

# **Grendles Mōdor: Academics versus Arts**

## **The Scholarly and Popular Reception of *Beowulf's* Grendel's Mother**



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MA Thesis Philology

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## INTRODUCTION

In the opening words to the first chapter of his book-length study on the monsters of the *Beowulf*-manuscript, Andy Orchard wrote:

“It was Kenneth Sisam who first considered that the *Beowulf*-manuscript may have been compiled on the basis of an interest in monsters which is exhibited by at least four of the five texts it contains; he mused that a medieval cataloguer, seeking to sum up the contents of the manuscript, might well have described it as a ‘book of various monsters, written in English’ (*Liber de diversis monstribus, angelice*).”<sup>1</sup>

Although terrifying, wondrous, and marvellous, the unnatural and the monsters fashioned by societies seem to have always intrigued both the general public and the critics. There is some appeal to that which we do not understand. Monsters are veiled in the unknown, seemingly far away yet always standing closer to humankind and civilisation than one might think initially. This mysterious allure is perhaps also the reason why both the monstrous and the unnatural feature so heavily in literature, both oral and written. The *Beowulf*-manuscript appears to be a case in point, as Orchard points out by referring to Sisam’s observation. Yet also consider more recent literary examples of monstrous beings such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein’s monster, Bram Stoker’s Count Dracula, or George A. Romero’s Living Dead to which helped establish the modern concept of zombies. They frighten us the more because at times we see ourselves reflected in their image. A similar case has been made numerous times for the opponents of Beowulf in the eponymous poem, including Grendel’s mother to whom we shall turn our attention in this thesis.

The word *monster* as it is understood now and as it is used above, is of course a fairly modern notion. Indeed, as Signe M. Carlson points out, the actual word *monster*

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995), 1.

only makes its first appearance in the English language during the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> *Monster* is derived from the Latin *monstrum*, where it originally meant “a divine portent or warning”<sup>3</sup> rather than its current definition of “a large, ugly, and frightening imaginary creature”.<sup>4</sup> Though unsuitable for categorising beings that defy the norm in Anglo-Saxon poetry such as *Beowulf*, the usage of the word *monster* in scholarly criticism does open another door: the door to a closer understanding about the conception of Anglo-Saxon culture by scholars and even literary writers. One of the leading –though not the first– theories on understanding cultures through the marvellous beings and monsters they produce is Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s monster theory. Published in 1996 as an introduction to a collection of essays on monsters and monstrosities in literature and cultures around the world, Cohen theorises that a community’s monsters are their anxieties incarnate.<sup>5</sup> Cohen’s theory provides a good, sturdy framework which allows scholars to examine any literary monster. This theory is a two-way street, however. Not only does Cohen’s theory allow us to understand the monsters, but also the critics that study them. The way scholars and artists interpret the monsters in a literary work, may give us deeper insight into their own anxieties or the anxieties of the time they lived in. It follows then that studying the depiction of literary monsters, both of the past and the present, may help us learn more about the cultures in which they and their critics reside. It can provide answers to the question of what anxieties influenced the interpretation of these monsters.

When considering the Old English poem *Beowulf*, the scholarly tradition is ripe with literary criticism and analyses of its characters. This is also true for the character of

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<sup>2</sup> Signe M. Carlson, “The Monsters of *Beowulf*: Creations of Literary Scholars,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 80 (1967): 357.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion on the etymology of ‘monster’, see *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *monster*.

<sup>4</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/monster>.

<sup>5</sup> See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. J. J. Cohen (Minneapolis, 1996), 3-20 for full discussion.

Grendel's mother, and the literary criticism concerning Beowulf's only female foe is very diverse. On the one hand there are the scholars who are part of the so-called 'monster tradition'. Their arguments are in favour of the supposedly monstrous nature of Grendel's mother, representing the fears of the original audience of the poem. After all, she is not the conventional Anglo-Saxon woman. She defies the depiction of more typical female characters in more proper female roles, such as the 'peace-weaver' Freawaru. Unlike her other female counterparts in the poem, she herself takes on a man's job of avenging fallen kin and settling a blood feud.<sup>6</sup> Although she is a woman, Grendel's mother takes an active stance in ruling her court, while the rest of the poem seems to suggest that this is very atypical behaviour for a woman. In essence, Grendel's mother is the frightening union of both the masculine and feminine in one body. It is for this reason that Paul Acker sees her as an abject<sup>7</sup> and Gwendolyn Morgan meanwhile considers her the very definition of "the negative aspect of the Feminine",<sup>8</sup> a woman monstrous because she is a woman acting like a man. However, more recent Beowulf scholarship has started to provide arguments for the humanity of the female antagonist. After all, with the rise of feminist scholarship which has offered a new lens to examine literature, female characters such as Grendel's mother have been re-examined.<sup>9</sup> This newly rising 'human tradition' includes scholars such as Christine Alfano, who believes that Grendel's mother ought to be "[reinstated] in her deserved position as *ides*,

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<sup>6</sup> The most important thing to note here is that Grendel's mother is not the only female in *Beowulf* with apparent violent tendencies, but she is the only one who settles her own battles herself. In an interpolation, the story shifts from Beowulf's narrative to the tale of a former queen Modthryth who exhibited violent behaviour as well. Despite their similar positions (both women hold a ruling position within their own respective courts and they both defy feminine conventions by taking on more masculine roles for it), Modthryth seemed to have been more inclined to order others to do her bidding, while Grendel's mother, without any other kin or subjects to rely on, had to finish the job herself. See *Beowulf*, ll.1931b-1943b.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Acker, "Horror and the Maternal," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 702-716.

<sup>8</sup> Gwendolyn A. Morgan, "Mothers, Monsters, and Maturation: Female Evil in Beowulf," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Art* 4 (1991): 65.

<sup>9</sup> For a re-examination in this fashion of Modthryth, who is, as mentioned earlier, similar to Grendel's mother, see Mary Dockray-Miller, "The Masculine Queen of *Beowulf*," *Women and Language* 21 (1998): 31-38.

*aglæcwif*: “lady, warrior-woman”,<sup>10</sup> and M. Wendy Hennequin who sees in her a noble human warrior wronged by the gender biases of critics.<sup>11</sup> While critics debate the reception of Grendel’s mother by its original audience, a similar shift seems to have taken place within the popular reception of Grendel’s mother as well.

Whereas earlier depictions of Beowulf’s only female foe also tend to lean towards the monstrous and unnatural, more recent depictions appear to side with the human view of recent *Beowulf* scholars. The earlier monstrous depictions have varied much in nature over the course of years. For instance, J.R. Skelton’s illustration for *Stories of Beowulf* depicted the female adversary as a ‘water witch’ in 1908.<sup>12</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien on the other hand, fashioned her to be an “old ogress with fangs like a wolf”<sup>13</sup> during the early 1940s, while John Gardner in his popular novel *Grendel* of 1971, which retells the story of the Old English poem from Grendel’s point of view, describes Grendel’s mother as a feral being, complete with bristly fur and walking on all fours.<sup>14</sup> Recent additions to the literary adaptations of the Beowulf poem on the other hand, such as Susan Signe Morrison’s *Grendel’s Mother: The Saga of the Wyrd-Wife* and Maria Dahvana Headley’s *The Mere Wife*, explore the epic from the perspective of a fully human version of Grendel’s mother.<sup>15</sup>

The current thesis will explore both the critical and the popular reception of *Beowulf’s* Grendel’s mother.<sup>16</sup> Analysing both literary criticism and popular culture,

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<sup>10</sup> Christine Alfano, “The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel’s Mother.” *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 23 (1993): 12.

<sup>11</sup> M. Wendy Hennequin, “We’ve Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel’s Mother,” *English Studies* 89 (2008): 503-523.

<sup>12</sup> Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall, *Stories of Beowulf* (Harvard University: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1908).

<sup>13</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “Sellic Spell,” in *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary together with Sellic Spell*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2016), 377.

<sup>14</sup> John Gardner, *Grendel* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 28-29.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Signe Morrison, *Grendel’s Mother: The Saga of the Wyrd-Wife* (Hants: Top Hat Books, 2015); Maria Dahvana Headley, *The Mere Wife* (New York: MCD, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> A study in a similar fashion for her son Grendel can be found in Nienke Christine Venderbosch, ““The Com of More under Mistlethum Grendel Gongon”: The Scholarly and Popular Reception of *Beowulf’s* Grendel from 1805 to the Present Day.” unpublished Phd-thesis, Yale University (2014).

while taking monster studies into account, I wish to examine whether the scholarly and popular receptions of this complex character show parallels and whether there was any interaction between these two spheres. I will also examine what this can tell us about the conception of Anglo-Saxon culture by critics, writers and artists alike. Such an exploration may provide a better understanding of conventions of ‘otherness’ and femininity in both Anglo-Saxon and contemporary culture.

Chapter One will consist of an exploration into the scholarly reception of Grendel’s mother in the period of 1815 up until the 1936. The starting point of this period, 1815, is generally accepted as the beginning point of modern *Beowulf*-scholarship with the first complete edition of the Old English poem by the Icelandic philologist Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin published in this year. This chapter, which covers over a century of scholarship, will focus on the marginalisation of Grendel’s mother as well as the scholarly tradition in which she is viewed as a monstrous being of some kind. Chapter Two will in turn focus on the scholarly reception of the female antagonist from the 1936 up to the present. This chapter will mainly focus on illustrating a shift in *Beowulf* scholarship which has brought to the fore more arguments for the humanity of Grendel’s mother (especially since the early 2000s). After these two chapters, which focus solely on the scholarly reception of Beowulf’s only female adversary, this thesis will then turn towards the popular reception in Chapter Three. This chapter will dive into a variety of popular modern adaptations of the original *Beowulf* poem dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Due to limitations, this study will only be able to analyse major literary and cinematic adaptations of *Beowulf*. The findings in this chapter will then be compared to the ones in Chapters One and Two, which covered the same period of time for the scholarly reception.

## CHAPTER 1 - SCHOLARLY PERCEPTION FROM 1815 TO 1936

Modern *Beowulf* scholarship found its origin in 1815 with the publication of an edition and Latin translation of *Beowulf* by the Icelandic-Danish scholar Grímur Jónsson Thorkelín. Although not the first to tackle the Old English *Beowulf*,<sup>17</sup> Thorkelín was the first to provide a complete translation of *Beowulf* in any language.<sup>18</sup> As such, he was the first to introduce its cast of characters to critics and other translators. Ever since, *Beowulf* has received sustained critical attention. The fact that *Beowulf* has been available for critical review for such a long period of time makes it impossible for a single person to read, discuss, or even just be aware of all the critical works published on *Beowulf*. Consequently, the current study cannot cover all that has been written on Grendel's mother and her representation; it does, however, attempt to paint a picture of the evolving scholarly reception of Grendel's mother by discussing some of its major developments.

Despite having a long history of scholarly critical attention, little to no academic work from the 19<sup>th</sup> century exclusively focused on Grendel's mother.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the first critical essay to centralise *Beowulf*'s single female foe did not appear until well into the second half of the 1900s.<sup>20</sup> As Keith P. Taylor points out in his essay during the late 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sharon Turner had already translated a selection of the poem into Modern English as early as 1805. See Sharon Turner, *The History of Manners, Landed Property, Government, Laws, Poetry, Literature, Religion, and Language of the Anglo-Saxons* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, Paternoster Row, 1805), 398-408.

<sup>18</sup> His edition and translation of the poem is often described as unreliable, even during his own time. See, for instance, John Mitchell Kemble, who noted in 1835 that "[n]ot five lines of Thorkelin's edition can be found in succession in which some gross fault, either in the transcript or the translation, does not betray the editor's utter ignorance of the Anglo-Saxon language." J.M. Kemble, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf, The Travellers Song and the Battle of Finnesburgh* (London: William Pickering, 1835), xxix.

<sup>19</sup> A similar trend can be found for the son, Grendel. See for instance Venderbosch, "*Tha Com of More under Misthleothum Grendel Gongan*".

<sup>20</sup> The first to dedicate an article solely to the character of Grendel's Mother is, to my knowledge, Martin Puhvel. In his essay, he explores the folkloric origins of Grendel's mother and her episode. For further reading, see Martin Puhvel, "The Might of Grendel's Mother," *Folklore* 80 (1969): 81-88. Other scholars have either merely mentioned the female antagonist in passing or discussed her along with the other

century, “none has received less critical attention than Grendel’s mother, whom scholars of *Beowulf* tend to regard as an inherently evil creature who like her son is condemned to a life of exile because she bears the mark of Cain”.<sup>21</sup> Here, Taylor was referring specifically to the critics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but his point also holds true for much of the scholarly criticism on Grendel’s mother after this period as we shall see in the next chapter. The current chapter will examine the beginning period of *Beowulf* criticism.

### ***Beowulf scholarship before J.R.R. Tolkien***

In his formative “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” delivered in 1936, Tolkien was the first to point out the error of his predecessors of pushing the ‘monsters’ of *Beowulf* to the margins of the poem. He noted that “*Beowulfiana* is, while rich in many departments, specially poor in one. It is poor in criticism, criticism that is directed to the understanding of a poem as a poem”.<sup>22</sup> He went on to question why *Beowulf* should be approached “mainly as an historical document” when “*Beowulf* is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content”.<sup>23</sup> Tolkien illustrates his main dissatisfaction with the then current *Beowulf* scholarship by quoting W.P. Ker at length. Ker, Tolkien notes, did well to highlight the contrast between the themes and structure of *Beowulf*, yet failed to highlight the importance of *Beowulf*’s monsters.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Ker believed that the monsters of *Beowulf* were but “irrelevancies” put in the centre while the serious themes were left on the outer

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antagonists. See for instance Nora Kershaw Chadwick whose myth-based interpretation of Grendel’s mother will be discussed briefly further along within this chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Keith P. Taylor, “*Beowulf* 1259a: The Inherent Nobility of Grendel’s Mother,” *English Language Notes* 31 (1994): 13.

<sup>22</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” in J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (1936; London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2006), 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

edges.<sup>25</sup> Suffice it to say, Tolkien did not share this opinion. He ends his criticism on prior scholars by quoting several other scholars who objected to the poem's centralisation of the monsters, by stating in defence: "We do not deny the worth of the hero by accepting Grendel and the dragon".<sup>26</sup> Tolkien then turns his attention to said monsters, discussing their importance to the poem, leading the way for future *Beowulf* scholarship.<sup>27</sup> Including the works discussed in Chapter Two. First, we turn to some of the critics who in Tolkien's eyes had failed to provide the monsters the proper attention.

