

THE WITCH, THE OGRESS, AND THE TEMPTRESS: DEFINING GRENDEL'S MOTHER IN *BEOWULF* AND FILM ADAPTATIONS

Abstract: The characterisation of Grendel's mother is no doubt one of the most intriguing aspects of *Beowulf*. Traditionally considered as a monster by the majority of its readers, she has been redefined lately by critics and film makers. This article aims to shed light on this mysterious character by offering an analysis from two different angles. First, I will examine the references to Grendel's mother in *Beowulf*. Secondly, I will provide a study of her role in various films to see how several directors have envisioned her in an attempt to reflect underlying dualities that Grendel's mother is endowed with in the Old English poem. **Keywords:** *Beowulf*, Anglo-Saxon literature, OE *wrecend*, Grendel's mother, Anglo-Saxon monsters, gendered monsters, female warriors, gender studies, film studies, cinema adaptation, *The Thirteenth Warrior*, John McTiernan, Graham Baker, Sturla Gunnarsson, R. L. Zemeckis, Angelina Jolie.

Resumen: La caracterización de la madre de Grendel es, sin duda, uno de los aspectos más intrigantes de *Beowulf*. Tradicionalmente considerada un monstruo por la mayoría de los lectores, ha sido recientemente redefinida por críticos y cineastas. Este artículo pretende arrojar luz sobre este misterioso personaje, ofreciendo un análisis desde distintos puntos de vista. Primero, se examinarán las distintas referencias a la madre de Grendel en *Beowulf*. En segundo lugar, se estudiará el papel desempeñado por este personaje en varias películas donde diversos directores han aportado su visión en un intento de reflejar la dualidad de mujer y ser sobrenatural que se le adscriben a la madre de Grendel en el poema. **Palabras clave:** *Beowulf*, literatura anglosajona, antiguo inglés, *wrecend*, madre de Grendel, monstruos anglosajones, monstruos femeninos, mujeres guerreras, estudios de género, estudios de cinematografía, adaptaciones cinematográficas, *El Guerrero Número Trece*, John McTiernan, Graham Baker, Sturla Gunnarsson, R. L. Zemeckis, Angelina Jolie.

I INTRODUCTION

OMPARED TO GRENDEL AND THE DRAGON, GRENDEL'S mother has received scant critical attention even if, as suggested by John D. Niles's analysis of the poem's structural composition, the *Beowulf* poet most likely envisaged an equally prominent role for her. Niles analysed *Beowulf* on the basis of a ring structure in which different narrative parts are symmetrically mirrored revealing a closed pattern, whose nucleus is precisely Beowulf's fight against Grendel's mother. This episode is thus central to the plot and functions as the hinge from which

all narrative units develop. As pointed out by Niles, “many of these correspondences, both great and small, converge on a single narrative event of great intensity: the hero’s struggle against Grendel’s dam in the depths of the monster’s pool” (1979: 926–927). The choice of this event as the structural focus of the epic is therefore not accidental and suggests that the role of Grendel’s mother is more important than it had been thought before (Niles 1979: 930). By focussing on this character’s role in the narrative and its interpretation for cinematic versions, I intend to demonstrate that Grendel’s mother plays a more relevant part than it has traditionally been ascribed.

Apart from assigning the importance she has barely been given, I will redefine the character itself. Grendel’s mother has been for the most part considered a monster although recent studies have enhanced her human and heroic aspects. In her influential article, Christine Alfano defended Grendel’s mother’s right to be considered humanoid, holding translators and critics responsible for her monstrous nature. For Alfano, she might be the anti-hero, but being an avenger of her son’s death does not make her the evil monstrous creature we have so far believed her to be. She might have some magical skills but she does not have to be considered a monster since nowhere in the poem it is indicated that she is a troll, an elf, a devil, or any other abomination of nature. In their description of Grendel’s mother, both Hrothgar and the poet avoid providing her with a definite physical appearance so that the readers can give way to their imagination. From my point of view, this is done deliberately by the poet to confer upon her mystery as well as a frightening quality. She is just said to have great strength and she proves this by threatening Beowulf’s life. But mythological women warriors, such as Valkyries, were also strong and mighty and their appearance, far from being monstrous, was that of women warriors who could, depending on the tradition, be evil or protective. Helen Damico analyses the figure of Valkyries in Old Norse and Old High German literature as well as in the Irish tradition, reflecting

on the possible mirroring they could have had in Anglo-Saxon literature. She devotes part of the chapter “The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature” to the pondering of Grendel’s mother as a type of Nordic “war-maid” (Damico 1990: 176).

Alternatively, there are several critics who have already expressed the idea of considering Grendel, his mother and the dragon as monsters. However, there are the cinematic adaptations of the Anglo-Saxon poem which show Grendel’s mother in a more or less human shape. Signe M. Carlson also considered “the existence of such creatures [monsters]” as “out of place.” He believed that such creatures are a figment of the human imagination and that they were not real even in the poetic context (1967: 363). As Christine Rauer has proved, *Beowulf* is possibly related to folktales or narratives of different kinds where these supernatural creatures are abundant.¹ Nevertheless, Grendel’s mother is not said to be any specific creature, because of which imagination in readers, translators and critics creates a character of their own.

