BEOWULF AND OTHER MONSTERS:
RECONSIDERING TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MONSTROSITY
IN THE CHARACTERS OF BEOWULF

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Thesis

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. GRENDEL’S MONSTROUS CHARACTER AND THE EFFECT OF LABELING</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. GRENDEL’S MOTHER: SOCIETALLY CONFINED OR RADICALLY INDEPENDENT</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. BEOWULF AND THE MONSTROSITY OF INDEPENDENCE</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

GRENDEL’S MONSTROUS CHARACTER AND THE EFFECT OF LABELING

While Beowulf has been considered worthy of critique since the late 19th century, reactions to Grendel have remained somewhat one-sided throughout the history of Beowulf scholarship. These reactions have been largely generalized, insofar as they have focused upon Grendel’s monstrosity as a contrast to Beowulf’s heroism, but have said very little about Grendel himself (Atkinson 61; Johansen 196; Robinson 79). However, despite the uniform nature of these critiques, none of the poem’s other monsters has engendered the same degree of discomfiture as Grendel, such that the terminology used to describe him within the text has also been the subject of conflicting interpretations, as will be shown later. The difficulty inherent in pinning Grendel down with any one interpretation is largely due to textual ambiguities, but it may be that these ambiguities are there for a reason: we may not be meant to fully understand Grendel. If this is the case, his role in the poem is more important for the message his presence conveys than whatever his actions and vague physical traits may say about him as a character.

In the passages that follow, I argue that the text constructs Grendel as a hybridized, part-human figure, whose monstrosity is to a great degree dependent upon behaviors also exhibited by humans within the poem. In so constructing him, the text initially describes Grendel in terms that are usually translated to suggest that he is
potentially both morally and physically monstrous. For example, the translated lines “Then the fierce spirit painfully endured hardship for a time, he who dwelt in the darkness” present a number of ambiguities (Donaldson 5).¹

A comprehensive understanding of passages such as this is crucial to our ability to discern a clear picture of who Grendel is, but even a most cursory glance at the translation reveals several discrepancies. *Ellen-gæst*, the OE compound here describing Grendel, has been interpreted by Donaldson to mean “fierce spirit.” According to the *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (hereafter CASD), however, the compound, when taken at face value, may be read as “bold / courageous soul.” *Ellen* cannot be said to connote physical monstrosity per se, since the word is also used to describe Beowulf in lines 340, 602, and 828. If such terms are applied to Beowulf as well, then the poet suggests either that Beowulf possesses monstrous traits, that Grendel possesses traits that may also be used to describe humans or that the characters are simply alike in some ways. The dictionary definition itself is suggestive of little more than Grendel’s being willing to act boldly, an interpretation that also allows room for the word’s later attribution to Beowulf. Further, the meaning of the term *gæst* is also somewhat vague and has been the object of some debate (Tolkien 37). The presence or absence of a macron over “æ” provides the only distinction between the word meaning “stranger” or “guest” (without macron) and “soul” or “spirit” (with macron). In line 102, Grendel is referred to as *gæst* (without macron), so the suggestion that the poet meant to refer to Grendel as a literal demon upon the basis of line 86 alone is questionable, given that the alternate form is used less than 20 lines later.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references to the *Beowulf* text are taken from E. Talbot Donaldson’s prose translation.
These textual ambiguities continue, such that, owing to these disparities among translations, readers begin to acquire a muddied picture of Grendel. In line 101, Grendel is referred to as *feond on helle*, which Donaldson translates as “hellish enemy.” Donaldson is decidedly careful in his choice, for the CASD defines *feond* as “foe, adversary, or enemy” and *helle* as “hell.” The definition of *feond* as noted here is given primacy to any mention of “devil” in the dictionary entry (an option that appears as something of an afterthought, at the end). This term, therefore, may be applied to any sort of enemy, human or monstrous. While the CASD cannot be said to possess the final word on the subject, the presence of the contradiction between a reliable translation and the accepted definition is a prime example of the ambiguities surrounding Grendel throughout the poem.

Grendel’s purported physical monstrosity undeniably stems from his association with Cain’s kin. One of the poem’s most infamous passages concerning monsters occurs just after Grendel enters the narrative:

> The grim spirit was called Grendel, known as a rover of the borders, one who held the moors, fen, and fastness. Unhappy creature, he lived for a time in the home of the monsters’ race, after God had condemned them as kin of Cain. (5)

“Kin of Cain” here seems to refer to the creatures mentioned in lines 112-113 of the surviving manuscript: *ylfe, orcneas, gigantas* (elves, trolls, giants), creatures who are monstrous for their unnatural physiology and, usually, aberrant deeds. The poet constructs Grendel’s introduction amongst a list of monstrous species in a way that reinforces his association with them as an exiled being who is in some way physically different, as well as morally monstrous. While these lines may at first seem to provide an explanation for Grendel’s physiological state, Grendel is not explicitly stated as being
one of Cain’s kin, himself. The poet states, as noted above, that Grendel is an outcast, and that as such, he has been living among monsters for some time: “he lived for a time in the home of the monsters’ race” (5).

Grendel’s having unusual neighbors does not require him to be a monster himself, though. His living among Cain’s kin may be a consequence of his banishment. Grendel’s inhabiting the mere itself, however, is more suggestive of physical monstrosity on his part, given that other animals avoid it and the Danes speculate some involvement of black magic in the area, which is also known to be the dwelling of many monsters: “There each night there may be seen fire on the flood, a fearful wonder. Of the sons of men there lives none… who knows the bottom” (24). Later, upon his going to the mere, Beowulf observes “many a snake-shape, strong sea-serpents exploring the mere, and water-monsters lying on the slopes of the shore” (25). Thus Grendel’s association with such monsters is a byproduct of his ties with Cain’s kin. According to the story in the Biblical book of Genesis, Cain’s fratricide was punishable in the form of exile from the rest of humanity. His descendants, who later intermarried with non-exiled humans, produced a variety of races and species who remained cursed, as a mark of their banishment. Therefore, the kin of Cain are those creatures whose monstrous physiology and manner are reflective of Cain’s cursed state and serve as a reminder of his misdeeds. The Cain legend would have been common knowledge throughout medieval Europe, so it was a logical choice for the poet, given that it provides a concise rationale for the physical and relational separateness of monstrous creatures from the rest of humanity.

One difficulty with the Cain myth, however, is that it does not allow room for a pre-Christian rationale for Grendel’s circumstances and also fails to offer an explanation
for Grendel’s own exile, or why he feels that Hrothgar has somehow aggrieved him personally. It is worth pausing to consider this point, since Grendel’s role, it seems, is somewhere between that of a traditional Norse monster and a Christian monster (such a spiritual significance was usually lacking in earlier pagan monsters). Regardless of who or what he is, the poet states that Grendel “earfoðlice þrage geþolode” (86-87) or “painfully endured hardship for a time” (5). The nature of this hardship, or “grievance” as Seamus Heaney poetically interprets it in line 87 of his translation, is never stated explicitly, but the consequence is that Grendel is suffering in his banishment. This aspect of the monster as one who suffers as well as causes suffering is a fairly Christian notion and one that was likely not present in Norse myths.

Because of their tendency to give the Cain references primacy, scholars have often attributed Grendel’s exile to his having been born into a monstrous race. What we do not know for certain is whether Grendel’s behavior is a backlash of his exile, or if he has been exiled due to his behavior. Apart from the instance where Hrothgar notes his landsmen seeing Grendel and his mother traversing the moors, the poem offers no evidence of how Grendel behaved prior to his nightly raids. Nor does it enlighten readers as to why he perceives his exile as a basis for retaliation. He is portrayed solely in terms of his role as an invader whose exile prevents his participation in society, but the text does not disallow his coming so near to Heorot that he still witnesses its riches. His spying increases his sense of alienation, as noted in lines 88-90: “for every day he heard loud mirth in the hall; there was the sound of the harp, the clear song of the scop” and we are left to wonder why he, as a non-human creature, longs for participation in human society in a way that the other mere creatures clearly do not (5).
While Grendel is indeed inhuman, his humanlike traits make his classification as purely “monstrous” rather difficult, as well. His attacks are provoked by his anger and frustration, not brutish stupidity, yet there is little indication as to whether his anger is due to his exile, or vice versa. We may presume that Grendel has always been exiled, but without knowing whether or not anything more specific than his being of Cain’s kin prompted his exile, we cannot determine whether his behavior is innate or the byproduct of his being relegated to the role of outsider. Further complicating any clear characterization of Grendel is the fact that he only explicitly appears in the narrative twice: once when he raids the mead hall for the first time, and again during his final (and fatal) encounter with Beowulf twelve years later. Grendel’s role in the poem for the intervening twelve years, when he is said to rule Heorot by night, is the subject of retellings but is never shown, nor are any intermediate raids individually described (5). As a result of this plot formulation, the majority of his role in the poem is that of the “other,” such that his actions are the source of discussion on the part of a society that he feels prevented his participation by any other means.

Grendel’s first attack is relayed in lines 120-125: “The Creature of evil, grim and fierce, was quickly ready, savage and cruel, and seized from their rest thirty thanes. From there he turned to go back to his home, proud of his plunder, sought his dwelling with that store of slaughter” (5). Grendel carries off thirty thanes, showing no small amount of strength. His actions and appearance are not described further, however, and the poet leaves the reader ignorant of Grendel's full intent or capacity for damage, simply stating that by morning, the evidence of Grendel's guð-cræft or “war craft” is all that remains (127). Grendel may be introduced as a villain, a wiht unhælo (120), which the CASD
defines as "mischievous or evil man or creature," but this passage contains no physical
description other than that he possesses unnatural strength, a trait that Beowulf has been
argued as possessing as well².

What seems to make Grendel so monstrous to the Danes is that his anger is not
sated after his first attack and that he performs similar raids for twelve years: “In the dark
nights he dwelt in Heorot, the richly adorned hall. He might not approach the throne,
[receive] treasure, because of the Lord; He had no love for him” (6). This passage
describes what Atkinson refers to as Grendel’s assuming a role of mock-thane, a role
later used in contrast to Beowulf’s “ideal” thane-like behavior. He notes that the poem’s
most famous monsters (Grendel, his Mother, and the dragon) serve as antithetical
versions of Beowulf in their corresponding portions of the poem (58). This passage,
according to Atkinson, introduces Grendel as the mock-thane in a way that emphasizes
the contrast between him and Beowulf. The poet seems to be implying that Grendel, as
the mock-thane, cannot fulfill the appropriate duties of a “real” thane, since his coming to
Heorot is not acceptable to Hrothgar in the way that such an action would be accepted
from Beowulf. If this is the case, then there is also a suggestion that Grendel is capable of
at least some degree of human-like action, such as committing revenge or paying
compensation to a ring-giver. Such expectations on the part of the narrator or the Danes
thus place Grendel somewhere between the role of more animal-like monsters and
humanoid monster-like creatures, such as those found within the other works of the
Beowulf manuscript, the parallels of which will be discussed shortly.

² See discussion on Huffines and Greenfield in chapter 3.
This passage also lends Grendel’s personal situation a degree of clarity that the poet does not afford Cain’s kin in general. If Grendel has become the nightly hall thane, he may have done so in order to oppose Hrothgar even more fully, as a means of emphasizing his anger. This interpretation coincides with lines 151-159, where his purpose is given in more detail than it occurs anywhere else in the poem:

[It became known] that Grendel had fought a long time with Hrothgar, for many half-years maintained mortal spite, feud, and enmity – constant war. He wanted no peace with any of the men of the Danish host, would not withdraw his deadly rancor, or pay compensation: no counselor there had any reason to expect splendid repayment at the hands of the slayer. For the monster was relentless. (6)

These lines provide the basis for an important shift in our understanding of monstrosity as it occurs within the text. Grendel’s association with the “kin of Cain” (innate monstrosity) is deemphasized and the focus here is on something much more voluntary. Here, a new possibility is presented: Grendel’s exile may not refer solely to his lineage. His actions themselves may have brought on his monstrous label.

