

Grendel's Mother: Female Warrior

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Exploring the ways in which women are portrayed in ancient literature is crucial to society's modern understanding of culturally ingrained misogynistic tendencies. The ancient poem, *Beowulf*, covers the story of a haughty male warrior on his successive quests to defeat a number of vicious monsters. During one battle in particular, Beowulf meets his greatest match—a female warrior. This creature in particular does not have a name but is rather referred to as: Grendel's mother. In a 2020 translation of *Beowulf*, female author Maria Dahvana Headley calls attention to the female injustice and misogamy within the poem. Through the comparison of Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* translation and Headley's modernized translation, the inconsistent portrayal of Grendel's mother reflects modern misogynistic biases.

The portrayal of women in *Beowulf* reinforces the misogyny that was preset in Scandinavia in the sixth century, when the poem supposedly took place. Besides the monstrous depiction of Grendel's mother, the other female characters within the text have nearly insignificant roles. In reference to royalty, the queen is merely described as, "And a daughter, I have heard, who was Onela's / queen, / A balm in bed to the battle-scarred Swede" (*The Beowulf* Author 2). This description belittles the queen and presents her as nothing more than a "balm in bed." The queen's depiction dehumanizes her and is a way to objectify her as a commodity of the king. Scholars of medieval English literature, such as Jane Chance, have argued that Anglo-Saxon women had the role of being a complementary object of men. Chance also refers to marriage within the text, where women are described as being "taken" or "given" in their marriages (Chance). Here, we see women being portrayed as a commodity that can be exchanged

between men. Christopher Fee suggests that women in *Beowulf* are depicted similarly to treasure within the text; “Implicit in the institution of slavery is the philosophy that human beings may actually be equated with material objects in terms of value [...] even (or perhaps especially) queens, are objects of material value” (Fee). Here, Fee compares the depiction and objectification of women within the text to that of the material value of slaves. He makes the point that human slaves were seen to be material objects with differing values, the same is to be said about female characters within the poem.

After *Beowulf* defeats the murderous monster, Grendel, King Hrothgar asks for *Beowulf*’s help once again. A new character emerges in the text, Grendel’s mother. The reader’s first glimpse of this woman can be seen as the author writes, “Grendel’s mother, Monstrous hell-bride, / brooded on her wrongs” (The *Beowulf* Author 9). The author is quick to portray Grendel’s mother as monstrous, yet he fails to provide the reader with any true depictions of her physical appearance. Mourning the death of her son, Grendel’s mother is described as, “Grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge,” (The *Beowulf* Author 9). Enraged by the murder of her son at the hands of *Beowulf*, Grendel’s mother emerges for a surprise attack. The monster’s mother kills Hrothgar’s friend in an attempt to seek vengeance. From this moment on, Grendel’s mother is depicted as savage and devilish. The place in which Grendel’s mother is said to inhabit, is described similarly to the evil lair of a modern-day super villain;

“A few miles from here
a frost stiffened wood waits and keeps watch
above a mere; the overhanging bank
is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface.
At night there, something uncanny happens:

The water burns. And the mere bottom

Has never been sounded by the sons of men.” (The *Beowulf* Author 10)

It is interesting that Grendel’s mother is demonized for seeking revenge, yet Beowulf is celebrated for his many attacks. Grendel’s mother’s rage is fueled by humanizing emotions of loss, whereas Beowulf is simply looking to build his combat resume. The inconsistencies between the portrayal of the male and female characters reinforces the misogynistic tendencies that are so deeply engraved in modern culture. Strong men are praised, and strong women are villainized.

As Hrothgar asks for Beowulf’s help in defeating yet another monster that has invaded his kingdom, he encourages Beowulf to win this battle. While he convinces Beowulf to venture to Grendel’s mother’s lair, King Hrothgar says, “She’ll have nowhere to flee / to. Endure your trouble to-day. Bear up / And be the man I expect you to be,” (The *Beowulf* Author 10). This passage is significant to reinforcing misogyny within the text because it suggests the idea that Beowulf will live up to Hrothgar’s expectations because he is “the man”. As Hrothgar says, “And be the man I expect you to be,” he is directly referring to male superiority. These men have devised a plan to invade Grendel’s mother’s home and corner her so, “She’ll have nowhere to flee,” in an attempt to do just as she is doing– seek revenge. By cornering her on her own home, the men display their superiority and toxic masculinity when it comes to the degradation and mistreatment of female characters within the poem. This point in the text depicts the double standards placed on women, ultimately reinforcing the patriarchy.