Cinema has likewise provided an interpretation of these so-called “monsters” offering the spectator the visual image of an individual which, as it will be shown later in this essay, is not unfounded but based on specific readings of the poem. This paper will consider four film versions in which Grendel’s mother is assigned an interestingly significant role that seems to have been inspired by the character’s controversial nature. Thus, in McTiernan’s *The Thirteenth Warrior* (1999) she appears as the leader of a matriarchal society, savages when compared to the more civilised Danes. She has a similar portrayal in Gunnarsson’s *Beowulf and Grendel*, where she is also a common—though seemingly primitive—woman with no supernatural powers. In Baker’s *Beowulf, the Legend* (1999) and in Zemeckis’s *Beowulf* she is portrayed as endowed with a supernatural

¹ Rauer has brought up narratives from different periods, taking into consideration Germanic, Celtic, Classical and Christian legends. She also sees “two human monsters and a dragon” (2000: 11), from which it can be assumed that despite being compared to trolls or giants, Grendel and his mother are human by nature.

gift, with the appearance of an extremely sensual woman, a feature that is probably intended to represent her masculinity as a vengeful warrior. In the four films her role as both a “matriclan mother goddess” (Dockray-Miller 2000: 89) and as a masculine woman, respectively, rather than the traditional monster, define Grendel’s mother and distinguish her from the other female characters of the story. As I intend to show in this essay, the four films combine ideas of a human version of Grendel’s mother that are supported by a close reading of the text.

2 GRENDEL’S MOTHER IN THE ANGLO-SAXON POEM

The traditional view of Grendel’s mother as a monstrous creature stems from the notion that the monsters prevail as a topic in the poem. Kenneth Sisam’s ideas appear to stem from this opinion. He was the first scholar who pointed out that the *Beowulf* manuscript could have been compiled according to a simple thematic pattern, since the different works it contains deal with monsters: “if a cataloguer of those days had to describe it briefly he might have called it ‘Liber de diversis monstris, anglice’” (1953: 96). J. R. R. Tolkien’s famous lecture “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” similarly granted special attention to the poem’s “monsters” that had not been seriously taken into account until then. Tolkien nevertheless did not analyse Grendel’s mother in depth, whereas he provided a detailed study of Grendel and the dragon. He then affirmed: “I shall confine myself mainly to the monsters, Grendel and the Dragon” (1936: 36), from which it can be inferred that Tolkien did not consider Grendel’s mother a monster. Andy Orchard has also proved that pride and prodigious character constitute a controlling theme that dominates *Beowulf* but also pervades the other works in Cotton Vitellius A.xv (1995: 1). All these works assume a notable presence of monsters in *Beowulf*.

But what if Grendel’s mother was not a monster as she has always been considered? Alfano has established the notion that this character has traditionally been mistreated and misinterpreted. She

argues that Grendel's mother was originally conceived as a female warrior rather than a monster and believes that "translators [have] transform[ed] an avenging mother into a bloodthirsty monster" (1992: 2).² From her point of view, most translators have chosen the meaning that confers the character monstrous or inhuman features, even when that interpretation is not justified. For example, the term *aglæca* in "āglācwīf"³ or any other compound in *Beowulf*, is differently translated depending on whether it applies to the "monsters"—Grendel, his mother or the water monsters—or to the "human" characters, Beowulf and Sigemund. In the case of Beowulf, he is usually referred to as a "warrior" whereas Grendel's mother is considered a "monster."⁴ According to Carlson, "two thirds of the translators describe Grendel's mother as a 'monster' or 'monstrous' ('āglācwīf,' 1259) while others use variations like 'troll-wife,' 'witch-wife,' 'dam of evil,' 'female horror,' 'vile crone,' 'ogress' or 'terrible woman'" (1967: 359–360) even when none of them is suggested in the original. In Seamus Heaney's verse translation, for example, she is designated as "hell-bride." Although "bride" denotes humanity, only a devilish creature can be associated to hell. As C. McCarthy has remarked, "Heaney's choices here are the most pejorative available—they emphasise the monstrous aspects of Grendel's mother rather than the suggestions of humanity"

² Alfano stresses that this interpretation of Grendel's mother as a monster emerged with the nineteenth-century criticism. "Since that century hosted the first major surge of Anglo-Saxon scholarship, the first Old English scholars were probably at least partially responsible for incorporating feminine monster imagery into the *Beowulf* text" (1992: 12)

³ "troublemaker, female adversary" (Fulk *et al.* 2009: 348).

⁴ Alfano traces the different etymologies given by language historians such as Sherman Kuhn, Signe M. Carlson, Elliot Dobbie or Claude M. Lotspeich and concludes that *aglæca* is a term that alludes to someone who causes trouble—since the word always appears in the context of battle or struggle—but who does not necessarily be a monster (1992: 5). As noted above, this is the translation provided by the editors in the Klaeber's edition of 2009.

(2008: 118). But, as M. Wendy Hannequin also asserts, the poem does not support these interpretations since she is always alluded to by means of “normal Old English words used for women, such as *wif* and *ides*” (2008: 504).⁵ As it is defended throughout this paper as well, it is the reading made of the poem and its characters that has made a monster of her.

The many possibilities of translations and interpretations are due to the fact that the character of Grendel’s mother is only vaguely portrayed in the Anglo-Saxon poem. To begin with, she does not receive a name, a fact that was not meant to minimise her role in the plot, but was most likely intended to add suspense and mystery to the narrative. Thus, a suggestive clue about this character’s personality is first provided by the narrator with the idea that, after Grendel’s death, an avenger (“wrecend”) should come:

	þæt ges̄ne wearþ,
wīdcūþ werum,	þætte wrecend þā gýt
lifde æfter lāþum,	lange þrāge,
æfter gūðceare. ⁶	(1255b–1258a)

It was clearly seen, obvious to all men, that an avenger still
lived on after that enemy for a long time after that grim battle.

