears some similarity to *Beowulf's* Grendel, who takes in the abject by feasting upon it.

This is further complicated as Gawain himself falls into the liminal: his actions ruin the perfection signified by the pentangle which Gawain bears on his arms and as a figure who

is suspended between the borders of the moral and the immoral, the collective and the individual, the perfect knight and the imperfect human, Gawain's identity is destabilised by its doubleness and - like the Green Knight - Gawain evades meaning. Consequently, as Gawain is originally marked out in the poem as an exemplary model of the chivalric code, his own liminality then introduces contention in how we are to define the abject that Auslander discusses in terms of 'social and symbolic order' when the social order itself seems to be abject.

The increasingly complex relationship between social order and the abject is demonstrated in the next chapter through exploring *Njal's Saga*.

Njal's Saga: The Abject Social Order The Honour Code and Blood Vengeance

The problematic rendering of the abject in the saga stems from the society it portrays, in which the intricate relationship between the notions of honour, feud, and blood vengeance are the model upon which social order is based. However, this then seems to be inherently conflictive and indeed, Olarson observes that there is 'paradox at the heart of the revenge imperative. The right to avenge is a necessary defence and insurance for a family wishing to live in peace, and ought therefore to promote social harmony, but it can also drive men to act in ways which destroy themselves and their families, and which can threaten society as a whole'. In having an essentially paradoxical foundation, whereby order promotes disorder, the society of *Njal's Saga* thus falls into the state of ambiguity and liminality and as such, the social order is seemingly rendered abject. Accordingly, it is these notions which are at the root of many of the abject scenes that occur in the saga. Thus, in order to best explore how the relationship between honour and blood vengeance and social order functions in the saga-society, we must first look at an episode in which the abject has manifested due to these notions.

Having been convinced by Mord that Horskuld had been plotting to kill them, the Njalssons decide to retaliate against Horskuld's supposed crime by then killing him first. Horskuld is Hildigunn's husband and having found out about his death, Hildigunn then seeks out her uncle, Flosi:

She picked up the cloak and wiped up all the blood with it and wrapped the clotted blood into the cloak and folded it and placed it in her chest.

Hildigunn then went out and opened up her chest. She took from it the cloak which Flosi had given Horskuld and in which Horskuld was slain, and which she had kept there with all its blood... Hildigunn placed the cloak on Flosi's shoulders; the dried blood poured down all over him.

Then she spoke: This cloak, Flosi, was your gift to Horskuld, and now I give it back to you. He was slain in it. In the name of God and all good men I charge you, but all the powers of your Christ and by your courage and manliness, to avenge all the wounds which he received in dying — or else be an object of contempt to all men.'

(pp. 194-5).

From my discussion so far, it is perhaps quite clear to see how the idea of blood pouring down upon someone is abject — it is first and foremost not a behaviour that is in itself acceptable in society. It transgresses the borders of the body and flesh, the boundaries between life and death, the internal and the external and as such, threatens the social and

symbolic order. However, when this scene is explored in regard to the notions of the social order it is functioning within, the abject is complicated as its manifestation actually appears to uphold the social order of the saga-society.

Indeed, it is through the abject action of showering someone in the blood of a dead man that we see a very visual symbol for blood vengeance. This symbol works firstly in that the context whereby the blood comes to be on the cloak represents a violation of the notion of honour. For the Icelandic society in *Njal's Saga*, honour is intrinsic to the social and symbolic order in that it is 'both the operating system and the lubricant that makes social life work'^{4E}. As such, honour is crucial in the shaping of the saga's 'ethical tenor' whereby it determines many appropriate (and accordingly, inappropriate) codes of behaviour. Honour is therefore concerned with the principle of personal integrity' and in being linked to social value in saga-society, personal integrity not only demands that honour is defended, but also that it is put to the test'⁵. Honour then perhaps functions similarly to the idea of reputation in both the heroic world of *Beowulf* and the chivalric world of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where the preservation of one's honour is related to the preservation of one's self-image. This relates to society in that where honour 'is a function of the social order', an affront to honour is thus also an assault on society. In spreading slander about Horskuld, Mord greatly damaged the sanctity of Horskuld's honour and as a result of this, he is wrongfully killed by his own foster brothers. The grievous misconduct that has occurred can perhaps then be considered a representation of the abject in that it has undermined the honour code, and here it seems that the abject (violation of honour) engenders further abject moments (slaughter of Horskuld) in *Wars Saga*.