In line 133, Grendel is called *wergan-gastes*. This term, like *gaest*, has been taken to mean that Grendel is not merely monstrous, but otherworldly. The CASD, however, defines *wergan* as "felon, criminal, wicked" such that the term could be said to mean roughly "wicked soul." The CASD terminology suggests, instead of an otherworldly monster, a worldly enemy whose actions are worthy (at least to the Danes) of the designation "criminal." Further, line 137 reiterates the nature of Grendel's motivation: he lacks remorse not because he is an innately evil monster capable of nothing else, but because his mind is so fixed upon *fæhde ond fyrene*, which CASD translates as
"vendetta" or "hostility." In both cases, Grendel is clearly identified as a revenge-killer, an action that is both human-like and monstrous, if taken to the extreme.

In discussing Grendel’s attitude toward Heorot and his motivation for killing, Edward Irving notes:

> Whatever [Heorot] stands for, always he is driven to destroy it. Perhaps, when all is said, the hall itself remains the clearest explanation for the puzzling motivation of the Cain-monsters… If they cannot live in it, then they must render it unlivable for others. Compulsively Grendel labors to bring its mutually supportive heroic activities, its interchange of dependencies, the circulation of its heart’s blood, to a dead standstill. (139)

Revenge killing was often sanctioned in Anglo Saxon culture (provided it occurred within certain contexts), but nonetheless Grendel’s revenge seems to be partly what contributes to his monstrosity. While a human warrior should be satisfied with a single revenge killing, Grendel is not satisfied with hundreds. His insatiable bloodlust seems to be what the Danes consider the basis for his monstrosity more than his monstrous physiology. The text thus identifies him as a revenge killer of sorts, and it also differentiates between revenge killing and emotionless animalistic killing. However, given that Norse warrior culture would have condoned revenge killing in equal measure of the initial grievance, where the killer may exact a life for a life, the suggestion seems to be that Grendel is monstrous because he is not avenging any particular death (or at least not one that is known to the reader) and has killed beyond the reasonable limit. Thus Grendel both fills and exceeds a human avenger role.

Revenge killing is presented as being justifiable in the portion of the poem commonly referred to as "The Finnsburg Digression," as well as when Beowulf avenges
the murders that Grendel and his mother commit. Beowulf himself praises the notion of
vengeance when he goes after Grendel’s mother, stating “It is better for a man to avenge
his friend than much mourn” (25). Queen Modthryth, on the other hand, who avenges
such slight offenses as men gazing too long upon her, is criticized for her extremist
attitude toward vengeance in lines 1931-1940. Because revenge killing was acceptable in
Anglo-Saxon culture, and Grendel's revenge killings are so clearly unacceptable to both
the Danes and to Beowulf, it could be said that Grendel’s killings contribute to his
monstrous label simply because the poem is narrated in part by those he has victimized.
Thus Grendel’s choice of victims seems to partly bring about a designation of
“monstrosity” in the same way that Queen Modthryth is considered monstrous before she
reigns in her terrible temper. The implication here is that the Danes also expect Grendel
to adhere to human values in a way that other inhuman species would not be expected to,
and they attempt to project and condemn Grendel as monstrous based upon these
expected values. The Danes thus have the peculiar expectation that Grendel should know
better, that he should in essence control himself in a human-like manner. Again, Grendel
is shown to inhabit a hybrid position: he is not merely monstrous, nor is he human.

Other critics have noted this hybrid quality in Grendel as well. Sandner, for
example, discusses Grendel’s liminal position by noting that in lines 151-159:

Grendel’s use of human, not monstrous, strategy is implicitly
acknowledged in the narrator’s response… The implication is that the
matter could be settled by payment… the suggestion is that Grendel is but
the lord of a tribe feuding with the Danes. But to the extent Grendel is a
lord, he is an uncanny lord… only a terrible dealer of death. (171)

In discussing the same passage, Phillips notes that Grendel appears monstrous to the
Danes simply because he “disappoints the expectation of blood money” (49). These
descriptions of a more human-like Grendel echo other medieval (but human) villains who famously possessed morally monstrous traits, as well as physically monstrous characters who behaved like humans.

Throughout the course of his book *Pride and Prodigies*, Andy Orchard notes that monstrous designations may be given to other races, pagans, and the supposed monstrous races alike. In *Judith*, the Babylonian general Holofernes is referred to as a “treaty-breaker,” “hateful to the savior,” and a minister to the devil, terms that are reminiscent of Grendel’s more infamous monikers (8-9). Further, as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar in the Old Testament Book of Daniel, monstrous character is shown to lead, in turn, to monstrous physiology. Nebuchadnezzar’s pride was the basis for his banishment, such that God spoke to him through a dream that was interpreted by the prophet Daniel: “They shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen… till thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will” (Daniel 4:25, KJV).

Nebuchadnezzar’s exile also produces physically monstrous consequences: “and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen… till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like bird’s claws” (Daniel 4:33, KJV). Thus Nebuchadnezzar’s physical changes are indicative of his inner monstrous potential, a theme that is common in other medieval texts. Descriptions such as these are strikingly similar to those of St. Christopher the Cynocephalus, a physical monster with morally upright character. Orchard cites a description of St. Christopher from Old English Martyrology:

[Christopher] came… from the race where people have dog’s heads and from the land where folk eat each other. He had the head of a dog, and his
locks were exceedingly long, and his eyes shone as brightly as the morning-star, and his teeth were as sharp as a boar’s tusks… but he could not speak like a man. (14)

In another text, St. Christopher is also stated as having “nails… like unto curved reaping hooks, and the nails of his toes were like unto the claws of a lion” (Orchard 15). These passages call the text’s few descriptions of Grendel’s physical traits to mind. When Grendel makes his final approach to Heorot, the poet notes that his eyes hold a ligge gelicost / lehot unfaeger, “light not fair, most like a flame” (726-727). When Grendel’s arm is later displayed within the hall, the poet notes the following of his fingers:

The end of each one [finger], each of the nail places, was most like steel; the hand-spurs of the heathen warrior were monstrous spikes. Everyone said that no hard thing would hurt him, no iron good from old times would harm the bloody battle-hand of the monster. (18)

Thus the poet reiterates that Grendel is not only physically monstrous, but that as a heathen warrior, his appearance may be reflective of his condemned soul in much the same way that Nebuchadnezzar and St. Christopher’s appearances also reflected their initial heathen states.

Physical monstrosity is also said to point to innate or willful sin, as echoed in the later medieval idea of the wild man. The wild man, whose “alienation from God’s grace [is] represented by… bodily disfigurement” is said to be spiritually monstrous, according to Bovey, who claims “The wild man’s animal appearance reflects his inner moral state” (57). Whether they appear in the book of Daniel, retellings of the St. Christopher legend, or in later medieval wild man tales, the message surrounding these depictions of physical monstrosity is clear: a monstrous appearance signifies moral monstrosity.
On two occasions in the poem, Grendel’s physical monstrosity is also emphasized. Hrothgar refers to him and his Mother as they appeared to those who observed them on the distant moors, and the poet also notes the largeness of Grendel’s head, when it is brought back to Heorot following Beowulf’s killing of Grendel’s mother. In the first instance, Hrothgar is clearly unsure of Grendel’s nature and origin:

I have heard landsmen…[say] that they have seen two such huge walkers in the wasteland holding to the moors, alien spirits. One of them, so far as they could clearly discern, was the likeness of a woman. The other wretched shape trod the tracks of exile in the form of a man, except that he was bigger than any other man. Land-dwellers in the old days named him Grendel. They know of no father. (24)

This passage allows room for several interpretations. At face value, it suggests that Grendel is of a race of giants, of an exiled alien people, or perhaps both. Much later in the poem, the poet also states that Grendel’s severed head is a mægen-byrpenne or “great burden” for Beowulf (1625), and that four men were required to carry it to Heorot (1637-1639).

Sandner and historian Alexie Bovey have noted that literary monsters such as Grendel appear on the cusp of a shift in thought, when humans began to place the so-called monstrous races and species on a continuum that was marked by their potential for salvation (Bovey 5; Sandner 173). Prior pagan monsters presented a simpler picture because they lacked souls and therefore needed no characterization. Tolkien also notes that the early Christian Anglo-Saxons had begun to view prior assumptions about monstrosity in a decidedly Christian light, with “old” monsters assuming new significance as images of spiritual evil (27). The religious context of the Cain myth provides the reader with a rationale for Grendel’s ill treatment: religious context shifts the role of monsters from simple creatures to spiritually depraved enemies who, in a sense,
deserve what they get (Atkinson 60). The Cain myth is used to keep Grendel firmly in his monstrous place and as Atkinson notes, Grendel's mother is also referred to as a descendant of Cain when she avenges Grendel’s death, as if a reminder of her true role in the poem is necessary, lest her revenge be considered justifiable (61).

Cynocephali such as St. Christopher are also at a similar point along a monstrous continuum, for as the story of the martyred saint clearly shows, they were considered monstrous but of enough conscious capacity that they were also savable (Orchard 15). Grendel, too, occupies a border space with other beings that are not human but are close enough to human status that they may be called “heathen” and are therefore damnable as well. This continuum thus allows room for the variety of monsters that Bovey outlines in her historical analysis, and gives further evidence of the often blurry line between humans and other species, as well as humanoid monsters. Because Grendel is not described in great detail, we cannot know what species he is a part of, but the text does not allow for him to be a dumb brute, either. Grendel’s monstrous behavior therefore seems to be rooted in a combination of circumstances and his exile in connection to Cain’s kin, such that his actions appear particularly monstrous because he is a physical “other.”

As seen throughout the preceding sections, the text raises numerous questions that it does not answer. Edward Irving has summed up the situation as it is presented to the reader:

[Grendel] is referred to at different times as a devil (feond on helle 101, feond mancynnes 164); a destitute man (feasceafi guma 973); a hall-thane (healðegnes 142); a sorcerer (helrunan 163); …a giant (eoten 761) …So what is Grendel really, since these descriptions are hardly consistent with each other? …No clear distinctions or discriminations are provided…The poem never answers these questions in a way that logically tidies up all loose ends and contradictions (18).
Grendel is, simply put, not wholly knowable. His departure from the non-human characteristics of traditional Norse monsters, as well as his placement nearer the human borderline of accountability is what befuddles readers, critics, and the other characters in the poem. It may also be what creates his simultaneous allure and uncanniness. Grendel can, in some sense, be twisted to reflect whatever one seeks in him, such that he represents human and monstrous traits alike, yet is never fully either.

Tolkien's benchmark essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," was one of the first critiques to consider Grendel worthy of much discussion, but the emphasis is largely concerned with how the poem's monsters may have been inappropriately sidelined in favor of focusing entirely on Beowulf. Since then, most serious discussions of monstrosity in the poem have begun with a reiteration of Tolkien's stance, so that his essay has served as something of a cornerstone in scholarship. Tolkien's treatment of Grendel occurs most carefully in his Appendix (a), namely "Grendel's Titles." Tolkien notes that monsters of the pre-Christian era that were of "more or less human shape" would have leant themselves to an interpretation of being cursed, such that "Their parody of human form... becomes symbolic, explicitly, of sin" (36). Tolkien continues by saying that "Grendel is not only under [Cain's] inherited curse, but also himself sinful... he is conceived as having a spirit, other than his body, that will be punished" (36). For Tolkien, the question of Grendel's character is rooted in the poem's transitional time-period. Grendel is not a relic of the pagan monster tradition, a classical bogie, nor is he a supernatural devil. The Cain myth places Grendel at an awkward intermediary period, so that he is not only a liminal character, but something of a liminal monster, as well.
Applying the title of "ogre" to him as Tolkien does places Grendel safely not in the world of mere suggestions of devilishness, but among very real, physical shadows.