In the same passage, the poet directly alludes to her being Grendel’s mother and defines her as “ides āglācwīf” (1259a), in other words, as an awesome but otherwise unspecified female creature. As explained above, the compound “āglācwīf” has been frequently commented since it poses a problem when defining this female character. *Ides*

⁵ Hannequin devotes her article to defend the humanity of Grendel’s mother based on the lack of evidence that she is a monster.

⁶ All references from the poem are from *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, edited by Fulk, Bjork and Niles. Translations have been extracted, unless otherwise stated, from Liuzza’s *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*.

is a controversial term that has aroused much scholarly discussion.⁷ It literally means “lady” or “woman.” From this word, it may be implied that Grendel's mother's nature is human; otherwise that description would not apply.⁸

The following allusion to the mother in the poem is offered from Hrothgar's point of view. The king of the Danes laments the loss of Æschere referring to his murderer as a “death-spirit” (“wælgæst,” 1331a) and, terrified at the prospect of further attacks at Heorot, describes her as having the likeness of a female (“idese onlicnæs,” 1351a). Here, “gæst” or “gæst” poses another problem of interpretation, since it could be a “deadly guest” or a “murderous monster.” Alfano defends the idea of taking the variant with the short *e*, which means “guest” since the occurrences of *gæst* “ghost” or “spirit” in Old English poetry other than *Beowulf* are in a religious context. She suggests that the interpretation is thus biased towards a consideration of Grendel and his mother as supernatural beings where there is no clear evidence in the poem but rather a predisposition towards the idea of monstrosity in these two characters (Alfano 1992: 6–7). Fulk, Bjork and Niles consider however the longer *æ* and translate it as “slaughtering demon” (2009: 451). According to these editors, Hrothgar himself may not have known much about this second threat, since previously in lines 1345–1346 he expresses his lack of knowledge about her (2009: 199–200). I am more for the idea of inspiring mystery rather than fear, especially in relation to Grendel's mother, who is a very

⁷ According to Bosworth & Toller, *ides* is “a word little used except in poetry, and it is supposed by Grimm to have been applied, in the earliest times, like the Greek *νύμφη*, to super human beings, occupying a position between goddesses and mere women” (Bosworth & Toller 1964: *s.v.* *ides*). Even if *ides* is interpreted as a super human being it does not necessarily mean a monster. Heroes such as *Beowulf* are super human with incredible strength and other abilities, but they are not considered monstrous.

⁸ For further reading on the term *aglæca*, see Hennequin 2008: 510.

tenuous character that even nowadays has caused scholarly disputes as to her true nature.

Up to this point in the narrative, the audience of *Beowulf* would have been curious about the identity and the obscure nature of this second creature that is only sketched with subtle strokes.⁹ The next reference they have about her is that she is a “she-wolf of the sea” (“brimwylf,” 1506a and 1599a), a “mighty mere-woman” or “water-witch” (“merewif mihtig,” 1519a) and as a “(female) outcast of the deep”¹⁰ (“grundwyrġenne,” 1518b), as noted by Klaeber’s glossary to the poem.¹¹ These terms make allusion to the aquatic environment where the mother lives, but again, there are critics who defend alternative translations in order not to tinge the character with a supernatural nature. Alfano defends the idea of a kenning for this description in which “brimwylf,” as in the name *Beowulf*, makes allusion to the strong nature of the character. She argues that “the *wulffwylf* compound is not uncommon” and that in his definition of this root, Bosworth writes that “an early admiration for the wolf seems shewn by the frequency of *wulf* in proper names [...] The substantive compounds of *wulf* he [Bosworth] cites all refer to warriors and their battle skill” (Alfano 1992: 8). From Bosworth’s and Alfano’s perspective, it can be assumed that the *Beowulf* poet

⁹ Acker asserts that Grendel and his mother suddenly appear without having received any introductory comment but they burst in the narration without preamble. “The appearance of Grendel’s mother is the more marked for the fact that she is introduced in the narrative action only after she already intruded upon it” (2006: 704). From his point of view, this sudden apparition has also given rise to the idea of the monster being a creature of the night, who comes into view all of a sudden, creating thus fear and uncertainty.

¹⁰ In the 1950 edition it was “accursed (female) monster of the deep,” from which it is interpreted that the editors of the new Klaeber version have considered not adding the term “monster” as it is not implied in the original’s meaning. Thus, their translation in the glossary has changed to a more neutral option, which is “(female) outcast of the deep.”

¹¹ Liuzza’s translation coincides in the first two terms but differs in “grundwyrġenne,” which is translated as “water-witch.”

could be defining Grendel's mother as a fierce brave warrior who lives close to a water environment. Carlson, on the contrary, points out the possibility of a scribal miswriting of "brimwif," which would be "ocean-woman" (1967: 359), although relying on possible scribal errors may lead to any interpretation of the poem. In any case, most translators have interpreted these terms as referring to the mother as non-human.