### *Grendel's Mother as Historical Jute and Avenger*

As Tolkien had noted, *Beowulf* had indeed been studied quite extensively by his predecessors during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>28</sup> However, unlike today, scholarly interpretations of *Beowulf's* 'monsters' are scarce throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the Old English poem was received and studied predominantly as a historical document. This assumed historicity can be seen most notably from Thorkelín's translation and edition which he published under the title of *De Danorum Rebus Gestis Secul. III & IV. Poëma Danicum Dialecto Anglosaxonica*, which roughly translates to "History of the Danes during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Danish Poems in the Anglo-Saxon Dialect".

Studying the poem as a historical document in turn influenced the reception of its characters, who were perceived to be historical as well. For instance, in the case of Grendel and his mother, Thorkelín argued that an anti-Jutish bias caused a less than human portrayal of two Jutish royals as the Grendelkin. Although he makes no mention

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<sup>25</sup> W.P. Ker, *The Dark Ages* (London: Blackwood, 1904), 253.

<sup>26</sup> Tolkien, *The Monsters*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Tolkien does however overlook Grendel's mother. Grendel's mother is only mentioned by Tolkien once in the Appendix, as an addition to his entry on "Grendel's Titles". See *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

of Grendel's mother in his glossary, he does mention Grendel twice. In his second gloss on Grendel, Thorkelín states:

Rex quidam Jutorum. II. 59. ob diabolicam indolem Diis et hominibus inimicam sic dictus, eadem ratione, qva nos hodie mala nobis mediatum fiende inimicum appellamus. Vino somnoqve sepultos Danos irruit et jugulat. 11. 12. 13. paludes et deserta inhabitat. 15. ejus cum Danis bella. 55. 95. 105. 119. 156. 159. Magia infamis. 156. a Beowulfo caesus. 120. 123. 124. Ejus personae et regni descriptio. 103. seqqv.

[A certain king of the Jutes, II 59. So called on account of his diabolic and innate hostility to gods and men, for the same reason that we now call an enemy ill disposed towards us a fiend. He attacks and slaughters the Danes overcome by wine and sleep. 11. 12. 13. He inhabits marshes and wastelands 15. His war against the Danes. 55. 95. 105. 119. 156. 159. His infamous science. 156. Killed by Beowulf. 120. 123. 124. His person and reign described. 103 ff.]<sup>29</sup>

First to do so, Thorkelín fashions Grendel as a 'king of the Jutes'<sup>30</sup> and offers an explanation for the rather pejorative name given to this certain king who, in his mind, must once have existed. Thorkelín does not mention Grendel's mother explicitly; however, his carefully discussed interpretation of Grendel as a supposedly historical king suggests that Thorkelín may have also considered the mother of said king a human individual. In this respect, Thorkelín may be the first to allow a human reading of the now much debated female antagonist.

Swedish scholar Gustaf Wilhelm Gumælius presents the same human reading of the Grendelkin in his review of Thorkelín's edition.<sup>31</sup> His reading of Beowulf's female foe is also linked to that of her son Grendel. In a similar fashion to Thorkelín, Gumælius notes: "Jotames anförare Grendel är vida svårare att lära känna" [Grendel, leader of the

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<sup>29</sup> Grímur Jónsson Thorkelín, ed. and trans., *De Danorum Rebus Gestis Secul. III & IV. Poëma Danicum Dialecto Anglosaxonica. Ex Bibliotheca Cottoniana Musaei Britannici* (Copenhagen: Th. E. Rangel, 1815): 261. Translation taken from Nienke Venderbosch, "Tha Com of More under Misthleothum Grendel Gongan".

<sup>30</sup> Thorkelín supports this 'Rex quidam Jutorum' reading of Grendel throughout the poem with the translation of the Old English "eoten" [giant] to the Latin *Jutus* [Jute] when referring to Grendel in for instance l.761a: "Eoten wæs ut weard" [Jutus aufugit foras]. *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>31</sup> Although appearing anonymously at the time, Gumaelius was later identified as the author of the review by Andreas Haarder. See Andreas Haarder, "Syv Beowulf-anmeldere," *Grundtvig Studier* (1968): 65-76.

Jutes, is far more difficult to get to know].<sup>32</sup> He too considers the poem a historical record documenting true historical events and people. He further explores the demonisation of Grendel's character and also attests that the exaggerated negative portrayal of Grendel as a murderous, cannibalistic monster stems from Danish "Nationalhätshet" [national acrimony]<sup>33</sup> towards the Jutes. Like Thorkelín, he considers Grendel to be a human leader. Again, although Grendel's mother is not mentioned explicitly by Gumælius, his extended argument for the humanity of Grendel, suggests that the same could be true for the mother in his mind.

### *Grendel's Mother as the Devil's Dam*

While Thorkelín and Gumælius argued for an interpretation of the Grendelkin as Jutish royalty suffering under a Danish bias of historiography, their German contemporaries begged to differ. Their understanding of *Beowulf* still retained the assessment of the Old English epic as a historical document, but with the embellishments of Germanic, and especially German, folklore rather than Danish reality. Although not quite yet prompting the 'German take-over', as T.A. Shippey and A. Haarder call it in their *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage*,<sup>34</sup> the first foundation for such a take-over was laid by famous German academics Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Central to their works, are the analogues they found between the Old English *Beowulf* and the German folklore they had been collecting and studying.

In his first response to *Beowulf*, a review of S. Gruntvig's 1820 Danish translation, Jacob Grimm writes the following about the content of the poem:

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<sup>32</sup> Anon. [Gustaf Wilhelm Gumælius], "Recension," review of *De Danorum Rebus Gestis Secul[is] III et IV: Poëma Danicum Dialecto Anglosaxonica*, translated and edited by Grímur Jónsson Thorkelín, *Iduna* 7 (1817): 156. My own translation.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>34</sup> See T.A. Shippey and A. Haarder, *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2005): 27-33 for further information.

However important it is for the knowledge of the language and the art of poetry, it is important in equal scale for the illustration of the customs and tradition of our ancient history. More than one perspective is opened into the household life of people in those times; the customs belonging to the arrival and introduction of foreign guests are depicted with great vividness and indubitably with great truth. Space forbids us examples; they would not become clear unless one extracted passages from the text and translated them word for word. There is much to learn about legend, in detail and as a whole.<sup>35</sup>

Grimm starts by acknowledging the importance of the poem for a better understanding of the Anglo-Saxon language, but believes the true merit lies in that which the poem can teach its critics on the customs and legends of the time. Unsurprisingly, he immediately turns his focus to the underlying legends of *Beowulf*. His first mention of a German folkloric analogue to Grendel and his mother comes immediately after:

The first half of the poem is filled by the struggle against a water-spirit called Grendel, who comes into the king's hall by night and attacks and devours sleeping men, and by the equally severe fight with his mother, and much is reminiscent of deep-rooted German folk-legends. Right up to the present day Christianity has not rooted out the idea of a mythical mother or grandmother for the devil (his father or brother is never mentioned).<sup>36</sup>

Here, Grimm notes “deep-rooted German folk-legends” that remind him of the *Beowulf* narrative involving the Grendelkin, and that have not yet been “rooted out” by Christianity. More specifically, Grimm refers to the folktales of the ‘Devil and his Dam’. He, and his brother Wilhelm, would continue to refer to these “folk-legends” in their discussions of *Beowulf*'s Grendel-fights by citing some of their collected children's stories and proverbs.<sup>37</sup> However, those discussions lack examples from *Beowulf* that could illustrate their theory.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>37</sup> In 1835, Jacob Grimm noted for a second time that: “In *Beowulf* there appears a hostile devilish spirit called Grendel, and his mother (*Grendeles modor*, *Beow.* 4232, 4274) as a veritable devil's mother.” Around 1842, Wilhelm Grimm similarly noted that: “Grendel, the water-spirit, and his mother (as still today folk-tales speak of the devil and his mother) are dark, malicious spirits in terrifying form.” See *Ibid.*, 189, 242. For a short overview of some of the proverbs mentioning the Devil and his Dam (in English), see Isabel Cushman Chamberlain, “The Devil's Grandmother,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 13 (1900): 278-280.

The requisites for the ‘Devil and his Dam’ folktales are the following: a Devil figure, a mother, and the absence of other male kin as noted by Grimm above. The latter can be easily found within *Beowulf*, as Hrothgar explains after the attack of Grendel’s mother that “*nō hīe fæder cunnon*” [they did not know of his father]<sup>38</sup>, and the poet never introduces a patriarch. The only kin that Grendel has is his mother. The reason for this lack of male kin is, according to Jeffrey Burton Russel, that “a father, unlike a female ancestor, would (to the masculine mind) diminish [the Devil’s] authority”.<sup>39</sup> Grendel’s association with the Devil actually goes back to Thorkelín who in his first gloss on the etymology of Grendel’s name noted: “*Caeterum Grendel loco adducto apud Caedmonem et Deofel Diaboli, et Sathanae venit nomine*” [Grendel also comes in the name of both Deofel Devil, and Satan in a short passage in the writings of Caedmon].<sup>40</sup> This, together with the knowledge that Grendel is referred to within the poem with terms such as “*helle gāst*” [spirit of hell]<sup>41</sup>, would have made Grendel a viable Devil’s figure.

All in all, the brothers Grimm proposed an analogue to German folklore that would later be picked up and expanded upon.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the connection between Grendel’s mother and the Devil’s Dam established here would also influence future translations and depictions of the female antagonist which shall be discussed more in depth in Chapter 3. It also should be noted, that in this interpretation of Grendel’s mother as the Devil’s Dam, her identity becomes subsumed into that of her son. The same trend may be observed in other early interpretations of Grendel’s mother.

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<sup>38</sup> *Beowulf*, 1.1355b. All quotations of *Beowulf* are from *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, ed. R.D. Fulk, R.E. Bjork and John Niles, 4th ed. (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2008). Unless stated otherwise, all translations of *Beowulf* were taken from *Beowulf on Steorarume*, ed. B. Slade, <http://www.heorot.dk>.

<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russel, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984): 149.

<sup>40</sup> Thorkelín, *De Danorum Rebus Gestis*, 261. Translation taken from Nienke Venderbosch, “*Tha Com of More under Mistleothum Grendel Gongan*”.

<sup>41</sup> *Beowulf*, 1.1274a.

<sup>42</sup> See Russel, who attests that the Devil’s Dam is “the prototype of Grendel’s monstrous mother”. Russel, *Lucifer*, 77.

### *Grendel's Mother as the Personification of the Sea's Depth*

“That Grendel is fictitious no one, of course, would deny,”<sup>43</sup> R.W. Chambers stated in his 1921 book *Beowulf: An Introduction*. Although those words did not ring completely true to Thorkelín and Gumælius, this view of Grendel and his mother was the predominant one even during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his chapter entitled “The Non-Historical Elements, Section I: The Grendel Fight”, Chambers discusses some of the more popular interpretations of Grendel and his mother up to 1921. As the chapter’s title suggests, Grendel and his mother fall under the ‘non-historical elements’ of the *Beowulf* poem according to Chambers, emphasising that their characters are not rooted in historical fact. Here he briefly summarises the interpretation of the Grendelkin by the German philologist Karl Viktor Müllenhoff (1818-1884), which he considers the most popular of “[t]he different mythological explanations of Beowulf-Beowa and Grendel”<sup>44</sup> to be found up to that point.

As Chambers notes, Müllenhoff and his followers attributed the non-historical elements of the poem to mythology, in particular to ‘nature-myths’.<sup>45</sup> As early as 1849, Müllenhoff had argued that the Old English poem must be a mythical allegory relating to his home of Schleswig-Holstein.<sup>46</sup> He believed that the epic originated from his home, relating a local German legend of a hero descendant from the gods. Although *Beowulf’s* historicity appeared definite to Müllenhoff, as it did for most of his contemporaries, he took one step away from it with his interpretation of the Grendelkin. In his mythological analysis of *Beowulf*, Müllenhoff briefly turns to Grendel and his mother. According to Müllenhoff, Grendel is not the historical Jutish king presented by Thorkelín or

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<sup>43</sup> R.W. Chambers, “Chapter II: The Non-Historical Elements, Section I: The Grendel Fight” in *Beowulf: An Introduction* (Cambridge: University Press, 1921): 46.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>46</sup> Shippey and Haarder, *Critical Heritage*, 280.

Gumælius, nor is he a person per se. Instead, Müllenhoff interprets Grendel as the personification of the stormy North Sea during the springtime, framed within the myth of the god *Beaw* who would save the devastated people from its watery clutches.<sup>47</sup> More interestingly for the current study, though, Müllenhoff explicitly mentions not just Grendel, but also his mother: “Grendel is at bottom identical with his mother, who is likewise only a personification of the depths of the sea”.<sup>48</sup> With these words, Müllenhoff makes sure to leave nothing to the imagination with his interpretation of the female antagonist: she is identical to her son, and she cannot be separated from him as much as he cannot be separated from her. He reinforces this view with the second statement that neither are human, but that they are instead just mere personifications of a nature-myth that warns the people of the treacherous oceans.

As such, writing in 1849, about 34 years after the publication of Thorkelín’s *Beowulf* edition, Müllenhoff was one of the first to offer an explicit interpretation of Grendel’s mother, along with the brothers Grimm. However, like many who would later follow, Müllenhoff does so by subsuming the mother into the identity of the son.

### *Grendel’s Mother as a She-Bear*

In 1886, W.W. Skeat introduced a theory that the monstrous Grendel was in fact not as much of a monster as scholars at the time believed him to be. Instead, Skeat’s interpretation of Grendel, and by proxy his interpretation of Grendel’s mother, was that of a ferocious but very realistic bear. In his paper, Skeat makes it clear that “[l]ittle is gained by calling Grendel ‘a monster,’ which is the usual vague phrase, and useful only because it conveniently evades all difficulties”, before attesting that the terms used to

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 284. Kemble made a similar statement in the same year: “The Grendels and Nicors of our forefathers were gods of nature, the spirits of the wood and wave.” *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

describe Grendel within the poem are not as mystical as they have been made out to be and offering an etymology to the name *Grendel*. Grendel, he explains using Ettmüller's 1840 etymology, is derived from the Old English verb *grindan* which means 'to grind'. Grendel thus literally translates to 'grinder'. Skeat sees this epithet as synonymous with 'carnivorous' as in his mind it can only be a reference to "the grinding of bones".<sup>49</sup> In turn, Skeat uses this etymological analysis of Grendel's name as proof for his theory.

