

# The Grendel-kin: From *Beowulf* to the 21st century

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## Introduction

Since the 19th century, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* has received sustained critical attention; first transcribed and translated in the early 1800's, *Beowulf* was at a focus point in scholarly study, albeit not on the merit of its literary or poetic achievement. The text was valued more as an interesting linguistic document until what has been described as one of the most important turning points in criticism of the poem, J.R.R Tolkien's study *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, delivered in 1936. In this essay, Tolkien argued for the integrity of the poem in and of itself and for the central place of what are now often seen as the defining aspects of the poem: the monsters, who Tolkien argued held symbolic significance in the poem, and elevated it to more than just an exciting epic concerning the feats of the hero Beowulf against Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. Since Tolkien's essay, many more translations of *Beowulf* have appeared, joined in the 1950's by the first of many narrative adaptations, W.H. Canaway's *The Ring-Givers* (1958). Since then, numerous narrative retellings have appeared, most notably John Gardner's *Grendel*, along with comic adaptations, and — since the 1990's — numerous animated and live-action film adaptations, most famously Robert Zemeckis's 2007 *Beowulf*, memorable through the image of a naked Angelina Jolie as Grendel's mother!

My thesis aims to document *Beowulf's* reception history, from the beginnings of its translation in the 1800's to its most recent adaptations of the last decade, exploring how these works have engaged not only with the poem itself, but also with scholarship surrounding the poem. Such a study will allow us to better understand these works' engagement with the poem in relation to contemporary social and philosophical contexts, and how the poem is used as a means to express modern issues and anxieties. Furthermore, a study of these works can also open opportunities for new readings of the poem and the characters within it, offering alternative viewpoints which may have previously been overlooked.

Of all the characters in the Anglo-Saxon poem, I would argue that the monstrous figures are the most appealing, and the ones who inspire the most creativity in adaptations; it is also through these figures that contemporary fears and anxieties are most clearly expressed in retellings of the poem. Despite Beowulf's role as the heroic protagonist, it is rather Grendel and Grendel's mother (and, to an extent, the dragon) who have captured

the imagination of modern day audiences, as can be seen in one of the more notable adaptations, Gardner's *Grendel*. Gardner's 1972 novel chooses to concentrate on the monster through a twentieth century perspective, one which is perhaps more likely to see the humanity in monsters. This twentieth (and twenty-first) century inclination to see humanity in, and sympathise with, monstrous figures, along with the morbid fascination with antagonistic characters, has led to many more interesting takes on these figures. Such examples can be seen in the sympathetic view of Grendel as a misunderstood outcast in Sturla Gunnarsson's *Beowulf and Grendel* (2005), and a rather surprising appearance of the poem in *Xena: Warrior Princess*, which chooses to focus on Grendel's mother, casting Beowulf as a rather unimportant and superfluous figure.

### The translation of *Beowulf* in context

In order to understand how adaptations and translations engage with the original poem, one must go back to the original Old English in which it is written. Only then, for instance, can one begin to develop an understanding of the first translators' reception of the poem in the 19th century, and in the height of the Victorian era. Written sometime between the eighth and eleventh centuries in the West Saxon dialect of Old English, the poem is accessible to the majority of readers only through translation, meaning that the representations of characters are dependent on popular translations. As argued by many, from the Roman philosopher Cicero in the first century BCE, to the linguists Eugene Nida and Roman Jakobson in the twentieth century, the act of translation can never have absolute correspondence — i.e. there is never exact equivalence between two languages— and therefore, no exact translation can exist. This is especially true of a language like Old English, which hails from both a different time and culture. This lack of absolute correspondence allows for more subjectivity and freedom in translations, and much of this subjectivity, which is often shaped by cultural and societal norms, can be seen in the translations of Grendel's and Grendel's mother's characters.