Despite the frequent insistence on her being a female, the poet makes clear that she is as powerful, fierce and dangerous as Grendel. He also clearly presents her as the ruler of the "mere-hall"—i.e. the antitype of Hrothgar—that she is ready to defend as soon as she notices Beowulf's intrusion:

Sōna þæt onfunde sē ðe flōða begong
heorōgīfre behēold hund missera,
grim ond grædiġ, þæt þær gumena sum
ælwihhta eard ufan cunnode. (1497a–1500b)

She who held that expanse of water, bloodthirsty and fierce,
for a hundred half-years, grim and greedy, perceived that some
man was exploring from above that alien land

Interestingly, it is perhaps this combination of masculine strength, ruthlessness and a warrior-like character that prompts some cases of gender inconsistencies when referring to Grendel's mother: "nō hē on helm losað" (1392b, emphasis mine) [he will find no protection]. In line 1260a she is also referred to by the masculine pronoun "sē þe" instead of "sēo þe" or "hē" instead of "hēo" in line 1394b. According to the editors of *Klaeber's Beowulf*, that the masc[uline] pronoun here "is not simply a scribal error is also suggested by the poet's description of Grendel's mother as "sinnigne secg" (1379a), meaning "culpable man", or "Gryreligne grundhyrde" (2136b), "terrible guardian of the deep" (Fulk *et al.* 2009: 197).

The way Grendel's mother is presented makes her a feminine antitype. Rather than a peace-weaver, she is an avenger; she does not solve quarrels, but rather creates them. Her irruption in the narration is preceded by two other feminine figures: Hildeburgh

and *Wealhtheow*, making thus a greater contrast between what is expected of a woman—and, especially, of a mother—and the way Grendel's mother appears.¹² Acker suggests that the fact “that a female creature and more particularly a maternal one takes this revenge may have highlighted its monstrousness. Unlike Hildeburgh and *Wealhtheow*,¹³ Grendel's mother acts aggressively, arguably in a fashion reserved for men” (2006: 705). Thus the monstrousness of Grendel's mother is not in the fact that she is actually a monster but that it is unnatural for an Anglo-Saxon¹⁴ woman to act the way she does, namely in such a manly manner. If she had lost her son, she would not be supposed to have avenged him, since that role only corresponds to a male and, more specifically, a warrior. Thus, her characterisation as a *secg* is contrary to known laws in that society and, consequently, it makes her fall into a non-human category because of defying the established norms.

¹² There are several studies on women in Anglo-Saxon England, such as Dockray-Miller or Fell's. They rely on legal as well as literary texts to determine the status that women had for the Anglo-Saxons. However, most of the information obtained from those texts is assumed more than explicitly given. As Fell states, “if, then, it is difficult to generalise about the Vikings and yet more difficult to generalise about Vikings in Britain, it is clearly impossible to generalise about Viking women” (1994: 129).

¹³ According to Fell, *Wealhtheow* means “foreign slave” and this name “is not recorded elsewhere in Old English, and indeed must be thought of as descriptive, rather than as a baptismal name” (1994: 66).

¹⁴ Although *Beowulf* is set in Scandinavia, it has been commonly assumed that the cultural codes that are represented in the poem are those of Anglo-Saxon England. The legend might have been of Danish/Swedish origin, but its writing down was undertaken in English territory, adapting this way the narrative to contemporary and local uses. Viking women seemed to have been freer in sexual and marital terms (Fell 1994: 141) whereas Anglo-Saxon women were already constrained by religious ethics. *Beowulf* reflected this in the opposition of Grendel's mother to the other women in the epic.

The little information we have about Grendel's mother's origins is that, like her son, she stems from Cain's kin:¹⁵

sē þe wætereġesan wunian scolde,
cealde strēamas siþðan Cāin wearð
tō ecġbanan āngan brēþer,
fæderenmæġe; hē þā fāġ ġewāt,
morþre ġemearcod mandrēam flēôn,
wēsten warode. þanon wōc fela
ġeōsceaftġāsta; wæs þāra Grendel sum,
heorowearh hetelīc [...] (1260a–1267a)

Grendel's mother, monster-woman, remembered her misery, she who dwelt in those dreadful waters, the cold streams, ever since Cain killed with his blade his only brother, his father's kin; he fled bloodstained, marked for murder, left the joys of men, dwelled in the wasteland. From him awoke many a fateful spirit—Grendel among them, hateful accursed foe [...]

As pointed out by Robert E. Kaske, the idea that monsters and giants spring from Cain's stock was well-known in the early Middle Ages. In the apocryphal *Book of Enoch*, different monsters and evil creatures are connected to Cain's lineage as a consequence of his murdering his brother Abel (1971: 421–431). This is said to be the origin of his damned offspring, as stated in the preceding citation from *Beowulf*. This might also suggest that Grendel and his mother were of gigantic size, a notion that may be supported by Hrothgar's description of these fantastic creatures in the following passage:

Ic þæt londbūend, lēode mīne,
selerādende secgan hýrde

¹⁵ According to the editors of *Klaeber's Beowulf*, "the conception of the descent of monsters (evil spirits) and giants from Cain, and of destruction of the giants by the deluge is based ultimately on the biblical narrative a casual relation being established between Gen. 4, 6: 2, 6:4 (*gigantes*) and 6: 5–7, 7: 1–24 (the deluge). The immediate source has not been discovered in this case, though Hebrew tradition (like that contained in the pseudepigraphical *Book of Enoch*), the Irish *Sex aetates mundi*, and Christian interpretation of Scripture, have been adduced" (Fulk *et al.* 2009: 122–123).