Turning to the poem in order to solidify his arguments and explaining away any contradictions, Skeat also takes Grendel's mother into account. In points 6 to 10, Skeat offers a variety of arguments in favour of his bear interpretation for Grendel's mother. These arguments include an explanation for the strength of Grendel's mother, which Skeat explains as "an old she-bear [...] angered by the loss of her whelp", or the lack of weapons on her part for she had only "her "grápum", i.e. her claws".<sup>50</sup> Besides these, Skeat explains away the underwater cavern of Grendel's mother as a bear's den on the other side of a lake which Beowulf had to swim across, and also includes the assumed incapability to speech and carnivorous nature of the female foe as arguments for his reading. Yet, his understanding of Grendel's mother as a bear only comes from his interpretation of Grendel. Once again, the identity of Grendel's mother is intrinsically linked to that of Grendel.

As Shippey and Haarder point out in their introduction to Skeat's paper, it was "a good example of the aggressively 'common-sensical' approach often taken by British scholars in opposition to the 'fanciful' Germans".<sup>51</sup> Skeat's interpretation is indeed much more down-to-earth than those of earlier and later critics. His paper offers an interesting, and definitely original take on the Grendelkin, although it did not gain much

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 439-440.

<sup>50</sup> W.W. Skeat, "On the Signification of the Monster Grendel in the poem of Beowulf; With a Discussion of Lines 2076-2100," *The Journal of Philology* (1886): 124.

<sup>51</sup> Shippey and Haarder, *Critical Heritage*, 439.

traction. Nevertheless, his theory, despite focussing mostly on Grendel, does offer an interpretation of Grendel's mother as well

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### *Grendel and his Mother as the Two-Trolls of Folklore*

The first Old Scandinavian analogue to Beowulf's fight with Grendel and his mother was proposed in 1878 by Guthbrandur Vigfússon. By that time, Vigfússon had only briefly mentioned a parallel between the Old English *Beowulf* and the Icelandic *Grettis saga* in his edition of the *Sturlunga Saga* including the *Islendinga Saga*. In his introduction to the edition, Vigfússon claimed that the *Grettis saga* "contain[s] a late version of the famous Beowulf legend", something which he had noticed in the spring of 1873 while reading the original Old English *Beowulf*.<sup>52</sup> Yet, however brief, Vigfússon's mention of a *Grettis saga* parallel would prove to be influential in years to come. In fact, according to Theodore M. Andersson, Vigfússon's discovery breathed new life into the theory that *Beowulf* had Scandinavian origins.<sup>53</sup> In 1880, Hugo Gering would praise Vigfússon for his findings. Just another six years later, Gregor Ignatz Sarrazin would launch an investigation into the exact geographical origin of the Grendel-legend which he concluded to be Denmark, perhaps at the royal court in Lejre.

Vigfússon himself would eventually return to this Scandinavian analogue together with F. York Powell in 1883, where they liken Grendel's mother to the ogress of the *Grettis saga* who haunts a farm at Yuletide. After discussing the likeness between Beowulf's fight with Grendel and Grettir's fight with the corporeal ghost Glam, Vigfússon and Powell offer a brief summary of the *Grettis saga* chapter and note that there appears to be a repetition of some elements of the Grendel fight, such as the fact

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>53</sup> Theodore M. Andersson, "Sources and Analogues," in *A Beowulf Handbook*, eds. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997): 130.

that the hero lies in wait for the monster and the loss of an arm.<sup>54</sup> The two academics end their passage on Grendel's mother with the similarities between the two stories. The comparison they offer between the *Grettis saga* and the fight with Grendel's mother is brief, occupying just one paragraph. Chambers offers a more extensive discussion of the parallels and the differences between Beowulf's fight with the Grendelkin and the relevant *Grettis* passages, even offering an analogue with another Scandinavian legend.<sup>55</sup>

Clearly, Vigfússon's discovery of a possible Scandinavian analogue opened the doors to new explorations. Eventually, it also allowed for new discoveries of other Scandinavian analogues featuring "two-troll fights" which strengthened the interpretation of Grendel and his mother as stemming from Scandinavian folklore, as we will see in the next chapter.

This chapter has so far outlined a variety of interpretations –some implicit, some explicit– of Grendel's mother before Tolkien's famous lecture of 1936. Despite representing the female antagonist in different ways, all of these interpretations have one thing in common: her identity as a mother and fearsome foe to Beowulf is only ever discussed in the light of her son, Grendel. Her significance to the story is reduced in this manner and allows for her to be overlooked. This would change during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Slowly but surely, Grendel's mother started receiving more critical attention of her own, and her importance to the poem was brought to the fore. We now turn to the next chapter, where some of the most influential and innovative scholarly interpretations of Grendel's mother after Tolkien's lecture will be discussed.

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<sup>54</sup> For full account, see Shippey and Haarder, *Critical Heritage*, 418.

<sup>55</sup> For full discussion, see Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction*, 48-54. Here, Chambers paraphrases the relevant *Grettis saga* passages and argues for a common source for both the Old English epic and the Old Scandinavian saga, as well as briefly discussing a parallel with the story of Orm Storolfsson which he admits is less clearly observable than the former.

## CHAPTER 2 - SCHOLARLY RECEPTION AFTER TOLKIEN

The previous chapter has illustrated a variety of interpretations of Grendel's mother, mostly from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A new trend emerged during the 20<sup>th</sup> and especially the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries: Grendel's mother now enjoyed a spotlight of herself. More scholars studied Grendel's mother independently from her son (although many still saw her in some monstrous light). Despite the shortcomings of Tolkien's paper, as he himself too had overlooked Grendel's mother while pointing out the importance of *Beowulf's* monstrous antagonists, it allowed for later scholars to shift the focus to Grendel's mother. The current chapter will take a closer look at some of the varying approaches to the female antagonist and will discuss some of the more prominent theories about the character of Grendel's mother which took shape during this period.

### *Beowulf scholarship after J.R.R. Tolkien*

Tolkien's paper did indeed open the door to new, literary explorations of *Beowulf* and more importantly, its monsters and antagonists. Tolkien called upon scholars to start appreciating and studying the poem as "a work of art"<sup>56</sup>, rather than as a quarry for historical facts. Furthermore, he proposed placing the 'monsters', which are now often considered the defining aspects of the poem, at the centre of the analysis. This call was indeed heeded by literary critics the world over. Unlike critics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholars took a closer look at *Beowulf's* enemies and Tolkien's essay is now considered one of the most important turning points in criticism for *Beowulf*.<sup>57</sup> How did

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Rolf H. Bremmer Jr, "Tolkien and *Beowulf*: On J. C. van Meurs's Contribution to *Neophilologus*," in *Tracing Paradigms: One Hundred Years of Neophilologus*, edited by Rolf H. Bremmer Jr, Thijs Porck, Frans Ruiter and Usha Wilbers (s.l.: Springer, 2016), 247–253.

these scholars, with these new insights and rejuvenated literary spirit interpret Grendel's mother?

### *Grendel's Mother Ignored Once More*

Tolkien's paper paved the way for literary criticism of *Beowulf* and its 'monsters'. Yet, this did not mean each antagonist was immediately and equally studied throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tolkien himself for instance turned his attention solely towards Grendel and the Dragon. Despite his call to avoid marginalising the so-called monsters of the poem, and condemning his predecessors who did, Tolkien himself marginalised the role which Grendel's mother plays. For Tolkien, only two monsters play a significant role: Grendel and the Dragon. He asserts that these antagonists create "an opposition between two halves of roughly equivalent weight, and significant content" much like those observed within the two half-lines of Old English poetry.<sup>58</sup> He continues with the assertion that:

In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death. It is divided in consequence into two opposed portions, different in matter, manner and length: A from 1 to 2199 (including an exordium of 52 lines); B from 2200 to 3182 (the end).<sup>59</sup>

In Tolkien's vision, presenting Grendel's mother and her episode as separate from that of her son Grendel would disrupt the balance of the poem. By including the fight with Grendel's mother in Grendel's portion of *Beowulf* and refusing to address her at all,<sup>60</sup> Tolkien's pictured balance is maintained, but her significance as a fearsome foe is

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<sup>58</sup> Tolkien, "The Monsters and the Critics," 28.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>60</sup> The first and only time Tolkien mentions Grendel's mother is as a passing note within the Appendix, under the entry for *Grendel's Titles*. See Tolkien, "the Monsters and the Critics," 36. Jane Chance notes in *Tolkien, Self and Other: "This Queer Creature"* that even in earlier variants of his article, Tolkien hardly mentions Grendel's mother at all. Jane Chance, *Tolkien, Self and Other: "This Queer Creature"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 193.

diminished. As an antecedent for the study of all of *Beowulf's* antagonists, this celebrated paper unfortunately came short.

Another significant marginalisation of Grendel's mother in scholarly criticism can be found in Paul Beekman Taylor's essay. His essay, entitled "Beowulf's Second Grendel Fight", is the epitome of subsuming the mother's identity as person and antagonist into that of the son. As suggested by the title of the essay, Taylor considers Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother in the mere a mere continuation of his fight with Grendel back in Heorot. Or, as Taylor argues, Beowulf himself did at least. Taylor's argument "that the hero fears that Grendel himself is not yet dead" and that he has "motives for a second Grendel fight" stems from the presence of masculine pronouns in Beowulf's speech after the attack on Heorot by Grendel's mother.<sup>61</sup> By analysing these particular lines, as well as the surrounding context of them, Taylor comes to the conclusion that the masculine pronouns used by Beowulf have a deliberate function.<sup>62</sup> He is, in fact, unconcerned about Grendel's mother and her actions. Taylor thus implies that even Beowulf himself did not acknowledge his female foe as a separate entity until much later. No longer is Grendel's mother a grieving mother avenging her fallen son, she is merely a means for Beowulf to confirm Grendel's death. As Taylor notes, "[h]is fight in the underwater cavern is a second fight against Grendel himself".<sup>63</sup> She is nothing more than an extension of her son.

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<sup>61</sup> Paul Beekman Taylor, "Beowulf's Second Grendel Fight." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 86 (1985): 64.

<sup>62</sup> For instance, in lines 1392b and 1394b, Beowulf himself refers to Grendel's mother with the masculine pronoun *hē* in his address to Hrothgar. Even the narrative voice refers to her with masculine pronouns and demonstratives at times, such as at l.1260a: *sē þe wæteregeas / wunian scolde* [she who the dreadful water had to inhabit]. M. Wendy Hennequin (also discussed later in this chapter) would later use a similar argument to explore the unique role of both Grendel's mother and Modthryth, arguing amongst other things, that the use of male pronouns in reference to Grendel's mother signifies her role as king of her own hall, and Beowulf's acknowledgement of this fact, as a parallel to Hrothgar and Heorot. For full discussion, see M. Wendy Hennequin, "Her Own Hall: Grendel's Mother as King," *The Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe* 17 (2017). Accessible through: <https://www.heroicage.org/issues/17/hennequin.php>

<sup>63</sup> Taylor, "Beowulf's Second Grendel Fight," 69.

### *Grendel's Mother and the Folkloric and Mythical Traditions*

Despite the continued marginalisation of Grendel's mother by some scholars, others did eventually study the female antagonist more extensively. Their approaches to the subject all vary, as do their views on Grendel's mother as a literary character. The first academic approach that will be looked at here, is that of unearthing parallels and analogues between folkloric and mythological traditions. The most notable of these that will be discussed here are the Old Norse Valkyrie tradition, and the Two-Trolls analogues, both originating from Norse literature. Whereas scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century had given more consideration to the Germanic folkloric elements of *Beowulf*<sup>64</sup>, scholars of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shifted their focus to the Norse setting and characters of *Beowulf*.

Nora Kershaw Chadwick was one of the first to claim there is a link between the Valkyries of Old Norse mythology and Grendel's mother. Although Chadwick does not go into much detail in her seminal article "The Monsters of Beowulf", she notes that Grendel's mother is an Anglo-Saxon conception of a Norse Valkyrie. Her main argument, which she discusses rather briefly, is evidence from mediaeval Latin-Anglo-Saxon glosses discussing particularly mystifying words such as *byrs* and *helrunan* used in *Beowulf* to describe Grendel and his mother. According to her, the definitions provided in the Latin-Anglo-Saxon Glossary, as well as glossaries by Aldhelm, illustrate how the *Beowulf* poet described Grendel's mother as "an English conception of a Valkyrie, as a fierce and vengeful spirit of the underworld, a 'slaughter chooser'".<sup>65</sup> Her argument is short and relies on having a fuller understanding of the Old Norse

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<sup>64</sup> See for instance Puhvel, "The Might of Grendel's Mother," 81-88. Here, Puhvel discusses a few parallels between Grendel's mother and monstrous, but mighty female antagonists from Germanic, Irish, and Celtic folklores first offered by scholars such as E. Lehmann and Fr. Panzer.

<sup>65</sup> Nora K. Chadwick, "The Monsters and Beowulf," in *The Anglo-Saxons*, ed. Peter Clemons (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1979), 176-177.

Valkyrie and the context of these beings, which are not discussed at full in the paper at hand.

Perhaps in an attempt to strengthen her view, Chadwick then goes into a longer discussion of early Norse monster stories that appear to carry parallels between some of their female monsters and the Anglo-Saxon mother of Grendel. These parallels include the hostile and destructive nature of the monsters, as well as an established familial bond with an earlier, weaker male monster. Discussing two of such stories, Chadwick likens Grendel's mother to the evil Valkyrie Skuld of the *Saga of Hrólfr Kraki* (or the *Hrólfs Saga Kraka*) and Kolfrosta of the *Bósa Saga ok Herraud̄s Konungs* (more commonly referred to as the *Herraud̄s Saga*).<sup>66</sup> Chadwick continues her discussion of possible parallels between the various sagas and *Beowulf*, and a short discussion based on etymology and ancestry of how Grettir and Grendel may be one and the same yet leaves the discussion of Grendel's mother at what it is with that.

