

The European English Messenger



GREDELLE: BEOWULF'S DEAD MOTHER

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Of all the characters who populate the lines of the English epic *Beowulf*, Grendel's mother has fared worst at the hands of critics: ignored, called various names, or seen as a second Grendel. (She is ignored by J. R. R. Tolkien, for example, in his famous essay on the *Beowulf* monsters, while Edward B. Irving Jr. calls her 'something in Grendel, or of Grendel, that is still alive' [57].)

It was only in the 90s that such opinions were challenged by critics like Christine Alfano and Gillian Overing. In 'The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother', Alfano's analysis of the contextual value of the epithets applied to Grendel's mother (like '*ides, aglaecwif* - 'lady, monsterwife' - and '*brimuwf* - 'she-wolf of the deep') exposes the gender bias of translators and critics, and reclaims her as a formidable foe. Similarly, Overing's book on language and gender in *Beowulf* uses Lacanian theory to shed new light on the female characters in the poem and on the way language has meaning beyond its face-value; still, the critic devotes too little space to the analysis of the shadowy female monster.

It is as a step in this new direction that a different view of Grendel's mother will be presented here, one based on the French feminists' revision of Lacan. The purpose is to endow this character, who in this argument will be given her own name of 'Grendelle' - a name which reflects the female and mother as well as the monstrous other - with a pivotal role in the poem, and the poem itself with another layer of meaning.

Revising Lacan

In Lacan's theory, which ties Freud's Oedipus complex to language-acquisition psychology, the (male) child originally exists in a pre-sexual, pre-linguistic union with the mother, who is the person providing immediate satisfaction for the infant's needs. At about 18 months, however, he simultaneously discovers sexual difference and language

proper, whose essence is representation through an absent signifier. Language thus becomes associated with the father's differentiating attribute, the Phallus (resulting in the authority principle Lacan termed 'Name of the Father'), and with the laws prohibiting an incestuous return to the mother ('Law of the Father'). The child is in this way driven to join and reify the powerful phallic order so as to overcome the fear of its authority. The mother herself is reduced to the mute figure of the pre-Oedipal past, and language now becomes the figurative substitute for the forbidden womb - a symbolic communicator instead of a physical one. But since language and the Phallus-principles share the same figurative social constitution, a speaking mother becomes a threat to the sex-monopoly of language, disrupting the desirable identity of the son by revealing the 'fictive' nature of the Father's language and law, in contrast to her 'literal' reality.

Based on this observation, French feminist theorists have implemented the theory in a radical way, shifting the focus to the so-called 'death of the mother'. Margaret Homans explains:

We could locate in virtually all of the founding texts of our culture a version of the myth...that the death or absence of the mother sorrowfully but fortunately makes possible the construction of language and of culture.... Similarly, Luce Irigaray has suggested that 'in Freud's myth, in *Totem and Taboo*, of the founding of human culture on the murder of the father...', Freud 'forgets a more ancient murder, that of the woman-mother...' a murder necessary to the establishment of civilization. (2)

One must, in other words, kill his mother (by rendering any ties to her obsolete) and marry his father (by 'espousing' - pun intended - his law) to be able to use and sustain patriarchal self-reflective language. To quote Homans,

'The symbolic order is founded not merely on the regrettable loss of the mother, but rather on her active and overt murder', the cure against the threat of choosing her old silent way (10). And as part of the same culture, we should expect literature to participate in – and represent – this psycholinguistic process.

However, in *Beowulf*, the mother killed is not the righteous hero's, but somebody else's. What should be examined, therefore, is the possibility of a symbolic mother-son relationship between 'Grendelle' and Beowulf: the application of the post-Lacanian axiom could elucidate the thinking and mechanics which determine the events in this poem.

