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**Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies**

**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/39g6c6rm>

**Journal**

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 23(1)

**ISSN**

0069-6412

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**Publication Date**

1992-10-01

Peer reviewed

## THE ISSUE OF FEMININE MONSTROSITY: A REEVALUATION OF GRENDEL'S MOTHER

Christine Alfano

In her book *Sensational Designs*, Jane Tompkins discusses the ways in which a text is fluid, essentially rewritten by the cultural context of each new interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Although she uses this argument in order to vindicate nineteenth-century American popular fiction, I think this concept of textual fluidity applies also to the problem of Grendel's mother. In short, I find a noticeable disparity between the Grendel's mother originally created by the *Beowulf* poet and the one that occupies contemporary *Beowulf* translations. Instead of being what Sherman Kuhn calls a "female warrior," the modern Grendel's mother is a monster.<sup>2</sup> This assumption informs almost all areas of *Beowulf* scholarship, although there is little evidence for this characterization in the original Anglo-Saxon work.<sup>3</sup> I believe that this woman-as-monster motif is a relatively recent construct that translators, lexicographers, and literary critics have superimposed upon *Beowulf*, thereby rewriting both character and text. Through investigating the connection between Grendel's mother and monstrosity, I hope to reclaim the text from the influence of modern prejudices, so we can again see *Beowulf* and Grendel's mother within their original Anglo-Saxon context, rather than that of various contemporary translators.

### Translations

Translators face a constant dilemma: should they produce a literal rendition of a text or use it merely as a basis for artistic creation? Burton Raffel, in his article "On Translating *Beowulf*," locates this tension in the difference between "scholar-critic" and "poet." According to Raffel, whereas the scholar-critic must depend on "sources and canons" to maintain his

objective distance, the poet can indulge in subjective interpretations. Translation itself, he argues, is essentially an act of re-creation: “no poem in translation is the original from which it takes its life; there must be distortion, to a greater or lesser degree, simply by definition.”<sup>4</sup>

Having categorized himself as a “poet,” Raffel uses this statement to justify more creative rather than literal translations. His argument is not illogical; technically as well as aesthetically, it is often necessary to alter a work subtly to retain nuances potentially lost in translation. As a result, however, the reader can interact with the text only through the filter of the translator’s subjectivity, which has unfortunate repercussions for our view of Grendel’s mother. Most *Beowulf* translators, motivated by contemporary biases rather than artistic impulse, produce an exaggerated version of the original *ides, aglæcwif*.<sup>5</sup> Grendel’s mother disrupts gender conventions; to the Anglo-Saxons, this made her *atol*, “terrible” (line 1332), but to contemporary translators, it makes her “monstrous.”<sup>6</sup> Stripping Grendel’s mother of humanity, translators transform an avenging mother into a bloodthirsty monster.

This process can be seen more explicitly in textual examples. What follows are five different translations of the Old English phrase that introduces Grendel’s mother:

Grendles modor,

*ides, aglæcwif, ymþe gemunde* (lines 1258–1259)

1. Grendel’s mother, a monster woman, kept war-grief deep in her mind
2. Grendel’s Mother herself, a monstrous ogress, was ailing for her loss
3. Grendel’s dam, a monstrous woman, knew misery
4. The demon’s mother, a witch of the sea, resenting her sorrow
5. Grendel’s mother, woman, monster-wife, was mindful of her misery.<sup>7</sup>

Each employs monstrous imagery, although I believe there is little evidence for this in the Old English. She is an *ides*, “lady,” and an *aglæcwif*, “warrior-woman,” not a “monstrous ogress,” “witch of the sea,” or “monster woman.”<sup>8</sup> Since this is the reader’s first introduction to Grendel’s mother, these distortions are particularly pernicious. This initial appearance most likely influences subsequent impressions of this character; by calling her a monster from the start, the translator prejudices the reader against a more human reading of her character.

Yet such distorted translations pervade the sections featuring Grendel’s mother. For example, *wif unhyre* (line 2120), literally “awful woman,”<sup>9</sup>

becomes “monstrous woman.”<sup>10</sup> In addition, the simple substitution of “dam,”<sup>11</sup> a term used generally to describe animals, for “mother” in the translation of *modor* (line 1538) further diminishes her claim on humanity. In a similar fashion, many translators interpret *felasinnigne secg* (line 1379) as “creature of sin,” “sin-filled creature,” “seldom-seen creature,” “sinning creature,” and “surly demon.”<sup>12</sup> Since *secg* often refers specifically to men or warriors (as in lines 208, 249, 402, and 871 of *Beowulf* for example), translators seem averse to applying it to Grendel’s mother. In this way, her transgression of gender roles codes her as monstrous. A creature rather than a warrior, she loses both her claim to humanity and to any heroism implied by the word *secg*. *Wrecend*, “avenger” (line 1256) and *handbanan*, “slayer-by-hand”<sup>13</sup> (line 1330) are translated to a similar effect. By defining these words as “monster” and “bloodthirsty monster,”<sup>14</sup> translators maintain the integrity of a masculine ideal at Grendel’s mother’s expense.