Building on Chadwick's theory, Helen Damico dives further into Anglo-Saxon depictions of the Norse Valkyrie tradition some 25 years later in her book *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*. Within the third chapter of her book, and in a 1990 essay adaptation of said chapter called "The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature", Damico touches upon the subject of Grendel's mother. She presents her evidence for linking the antagonist to the Valkyrie tradition as follows:

In both their benevolent and malevolent aspects, the valkyries are related to a generic group of half-mortal, half-supernatural beings called *idisi* in Old High German, *ides* in Old English, and *dís* in Old Norse, plural, *dísir*. Both groups are closely allied in aspect and function: they are armed, powerful, priestly. They function as arrangers of destinies and intermediaries between men and the deity. [...] The *Beowulf* poet follows the tradition of depicting the valkyrie-figure as a deadly battle-demon in his characterization of Grendel's Mother. As Chadwick has

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 179-182.

argued, Grendel's Mother, that *wælgæst wæfre* 'roaming slaughter-spirit' epitomizes the earlier concept of the valkyrie.<sup>67</sup>

Much like Chadwick before her, Damico believes that the *Beowulf* poet was aware of and utilised a specific type of Valkyrie-figure in his portrayal of Grendel's mother, which closely corresponds to an earlier concept of the Valkyrie.

To strengthen her argument, Damico provides a short rundown of Old English literature that document the valkyrie as a "baleful war-spirit".<sup>68</sup> She refers to the Old English equivalent *wælcyrge* of the Old Norse *valkyrja* in several glosses of the 8<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, as well as Cnut's letter to his subjects and *The Wonders of the East* within the *Beowulf* codex. Here, she notes, the *wælcyrge* is consistently associated with slaughter and seen as a threatening influence on society. Especially in *The Wonders* they are described as terrifying marvels.<sup>69</sup> Damico then argues that the "*Beowulf* poet follows the tradition of depicting the valkyrie-figure as a deadly battle-demon in his characterization of Grendel's mother"<sup>70</sup> on account of her numerous epithets such as *merewīf mihtig* 'mighty sea-woman' and *micle mearcstapa* 'great boundary-stalker'<sup>71</sup>, and her murdering of Æschere. Apart from the murderous nature of the valkyries, Damico also notes the seeming confusion over the true gender of Grendel's mother as proof by stating that "she is ambisexual, as are the *skjaldmeyjar* ['shield-maidens'] whom Saxo describes as possessing the "bodies of women ... [but] the souls of men." Grendel's mother has the 'likeness of a woman' (*idese onlīcnes*, l. 1351a), but is characterized as a *sinnigne secg* 'sinful man' (l. 1379a),

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<sup>67</sup> Helen Damico, "The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, eds. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 176-178.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>71</sup> *Beowulf*, l.1519a & l.1348a, respectively.

and several of her pronominal references are in the masculine (ll. 1260, 1392, 1394).<sup>72</sup> With these arguments to illustrate her claim, Damico is confident that the *Beowulf* poet fashioned Grendel's mother with the Valkyrie in mind.

Another scholar who draws on the term *ides* in his study of Grendel's mother is Frank Battaglia. By linking OE *ides* to ON *dís*, like Damico before him, Battaglia notes that the *dís* were supernatural female beings defined by contradicting aspects. On the one hand, they were documented to act as fierce but righteous guardian angels. On the other hand, they were feared for their "power over the dead and choosing who would die".<sup>73</sup> Battaglia's description of the *dís* so far overlaps with that of Damico's valkyries. Yet Battaglia sees a different mythological being in the portrayal of Grendel's mother. He suggests that *Beowulf*'s sole female antagonist is a depiction of the early Germanic goddess Gefion, who in turn was a form of the fertility goddesses Nerthus and Freyja.<sup>74</sup> To strengthen his point, Battaglia argues that the word *dís* is known to mean 'goddess' in skaldic poetry and that "Freyja herself is called *Vanadís*, that is, *dís* of the Vanir, the Scandinavian chthonic, fertility deities."<sup>75</sup> Although Battaglia's theory did not catch on, it is an interesting one that is reminiscent of one of the *Beowulf* adaptations that will be discussed later on in Chapter Three.

### *Grendel's Mother and the Two-Trolls Analogue Revisited*

Another, though different analogue with Old Norse literature, found for Grendel's mother (and her son) is that of the two-trolls analogue. In the previous chapter, this

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<sup>72</sup> Helen Damico, "The Valkyrie-Figure in Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Literature," in *Beowulf's Wealththeow and the Valkyrie Tradition* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 46; Saxo Grammaticus, *The First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*, trans. Oliver Elton, Norroena Society; rpt. (Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1967), 310 (Bk. VIII).

<sup>73</sup> Frank Battaglia, "The Germanic Earth Goddess in *Beowulf*," *Mankind Quarterly* (1991): 433.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 415-417.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

analogue has already been mentioned briefly. It showed how Vigfússon had mentioned a parallel between *Beowulf* and the *Grettis saga* as early as 1878.<sup>76</sup> His discovery was noted to have opened the doors to new explorations of possible Scandinavian analogues which continued until well into the late 20th century.

In 1975, Peter A. Jorgensen suggested a new analogue featuring a two-troll fight.<sup>77</sup> In a short discussion, Jorgensen first offers a translation of a brief passage of the *Hálfðanar saga Brömufóstra* which he believes to contain some notable parallels with *Beowulf*. In it, the hero Hálfðan finds a cave with two trolls: Járnnefr the male troll and Sleggja the female troll. The two are sitting around a fire, enjoying a meal of horse and men. Appalled, Hálfðan attacks the trolls, chopping the head of Járnnefr off with one swing of his axe. His fight with Sleggja on the other hand is more challenging. They wrestle and struggle for a while before Hálfðan finds a gold adorned sword lying near him, which he uses to decapitate Sleggja before returning to his retainers who had feared he had died in battle.<sup>78</sup> Jorgensen then moves on to the next section in which he notes a series of parallels between the passage and the fight with Grendel's mother. He likens Beowulf's female foe to Sleggja, supporting his reading by closely comparing the two female beings. As is the case with Beowulf and Grendel's mother, Hálfðan struggles much more in his battle with his female opponent. Furthermore, both heroes are only able to defeat their respective foes with a special blade found within the vicinity of their ongoing battle.<sup>79</sup> He concludes his discussion with the assertion that "the saga's description of the trek to the cave and the battle with the female monster are closer to the Old English epic version than is the famous *Grettis saga* or any other

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<sup>76</sup> Shippey and Haarder, *Critical Heritage*, 391.

<sup>77</sup> Peter A. Jorgensen, "The Two-Troll Variant of the Bear's Son Folktale in *Hálfðanar saga Brömufóstra* and *Gríms saga loðinkinna*," *Journal of Scandinavian Folklore* 31 (1975): 35-43.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. Jorgensen further notes that it is "implicit that the axe used to decapitate Járnnefr was useless against the female, just as Beowulf's sword could not pierce Grendel's mother".

single Olde Norse saga”. Jorgensen presents a strong case, as the parallels he points out are almost too obvious to ignore.

This analogous material as presented by Jorgensen became widely known and accepted as the ‘two-troll variant’. Folklorists such as J. Michael Stitt took Jorgensen’s methodology and incorporated it to his own analysis of the variants of Panzer’s Bear’s Son folktale. He even added more Old Norse analogues from different genres to the list.<sup>80</sup> Theodore M. Andersson and Andy Orchard on the other hand stuck with the legendary sagas like Jorgensen had, and applauded his findings.<sup>81</sup>

Yet as with most scholarly criticism, Jorgensen’s ‘two-troll variant’ also found some resistance. In a recent paper, Magnús Fjalldal challenges Jorgensen’s widely accepted findings. He relates that like Jorgensen and his supporters, he too believes “that the monsters in *Beowulf* and *Beowulf*’s fights with them have their roots to a certain extent in a shared Germanic tradition that also surfaces in the extant Old Norse materials”.<sup>82</sup> However, he thinks Jorgensen’s approach is too narrow and sees three problems with his supposed analogue. Fjalldal’s first issue, he states, arises from Jorgensen’s methodology. According to Fjalldal, Jorgensen’s method for relating analogous material is too flexible and too far removed from the criteria applied by earlier scholars for finding analogues in Old Norse texts.<sup>83</sup> He believes that any Old Norse story with some similarities to *Beowulf* can be called an analogue this way. Fjalldal’s second issue stems from Jorgensen’s definition of a two-troll story. Listing Jorgensen’s definition, he shows that it is too broad to work and easily hijacked by

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<sup>80</sup> J. Michael Stitt, *Beowulf and the Bear’s Son: Epic, saga and fairytale in northern Germanic tradition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992).

<sup>81</sup> For full discussion see Andersson, “Sources and Analogues,” 125-148; Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 124.

<sup>82</sup> Magnús Fjalldal, “*Beowulf* and the Old Norse Two-Troll Analogues,” *Neophilologus* (2013): 543-544.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 543-544.

scholars.<sup>84</sup> Lastely, he notes that he finds issue with the type of creatures compared between *Beowulf* and the proposed analogue.<sup>85</sup> This final point he analyses more extensively.

As Fjalldal argues, there are some notable “differences that separate the trolls of the legendary sagas from Grendel and his mother”.<sup>86</sup> He offers a long list of reasons that show how the Grendelkin and the trolls of Norse sagas differ. These range from reasons such as the fact that trolls cook their victims before they eat them whereas the Grendelkin seem to prefer their men raw, to the fact that Grendel and his mother are much more pivotal to the plot of *Beowulf* than any troll in any Norse legendary saga ever has been.<sup>87</sup> In short, Fjalldal just cannot believe that the trolls of the *Hálfðanar saga Brömufóstra* and the Grendelkin are similar enough to warrant the title of analogue. Taken together with his earlier arguments,

Not wanting to just dismiss the idea of *Beowulf*'s Old Norse analogues, Fjalldal instead offers an alternative. He sees in Grendel and his mother the *draugar* and *haugbúar* of Old Norse tradition: ghastly undead creatures with superhuman strength stalking their local areas during the night, terrorising its inhabitants.<sup>88</sup> Fjalldal notes other similarities between the *Beowulf* epic and Norse monster stories featuring these *draugar* and *haugbúar*. For instance, most stories about *haugbúar* have the hero lower himself into a barrow where the monster resides, only to be presumed dead by his companions who then abandon him. Fjalldal points out that this occurs in *Grettis saga*, ch.18, amongst other sagas<sup>89</sup> These events closely resemble the events of *Beowulf*:

Sōna þæt gesāwon    snottre ceorlas  
þā ðe mid Hrōðgāre    on holm wliton·

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 544.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 545.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 545.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 545-546.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 546-547.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 546-547.

þæt wæs yðgeblond eal gemenged  
 brim blōde fāh· blondenfeaxe  
 gomele ymb gōdne ongeador spraēcon  
 þæt hig þæs æðelinges eft ne wēndon·  
 þæt hē sigehrēðig sēcean cōme  
 maērne þēoden· þā ðæs monige gewearð  
 þæt hine sēo brimwylf ābreoten hæfde.  
 Ðā cōm nōn dæges· næs ofgēafon  
 hwate Scyldingas· gewāt him hām þonon  
 goldwine gumena· gistas sēcan  
 mlbid.,ōdes sēoce ond on mere staredon·  
 wīston, ond ne wēndon þæt hīe heora winedrihten  
 selfne gesāwon. Þā þæt sweord ongan

[Suddenly that saw the wise fellows, who with Hrothgar looked at the lake, that was turmoil of waves all stirred up the water coloured with blood; with blended-hair, aged, about the good man, together they spoke, that they that noble one did not expect again that he, triumphing in victory, would come to seek the glorious ruler; then it many agreed, that the sea-wolf him had destroyed. Then came then ninth hour of the day; they abandoned the cape, the brave Scyldings; he went home hence, the gold-friend of men; the guests looked about sick at heart, and stared into the mere, wished, and did not expect, that they their lord and friend himself would see.]<sup>90</sup>

Seeing the water of the mere colour red with blood, Beowulf's companions assume he has perished in the fight against Grendel's mother. Saddened, they abandon him.

Fjalldal may have rejected Jorgensen's supposed analogue, yet he did not reject the notion of Old Norse analogous material underlying the plot of *Beowulf*. Instead, he argued for looking beyond single passages and finding material that surfaces in multiple Scandinavian tales, such as the stories of *draugar* and *haugbúar*.

### *Grendel's Mother as the Abject of Society and Horror of the People*

As the decades progressed, Grendel's mother began to enjoy a spotlight of her own within the academic world. This is especially true of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, when more and more scholars started to view Grendel's mother independently from her son and began to study her individually from any other character within the

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<sup>90</sup> *Beowulf*, ll.1591a-1605a.

context of *Beowulf*. Looking to better understand the actions of Grendel's mother, many turned their focus from representations and analogues to more psychologically rooted theories.

Gwendolyn A. Morgan was one of the first to approach Grendel's mother through a cultural, and psychological lens. In her analysis of literary female archetypes, she draws on Erich Neumann's work on the archetypal "Great Mother" and the position of the so-called "Terrible Mother" within traditional cultures. Grendel's mother, according to Morgan, is a depiction of this "Terrible Mother": she embodies the fears of the female that a patriarchal society such as the Anglo-Saxons fostered. Morgan explains that the "Terrible Mother" is "a monster which dominates, threatens, and in some manifestations actually devours the male"<sup>91</sup> in her refusal to set free whatever wishes to become independent from her smothering grasp. The "Terrible Mother" is the anxiety concerning the capabilities of the maternal body incarnate, projected onto Grendel's mother. This projection is what makes Grendel's mother so particularly frightening, according to Morgan, who argues that the lack of a paternal figure (as far as the Danes are concerned at least)<sup>92</sup> in Grendel's life suggests that she may have been capable of procreation without a mate, another aspect of the archetypal "Great Mother". Had she not been slain by Beowulf, she might have birthed even more Grendels that would terrorise the Danes for decades to come.<sup>93</sup>

A similar argument was later made by Paul Acker. Steering clear from any archetypal analyses, Acker instead draws on the psychoanalytical theories of Jacques Lacan on the formation of the ego, and the abject theory of Julia Kristeva. Borrowing Kristeva's definition for the 'abject', Acker argues that Grendel's mother embodies an

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<sup>91</sup> Morgan, "Female Evil in Beowulf," 55.