It is also worth reiterating that we are never given Grendel’s perspective. He is instead presented as the subject of retold stories, appearing only twice as an acting character, and even in those moments, is never given the “voice” that speaking characters are given (whether this is the case because Grendel cannot speak, or because the author refuses him a voice is unclear). Beowulf, in contrast, is the poem’s hero and as such his reasons for killing are fully known, sanctioned, and excusable. This fact of sanctioned killing also highlights a key aspect of cultural understandings of monstrosity: what one side considers heroic may be viewed as monstrous by the opposing side in a conflict. The frequency of aforementioned parallels among terms used to describe Grendel and Beowulf, as well as the parallels in their actions as warriors or revenge-killers are sufficient to inform the reader of how much more blurry the line between heroism and monstrosity is than it at first appears to be. Greenfield suggests that Beowulf exhibits similar traits to Grendel in some portions of the text, and notes that parallels between Beowulf and Grendel’s behavior indicate that the poem’s hero has the potential to behave just as monstrously (297). By using such parallels to prove that Beowulf is capable of being monstrous, Greenfield also supposes that Grendel is the default monstrous character in this scenario. He does not consider a second possibility: that the characters are discussed in parallel terms because they possess comparable roles on opposing sides.

Grendel may be deemed morally monstrous simply because his nightly reign over the mead hall prevents a generalized enforcement of Heorot’s norms. In this sense, Grendel is more a rival to Hrothgar than he is an ironic thane, for as long as Grendel
lingers about, Hrothgar cannot reign supreme. Grendel’s receiving of the monster label further contrasts him with how “good” Hrothgar supposedly is, so that his actions also pave the way for a later contrast to those of Beowulf. Cohen reminds us that without monsters we cannot have heroes and Grendel’s actions provide Beowulf with a means to demonstrate his heroism (81). To claim that Grendel is merely a foil for Beowulf’s heroism seems an incomplete reading, however, for the ambiguity of his exile and his feud with Hrothgar are suggestive of missing pieces to a puzzle, of something deeper but unstated, such that Beowulf’s arrival may be the final, but not a central piece of this puzzle.

More recently, Robinson, Huffines, and Orchard have suggested that the poem’s language allows room for a blurred distinction between monstrosity and heroism (and therefore between Beowulf and Grendel), but this criticism has dealt primarily with how aspects of monstrosity may relate to Beowulf, and to what degree he is or isn’t heroic, such that Grendel is implied, by default, to be Beowulf’s monstrous counterpart. Our understanding of Grendel cannot easily be separated from the context of his critical reception over the years, so confirmation bias may also be playing a large part in current interpretation: we tend to view Grendel as being monstrous in specific ways or for specific reasons, simply because the critical heritage has long constructed him in these ways. While Robinson and Greenfield have noted that the poem’s ambiguity allows room for Beowulf to be less heroic than we have traditionally supposed, it has never been suggested that these ambiguities might imply that Grendel’s monstrosity is something of a cultural projection, either.
In summary, I have been arguing that Grendel’s monstrosity rests in the excessiveness of his behavior, rather than his behavior itself. He nonetheless is therefore much closer to human status than generations of scholars would have us believe. The pitfall of confusing a textually-based, Anglo Saxon view of monstrosity with modern definitions of monstrosity may be avoided by placing authority upon the original text and its most literal translations, but we are still left with the question of why Grendel’s monstrosity is presented in the way that it is, why he is deemed human-like in some instances, while he is clearly not human, and why the poet chooses to have the Danes project such anxieties onto him. Grendel’s role as an “other” is particularly apparent because he cannot be understood outside of his monstrous label: what we see is all we have. There is no "non-other" context for him so we are forced to view him as the monstrous other. Was Grendel “monsterized” more readily because he is inhuman, and therefore an easy scapegoat? We lack a context for him outside of his relationship to Heorot, so his monstrosity is dependent upon Heorot in order to serve as a contrast to what is “civilized.”

Theoretical topics of monstrosity will be discussed in greater detail later, but a generalized definition of monstrosity as it has been shown to exist in the text thus far, may be said to refer to a being that is in some way different, unnatural, liminal, and uncanny (Sandner 173). According to such a categorization, Grendel is indeed a monster by the Danes’ standards, but his apparent agonies over his exclusion (lines 88-90) also suggest that he believes that the Danes have treated him monstrously. In this sense, Grendel may be both monster and victim: a sort of scapegoat who must die in order to put an end to “an ever escalating cycle of reciprocal violence” and whose individual role is
less important than the warning his actions and death seem to convey (Lionarons 4). The varied uses and understandings of a monstrous label also suggest that monstrosity, apart from being not at all uniform in its object, is subject to change according to whose perception is being considered. Grendel’s situation may be said to inform us that, in the world of *Beowulf*, monstrosity may be innate or may develop as a byproduct of circumstances acting upon a “normal” nature, but that most importantly, monstrosity is *assigned*. 
CHAPTER II

GRENDEL’S MOTHER: SOCIETALLY CONFINED
OR RADICALLY INDEPENDENT?

The critical heritage surrounding Grendel’s mother is of a more recent development than the scholarship focusing on her son and often approaches her from a completely different angle. Chance has suggested that she is human-like in some ways, but is nonetheless atypical of human women of the period because she responds to Grendel’s death by avenging him, rather than promoting peace, as Anglo-Saxon women were expected to do (253). Temple notes that the text presents her as a noblewoman who has betrayed her status by enacting the male task of revenge killing (14). Contrary to this interpretation, Taylor has proposed that Grendel’s mother fulfilled a duty that would have been appropriate for women in Anglo-Saxon society to assume in the absence of a male family member (21). Thus her behavior has been alternately condoned or cited as an ironic inversion of a traditional female role, but the central basis for her actions within the poem remains beyond questioning. Since she kills to avenge her son, as line 1256 of the poem clearly indicates by referring to her as an “avenger,” her being designated a monster on the basis of revenge alone produces a role for her that is hardly comparable to that of Grendel.
Each of these approaches focuses upon what has become the default theme of her story: the question of whether or not her behavior is monstrous for a female. This tendency so pervades the criticism that claims regarding her monstrosity hinge primarily upon these questions of gender-appropriateness, to the virtual exclusion of all else. While a non-gendered reading, which divorces gender from identity and culture entirely, is not possible, I do maintain that the criticism thus far has been so thoroughly preoccupied with the question of her femaleness that this topic has significantly overshadowed and prevented our viewing her monstrosity as a whole. Such responses as these fail to adequately address a key issue: if Grendel’s mother is of the same lineage as Grendel, she is likely of the same species, yet her monstrosity is never framed in the same terms as those of her son.

A cursory look at the text will reveal the likely basis for these arguments: namely, that specific details about her are impossible to sketch out, since her very identity is based upon her gender and her relationship to her son, without whom she has no connection with human society. Without Grendel, she has no name, no textual function, and had Grendel not been killed, she would likely not have acted. This quality of her being unknowable outside her relationship to Grendel may in fact be the very aspect of her that induces anxiety in Beowulf and the Danes, for without the framework of her son’s story, we know nothing about her. At first, her seeming interdependence with Grendel and firmly constructed gender role assignation (she is, after all, nameless apart from the identifier as “Grendel’s mother”) place her in an even more liminal role than her son. Thus Grendel’s mother, like her son, is situated in a viewing space dominated by contradictory critical interpretations, each speculating upon what are essentially
unknowable details. The question then becomes whether or not this liminality is intentional on her part, is the byproduct of her being discounted as a monstrous “other” by the Danes, or if it’s due to a combination of reasons.

A larger issue then emerges out of these contradictions: she incites disagreement among scholars because the text itself presents her in a way that is self-contradictory, repeatedly constructing her in terms that either highlight her physical monstrosity (by referring to her collectively with Grendel as “huge creatures” in line 1348) or her savagery in battle, both tactics that distance her from human society and place her firmly in the realm of “the monstrous” while also telling us very little about her. The critical history on Grendel’s mother also complicates this issue by myopically fixating upon her femaleness, a theoretical move that bases assumptions about her behavior upon a single action and does not consider her life or status prior to that interaction, presupposing that she maintains the same beliefs about gender appropriateness that humans do. While feminist critics often cite Grendel’s mother’s “incorrect” or “unfeminine” actions as the basis for her monstrous designation, her lack of a social role until she attacks is more telling than is the presence or absence of human feminine attributes.

Contrary to this critical trend lies an unexplored alternate possibility: that by constructing her as it does, the text suggests that (in addition to her disregard for human gender roles) Grendel’s mother is in fact more monstrous than her son because she is much more independent from society. Her absence from the poem until the moment of revenge may not be an indicator of exile so much as emphasize just how unappealing society is to her. I propose that, unlike Grendel, his mother is not a social being and is, for this reason, othered twice: once for her physical monstrosity and once for her asocial
behavior, an aspect of her monstrosity that stands apart from human definitions of gender appropriateness. Her disinterestedness in participating in a society that focuses upon participation and interdependence as a measure of one’s purpose likely creates greater anxiety than Grendel’s thwarting of societal mores through his warped form of participation. By handling her revenge as she does, Grendel’s mother shows that human rules are not only unnecessary to her survival, they are beneath her notice.

The possibility that Grendel’s mother does not feel the need to conform to the Danes’ norms on their terms is suggested in the almost complimentary terminology that is used to describe her in certain instances throughout the poem. Unlike Grendel, whose introduction is rooted in the Cain legend, Grendel’s mother’s story is presented as a direct reaction to Grendel’s death, such that her primary role as mother-avenger is firmly set. She is introduced in line 1259 as *ides aglaecwif* or “lady monster woman,” a term that has spurred some controversy. Temple notes that

One detail of the poet's description [of Grendel’s mother that] has been overlooked by commentators is the epithet applied to the troll-wife in 1259a: *ides aglaecwif*. The latter compound means 'monster woman,' or less specifically, 'powerful woman.' The meaning of the former is less obvious, and more significant… [The term was] applied, in the earliest times... to superhuman beings, occupying a position between goddess and mere woman. (10)

As Temple rightly states, the term *ides* presents an interpretive challenge because it has been applied not only to Grendel’s Mother but also to human noblewomen throughout the corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature and typically denotes a woman who is to some degree a lady, though not necessarily benign. Such a woman may act for the good of her people, as in the case of the heroine Judith in the text by the same name, but she may also cause
their downfall. Eve is referred to as an *ides* on occasion, as is Modthryth, a human queen in *Beowulf* who famously puts to the sword all men who offend her. Temple also suggests that Modthryth is a:

A woman who is not, like Wealhtheow and Hildeburh, merely unfortunate, but evil, [and] is also called *ides* by the *Beowulf*-poet. He observes of Modthryth's unladylike habit of having all who looked at her put to death 'nor was that such queenly behavior for a lady' (1940b-1941a). She is no 'lady,' and neither is Grendel's mother. (13)

While these terms may be applied to women of questionable moral standing, they are always applied to human women, with the exception of Grendel’s mother. Temple has noted that, unlike the other female characters in the poem, “Grendel's mother is outside human society altogether. But the poet refers to [her and Modthryth] by the same word, as if to suggest that the Grendel-kin are not so far from the human order as the dwellers in Heorot would like to think” (14).

By using terms such as *ides aglaecwif* to describe Grendel’s mother, the *Beowulf*-poet "creates semantic tension... in order to focus the attention of his audience away from the potentially derogatory term aglaecwif and towards a term which denotes nobility of birth or character" (Taylor 18). Taylor also points out that

There is no information available to the audience of *Beowulf* to indicate that Grendel's mother is an inherently evil creature... the only information recoverable... concerning Grendel's mother is that she is in fact Grendel's mother and as such must be both a woman and an aglaeca. (20)

If being aglaeca also connotes evilness, then herein lies a contradiction. The *Beowulf* poet, as Taylor notes, uses this term to effectively draw attention to Grendel's mother “through his deliberate application of a term that almost always denotes either a woman
of gentle birth or a woman who performs some brave deed" (20). While she is different from humans, she is also, at least in this respect, different from her son, who possesses a defined, albeit warped role within human society.