In addition to applying distorting nouns to Grendel’s mother, translators dehumanize her in other ways. Translators particularly misrepresent her when depicting the confrontations with Beowulf, citing her firm grip as evidence of monstrosity. Beowulf himself, however, boasts of this fighting technique before his encounter with Grendel, exposing an interesting double-standard on the critics’ part. For instance, where a literal reading of Grendel’s mother’s *atolan clommum* (line 1502) suggests a “terrible grip/grasp,”<sup>15</sup> the phrase instead becomes alternatively “horrible claws,” “terrible hooks,” and “terrible claws.”<sup>16</sup> This transmutation of the heroic grip into “claws” and “hooks” reemphasizes the translators’s marginalization of Grendel’s mother’s “unfeminine” actions. Similarly, *laþan fingrum* (line 1505), literally “hostile/hateful fingers,” becomes “claws” and “piercing talons,”<sup>17</sup> and *grimman grapum* (line 1542), “fierce grasp,” is transformed into “grim claws” and “sharp claws.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition, when telling Higelac of his struggle with Grendel’s mother, Beowulf refers to the *feondes fæðmum* (line 2128). This phrase most literally reads as the “enemy’s embrace,” yet it finds its way into modern texts as a “monstrous embrace.”<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the *lastas* (1402) or “tracks” Beowulf uses to follow Grendel’s mother lose any resemblance to footprints by becoming “the creature’s tracks” and the more decidedly animalistic “spoor.”<sup>20</sup>

Through such creative license, these translators divest Grendel’s mother of her humanity largely because she disrupts convenient gender stereotypes. This action has repercussions far beyond intimate academic circles. Most students first encounter *Beowulf* in translation, usually in a receptive, unchallenging manner. For this reason, it is important to separate the original Anglo-Saxon text from the more modern “woman-as-monster” motif.

## Lexicography

Of course, the translators are not wholly responsible for their misrepresentations of Grendel's mother. Most utilize dictionaries as interpretative, and inadvertently critical, tools in creating their translations. In his article "Lexicography and Literary Criticism: A Caveat," Fred Robinson warns of the dangers of lexicography:

Sometimes when a lexicographer is assessing the meaning of a word in a given occurrence, he slips unawares into the role of literary interpreter, recording a meaning for a word not on the basis of lexicographical evidence but purely because his particular critical interpretation of the passage requires such a meaning. Scholars who then encounter his judgments in the dictionary often fail to distinguish between what is lexicographical fact and what is the dictionary-maker's momentary indulgence in literary criticism.<sup>21</sup>

This slippage between lexicographer and literary critic is largely responsible for most "monstrous" interpretations of Grendel's mother. When formulating a definition based on a word's literary context, many of these dictionary makers (and glossary compilers) fall victim to their own internalization of the "woman-as-monster" stereotype. This, coupled with a pronounced critical tendency to associate Grendel's mother with Grendel and the dragon, prejudice these scholars against a more literal textual reading. In addition, the obvious need for approximation and speculation in this field leaves lexicographers open to some of the very same creative license that besets translators. Unfortunately for Grendel's mother, this process often results in her being described as monstrous. I would like to reexamine some of the vocabulary responsible for this tendency and attempt to validate a more "human" reading of these words.

There are five words that I believe to be equally disputable yet indispensable to our interpretation of Grendel's mother. They are: *aglæcwif* (line 1259); *wælgæst* (line 1331); *ellorgæstas* (line 1349); *grundwyrge* (line 1518); and finally *brimwylf* (line 1506, 1599).<sup>22</sup>

Of these words, the *aglæc* compound has received the most philological and critical attention. The meaning of the root form *aglæc* has long been debated. The various lexicographical readings of *aglæca* range from "fierce enemy" to "monster."<sup>23</sup> In general, *Beowulf* glossaries suggest the "monster" definition; most, however, provide a separate gloss, "warrior" or "hero," for lines 893, 1512, and 2592, which refer to Sigemund, Beowulf, and Beowulf and the Dragon.<sup>24</sup> It seems significant that a definition must be so radically altered to accommodate three lines of poetry. By tracing the etymology and occurrences of *aglæca* it is possible to arrive at a more satisfactory definition.