þæt hīe gesāwon swylce twēgen
micle mearcstapan mōras healdan,
ellorgāstas. Ðæra oðer wæs,
þæs þe hīe gewislicost gewitan meahton,
idese onlicnæs; oðer earmsceapen
on weres wæstmum wræclāstas træd
næfne hē wæs māra þonne āniġ man oðer. (1345a–1353b)

I have heard countrymen and hall-counselors among my people report this: they have seen two such creatures, great marsh-stalkers holding the moors, alien spirits. The second of them, as far as they could discern most clearly, had the shape of a woman; the other, misshapen, marched the exile's path in the form of a man, except that he was larger than any other.

Nevertheless, being *micel* is not the same as being a giant.¹⁶ The fact that Beowulf can only kill Grendel's mother with a giants' sword ("ġīganta ġeweorc," 1562b) makes allusion to the special creature she is, since in folktales and legends, supernatural creatures could only be killed by magical weapons. But being supernatural does not make her a monster, either, the same way that Beowulf's extraordinary strength makes him an unusual being and he is never referred to as a monster. In the sword hilt that Beowulf gives Hrothgar after his fight with Grendel's mother is engraved the origin of giants, but this reference does not imply that she is one of them, since in the Anglo-Saxon world some swords were engraved either with the owner's name or with the maker's.

Hrōðgār maðelode; hylt scēawode,
ealde lāfe. On ðām wæs oðr writen
fyrngewinnes; syðþan flōd ofslōh,
ġifen ġeotende ġīganta cyn;
frēcne ġefērdon; þæt wæs fremde þeod
ēcean dryhtne; him þæs endelēan
þurh wæteres wylm waldend sealed. (1688a–1693b)

¹⁶ According to the *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, it can also make reference to great "in a metaphorical sense" (Bosworth & Toller 1964: 682).

Hrothgar spoke—he studied the hilt of the old heirloom,
where was written the origin of the old heirloom, where was
written the origin of ancient strife, where the flood slew,
rushing seas, the race of giants—they suffered awfully. That
was people alien to the eternal Lord; a last reward the Ruler
gave them through the raging waters.

Whether a giant or simply a stronger woman than naturally conceived she would have some kind of mysterious power that her son lacks since Beowulf needs two weapons, Hrunting and the gigantic sword found in Grendel's mother's den to kill her whereas he fights Grendel with only his strength.

There are further references to the female monster's physical appearance and character that are worth analysing. In this sense, it is interesting to note that Howell D. Chickering contends that Grendel and his mother may be representative of the Scandinavian *draugar*—a walking dead or a kind of zombie. In his words, “a *draugr* is supernaturally strong and invulnerable (being already dead) and will often have a mother called *ketta*,¹⁷ or ‘she-cat,’ who is even more monstrous than he” (Chickering 1977: 256). The *draugr* can only be killed by grappling hand-to-hand and wrestling, the same manner in which Beowulf kills Grendel. Nevertheless, from my perspective, Grendel's mother is not a *ketta*; just as she is not an ogress, a troll or any other creature since she is nowhere thus defined. Had she not had human characteristics, she would not have used a “seax” (1545b) when fighting Beowulf. Her capacity to use a sword or long knife suggests she has hands and fingers instead of claws.

¹⁷ In the Icelandic *Orm Storolfson's Saga*, the hero, Orm, has to fight a man-eating giant and his mother, who is an enormous she-cat. The story is quite similar, maybe because the translators interpreted Grendel's mother's “atolan clomum” (1502a) as “terrible grasp”, which in Beowulf's case is something heroic whereas the same terms are monstrous for her. The same could be said of “laþan fingrum” (1505b), which should be literally “hateful fingers” and not “claws” (Alfano 1992: 3).

Despite the ambiguity regarding Grendel's mother's physical appearance, the poet by contrast, takes special interest in defining her character in detail. In opposition to other mothers appearing in the poem, she does not adjust to the conventional role of women in Anglo-Saxon society. Compared to the other female characters, such as queen Wealhtheow, her daughter Freawaru or Finn's wife, Hildeburh, her role is radically opposed to that of the "peace-weaver." Furthermore, the idea of a woman who is characterised as "grim and ravenous" does not correspond to the typical standards. She is even described in masculine terms as her own lord, so that the reference to her as a *wrecend* or avenger would seem quite logical since she has no husband,¹⁸ father or brother to take care of that for her. Grendel's mother thus has a status that does not correspond to the usual Anglo-Saxon standards. Dockray-Miller (2000: 90) believes that

part of the grendelkin's monstrosity is that there is no patriarch in the household.¹⁹ These social and cultural disruptions, more than any actual physical description in the text, has led to the common critical perception of Grendel's mother as a monster, subliminally a monstrous mother to be feared.

Single motherhood and living outside of the community, to Danish society, would be reasons enough to consider Grendel's mother as anti-natural, once one has taken into consideration the fixed role of women in Anglo-Saxon society. Therefore, being a vengeful mother would definitely make Grendel's mother a monster.²⁰ After considering her appearance and character, further discussion is required regarding the importance Grendel's mother has in the

¹⁸ *Nō hīe fæder cunnon* ("they have no knowledge of a father," 1355b)

¹⁹ See also Overing 1990: 73.

