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“Grendel’s Mother: Defying the Feminine Gender Norms” by Haley Beasley (she/they)

ABSTRACT. *When Beowulf was composed, the gender norms of the masculine and feminine were strict and unmovable. The poem, written down between 900 and 1100, defies these by introducing the reader to Grendel's mother, a character who equates the feminine with the monstrous while simultaneously treading normatively masculine waters. This essay looks at the fight between Beowulf and Grendel's mother in her hall and how it illustrates Grendel's mother's shift along the gender scale in order to avenge her son's death and protect her home. This assertion of power by an attempt to strip Beowulf of his manhood summarizes his, and this society's, fear of a woman undefined by stereotype.*



STUDENT BIO. Haley Beasley is a junior English major from Ellisville, Mississippi with a minor in Disability Studies at The University of Southern Mississippi. This is her second undergraduate degree, with her first being a Bachelor's of Fine Arts in Performance from The University of Southern Mississippi. They submitted their academic essay titled, "Grendel's Mother: Defying the Feminine Gender Norms" in the Identity and Culture category on Monday February 7, 2022.

Haley Beasley

Grendel's Mother: Defying the Feminine Gender Norms

The character of Grendel's mother in *Beowulf* not only defies normative gender roles by existing amongst men who carry out their masculinity through war and violence, but she is purposefully set against the other female characters in the story by using comparison to draw a more defeminizing gaze towards her. Jessica Troy says, "The monster's mother may not be a peace-weaver or cup-bearer, but she certainly understands that she has enemies and needs to defend herself since she views her son's death as an attack on her life." (34). This is emphasized during her fight with Beowulf in the mere, where she is host and head of household simultaneously. I will be exploring the fight scene between Grendel's mother and Beowulf as it is depicted in Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*, a piece originally put to paper between the years 975 and 1025. By viewing this scene through the lens of gender studies with reference to queer theory, I will show that while Grendel's mother is acting on her protective instincts by avenging the death of her son and protecting her home, she steps into traditionally masculine territory while doing so, which has great thematic implications. During the time of the poem, the gender norms would have been seen as set in stone and applied accordingly. This traverse of norms sets Grendel's mother up to counterbalance Beowulf's strength and call into question the role of gender within battle and the world of the poem.

Grendel's mother's guardianship of her family and home quickly parallel the other women of the poem. Modthryth at first defies feminine roles by a show of wickedness in the eyes of her people. She then succumbs to her gender's role when she is married and has children with King Offa. Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's wife and queen of the Danes, takes her role as peace-weaver and host to her people very seriously. She keeps the mead-hall and the people within it

satisfied, and she ensures a path for her family lineage to continue. These characters, and other female characters within the poem, are traditionally confined to halls where they enact their expected duties by pouring mead, mitigating conversations and arguments, and appeasing the more dominant male figures. When Grendel dies and his mother acts against those that maimed him, this spurs the fight with Beowulf in her own hall. This act of passion, fear, and anger is seen as masculine and monstrous set against the meekness and slightness of the other female characters who fit the feminine mold set up by the community and society.

In the battle scene, Grendel's mother's character is shown as a primal being and, therefore, masculine. When "that wolfish swimmer / carried the ring-mailed prince to her court" (Heaney 1506-1507), Grendel's mother is also being directly compared to the queens of the halls that infest her land by setting her up as royalty with a court of her own. This makes the use of "wolfish swimmer" to describe a supposed queen of her castle defeminizing and dehumanizing by comparing her to a wild animal who operates on blood-thirsty instinct instead of intellect. "Their multi-sexed, conglomerate bodies horrify because they can pass as normative." (Price 411) In this world of fulfilled gender roles, the idea of someone who is a woman but interacts in a way that is masculine is monstrous and invokes a feeling of fear amongst this society that operates at a base line of normativity. When Beowulf is coming into Grendel's mother's mere-hall, that juxtaposition is something that is just as frightening to him as the battle itself. Not only will he not be welcomed with a cup full of mead, but he will be met in this court by a woman who matches his physical strength and whose anger and rage are caused by his very own actions. Furthermore, Beowulf is validated in his attack on her hall and self because of her animalistic nature; she has moved so far away from her traditional female faculties that she resembles a woman "out of her mind" and needs to be stopped.