The word *aglæca* appears thirty-four times in Old English poetry, nineteen times in *Beowulf*.<sup>25</sup> The root *aglæc* or *aglac* also appears in three compounds: *aclæccræftum* (*Andreas* 1362); *aglachade* (*Riddle* 53, line 5); *aglæcwif* (*Beowulf* 1259). Sherman Kuhn, observing that the contexts of these occurrences of *aglæca* and its derivatives all involve combat or attack, proposes the definition "fighter, valiant warrior, dangerous opponent, one who struggles fiercely" for *aglæca*, comparing it to the Middle Irish *óclach* or *ócláech*, "young warrior" or "warrior". Similarly, in her 1967 article "The Monsters of *Beowulf*", Signe Carlson traces the etymology of *aglæca* back to the Gothic *aglo*, "trouble," Old Norse *agi*, "terror," and *lac*, "gift or sport," concluding that a suitable definition would be "bringer of trouble."<sup>26</sup> This reading concurs with Elliot Dobbie's observation that

Mackie's translation of *aglæca* as "monster-warrior" or "giant-warrior" . . . [is] not borne out by the total evidence. Whether *aglæca* originally meant "warrior" . . . or "one inspiring fear" . . . it is clear that in the historical period of Anglo-Saxon it did not need to have any more specific meaning than "formidable (one)."<sup>27</sup>

This accords with C. M. Lotspeich's definition: "one who goes in search of his enemy . . . an attacker . . . stalker . . . pursuer . . . and adventuring hero."<sup>28</sup> Retranslated in these terms, the initial introduction of Grendel's mother as an *aglæcwif* is substantially altered. Kuhn asserts that "Grendel's mother was an *aglæcwif*, "a female warrior" (*Beowulf* 1259). There is no more reason to introduce the idea of monstrosity or misery here than there is in line 1519, where she is called *merewif*, defined simply as "water-woman, woman of the mere" (Wrenn)." No longer a "monster-woman," Grendel's Mother becomes a "warrior-woman" or "a female adversary," appellations more appropriate to her literal portrayal.<sup>29</sup> Alexandra Olsen offers another possible reading of *aglæca*. In "The *Aglaeca* and the Law," she postulates that "The use of the term "aglæca" to describe a being who invades and ravages in the domain of his adversary and the fact that such a being seems to act in a state of "moral decline" suggests that an "aglæca" is one who violates some natural or moral law."<sup>30</sup>

Although Olsen asserts that Grendel's mother's identification as *aglæcwif* results from her kinship to Cain and its moral ramifications, I believe that Grendel's mother merits this title simply by virtue of her masculine behavior patterns. In other words, her moral ambiguity resides in her departure from the peace-weaver stereotype. The primary conflict that identified her would therefore be encapsulated in her textual introduction: *ides aglæcwif*. The second term, with its implications of gender transgression and ambiguity, would problematize and deactivate the standard *ides*, "lady" reference,

setting the tone for the section to follow.

As with *aglæcwif*, the difficulty with *wælgæst* and *ellorgæstas* originates in one of the roots: *gæst*. There is some dispute whether this root is derived from *gæst* (variants: *gast*, *gest*, *giest*, *gist*, *gyst*), defined by Bosworth as “guest” or “stranger, an enemy,” or from *gǣst* (variant: *gāst*) which he interprets as “spirit, soul, ghost.” Technically, then, this debate centers on whether the *æ* of *gæst* is long or short, and therefore whether Grendel’s mother is a “murderous sprite” or a “deadly guest.”<sup>31</sup> Most lexicographers have chosen the *gǣst*, “ghost” alternative, complementing the Grendel’s mother-as-monster motif. In “The Monsters of *Beowulf*,” Carlson attacks this preference:

Even “spirit” may be construed as “ghost” rather than as a real being because of the environment of other words translated in a slanted way. It would seem that “stranger” or “spirit,” depending on the context and not on any fixed formula, might more adequately convey the poet’s intended meaning of *gǣst* or *gæst* without prejudicing the reader and might thereby provide a clearer picture of the creatures of folktale.<sup>32</sup>

Thus this question of a long mark becomes crucial to any accurate interpretation of Grendel’s mother’s character. Although theories of meter might be employed to solve this problem, they cannot provide a definitive resolution. As an alternative approach, I would suggest examining how the two forms are used in Anglo-Saxon poetry, with specific focus on *Beowulf*.

The root *gǣst/gæst* appears as the second element in a compound noun twenty-six times in Old English poetry, precisely half of which are found in *Beowulf* (lines 86, 807, 1266, 1331, 1349, 1545, 1617, 1621, 1976, 1995, 2560, 2670, and 2699). Of these words, only five are generally attributed to *gæst* (lines 1545, 1976, 2560, 2670, and 2699). However, of the eight supposedly derived from *gǣst*, variations of *ellorgæst* account for four and *wælgæst* two others. Therefore, only four separate words in *Beowulf* are hypothetically based on the *gǣst* root. When examining the other occurrences of the *gǣst* or “ghost” compounds in Anglo-Saxon poetry, an interesting discrepancy arises. The three *gǣst* compounds not found in *Beowulf*, *heahgæst* (*Christ* 358), *ærendgast* (*Genesis* 2298), and *wuldorgast* (*Genesis* 2913), are found in a religious context. None of the *Beowulf* words carries such religious implications; when translated according to the “ghost, spirit” definition, *ellengæst* (line 86), *ellorgæst* (lines 807, 1349, 1617 and 1621), *geosceaftgasta* (line 1266), and *wælgæst* (line 1331 and 1995) seem more supernatural than spiritual.<sup>33</sup> In addition, since all of the *Beowulf* words refer to Grendel or his mother, it is not unreasonable to assume that the choice of the *gǣst* or “ghost” definition reflected the lexicographer’s desire to read

