Misogyny, Monstrosity, and Patterns of Power in Old English Literature

Lauren Silverman
SUNY Geneseo

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Old English poems of *Beowulf* and the lesser-known elegy *The Wife's Lament* in the light of modern understandings of gender and gender theory. In particular, it will look at the ways women's deviation from gender norms is treated as a deviation from nature itself. In *The Wife's Lament*, the nameless narrator finds herself exiled from her community, one of the worst fates one could experience in the Anglo-Saxon world, for her departure from gender confinements in order to be reunited with her husband, while in *Beowulf*, Grendel's Mother is killed for the same set of actions that would have seen a man praised. Both fates demonstrate the conclusion of a cycle of dealing with those that threaten a status quo founded on the oppression of adjacent demographics: to villainize their deviance, to punish them for it, and to erase them from future eyes.

If all the world's a stage, there is arguably no part more prevalent, or more difficult than that of gender. Originating long ago and persisting through the present, the presentation of a distinct gender binary has seen the assignment and teaching of gendered roles and expectations that continue to demand conformity from those it affects. While in the present it has become more acceptable in many places to push back against traditional expectations of masculinity and femininity, the societal urge to defend them often manifests in ways similar to how it has throughout all of history, through explicit and subtle aggression against those that either cannot, or choose not to play the part they were given. This essay will attempt to examine the ways in which Anglo-Saxon and later English culture enforces gender roles, primarily upon women such as Grendel's nameless mother in the Old English poem *Beowulf*, as well as the societal rewards and punishments facing women who could not fit into the binary of their world. In particular, it will explore how Old English literature may be read to examine the patriarchal pattern of distinguishing the sexes into a binary that associates gender with perceptions of natural "correctness," practices demonization or erasure of those that threaten the masculine standard, and eventually works to return to the status quo that continues to dominate English literary tropes today.

The Binary, The "Natural State"

Regardless of whether one chooses to admit to the privilege afforded to them, there can be no denying the existence of power dynamics that govern the way one interacts with the world, as well as the way the world interacts with you. Specifically focusing on cultures dictated by a reigning patriarchy, individuals tend to be taught that they fit by nature on one end of a distinct gender binary. Historically, this binary has encouraged men to consider "themselves active, strong, adventurous, brave, and intelligent, and they applied the opposite characteristics to women" (Molter, 2016, p. 3). However, as "the opposite characteristics" tend to be received with negative connotations, such as being weak or passive, they work to discourage men from crossing binary bounds in order to maintain a positive appearance. Defining feminine characteristics as those of dependence also aids the translation of masculine characteristics as being more aggressive in their activity, which will establish them in the eyes of others as guardians, or warriors. From early ages, boys are taught that they are meant to be big and strong, emotionally detached, that they do not have to be nice in order to get what they want, but rather to fight for it, thus attributing failure to a kind of lack of aggression. These traits are highly toxic, enabling a sense of entitlement as well as instilling societal pressure to subdue one's own mental and emotional struggles in order to maintain an image of outward strength; they are nonetheless lessons that work to embolden men to hold their heads up in the face of adversity. One might say they are the root of the trope of the undefeatable warrior that characters such as Beowulf strive to be.

Women, however, beginning as young girls, are offered a far more confining set of guidelines for their performance. In her essay on *The Effects of Gender Trouble*, psychologist Thekla Morgenroth (2021) notes how the maintenance of the gender binary "upholds a patriarchal system of compulsory heterosexuality in which women's purpose is to serve men as partners in reproduction, as their mothers, and as their wives." (sec. 7). Women are expected to behave in a passive manner and gentle manner, as opposed to the masculine active and strong. Essentially, women in this system are portrayed not as beings with their own qualities independent from those of men, but rather as lacking in the qualities of men, the qualities that a human being is *meant* to have, and thus compliant with the concept that women must rely on their masculine counterparts, in a way, to be whole. In this sense, women are not so much "women" as they are simply "not men," establishing the masculine as the natural basis, and the feminine as something that is, simply put, inherently "other."