Much of this subjectivity becomes evident in a reassessment of the Old English terms used to describe these two characters, where some meanings appear to be at odds with many translators' definitions. Through a study of these terms' etymologies and cognates, as well as their appearances in other works from the Old English corpus, a more objective sense of their meanings can be attained. Examples include the Old English *hilderinc*, meaning "warrior", literally "battle-man", which has been translated along the lines of "monster" by numerous translators, and *rinc*, simply "man", which has been translated as "creature", both of which are used in describing Grendel. *Hilderinc* and *rinc*, however, are used also throughout *Beowulf* in descriptions of non-monstrous characters, including Beowulf himself, and also appear throughout the wider Old English corpus in describing other admirable figures, such as Abraham and Enoch in the Old English *Genesis*.

This subjectivity is especially evident in translations of terms relating to Grendel's mother —

*wif unhyre*, literally “terrible-” or “fierce woman”, has received quite inventive translations, with translators, from Tolkien to Heaney, using extremely monstrous and bestial terms in translating this term. *Wif*, however, is used throughout the Old English corpus to mean simply “woman” or “wife”, while *unhyre* is used in texts such as the Old English *Genesis*, *An Old English Martyrology* and in *The Metres of Boethius*, with the meaning of “rough”, “grim” or “fierce”. This, along with the possibility of *unhyre*’s relationship to Old Icelandic *u-hýrr* (“unfriendly looking” or “unkind”) casts doubt on translations which demonise her character.

Such demonising terms are not too surprising, being influenced no doubt, from the very first translations which appeared in the early- to mid-1800’s. One feature of the Victorian era, was the re-popularisation of the pseudo-science physiognomy, which involved the assessment of an individual’s character based on their outward appearance, a — now wholly-discredited — “science” which we still see the effects of in many forms of media today, especially in children’s literature and film. The antagonists of such films as *The Lion King* and the *Harry Potter* series, for instance, namely Scar and Voldemort, may be described as somewhat less aesthetically pleasing than the heroic figures of the stories! The influence of physiognomy can be seen throughout Victorian art and literature, and is notable in works by Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and Oscar Wilde. Morally corrupt figures were often ascribed physically repellent features, an aspect which has arguably been carried over into the translations of *Beowulf*. Grendel and his mother, both of whom were seen as morally inferior characters, were given exaggeratedly repulsive features as a means of expressing their morally repulsive dispositions.

The Victorian translations were also most likely influenced by the prevailing view of women at the time — the Victorian period is notorious for its strict policing of women’s femininity and sexuality; those who swayed from the ideal functions of marriage and procreation were often deemed abnormal, and those who took on active roles were often ascribed unattractive features, as exemplified in caricatures of suffragettes from the late Victorian era. Descriptions of Grendel’s mother are not so far removed from the descriptions of Becky Sharp in William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, an autonomous figure who is described in physically monstrous terms, and is the binary opposite of Thackeray’s heroine, the passive and compliant Amelia Sedley. As is the case for Becky Sharp, Grendel’s mother also appears to have a binary opposite, seen in the virtuous figure of Queen Wealhtheow, a character frequently compared to the Virgin Mary in Christian readings of the poem. The polaric view of women used in both Victorian texts and in translations of *Beowulf* appears to be influenced by the more Medieval Madonna-Whore (or Madonna-Eve) dichotomy, manifesting into an Angel-Demon dichotomy for the more secular Protestant England of the 1800’s. Although these societal views have changed, the Victorian translations still appear to have considerable influence on modern translations, the monstrous view of Grendel’s mother still remaining intact, despite the very real possibility that she was constructed as a human figure in the Old English text.

