

Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

An Online Open Access Journal

ISSN 0975-2935

www.rupkatha.com

Volume V, Number 3, 2013

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How Many Heroes are there in *Beowulf*: Rethinking of Grendel's Mother as 'aglæcwif'

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Abstract

Since Anglo-Saxon heroic society was male-dominated, women were relegated to a position of comparative mediocrity. However, Old English literature does contain instances where women often proved their prowess and ferocity through martial exploits. In this paper, I argue the case of Grendel's Mother, as I try to rescue her from a status of enforced marginalization as a monster who is not even given a name. I analyze closely her encounter with Beowulf, as the desire for revenge propels her to fight against the slayer of her son Grendel, pointing out how she uses strength, strategy and intelligence to fight her adversary. At one time, she even throws the redoubtable hero Beowulf down and is in the process of killing him, when he grabs hold of a magical sword and kills her instead. Yet, concomitant with her war-like qualities, she also displays a wonderful motherly instinct. All these force us to contest the term "monster" that had been used to describe her for a long time, and view her in a new reverential light.

[**Keywords:** Beowulf, Grendel's mother, hero, monster, woman]

Anglo-Saxon society was, for all purposes, a male-dominated society; the literature of the period describes how men ate, drank, proved their mettle in the field of war and boasted in unequivocal terms of their prowess as warriors as they travelled on the path to everlasting heroism. But this overwhelmingly androcentric quest for 'lof' and 'dom' relegated the women to a materially inferior position in society. If one studies the social and economic history of the period, it becomes clear how in this era of glory-seeking, women were associated with less glorious activities. If one goes through England's literary history, one finds that the women in the literature of this period are either merely mentioned as in the case of Sarah and her Egyptian handmaid in the Old English religious poem *Genesis*; or they are briefly described in one or two lines as in the case of Beaduhild and Mathhild in the elegy "Deor's Lament"; or they are shown lamenting their present sorrowful state as in the lyrics "The Wife's Lament" or "Wulf and Eadwacer"; or like Hrothgar's wife Wealhtheow, they perform unimportant tasks such as that of host supplying alcoholic drinks to heroes as they feast in the mead-hall; or like Freawaru in *Beowulf*, they act as peace-weavers attempting to stop a long-enduring feud between two rulers. In this general drama of enforced feminine mediocrity, very few names stand out to prove the fighting spirit of women, giving readers the impression that women in Anglo-Saxon England were by-and-large passive who distanced themselves from fighting and war and let themselves be dominated by men. Only three major exceptions may be

found in Old English literature — the first is Modthryth in *Beowulf* but her fierceness is generally glossed over and her function in the text is mainly as a contrast to Hygd, the wife of Beowulf's uncle Hygelac; the second is Judith whose heroic exploits in decapitating the wicked king Holofernes is not elaborated but swept over with a formidable Christian colouring; the third, who is a hero no doubt but whose heroism is not made so obvious, is a character in *Beowulf* called Grendel's Mother. It is my endeavour in this paper to rescue the heroism of Grendel's Mother from obscurity and marginalization, and highlight the instances where she is as heroic and sometimes more heroic than the redoubtable hero Beowulf himself.

Of the 3183 lines in *Beowulf*, the incident involving Grendel's Mother occupies a mere 293 lines — lines 1276 to 1569 of the text. The story in brief: the Danish King Hrothgar invites the Geatish hero Beowulf to his hall Heorot in order to cleanse it of Grendel, a man-eating monster who had haunted it for a long time. As Grendel comes that fateful night and reaches out towards Beowulf in the dark mistaking him to be one of Hrothgar's men, Beowulf catches Grendel's arm and twists it out of his body. In mortal pain, the monster flees towards his dwelling, and his mother now comes to avenge his death. She first seizes Aeschere, an important retainer of Hrothgar and swiftly makes her way back to her abode. Beowulf is quick in his pursuit and, after a fierce encounter in which the hero suffers numerous setbacks, is able to kill her finally with a magic sword and save himself.

