



Monster versus Monstrous

A discussion of the characterisation of Grendel's Mother

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Of all the characters in *Beowulf*, Grendel's Mother is one of the most interesting and ambiguous – and therefore one of the most difficult to define. Her characterisation stems from the combination of seemingly contradicting aspects: she is a mother and a monster, undoubtedly female and a masculine avenger. However, because 'she is the most difficult to pin down'¹ she has been somewhat overlooked by critics historically. In *The Monsters and the Critics*, Tolkien 'expels the female'² and concentrates on the two characters he considered monsters: Grendel and the dragon.³ On the other hand, Gillian Overing discounts Grendel's Mother from her analysis of *Beowulf's* women because 'her inhuman affiliation and propensities make it hard to distinguish between what is monstrous and what is female'.⁴ Grendel's Mother is therefore too monstrous to be female, and too female to be truly monstrous. However, it is this disparity between aspects of her character that makes Grendel's Mother so fascinating.

This essay will consider these differences in more depth, concentrating on the supposed monstrosity of Grendel's Mother and how this is supported by the original text, for while she conforms to some stereotypes of monsters (particularly in the Anglo-Saxon age), she is not especially evil and does not necessarily fulfil the role of 'villain' (a potential synonym for 'monster' for modern audiences). By focusing on the presentation of Grendel's Mother as a monster, I aim to illustrate that there is a considerable difference between what makes a *monster* and what makes someone *monstrous*. I shall first analyse her as a physical monster, before discussing whether or not she is a monster by nature, and then conclude with a brief suggestion as to why modern audiences in particular may interpret the character of Grendel's Mother in this way.

Although Tolkien refrained from discussing the character of Grendel's Mother at all, I believe that she should be regarded as one of the three monsters in *Beowulf*. Her section of the poem is considerably shorter than those of Grendel and the dragon, falling at roughly 500 lines (1251-1784),⁵ yet it would do both her character and the poem itself a disservice if we were to disregard her as one of Beowulf's three adversaries. For a start, Grendel's Mother clearly proves a stronger combatant than her son when Beowulf meets her in the mere (1497-1568): she not only forces Beowulf to attack on her own turf, but she is able to overpower him and is only prevented from killing him, as we are explicitly told, by God's intervention:

<i>Hæfde ða forsiðod under gynne grund, nemne him heaðobyrne herenet hearde, geweold wigsigor.</i>	<i>sunu Ecgþeowes Geata cempa, helpe gefremede, ond halig God</i>
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(1550-1554)⁶

¹ Renée Rebecca Trilling, 'Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again', *Parergon*, 24:1 (2007), 1-20, p.5.

² Clare A. Lees, 'Men and *Beowulf*', in *Medieval Masculinities: regarding men in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Clare A. Lees, Thelma Fenster, and Jo Ann McNamara (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p.133.

³ J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf. The Monsters and the Critics', in *Interpretations of Beowulf*, ed. by R. D. Fulk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p.14.

⁴ Gillian R. Overing, 'The Women of *Beowulf*. A Context for Interpretation', in *The Beowulf Reader*, ed. by Peter S. Baker (New York: Routledge, 2000), p.230.

⁵ Jane Chance, 'The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*. The Problem of Grendel's Mother', in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. by Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.248.

⁶ *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ed. by R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4th edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). All references to the original text of *Beowulf* are from this edition.

(The son of Ecgtheow, warrior of the Geats, would then have perished under the broad earth, had not his battle-corselet, the hard battle-mesh, afforded help to him and had not holy God controlled victory in war.)⁷

Not only does this passage illustrate the struggle Beowulf faces when fighting Grendel's Mother, it also demonstrates how much preparation he undertook before venturing into the mere, equipping himself with his 'oldest, most battle-worn, and therefore most reliable of warrior's equipment'⁸ (1441-1464). Before fighting Grendel, Beowulf strips himself of armour and weaponry (671-687), yet 'for a man about to demean himself by fighting a female rather than a male, Beowulf is surprisingly well outfitted.'⁹ The fact that Beowulf goes to such lengths to defeat Grendel's Mother indicates that she is a worthy opponent who should be taken seriously not only as an adversary, but also as one of the three monsters in the poem.

Additionally, the description of the mere itself further characterises Grendel's Mother as a monster. Hrothgar has already described her habitat as wild and alien (1357-1376), thus suggesting a degree of 'otherness' which is almost synonymous with monsters in the Anglo-Saxon world.¹⁰ More important is that Grendel's Mother rules over a mere filled with *wundra bæs fela* (so many strange creatures, 1509) and *sædeor monig hildetuxum* (many a sea-beast with battle tusks, 1510-11). The fact that she has ruled over these creatures for fifty years (se ðe *floda begong/heorogifre beheold hund missera*, 1497-8) implies that she is a monster through association. Hennequin states that 'the text clearly makes her frightening and threatening, but it does not associate her with monsters (except Grendel).'¹¹ Given the textual evidence, however, I have to disagree with this, for in what way is her habitat *not* explicitly associating her with monsters? The fact that she has the power and authority to not only exist in but actually rule over a world populated by strange creatures and sea-beasts surely indicates that she too must be some kind of monster, not to mention that she is in the unfortunate position of being the mother of Grendel – who is both a monster *and* monstrous in his nature.