A Chorus of Mothers

The first thing to notice is how Grendelle's character seems to fit into the poem's chorus of mothers whose single common feature is sorrow for their lost sons, and how she is tied to each of them with specific parallelisms. Grendelle is strikingly described as '*ides*', 'lady', a term used invariably for the queens in the poem – Hildeburh, Modthrytho, and Wealhtheow – and connoting mothers of illustrious persons. With the first queen, Grendelle also shares an unusual nature (one fictional, the other nonhuman), and the trip they undertake after the loss of their sons. Paired to Hildeburh's tragic loss of family and status in the feud sung in the Finn lay (embedded in ll. 1063-1160a), Grendelle's grief is put under a more sympathetic light. Still, Grendelle's obvious tie is to the Medusa-like Modthrytho, Offa's evil queen (she destroys any man who looks at her), to whom the epic refers briefly on ll. 1931b-43. She also journeys into a male stronghold, Offa's court, after which, like Grendelle, her threat is ended by superior masculine attributes.

Modthrytho's foil, according to the structural arrangement in the text (ll. 1926-43), is Hygelac's wise queen, Hygd, who offers her nephew Beowulf the place of her son, his throne. But apart from her and Grendelle's mutual pairing, for different reasons, to Modthrytho, the two mothers are directly linked in their passivity versus their sons' activity. While they stay silently at home, their sons go off to get imprudently involved in foreign affairs and, in dying, both sons advance Beowulf's social status.

But the instances that really reveal Grendelle's motherly relationship to Beowulf occur paradoxically in the heart of patriarchal territory, the monster-besieged castle Heorot. At one point king Hrothgar mentions Beowulf's mother in a manner that leaves her identity challenged, and then proceeds to adopt the hero himself:

Who bore such a son	into man's world
that woman I say	if living still,
that Eternal God	was gracious to her
at her birth giving.	Now, my Beowulf,
best of men,	I will love you like a son,
cherish you for life.	Keep this new kinship...

(ll. 942-48)

Significantly, it is on that very night that Grendelle appears and violently claims her son back. Beowulf's mother and Grendelle are thus united not only by structural proximity, but also in their Lacanian silencing within the text, having neither name, form, nor past; it is Hrothgar who appropriates the dubious narrative of both their stories (ll. 1345-46). Finally, Beowulf's mother fits the chorus of grieving mothers nicely, since early on she must relinquish her son to a powerful man's court and conventions.

Still, if there is an actual, ceremonial adoption of Beowulf, linking him to Grendelle, that must be the one that comes through the figure of Hrothgar's queen, Wealhtheow, with whom Grendelle shares, as *Beowulf* critic Helen Damico claims, a previously unified valkyrie identity:

just as Grendel's mother is the earliest rendering in Nordic and Anglo-Saxon literatures of the female warrior-figure as a battle-demon, so Wealhtheow may very well be the earliest representation of the other concept of the battle-maid: the nobly-born valkyrie ... Grendel's mother and Wealhtheow do, in fact, exist in an antipodal relationship. (57)

Thus Wealhtheow offering Beowulf a drink from her ceremonial cup – nourishing as well as honouring – is related to Grendelle generating for the protagonist his new heroic identity through her death. The two '*ides*' appear in parallel, similarly structured passages (Damico 9), and engage in masculine postures: revenge, and queenly claims of authority over the thanes (l. 1231).

Ironically, the queen's speeches become the flipside of Grendelle's silence, as they, according to Overing, 'offer a demonstration of the Lacanian assumption that language is our inscription into patriarchy' in their ultimate ineffectiveness against masculine violence (91). As Wealhtheow's favourite adopted nephew, Hrothulf, will finally slay her family, so Beowulf could be seen as killing his 'mother' and 'brother' - wielding against them, moreover, Hrunting, a sword borrowed from Unferth, a fratricidal thane! Indeed, the connections between Beowulf - the nature of his name and the strength of his terrible grip, for example - and the Grendels' attributes, have long been established by S. L. Dragland and Stanley Greenfield.

As can be argued, therefore, Grendelle is not only applicable as a mother-figure to a young hero, but the synergy of parallelisms and connections specifically points at her figurative kinship with Beowulf. Further elements in the story help establish a post-Lacanian setup.