This can then be further developed: recalling the models of the heroic code and the chivalric code, we know from other examples in medieval literature that the defence of one's reputation can often lead to violence. Both the heroic warrior and the knight must demonstrate great prowess in battle to gain a good reputation in their respective roles; where one already has a good reputation, we often see this challenged by an adversary which may then lead to a violent dispute. This is also the case with honour in the saga-society where Olason observes there is 'the need to increase that honour by feats which involved some form of fighting', and indeed, 'challenge is part of the social process... a man's objective is to achieve as much honour as possible at others' expense'. It is then through another's 'expense', and thus the damage of that person's honour, that blood vengeance is incited because '[i]nextricably linked to honour is the obligation to take revenge when there is no other way of satisfying wounded honour'. Here we return to Olason's view on the paradox of blood vengeance: where the social and symbolic order (honour, and in turn, peace) has been damaged, and then the resulting disorder is a manifestation of the abject, the solution is to use violence (blood vengeance, which results in the abject entities of blood, wounds, the corpse) to rectify the situation.

The notion of honour and its relation to blood vengeance is complicated when it becomes bound up with another fundamental aspect of saga-society, that of family and kinship. Honour is not only a matter of individual reputation, but also a matter of the collective reputation of one's family. As such, where an Icelander is 'expected to take arms against members of other clans to avenge the death of a kinsman', they are also obliged by their familial duty to act against 'other violations of the family's rights', such as that of honour. Horskuld's cloak is therefore a physical representation of kinship in that it was a gift from Flosi to his nephew-in-law. In soaking the cloak in Horskuld's spilt blood, the kinship between Flog and Horskuld is thus enveloped in the abject whereby the line of kinship in Flosi's family has been violated. When the blood pours down over Flosi, it is a very vivid emblem of Horskuld's slaughter and a reminder of Flosi's duty to avenge his kin. In this episode we see the abject repeatedly engender more forms of abjection and this is perhaps

due to the abject functioning here as a prop through which Hildigunn attempts to uphold core values of the saga-society and again, we are met with difficulties in defining the abject.

It is then through Flosi's reaction that we see another perspective for why the abject seems to be built into the society of *Njal's Saga*. Flosi refuses to take the path of blood vengeance, instead deciding to settle the matter through law - one of the many times in the narrative that demonstrates the saga's concern of law. Olason observes that it was 'of great importance for the development of Icelandic society that the whole country was united under one code of law and with one central assembly, the Althing' and indeed, it is through the legal proceedings carried out at the Althing, over conflicts such as that of Horskuld's killing, that we see methods other than that of blood vengeance introduced.

Many killings occur in the course of the narrative, and as such we witness many cases at the Althing. It is here that a less violent nature in the Icelanders is depicted where instead, the emphasis is on 'intelligence, wisdom, decisiveness, purposefulness, a shrewd business sense, the ability to give and follow advice'⁵⁵, and we see this in the complex negotiations between the lawyers. Initially, it seems that the legal system is successful - disputes are to be resolved through settlements of arbitration and compensation. However, we soon start to see that the unity of the whole country cannot exist under one code of law' so long as it is infiltrated by those who will not accept these settlements (and thus, they act upon the code established already in society: honour). The solutions of compensation and arbitration are then only temporary and are soon broken, and indeed this too is the case for Flosi. Having felt his honour insulted during the case at the Althing, Flosi rejects the offer of a settlement through compensation. Instead, he returns to the values urged upon him earlier on by Hildigunn and in the resulting clash, Njal and his family perish in the burning of his household. As Cook notes: 'law, even the elaborate law code of medieval Iceland, is incapable of controlling violence', and thus, the abject moments that emerge from the violence demonstrate how blood vengeance prevails.

Blood Vengeance versus Law

An excellent example of this in *Njal's Saga* can be seen in the episode where it is revealed to Thorhall that the lawsuits he has presented against Flosi in the case of Njal's death have been quashed:

... When Thorhall heard this he was so upset that he could not speak a word. He sprang out of his bed and seized his spear, Skarphedin's gift, with both hands and drove it through his leg. Flesh and the core of the boil clung to the spear when he had cut open his leg, and a gush of blood and a flow of pus poured like a stream across the floor. He then walked out of the booth without a limp and moved so fast that the messenger could not keep up with him, all the way to the Fifth Court. There he came across Grim the Red, Flosi's kinsman, and as soon as they met Thorhall thrust at him with the spear and pierced his shield and split it in two, and the spear passed through him so that the point came out between his shoulders. Thorhall threw him off the spear, dead.

(p. 270).

If we look at Thorhall as a figure who signifies the law, we can see how even the law succumbs to blood vengeance. The quashing of all his lawsuits means that there is no legal settlement through which the burning of Njal can be resolved in terms of arbitration or compensation. However, considering that burning of a household is such a 'heinous crime, punishable by full outlawry even if no persons were burned'⁵⁷, it would be an outrage if no punishment was exacted from the burner. We are then left with the only other form of

settlement in the saga-society that is deemed a suitable retaliation, and as such, Thorhall takes it upon himself to avenge his kinsman by killing Grim the Red.