Still, it is the very disparity between what is a *monster* and what is *monstrous* that creates ambiguity in the character of Grendel's Mother. As I have demonstrated thus far, she is undoubtedly a monster in the physical sense of the word. However, unlike Grendel who kills repeatedly, Grendel's Mother never demonstrates any violence beyond that which she deems necessary. When she first comes to Heorot, it is not to go on a killing spree like Grendel, but as a grieving mother (*yrmbe gemunde*, 1259; *galgmod*, 1277; *sorhfulne*, 1278) who has come 'to avenge the death of her son' (*sunu deoð wrecan*, 1278). While the role of avenger is a traditionally masculine one that would normally fall to a kinsman – certainly not to a mother – it is also a legal role and one that almost excuses her actions. True, she does kidnap and cannibalise Aeschere – thus making her seem more monstrous than she might actually be – but she only takes *one* man, thereby demonstrating that her primary interest was vengeance rather than homicide. Jane Chance suggests that the actions of Grendel's Mother here are indeed monstrous, not because of what she does to Aeschere, but rather because of the masculine role she adopts: 'for a mother to "avenge" her son (2121) as if she were a retainer, he were her lord, and avenging more than peace-making, is monstrous.'¹² It is, however, unjust to call Grendel's Mother monstrous purely because she does not fit the model of an Anglo-Saxon woman suggested by Chance. Instead, it is how Grendel's Mother deliberately chooses to resist these expectations and accepts the role of a male kinsman on behalf of her son (who is somewhat lacking in male relatives) that potentially demonstrates a more civilised, un-monstrous nature.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that the poet chose for Grendel's Mother to act as Grendel's avenger, for while she takes on numerous male roles, she is still constructed as a female character. At the simplest level, she is Grendel's *Mother* (and has no other identity beyond that)¹³ and is continually identified as this throughout the poem (1258, 1276, 1282, 1538, 1683, 2118, 2139). The poet, however, did not necessarily have to make her a female character, and could have just as easily introduced a male relative to seek vengeance for Grendel's death instead.¹⁴ Changing the gender would have had

⁷ Translations are my own, unless otherwise stated, with assistance from Marsden and Crossley-Holland.

⁸ Trilling, p.14.

⁹ Trilling, p.14. For an interesting topic of discussion, compare this to Martin Puhvel's *The Might of Grendel's Mother* (1969), especially pp.81-2.

¹⁰ John D. Niles, 'Pagan survivals and popular belief', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.123-128.

¹¹ M. Wendy Hennequin, 'We've Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel's Mother', *English Studies*, 89.5 (2008), 503-523, p.513.

¹² Chance, p.252.

¹³ That the identity of Grendel's Mother exists only in relation to her son is an interesting topic, but not pertinent to this essay. I recommend Trilling for a more thorough discussion of this idea.

¹⁴ Hennequin, p.512.

very little effect on the plot of *Beowulf*; if anything it would remove many of the ambiguities I shall now discuss.

Although Grendel's Mother is an undoubtedly female character, there are lexical ambiguities in the poem that contradict this representation. The original text uses relatively human terms to describe her, notably *wif* 'woman' (*aglæcwif*, 1259; *merewif*, 1519; *wif unhyre*, 2120) or *ides* (1259), both of which highlight her femininity and undermine the suggestion of monstrosity. Yet when Beowulf is first attacked in the mere, the masculine pronoun *se* (1497) is used to refer to Grendel's Mother. Here the poet could be trying to illustrate that she has been forced to adopt another masculine role: this time as a ruler with a domain (the mere), subjects (the creatures described in 1509-1512), and her own hall to envy Heorot (the *niðsele* introduced in 1513). However, a more telling discussion of the lexical representation of Grendel's Mother comes from analysing how the language pertaining to her character has been translated, as a great deal 'of her supposed monstrosity is the result of [this].'¹⁵ I shall concentrate here on two compound nouns, *merewif* and *aglæcwif*, to analyse how Grendel's Mother has been somewhat vilified by modern translations.

