

Abstract/proposal for a paper at the 2004 Colloquium on Violence and Religion

Eric Carlson  
Purdue University  
[carlsone@purdue.edu](mailto:carlsone@purdue.edu)

Working title: "Becoming the Animal: Reconfiguring the Monstrous Double in Old English and Old Norse Texts"

In this paper I propose to discuss the relationship between the world of predatory animals and the psychology of killing in terms of the mimetic relationship between individual combatants as depicted in Old English and Old Norse texts. In essence, the intensely close physical proximity of combatants in these texts leads to a modification of the concept of the monstrous double. Mimetic theory shows us that aggressive contact can cause combatants to become akin to each other—a process of meeting in the middle, so to speak. However, I find that the case is often different in these medieval texts. There is indeed a doubling process at work here. The victim/object of violence is transformed (as expected) into an inhuman/animal Other in order to facilitate killing, but due to close physical proximity which may reinforce psychological prohibitions against killing, the killer/signifier must in turn objectify himself into the inhuman beast. Doubling in this case is not meeting in the middle; instead it is a meeting at the bottom, a bottom which is governed by the amoral behavior of the animal world.

Significant texts (primary):

*Beowulf*  
*The Battle of Maldon*  
*The Battle of Brunanburh*  
*Egil's Saga*  
*Hrafnsmál*  
*Saga of King Hrolfr Kraki*  
*Saga of the Volsungs*

Significant texts (secondary):

René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*  
-----*The Scapegoat*  
-----*Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*  
Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, *On Killing*  
Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War, and Sacrifice*  
Stephen O. Glosecki, *Shamanism and Old English Poetry*  
Dean Miller, *The Epic Hero*