The cutting out of the infection in his leg is thus the first abject moment that results from his path of blood vengeance. In the depiction of spilt blood pouring down from his leg, we are perhaps reminded of the earlier scene in which the blood of Horskuld pours down upon Flosi. As such, the action is linked to both the perpetrator of the burning, the undermining of the social order and of course, the notion of blood vengeance; the spilt blood thus becomes a multi-faceted symbol of the abject. We can perhaps interpret this moment even more so, and think about the infection in relation to the abject and law. Throughout the legal proceedings, Thorhall has been limping due to the infection; however once this infection is cut out he is able to move unimpeded, allowing him to avenge Njal. The infection may then be a symbol for the failings of the law system, which when removed allows blood vengeance to prevail. Returning to Kristeva's framework, law then seems to fall into the abject in relation to blood vengeance by being 'what I permanently thrust aside in order to live'. Indeed, this is then reinforced as Thorhall's action leads to a huge outbreak of fighting at the Althing which 'makes a mockery of the law that the assembly was meant to be free of armed strife'.

However, we have seen that the abject engenders more abject moments, disorder breeds further disorder. Notions of honour, feud and blood vengeance are all catalysts for the downfall of a law system and the destruction of many families, and consequently, 'the problems thus arise out of that society's basic structures'. In its destructiveness, it seems that 'it is only when vengeance has been stretched to its fullest extent that the story can end' and indeed, *Njal's Saga* ends with the exhaustion of the vengeance path. Many of the burners have been killed by Kari, and having been absolved of their sins in Rome, Kari and Flosi reconcile where '[p]eace is finally secured when Kari the relentless avenger marries Hildigunnr the unappeasable inciter'. These final events seemingly result in the abandonment of the social order in which honour, feud and blood vengeance were so intrinsic and thus, for the society in *Njals Saga* the seeds in its destruction lay in its foundations. The society itself becomes abject and Kristeva notes that 'immersion [into the abject] gives [it] the full power of possessing, if not being, the bad object'; although I cannot definitively say that the saga-society is 'bad', it is still interesting to note that this is what the framework of the abject can reveal.

It is these last events of *Njal's Saga* that introduce the final area I will briefly explore in my discussion of the abject in medieval literature. The ending scenes of the saga seem to hint that the social order which will replace the previous code of honour and blood vengeance will be based on a Christian model, and indeed, this has previously been indicated in the saga through the deaths of Horskuld and Njal. Such an idea then calls into question how the conflicts between an outgoing mode of social order and the incoming mode of social order affect notions of the abject in medieval literature. It is then Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* which will provide an example of how these tensions are tackled.

The Edda: Mythical Schemas and Interpretation

The *Edda* 'contains some of the best known and most effective of Norse mythological stories', yet Snorri is a Christian author – indeed, he even warns his readers against belief in heathen religion in the *Edda*. The problem thus is how a Christian author is to deal with these pre-Christian elements that his religion does not allow him to believe in. Here we must turn to Ross's concept of 'mythical schemas', which she believes underlies all Icelandic literature. Mythical schemas are essential for the understanding of these texts, whereby the schema of old Norse myth was part of the basic conceptual equipment of medieval Icelanders even after

they have converted to Christianity'. Essentially, these schemas are based upon an established knowledge of particular concepts and their conventional meanings' in Norse mythology, and as such mythical schemas aid in the interpretation of 'a whole range of concepts and ideas that were integral to their culture' which may be inaccessible otherwise. Mythical schemas thus do not only work as an interpretative function of religious models, but also as one of society. It is then interesting to see how this concept is demonstrated in Snorri's *Edda* in regard to my discussion on the abject, as it is in his handling and interpretation of his pre-Christian sources where we see abject moments in the text.

Perhaps the best example to explore is in relation to the origin of poetry, which is particularly significant considering that the *Edda* is essentially a textbook on poetry:

Bragi replied: 'The origin of it was that the gods had a dispute with the people called Vanir, and they appointed a peace-conference and made a truce by this procedure, that both sides wet up to a vat and spat their spittle into it ... the gods kept this symbol of truce and decided not to let it be wasted, and out of it made a man. His name was Kvasir ... when he arrived as a guest to some dwarfs, Fialar and Gala, they called him to a private discussion with them and killed him. They poured his blood into two vats and a pot... They mixed honey with the blood and it turned into a mead whoever drinks from which becomes a poet or scholar. The dwarfs told the iEsir that Kvasir had suffocated in intelligence because there *was* no one there educated enough to be able to ask him questions.

... when Odin came in over Asgard him spat out the mead into the containers ... Anyone took it that wanted it, and it is what we call the rhymester's share. But Odin gave Suttung's mead to the iEsir and to those people who are skilled at composing poetry. Thus we call poetry Odin's booty and find, and his drink and his gift and the fEsir's drink.'