²⁰ Hennequin builds up the idea of Grendel's mother degenerating into a monster because she does not behave accordingly to her gender-expected role. She quotes Judith Butler and Riki Wilchins, gender critics to support the notion of action defining a character in a cultural and social aspect (2008: 504).

poem. Although the meaning of the following lines is unclear, the retainers at Heorot seem to undervalue her murderous capacity at first when they notice she is a female:

Cōm þā tō Heorote, ðær Hring-Dene
geond þæt sæld swāfun. Þa ðær sōna wearð
edhwyrft eorlum, siþðan inne fealh
Grendles mōdor. Wæs se gryre læssa
efne swā micle swā bið mægþa cræft,
wīggyre wifes be wæpnedmen,
þonne heoru bunden, hamere gēþruen,
sweord swāte fāh swīn ofer helme
ecgum dyhttig andweard scireð. (1279a–1287b)

She reached Heorot, where the Ring-Danes slept throughout the building; sudden turnabout came to men, when Grendel's mother broke into the hall. The horror was less by as much as a maiden's strength, a woman's warfare, is less than an armed man's when a bloodstained blade, its edges strong, hammer-forged sword, slices through the boar-image on a helmet opposite.

As it can be appreciated by the above description, her womanhood makes her less threatening than a warrior that could bear a "sweord" and a "swīn ofer helmesword." Liuzza comments that "the point of these lines is not clear," as "Grendel's mother is a much more dangerous opponent for Beowulf" (2000: 93). Apart from this depiction, Grendel's mother seems to be presented as a weaker murderer as she only kills one retainer, while his son killed thirty at a time. However, if we consider that the mother's victim is Æschere, Hrothgar's favourite retainer, the damage she produces is comparatively important.²¹ Similarly, she proves to

²¹ Puhvel believes that the fact that she flees after taking Æschere "is also understandable from the artistic point of view; otherwise one would expect an immediate showdown with Beowulf" (1969: 82). It is worth noting that the poet creates an atmosphere of mystery around Grendel's mother, and with this quick attack and disappearance he is creating expectations in his readers, who would be eager to be told more about this new threat.

be an excellent warrior as Beowulf's life is at stake for the first time in the poem. This points to her being more relevant in the story than her son; Beowulf fights Grendel without weapons, only by means of his powerful handgrip whereas he needs a magical sword to kill the mother. It also indicates that the mother, unlike Grendel, is invulnerable until Beowulf attacks her with that special sword, which means she is a more dangerous opponent because of her supernatural nature. She is finally presented as cunning taking Hrothgar's most valuable retainer which would respond to the compensation patterns of the Anglo-Saxon laws, the *wergeld*. Then, considering Beowulf's difficulties in killing Grendel's mother, it can be concluded that she is much more dangerous for the hero than her son was.

Summing up, Grendel's mother's role in the poem seems to be of greater importance than many critics have ascribed to her. Besides, she could have been a supernatural or magical creature since there are hints in the poem that suggest it, but she is never said to be a monster. The visual interpretations of both her role and her physical appearance will be analysed in the chosen film versions of *Beowulf*, so as to draw a conclusive image of this mysterious character.

3 ANALYSIS OF GRENDEL'S MOTHER IN FILM VERSIONS

In film tradition, Grendel's mother has been represented in two different but complementary ways: either as a sort of prehistoric woman, featured wearing rags and belonging to an underdeveloped society, or as a sexually powerful seducer.²² None of these roles correspond to Grendel's mother in the poem but by certain hints in the Anglo-Saxon epic it can be understood why different directors

²² D. W. Marshall argues that the different interpretations in the cinema versions aim at Grendel's mother portrayal of a "threat to masculine social structure" (2008: 1-2). Whether she is an outcast of the superior Danish society or a powerfully sensualised woman, because she is an independent woman, Grendel's mother represents a threat for the Danish's assertion of masculinity.

have portrayed her that way. The reasons for both versions are analysed as her role in the film is explained. Incidentally, in neither of the films is she a monster. In McTiernan's *The Thirteenth Warrior* and in Gunnarsson's *Beowulf and Grendel* she is an indigenous tribal woman. In the other two films, Baker's *Beowulf, the Legend* and Zemeckis's *Beowulf*, she is a magical and very sensual temptress. She has powers and she is older than any other being, so it is reasonable to deduce that she could be a witch or a supernatural being who, in Baker's version, has the ability to transform herself into a beast. Nevertheless, I would emphasise that her physical appearance is that of a female in all cases.

John McTiernan's *The Thirteenth Warrior* (1999) is based on Michael Crichton's novel *Eaters of the Dead* (1976). The novel combines some characters and narrative elements found in *Beowulf* with reports described by the Arab Ibn Fadlan, who wrote down a chronicle about his experiences on a trip made to what is now Russia during the tenth century. Crichton presents a story which has been stripped of all supernatural elements, justifying the legends by what people imagine about the unknown.²³ Grendel's role is played by the Wendol, who are cannibal-like people—although it is not made clear if they actually eat human bodies. The Wendol are described by the people who represent the Danish in the poem as being half human, with claws and bear heads. Once they appear on screen they are discovered to be human beings but covered in bear fur and actual claws as a war outfit to scare and attack their enemies.

²³ Even the dragon is seen in the distance as a huge snake of fire, which is actually the enemy troops advancing in a winding line while porting torches, which gives them the visual image of a *wyrm*, which could be a dragon, as it is translated in the poem or as a serpent, as represented in the film. In this sense, the critic S. R. Jensen also argues that the dragon in *Beowulf* could be representative of a barbaric society, who has a "malicious and spiteful" leader and from whom Beowulf takes the treasure (1993: 3).