Whether this usage of *ides* was meant ironically or literally makes all the difference in how we approach Grendel's mother. As Taylor has posited, the term would seem to suggest that, unlike Grendel's killings, the *Beowulf*-poet meant to highlight the justification behind Grendel's mother's actions and therefore the term was meant literally. An ironic usage of the word would instead highlight the extent to which she has been "othered" because her actions would have been noble had she been human, but are not excusable for her. The fact of these differences may also be what arouses such anxiety among the Danes: the knowledge that she is not driven by bloodlust could not have eased matters in their minds. Two possibilities are thus presented: that she is not excused because she is a female, and she is not excused because she is a monster. Temple does address this latter possibility by stating that "The description of Grendel's mother as 'ides' recalls the sense in which the monsters' realm of exile is an anti-society, Grendel a parody of the hall-thegn, and his mother a ghastly caricature of the cup-bearing hostess," but he limits the argument to the question of to what extent Grendel’s mother, like her son, is intentionally (or accidentally) mirroring human society (14). Chance believes that Grendel's mother's "masculine aggression contrast[s] with the feminine passivity of both Hildeburh and Wealhtheow" (*Women* 100) while Acker presents her as a feminine anti-type and points out that Norse women who took "vengeance into their own hands...[were] considered distinctly deviant" (706). He also notes that the legend of other female warriors such as Guthmundr and Hervarthr "reflect[s] a fascination with the anomaly of a
female warrior, who adopts her role only in the absence of male heirs” such that “the system of feuding has produced a monstrous, avenging mother who carries the hero to the threshold of mystery” (706,8). Each of these approaches is based upon the assumption that Grendel’s mother operates with intent similar to that of Grendel, and that she wishes to participate within human society.

Another problematic term used to describe Grendel’s mother with surprising regularity throughout Beowulf criticism is the word “dam.” This term does not have a counterpart in the poem and associates her with the animal kingdom in a way that contradicts the other terms discussed above. She may be inhuman, but the surprising consistency with which this term is embraced throughout scholarship denies her agency completely, placing her in a category that is much less human-like than Grendel is ever described as being. Acker alone notes that this term is “not strictly speaking supported by the poem's usage, which calls her Grendel's modor” (709). “Dam” also confines her to a niche that may well represent how the Danes perceive her in the text but belittles her in a way that is not justified by the more objective descriptions of her that are provided throughout the narration. It is possible that the anxieties caused by her role and circumstance have even spilled over into criticism, such that our tendency to view characters whom we have been told to consider monstrous has allowed for the wide adoption of a term that is typically reserved for livestock to be used to describe a character of unknown physiology. Critics who use such terms have forgotten the indefinite nature of her character and wrongly emphasize her monstrous physiology in a way that foregrounds physical monstrosity as the basis for her separateness from human society. The text is, in fact, quite ambiguous about her physical appearance and implies
that while her position within the poem is further removed from human status than Grendel’s is, it also suggests that this separateness does not bother her, much less provoke her retaliation. It could be that Grendel’s mother is represented in more animalistic terms simply because she does not take an interest in society and, to the Danes, participation is a defining characteristic of humanity.

Her apparent lack of interest in human society, as well as the absence of a definable overlap between her sphere and that of the Danes, may be what makes her single known act of violence more unnerving than Grendel’s. Her act is based solely upon her devotion to her son and not predicated upon a need for social interaction. If one argues that revenge is a human behavior, then the only time when Grendel’s mother exhibits human-like behavior is when she kills Aeschere. Whether or not her actions are suitable for a woman should not be the question so much as why she is viewed as most monstrous precisely at the first (and last) time she behaves like a human. Grendel’s mother thus becomes a source of anxiety not just due to her gender but because her actions threaten what Julia Kristeva refers to as “individual man's dominance” and promote a general disrespect for “borders, positions [and] rules” (4). Therefore, Grendel may be monstrous because he has an insatiable desire for revenge, killing beyond the limit of what would be considered an acceptable level within a warring culture, while his mother is monstrous because she does not care to play by the rules even a little.

The question of what constitutes appropriate revenge becomes very important when considering Grendel’s mother’s role because the text assigns that role to her so explicitly. Unlike Grendel, whose motivation is more ambiguous, his mother is described in no uncertain terms as being “an avenger… woman, monster-wife” and later is said to
be “greedy and gallows-grim… to go on a sorrowful venture, avenge her son’s death” (23). The avenger role is further emphasized in the “head for head” motif that follows her single attack on Heorot. The poem reads, following her killing of Hrothgar’s long-time friend Aeschere, “That was not a good bargain, that on both sides they had to pay with the lives of friends” (24). Between lines 1331 and 1344, she is referred to as a “wandering, murderous spirit,” an “awful creature,” and a “worker of wrong.” She is also said to “avenge the feud,” “avenge her kinsman,” and to “carr[y] far her revenge” (24). Irving sees each monster’s motivation as being plainly displayed, stating that “Grendel attacks because he is angered that the Danes are making music in their newly-built hall. His mother later attacks to gain vengeance for her son’s death” (9). Thus vengeance is, to most critics, synonymous with her character. The reason for this trend is straightforward enough, for had she not been given cause to act, she may not have entered the narrative at all. The Danes do not even find it necessary to mention her existence to Beowulf prior to her attack. Hrothgar, upon learning of Aeschere’s death, then sees fit to describe her, collectively with Grendel, as a “huge walker” and “alien spirit” and also, as noted prior, goes on to state that she “so far as they could clearly discern, was the likeness of a woman” (24).

The passage above almost suggests a rekindled memory, an “afterthought” acknowledgment of her presence, as though the Danes had considered her beneath their notice until she overstepped the bounds of her role as an isolated, female monster. Initially, her attack pales in comparison to the havoc that Grendel repeatedly wrecked upon the Danes: “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). Instead of Grendel’s standard thirty-thane killing spree, she kills one man and departs, her vengeance fulfilled.

It is possible that this oversight was due to an assumption that she, as a female, was not a threat, but it could also be that Hrothgar did not deem it necessary to mention a monstrous being who had until then showed no interest in him or his people. Various references to human women as peace-weavers throughout the poem give ample precedence of the expected roles of women in Anglo-Saxon society, such that the likelihood of a female monster attacking Heorot had probably not entered his mind, assuming that anyone in Heorot remembered her at all, prior to her attack.

It is at this point in the narrative, however, that her role and character become somewhat less clear, for when Beowulf retaliates on Hrothgar’s behalf, the tables turn. The remaining scenes where she is either physically present or spoken about produce what becomes one of the poem’s central mysteries: why does her conducting an act that is usually condoned by humans earn her the label of monster? Grendel is presumably provoked by a far less noble motive than familial obligation. Beowulf, who did not know of her until her attack, takes on the role of avenger himself and follows her to the mere, where he then encounters her within her own sphere. A striking shift in tone occurs here, for Grendel’s mother cannot be easily vanquished, and Beowulf soon realizes that he must give his all and “care not for his life” (27). Thus the hero finds himself to be an “angry warrior,” “desperate for life” and “savage and slaughter-bent” while Grendel’s mother is simply referred to as “deadly foe” and “avenger” (27). This is the second time when the poet offers a “somewhat sympathetic description of Grendel's mother …
[whose] motive for attack on Heorot is maternal vengeance” (Butts 120). Beowulf has found himself nearly outdone in terms of both his strength and will power.

As noted prior, what seems especially startling to critics is not Beowulf’s near undoing at the hands of a monster, but the fact that his opponent is female. Acker notes that Anglo-Saxon society maintained "particularly explicit... expected male and female roles in a feud" where "the role most often taken by women… is inciter to revenge" and not the avenging role, itself: "inciting is women's business, but revenge is men's business" (705). However, assigning Grendel's mother a monstrous label on the basis of this action alone seems precarious. Had she been human, her revenge may have seemed justified. Her revenge therefore seems monstrous because she is already a monster: the revenge in itself is not what makes her monstrous. Taylor notes that "Ironically it is precisely this action which has caused some contemporary critics... to condemn Grendel's mother as an inversion of the Anglo-Saxon idea of femininity" (21). This may be the case if we were to limit the discussion to one of gender, but if vengeance in itself is not a sign of monstrosity, what discomfits Beowulf so greatly that he avoids retelling his near-death experience with an even greater monster than Grendel? Irving notes that from the heroic point of view... to be blocked from any free action by a female monster must seem more frustrating and humiliating than to be blocked by a male... In this fight there is, in other words, a powerful and effective contrast... that gives the fight with Grendel's mother its distinctive quality, making it more dangerous, more unpredictable, and more excitingly vivid. (98)

But fascination does not imply tolerance, and Grendel’s mother is hardly excused. A mother would have been expected to act primarily as a peace-weaver, or to allow her
husband, sons, or other male relatives to avenge on her behalf, but Grendel's mother, on the other hand, “does not play by [masculine] rules; she absconds with her prey and forces Beowulf to fight on her home turf” (Acker 708).

The entirely different context of Beowulf’s battle with a female monster produces greater tension than does the fairly straightforward battle with Grendel, to the extent that Beowulf is far from eager to give details of the fight upon his return from the depths of the mere. Dana Oswald has suggested that Beowulf’s hesitance to discuss the goings-on in the mere is a reflection of his discomfort with Grendel’s mother’s power, as well as with his embarrassment at having been emasculated on several occasions throughout the fight. She notes that Beowulf "suppresses certain details and exaggerates others" when he retells his battle stories to Hrothgar and later to Hygelac, that while "many scholars... have shifted Grendel's mother to the background of the poem... Beowulf reacts to this powerful figure of the archaic mother by covering her up both in the mere and with the reports he offers..." (64). Oswald further contends that “in attempting to erase [Grendel’s mother] from his stories, Beowulf signals to the reading audience just how important she is" (63-64). Herein lies a notable distinction between the narrative Beowulf tells and what we as readers learn from the poet, which Oswald attributes to Beowulf's unwillingness to revisit "the strange and erotic tension he experiences in his fight with Grendel's mother" (64). Of this same instance, Irving simply calls him "passive and helpless" (98). Since his Geatish comrades bear witness to his fight with Grendel it needs no embellishment, but the fight with Grendel's mother goes unobserved, such that Beowulf is free to embellish or omit details as he pleases (65). If Beowulf withholds information from the Danes and
Geats in an effort to maintain his pride and to cover over his anxiety over having almost lost the battle, then the fact that the hero is so shaken indicates the sway that Grendel’s mother holds within the narrative. Her role as agent in her own story may have been exhausted upon her death, but the uncertainty and anxiety that she provokes reveals that her impact may be more lasting than that of her son.

The poet notes that Beowulf chooses to bring back Grendel’s head and the sword hilt he has discovered within the mere hall, but the conspicuous absence of a trophy related to his vanquishing Grendel’s mother is particularly telling. Oswald suggests that in bringing back Grendel’s head alone, Beowulf chooses to convey the message that Grendel’s mother was the less formidable of the two opponents, in keeping with what readers were told upon her first attack. Since the poet also narrates the encounter between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother in the mere hall, the text seems to emphasize Beowulf’s attempts to erase Grendel’s mother in the retelling (74-75). Beowulf therefore seems to counter his own efforts, since his denial of the importance of the fight seems to emphasize its prominent position.

Further, in terms of the appropriateness of revenge in general, Beowulf himself states that “it is better for a man to avenge his friend than much mourn” (25), so it seems unusual that Grendel’s mother should be singled out as a monster for having adhered to that standard. Irving reminds us that, in regards to the question of vengeance, “there is clearly a political situation to consider” such that in choosing to go after Grendel’s mother, the “Danes are by now even more deeply involved in the operation against the
By challenging Grendel's Mother, Beowulf goes beyond the role of monster-slayer and engages in a more personal feud. He exacts a principled revenge on Hrothgar's behalf, to repay her for Aescere’s death.

Beowulf also misjudges his second opponent, so the fight that he likely presumed would be a small matter when compared to the fight with Grendel (readers are told that she is “less terrible by just so much as is the strength of women”) turns horribly wrong, when he finds himself in territory that is both literally and metaphorically uncharted. Grendel’s mother’s strength is also something for which he is not prepared. Irving notes that Beowulf probably "assumed his special strength…would serve him well, but Grendel's mother throws him easily, beating him at his very own game…” (96). Beowulf is thus taken aback and unsettled, and from that point forward, anything can happen. Irving describes their ensuing fight as an “elaborate stripping away of defenses, real and symbolic” such that, in Grendel’s mother, Beowulf has “a new kind of opponent, and is in a new world without stable and predictable rules. What is left... is the naked will: being... 'single-minded, not slow in courage' (1529)” (96). Beowulf cannot rely upon his strong handgrip here. The old rules no longer apply and his strength nearly fails him as he is faced with the force of vengeful mother-love. Clearly revenge mentality cannot be a sufficient basis for assigning monstrosity in this case, since Beowulf is now also an avenger, and the fight is between opponents who would both be considered justified in their actions.