<sup>92</sup> *Beowulf*, ll. 1355b-1357a. After the nightly attack by Grendel's mother, Hrothgar notes to Beowulf that 'nō hīe fæder cunnon / hwæper him aēnig wæs / aēr ācenned / dýrnra gāsta' [they did not know of his father, whether of them any were born previously of obscure spirits].

<sup>93</sup> Morgan, "Female Evil in Beowulf," 59.

abjected mother. According to him, she is the projection of that which the Danes in the poem and the Anglo-Saxon audience “feel compelled to cast away [...], that which arouses horror, loathing, and disgust”.<sup>94</sup> Grendel’s mother spreads fear within the patriarchal society. She stalks its borders but is never truly a part of their society, because she is a maternal being taking on a man’s role. She is simply something which the Danes of *Beowulf* cannot accept. Instead, as Acker argues, they must reject her completely before they are unable to break free from her maternal body.

Up until this point, scholars had focused more on the question of what type of monster Grendel’s mother may have been. They had assumed her to be a monster because Grendel was Cain’s progeny, so his mother must be too. Many scholars had turned to genealogy and analogues with Old Norse literature for answers. However, none had examined the actions of Grendel’s mother or attempted to explain how these actions may have reflected on her character. Just before the turn of the century, this seemed to change. Taking a psychological approach to the poem, Morgan and Acker set out to explain that it is not her body or ancestry which makes the mother monstrous, but her actions. Taking on a masculine role as a maternal being fed into the male fear of femininity. As a result, Grendel’s mother was fashioned a monster, an evil that must be done away with.

*Grendel’s Mother as the Warrior Woman: the ides, āġlācwīf*

Besides studying Grendel’s mother through literary analogues and cultural lenses, scholars also turned to phrases used to refer to her to better understand the elusive being that is given no name of her own. The most famous of these is the phrase “ides,

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<sup>94</sup> Acker, “Horror and the Maternal,” 703.

āġlācwīf<sup>95</sup>, which has caused much debate amongst scholars of *Beowulf*, especially in more recent years. It is an especially interesting phrase, as it is often used by scholars in favour of a human reading of Grendel's mother. Although most of these scholars have focussed their attention on researching possible connotations for the root *āġlāca* of *āġlācwīf*, some, like Mary Kay Temple who will also be briefly discussed here, have taken a deeper look at *ides*. Others, like Melinda J. Menzer, have studied the connotation of the seemingly straightforward *wīf* morpheme, and its effect on the compound word. Taken together, these essays show that there must be more to the now almost infamous phrase than the rather simple diverging definition provided by Friederich Klaeber in his first edition of *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. Here, Klaeber had glossed the word *āġlāca* to mean “wretch, monster, demon, fiend” when referring to the dragon, Grendel, and his mother by extension.<sup>96</sup> *Āġlācwīf*, which is only found in *Beowulf*, became glossed by Klaeber as ‘wretch, monster of a woman’ and set a standard for equally dehumanising translations thereafter.<sup>97</sup> On the other side, Klaeber claims the same word to mean “warrior, hero” when it refers to the titular protagonist of *Beowulf*.<sup>98</sup> This is a remarkable translation choice, as the distinction between the male and female forms seems arbitrary at best. By the time the fourth edition of Klaeber's *Beowulf* came around, this gloss had been amended by editors Bjork and

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<sup>95</sup> *Beowulf*, l. 1259a.

<sup>96</sup> Friederich Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (D.C. Heath & Co., Publishers, 1922): 277.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 277. For instance, Stanley B. Greenfield translates the phrase to ‘a monstrous woman’, Seamus Heaney decided on a translation to ‘monstrous hell-bride’, while Edwin Morgan went with ‘monster in woman-sex’ for his translation. *Beowulf*, trans. Stanley B. Greenfield, *A Readable Beowulf: The Old English Epic Newly Translated* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), l. 1259; *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, ed. Daniel Donoghue (New York: Norton, 2002), l. 1259; *Beowulf*, trans. Edwin Morgan, *Beowulf: A Verse Translation into Modern English* (Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 2002), l. 1259.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

Niles to a more general “troublemaker, female adversary”<sup>99</sup>, however, it did little to stifle the confusion over a satisfactory definition for the “ides, āġlācwīf” phrase.

Doreen M. E. Gillam was one of the earlier scholars to attempt to clarify the confusion of the word *āġlāeca* which true meaning has deluded so many scholars before and since. By comparing both referent and context for each instance of usage of the word, Gillam applies I. A. Richard’s interpretation of ‘denotation’, ‘connotation’, and ‘psychological context’ of words to discuss *āġlāeca* in full. Exploring the various occurrences of *āġlāeca* and its applied variations in both *Beowulf* and Cynewulfian religious poetry, Gillam explores two major denotations: ‘monster’ and ‘devil’. According to Gillam then, *āġlāeca* can mean nothing more than either monstrous creature with bestial and sinister characteristics which is, by definition, evil and hostile towards men,<sup>100</sup> or a devilish creature, wretched, supernatural, and sinful which is always hostile to men and God.<sup>101</sup> Yet what does Gillam then make of the instances in which both Sigemund and Beowulf are also referred to as *āġlāeca*? They are, after all, neither bestial nor devillish. Both heroes are definitively portrayed as human. Gillam’s answer to such a question is reading these uses of the word as purely metaphorical. As she explains: “Beowulf is to the Dragon, the inferior creature whom he will overcome, what the Dragon is to the ordinary man whom he overcomes. Beowulf typifies goodness which is superior to ordinary men”.<sup>102</sup> In a sense, Beowulf, as well as Sigemund before him, becomes the horrifying, monstrous *āġlāeca* who is outside the range of the dragon’s understanding and therefore sinister. According to Gillam, then, there is not necessarily a seemingly arbitrary distinction between different kinds of *āġlāeca* as proposed by

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<sup>99</sup> *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, ed. R.D. Fulk, R.E. Bjork and John Niles, 4th ed. (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2008), 348.

<sup>100</sup> For full discussion on the ‘monster’ denotation of *āġlāeca*, see Doreen M. E. Gillam, “The Use of the Term ‘Āġlāeca’ in *Beowulf* at Lines 893 and 2592,” *Studia Germanica Gandensia* 3 (1961): 149-156.

<sup>101</sup> For full discussion on the ‘devil’ denotation of *āġlāeca*, see *ibid.*, 156-162.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

Klaeber. Instead, it has one main connotation, which is a negative one and more in line with Klaeber's initial 'monster-referent' definition than anything else.

Over a decade later, scholars had still not reached a consensus reached on a satisfying meaning to *āġlǣca*. Nor had there been many further attempts to more closely examine *āġlǣca*, until the late 1970s when two scholars took it up once more. Disagreeing with his predecessors, Sherman M Kuhn argued in his paper that a bifurcated meaning as proposed in Klaeber's glossary seemed most illogical. As he notes:

If the poet and his audience felt the word to have two meanings, 'monster', and 'hero', the ambiguity would be troublesome; but if by *āġlǣca* they understood a 'fighter', the ambiguity would be of little consequence, for battle was destined for both Beowulf and Grendel and both were fierce fighters.<sup>103</sup>

According to Kuhn then, a bifurcated meaning of 'monster' on the one hand, and 'hero' on the other would seem illogical and troublesome: the ambiguity of it would be too complex to follow. The poet's audience would have trouble keeping up with the story if they were made to decide for themselves which meaning would be appropriate in which context. His understanding of the word *āġlǣca* and its meaning is in direct opposition with that of Klaeber, and Gillam's theory of a metaphorical reading.

Also disagreeing with his predecessors, and most notably with Gillam, Eric G. Stanley notes that "*aglǣca* [is] a word which we do not understand."<sup>104</sup> Unlike Gillam before him, who found that the word *āġlǣca* did in fact occur "sufficiently often to provide a considerable body of contextual evidence"<sup>105</sup> for providing a satisfying meaning to the elusive word, Stanley argues to the contrary. Naming Gillam as the one scholar who has attempted to solve the *āġlǣca* conundrum, he considers her attempt

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<sup>103</sup> Sherman M. Kuhn, "Old English *aglǣca*-Middle Irish *ólach*," in *Linguistic Method: Essays in Honor of Herbert Penzl*, eds. Irmengard Rauch and Gerald F. Carr (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 216-217.

<sup>104</sup> E.G. Stanley, "Two Old English Poetic Phrases Insufficiently Understood for Literary Criticism: *þing gehegan* and *seonop gehegan*," in *Old English Poetry*, ed. Daniel G. Calder (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 75.

<sup>105</sup> Gillam, "'Æglǣca' in *Beowulf*," 148.

interesting if not fruitless. Stanley attests that despite examining the uses of *āġlāca* including compounds and uses in prose, as well as looking at the Middle English cognate *egleche*, one could only come to the conclusion that it is “not pejorative in force”.<sup>106</sup> Here Stanley briefly touches upon the portrayal of Grendel’s mother and how it has suffered under the assumed monstrous reading of *āġlāca* when he declares that:

We must not follow Klaeber’s distinction of ‘wretch, monster, demon, fiend’ for Beowulf’s enemies, and ‘warrior, hero’ for Beowulf himself; and we must not abuse Grendel’s mother when she is called *aglæcwif* by translating the word as Klaeber does, ‘wretch’, or ‘monster, of a woman’. We must never forget that she is called there *ides aglæcwif* (1259), and *ides*, ‘lady’, is not a term of abuse.<sup>107</sup>

According to him, Klaeber’s distinction is misguided, as is Gillam’s attempt to argue for a pejorative connotation for *āġlāca*. He asserts that despite a negative bias, it should not be forgotten that the poet of *Beowulf* does not speak abusively of its antagonists, and that this should be considered when attempting to better understand a character like Grendel’s mother.

Unlike the academics mentioned before, Mary Kay Temple turns to look at the first part of the much-debated phrase, *ides*, avoiding a discussion of *āġlāca* altogether when discussing a possible connotation for the phrase. According to her, the word *ides* suggests a female being that is removed from the ordinary ‘woman’, much like the Greek “nymph”.<sup>108</sup> She provides examples from various other Old English texts, such as the Cædmonian *Genesis*, *Judith*, as well as different examples from *Beowulf*, to explain the term. According to her, *ides* is used only for those women that “are ladies of nobility, or, more significantly, parents of men whose deeds had great impact on human history, whether for good or ill”. The *Beowulf*-poet could have expected his audience to have those expectations of the word as he used it with a sort of ironic truth when he has

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<sup>106</sup> Stanley, “Two Old English Poetic Phrases,” 75.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>108</sup> Mary Kay Temple, “*Beowulf* 1258-1266: Grendel’s Lady-Mother,” *English Language Notes* 23 (1986): 10.

Hrothgar describe Grendel's mother as *idese onlicnes*.<sup>109</sup> Temple's reading sees the female antagonist as a commentary on the conventional role of noble ladies. Grendel's mother is an *ides*, but not because she was born into nobility or weaves peace between men. She is an *ides* because she birthed a son who would have a great impact on the history of the Danes. At least, within the narrative.

In a short paper, Melinda J. Menzer also explores the much debated *āġlācwīf*, focussing her research more unto the morpheme *wīf* and its effect on the Old English compounds it is a part of. Menzer starts off her paper by explaining the uncertainty over the application of the Old English *āġlāca*, and how the same uncertainty has bled into the related compound *āġlācwīf* which is unique to *Beowulf*. She illustrates this confusion by quoting the definitions of several academic sources, such as Klaeber, Bosworth and Toller, and the editors of *The Dictionary of Old English*.<sup>110</sup> She also notes that although “[m]any scholars (most notably Kuhn and Gillam) have explored the meaning of *aglæca*, [...] no one has found a completely satisfying explanation for this word's range of application”.<sup>111</sup> The lack of a satisfying definition thus leaves literary critics and their interpretations divided. Menzer ends her note by admitting that her discussion of the *āġlācwīf* compound does not offer a definitive definition for *āġlāca*. However, her discussion of the semantics governing *-wīf* compounds does offer a better understanding of the root word. Utilising examples of seven other Old English compounds that contain the *-wīf* ending, Menzer argues (somewhat tentatively) that “*aglæcwīf* denotes a woman, a human female, who is also *aglæca*”.<sup>112</sup> According to her research, the morpheme *-wīf* in Old English compounds solely denotes a human woman,

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>110</sup> Melinda J. Menzer, “*Aglæcwīf* (*Beowulf* 1259a): Implications for *-wīf* Compounds, Grendel's Mother, and other *Aglæcan*,” *English Language Notes* 34 (1996): 1.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

rather than just a female being.<sup>113</sup> The distinction between these two is paramount to Menzer's theory. It is therefore unlikely for the *wīf* in *āglācwīf* to mean anything but "human woman" who happens to be an *āglāca*. Menzer's interpretation of Grendel's mother is thus that she is not just a female *āglāca*, but a human one, although she is not as vocal in this assertion as the following critic.

M. Wendy Hennequin is perhaps one of the biggest supporters of the human reading. In her 2008 study, Hennequin takes a closer look at the language used for Grendel's mother in the original text. Comparing this language to that used for other human warriors and her son, she argues, much like Alfano before her, that a monster reading seems unfounded. She too concludes that it was the literary critics who were responsible for the monster that had become known as Grendel's mother. The poem itself, she claims, "calls her normal Old English words used for women, such as *wif* and *ides*".<sup>114</sup> However, critics and translators alike have consistently perpetuated a 'monster tradition' with their analyses because of modern gender expectations they place on Anglo-Saxon women: "because Grendel's mother does not behave like Wealtheow, Hygd, or Hildeburh, whom scholars consider to be proper models of womanhood, Grendel's mother must be monstrous".<sup>115</sup> Grendel's mother fails to do her gender right, for which she is punished not by the poet, but by the critics.