Grendel's mother is likewise not a monster at all but appears as the worshipped leader of the matriarchal tribe, a sort of shaman.²⁴ Her role in the film is more significant than Grendel's. This idea of the female threat being more relevant than the male is presented to the spectator right from the beginning. Buliwyf—the equivalent to Beowulf in the film—and his retainers find a little sculpture with the shape of a female body, a first hint pointing to the fact that the “monsters,” belong to a matriarchal clan. Some advice given by Hrothgar's sorcerer confirms it, as she says that they have not been able to beat them because they have to kill their mother. She is said to be “the earth,” a matriarchal association between woman and earth due to fertility, present as well in the little sculpture reminiscent of the Willendorf Venus. Thus, if Buliwyf kills the mother, they will easily exterminate the whole tribe. This female character is surrounded by a note of mystery and suspense; as Buliwyf approaches her den, the only thing the spectator can see are the hanging heads of those warriors that had been killed. Behind curtains of heads, she is worshipped as a priestess or goddess.²⁵

Eventually, the female leader kills Buliwyf by poisoning him with a bear claw, thus assuming the role the dragon has in the poem, although she dies at his hands in a similar way, her head severed by a powerful stroke. As her death provokes the immediate decadence of her tribe and she is the only one able to fatally wound Buliwyf, it can be concluded that Grendel's mother plays a more

²⁴ This interpretation could derive from the idea that Grendel's mother is powerful because she has some kind of magic, inferred by Beowulf's difficulty in killing her in the Anglo-Saxon epic.

²⁵ Marshall states that this representation of Grendel's mother associates femininity with death (2008: 6). She is the one that kills the hero and is linked to death by the portrayal made of her: the poisonous snake around her neck, her deadly make-up and all the skulls, bones and other parts of human bodies that decorate her cave as well as herself. However, I see her death association as the perpetuation of her species, not linked to fertility in this case but to survival by assertion of strength.

prominent role than that of her male counterparts in this film version. Likewise, the idea of an imaginary monster which in the end turns out to be but a powerful woman coincides with the analysis of the character in the poem which has been previously considered.

In Sturla Gunnarsson's *Beowulf and Grendel* (2005), Cain's descendants are also given a prominent role. Their portrayal is nevertheless quite distant from the poem's depiction of them. Grendel's line is traced from his father to his own son. As in *The Thirteenth Warrior*, they belong to a society that is not as developed as the Danish one. They are also characterised by being people of extraordinary height,²⁶ the native inhabitants of the land before the Danish invasions. At the beginning of the film, Grendel's father is killed by Hrothgar for unknown reasons, thus becoming the origin of Grendel's attacks on Hrothgar's *thane*. Grendel is portrayed in a very human manner. This vision of him differs completely from the Anglo-Saxon poem; he is pitied by the spectator and even Beowulf feels empathy for him building him a tomb and paying him his respects at the end. The hero meets the woman with whom Grendel has had a son, Selma, who illustrates the idea of a very human Grendel, whom she considers as just a victim of the Danish brutalising towards inferior cultures.

Grendel's mother differs as well from the poem's portrayal. She appears in the film for only a few minutes. Her first appearance is suggested under the water, as Beowulf arrives by ship. Then, she is seen completely when she avenges the death of her son by killing Æschere. Her role is played by an old woman who lacks power, not presenting any kind of threat to Beowulf's life. The battle

²⁶ The fact that two cinema interpretations represent Grendel and his mother as a more primitive group of people than the Danish is quite significant. Acker argues that "seen from within the socialized world of the hall, such a figure could only be a monster from the frontiers of the human world, on the borders of the animal world, in which for instance a mother bear might come roaring from her den to protect her cub" (2006: 707).

between Beowulf and her is likewise unimportant. The hero has no difficulty in killing her. She is, as in the poem, still related in some way with water, since she appears from the sea and the battle with Beowulf takes place in her den, where there is an underground lake. Apart from this similarity, no further coincidences can be considered, either in the depiction of the *wrecend* or in the role she plays for the development of the story.

However, the character of Selma, the woman who engenders Grendel's son, has some of the characteristics that are ascribed to Grendel's mother in the poem. She is an independent woman who lives away from the hall, being an outcast from Danish society. This otherness is also emphasised by being a single mother living in the wilderness, like Grendel's mother in the poem. She seems to be a sorcerer or a witch who can predict the future and read men's destiny in bones, from which it is assumed that she has some kind of magical power. Her role in *Beowulf and Grendel* is somewhat different to that she has in the epic. She does not fight Beowulf but rather seduces him; she is thus powerful enough to make the hero fall in her net. Similarly, she does not avenge Grendel but defends him, not physically but by convincing Beowulf that he is not the monster that he is said to be. Finally, Selma is also related to Grendel's family once she gives birth to Grendel's son. In this film, instead of being literally Grendel's mother, she is the mother of his child, so she continues Grendel's kin. Because of all that, I would consider Selma a partial representation of Grendel's mother since her role and significance in the film correspond to her depiction in the poem.²⁷

An interesting interpretation of Grendel's mother is offered in the medieval-futuristic film *Beowulf, the Legend* (1999), by Graham

²⁷ This parallelism has likewise been established by Marshall (2008), who also thinks that Selma can represent the character of Grendel's mother, complementing the real mother in aspects such as the connection to magic, sensuality and wonder-woman. She is the fully portrayed female in the film whereas the actual mother is barely seen.