these characters as super or unnatural. Personally, I prefer to define these terms as "guests or strangers from elsewhere" (*ellorgæstas*), a "bold or powerful guest or stranger" (*ellengæst*), or as "murderous guest" (*wælgæst*). These interpretations complement the thematic emphasis in *Beowulf* on the customs and tensions associated with the Anglo-Saxon hall, host, and guest interaction.

Shifting to the last pair of words, *grundwyrge* and *brimwylf*, I believe that many lexicographers define *grundwyrge* inappropriately, based on their prior misinterpretation of *brimwylf*. As in the previous cases, the discrepancy in *grundwyrge* arises from one of its roots; the treatment of *wyrge* determines the definition of the entire word. Ironically, there really is little discernable complication in defining *wyrge*. Lexicographers almost unanimously agree that it is derived from a form of *wiergan* (variants: *wergian*, *wirgan*, *wirigan*, *wirian*) meaning "to abuse, outlaw, condemn, curse, proscribe, blaspheme, do evil."<sup>34</sup> Bosworth defines the noun *wearg*, a variant spelling for *wyrg*, as "I. of human beings, a villain, felon, scoundrel, criminal. . . II. of other creatures, a monster, malignant being, evil spirit." Obviously, I prefer the "human" definition, reading *grundwyrge* as "accursed one of the earth," emphasizing the link to Cain, or "the accursed one / criminal of the deep," referring to Grendel's mother's residence beneath the mere.

However, despite these perfectly satisfactory interpretations of *wyrge*, many definitions of *grundwyrge* transform Grendel's mother from a criminal to a monster. Klaeber assigns her the epithet "monster of the deep," and Wrenn, "accursed she-monster of the deep." These definitions in themselves are not overly disturbing; Klaeber and Wrenn obviously appropriated Bosworth's second definition. However, Borden and Clark Hall both define the term as "water-wolf," and Bosworth himself reads *grundwyrge* as "a wolf of the deep [Grendel's mother]." This idea of *grundwyrge* implying "wolf" seems arbitrary. As if to justify his creative license, Clark Hall makes a slight adjustment to Bosworth's standard definition of *wearg*. He prefaces the conventional explication with the parenthetical word "wolf," although he does not support his choice with arguments from sources, roots or variants of this citation. This leads me to believe that he had the connection between *grundwyrge* and Grendel's mother specifically in mind, and hence that he manipulates the Anglo-Saxon word to further dehumanize her.

I believe the solution to this mysterious "wolf" riddle lies in a fundamental misinterpretation of *brimwylf*. Lexicographers probably considered *grundwyrge* and *brimwylf* to be complementary terms. However, reading *wearg* as a parallel to the *wylf* root assumes that *brimwylf* is a



physically descriptive phrase. It is possible that *brimwylf* does not imply Grendel's mother's literal resemblance to a female water-wolf; it could function as an epithet such as those applied to warriors and figures in battle. The *wulf/wylf* compound is not uncommon. In his definition of this root, Bosworth writes that "an early admiration for the wolf seems shewn by the frequency of *wulf* in proper names." Wulfstan, Wulfgar, the Wylfingas, and Beowulf himself all utilize *wulf* as a component of their names. In addition, Bosworth observes that *wulf* is used to describe "a figure in battles . . . in reference to outlaws . . . a cruel person."

The substantive compounds of *wulf* he cites all refer to warriors and their battle skill. *Heoruwulf* is used to refer to "a fierce wolf, a warrior" much as its variants *herewulf* and *hildewulf* are "a war-wolf, warrior." Finally, Bosworth defines *wælwulf* "as an epithet of a warrior, a war-wolf, one who is as fierce to slay as is the wolf."<sup>35</sup>

I believe that *brimwylf* is informed by this tradition, an acknowledgment of Grendel's mother's might as an adversary, not as an indication of her monstrous nature.<sup>36</sup> In attempting to establish some sort of correspondence between *brimwylf* and *grundwyrgegne*, the lexicographer reads metaphor and imagery as literal representation, complicating the interpretation of both words.