Hennequin moves beyond this tradition, using the Old English of the original epic as support. She notes that the text of *Beowulf* constructs the female antagonist as a noble human warrior, much like it does for Beowulf. Despite the poet's comment that "wæs se gryre laessa" [the terror was less],<sup>116</sup> Grendel's mother displays incredible

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<sup>113</sup> With the exception of "*sigewif*", which Menzer notes is used metaphorically. *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>114</sup> Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster," 504.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 504.

<sup>116</sup> *Beowulf*, l. 1282b.

strength and martial skill.<sup>117</sup> Because of this, she is referred to with masculine warrior terms by both the poet and the other characters. Beowulf, for instance, calls his female adversary a *māgan*,<sup>118</sup> a masculine term for ‘relative’,<sup>119</sup> where the alliterative structure of the poem would just as easily have allowed for the feminine *mōdor*. Aside from this, the poem also literally calls Grendel’s mother a “secg” [warrior].<sup>120</sup> Because of this, and the fact that the diction of *Beowulf* represents her as human, Hennequin believes that a reading of Grendel’s mother as a noble, human warrior is the only suitable one.

This chapter has outlined some of the major interpretations of Grendel’s mother after Tolkien’s famous lecture of 1936. Despite Tolkien’s call, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not yet see Beowulf’s deadly female adversary examined on her own. Like the period before, Grendel’s mother was still being discussed solely in connection with her son. However, this changed towards the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars turned to folklore and myth in order to find analogues with other works. After critics felt comfortable enough to conclude that Grendel’s mother was not only monstrous, but also based on long traditions of monstrous beings, some turned to psychology to better understand her actions. Others turned to the original Old English text to completely challenge the monster reading. These critics believed that it was a scholarly bias which created the monster, not the poet himself. A human reading was introduced which appears to have caught on with some of the most recent scholars. We now turn to the next chapter, where some of the major popular adaptations and their interpretations of Grendel’s mother will be discussed.

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<sup>117</sup> *Beowulf*, ll. 1537-1544.

<sup>118</sup> *Beowulf*, l. 1391a.

<sup>119</sup> John R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1916), s.v. ‘māga’

<sup>120</sup> *Beowulf*, l. 1379a.

### CHAPTER 3 – GRENDEL’S MOTHER IN POPULAR ADAPTATIONS

Besides academic interpretations of Grendel’s mother, some of which have been discussed in the previous two chapters, there has also been a rise in popular interpretations. Evidenced by the ever-growing body of artistic reworkings of the Old English epic, one may say that the adventures of the Geatish Beowulf still hold sway over many a creative mind. As such, *Beowulf* has seen many adaptations in various media, including art, music, literature, as well as the small and the silver screens. For the sake of clarity, the following chapter will briefly touch on the subject of the *Beowulf* translations and take a closer look at some of the more major literary and cinematic adaptations of *Beowulf* to discuss them in more detail. Analysing the portrayal of Grendel’s mother in the chosen adaptations, the current study will show whether academic tradition has influenced said portrayal in different forms of contemporary adaptations. The chapter will only include the major adaptations, leaving aside works such as the animated *Grendel Grendel Grendel* directed by Alexander Stitt and John McTiernan’s *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior* starring Antonio Banderas, as they in themselves are cinematic adaptations of literary adaptations discussed here.<sup>121</sup>

#### *Translations*

One of the most easily influenced forms of adaptation, is that of the *Beowulf* translations. Although there are different manners to approach a translation, a translator’s main job is to translate the source text to the target text in such a way that his or her target audience understands the text. In order to achieve that, the translator needs to have a good

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<sup>121</sup> The animated short and the live-action film are adaptations of John Gardner’s *Grendel* and Michael Crichton’s *Eaters of the Dead* respectively.

understanding of the source language but also of form of the original text. This makes things somewhat more complicated for translators who tackle Old English poetry, as its language and style of alliterative verse are less accessible than poetry in modern languages. In turn, this results in translators, who are often *Beowulf* scholars themselves, relying on earlier *Beowulf* scholarship for their own understanding and transmission of the text. Christine Alfano notes in her research on *Beowulf* translations that they may be relying too heavily on such scholarship as “[m]ost *Beowulf* translators [are] motivated by contemporary biases rather than artistic impulse”<sup>122</sup> when providing a modern translation for the Old English original. Evidence for such a statement can be found when consulting the introductions to many *Beowulf* translations. Michael Alexander for instance relates that he owes his verse translation to earlier scholars, who he considers solely responsible for making the enigmatic poem accessible to a bigger audience.<sup>123</sup> Likewise, Stanley B. Greenfield notes in his defense of yet another translation of the poem that years’ worth of critical research (including his own) makes his translation more accurate in meaning.<sup>124</sup> Thus, although providing their own take on the Old English poem, their readings were shaped by previous scholarship.

In the case of Grendel’s mother, this has resulted in a less than flattering portrayal. Before the early 2000’s, the notion that Grendel’s mother may not be a monstrous being, but a human had not yet gained traction. The critical tradition and its critics were still very much in favour of a monster reading of the unfortunate mother (although what type of monster she truly was, was still up for debate). As such,

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<sup>122</sup> Alfano, “A Reevaluation,” 2.

<sup>123</sup> Michael Alexander, *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, trans. Michael Alexander (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 12.

<sup>124</sup> Stanley B. Greenfield, *A Readable Beowulf: the Old English Epic Newly Translated*, trans. S. B. Greenfield (Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 27.

translations such as “Grendel’s dam, a fiend of a woman”<sup>125</sup>, “a monstrous ogress”<sup>126</sup>, and “monstrous hell-bride”<sup>127</sup> are commonplace. They echo the scholarly trends. Hall published his metrical translation in a period in which Christian readings of *Beowulf* prevailed, which is reflected in his use of words such as “dam”<sup>128</sup> for the Old English *mōdor* and the religiously laden “fiend”. Alexander on the other hand took note of the folkloric traditions which were on the rise again after years of “Christianizing the interpretation of *Beowulf*”<sup>129</sup>, thus likening Grendel’s mother to the trolls of folk-tales. And these are just some examples of centuries worth of *Beowulf* translations.

### ***The Monstrous Grendel’s Mother in Popular Adaptations***

The notion of Grendel’s mother being a beast, or a monster of some kind, predominated up until recently. The previous chapters too have shown that since the surge of *Beowulf* scholarship in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, up until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, most scholars have either dismissed her importance to the story or perceived her to be an inhuman being. *Beowulf* translators seemed inclined to follow critical tradition in their interpretations of Grendel’s mother. But what about literary and cinematic adaptors? Were they, like the translators, influenced by what Alfano dubbed the contemporary biases? And if so, to what degree? The following sections will take a closer look at the first of two umbrella-interpretations: the monstrous mother.

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<sup>125</sup> J. R. Clark Hall, *Beowulf; A Metrical Translation into Modern English*, trans. J. R. Clark Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 46. Ll. 1258b-1259a

<sup>126</sup> Alexander, *Beowulf*, 90.

<sup>127</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, trans. Seamus Heaney (New York, N.Y.: Norton, 2002), 97.

<sup>128</sup> See Chapter One for a discussion on the “Devil and his Dam” reading.

<sup>129</sup> Alexander, *Beowulf*, 18.

*Grendel's Mother: the Beastial Dam*

John Gardner's *Grendel* of 1971 has often been cited as one of the most influential and successful literary adaptations of the original poem. Unlike its Old English source material, *Grendel* explores the story from the antagonist's point of view, effectively placing the titular Grendel in the position of an anti-hero. Where the original work offers only a physical description of Grendel, Gardner's work dives deeper into his psyche and portrays a character who often appears as human as the Danes or the Geats. The audience is allowed a glimpse into his thoughts and motivations, creating a character with whom we can sympathise.

Though providing a more humanised and sympathetic portrayal of Grendel, Gardner puts in much less effort to humanise his mother. Throughout the narrative, Grendel describes his mother as a mute. "She never speaks", Grendel assures us, "[s]he'd forgotten all language long ago, or maybe had never known any".<sup>130</sup> Besides her inability to speak, Grendel relates how his fat mother walks on all fours and dons a coat of bristly fur.<sup>131</sup> The words that Grendel uses to describe his mother reminds one of an animal. In fact, her description here is almost reminiscent of the 'bear reading' by Skeat discussed earlier in Chapter One. Not only is she a carnivore,<sup>132</sup> Grendel tells us that she has claws and does not think like a human does.<sup>133</sup> All of these are points made by Skeat in defense of his reading.<sup>134</sup> She is also violently protective of Grendel and able to mow down trees as she charges to save her son from his first hostile encounter

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<sup>130</sup> Gardner, *Grendel*, 11 & 28.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29. Here we learn that the watery cave which Grendel and his mother call home is littered with bones, and that Grendel's mother "smells of wild pig and fish", presumably because this constitutes a large part of her diet.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>134</sup> Skeat, "On the Signification," 124. See specifically points 8, 9, and 10.

with the Danes.<sup>135</sup> She is his dam, a word which implies an animal background per definition and marginalises her role. Her only role within the narrative is to emphasise her son's loneliness and despair at his current life. She is old, and never offers him answers to his questions as to why the two of them should live such a cursed life, hidden underground and feared by humans.

As one of his kind, Grendel's mother may be a portent of what Grendel could have become, had Beowulf not come along to kill him and free him from his tormented life. Grendel does, after all, hint to a time where she may have been able to speak. If this is true, then it may be assumed that his mother was at one time, long in the past, able to order and convey thoughts like Grendel does. She at the very least seems to be able to understand, and respond intelligibly to Grendel's multiple inquiries.<sup>136</sup> Although Grendel never describes himself in the same way as he does his mother, he does note that he is a "hairy creature"<sup>137</sup> and he is known to run on all fours in times of desperation.<sup>138</sup> In this way, this depiction of Grendel's mother is truly a 'monster' in the etymological sense of the word. The word 'monster' as we know it today is derived from the Latin *monstrum* meaning "a divine omen indicating misfortune, an evil omen, portent"<sup>139</sup>, which in itself is derived from the Latin *moneo* "a reminder, a warning".<sup>140</sup>

### *Grendel's Mother: The Shapeshifting Seductress*

The year 1999 saw the first live-action cinematic adaptation, simply titled *Beowulf*, starring Christopher Lambert as the titular protagonist. The science-fiction

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 124. In point 6, Skeat argued that the strength of Grendel's mother being greater than her son's evoked the image of a mother bear angered by the loss of her whelp. The same image is still evoked today in the popular phrase "Don't mess with a mama bear and her cub!".

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>139</sup> <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0059:entry=monstrum>

<sup>140</sup> <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/237889#eid13034020>

retelling directed by Graham Baker, which deviates partly from the original plot, depicts Grendel's mother as a shapeshifting seductress portrayed by former Playmate Layla Roberts. The casting of an actress who is considered very attractive is already a striking fact. After all, most academics and adaptors before had likened her to a monstrous-looking figure, and there had yet to be a fully human reading of her by critics. Yet it plays well into the plot of this adaptation. Grendel's mother is first introduced into the film's narrative in a manner reminiscent of popularised succubi: visiting a sleeping Hrothgar in his dreams while assuming the form of a highly attractive woman to seduce him through sexual activity.<sup>141</sup> Despite her human appearance here, she is all but. She quickly shifts into a multi-limbed devil during her standoff with Beowulf, which may be her true form.

Her shapeshifting nature was a new addition to the established character of Grendel's mother, both in the scholarly and popular receptions. In the film it serves an important purpose. Grendel's mother uses her ability to change her form completely in order to seduce Hrothgar and mate with him to procure herself an offspring. She also seduces Roland (a character who is a combination of both Unferth and Æschere) to exact her revenge after Grendel has been fatally wounded.<sup>142</sup> He resists, but she ultimately succeeds. Her actions here are deliberate: she uses sex with a specific goal in mind each time. The product of the union between her and Hrothgar is Grendel. This established paternal lineage for Grendel was also a new addition, and most likely an attempt to refit the story to conform to the current scriptwriting practices and the audience's expectations.<sup>143</sup> After the death of her son, she attempts to seduce

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<sup>141</sup> *Beowulf*, DVD, directed by Graham Baker (1999; USA: The Kushner-Locke Company & Capitol Films, 1999), 00:30:00-00:31:36 & 00:47:04-00:48:46.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 01:07:35-01:09:49.

<sup>143</sup> See Robert Spindler, "Epics and Screenplays: The Problem of Adapting *Beowulf* for the Screen," *Old English Newsletter* 43 (2011). Accessible through: <https://asnoc.wordpress.com/2012/06/10/epics-and-screenplays-the-problem-of-adapting-beowulf-for-the-screen/>

Beowulf.<sup>144</sup> When he refuses her advances, she turns on him and the battle ensues, ultimately leading to her defeat.

The ability of Grendel's mother to change her form completely defies a human reading. She herself confirms that she is not human when she tells Hrothgar that Grendel is his son and half-human, implying that hers is the nonhuman blood that flows through Grendel's veins.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, she relates that she is an ancient being who had originally lived on the lands where Hrothgar's castle now stands.<sup>146</sup> Besides letting Grendel's mother herself testify to her supernatural nature, the film makes use of a different technique to underline her monstrosity. During the battle scenes with Grendel's mother, the camera often shifts to Beowulf's point-of-view. In the field of narratology, this is better known as 'focalisation', a term first coined by French narrative theorist Gérard Genette in the 1960's.<sup>147</sup> The monstrous form of Grendel's mother is projected right in the audience's face, slashing directly at the audience as she slashes at Beowulf. Through this, the external focalisation, where the audience watches the film's events unfold from an objective distance without insight into the inner workings of the character's minds, shifts to internal focalisation, where we do gain some insight into Beowulf's mind.<sup>148</sup> We see what Beowulf sees as he fights for his life, and we feel what we suppose he must feel as he faces off with this monstrous creature. It is as if we are experiencing the ferocity of Grendel's mother ourselves, emphasising her monstrosity.

Although her screen time is limited, Grendel's mother acts as a foil for the titular hero, who in this adaptation is also the product of a human-nonhuman union. Here too,

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<sup>144</sup> *Beowulf*, 01:18:08-01:18:20.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 01:15:36-01:15:49.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 01:15:56-01:16:03.

<sup>147</sup> See M. Bal, *Narratology: introduction to the theory of narrative*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) for a full discussion on Genette and his literary theory of focalisation.

