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**John Scanlan
(Manchester Metropolitan University)**

COMMENTARY ON:

**Waste Studies - A New Paradigm for Literary Analysis
Something is Rotten in the Denmark of *Beowulf* and *Hamlet***

Susan Signe Morrison
Texas State University – San Marcos

By way of an introduction ...

As these papers (and their responses) will likely be read by some readers who have no in-depth knowledge or appreciation of the subject at hand, I feel that it is perhaps appropriate to begin by remarking on the dimensions of the subject matter. That the fact that I – an academic with an interest in modern philosophy and the sociology of modernity – am now writing this response to your short analysis of ‘waste’ in *Beowulf* and *Hamlet*, two texts well beyond my nominal field(s) and far outside the timeframe of my disciplinary background, reveals something of the nature of ‘Waste Studies’, as discussed extensively in this paper. Perhaps the seeming anomaly of this interchange of ideas also identifies some of the problems and difficulties inherent in cross-disciplinary intellectual discourse – because this is also what your lively and engaging contribution to this conference (which, after all, is titled ‘Breaking Down Barriers’) reveals.

A framework for beginning a discussion:

- (i) ‘Waste’ in *Beowulf* and *Hamlet*
- (ii) The relationship of ‘Waste Studies’ to ethical and moral criticism
- (iii) Implications and applicability of the ‘Waste’ paradigm

- (i) ‘Waste’ in *Beowulf* and *Hamlet*

Within your broader argument regarding the nature of waste studies the analysis of *Beowulf* and *Hamlet* reveals startling continuities between the semantic-conceptual framework within which these works were written, and – for instance – contemporary literature that also touches upon the nature of ‘waste’. I wonder if, when it all comes down to the final analysis, what we are ultimately concerned with in such works is a western opposition between life and death, which would seem to be the ultimate of those binary oppositions that ‘waste’, as you say, complicates (p.10)? To add to this, literature, in being concerned at the most general level with what it is to be *human*, arguably articulates what philosophy is also concerned with but at a more abstract level. As such, the examples you cite from these two texts to reveal the extent to which ‘waste’ is at work seem to me, indeed, to illustrate the struggle between life and death. Or, to put it another way – the conflict between what sustains the *human* and those ‘things’ (powers, forces, etc. – active or latent) that are held to be a threat to it – no matter how those distinctions appear in the works in question.

If I can choose a perhaps less obvious passage from your paper – on the violence and ‘waste’ that results from political turmoil – to illustrate what I am trying to get at:

Within each work [i.e., *Beowulf* and *Hamlet*], figures are discarded by political victors: Grendel and his mother are aggressively defeated by Beowulf; Claudius sends his nephew and rival Hamlet to be executed. When this plan fails, he schemes a plot that concludes with virtually universal carnage.

Now, that is aside from more obvious continuities in the language of defilement, disgust, decay, and so on. The less obvious passage may be the more interesting in this regard because like the other passages which work around the metaphors and matter of waste in the two texts, it hints at a universal theme in the sense that one could mention similar struggles between life and death at other times in history and see the same kind of underlying thinking/logic at work.

In Machiavelli, for instance, a prince is enjoined to take care of the *dirty* business of political life, but to do so in a way that leaves him ‘clean’ – ‘wear clean gloves’ seems to be the injunction, ‘it is necessary for the maintenance of the realm’, etc. One might equally draw an analogy with *The Sopranos* (as William G. Little, in his book *The Waste Fix*, has). Equally, I think here of Cold War-era America, when agencies of power felt the need to fight ‘reds under the beds’ (Edgar Hoover at the FBI pioneered trash trawls to ‘rubbish’ the enemies of the state); they were viewed as some kind of alien presence that

threatened – like a virus – to infect/destroy the host culture (and so on – to your parallels with Zygmunt Bauman’s thoughts on the foreigner).

In the ideology of modernism, cleanliness, purity and the break with the old became a guiding mantra – the recipe for a world fit for a new kind of human (again, takes us back to the old versus the new). That all of these examples would trade on oppositions such as dirty/clean, waste/value, survival/threat to illuminate the drama of, say, sovereignty, civilization, or meaning, seems to indicate something fundamental at work in western ways of thinking about and writing about the world. I say ‘western’, because I am not convinced that one would find the same in pre-contemporary China, Japan, or parts of the world where our *metaphysics* (or the Cartesian ‘I’, as you mention on p.3) held sway. I wonder if you have had any thoughts about whether or not there is some universal opposition at work in the texts you are looking at? How would/should scholars of your period respond to your ideas about the importance of waste?

(ii) The relationship of ‘Waste Studies’ to ethical and moral criticism

At a number of junctures you go back to your opening views regarding the importance of seeing in waste a new means of understanding ourselves. Through the subjects Waste Studies embraces, it would reveal our belonging to a temporal continuum that may be obscured otherwise. This, it seems to me, is what lies behind your belief in the ethical dimensions of such studies. So, when you say, ‘Waste Studies highlight that which has been discarded’ (p. 4) and ‘waste is a way to acknowledge [...] the interconnectedness of one’s own body with those of others’, it is clear that for you Waste Studies bring us – and intellectual work – into a moral context. I wondered if this represents a break with your home discipline, and if it does, to what extent? Do you see more to gain than to lose in arguing for a new waste paradigm?

(iii) Implications and applicability of the ‘Waste’ paradigm

I understand what you are getting at in your elaboration of the waste paradigm, and I agree to a large extent with what you are saying and doing in this paper. The ‘superfluous matter (data/information) that cannot be explained or subsumed into or under the existing paradigm’ (p.1) raises the problem of how we socially and intellectually cope with excess, which is more than ever a demand that cannot be ignored. In my own work I see it as more widely a question of the growing indeterminacy of the phenomenal world (the world of feeling and sensation, and our relationship to transience), and in which waste stuff is seen as material form of the indeterminate (and where literature provides access to how the phenomenon is encountered).

One question that suggests itself to me when considering the implications and applicability of the waste *paradigm* is the language of waste itself. In the period you study the word 'waste' hadn't yet taken on the same kind of moral force it assumes in the modern period – which, of course, was a result of the fine-tuning of knowledge for (in general) exploiting nature. Can you still insist on a continuity between 'waste' studies in the period you are looking at, and 'waste' studies in contemporary life? Can 'Waste Studies' accomplish anything *within* disciplinary boundaries, or is it necessary that it bridges the disciplines – and even the centuries?

I have already gone over the space allotted to these comments, but undoubtedly we will discuss this further. I will end this short comment by revealing my own cautionary position after going through a period where I began to see 'waste' in everything – for those of us who have come to these various 'waste studies', are we in danger of placing history, society and the materials we study at the service of theory just as much as they ever were under the logic of binary oppositions? I think here of the reception of Deconstruction which, in 'seeing through' the text, was charged by many to perform a textual *minuet*. When I think about 'waste' I worry about this, and I was wondering if you do, too?

Can 'Waste Studies' - by having a supposed ethical dimension - escape such a charge?