Killing the mother

Apart from his strength, another attribute marks Beowulf's debut, as George Clark notes: 'unlike heroes of folktale, Beowulf bears the burden of a famous father, a world-famous father in his own view, and thus has before him a familiar and formidable task in coming to terms with himself and his father's achievement' (111). This awe (ll. 262-66) is, however, revealed as hyperbolic, when contrasted to Hrothgar's account of Ecgtheow as a fugitive indebted to him (ll. 459-72). Through this rite of passage, Beowulf has come not only to release Heorot from a monster, but at the same time himself from the emasculating fatherly spectre.

In this light, the killing of Grendel can be seen as a rejection of the pre-Oedipal self, paving the way to full acceptance of/by the Phallic principle. Grendel is the one who has not cut the bond to the maternal, and is angered by the appropriation of maternal pro-creativity by a male God in the Creation song (Overing 73). He is a-lingual, and functions according to infantile id-impulses - food and avoidance of pain. The later detail of Grendel trying to stuff Beowulf in the pouch that hangs from his waist eloquently symbolises the threat, for it could be seen as the monster's invitation to re-experience the lethe of the womb (ll. 2085-90).

The battle is also framed by references to fratricide (Unferth and Cain), stressing the kinship between the two foes. The gifts that Beowulf earns for fatally ripping Grendel's arm off - a symbolic emasculation of him who patently deserved no Phallus - also corroborate a post-Lacanian schema.

Weaponry and horses are part of male social functions, while the phallic trophy of the erected arm symbolises Beowulf's newly-earned figurative masculinity and his adoption into the order of Heorot without further taunts. While Wealhtheow now diplomatically rejects him as an adopted son, Hrothgar's status as an incarnation of 'the Name of the Father' gains in figurative potency.

The blow to this fictive might descends that night in the form of Grendelle. She steals back Grendel's arm, rendering Beowulf's symbolic masculinisation incomplete (ll. 1005-08). The conflict of mother and neophyte man is now unavoidable, for she is identified as the literal root of the problem. Yet by coming to male territory to uphold a masculine tradition - vengeance - Grendelle also renders herself momentarily vulnerable to patriarchy: 'In Heorot Grendel's mother's flight suggested her vulnerability to the weapons of the Danes ... but in the depths of the mere Grendel's mother becomes the archetypal enemy and assumes the powers of the place itself, chaos, the antiworld' (Clark 100). And the crude language-signs which mark her foray (Aeschere's head and her footprints) not only lead her pursuers to her mere, but also become evidence towards her death-sentence.

The post-Lacanian principle also elucidates the hero's preparation for battle. To understand why nobody else offers to fight Grendelle, given her poor resistance, we must observe that it is only Beowulf who can and *needs* to fight her. Hrothgar's covert reference to Heorot's - 'the stag's' - inability to enter the mere reveals how anything that solidly belongs to patriarchal society can never return to the maternal locus. Beowulf's quasi-determined status both gave the 'monsterwife' access to Heorot (as Hrothgar hints in ll. 1333b-37a), and will enable him to enter the mere, whose cave under bloody, monster-churning waters is the womb of Grendelle herself.

Beowulf's weapon

Moreover, in Beowulf's borrowed weapons and purpose for fighting - for it is Hrothgar who implores him - we see the influence and psychological aid patriarchal society offers, one that will empower the man to slay his mother. How much his byrnie means to Beowulf is best seen in the critical help it offers against Grendelle's attempt to cut through it for the ambiguous purpose - perhaps a literal one - to 'buy back her son' (l. 1546b).

But ultimately, Beowulf must find his own weapon to kill the mother, one that comes both of her and his essence, and is figurative - like language - too. That's why the poet has him borrow Hrunting: not for shortage of swords, but to emphasise Beowulf's lack of a phallus-token; and also, why Hrunting fails against Grendelle - it's not personalised.