<sup>148</sup> Allan Parsons, "Focalisation," 2017. Accessible through: <http://compendium.kosawese.net/term/focalisation/>.

Grendel's mother becomes a portent: should Beowulf give into the darkness that is an innate part of him, he could become just as monstrous as his female adversary. "Tell me, hero." she implores Beowulf, "Whose world do you really belong to? Theirs or mine?"<sup>149</sup> He resists her call, ultimately overcoming both Grendel's mother and the darkness seeded deep within in him to retain his humanity.

Eight years after the debut of Baker's *Beowulf*, Robert Zemeckis introduced his cinematic adaptation of the Old English poem, making use of both real-life actors and CGI-enhancements. Zemeckis' *Beowulf* seems to have built on the ideas of Baker's and his screenwriters. Like the Grendel's mother portrayed by Roberts, the Grendel's mother of Zemeckis' *Beowulf* is portrayed by a seductive actress, Angelina Jolie. Also similar to the science-fiction portrayal, Grendel's mother of this CGI-enhanced film is a shapeshifter, using her ability to shift forms in order to procreate with Hrothgar and Beowulf. Her union with Hrothgar here also results in the birth of Grendel. Unlike the earlier *Beowulf* film, however, Grendel's mother does succeed in seducing Beowulf, a union which allows her to later give birth to the dragon who attacks Beowulf's kingdom. Her portrayal in this cinematic adaptation deviates even further from the original poem: especially in terms of her role. In this film, Grendel's mother becomes the main villain, the golden thread that connects all of the events and provides motivation to Beowulf's actions.

The first time that the audience is introduced to Zemeckis' Grendel's mother, it is through nothing more than a short glimpse in the reflection of a shield.<sup>150</sup> Flashes of gold scales, a fish-like head and slithering tail, and a female sounding voice are the only hints for the nature of Grendel's mother. Zemeckis builds the suspense, temporarily leaving the body of Grendel's mother up to the imagination of the audience as much as

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<sup>149</sup> *Beowulf*, 01:18:35-40.

<sup>150</sup> *Beowulf*, DVD, directed by Robert Zemeckis (2007; USA; Paramount Pictures, 2007), 00:13:07-54.

the original poem did with ambiguous physical descriptions such as *micle* [massive]<sup>151</sup> and *idese onlīcnaes* [of the likeness if a woman].<sup>152</sup> There is a bit of the uncanny by Freud at play here. She speaks our language. Yet that language does not match the flashes of serpentine body that follow.<sup>153</sup> Grendel's mother is not human, and the ambiguity of her form makes her all the more fearsome and monstrous.

When she does finally reveal herself in full view of the camera's eye, Jolie's Grendel's mother exhibits the same kind of shapeshifting abilities and tendencies as Roberts'. After the death of her son, Grendel's mother visits Heorot to avenge Grendel by confronting Beowulf. When she arrives, she approaches a sleeping Beowulf and attempts to seduce him in the form of Wealhtheow.<sup>154</sup> She does not quite succeed, and Beowulf wakes up to a hall filled with Danes slaughtered by the mother. When he sets out to confront Grendel's mother both the audience and Beowulf himself finally get to see one of her forms. She appears in a distinctly, though literally gold adorned, human form.<sup>155</sup> Like Roberts' Grendel's mother, Jolie's is seductive and cunning. She uses her shapeshifting and sexuality to obtain certain goals. She tries to seduce Beowulf again, offering to make him "the greatest king that ever lived"<sup>156</sup> in exchange for a son. This time she succeeds, setting the plot for the remainder of the film in motion.

In both films, Grendel's mother is depicted as the embodiment of carnal desires and the fear of giving in to female temptation. In fact, Roberts' Grendel's mother herself tells Roland: "Why, I am your dreams and desires come to life."<sup>157</sup> Any man who has succumbed to her advances has met some sort of unfortunate fate. Hrothgar's wife commits suicide after Grendel's mother becomes pregnant by him and he dies by

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<sup>151</sup> *Beowulf*, l.1348a.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, l.1351a.

<sup>153</sup> *Beowulf*, 00:43:24-00:44:37 & 00:47:08-00:47:43

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:48:47-00:49:41

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:56:02-00:56:58.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:58:58.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 01:07:45-01:07:48.

Grendel's hand. Next, Roland is killed by her own hand. Only Beowulf lives to tell the tale, because he did not give in to the temptation that is the succubus-like mother of Grendel. He is the exception which confirms the rule. Similarly, the men seduced by Jolie's Grendel's mother all meet a terrible fate. Hrothgar commits suicide, and Beowulf dies after his battle with the dragon. In the 2007 adaptation however, Grendel's mother does not get defeated. She lives on, perhaps seducing Wiglaf, because Beowulf was unable to resist her, effectively making a pact with a demon that leads to his demise. And so, the monster lives on.

The portrayal of Grendel's mother in the films discussed above appear to have no clear scholarly counterpart with regards to her demonic nature and role. It raises the question why these cinematic portrayals differ so much. A short study into modern screenplay practices and *Beowulf* films by Robert Spindler may answer this question. Through a case study of *Beowulf & Grendel* (2005) and *Beowulf* (2007), Spindler shows how their directors and screenwriters adapted the plot of the Old English original into a commercially viable screenplay. According to Spindler, although the plot of the epic seems more than suitable for cinematic adaptation with its archetypal story design, it is not. Its dramatic structure simply does not fit modern screenplay conventions.

After studying several modern screenwriting guides, Spindler concluded that *Beowulf* "lack[s] the formality and straightforward plot lines usually associated with the Beowulf-type hero in modern cinema".<sup>158</sup> In short, Spindler notes that screenwriters opting to tackle *Beowulf* struggle with three major issues. Firstly, the antagonistic forces of the story, though worthy opponents, appear and disappear far too quickly for a modern audience of filmgoers. Secondly, Beowulf's final fight with the dragon feels too unrelated to the prior events of the narrative. Lastly, Beowulf's motivations change with

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<sup>158</sup> Spindler, "Epics and Screenplays".

each passing antagonist, making it difficult for filmgoers to figure out his ultimate goal in such a short amount of time.<sup>159</sup> All in all, the epic misses the thread that guides the audience through the action-packed events.

As Spindler demonstrates with his paper, screenwriters of cinematic film adaptations of *Beowulf* have employed different strategies of fixing these issues. Baker's *Beowulf* for instance leaves out the dragon fight and provides Beowulf with an ultimate goal: eradicate all evil. Giving the Grendelkin a connection to Hrothgar through blood and a claim to his lands also establishes a guiding thread. Similarly, Zemeckis' *Beowulf* uses Grendel's mother as the one true thread that links all of the film's events together. She is present from start to finish, working her plan either behind the scenes or in view of the audience. Portraying Grendel's mother in both films as a seductive shapeshifter who interacts with several important characters by binding herself to them, plays into an adaptation that is more likely to be a commercial success.

### ***The Human Grendel's Mother in Popular Adaptations***

#### *Grendel's Mother: The Revered Matriarch*

The depiction of Grendel's mother in Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* is distinctly different from previous depictions and depictions since its release in 1976. In this retelling, which is based partially on the personal journal of the Muslim Arabic writer Ahmad Ibn Fadlan as well as *Beowulf*, Grendel's mother is at first portrayed as a goddess-type creature who is revered by a Neanderthal-like people, referred to in the novel as the 'wendol'.<sup>160</sup> The narrator of this retelling, the same Ahmad Ibn Fadlan

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> Although shrouded in mystery for most of the book, Ibn Fadlan is able to give a thorough description of the wendol near the fight with the mother: "The aspect of these demons was thus: they appeared to be manlike in every respect, but not as any man upon the face of the earth. They were short creatures, and

whose personal journals served as an inspiration for this tale, is first introduced to the mother of the wendol through a series of stone carvings depicting a pregnant woman<sup>161</sup>, reminiscent of early fertility fetishes such as the “Venus of Willendorf”.<sup>162</sup> We as the audience follow the narrative from Ibn Fadlan’s perspective. His subjectivity adds an extra layer to this depiction of Grendel’s mother. We believe that the mother of the wendol is some primitive goddess, because this is what Ibn Fadlan believes. It is after all what he has been told by Buliwyf and his companions. Aside from Ibn Fadlan’s and the Vikings’ perception, there is nothing in the narrative that suggests that she is not human. In fact, it is later revealed that the mother of the wendol is not a goddess, but rather an elder wendol.<sup>163</sup> She does seem able to command snakes to some extent, for they circle her without harming her.<sup>164</sup> Yet this not definitive proof of divinity or an otherwise inhuman nature.

However, the fact that she is being revered as a goddess by her people suggests that she at the very least holds a lot of political power over their primitive society. She is their matriarch, as her name suggests. Her role as a matriarch, ruling over a society that is so different from both the Muslim and Viking societies, makes her more monstrous in the eyes of Ibn Fadlan and Buliwyf, both men who hail from patriarchal

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broad and squat, and hairy on all parts of their bodies save their palms, the soles of their feet, and their faces. Their faces were very large, with mouth and jaws large and prominent, and of an ugly aspect; also their heads were larger than the heads of normal men. Their eyes were sunk deep in their heads; the brows were large, and not by virtue of hairy brows, but of bone; also their teeth were large and sharp, although it is true the teeth of many were ground down and flattened.” Furthermore, Crichton himself refers to the wendol as Neanderthals. Michael Crichton, *Eaters of the Dead* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 177, 210.

<sup>161</sup> Crichton, *Eaters*, 139, 146-147. Here was a giant rock, as high as a horse's saddle, and it was carved in the shape of a pregnant woman, with bulging belly and breasts, and no head or arms or legs.

<sup>162</sup> The “Venus of Willendorf”, despite its name, is not a figurine of the goddess Venus, as it predates the mythological figure by thousands of years. Rather, it is generally believed to be a representation of a mother goddess personifying nature, motherhood, fertility, creation, as well as destruction, and embodying earth.

<sup>163</sup> Crichton, *Eaters*, 178.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

societies.<sup>165</sup> So despite her human form, the mother is made a monster because she defies stereotypical gender roles.

Crichton's portrayal of Grendel's mother is somewhat reminiscent of Battaglia's earth goddess reading, especially with the inclusion of fertility fetish-like statues used to honour the mother of the wendol. However, Battaglia's theory wouldn't be published until almost 20 years after the release of Crichton's novel. If there have been scholars before Battaglia who offered similar interpretations, they have remained undiscovered by the author of this current study. Yet the similarities between both interpretations are too striking to be coincidental. Especially given the fact that Battaglia's theory was one of the minor ones that did not catch on. If Crichton was not influenced by Battaglia, then perhaps Battaglia may have instead been influenced by Crichton. After all, Crichton notes in a Factual Note added in 1992 that although reviewers were less impressed with his work, many scholars wrote him to express their appreciation for his adaptation.<sup>166</sup> This would have given Battaglia enough time to conduct his research for his 1991 publication. Yet this remains speculation, and further research into the earth goddess theory may yield irrefutable results.

### *Grendel's Mother the Human*

One of the most recent literary adaptations of the Old English poem portrays the female antagonist much differently from any previous adaptations. Susan Signe Morrison's *Grendel's Mother: The Saga of the Wyrd-Wife* (henceforth *The Wyrd-Wife*) is the first to take Grendel's mother as its main subject, granting her a proper name and origin story

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<sup>165</sup> Several scholars such as Mary Dockray-Miller, and Wendy Hennequin have noted that the performing of masculine deeds and duties by females must have stricken fear into the hearts of the original (and even the contemporary) audience of *Beowulf*. See Dockray-Miller's discussion of Modthryth in Dockray-Miller, "The Masculine Queen of Beowulf," 31-38; and Hennequin's discussion of Grendel's mother in Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster," 503-523.

<sup>166</sup> Crichton, *Eaters*, 211.

to fully humanise the otherwise dehumanised antagonist. As the back of the book clearly conveys: “She is no monster”.<sup>167</sup> In Morrison’s retelling of the classic epic, Grendel’s mother is washed ashore of Hrothgar’s Danish kingdom as a baby. Here, she is taken in by a fisherwoman and her husband, who name her Brimhild and raise her as their own. She grows up a Dane, eventually even marrying king Hrothgar and giving birth to their son, Grendel. After Grendel grows up, he and his mother are eventually banished from Heorot, and from this point the events of *Beowulf* take off.

Despite being human, Brimhild is still ‘other’. She is a foreigner, washed ashore from some unknown land, babbling in a tongue unknown to the Scyldings who found her. She is different, alien, and several characters within the story point out this fact and voice their concerns about it. Ealhild, Hrothgar’s mother in this saga, all but happily welcomes the baby when she finds out that it is a foreigner.<sup>168</sup> In her first meeting with baby Brimhild, she does her best to find a reasonable excuse to convince her son, the king, to get rid of the child. “It could be a trap,” she says, her people could be coming back for her, biding their time to start another war.<sup>169</sup> Or she could be a spy, she says, although she herself does admit to the ridiculousness of such a statement. It is not the baby itself that scares Ealhild, but her perceived identity of the baby as ‘different’ is what truly frightens the king’s mother.

This underlying fear that permeates the narrative of Morrison’s retelling, is one that is as old as the material it is based on yet is still very much reflected in modern societies: the Anglo-Saxon fear of ‘the Other’. The original text of *Beowulf* is delivered to us in the so-called Nowell Codex, a manuscript which appears to be a compilation of texts dealing with monsters of some kind.<sup>170</sup> Thus, alongside the text of *Beowulf*, we

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<sup>167</sup> Morrison, *The Wyrd-Wife*.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>170</sup> See Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies* for full discussion of the Nowell Codex.

find in it the *Liber monstrorum*, aka “The Book of Monsters”. The *Liber monstrorum* most of all warns of the dangers of beings that are almost far beyond the Anglo-Saxon comprehension: humanoid creatures who have no head and instead wear their faces on their chests,<sup>171</sup> or people who “are born reasonable in stature, except that their eyes shine like lanterns”<sup>172</sup> and so on. These creatures are all considered ‘monstrous’ for their physical abnormalities. They are not like the Anglo-Saxon standard. They are ‘the Other’. Yet it also mentions real humans, such as Ethiopians and Pygmies, who are considered different, and perhaps even monstrous, on account of their dark skin. The inclusion of these real-life human races shows that it is not just the supernatural that should be feared. Brimhild, of course, shows none of these physical discrepancies. The book even mentions that some thought her to have been a Dane from the start.<sup>173</sup> But she is of a different race. By fashioning Brimhild as a foreigner, a Jute, rather than a Dane, as well as adding the fact that she has an incestuous relationship with her father Hrothgar, she becomes ‘Other’, echoing the ‘Otherness’ of Grendel’s mother in the original poem. Here, Grendel and his mother were a *mearcstapan* [marchers of no-man’s land] and *ellorgaēstas* [alien spirits].<sup>174</sup> Living on the borders of society and the perceived ‘normal’. Brimhild’s ‘Otherness’ is further underlined by her affinity for magic, and later her conversion to Christianity.<sup>175</sup> To the Danish pagan society of the narrative, these are aspects of Brimhild that they do not understand and further alienate her from the norm.