Grendel’s mother’s attack on Heorot also reminds readers that the Danes may have been prematurely resting on their laurels. Irving notes that her attack suggests that, “as at Finnsburg, murderous violence can always burst into any hall from the darkness

33
outside" (148). This unsettling notion that one can never quite expect to be safe pervades the text, but what is even more unsettling is Grendel’s mother’s absence until that moment. Since she had not attacked previously, and she does not give the impression of planning to return (though this can only be inferred since she is given but one opportunity to attack), Beowulf’s pursuit of her to her mere hall thus creates an entirely different series of anxieties for both Beowulf and the Danes. They have now committed themselves to retaliate in her territory, to what Irving refers to as a “ghoul-haunted ‘elsewhere,’ the home of the elsewhere-spirits” (149).³ Thus the context of monster battles shifts from one of simple defense and prevention from future attacks to revenge for a single life taken. By choosing to propitiate what amounts to a traditional blood-feud with the Grendel-kin, Beowulf and the Danes draw the monsters further into the human culture of reciprocal violence, and Grendel’s mother into a role that the text never suggests she wanted.

Perhaps the most notable way in which Grendel and his mother differ is that his mother is only presented outside her home environment on two occasions: the single time she attacks Heorot and when Hrothgar’s men reportedly see her walking along the moors with Grendel. Apart from these instances, her actions are unknown to the reader and her existence is not even mentioned. The suggestion is that she has, until then, been limited solely to the mere. Scholars have analyzed her relationship to the mere in various ways.

³ Irving also refers to Grendel’s mother as being “extraordinarily deeply embedded in her natural (or unnatural) surroundings” thus suggesting that as a figure susceptible to stereotyping, she is “systematically reduced, ignored, discredited, and deprived of the ordinary dignity any ravening monster is entitled to” (70). This idea of her being subsumed by her environs until she has become an integral part of them is in contrast to the ideas that “othering” usually calls to mind.
Butts, in one such analysis, describes a parallel between her vagueness and the mere’s highly indefinite topography:

The poet's conflation of lake and sea imagery thwarts any clear picture of Grendel's mere; each cluster of imagery undermines the signifying power of the other. Details of the description of Grendel's mere are manipulated by the poet to produce a subversive rhetoric…we are left with what is, I think, an intentionally contradictory picture. (116)

Butts aptly notes these contradictions, which highlight how much the mere resembles a traditional human home to some degree - it is dry and warm and has a fire – while also being quite dreadful - it is full of weapons and houses Grendel’s dismembered body. What seems even more fitting is that the poet uses hall imagery (which is typically focused upon masculinity and community) to describe the home of an independent female monster. Her home is uncannily like a hall, but it is a monstrous hall, since it is the home to a solo female creature and (until very recently) her only son.

Also worth noting is the ironic fact that, like most critics, Butts does not describe the mere as being "Grendel's Mother's mere," despite her being the mere’s primary denizen. Our awareness of Grendel is primarily due to his stubborn refusal to remain near the mere, to keep to his territory beyond the boundaries of the human world. Grendel’s mother’s lack of interest in venturing out until her son’s death is not only a clear indication of her attachment to her home, it is evidence of her desire to remain separate from human society. If the imagery used to describe the mere itself is unsettling enough to produce the dread that is does, then its association with Grendel’s mother is all the more fitting, since it confines a female creature who is dreadful due to her resistance to conform to human society. Unlike Grendel, his mother “seems to prefer the company of the mere's sea-dragons, and it may not be only her female lack of strength that keeps her
from staying long on her only visit to Heorot. Fanatical and vengeful mother-love is her sole human characteristic" (Irving 71). Thus she not only appears more animalistic than her son does; her subsequent lack of interest in social interaction also heightens the Danes’ perceptions about her monstrosity. Given the fact that Grendel clearly has a wish to participate to some degree in human society while his mother is content to keep to her own regions, this tendency to associate the mere with Grendel seems all the more strange.

As in the case of her relationship to Heorot, Grendel’s mother occupies a distinctly different position from that of her son when it comes to the mere: she is content to remain within its boundaries until she is provoked. While we are told that Grendel also considered himself grieved, we do not know the cause of this grievance. In his mother’s case, the full picture is present and we can understand why Grendel’s death would force her beyond the limits of what is familiar to her. Upon her entrance in the poem, the world of the Grendel-kin is thrust suddenly into the foreground and monsters become less “unknown outsiders” and more so flesh-and-blood enemies. In some sense, they lose a portion of the mystery that surrounded them when they were noted by Hrothgar’s landsmen while traversing the moors, or in Grendel’s case, invading in the darkness. The significance of the Grendel-kin has shifted. They are no longer vague monsters inhabiting the role of “other”: they are a very earthly, though almost certainly alternate, species of creatures whose understanding of familial loyalty is comparable to that of the Danes.

In a warring culture where human society revolves around communal decisions and mores, the question of how Grendel’s mother behaves when she interacts with such a society seems less relevant than the ways in which she is separated from it, and whether or not her separation is intentional. Grendel may live apart from society, but his nightly
raids still enable his participation in it. He is, by and large, a social being whose role may be abhorrent to the Danes, but is nevertheless dependent upon some form of mutual interaction with them. In short, even Grendel has his niche within human society.

Grendel’s mother, on the other hand, differs from her son in a way that seems to engender greater anxiety: she does not long to participate in human society and is apparently content to remain independent, within her own environment.

This reading may also be twisted to suggest that if Grendel’s mother is fundamentally asocial, then her response to Grendel’s death may also be akin to that of a mother bear defending her cubs and may not imply a desire to be human-like at all, but actually emphasize her lack of interest in being such. Thus, Grendel’s mother’s most human-like action takes place not within her home, but outside it, when she does that which is very unfeminine (in human terms) by enacting a revenge killing and thereby also thwarting any potential she may have had to peacefully coexist. She has ruined her chances, so to speak, to be taken for anything less than a monster because her only interaction with human society is an inappropriate one. Thus, the textual basis for her monstrosity seems to be constructed less from her gender or physiology than from her choice to maintain her distance from humanity until participating in this particular action.

Grendel’s mother’s maintained and apparently intentional self-distancing from human society results in her being even less knowable than Grendel, such that her monstrosity is somewhat predicated by her vagueness. Irving notes that her very identity is less clear than Grendel’s, and therefore also seems less stable, stating that

Since Grendel’s mother has no apparent ancestry, she does not seem to be directly involved in the great feud between Cain’s descendants and God…she is [instead] included among the monsters who have lived on in the ‘cold streams.’(71)
Irving here suggests, albeit cautiously, that the text presents a paradox: Grendel and his mother are not of the same species. Whether or not this is the case cannot be determined judging by the text itself. Since it is not possible to determine what relationship the poet intended for her to have to Cain, what we can infer is that, because monstrous actions are often suggestive of spiritual depravity, and because the Cain myth is the specific example that the text presents, then the text may not be separating Grendel and his mother physiologically so much as saying that Grendel is more monstrous morally, and therefore more similar to Cain than his mother.

Thus the question of who Grendel’s mother is suddenly seems to matter less in light of the question of what her self-imposed exile tells us about her attitude toward the human society that surrounds her. Acker suggests that "through [Grendel's mother] is projected an anxiety over the failure of vengeance as a system of justice and that her 'powers of horror'... partly reside in her maternal nature" (703). He goes on to say that,

Through the irruption of a monster, the text projects the anxieties it cannot otherwise adequately voice concerning the inherent weaknesses in the system of feuding and revenge. Killing off one opponent will only trigger the appearance of another as long as the system of revenge by kin is in place. That a female creature and more particularly a maternal one takes this revenge may have highlighted its monstrousness (704-5).

While Acker rightly notes the presence of certain textual cues indicating the futility of cyclical revenge, he fails to see Grendel’s mother’s monstrosity as separable from her femaleness. By stipulating that her monstrosity is more or less based upon an urge for revenge that would be misguided in a female, he pegs her with human standards of appropriateness that the text does not substantiate. To view her as being human-like (or desirous to be so) in the same manner that Grendel is eliminates the differences between
them, and there clearly are differences. Acker clings to the gender question for resolution in a limiting rhetorical move that has become the fallback position of most critics. By claiming that inappropriate behavior for a female is the sole basis for her monstrosity, he fails to see radical independence behind, and singularity of, her actions insofar as they are related to human society.

Thus while Grendel’s desire for contact with human society is made apparent through his consistent and voluntary participation in it, but his mother’s independence is not so clearly stated so much as suggested by her absence outside the context of avenging Grendel’s death. What we have is a character whom the text presents as existing outside the fringes of society, but who has not tried to get in, about whom there is no discussion of relatedness (monstrous or otherwise) to humans. Thus the basis for what her textually constructed monstrosity lies not in an overt discussion of her disinterestedness as much as in the lack of discussions about her in general.

Since the poem's critical heritage fails to recognize her monstrosity in any context apart from her being monstrous for a female, the issue of her independence from society as a whole is never truly considered. By avenging Grendel's death, the murder of a murderer, she does thwart standard female roles but even more so, she indicates that the roles deemed appropriate by human society are not applicable to her. She is, therefore, monstrous primarily due to her radical independence from human society. Her absence from the poem's action until she avenges Grendel's death shows that not only does she lack interest in participation in Heorot, she actually prefers her mere. The sudden presence of a character that has thrived outside of societal involvement of any kind is more discomfiting than a character who has been participating in a consistent, albeit
warped, relationship to society. Grendel, for all his inappropriateness, occupies a niche that the Danes have adapted to and participated in for twelve grueling years. The force with which Grendel's mother breaks onto the scene draws attention to the fact that a world exists outside the borders of Heorot, and that in such a world, some monsters do not aspire to be human-like.

The extent to which Grendel’s mother differs from her son is made most apparent in how the text presents her attack. Not only are her actions somewhat involuntary, but coming to Heorot at all is something that appears to grieve her greatly. She is said to be “mindful of her misery” and “on a sorrowful venture” when she raids the hall (23). The text goes on to describe her as most eager to leave, such that “[s]he was in haste, would be gone out from there… Swiftly she had taken fast hold on one of the nobles, then she went to the fen” (23). These lines are quite different from those used to describe Grendel as a bloodthirsty ravager who carries off thirty men without batting an eye. Not only does Grendel’s mother not mimic her son’s nightly raids; her haste to leave seems more indicative of a conscious decision to maintain her separateness, to do what she came to do and return home as soon as possible.

Hrothgar himself acknowledges that she “has avenged the feud,” perhaps indicating that he did not anticipate her attacking again (24). This passage further suggests a possibility mentioned earlier, than Grendel’s mother’s attack shifts the focus from one of defense against a more generic monster, to offense and retaliation toward a specific being against whom Hrothgar now has a personal grievance. Had she joined Grendel on his prior raids, her conformity to what the Danes had come to expect from
Grendel would have kept her comfortably within a definable role, albeit a monstrous one, but her independence until that moment casts her in an entirely different light.

While *Beowulf* provides ample examples of characters praised for their conformity and interdependence, for understanding that they must contribute to society's collective interest in order to effectively fulfill their roles, non-conformity is not the norm in Heorot and is discussed very little. Unferth, the Dane who famously accosts Beowulf upon his arrival in Heorot, is summarily dismissed when he presents a dissenting opinion. The poet suggests that there is no place for an individual voice, stating that Unferth “would not allow that any other man of middle-earth should ever achieve more glory under the heavens than himself” (11). Beowulf, by way of retort, reminds him of his dubious character, noting how Grendel “would not have performed so many terrible deeds against your chief, humiliation in Heorot, if your spirit, your heart, were so fierce in fight as you claim” (12). Here, putting one's own interests and glory above that of the community is not only cause for public humiliation, it is a sign of questionable morality. Unferth's attempt to castigate Beowulf for what amounted to "showing off" also suggests that, though he himself is of questionable character, he does recognize rogue independence as a legitimate basis for assigning moral monstrosity. Prideful independence and non-conformity is therefore both Unferth’s basis for his criticism against Beowulf, and the fuel for Beowulf's reply.