Baker. Here, the mother's masculinity, which in the poem is emphasised through the use of masculine pronouns and masculine terms to make reference to her, is suggested by portraying her as extremely sexually active, which would be a male characteristic even in that re-invented medieval world. In the film, her sexual role does not appear before the fight and is suggested in both her physical appearance—a very young blonde with a scantily-clad voluptuous body—and her actions. Instead of being portrayed as a warrior or a witch, her power is in her physical attraction, since she seduces instead of killing her enemies. In a way that resembles Arthurian narratives, the female monster tempts Hrothgar while asleep, just as Lady Bertilak visits Sir Gawain's chamber to tempt him. In this sense, Grendel's mother's act might be interpreted as rape, thus emphasising another male aspect in her. She is also presented as a character that continually dominates all situations and uses men at her will. The vengeance motif is similarly present in this film version but it is significantly different from the Old English poem. In the film, the conflict originates when the mother urges Grendel to look for his father, Hrothgar, to claim his right to Heorot, not only for being his son but also because the hall was built in lands that were before her dwelling. Grendel ends up killing his father when the king is about to attack his mother.

In this film, Grendel is some kind of extra-terrestrial that resembles the monster in the science-fiction film *Alien* (1979), directed by Ridley Scott. Grendel's mother is nevertheless presented as mostly human, some kind of vamp woman, since she sucks the murdered retainers' blood, until she metamorphoses into a monster made up of a mixture of spider, scorpion and giant crab. In this light, as she is the source of the main conflict, the female enemy is again given more importance than her son. However, *Beowulf, the Legend* is, of all versions considered, the one that has less to do with the Anglo-Saxon source, not only due to the futuristic approach also but because the accounts narrated do not have an equivalent in the poem. Beowulf kills Grendel with a sword instead

of his bare hands and he kills the mother with the same sword. There is no fight in any kind of lake or aquatic scenery and the female opponent is difficult to define: something between a demon and a witch.

Likewise, in Zemeckis's *Beowulf*, Grendel's mother's role is interpreted by Angelina Jolie, the female character being thus drawn as a very sensual woman—in fact, she always appears naked, emphasizing her voluptuousness. However, unlike in *Beowulf, the Legend*, having sex with the warriors is just a means of getting a child and perpetuating her species which is on the verge of extinction. In this film, as in Baker's, Hrothgar fathered Grendel, but the interpretation goes beyond that: Beowulf is also seduced—by the sensual woman and by the tempting idea she presents him with wealth and power;²⁸ and thus she begets the dragon. In Zemeckis's version, Grendel's mother does not die. Beowulf claims to have killed her, whereas in reality he succumbs to her charms and agrees to give her a child. In the end, the mother outlives the hero and, it is implied, seduces Beowulf's right hand-man, Wiglaf.

Although her appearance is human-like, by contrast to Grendel or the dragon, there are hints that she does not belong to the human species, i.e. high-heeled feet, gliding about, her plait that moves independently as if it were a tentacle or a tail, etc. She lives in a cave, under the water, and is partially seen covered by golden scales, which indicates her aquatic nature, that she is a *merewif*. Nevertheless, despite her supernatural essence, she is not a monster. Actually, the director plays with the audience's expectations since what is first seen of her seems to be tentacles when in fact it is her long plait. The importance given to her in this film version is extremely relevant. She is the source of all the problems the Danes

²⁸ Beowulf's sword melts when she approaches the hero and tells him about the power and fame he may acquire if he yields to her desires. The image is charged with sexual overtones as she caresses the sword in a very insinuating way. Taking this sexual image of sword meaning phallus, the second sword with which he kills her in the poem could be interpreted as the male organ itself.

have; she controls them by means of her power to seduce men and makes them her lifelong servants since, as she explains to Beowulf, he would have power while she has the golden horn she keeps as token. She is not only the cause of all monsters but also the reason for heroes to be powerful and successful.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the evidence presented from the poem and supported by critics such as Alfano or Dragland, among others, the character of Grendel's mother should not be considered a monster. She is not a common woman due to her magic resistance to normal weapons together with the abnormal strength she has, but it is difficult to determine whether she is a witch or any other supernatural creature, again because of the lack of definition in her portrayal. In any case she has been proved to share human characteristics and her appearance is that of a woman. From this assertion, the references to her as a monster should not be taken into consideration nor her analogues, the female trolls found in Northern sagas or Irish folktales. Had she been such a creature, she would have been so defined instead of being described in a very subtle and obscure manner that gives way to the numerous interpretations that this character has been the subject of, also because her nature has been further obscured in the translations of the poem.

The consequence of her ambiguous yet human nature is the different versions of the same character that are shown in the four films analysed. Whether a primitive woman, leader of a matriarchal society or an independent outcast, a sensual sorcerer or hero temptress, Grendel's mother is in any case a powerful woman who does not fit in the role devised for her in a society where women were not supposed to be vengeful, violent or independent. Her importance in the development of the story is likewise echoed in these films, where she plays a central part. While in the Anglo-Saxon epic she is the one who threatens Beowulf's life, in *The Thirteenth Warrior* she kills the hero, in *Beowulf, the Legend* she

generates the conflict and thus makes the appearance of Beowulf possible and, finally, in Zemeckis's *Beowulf* she is powerful to the point of corrupting even the hero so that she can continue alive and engender another monster. In the Icelandic version *Beowulf and Grendel*, if Selma—the Danish witch who begets Grendel's son—is considered the real portrayal of Grendel's mother instead of the mother herself, both her role and her character coincide as well with that represented in the magnificent Anglo-Saxon epic which after centuries of interpretations still gives way to great debate.

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