This weapon is found only after the ambiguous fight choreography, where Grendelle's hugging and straddling the fallen hero represent not just an attack, but also Beowulf's struggle against the incestuous appetites of a primeval Jocasta, which is now the only mode of re-approaching the maternal. In that critical moment, Beowulf sees the huge sword - and in the next moment, as if by magic of pure will, weapon and warrior act as one: 'The last line nicely juxtaposes the bloody sword and rejoicing warrior and, like the adjective "*heorogrim*" unites the warrior and the weapon. The hero's exultation in the enemy's killing and the sword's bloody stains seem one ... its power, spirit, and mood matching his.' (Clark 102-03)

The sword is not part of the masculine tradition, for the giants who fashioned it are probably the same giants who in the Bible descended from Cain's incestuous race; it then partakes of the Grendel-kin's essence. The material that the mother provides is combined with the indoctrinated will of the son to create, through severing of their ties, his new masculinity. As for the unreal light that marks the beheading - the final mocking flash of revelation of the pre-Oedipal world before oblivion claims it forever - it could well be explained by a mythological parallel, the beheading of Medusa by the hero Perseus, and the emergence from her head of a living phallic lightning, Chrysaor, and the well-known winged horse Pegasus, symbol of inspired word-craft.

Below, the birth of the new man has been completed. Above, the Geats linguistically interpret the bloody water as a sign of loss, giving the emerging hero the chance to show his new-found language-control by turning the sign to the desirable semantic value of victory. Beowulf has managed, in Luce Irigaray's words:

to force entry, to penetrate, to appropriate for himself the mystery of this womb where he has been conceived, the secret of his begetting, of his 'origin' ... to make blood flow again in order to revive a very old relationship - intrauterine, to be sure, but also prehistoric - to the maternal. (351)

... and he has also heroically rejected this bond, thus fulfilling his role as the post-Lacanian son who kills his mother to enter patriarchy in a paradigmatic manner.

From that point on the tone of the episode is transformed: the earlier fragmentary pace is now fused together in a social routine fashion. The head-on-a-stick, the phallic symbol which Beowulf erects anew (and which portrays the faculties of speech and cognition) makes its point and disappears, while nobody even wonders what happened to AEschere's body. The 'Name-of-Hrothgar', now becomes stronger than ever: in his long and unusual sermon the king reasserts himself through rhetoric as a generous father and a paragon of moral law. He receives the hilt of the melted sword, symbolically reaping the influx of power that Beowulf's victory has earned him. The textual focus on the previously unseen inscription on the hilt emphasises its function as Beowulf's symbolic phallus, as through language it recreates the implied dimensions of the sword in both space and time. The runic form of the message additionally centres the reconstructive function of this language precisely on metaphor, the absence of the signifier.

Language, in fact, becomes the closing theme of the episode: now all things are inscribed in absence. No details of gifts are given, and no ceremonial nourishment comes from Wealhtheow, for motherhood to Beowulf is irrevocably past. After Grendelle's attack, Clark notes, 'at the early morning conference Hrothgar seems nearly incoherent with grief' (106); earlier, in his Breca narrative, the hero

shows a slight unease for his youthful 'showing off'. But now Beowulf offers another speech and 'Hrothgar is positively staggered, it seems, by the revelation of this new dimension of Beowulf's talents..., for the king has never before heard a young man speak with more mature intelligence' (Irving 68). Clearly, the killing of the mother-figure has transformed language perception, *aphairesis* has made speech more beautiful and potent. It has led the hero into full acceptance by society, under a definite status involving adherence to 'the Law of the Father', and has given rise to the occasion for *laf*, fame, one of the mainstays of mythic society. In fame, which transcends mortality, Beowulf has found the ego that he lacked,

and Heorot its source of strength. The collapsible formulations of patriarchal society have been strengthened by one more case of overt conformity to its laws; in turn, the heroic image will live forever in the Father's song.

Similarly, the poem carries through its edifying purpose, benefiting the patriarchal society which gave it 'birth', while society's canonisation of the text rewards and immortalises the author for his loyalty to the credo of the Phallus. Poem and hero become one in this self-gratificatory process which transcends the mere story to express culture; for now man's consciousness has stopped searching for the absent mother, and finally rests on its own reflection-in-verse.

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