Even the nameless Dane whom the poet tells us "sought rest for himself elsewhere" is said to return to the fold of Heorot when Grendel's bloodlust becomes apparent, indicating that those who distance themselves from society for whatever reason will recognize their need for integration in times of necessity (5). Thus Grendel’s mother
becomes the first independent character in *Beowulf,* a text that relentlessly reinforces the need for conformity, regardless of status, gender, or whether or not one is even fully accepted, as in Unferth’s case. Grendel's mother is not monstrous because she is an avenger, an inappropriately empowered female, or physically different; she is monstrous because she does not desire her own niche in a society that praises interdependence; even if the fringe of that society is the nearest she can ever hope to come.
CHAPTER III

BEOWULF AND THE MONSTROSITY OF INDEPENDENCE

Recent trends in *Beowulf* scholarship have seen the poem's hero subjected to a new brand of critique, one where the lines between monstrosity and heroism are blurred, parallels between physiological monsters and humans are drawn, and Beowulf's prior un tarnished image is called into question. M. L. Huffines notes that Beowulf himself is described as an *aglaeca*, a term that is often roughly translated to mean "monster" but is also used to describe the historical king Sigemund in line 893 of the poem and Beowulf and the dragon collectively in line 2592. Until its appearance in this portion of the poem, the term is reserved for devils and monsters, and as far as we can tell, this is also the only instance in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature when the term is used to describe humans (74).

In contrast, Fred Robinson has suggested that Beowulf the character should be interpreted as being nothing but an ordinary man with ordinary strength. He notes of Beowulf’s super-human traits that “If the poet had been indiscriminate in his use of the supernatural… then the hero would have become a kind of monster himself, and *Beowulf*… would have been a romantic fable describing the conflict between good monsters and bad monsters” (79). In short, Robinson goes on to dismiss those instances
within the poem that have usually been interpreted as giving evidence of Beowulf's superhuman strength to be editorial misinterpretations, noting that his prolonged, under water descent into the mere (81), his armor-laden flight from Frisia (84) and his days-long ocean swim against Breca (86), when read properly, would seem like normal human activities.

Stanley Greenfield counters this interpretation, claiming that "There may be, after all, a touch of the monstrous in the hero, and that such a touch is not alien to the nature of the Germanic epic" (294-295). If this is the case, then Beowulf's possession of such traits is both textually reasonable and not significant of his being anything less than heroic. Greenfield concludes by stating that "a good case can still be made for the hero's superhuman, and epic, qualities... I would go so far as to say that a touch of the monstrous is not only possible but likely in the characterization of our Old English hero" (300).

Greenfield’s moderate stance seems more plausible, given that Beowulf’s extreme strength is not only evidenced by his actions but is also commented upon by other characters within the text. Beowulf himself brags about having squeezed the warrior Daeghrefn until “my warlike grip broke open his heart-streams, his bone-house” but such statements are not limited to Beowulf’s own self-promotion (42). The Danish coast guard praises Beowulf upon his arrival, stating “I have never seen a mightier warrior on earth than is one of you, a man in battle-dress. That is no retainer made to seem good by his weapons – unless his appearance belies him, his unequaled form” (7). The poem’s narrator calls him “a good man among the Geats… of mankind he was the strongest of might in the time of this life, noble and great” (6).
Regarding the poet's troublesome use of *aglaeca* as a referent to hero and monster alike, Taylor notes that Klaeber, the influential editor of the Anglo-Saxon text, “resolved this problem simply by glossing *aglaeca* as 'monster, wretch, demon, or fiend' whenever it appeared in apposition to Grendel, his mother, or the Dragon but as 'warrior' or 'hero' when the term was applied to Beowulf or Sigemund” (14). She further notes that other glosses of the term have included "one who goes in search of his enemy" (Lotspeich), "formidable one" (Dobbie), "terrible being" (Storms), and "fighter, valiant warrior, dangerous opponent, one who struggles fiercely" (Kuhn) (15). On the particular impact of the term itself, Huffines states that "just as Sigemund is connected with crimes... and the *Beowulf* poet seems to see something barbaric in his actions, Beowulf gradually becomes identified with the monsters after numerous encounters with them” such that he is ultimately “contaminated by monster-likeness as well as by the monster's poison" (80). Huffines' point is clear: because Beowulf is described in the same terms as the dragon, this terminology must indicate that not only does he possess what seem to be superhuman abilities, he has also devolved into something morally monstrous. What she fails to see is that the use of one term to describe monster and hero simultaneously does not necessitate the hero's corruption as much as it suggests that he has, in that instance, adopted traits that the text has otherwise presented as being monstrous. The term may also suggest a parallel in Beowulf's emotions or motivation during that moment more than a monstrosity of character: he has been driven to act in a way that the reading audience of the time, or perhaps the poem's other characters, would have considered monstrous.
The ambiguity of this term (as well as the various parallels between Beowulf and the Grendel kin that appear throughout the poem) has led scholars to compare Beowulf with Grendel on more than a few occasions, but on such occasions, the characters are usually described as being inversions of one another. Stephen Atkinson notes "even the sympathetic side of Grendel's characterization is based upon a fundamental disruption of thaneship" and argues that Grendel "emerges as a grotesque distortion of the hero himself" (59-60). Placing Grendel in such a one-dimensional role, however, does not address Grendel’s relationship with his mother. Nor does it allow room for comparison or contrast between that relationship and how Beowulf reacts to her later in the poem. If Grendel and Beowulf are to be contrasted that plainly, should the contrast not continue throughout the text with parallel battles and relationships? If Grendel is different from his mother (as I have argued prior) and both are called aglaeca, and if Beowulf and the dragon are equally deserving of the term despite their occupying different roles, then recent interpretations of aglaeca may be too literal. Further, I would suggest that these interpretations miss another parallel within the text. During his final battle, Beowulf becomes the protector of his people, a role that is arguably nobler (by today's standards) than his earlier fame-seeking behavior, yet it is at this moment when the text describes him in the most ambiguous terms.

Until this final battle, Beowulf is referred to in solely complimentary terms. He is called "noble and great," "a good man" (6), a "brave one," "mighty warrior" (7), "daring and bold" (8), a "strong chief," "famous in battle" (9), "fierce" (13) and "mighty" (14). He is not referred to as aglaeca for having killed Daeghrefn, and his detractor Unferth does not label him as such when calling his character into question. Notably, all of these
positive terms are used to describe Beowulf prior to his fight with Grendel. Throughout the remainder of the text, the language shifts subtly in tone, such that we witness not a hero’s decline into a state of monstrosity as much as his shifting of priorities, away from his desire for societal acceptance. The text thus presents an aging Beowulf who is driven to his final battle by an internal impulse to protect those he loves, more so than by an understanding of his role in communally sanctioned revenge.

We are first introduced to Beowulf upon his arrival along the Danish coast. The coast guard ushers Beowulf’s party inland, where Wulfgar, Hrothgar’s thane, receives them. Wulfgar notes of Beowulf’s physical appearance, “strong indeed is the chief who has led the warriors here,” and he states that he “he has in his handgrip the strength of thirty men” (9). This is the first instance where the hero is noted as possessing what amounts to super-human qualities, and it also presents the first parallel between him and a monster (we are, of course, told later in the poem that Beowulf can carry thirty suits of armor as easily as Grendel can nab and dismember thirty thanes). In fact, monsters seem to be the only characters who present a challenge to match Beowulf’s great strength, and as what may be considered the poem’s weakest monster, Grendel is hardly a match for him at all.

Of the Beowulf and Grendel fight, Orchard observes that “the distinctions between man and monster have been deliberately obscured… in a twilight domain where the mark of the assailant is measured as much in terror and anger as in corporeal harm” (37). Of the combatants themselves, the text states that “both were enraged, fury-filled, the two who meant to control the hall” and Grendel is described in terms highly contrastive to Beowulf (15). He is “hostile,” a “foul ravager,” “deprived of joy,” and
“wear[s] God’s anger” (14). Grendel’s capacity for evoking terror is represented eloquently, despite the relatively small challenge he presents to Beowulf. During this battle, the contrast between Grendel’s definitive monster role and Beowulf’s role as the hero is reinforced. The narrator states of Beowulf, “Not for anything would the protector of warriors let the grim guest go alive” (15). In short, Grendel may represent something of a hybrid figure, but his monster role is not quite debatable as long as we remain loyal to the text. He functions to some extent as a contrast to Beowulf, but he does so in a simpler and more limited fashion than does his mother.

Scholars have often traced these parallels and parallels between Beowulf and these two monsters. One of the more common areas of exploration focuses upon the idea of invasion and the hall. Lionarons has noted that

> In the main plot of the poem, Beowulf (as hero) and Grendel and Grendel's mother (as monsters) are all uninvited visitors to the [hall] of Hrothgar… Despite the fact that the narrative clearly delineates one as welcome and beneficent and the others as unwelcome and maleficent, each is in fact both heroic and monstrous in differing degrees. (7)

Lionarons aptly notes this use of the hall theme, but she also raises the question of what invasion represents, examining “differing degrees” of monstrosity and heroism, of what essentially amounts to sanctioned vs. unsanctioned invasion. Irving has also considered this aspect of invasion vs. invitation, noting a parallel when Beowulf invades the mere hall. Beowulf is often, for this act, compared to Grendel, but is seldom compared to Grendel’s mother and her invasion of Heorot.

When Beowulf fights Grendel’s mother, the language and textual tone shifts to one indicative of parallels rather than contrasts. Both characters are referred to as “mighty” and Beowulf is described in less than flattering (and more ambiguous) terms for
the first time: he is referred to as “savage and slaughter bent” (27). Grendel’s mother, in turn, is a “deadly foe” but is never referred to in terms that are comparable to those used to describe her son (27). Hrothgar notes, after the battle, that Grendel’s mother has “avenged the feud – that last night [Beowulf] killed Grendel with hard hand-grips, savagely, because too long he had diminished and destroyed my people” (24). The word “savagely” is also telling here, and seems to hint at Beowulf’s later receipt of a monstrous label as he battles the dragon. In Grendel’s mother, Beowulf finds an opponent who is more difficult to defeat than her son. Since Grendel was vanquished for arguably legitimate reasons, her actions declare that familial duty takes precedence over a generalized appreciation of justice, and Beowulf barely escapes her. In avenging her son, Grendel’s mother implicitly declares that familial duty takes precedence over a generalized appreciation of justice, since Grendel was vanquished for what the text clearly shows to be legitimate reasons.

In his later invasion of the dragon’s barrow in order to avenge the deaths of some of his people, Beowulf provides a far nearer parallel to Grendel’s mother than to Grendel. Despite his monstrous status, the dragon is essentially innocent in the way that the people of Heorot were innocent: he does not attack the Geats until his home is trespassed upon accidentally and a portion of his treasure subsequently stolen. Thus the poem’s second battle is not an inversion of the first as much as it is a foreshadowing of the last. The portions of the poem preceding the final monster battle, that of Beowulf and the dragon, reiterate just how respected Beowulf has become. But not even Beowulf can keep the peace, for his people bring strife upon themselves in the form of battles with rival nations, as well as the dragon itself. The text notes that a slave accidentally comes upon
the dragon’s barrow while retreating from “hostile blows,” an act in itself innocent, but made all the more invasive for the fact that this intruder later steals a portion of the treasure the dragon has guarded for three hundred years (38). The dragon’s attack over this invasion is a sudden but somewhat different type of intrusion from those of the Grendel kin. Despite his monstrous status, the dragon is essentially innocent and has not harmed anyone for three centuries. It takes an invasion to spur him to revenge, just as the Danes also felt the need to avenge themselves upon Grendel for his similar invasions. These parallels are further suggested by Grendel’s mother’s retaliation on her son’s behalf, and Beowulf’s later vengeance on the part of his less than innocent people, such that the poem’s second battle is not so much an inversion of the first as it is a foreshadowing of the last.