In line 1259a of *Beowulf*, Grendel's Mother is described in the Old English language with the asyndeton "ides āglæcwīf" (Klaeber 48), a phrase that was translated by the influential *Beowulf* scholar Frederick Klaeber in 1922 as "wretch" or "monster of a woman". Following Klaeber, scholars down the ages have made a practice of labelling Grendel's Mother with pejorative epithets and appellations. Thus Seamus Heaney describes her as "monstrous hell bride"; Howell Chickering as "monster-woman"; E Talbot Donaldson as "woman, monster wife", Richard Trask as "ugly troll lady" and Charles Kennedy as "monstrous hag". Some translators like Marijane Osborn even take liberties with the translation to magnify her monstrous qualities, calling her a "witch of the sea" (47), although the Old English word for sea is nowhere to be found in the original phrase. But in 1979, Old English scholars Sherman Kuhn of the University of Michigan and E.G. Stanley of Oxford University set about saving Grendel's Mother from being eclipsed by allegations of monstrosity, suggesting a definition of "aglæcwif" as a fighter, valiant warrior and a dangerous opponent of the feminine kind. Christine Alfano of Stanford University recorded in 1992 her surprise at the disparities between "Grendel's mother originally created by the *Beowulf* poet and the one that occupies contemporary *Beowulf* translations" (1). The arguments of Kuhn and Stanley received impetus when the *Dictionary of Old English* published by the University of Toronto in 1994 updated the definition of "aglæc wif" as female warrior or fearsome woman, and was supported by the renowned Old English scholar Bruce Mitchell in his 1998 glossary of *Beowulf*. Thus after a prolonged scholarly tussle, Grendel's Mother evolved as a fierce Amazonian woman rather than a monster. The 2007 film adaptation of *Beowulf*, by casting Angelina Jolie as

Grendel's Mother, seems to suggest that she was not just a woman but an attractive one too.

So, having established the fact that Grendel's Mother is a fierce and valiant female warrior rather than a mere troll, we are in a position to study how she proves to be a dangerous and worthy opponent to the hero Beowulf. When Beowulf has just about reached the place below the lake where Grendel's Mother lived, she lunges towards him with her awful claws. Dragging him to the bottom, she proves the stronger of the two as she momentarily immobilizes the hero who claimed to have the strength of thirty men in his arm; even the poet admits in a shocked tone, "No matter how brave he was — he might not yield weapons" (27). In such a manner, the Mother leads Beowulf to her hall where she would be in perfect control of her foe.

The fight between Beowulf and Grendel's Mother, appropriate for a heroic poem of the stature of *Beowulf*, begins with Beowulf aiming a mighty blow with his trusted sword named Hrunting at the head of Grendel's Mother. But unlike other situations when the Geat's power had brought the most resolute heads of enemies down, he now finds that even though the "blade sang at her head a fierce war-song ... the battle-lightning would not bite, harm her life, but the edge failed the prince in his need" (27). The fact that the sword, which had doomed many men till now, fails to make a dent on Grendel's Mother, attests her superlative strength as a warrior. Throwing the sword down, Beowulf now attacks with his most potent weapon — his handgrip powered by his matchless strength, that had earlier floored the redoubtable Grendel. With this wrestler-like grip, Beowulf seizes Grendel's Mother by her shoulder. For a brief moment, his vice-like grip stands him in good stead as he is successful in throwing Grendel's Mother to the ground; but it only deceives to please because the next instant she strikes back like a true warrior, employing an equally deadly grasp of her own and seizes him. And, for the first time in his life, Beowulf falls.

Fierce warrior that she is, Grendel's Mother is quick to seize this chance to seal her adversary's fate. She sits astride Beowulf and plunges her knife into his chest. Beowulf would have died instantly, had not his strong armour deadened the impact of the dagger. Since God had ordained that Beowulf should be victorious and not the "monster", he stands up once again. Taking hold of a sword supposed to have been fashioned by giants rather than humans, he slashes at Grendel's Mother, cleaving her neck and killing her instantly. Thus, with her death, he gets to retain his status of hero all right, but details of the *agon* as enumerated above clearly underline who the hero in reality is. Beowulf needs an extra-ordinary sword (one that is made of special mettle and belongs to Grendel's Mother herself) to kill her. When in turn the woman strikes, it is not Beowulf's fighting prowess but his coat of mail that saves his life. And who can forget that when it comes to hand-to-hand combat, a woman gets the better of a mighty, boastful hero. In the context of these, it sounds decidedly comic when the poet opines, "... and holy God brought about victory in war; the wise Lord, Ruler of the Heavens, decided it with right, easily..." (27).

In addition to the display of strength and courage, another quality of heroism that we find in Grendel's Mother is her ability to strategize. Grendel's Mother is a master