In short, Morrison focusses on a human retelling of *Beowulf*, rather than a solely supernatural or even monstrous one. Her portrayal of Grendel’s mother epitomises the

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<sup>171</sup> Morrison, *The Wyrd-Wife*, 273.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>174</sup> *Beowulf*, ll.1348a & 1349a.

<sup>175</sup> Morrison, *The Wyrd-Wife*, 178.

recent shift in the scholarly perception of Beowulf's female antagonist, where academic critics such as Taylor, Alfano, and Hennequin have argued for a purely human reading.

Another human retelling of the original epic, and the most recent adaptation, comes from Maria Dahvana Headley's *The Mere Wife*. Here, Grendel's mother is portrayed as Dana Mills: a surviving war veteran, plagued by PTSD, who forsakes civilisation together with her son Gren to live in an abandoned train station in the mountains. Headley leaves little doubt about the nature of Dana. She is human, and she is perceived as such by the other characters.

Headley takes the distant unfamiliar mediaeval setting and replaces it with one much more familiar to her audience: the picturesque suburbs and gated communities of big American cities. Along with it, she replaces the old Anglo-Saxon anxieties with contemporary (American) ones. Dana's main concern throughout the narrative is to keep Gren safe from the outside world. A world that is especially dangerous to people of minority groups. "To me, he looks like my son. To everyone else? I don't know. A wonder? A danger? A boy? A boy with brown skin? Any of those things will make him a target,"<sup>176</sup> Dana laments, because "[o]ut there, I know it, I know it, my son running down a street would be my son confessing to a crime. My son shouting would be my son attacking. My son sleeping would be my son addicted. My son in love with the boy from down there would be my son hanging from a tree".<sup>177</sup> Passages like these echo the very relevant fears of parents of coloured adolescents. Especially in the United States, where police brutality against African-Americans and other minority groups is still prevalent.

These themes of violence versus safety keep returning, and the book plays with various perspectives. To Dana, Gren is just her son: the boy with brown skin and golden

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<sup>176</sup> Headley, *The Mere Wife*, 28.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

eyes, who was born with teeth.<sup>178</sup> Willa Herot on the other, Dana's counterpart and an unhappy suburban housewife reskin of Wealhtheow, sees Gren as a completely different being. After her son Dylan befriends the other boy, she becomes convinced that the latter is a monster: "Claws, she remembers. Fur. Monster, she remembers. *Monster*".<sup>179</sup> Whose perspective should the audience adopt as their own? The mother's, whose perspective is written in 1<sup>st</sup> person, thus giving us a better understanding of her mind and feelings of empathy? Or the fearful housewife, whose perspective is filtered through fear of 'the Other'? Headley makes you question your own perspective and forces you to adopt your own reading, much like a critic would.

Headley opens her novel with a note on 'selected translations' in which she shows that the masculine *āġlāeca* has been traditionally translated to 'fighter, warrior, hero'.<sup>180</sup> However, the note also shows that adding the feminine suffix *-wīf* to the Old English noun drastically changes the meaning. The once noble connotations of *aglæca* get warped to 'wretch, monster, hell-bride, hag' in *āġlāecwīf*.<sup>181</sup> Adding this note at the beginning of her story, Headley goes beyond simply adapting the story of *Beowulf*, and instead offers a critical feminist study which questions the very notion of monstrosity. With the addition of the translation note, Headley appears to suggest that the so-called monstrousness of Grendel's mother stems solely from her being a woman occupying a traditionally masculine role. This sentiment is reflected throughout the story. Dana is a US marine, a woman in a world dominated by men, whose military training makes her a convincing threat to the (seemingly) picture-perfect society of Herot Hall. Headley's feminist retelling and short study of *āġlāeca* versus *āġlāecwīf* echoes the readings of critics such as Kuhn and Menzer who rejected Klaeber's originally arbitrary translations.

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

Furthermore, it seems to side with Hennequin who has similarly noted that the original mother's masculine role as an avenger clashes so much with her feminine nature that she has been branded a monster because of it. She reads Grendel's mother as a human warrior in a "poem [that] refers to Grendel's mother with warrior words [which] makes her position as a warrior indisputable".<sup>182</sup>

The current study has shown how in the popular reception of Grendel's mother she has evolved from ignored, nameless bestial creature who barely matters to the narrative, to a fully human woman with a name of her own with whom we feel empathy and who is the main character of the narrative. Whereas the filmmakers discussed here have often turned away from the academic reception for their cinematic adaptations, the writers seemed more inclined to follow the changing trends within the academic tradition. Trying to fit the dramatic structure of the Anglo-Saxon poem to modern screenplay conventions may explain why the cinematic adaptations differ the most from the academic tradition. After all, films are expensive to make and first and foremost must appeal to the general public to generate a profit. It would therefore make sense to cater to audiences' expectations rather than adhere strictly to the readings of scholars. Literary adaptations, however, are not bound to such conventions. Even with creative freedom at their disposal, most literary adaptors seem to fall back on trends within the *Beowulf* scholarship. Some, like Headley, even include their own little bit of *Beowulf* criticism in their adaptations.

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<sup>182</sup> Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster," 510.

## CONCLUSION

The appearance of Grendel's mother has been a subject of much debate. After all, the Old English original does not provide us with a physical description of the female antagonist in the way that it does for her son. Her physical appearance is described only once. Through the words of Hrothgar, we learn the following:

Ic þæt londbūend, lēode mīne,  
selerǣdende secgan hȳrde  
þæt hīe ġesāwon swylce twēġen  
micle mearcstapan mōras healdan,  
ellorgǣstas. Ðāra oðer wæs,  
þæs þe hīe ġewislicost ġewitan meahton,  
idese onlīcnæs

[I it, land-dwellers, my people, hall-counsellors have heard tell that they saw two such massive marchers of no-man's land haunting the moors, alien spirits; one of them was, as they most certainly were able to discern, of the likeness of a woman.]<sup>183</sup>

Grendel's mother is described as large in stature, at least in the eyes of the Danes, and bearing "the likeness of a woman". Whether she has any weird appendices like the various creatures discussed in the *Liber monstrorum* do, we do not know. We cannot say for certain based on such a limited description what she looks like.

The ambiguous nature of the physical appearance of Grendel's mother has not only allowed scholars to speculate on her true nature, but modern adaptors as well. And this can be quite the (daunting) task. As Grendel's mother has only been vaguely described in the Old English version, much of her various forms through the various adaptations have been supplied by the imagination. Where Gardner's version of Grendel's mother was described with bestial terms, having claws and fur, the depiction of Grendel's mother in the cinematic adaptations have already been much more

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<sup>183</sup> *Beowulf*, ll.1345a-1351a.

humanised: in the versions discussed here she is capable of speech, and sports a mostly human form (at least at first).

This study set out to examine the reception of Grendel's mother not just from the scholarly perspective, but also from the popular perspective. People from all over the world often get their first taste of *Beowulf* not through the often complex body of *Beowulf* scholarship, but through more accessible modern adaptations of the epic. These adaptations shape their own perspective of *Beowulf* and its many characters, which they then pass on. However, most of the literary adaptors discussed in this study had a critical background. Whether they were literary critics like Gardner and Morrison, or merely students of English, they had been familiar with the original *Beowulf* and *Beowulf* scholarship before presenting their adaptations to the world. This raised with me the question as to what degree the perceptions of *Beowulf* scholars had influenced the perceptions of literary and cinematic adaptors, especially with regards to the character of Grendel's mother who had for a long time been overlooked by the critics.

Chapter One took a closer look at the critical reception of Grendel's mother from the earliest available *Beowulf* scholarship in the 1800's, until Tolkien's groundbreaking lecture of 1936. Here it was noted that Grendel's mother had either been ignored completely or mentioned only in connection with her more famous son. The discussion opened with the first complete Modern language translation of *Beowulf* by the Scandinavian scholar Thorkelín and a review on it by Gumælius. Both scholars considered the poem a historical record documenting real people and true events of a distant Viking past.<sup>184</sup> As such, they considered Grendel and by proxy his mother humans, demonised on account of an anti-Jutish bias.<sup>185</sup> Next, it discussed scholars such as the brothers Grimm, who saw in Grendel and his mother the Devil and his Dam from

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<sup>184</sup> Thorkelín, *De Danorum Rebus Gestis*, 59; Gumælius, "Recension," 156.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

German folk-legends;<sup>186</sup> Müllenhoff, who read the mother-son pair as the personification of the all-consuming, stormy North Sea;<sup>187</sup> W.W. Skeat, who offered a unique reading of the Grendelkin as ferocious, carnivorous bears;<sup>188</sup> and finally Guthbrandur Vigfússon, who was the first to mention a possible analogue between *Beowulf* and the *Grettis saga*, and influenced many scholars since to discover their own Scandinavian analogues featuring a so-called “two-troll fight”.<sup>189</sup>

Chapter Two dealt with *Beowulf* scholarship from 1936 up until the present. Tolkien’s formative essay had brought about a change in *Beowulf* scholarship. It encouraged critics to finally study the poem as a proper piece of literature. And more significant to this study, it encouraged the critics to examine the titular hero’s adversaries more closely. More and more studies were published on Grendel and the dragon, approaching the two foes from different literary angles. However, scholarship on Grendel’s mother was still as scarce as before. Even Tolkien, who had advocated for fair critical treatment of the antagonists, had failed to discuss Grendel’s mother.<sup>190</sup> It was not until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that Grendel’s mother was finally studied separately from her son. During the early years of this spotlight shift, Grendel’s mother was mostly viewed by critics through what Alfano dubbed the “woman-as-monster bias”.<sup>191</sup> Critics such as Acker and Morgan read Grendel’s mother as a monster, a terrifying representation of Anglo-Saxon fears.<sup>192</sup> Jorgensen fell back on old criticism, fashioning Grendel’s mother as a troll from Old Norse stories,<sup>193</sup> while Chadwick and Damico saw in her a fearsome Valkyrie-figure.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Shippey and Haarder, *Critical Heritage*, 189, 242.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>190</sup> Tolkien, “The Monsters and the Critics,” 28.

<sup>191</sup> Alfano, “A Reevaluation,” 1.

<sup>192</sup> Acker, “Horror and the Maternal,” 702-716; Morgan, “Female Evil in *Beowulf*,” 54-68.

<sup>193</sup> Jorgensen, “The Two-Troll Variant,” 35-43.

<sup>194</sup> Chadwick, “The Monsters and *Beowulf*,” 171-203; Damico, “The Valkyrie Reflex,” 176-203.

Moving closer to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, several scholars took a different approach towards the poem and Grendel's mother. They challenged the old 'monster tradition', opting instead for humanised readings of Beowulf's only female foe. Of these scholars, Alfano and Hennequin stand out the most. They took a closer look at the language of the original Old English text and found no basis for a monster reading. Instead, they argued that the critics were the ones who had made a monster out of the female antagonist.

Finally, Chapter Three turned to the popular adaptations of *Beowulf*. It tackled the questions of how modern writers and filmmakers interpreted the character of Grendel's mother, and whether their interpretations differed or followed the previously discussed critical readings. This chapter specifically took a closer look at four major literary works, and two major cinematic adaptations, analysing their interpretations of Grendel's mother. It found that the cinematic adaptations in particular deviated from the scholarly readings with regards to the nature of the mother. Starting with Graham Baker's *Beowulf* of 1999, the cinematic adaptations introduced a portrayal of Grendel's mother as a cunning, shapeshifting seductress who blurs the lines between human and non-human.<sup>195</sup> For the literary adaptations, this thesis found that especially the most recent writers tended to follow current *Beowulf* scholarship in their depiction of Grendel's mother. As such, Both Morrison and Headley offered fully human readings which closely echoed the readings of scholars of the newly rising 'human tradition'.

The current study has only taken a closer look at some of the major literary and cinematic adaptations of this time old classic. However, there are many other forms of adaptation that could not be studied here given the limitations of this study's scope. Such adaptations include portrayals of Grendel's mother on the small screen, such as

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<sup>195</sup> *Beowulf*, directed by Graham Baker; *Beowulf*, directed by Robert Zemeckis.

Grinhilda the Valkyrie in *Xena: Warrior Princess*,<sup>196</sup> which calls to mind the readings of Chadwick and Damico. Or artistic depictions of the female antagonist in comic books adaptations such as *Beowulf*<sup>197</sup> and *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer*,<sup>198</sup> which depict Grendel's mother as a feral, bestial she-being. In short, there are many different adaptations still which may offer interesting, and meaningful interpretations.

Although the current study could only discuss a small portion of the ever-expanding *Beowulfiana*, it already shows how *Beowulf* speaks to the imagination. One can take the questions it asks and apply it to modern issues, much like Headley did. Its characters too lend themselves to modernisation. *Beowulf* is easily adaptable. And as the body of adaptations keeps growing, so do the interpretations of Grendel's mother. All of this is facilitated by the ambiguous description of Grendel's mother in the original epic. It allows critics and artists alike to project their own fears and hopes onto the nameless mother. She is fluid, she is ungraspable. What Grendel's mother was meant to be, we may never know for sure. But what she can be, that is up to you.

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<sup>196</sup> *Xena: Warrior Princess*, DVD, directed by John Fawcett (2000; USA: Davis-Panzer, 2001).

<sup>197</sup> Jerry Bingham, *Beowulf*. First Comics, 1984.

<sup>198</sup> Micheal Uslan and Ricardo Villamonte, *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer*, Issue 2. DC Comics, 1975.

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