Atkinson has aptly noted the instability inherent to the revenge ethic, stating that "The role of the avenger... is simple, but when properly executed, its consequences may be unpredictable; vengeance, far from promoting stability, may reduce social order to chaos" (61). Nowhere do we see this more fully than in Beowulf’s vengeance for his people. While Beowulf’s attack upon the mere hall in order to avenge Aeschere’s death is disastrous for Grendel’s mother alone, his attack upon the dragon’s barrow produces horrific consequences for all. Without his leadership, his people become ripe for future attack. The text makes plain the fact that this attack is not far off. Wiglaf, the only thane who steps in to assist Beowulf in his battle, foretells the Geat’s impending defeat, noting the recent history of violence between the Geats and Swedes, as well as a “harsh quarrel” that arose between Hygelac and the Hugas (48). The Finns and Frisians are also noted to be openly hostile toward the Geats, such that “the people [may] expect a time of war,
when the king’s fall becomes wide-known” (48). While the poem ends shortly after this moment, and no future battles are explicitly detailed, the poet notes of Wiglaf’s speech that he did not “lie in his words or his prophecies” (59). The dreadful state of the female mourner at Beowulf’s funeral also belies the bleak future awaiting the Geats. Called merely “the Geatish woman,” she speaks to the future torment of her people by raising a “sorrowful song” and saying “again and again that she sorely feared for herself invasions of armies, many slaughters, terror of troops, humiliation, and captivity” (52). Instead of commenting further upon this outpouring of emotion, the narrator states simply that “heaven swallowed the smoke” of Beowulf’s pyre (52).

Despite this evidence, the cycle of violence generated by revenge is not condemned for innate futility so much as for those moments when vengeance is enacted on behalf of an individual who is also guilty, as is the case when Grendel’s mother attacks Heorot and when Beowulf attacks the dragon to avenge the dragon’s assault on the Geats. Of Grendel’s mother’s vengeance, Atkinson argues that she "embodies a perverted vengeance ethic, linked to an age-old feud, and Beowulf, in meeting the challenge, brings that feud to a satisfying conclusion" (66). What Atkinson does not consider, however, is the repeated vengeance motif in the dragon episode, where not only Beowulf's kingship but his role as a kingly avenger for a people who are, in fact, to blame for inciting the dragon's attacks, forces him to mirror Grendel's mother's actions.

While many scholars cite parallels between Beowulf and Hrothgar, how each man ruled his people for fifty years before becoming the object of a monster’s wrath, the text also supplies a parallel that is often overlooked. Like these two human chieftains, Grendel’s mother also ruled her mere for fifty years. Shortly before the dragon enters the
narrative, Beowulf is referred to as “an old guardian of the land” (38). This reference is never compared to a similar one regarding Grendel’s mother, despite the text noting, upon Beowulf’s descent into the mere that she who had “held the flood’s tract for a hundred half-years... grim and greedy... groped toward him” (26). Unlike his earlier adversary in the mere, the aging Beowulf is said to be “a man of good deeds” who “bore himself according to discretion” (37). The narrator also notes that, after fifty years of reign, his “heart was not savage, but he held the great gift that God had given him, the most strength of all mankind, like one brave in battle” (37). We are explicitly told that Beowulf is not only the strongest of men, but that his moral character is virtually unparalleled. It is this Beowulf who battles the dragon in his old age, who becomes aglaeca. Despite the narrator’s defense of him, Beowulf’s third battle presents a picture that is more troubling than that of the prior two: he acts in a way that is more sympathetic for modern audiences, yet is met with defeat for having done so. Perhaps this defeat is significant of more than Beowulf’s own end. Lionarons notes that "Although Beowulf and the dragon... destroy each other in what is seemingly the end of an era... their battle cannot provide the restoration of social harmony that is the desired result" (13). For the first time in Beowulf’s own life, revenge is futile. While the dragon may be vanquished, the surrounding human societies represent an enemy with equally fatal potential.

The most apparent difference between this fight and the others is that, in this instance, Beowulf is not acting as a hired hand that kills on behalf of the majority: he ventures out virtually alone, against all odds, to defend those he loves. He has not been petitioned to avenge another people but instead assumes the role of familial protector, a role that is more comparable to that of Grendel’s mother than her son. When Grendel’s
mother avenges her son’s death independent of any societal role, she denies the Danes their accustomed authority to sanction revenge on their own terms. Therefore, if a solo avenger is seen as monstrous, then it follows that Beowulf, for similar reasons, may be considered monstrous for acting above and beyond the expected limit of traditional vengeance.

To reiterate the issue stated earlier, vengeance seems to become problematic when the people whom one is avenging are, in fact, guilty themselves. However unintentionally at first, the Geats nonetheless incurred the dragon’s wrath to the end that, in avenging them, Beowulf ultimately surrenders his life for a people who are not wholly innocent. Grendel, also a guilty party, is similarly (and in a similar sense undeservedly) avenged by his mother, an act that also brings about her death. Thus Beowulf is not simply a mirror of Grendel, or an inversion of him, as has been suggested throughout the criticism, and comparisons between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother seem more appropriate. Her role as an independent invader and avenger on behalf of a guilty party is mirrored when Beowulf attacks the dragon’s lair. The independence exhibited by both Beowulf and Grendel’s mother speaks to a lack of regard for the rules that dictate societally-sanctioned revenge throughout the remainder of the text.

Further parallels may be found in the terms used to describe Grendel’s mother’s invasion of Heorot and Beowulf’s later attack on the dragon’s bower. In describing the poem’s final battle, Irving notes that the language surrounding Beowulf’s “slow walk” to his inevitable doom seems “willed and deliberate, toward death, as well as a movement toward the heroic vindication of his people" (106). Irving stops here, however, not recognizing that this tone is also present in the language used during Grendel’s mother’s
attack on Heorot, which is described as “a sorrowful venture” (23). Irving notes of the
dragon battle, that "The mixture of love and killer-fury was not so evident in the earlier
Danish scenes where the love [Beowulf] felt was much less intense," and he goes on to
say that, while Beowulf’s first two fights were motivated by a seeming desire for self-
promotion and protection of the people, his motivation shifts here from "personal pride"
to "personal love" for a people whom "he loves… better than they love him" (107). Irving
thus concludes that the difference between Beowulf the young thane and the aged king
Beowulf is primarily based upon whom he has chosen as the object of his protection.
Earlier, he sought to protect the Danes, but in this final case, it is his own people whom
he protects (107). Beowulf's near paternal devotion to the Geats is apparent here, and so
much so, that the critical disinterest in parallels between Beowulf’s love for his people
and Grendel's mother's love for her son is surprising.

The implications of this parallel are far-reaching and, as of yet, unexplored in the
scholarship. Orchard effectively argues throughout the course of his book *Pride and
Prodigies* that the poem sets up a trend of pride going before a fall, but pride seems an
insufficient basis for such a fall. Pride is warned against in the poem (Hrothgar famously
tells Beowulf to beware the pitfalls associated with it) but it is not pride alone that
produces the impression of monstrosity. I argue that inappropriate vengeance, no matter
how noble the intention, is condemned more consistently and clearly throughout the text
than pride alone, and that such perceptions of inappropriateness are centered on
vengeance that is committed without community backing.

In this sense, Beowulf may well be an *aglaeca* because he explicitly tells his
people that he must avenge the dragon alone, thus separating himself from the support of
community and indicating that his participation in society for its greater good is not necessary (45). A society that would deem his solo attack equally as inappropriate as hers would consider itself justified in referring to such an attacker as an *aglaeca*. Beowulf, moreover, is not dissuaded from entering the fray despite knowing full well that this will be his last battle. In this way, he resembles Grendel’s mother, whom we are told is “gallows-grim” and that she "wished to be gone from there" (23). Had Beowulf allowed the communal opinion to sway him, he may have enlisted the help of more than a dozen men to battle the dragon, and may also have considered the implications of his own death. Instead, Beowulf undertakes a similarly sorrowful journey to an equally grim end.

As is the case with Grendel’s mother, Beowulf’s monstrous designation may not be due to his exhibiting monstrous strength as much as his choice, later in the poem, to diverge from his role as a communal representative in favor of becoming an independent, renegade avenger. Such an avenger may be considered monstrous if he/she circumvents the usual process of vengeance by acting independently, and Beowulf and Grendel’s mother both meet their fate when avenging in this way. In contrast, when Beowulf and other characters avenge justifiably, they are praised. Lionarons has considered this possibility briefly, concluding that:

> critics who see the similarities between Beowulf and the monsters as indicative of some hidden evil on Beowulf's part have missed the point: Beowulf is indeed an untarnished hero precisely because in the retrospective viewpoint of the poem he has been split off from his doubles and designated as such, while the doubles have retrospectively been designated both evil and monstrous. (12)

Lionarons here suggests that Beowulf’s heroic image is in fact preserved precisely because he possesses a firm separation from his “monstrous doubles.” In order for this to
be the case, however, Beowulf could not be explicitly labeled as monstrous by the text, yet this is exactly what occurs during his battle with the dragon and is suggested in his battle with Grendel’s mother.

A more explicit return to the question of what I will refer to as “monstrous independence,” as exhibited by Grendel’s mother and Beowulf on separate occasions, is warranted here. Anglo-Saxon culture was clearly defined by strict rules centered on the importance of communal participation and kinship. Lorraine Lancaster notes that early Anglo-Saxon laws and poetry included references to this importance, that maintaining close ties with one’s kin was not only the expectation, but that departure from that norm would have resulted in a “hapless” or “sad fate” (234). I have suggested earlier that even Grendel occupies a societal niche that his mother lacks and that this niche is what makes him more readily understandable, as well as less monstrous, than she is. The apparent monstrosity associated with independence is outlined both subtly and explicitly on various levels.

First, the importance of communally sanctioned revenge is repeatedly reinforced. When Beowulf enters the narrative to combat Grendel, the poet states that “Very little did wise men blame him for that adventure, though he was dear to them; they urged the brave one on” (6-7). This passage clearly emphasizes the fact that Beowulf set out to kill Grendel with the Geats’ support. Upon his arrival to Heorot, Beowulf discusses his intentions openly, stating “I too do not think that anything ought to be kept secret,” further suggesting that support of the majority is necessary (7). When he battles Grendel, the text notes that “the lord granted to weave for them good fortune in war… that they should quite overcome their foe through the might of one man” (14). Here, Beowulf acts
as a solo avenger, but the emphasis is still upon community (“they should quite overcome their foe”- emphasis mine). Following the battle, Hrothgar’s queen Wealhtheow praises Heorot for its adoption of appropriate principles of community, stating that “[h]ere is each earl true to other, mild of heart, loyal to his lord; the thanes are at one, the people obedient” (22). Later, of the relationship between the Geatish king Hygelac and Beowulf upon his return home, the text reads that the men were “most true in hand fights, and each one mindful of helping the other” (37).

In contrast, the text repeatedly suggests, although less frequently or explicitly, that independent or selfish vengeance is often associated with disastrous outcomes. Hrothgar notes of Beowulf’s father Ecgtheow, “A fight of your father’s brought on the greatest of feuds… after that the country of the weather-Geats might not keep him, for fear of war afterward” (10). Ecgtheow was exiled for what appears to have been inappropriate behavior in the face of battle. While not explicitly stated, the text implies that this behavior later contributed to his ignoble reputation, which then cast an unfavorable light upon Beowulf, by association.

Hrothgar also warns Beowulf directly of the pitfalls of intemperate behavior, following his battle with Grendel’s mother. He retells the story of the bloodthirsty Danish king Heremod who, in drunken fits of temper, “killed his table-companions, shoulder-comrades, until he turned away from the joys of men, alone, notorious king… he lived joyless to suffer the pain of that strife” (30). While this story does not warn against unsanctioned revenge so much as it extols self-control, the additional message behind it is clear: acting intemperately may result in exile, and being alone produces suffering.
The rules surrounding appropriate revenge killing and the overall primacy of community over independence are outlined consistently throughout the text. Lionarons suggests that such a violent but community-driven society is necessarily dependent upon monsters to justify its violence:

Creation of order is therefore dependent… on the suppression of… merely human violence. Unilateral, monster-slaying violence is by contrast deemed 'sacred' violence and portrayed as [being] enacted… for the benefit of humanity. (4)

In short, a society that condones violence while promoting community must find an appropriate outlet for its violent tendencies. Lionarons thus posits that monsters are not only necessary in such a society, they may also function to suppress evidence of the fallibility of human vs. human revenge systems.