In the heat of this battle to maintain her keep, Grendel's mother is most clearly operating against the restrictive gender roles of the time. The fight itself is an act of constant rotation of roles along the gender spectrum, and there is a cyclical nature to the acquisition of dominance by both characters. Beowulf has no choice but to uphold his masculinity by resorting to attempting the use of weaponry and physical shielding. This is unlike his battle with Grendel, where he completely disrobed to prove his masculinity over Grendel's. He was "ring-mailed" and "for all of his courage he could never use / the weapons he carried." (Heaney 1507, 1509). Although he was not able to use the sword that he brought with him, he was still prepared with weapons. He was even ultimately saved by his armor, proving that Beowulf is not immortal nor invincible. Alongside physical protection, Beowulf was followed by a group of fellow soldiers. Grendel's mother's attack on Heorot was an act of revenge, and Beowulf is now venturing into her home to defeat her in a battle that relies on more of a show of masculine strength than actual justice. Troy says, "It seems that Beowulf is more nervous about facing this monster than he has been with any other foe because of his intense preparation, the wearing of reliable war gear, and grand boasting." (40) Even through the show of strength, Beowulf ultimately is aware of his possible death. There is a genuine fear present that he will be bested by this monster, and therefore, bested by a woman.

Grendel's mother is using force to defend herself, so the complexity of her womanhood is something to be feared by Beowulf and his men. "Even the mere itself, approached through winding passageways, slopes, and paths, and in whose stirred-up and bloody waters sea monsters lurk and the strange battle-hall remains hidden, almost projects the mystery and danger of female sexuality run rampant." (Chance 163) The mere-hall is physically representing not only the female genitalia, with its tunnels and blood, but female sexuality and the indeterminate mind of a

woman whose innerworkings do not resemble the women that uphold society in this world.

When she “grappled him tightly in her grim embrace” (Heaney 1542), not only does she quickly gain status, but the words “grappled” and “embrace” imply sexual connotations. She is taking on a normatively male role in battle and within the sexual nature of this moment. Beowulf loses control, and his masculinity is being physically tackled with. He must choose to see Grendel’s mother as a male opponent because, to him, it is impossible that a woman could have the capacity to challenge him. Because Grendel’s mother’s actions do not align with the traditional feminine roles in *Beowulf*’s society, Beowulf must mentally and physically treat her as male, hence why he uses male pronouns for her at times. In order to make sense of the female figure before him acting in ways that do not societally align with that gender, he sets her up as a warrior in need of defeating instead of a physically strong woman who is seeking vengeance for her son and the infiltration of her home.

The language around Grendel’s mother towards the end of the fight places her in not only a position of physical power but of sexual power. In the lines, “So she pounced upon him and pulled out / a broad whetted knife; now she would avenge / her only child.” (Heaney 1545-1546), she is using penetration to best her opponent. Not only is the knife a naturally phallic symbol because of shape, but the act of penetration is aligned with the action of the male sexual organ. Price says, “Grendel’s mother mounts him and attempts to penetrate him with her knife. In a potentially queer moment of gender transgression, Beowulf becomes the feminine object of a masculinized female-aggressor.” (411) Grendel’s mother uses Beowulf’s own definer of his sex to best him, therefore feminizing him in this battle. Through this role reversal, the poet defines Beowulf as the “weaker” of the two opponents. Not only is the feminizing of a male completely outside of societal norms of the time, but it shines negative light on Beowulf and his

abilities, which have already been questioned by at least one of the men surrounding him.

Grendel's mother weakens him both physically and mentally by her ability to make the gender switch from feminine to masculine.

Grendel's mother consistently straddles the line of gender normativity to produce a character that always challenges the expectations surrounding both men and women in this society. "The appearance of Grendel's mother disrupts the strictly ordered heroic world of the text, and the narrative engages in a mad scramble to conceal the disruption behind a mask of masculine reassertion." (Trilling 1) Through her failed coexistence with other women in society, her physical strength, her sexuality, and her ability to use the gender spectrum to her advantage, she starts to tear down the structure of the world around her. By examining the battle scene with Beowulf through the lens of gender studies with reference to queer theory, one can deduce a world where the existence of a woman such as she would produce fear and uncertainty in a warrior's eyes whose overtly masculine existence is his defining characteristic. This shows how this world built upon the structure of normative gender roles cannot sustain itself strictly on those terms without repercussions, be it physical or mental.

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