(p. 64).

The abject is again problematic because it is used to describe the origin of poetry, which was highly regarded as a locus of intellectual power, social control and corporate memory'. What then does it mean for such a valuable entity to be created in abject moments - particularly in regard to the underlying religious models of the *Edda*? It is here that an exploration of mythic schema in the episode can provide answers.

Snorri first establishes the mythic schema in the episode, utilising the trope of Odin's acquiring of the mead. The mention of Odin alone reinforces the high value of poetry as he is regarded as the most powerful of the Norse gods, and is indeed also a god of poetry. In regard to the trope itself, Ross notes that the fundamental aspects of this particular schema are that 'the god takes possession of a physical substance, an intoxicating liquid, which is external to himself ... [and] the substance that produces a state in which a person is enabled to compose poetry has to be taken by mouth, like a food or drink'⁷². The reference to external substances and liquids seems to allude to the abject again, and my earlier discussion on the taking in/ingesting of the abject can also be found in this trope. However, within this particular schema the negative connotations of the abject (in regard to that which is external) is seemingly negated by the core values of the myth which 'thus posits first, an external source of inspiration for both divine and human poetic composition'; rather than being destructive to the social and symbolic order, the abject now seemingly plays a role in being constructive. This divine source of inspiration then aptly ties in the Christian model and here we start to see how mythic schemas can be used by a Christian author to show interpretations of Norse mythology which actually reinforce the Christian era now in place.

This is then further developed in relation to society as poetry is a divine gift given from Odin to those below him, and this depiction demonstrates how ‘Norse mythology suggests that poets enjoyed a relationship of symbiotic reciprocity with their god, just as skalds did with their princely or royal patrons’”. The episode therefore reinforces the notion of social relationships, which were of key concern in the preservation of social order.

Thus, in exploring the abject that results as an interpretative function of mythic schemas in Snorri’s *Edda* we find that instead of undermining society or demonstrating the weaknesses of one society compared the another, the abject moment can actually be conducive to the reinforcement of social order - even during a time of greatest vulnerability to the social and symbolic order: a changing social model. The abject is then elevated to the highest values in society and it is no longer a defiling entity, pushed outside of society’s boundaries.

Conclusion

In exploring the abject in *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Njal’s Saga* and Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, I have discovered the true multiplicity of abjection in regard to its function in a text.

The abject moments in *Beowulf* demonstrate how abjection can be used to enforce, and then reinforce, the figure of the ‘outsider’; in doing so, the abject also reveals the fears and vulnerabilities of a society. However, definitions of abjection become problematised when the abject appropriates important social values, such as when Grendel’s mother seeks revenge. In appropriating these important values, the abject then challenges the identities that are shaped by these social codes. Thus, the abject is able to reveal the inconsistent and conflictive nature of the social order portrayed in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The abject can then be internalised when it manifests as a result of values intrinsic to a social code; for *Njal’s Saga*, the abject demonstrates the failings of a social code and how a social code can also ultimately be self-destructive. Finally, Snorri’s *Edda* demonstrates how the abject - as a representative of the ‘other’ – can be used to aid interpretations of society that is no longer in place. Indeed, this is essentially what I have been doing in my analysis of these medieval texts through the framework of abjection.

However, as I outlined in the introduction, my exploration of the abject in medieval literature is limited, and there are a number of areas that I have been unable to touch on due to the confines of my dissertation. If I were to go further, it would be especially interesting to first explore the role of gender in manifestations of the abject. Although the societies that I have been discussing are largely patriarchal, female characters - such as Hildigunn - have featured in the texts significantly in the manifestation of abject moments. Indeed this would reveal another facet of honour in *Njal’s Saga*, on which the concept of (related to sexual defamation) was again a social code that provoked blood vengeance, and thus further moments of abjection. The male-female boundary which could define another version of the abject would then be challenged by those such as Grendel’s mother, who take on male roles.

Another issue that could be explored further is the abject in relation to religion. In all of the texts I have discussed in my dissertation, religion featured in society to varying extents. In then introducing another code and ‘social and symbolic order’, where representations of the abject through defilement and sin are apt in discussions of religion, I believe religion would lead to fruitful interpretations of abjection and its functions in society.

Finally, I would like to have had the space to further discuss how the abject is intrinsic to identity and society, where we are constantly trying to define ourselves and in the process, establishing particular borders. As Harold observes, ‘[i]n this sense, the abject Other never remains at the margins; it never remains stagnant, creating stable boundaries for the self.

Kristeva thus introduces a dynamism into the concept of identity—a dynamism that depends on a subject's ability to recognize and reject the abject—that gets articulated and rearticulated through the self's interaction with an abject Other³⁵. The abject can then never be absolute and as such, it will continue to offer opportunities for discussion and interpretation in a wealth of areas.

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