strategist of war. If one reads the famous Old English heroic poem "The Battle of Maldon" in the context of war strategy, one will realize that Byrhtnoth's heroism notwithstanding, the English lose the war against the Vikings mainly because of the fault in Byrhtnoth's strategy in allowing the invaders too much space to cross over which ultimately costs them victory. A similar situation can be seen in the Grendel's Mother-Beowulf encounter. Unlike Grendel who had been overconfident and had never dreamt in his life that someone might one day come to arrest his misadventures, his Mother is chary against committing any maladroit action that might eventually jeopardize her plans. She knew that if she fought hand-to-hand with Beowulf at Heorot (a place alien to her), as her son had done the night before, she ran the risk of meeting the same fate as her son. She therefore wanted to meet Beowulf in her mere which was her native territory and therefore safer. So like an erudite planner, she devises a strategy to draw Beowulf to her home ground: she abducts Hrothgar's chief thane Aeschere, knowing very well that the proud Beowulf would have no other option but to come looking for her. Beowulf is so vain about his exploits and his heroic abilities that, expectedly, he falls into her trap and rushes to the fen where she lived and dives in. It is quite some distance from the surface to the bottom where her dwelling was, and every yard of the distance is infested with violent sea-monsters who pursue and attack Beowulf. This in fact may be considered another important strategy employed by Grendel's mother, because she expected the struggle with the sea-monsters to kill Beowulf (in which case she would not have to kill him herself), or at least exhaust him which would ameliorate her chances of killing him. Such rigorous planning and execution of plan by Grendel's Mother certifies her as a hero with brains as well as brawn, whereas many other so-called heroes had only strength to show but lacked strategy and foresight. In the light of this argument therefore, one cannot agree with Martin Puhvel's contention in the essay *The Might of Grendel's Mother* that Grendel's Mother "fails to stand and fight with the Danes, who had proved such inferior opponents for her son, but flees in all haste back to her mere-retreat" (81).

From the standpoint of heroism, one more point of support for Grendel's Mother is that she adheres to the Anglo-Saxon heroic ethic of the blood-feud. In a culture where fighting was a way of life and the people preferred fighting to peace because it was more honorable, blood-feuds were the fashion of the day. Not to go out and avenge the death of a relative was an unthinkable social disgrace. Grendel's attacks on Heorot are irresponsible and utterly avoidable. What happens to him in the end is entirely his own doing. In contrast, the actions of his mother is true to the contemporary tradition of the blood-feud, which made it a sacred and binding duty for a person to engage in war (feud) to seek revenge for the killing (blood-letting) of a kinsman. It is this heroic quality that prompts Grendel's Mother to shed her normal reticent, stay-at-home self and assume a belligerent stance. Even the *Beowulf* poet does not want to grudge her this merit, when he describes her as "þætte wrecend þa gyt" (48) in line 1256 b meaning "that an avenger still". Thus, to invert the opening sentence of Kevin Kiernan's essay viz "Grendel, to be sure, was a boy only a mother could love" (13), we might claim for his mother that she was a mother any child would be proud of.

This would do well to make us remember that apart from being a warrior, Grendel's Mother is also a *mother*. One does not know whether to emphasize the motherliness of this character, the poet leaves her without a specific name and merely calls her "Grendles Mōðor". It is interesting to note that Beowulf himself displays a tender motherliness towards his accompanying retainers when, before embarking on his assignment to fight Grendel's Mother, he requests Hrothgar to act as a benefactor to his companions — "... be guardian of my young retainers, my companions, if battle should take me" (26). It is only to be expected therefore that Grendel's Mother's maternal instincts shall be rejuvenated when she finds her child slain by Beowulf. Although Grendel is described as bloodthirsty and thriving on cannibalism, no such thing is mentioned of Grendel's Mother. So when she learns that her son had been killed, she is described as brooding over her misery as any mother would do on getting such shocking news. Her consequent thirst for blood is a result of her desire to avenge her son's death by killing his murderer, and it is with desire alone that she attacks Heorot, where her son was mortally wounded. In fact, one critic points out that she is "only venturing out reluctantly" (Kiernan 13). Additionally, the *Beowulf* poet inserts the poignant line — "She would avenge her child, her only son" (27) — to impart to the Mother's venture an emotional tinge. Moreover, her motherhood had been outraged that the arm of her dead son, which had been cruelly wrenched out of its socket by Beowulf, had been hung in Hrothgar's mead-hall as a vulgar trophy. So when she exists from Heorot with Aeschere in order to lure Beowulf to her dwelling, she remembers in the midst of the reigning danger and confusion to take Grendel's claw with her. It is stupendous that a primitive literary composition such as *Beowulf* encapsulates an incident that combines heroism with motherliness in such great measure.

In concluding, I would like to draw attention to the *Beowulf* poet's gendered comparison of the fighting spirit of Grendel and Grendel's Mother: "The attack was the less terrible by just so much as is the strength of women, the war-terror of a wife, less than an armed man's ..." (23). It seems as if the poet is disgruntled to acknowledge Grendel's Mother as a hero. The arguments that I have presented project her as a hero in the true sense of the term, having more heroic qualities than most heroes possess, and in no way inferior to other heroes in Old English heroic poetry such as Byrhtnoth, Wiglaf or Aethelstan. In this respect, the poem itself may be rediscovered as being a unique heroic poem in having two heroes, one of whom is a woman. Thus, by recognizing this hitherto undiscovered heroic quality in Grendel's Mother, we may be acknowledged as giving the "devil" her due.

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