During the battle between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother, Beowulf faces his closest match– but she is a woman. The author contends Beowulf with Grendel’s mother and depicts this battle as one that Beowulf truly struggles with. This fight is described as the author writes:

“He pitched his killer opponent to the floor

But she rose quickly and retaliated,
Grappled him tightly in her grim embrace,
The sure-footed fighter felt daunted,
The strongest of warriors stumbled and fell.” (The *Beowulf* Author 11)

his passage depicts the back-and-forth battle between Grendel’s mother and Beowulf, while also presenting an inability to praise the female warrior. The author describes Grendel’s mother, even as skilled as she is, as a “killer opponent.” Paul Acker describes Grendel’s mother’s appearance as he parallels this fight with the first attack of Grendel in the mead hall; “The similarity of her actions to that of her son, the fact that she is following in her son’s (bloody) footsteps, is emphasized” (Acker). On the other hand, the male warrior, Beowulf, is described as “sure-footed” and “strongest of warriors.” This praise of Beowulf directly coincides with the villainization of Grendel’s mother. At no point in the text is Grendel’s mother praised for her skills or fighting abilities, simply because of the fact that she is a woman. Instead, she is demonized and portrayed as the antagonist, even though she was the first to be antagonized by the men in the poem. Despite her strength and impressive combat skills, Grendel’s mother is constantly villainized throughout the text.

Through the comparison of Beowulf’s fight with Grendel himself and later on in the text, Grendel’s mother, one may recognize the difference in the depictions of both monsters. The first depiction of Grendel can be seen as the author writes, “Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark, / Nursed a hard grievance” (The *Beowulf* Author 3). Similar to the description of his mother as a monstrous “hell-bride,” Grendel is depicted as a demonic creature ready to attack. As the author continues on, Beowulf is seen to be confident in his chances of defeating the monster;

“I have heard moreover that the monster scorns
In his reckless way to use weapons;
Therefore, to heighten Hygelac’s fame
And gladden his heart, I hereby renounce
sword and the shelter of the broad shield,
the heavy war-board: hand-to-hand
is how it will be, a life-and-death” (The *Beowulf* Author 5-6)

Although Beowulf’s confidence in himself is apparent through much of the text as the hero is often boastful and egotistic, it is interesting to see Beowulf’s unwavering confidence as he agrees to fight off the monster who has destroyed King Hrothgar’s mead hall. At this point, Beowulf announces that he will not be using weapons or armor when fighting off Grendel. However, when Beowulf decides to fight Grendel’s mother, he chooses not to make this same “war-bond.” This begs the question as to whether or not Beowulf was truly fearful of taking on the fight against Grendel’s mother.

During Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother, he descends into her lair, eventually arriving to invade her home and kill her. What is interesting about the depiction of this fight is that Beowulf does not make the same agreement to fight hand-to-hand, as he did with Grendel. Acker suggests this is because, “Grendel’s [mother’s] dam may have seemed monstrous not only because she was a female exacting revenge but more specifically because she was a mother,” (Acker). As Acker suggest, Beowulf was fearful of the avenging mother, beyond the fact that she is a female, Grendel’s mother is a vengeful “Mama Bear.” Unlike his fight against Grendel, Beowulf brings his sword and is fully clothed in armor when fighting Grendel’s mother. This is interesting because for Beowulf to refuse to use his weaponry and armor, would mean that he

truly believes he has the power to defeat Grendel's mother, as he believed he could while fighting Grendel in the mead hall. By not following this same war approach, the reader can tell that Beowulf had some doubt in this fight against Grendel's mother. Furthermore, Beowulf's armor turns out to be the very reason he survives this fight. At this point, the author writes,