Firstly, *mere* simply means water, so *merewif* could be translated as 'sea-woman', though it is further modified by *mihtig* (1519) to illustrate her prowess and add to the tension and drama of the scene. The language itself certainly does not hold the same negative connotations modern translators often ascribe to it. Crossley-Holland, for example, gives *merewif* as 'sea-monster'¹⁶ rather than 'sea-woman', highlighting the supposed monstrosity of the character; Heaney, meanwhile, goes even further and translates it as 'tarn-hag'.¹⁷ Although not the only culprit of this, Heaney frequently demonises Grendel's Mother with his translation. For example, when she is described as an *ides aglæcwif* (1259), Heaney translates it as 'monstrous hell-bride'.¹⁸ Firstly, *ides* normally translates as 'lady' and, far from having monstrous connotations, often denotes 'a queen or woman of high social rank'¹⁹ as evidenced when it is used in *Beowulf* to refer to Wealtheow (620, 1168, 1649), Hildeburh (1075, 1117) and Modthryth (1941). Indeed, Hennequin points out that if it here means anything other than 'powerful lady', 'it is the only instance in Old English where *ides* is so used'.²⁰ Moreover, while *aglæca* is used on multiple occasions to mean 'monster' when applying to Grendel (159, 425, 433, 566, 592, 646, 732, 816, 989, 1000, 1269), it also has a variety of other meanings: 'one inspiring awe or misery', 'formidable one', 'adversary' or 'combatant'.²¹ I believe that when characterising Grendel's Mother, these translations offer a better interpretation that is closer to the original text. True, she is strong, dangerous and antagonistic, but she is also a worthy opponent and should be admired for being so; certainly there is no reference here to the evil or demonic monstrosity conveyed in Heaney's 'hell-bride'.

This idea of demonising Grendel's Mother through translation can be further supported by considering how her appearance is described. Her *laban fingrum* (loathsome fingers, 1505) become 'savage talons'²² in Heaney's translation. Perhaps this is not too huge a leap, for both Heaney's and a more literal translation convey a sense of hostility on the part of Grendel's Mother. Yet 'talons' suggests an animalistic quality to Grendel's Mother, a quality for which there is very little evidence in the original text. Not only do we know from Hrothgar that Grendel and his mother are, at the very least, human in shape (1349-1353), but the physical qualities that could make them appear more monstrous – their supernatural strength and Grendel's immense height – are actually the same qualities that make Beowulf a hero.²³ Grendel's Mother is identifiably human, thus illustrating that Heaney's animalistic and demonic translations are an unfair interpretation of the character.

A huge amount of the monstrosity associated with the character of Grendel's Mother comes from how the poem has been translated, not from the original text. Perhaps this is indicative of how modern readers expect the story of *Beowulf* to unfold. Although the title is editorial, modern readers will be aware that Beowulf is the protagonist of this story; to a modern audience, 'protagonist' is often synonymous with 'hero'. If Beowulf is the hero, then anyone he tries to defeat in battle must be the 'villain', purely by association. The original poem, however, struggles to support this interpretation, as is demonstrated by the fight scene between Beowulf and Grendel's Mother: Beowulf himself is the one attacking, trespassing on another's territory with evil intent and generally behaving in a non-heroic

¹⁵ Trilling, p.5.

¹⁶ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.112.

¹⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p.50.

¹⁸ Heaney, p.42.

¹⁹ Chance, p.249.

²⁰ Hennequin, p.516.

²¹ Klaeber's *Beowulf*, p.347.

²² Heaney, p.49.

²³ Hennequin, p.513.

manner, yet he remains the protagonist of the overall poem. That must mean that Grendel's Mother is the enemy – despite having already concluded her violence against Heorot – because she is fighting against Beowulf. It has perhaps become necessary for translators to emphasise the supposed monstrosity of Grendel's Mother in an almost hyperbolic fashion simply because that is what modern readers expect from a story about a brave hero who defeats monsters.

However, this is not a just representation of her character, and not one that is supported by the original text. While Grendel's Mother is one of Beowulf's three adversaries (despite Tolkien's dismissal of her as a monster) she is a somewhat human creature, as evidenced by the language used to describe her. The compound nouns analysed above combine the monstrous and the human, *aglæcwif* being a prime example, just as her character is enhanced by its ambiguities. Perhaps Tolkien's dismissal of Grendel's Mother as one of *Beowulf's* monsters (while an oversight) had less to do with her femininity – as Lees suggests – and more to do with her inherent monstrosity, or rather the lack of it. She is a monster in the sense that she exists outside civilisation as an alien being, but she is not 'the personification of malice, greed [and] destruction'²⁴ that makes a monster truly *monstrous*.

In summary, *Beowulf* constructs Grendel's Mother as a character of contradictions. Two of her overriding characteristics are that she is female and a monster, yet she does not entirely fit the frame for either. True, she is a female character, but she repeatedly takes on various male roles. More importantly, she exists as a monster in the physical sense of the word, but not in the modern sense, for she is not especially monstrous or evil in her nature and so does not perform the role of 'villain' as modern audiences might expect. The difference between Anglo-Saxon and modern audience expectations of this character are paramount, with modern translations being almost hyperbolic in their presentation of Grendel's Mother as a monster, translators needing to vilify her so as to fulfil the role audiences expect for a character who battles the hero of the story. The original text, however, remains fairer in its portrayal: Grendel's Mother is undoubtedly a monster, but she is by no means monstrous.

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²⁴ Tolkien, p.23.