## Criticism

Completing this vicious literary circle, the critics join their fellow scholars in institutionalizing this monstrous image of Grendel's mother. Her history in literary criticism itself leaves much to be desired. Traditionally, her section either has been denounced as extraneous, or viewed as a transitional passage between the scenes of Grendel and Dragon.<sup>37</sup> At times, critics almost completely ignore her existence, as does J. R. R. Tolkien in "The Monsters and the Critics."<sup>38</sup> Even when Grendel's mother merits critical attention, this monster bias excludes the possibility of fair treatment. For instance, Adrien Bonjour in the title of his article, "Grendel's Dam and the Composition of *Beowulf*" immediately marginalizes Grendel's mother, transforming her from a mother into a "dam."<sup>39</sup> Edward B. Irving also dehumanizes her. In his 1968 *A Reading of Beowulf*, after first reducing her to an extension of Grendel, Irving then states that "Grendel's mother is the mere," thus making her completely inanimate.<sup>40</sup> In his revised work, *Rereading Beowulf*, Irving continues to categorize her as a monster, despite declarations of feminist enlightenment. In fact, he exposes the dangerous nature of the powerful woman-equals-monster equation when discussing Thryth, who in his words is "another character entitled at least temporarily to the label of the female

monster."<sup>41</sup>

The ease with which he relegates an unconventional queen to the realm of monstrosity underscores the unfair treatment Grendel's mother has received.<sup>42</sup> This predilection to read a character as monstrous is specifically gendered by critics. Although both S. L. Dragland in "The Monster-Man in *Beowulf*" and Stanley Greenfield in "A Touch of the Monstrous in the Hero, or *Beowulf* Remarvelized"<sup>43</sup> examine *Beowulf*'s connections and similarities to Grendel, his mother, and the Dragon, as well as to monstrosity in general, neither even considers proclaiming the great Anglo-Saxon male hero a literal monster.

Perhaps some of the most convincing proponents of the Grendel's mother-as-monster majority are those scholars involved in source studies. Critics such as Nora Chadwick, Gwyn Jones, and Martin Puhvel link her inevitably to prior folkloric woman-monsters.<sup>44</sup> Although these source-stories, including the *Grettis Saga*, are peopled with female trolls and monster analogues, there is no definitive evidence that the *Beowulf* poet drew from a specific oral or literary tradition. The episode with Grendel's mother could have been an original construction. At the conclusion of his study "The Might of Grendel's Mother," Puhvel makes a fair assessment of the reliability of source material as an interpretative tool, claiming that "The author, as a free agent, may at times purposely deviate from the original tradition or motif or even independently create new elements where it suits his artistic purpose of creating a lengthy poem with an elaborate plot, possibly out of a great number of isolated stories and traditions."<sup>45</sup>

Basically Puhvel invokes the same principle of creative license on the part of the *Beowulf* poet that Burton Raffel claims for translators. Of course, this does not justify ignoring the ancient stories of monster-women. In addition to the Norse, Germanic, and Scandinavian elements Chadwick and others explore, ancient Greece and Rome contained similarly monstrous witch figures in the Gorgons, Circe, Medea, and Scylla. It is just as possible, however, that Grendel's mother might have been created in reaction to cultural stimulus as in agreement with a folkloric precedent. Perhaps Randall Bohrer, in "*Beowulf* and the Bog People," is correct in speculating that some sort of "historical revaluation" of patriarchal culture motivated her creation.<sup>46</sup>

We might expect that women critics would have more sympathy for Grendel's mother. In "*Beowulf* 1258–1266: Grendel's Lady-Mother," Mary Kay Temple quickly destroys such optimism in her first paragraph, claiming "One detail of the poet's description which has been overlooked by commentators is the epithet applied to the troll-wife in 1259a: *ides aglæcwif*. The latter compound means 'monster woman,' or, less specifically, 'powerful

woman."<sup>47</sup> Her article then abandons *aglæcwif* to investigate the *ides* term, leaving Grendel's mother hovering somewhere between power and monstrosity.

Jane Chance also falls victim to traditional generalizations. By grounding her argument in the traditional virgin-whore dichotomy, Chance ignores the possibility that a powerful, unconventional woman might not be monstrous.<sup>48</sup> Elaine Hansen does Grendel's mother the most justice despite her obvious avoidance of the "monster" issue. Hansen instead evaluates her as representing "an earlier more primitive world, where woman must fight when her men have been killed."<sup>49</sup> In fact, Hansen can even personify Grendel's mother as "evil incarnate" without calling her a monster. The reason is probably that Hansen discusses other powerful female figures whose intrinsic humanity has rarely been questioned:

*Elene* and *Judith* especially remind us of the militancy and activity in missionary and educational work open to the women of the time. *Elene* is the *gu cwen* (254a, 331a, warrior queen) who leads, commands, punishes, exhorts, teaches, and gives gifts. *Judith* combines alluring beauty with valor and a revengeful spirit which give her the strength to cut off the head of her would-be seducer and lead her countrymen to victory against their oppressors.<sup>50</sup>

These characters hardly conform to the peace-weaver stereotype, yet do not share Grendel's mother's title of "monster woman."<sup>51</sup> In light of these examples, Chance's treatment of Grendel's mother is even more disappointing. This disappointment is made greater by her last chapter, "Grendel's Mother as Epic Anti-Type of the Virgin and Queen," where Chance devotes several paragraphs to Judith's eroticized beheading of her "would-be seducer." Despite this juxtaposition, she insists that one strong female is monstrous, the other human.