## Back to the future

The visions of Grendel and his mother have remained relatively unchanged from the Victorian period within translations, the only real deviations appearing within adaptations of the poem. Despite the temptation to write off many of these adaptations as uninformed pieces of popular culture when comparing them to the original poem, they often show critical engagement not only with the text itself, but also with scholarly trends and academic debate. Even the most unlikely adaptations, such as Robert Zemeckis's 2007 *Beowulf*, appear to be rather well informed about the poem, seemingly influenced by a number of different scholarly debates on both the poem and other Anglo-Saxon and Norse texts. Perhaps the most unorthodox imagery in Zemeckis's offering is the image of Grendel's mother, a curvaceous, naked and golden figure who seduces Beowulf. Such an image (which for many readers of *Beowulf* was no doubt close to being blasphemous) appears to have its roots in scholarship, in particular the work of Frank Battaglia, and is a probable reference to an ancient Germanic fertility goddess, Gefion, albeit a somewhat more sexualised representation of her!

The sexualisation of Grendel's mother's character in Zemeckis's adaptation, along with Graham Baker's techno and back-flip filled 1999 adaptation featuring Christopher Lambert of the *Highlander* series, is itself also arguably influenced by *Beowulf* scholarship and Jane Chance's claim that the battle-scene between Beowulf and Grendel's mother in the poem contains sexual undertones as the two characters struggle for a dominant position astride the other. The fight comes to an end when Beowulf spots a sword of gigantic proportions, which it is said only he could wield in battle, a line reminiscent of *Riddle Twenty*, "The Sword", in the Anglo-Saxon Exeter Book, a double entendre which uses phallic imagery. With these scholarly debates in mind, the sexualisation of Grendel's mother, although taken to extremes in the film, is not as far-fetched as it first appears.

As well as this, the depictions of these two characters can often be seen to be changing in response to their own social and historical backgrounds; Gardner's *Grendel* can be seen as a manifestation of the increasing anxieties about conflict and 'The Establishment' in the latter years of the Vietnam War, and consequently the increasing suspicion of the 'hero'. Instead, the post-war era gave rise to the anti-hero, prevalent in many American novels of the sixties and seventies, such as Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969) and Randle McMurphy in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1961), and, in a British context, Alex DeLarge in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). As with all these characters, Grendel may be described as being opposed to the ideological values of 'the System', albeit in this case, the Anglo-Saxon system of norms.

On the other hand, *Xena: Warrior Princess* may be described as an extension of the 1990's and 2000's cultural phenomenon of "Girl Power", originally associated with Riot Grrrl punk bands like Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, and ultimately epitomised in the Spice Girls. This pop culture aspect of third-wave feminism can also be seen in numerous television

shows of the period, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and in films such as the 2000 reboot of *Charlie's Angels* and the game-to-screen adaptation of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001). Like Xena, Grendel's mother (here called Grinhilda), aims to show that girls don't have to give up beauty, skirts, and boys (or girls) to be a warrior.

Zemeckis's *Beowulf* then, one of the most recent adaptations, can be seen to represent the culmination of twenty-first century trends, especially those of the action and fantasy genres. It appears to follow the more recent trend of sexualising female monster (or often alien or robot) figures, a feature seen also in Letterier's remake of *Clash of the Titans* (2010), in Kusama's *Jennifer's Body* (2009) and more recently, although to a different effect, in Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013) featuring Scarlet Johansson, a trend which is now starting to see a backlash, evident in films like Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015). Anxieties expressed in this adaptation appear to revolve more around fears of sexuality and masculinity, as opposed to the war-related concerns of Gardner's *Grendel*, anxieties which are surprisingly not far off those of the Victorian era, where sexually powerful women are demonised or made unnatural.

## Conclusion

These examples serve to demonstrate just a small number of the ways in which adaptations and translations react and engage with the original Anglo-Saxon poem and with their own social context. The almost constant stream of translations and adaptations show that there is something in *Beowulf* which society relates to, and, especially through the characters of Grendel and Grendel's mother, these things become evident, whether it be the anxiety of war as told through the figure of Grendel in John Gardner's novel or the anxieties of twenty-first century sexualities in Zemeckis's 2007 film adaptation. Through this study of *Beowulf's* reception history, my research will document how translations and adaptations have engaged with the poem, and have used it as a blueprint on which to lay out contemporary concerns, and in doing so, will also aim to give often dismissed adaptations the scholarly interest they so far lack.