Monsters, as has been shown, say more about the culture that produces them than may be apparent at first glance. The monsters of Beowulf are not mere foils of the hero, nor is Beowulf wholly good. Thus complex monsters are compared or contrasted with an equally complex hero, and both raise equally compelling questions about human society at that time. If independence is in itself monstrous in a society where unthinking acceptance is the anticipated norm, there is no place for a “free spirit” in the world of Beowulf. To this end, Lionarons notes that the poem’s monsters have been assigned the monster label because such labeling “allows the other within to be located without,” to the end that the poem’s monsters becomes the representation of those traits that the Danes are not keen to observe in themselves (12). In order for the above to be true, then similarly monstrous traits must be exemplified by Beowulf, and subsequently stifled.

In conclusion, since the monster killings in Beowulf are surrounded by tales of revenge and invasion, Grendel’s Mother, as an already physically suspect being who
inhabits a different world, becomes doubly monstrous: she is both a physical monster and monstrous because she departs from socially acceptable roles, even to the point of rejecting any intercourse with human society. Taylor notes that "Grendel's mother accepted and adhered to the heroic ethic of the blood-feud... Her grief seems as real as Hrothgar's, and her response, swift life-for-life vengeance is... at least as heroic as Beowulf's" (21). Orchard states that, “our sympathy is evoked for Grendel’s mother” because,

Like the dragon, Grendel’s mother is seen as (at first) the victim of an unprovoked attack… Grendel’s mother, like Hrothgar and Beowulf, ruled her mere for fifty years before she (like them) suffered at the hands of an unwelcome guest. (30)

Thus the text implicitly condones her vengeance while condemning her at a surface level by means of the monstrous labels assigned to her by the other characters within the text.

The same trend can be found in the text’s presentation of Beowulf who, in his old age, more closely resembles Grendel’s mother that her son. Both of them are old hall-rulers, both are thwarted in their attempts to protect those they love, and both revenge acts are implicitly condoned by the text. In Beowulf’s case, however, it is the narrator and not the other characters within the text that seems to condemn him. While Grendel’s mother is described as monstrous by the poem’s other characters, it is the narrator who subtly questions Beowulf’s humanity by assigning him a monstrous label, albeit briefly. The narrator thus undercuts the praise that Beowulf repeatedly receives from other humans, in a rhetorical countermove to the approach that the text takes toward Grendel’s mother. The explanation for this contradiction may well lie in the possibility that while there is no place for overt independence in Anglo-Saxon society, and while such actions
may earn the offender a monstrous label, good intentions offset the perception of monstrosity, to a degree.

*Beowulf* provides us with three characters that behave more monstrously than society anticipates, but what ultimately separates Beowulf from the Grendel kin is this implicit contradiction within the narration itself. None of the characters condemn Beowulf, as they do the Grendel kin, and while Grendel is a sympathetic character at times, his actions cannot be condoned as long as we attempt to remain entirely faithful to the text. The sympathy we feel for Grendel’s mother is doubtless of a greater extent than that which her son provokes. Beowulf, however, is the only character whose monstrosity and heroism are explicitly presented by the same voice (that of the narrator) yet whose motives, I argue, become increasingly benevolent as the poem progresses. Nowhere else in the poem do we have it both ways, for while Grendel and his mother are somewhat hybridized and vague, they remain monsters nonetheless. The message behind this textual contradiction seems to be that, in a warlike culture where community is promoted and individualism seems profoundly out of place, an act that seems monstrous in its independence and refusal to follow the norm may nonetheless be heroic.

In this sense, *Beowulf* seems profoundly modern for its implicit recognition that a hero can still die a hero after behaving in a way that the society surrounding him considers monstrous. The poem ends on a grim note indeed (clearly many trials await the king-less Geats) but the presence of this contradiction, this suggestion of Beowulf’s being wholly heroic yet still monstrous, thwarts the possibility of dismissing the text, or its hero, as being too flat. There may be no room for extolling individualism in *Beowulf*, at least not overtly, but the ambivalence surrounding the hero’s independence provides just
enough suggestion of difference-in-similitude that it offers a glimmer of anticipation of a later literary world, where heroes are not condemned for their individualism, but praised.
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

When we consider the rich and fairly longstanding tradition of *Beowulf* criticism, two trends emerge as being most prominent. Initially, scholarship focused on the poem’s supposed epic or mythic traits, examining the text’s structural elements and posing parallels between *Beowulf* and myths, epics, or the Bible. Post-Tolkien, the focal point shifted to the roles of monsters and heroes, where cultural considerations and a degree of psychoanalytic interpretation also had their place. Most recently, Beowulf himself has become the object of critique, and has been argued as possessing monstrous traits, in stark contrast to earlier critics such as McNamee and Goldsmith, who see him as a type of Christ. These interpretations ultimately limit the text to a view that is hedged in by long-established expectations but fails to grapple with the complexities and contradictions within the text.

If *Beowulf* is consistently pigeon-holed as being nothing more than an early medieval epic, then we underestimate both the society that produced it and the complexities inherent in the text itself. The result of this tendency is that students of literature have essentially been predisposed to view the plot and characters as simple and flat. I contend that, by means of the ambiguities and subtleties inherent in the text, *Beowulf* presents itself as something far richer, as well as more modern and relevant than
the limiting trends in criticism have allowed it to be viewed thus far. Even the more novel arguments by Huffines and Greenfield, who have posited that Beowulf is perhaps more complex than his historical reception has allowed him to be seen, enable but a glimpse of the text’s potential for alternate interpretations. These more recent approaches also fall short of exploring the implications of their claims and go only so far as to suggest that Beowulf is more than a flat hero, that both hero and text present ambiguities that the epic theory fails to address.

An understanding of Beowulf’s structural complexities began to surface with Leyerle’s work on what he refers to as the interlace structure of the poem. He notes that “Beowulf is a poem of rapid shifts in subject and time… with little regard to chronological order. The details are rich, but the pattern does not present a linear structure” (146). As Leyerle goes on to point out, the poem’s narrative thread resembles a complex interlace knot, the traditional technique in Celtic and Norse artistry that is based upon creating a pattern of intertwining and interlacing lines in metalwork, sculpture, painting, or knotted rope. The lines within such designs have no discernable beginning or end, as Beowulf does not seem to begin or end definitively. We find ourselves thrust into a story already underway, a story whose ending lacks closure and presents further unanswered questions which circle back upon themselves through seeming lacunae of characters who appear and disappear in the telling. As Earl and others have argued, further digressions, retellings, and historical references hint at external facts that are never clearly stated but crucial to the story. When viewed in this way, Beowulf is clearly not a simplistic, linear, epic narrative. Nor is Beowulf himself a simple epic hero, successful in his virtue until pride becomes his downfall. Orchard has argued something
to this effect, but when we consider that Beowulf is defeated when he acts out of what appears to be vengeful love more than pride, such a claim seems unsubstantiated or at least insufficient.

Viewing *Beowulf* as more complex and relevant than its critics have recognized not only opens the door for further critique, it also presents various possibilities for new approaches to teaching the text. Teaching *Beowulf* has arguably been hampered for years by the pervading assumption that it is simple and limited in that it serves only as an artifact of Anglo-Saxon sentiment and, at best, forces us to see the potential for any society to become fixated upon irradiating what it perceives as monstrous. If *Beowulf* is presented in all its complexities and not seen as an archaic curiosity, we may glean much more from our attempts to interpret it. A prime example of such complexity lies in how the text presents its monsters. *Beowulf*’s monsters are humanoid and occupy the territory around an unfixed borderline of humanness that the hero himself crosses at times. Of the nature of *Beowulf*’s monsters, Phillips notes that “*Beowulf* is a liminal work because it hesitates in relation to the monstrous. Human consanguinity with monsters is a problem for the understanding of community… the consanguineous monster is the definition of humanity at war with itself” (41). Thus monstrosity threatens to overwhelm the text from the outside in: the monsters are made all the more monstrous because they highlight evils already present within society.

If we interpret Beowulf to be an occasionally monstrously-behaved hero, such a character presents a much more ambiguous and richer reading than he does when read as something of a Herculean successor. Such a Beowulf hints at a later breed of hero who often has to step outside the boundaries of his cultural norms – to become occasionally
monstrous by his culture’s standards – in order to accomplish his goal. This Beowulf must, in order to allow his individual principles sway, cease to be the idealized representative of his culture that he was prior to the dragon battle.

In my reading, Beowulf and Grendel’s mother seem to emerge as the poem’s more complex characters. Grendel, in contrast, serves as something of an introductory monster by foreshadowing battles to come. Sandner notes that “Grendel’s shapelessness heightens the effect of the fantastic in the text, leading the reader to shape the monster as the reader will” (163). This reading allows us to view Grendel as the monster who paves the way for future textual complexity by being enigmatic himself. The fact that we don’t know Grendel’s full story complicates the situation further, since we can never be sure of who he is or why he attacks. Grendel’s mother, as discussed prior, is more complex than her son because she challenges the expectation that every character in Anglo-Saxon society must occupy his or her own niche in order to fulfill a social role, regardless of what that role may be. Along these lines, Kearney has suggested that "Each monster narrative recalls that the self is never secure in itself... as our ideas of self-identity alter so do our ideas of what menaces this identity" (4). As the monsters of Beowulf evolve, so must the hero who fights them evolve and, in some sense, adopt certain monstrous characteristics in order to succeed. If we view Beowulf as a character whose identity is not wholly fixed, we encounter a hero who allows more room for interpretation than if we view him as a static, traditional epic hero.

The dragon, which is often seen as the ultimate foe simply because he defeats Beowulf and does not appear in the narrative until Beowulf is an old man, possesses quite a different role from the other two monsters. If we view Beowulf as a complex hero who
occasionally exhibits what his society would deem monstrous qualities, then Beowulf himself becomes something akin to the final monster as the dragon fades into the background, becoming the vehicle by which Beowulf exhibits his monstrosity. The dragon, when viewed in this way, need not serve the same purpose as the other two monsters and may instead function as a more basic threat that allows the scene to maintain its focus upon Beowulf.

A Beowulf who stands apart from society is also, fundamentally, more modern than we have given him room to be. That is to say he more closely resembles the anti-heroes of recent literature than a classical hero, in that he is willing to depart from societal norms. Definitions of what makes someone a monster may evolve with time, but an ambiguous hero and monster that are less easily pigeon-holed possess a greater degree of timelessness than clear-cut epic heroes and villains. Unlike epic texts, Beowulf gives us characters who serve both heroic and monstrous functions, who are deemed monstrous for one reason, but whom the narrator condones for other reasons. Ambiguity also allows for a richer reader response, since we need not feel conflicted about our responses to characters once we recognize that the text itself does not present them as wholly good or bad. As a self-contradictory hero, Beowulf is more modern than we typically give him or the text credit for being. Beowulf anticipates today's less-than-heroic heroes to such an extent that it is perhaps more profitable to call Beowulf an anti-hero than to simply say "Beowulf is also to some degree monstrous." Future criticism could certainly benefit from attempts to explore this angle, which has until now not been well-considered.

In conclusion, Beowulf as a whole is not only a medieval poem, but also eerily modern for its complex presentation of dualities within human nature. If one were to pose
the question, “what does a modern *Beowulf* look like?” the answer may well be “the same as the *Beowulf* we have always had.” The notion of a character that is willing to depart from societal norms within a society that emphasizes communal participation is not far removed from today’s anti-heroes and psychologically complex protagonists. Thus Beowulf is both monster and hero, enigmatic as Grendel, independent as Grendel’s mother, and as fearsome as the dragon. This duality is not only fundamentally unlike the epic style, it subtly and persistently modernizes the text to such an extent that an intentional modernization is not even necessary, so long as we can get past the years of limiting interpretive tradition in which *Beowulf* has been mired, and see the poem for what it is.
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