## Conclusion

One might expect that the feminist movement would have liberated Grendel's mother from her marginalization. Even Edward Irving credits contemporary feminism for his revised approach to *Beowulf*, and specifically to Grendel's mother:

That [Grendel's mother] is extraordinarily embedded in her natural (or unnatural) surroundings in the evil mere was clear to me when I wrote *A Reading of Beowulf*. But it now seems remarkable that my own unconscious biases then prevented me from perceiving an even more significant way of embedding someone in a stereotype. She is, once you notice it, systemati-

cally reduced, ignored, discredited, and deprived of the ordinary dignity any ravening monster is entitled to—because of her sex. It is important to acknowledge that the feminist movement has given us the power to open our eyes to this kind of embedding.<sup>52</sup>

There are still, however, “unconscious biases” at work. She is, for Irving, still monstrous. Although “the feminist movement” has opened Irving’s eyes to her marginalization, it has not compelled him to question it. Herein lies what I believe may be the paradox of this problem of monstrosity. It is possible that the feminist criticism of the past fifteen years has perpetuated, legitimized, and even institutionalized the idea of Grendel’s mother as monster. As a result of Nina Auerbach’s, Sandra Gilbert’s, and Susan Gubar’s work, the angel-monster dichotomy is now a commonplace in interpreting images of powerful women in literature.<sup>53</sup> In fact, I believe that it is due to the success of their theories and others like them that this “woman-as-monster” trope has achieved almost archetypal status. As with any archetype, however, the chief danger then lies in its complacent acceptance. The critic or reader searches for, finds, and analyzes the archetype; but never thinks to question how, or whether, it actually came to be embedded in the text. Consequently, while such scholars believe that they are finding the epitome of “feminine monstrosity” in Grendel’s mother, they are possibly simply reading this image into *Beowulf*.

This is evident when examining the way Gilbert and Gubar discuss the “monster” trope in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Although in some instances they cite actual female monsters in literature, such as Spenser’s *Errour*, Milton’s *Sin*, and Swift’s “Goddess Criticism,” the majority of their examples illustrate figurative monstrosity.<sup>54</sup> When discussing Shakespeare’s *Lady Macbeth*, *Goneril*, and *Regan*, or the mother of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, or Charlotte Brontë’s *Bertha*, Gilbert and Gubar do not interpret these women as subhuman creatures.<sup>55</sup> Their arguments instead focus on the monstrous imagery surrounding these characters, which separates them from their angelic counterparts. In many ways, Jane Chance situates her article in this tradition of categorizing feminine types; however, as do most scholars who discuss Grendel’s mother, she too readily reads “monstrous imagery” as “monstrosity” and therefore categorizes the unconventional woman as monster.

One reason this slippage is so inevitable is that Gilbert, Gubar, and Auerbach deal primarily with untranslated texts. When there is an intermediary between narrative and reader, their theories are not so readily applicable. Before we can make any valid analyses, we must distinguish between the original text and the text reconfigured by secondary sources and critical

tools. It is also significant that Gilbert, Gubar, and Auerbach all contend that the woman-as-monster stereotype flourished principally during the nineteenth century. Since that century hosted the first major surge of Anglo-Saxon scholarship, the first Old English scholars were probably at least partially responsible for incorporating feminine monster imagery into the *Beowulf* text. Grendel's mother might possess some attributes of what Gilbert and Gubar define as "monstrosity:" her character and actions defy traditional gender assumptions. However, this monstrous imagery does not lie in physical claws or in talons, but rather in her alienation, her ties to the Cain-kin, and her defiance of traditional gender conventions. In fact, a large part of her reputed monstrosity lies not in Grendel's mother, but in Grendel himself. Lacking any identity independent of her son's even in name, Grendel's mother replicates the historical experience of millions of women who were defined through their male relatives. She finds herself implicated in her child's monstrosity, as unchallenged assumptions subsume her maternal role within a son's identity. Refusing to differentiate between mother and son, these translators, lexicographers, and critics transform her into a inhuman beast; and readers consume their modified texts as if they represent authoritative truth. The process is simple and self-complementing; nevertheless, it is also unjustified. The reader must resist and challenge this tradition, so as to liberate the translated work from its critical baggage. It is time to relieve Grendel's mother from her burden of monstrosity and reinstate her in her deserved position as *ides, aglæcwif*: "lady, warrior-woman."

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## NOTES

1. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

2. Sherman M. Kuhn, "Old English Aglæca-Middle Irish Oclach," in *Linguistic Method: Essays in Honor of Herbert Penzl*, ed. Irmengard Rauch and Gerald F. Carr, (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 213-230.