“So she pounced upon him and pulled out

A broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge

Her only child. But the mesh of chain-mail

On Beowulf's shoulder shielded his life,” (The *Beowulf* Author 11)

It is fascinating to see the author depict Beowulf's armor as being the sole reason he was not completely annihilated by Grendel's mother during their battle. Acker adds to this phenomenon as he writes, “The combat with Grendel's mother is central to the poem not just as the second of three combats but as arguably the most mysterious and compelling” (Acker). Agreeing with Acker's point of the battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother, I believe the significance of this battle deserves more credit than it gets. Although Grendel's mother is Beowulf's closest combat contender, the text does not give her a name. By minimizing Grendel's mother's character as not worthy of a name, the reader becomes aware of the misogyny that was apparent during the time in which the poem takes place.

In her own exploration of *Beowulf*, Headley also found the portrayal of Grendel's mother to also be utterly disappointing. In her introduction, Headley explains, “I was appalled to discover that Grendel's mother was not only the main event but also, to many people, an extension of Grendel rather than a character unto herself, despite the significant ink devoted to her fighting capabilities,” (Headley 29). So why does Grendel's mother not get any praise or distinction? Some would argue it is because she is a monster, she is not human, so why humanize

her? Yet this theory can be immediately debunked based on the fact that Grendel himself is not human, but a monster, yet he is still given a name. Headley suggests that Grendel's mother is nonetheless an extension of Grendel's character, not one of her own. The reason for Grendel's mother's absence of characterization is deeply rooted in the aspects of misogyny. This previously ingrained prejudice against women is why Grendel's mother is presented as an inferior character within the poem.

In her own translation, Headley attempts to directly combat the original portrayal of Grendel's mother. Instead of immediately demonizing her, Headley attempts to humanize Grendel's mother by appealing to emotions. To this end, Headley writes:

“An avenger laid in wait,
counting sorted the seconds until the latest hour,
her heart full of hatred. Grendel's mother,
warrior-woman, outlaw, meditated on misery.” (Headley 58)

In this version, Grendel's mother is seen to be in mourning, grieving the loss of her son. Upon Beowulf's arrival, Headley depicts Grendel's mother as “an avenger laid in wait,” presenting her as a grief-stricken mother waiting patiently to avenge her son's death. In contrast, the original translation introduces Grendel's mother as, “Grendel's mother, / Monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs,” (The *Beowulf* Author 9). The differences between the two ways in which Grendel's mother is portrayed are significant to the way her character is perceived by the reader. When humanized, Grendel's mother is less of a villain, and easier to sympathize with. When she is villainized, it is harder for the reader to understand where her rage is coming from. Headley also challenges Heaney's translation as he describes Grendel's mother as, “warrior-woman, outlaw, meditated on misery.” Headley's diction used to describe Grendel's mother is

connotated positively. Headley presents Grendel's mother, not as a monster, but as a "warrior-woman." The use of language here shows how positive impressions of a character can result in a completely different interpretation. Ruth Franklin describes Headley's depiction of Grendel's mother as, "By contrast, Headley's translation allows for the monstrous element but also emphasizes the character's recognizably human emotions" (Franklin). Headley's translation works to celebrate Grendel's mother as the highly skilled warrior that she is.

As scholars continue to explore ancient texts like *Beowulf*, the prevalence of misogyny becomes more and more apparent when looking at the portrayal of female characters. If they have any significance at all, female characters are often presented as inferior to their male leads. When female characters are portrayed as strong, they are often villainized and scrutinized for their strength. People continue to study texts such as this to see how we have evolved as a society and to take a look into what life was like centuries ago. Even as humankind has evolved, many parts of our culture have remained the same, such as female oppression. By exploring texts like *Beowulf*, we become more aware of how ancient literature has a long-lasting impression on society today. Female oppression is an ongoing problem in modern society, and it stems from deeply rooted misogynistic tendencies and the belief of male superiority. Authors such as Maria Headley are striving to rewrite history and to give praise to female characters when the original authors failed to do so. Grendel's mother is *Beowulf*'s strongest contender and nonetheless, a female warrior.

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