3. It is my goal in this paper to address the monstrosity of Grendel's mother, not Grendel. Although much of the terminology and imagery of monsters is associated with both characters, the problem I am concerned with is the construction of monstrosity as related to femininity. Consequently, any lengthy discussion of Grendel's relative humanity would be inappropriate. However, S. L. Dragland does deal more specifically with Grendel's monstrosity in his paper "The Monster-Man in Beowulf," *Neophilologus* 61 (1977): 606-618.

4. Burton Raffel, "On Translating *Beowulf*," *Yale Review* 54 (1964-65): 533.

5. Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *Beowulf and Judith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), line 1259. All subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text itself, using this edition's line numbers.

6. Stanley B. Greenfield, *A Readable Beowulf* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 82. None of the four dictionaries/glossaries in which I found *atol* had "monstrous" as a definition. These were (1) Joseph Bosworth, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882): dire, terrific, terrible, horrid, foul, loathsome. Bosworth derives *atol* from the Old Norse *atall*, *ötul*, "fierce" and "atell" foul, corrupt from the *Ormulum*; (2) J. R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960): dire, terrible, ugly, deformed, repulsive, unchaste; (3) Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., Publishers, 1922): horrid, dire, terrible; (4) C. L. Wrenn, *Beowulf and the Finnsburg Fragment* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., Ltd., 1953): horrible, terrible.

7. (1) Howell D. Chickering, Jr., *Beowulf: A Dual Language Edition* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), 121; (2) Michael Alexander, *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1983), 90; (3) Greenfield, *Readable Beowulf*, 80; (4) Marijane Osborn, *Beowulf*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 47; (5) Talbot Donaldson's translation in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th ed., 2 vols., gen. ed. M. H. Abrams, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), vol. 1, 50.

8. Clark Hall, *Concise Dictionary*, defines *ides* as "woman, wife, lady, queen." For further explication of the term *ides*, see Mary Kay Temple's article "Beowulf 1258-1266: Grendel's Lady-Mother," *English Language Notes* 23 (1986): 10-15. The term *aglæcwif* will be discussed later in more detail.

9. Bosworth, *Dictionary*, translates *unhyre* as "fierce, savage, cruel, deadly, dire, dreadful, frightful" and relates it to the Icelandic *u-hyrr* "unfriendly looking, frowning."

10. Chickering, *Dual Language*, 175; Greenfield, *Readable Beowulf*, 108.

11. Greenfield, *Readable Beowulf*, 89.
12. Alexander, *Verse Translation*, 94; Chickering, *Dual Language*, 129; Donaldson, *Beowulf*, 52; Greenfield, *Readable Beowulf*, 84; Osborn, *Beowulf*, 51.
13. Bosworth, "Dictionary."
14. Osborn, *Beowulf*, 46; Alexander, *Verse Translation*, 93.
15. Clark Hall, *Concise Dictionary*.
16. Both Chickering, *Dual Language*, 135, and Greenfield, *Readable Beowulf*, 88, use "horrible claws." Alexander, *Verse Translation*, 98; Osborn, *Beowulf*, 55.
17. Chickering, *Dual Language*, 135; Osborn, *Beowulf*, 55.
18. Donaldson, *Beowulf*, 54; Greenfield, *Readable Beowulf*, 90.
19. Alexander, *Verse Translation*, 118.
20. Chickering, *Dual Language*, 131; Osborn, *Beowulf*, 51.
21. Fred C. Robinson, "Lexicography and Literary Criticism: A Caveat" in *Philological Essays: Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature*, ed. James L. Rosier (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 99.
22. In my examination of these words, I have decided to focus solely on their use in Old English poetry. To this end, I utilized J. B. Bessinger Jr.'s *A Concordance to Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978) in researching this section of my paper.
23. Clark Hall, *Concise Dictionary*.
24. For example, in Klaeber, *Beowulf*, 277.
25. In addition, it appears five times in *Christ & Satan*; three in *Andreas*; three in *Juliana*; once in *Elene*; once in *Guðlac A*; once in *Phoenix*; and once in the *Whale*. In addition, there are also two probable instances in the *Riddles*: *Riddle 3*, line 7 and *Riddle 93*, line 23. For this plotting of *aglæca*, I am deeply indebted to Sherman Kuhn's article "Old English *Aglæca*-Middle Irish *Oclach*."
26. Signe M. Carlson, "The Monsters of *Beowulf*: Creations of Literary Scholars," *Journal of American Folklore* 80 (July-September 1967): 357-364.
27. Dobbie, ed., *Beowulf and Judith*, 160.
28. C. M. Lotspeich, "Old English Etymologies," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 40 (1941): 1-5.
29. In fact, I would contend in light of this "warrior-woman" definition that Grendel's mother could be modeled on Viking women. Some Viking women were buried with weapons, perhaps indicating that they were the prototype for this "warrior-woman." See Christine Fell, "Viking Women in Britain" in *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 129-147. This could also explain the confusion of gender pronouns in reference to Grendel's mother in lines 1392 and 1394, and the application of the word *secg*, a typically masculine word for "man" or "warrior." It might have been difficult for the Anglo-Saxons to describe a person who so obviously resisted categorization as "peace-weaver". In addition, as invaders, Viking women would have been also susceptible to categorization as other, which might lead to modern interpretations of monstrosity.
30. Alexandra Olsen, "The *Aglæca* and the Law," *American Notes and Queries* 20 (Jan-Feb 1982): 66-68.
31. Clark Hall, *Concise Dictionary*, Klaeber, *Beowulf*, and Arthur R. Borden, Jr.,

*A Comprehensive Old-English Dictionary* (Washington, D. C. : University Press of America, 1982), and Wrenn all choose this definition, while "deadly guest" is Bosworth's term.

32. Carlson, "Monsters of *Beowulf*," 361.

33. Only *geosceftgasta* might accommodate a more religious motif, employed in a semi-biblical account of Cain and his progeny. I would tend to agree with Edward Irving, *Rereading Beowulf* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 71, that "The total effect of passage [1258b–65a], illogical as it may seem is to suggest that Grendel is a lineal and faithful descendant of Cain in a way that his mother is not." I believe that it is quite possible that Grendel's mother "married into the family." There is no indication that she is herself descended from Cain. Her worst crime before the murder at Heorot is to give birth to a cannibalistic, Cain-like creature such as Grendel.

34. Clark Hall, *Concise Dictionary*.

35. These two definitions are clear cases of what Robinson warned against in his "Caveat." The first definition is drawn directly from a reference in the *Battle of Maldon*, while the second has its source in *Andreas*. These definitions, therefore, are constructed solely from an act of critical, textual interpretation.

36. Carlson, "Monsters of *Beowulf*," provides an alternative, but complementary, reading of *brimwylf*, undermining the word's force in the text by questioning the accuracy of its reading in both lines 1506 and 1599. She emphasizes that the current line 1506 reading has been emended from the original *brimwyl* of the manuscript. This emendation is probably a result of supposed repetition ninety three lines later. However, she suggests that an alternative correspondence with *merewif* (line 1519) could be drawn, changing 1506 *brimwyl* to *brimwif*. This reading not only would be consistent with the textual imagery, but similarly would alleviate the repetition problem caused by the double *brimwylf*, which is the only compound noun used twice in reference to Grendel's mother.

37. Jane Chance, "Grendel's Mother as Epic Anti-Type of the Virgin and Queen," in *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 95–108.

38. J. R. R. Tolkien, "The Monsters and the Critics," in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 5–48. There is always the possibility that Tolkien ignored Grendel's mother because he did not consider her truly monstrous; however, more likely than not, she seemed too extraneous to merit attention.

39. Adrien Bonjour, "Grendel's Dam and the Composition of *Beowulf*," in *Twelve Beowulf Papers*, ed. Adrien Bonjour (Neuchâtel: Faculte des Lettres, 1962), 29–42. Fred C. Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 66, also refers to her as "Grendel's Dam."

40. Edward Irving, *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1968), 114.

41. Edward Irving, *Rereading*, 73.

42. Randall Bohrer, "Beowulf and the Bog People," in *Literary and Historical Perspectives of the Middle Ages: Proceedings of the 1981 SEMA Meeting*, ed.



Patricia W. Cummins, Patrick W. Conner, and Charles W. Connell (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1982), 133–147, approaches the same volatile area, but confines himself to observing that Modthryth, like Grendel's mother, is a type of "devourer of men" (142).

43. S. L. Dragland, "Monster-Man," 606–618; Stanley Greenfield, "A Touch of the Monstrous in the Hero, or Beowulf Remarvelized," *English Studies*. (August 1982): 294–300.

44. Nora Chadwick, "The Monsters and Beowulf," in *The Anglo-Saxons: Studies Presented to Bruce Dickins*, ed. Peter Clemoes (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1959), 171–203; Gwyn Jones, *Kings, Beasts and Heroes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); Martin Puhvel, "The Might of Grendel's Mother," *Folklore* 80 (Summer 1969): 81–88.

45. Puhvel, *Might of Grendel's Mother*, 88.

46. Bohrer, *Bog People*, 133.

47. Temple, "Beowulf 1258–1266," 10.

48. Chance, "Grendel's Mother as Epic Anti-Type."

49. Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "Women in Old English Poetry Reconsidered," *The Michigan Academician* 9 (Summer 1976): 114.

50. *Ibid.*, 116.

51. Temple, "Beowulf 1258–1266," 10.

52. Irving, *Rereading*, 70.

53. Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1984).

54. Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, address Error and Sin on 30, and Goddess criticism on 33. Given this article's length, I must indulge in an admittedly reductive reading of this book.

55. *Ibid.*, 30, 19, 361.