Thus, distinguishing a default and the dependent gender works to encourage a world-view centered around who is capable of surviving on their own, and who is not. In her discussion of the gender binary, Morgenroth (2021) comments on how "women who conform to these norms are seen as worthy of protection, but women who aim to upset the status quo are 'harshly punished'" (sec. 7). It should be noted that the perpetuation of gender roles depends on this idea that women need to be protected by men, primarily against the threat of other men. The Old English elegy *The Wife's Lament*, for instance, depicts a woman's attempt to use the same agency demonstrated

by her masculine counterparts, and the tragic end this earns her. Abandoned by her husband, she attempts to venture outward, into the world, when a woman's role was primarily inward, centered around the family. And yet, her husband was her family, and his disappearance has rendered her sphere void. She tells her audience how she "fretted at dawn as to where in the world [her] man might be," saying, "In my sorrow I set out there, a friendless wanderer, to search for my man" (Crossley-Holland 1999, pg 56). With such pressure for a woman to be dependent on her husband for guidance and protection, these lines read as something frantic, conveying the urgency with which she needed to go through with such an action despite knowing the consequences that might follow. It is almost as if she does not know how to function without her husband, whom she has been taught to rely on above herself, above her society. Her reaction, as drastic as it may have seemed to the men of her world, who deemed it wild enough to cast her out entirely, can thus be attributed to the co-dependency that their own patriarchal standards encouraged. Thus, it is the patriarchal influence that made her into what is arguably the perfect wife, and proceeded to destroy her for it.

The binary thus encourages women to remain docile for their male guardians in the hopes of being deemed worthy of the safety and security that all life inherently deserves. Though Morganroth's work is based in the modern field of gender study, this concept of keeping women confined to submission out of social force is nothing new. In works of literature such as *Beowulf*, numerous examples of this appear throughout the poem, one of the most prominent being the brief relation of the story of Modthryth, who begins defiant to the expectations forced on her based on her perceived gender. She demonstrates activity and takes agency in her life, something she, as well as Grendel's Mother, are demonized for. However, Modthryth's tale, unlike Grendel's Mother's, ends on what is clearly intended as a positive note, a return to security for the woman as well as the patriarchal standard, proclaiming her to have earned the praise and kind treatment of the men around her through her submission to her husband. The story thus acts as "the patriarchal equivalent of 'happily ever after,' naturalizing the social hierarchy for the survival of a patriarchal culture" (Molter, 2016, p. 4). In a small amount of text, the reader is presented with a woman breaking from what is perceived as natural, mending her ways, and returning to a state of balance. Thus, Modthryth and the nameless Wife of *The Wife's Lament* seem to raise the question of whether women in Old English literature are capable of retaining their femininity outside of the state of marriage. Their stories seem to articulate the idea that being a wife is the natural state for women to achieve, expressing the fear that women outside of this state of direct submission to a specific man as either maiden or widow allows for the rejection of her role in the binary.

"Unnatural"

This then raises the issue of Old English literature presenting unmarried women as being something unnatural, a concept culminated in Grendel's Mother, who has achieved the feminine ideal of motherhood without having submitted to a husband through marriage, and is thus never afforded the arc of redemption offered to Mod-

thryth in the poem. Grendel's Mother seems to be closer to (yet more dangerous than) the nameless Wife, becoming the poem's embodiment of both the threat and the fear of what cannot be controlled. Thus, Grendel's Mother comes to represent one who is harshly punished where women such as Modthryth and even Wealtheow juxtapose her as women who are worthy of protection, part of what is considered to be the natural balance. Grendel's Mother is not a wife, nor does she comply with the patriarchal expectation of her culture that she submit to the protection of a male kinsman; rather, she acts independently, ruling her own assets and proceeding through what would have been proper behavior in the wake of a kinsman's murder, had she been on the other end of the binary.

Perhaps what is most frightening from the masculine perspective is not simply Grendel's Mother's embrace of a blurred set of gender rules, but the fact that she is capable of fulfilling male roles almost better than the hero himself. Molter's (2016) article on Grendel's Mother as deviant calls particular importance not to the rather intimate language of the fight between her and Beowulf, not to the fact that it is more physical than his battles with men, but to the fact that he cannot defeat her with his sword, Hrunting, with which he has never lost a fight. Molter calls attention to this feat with a possible defense that maintains patriarchal control: that there would be no honor to be gained in slaying a member of the "lesser" sex, though this is a reading that seems to collapse with the breaking of Beowulf's sword. The failure of Hrunting seems to finally solidify Grendel's Mother as a force that cannot be controlled by either positive or negative reinforcements of patriarchal ideals, her very existence forcing confrontation with "the vulnerability of mankind and the inaccuracy of the patriarchal claims" (Molter 2016, p. 6). She thus comes to represent the fear exhibited by any reigning class that maintains their power through the active degradation of other demographics: that those they control through falsehoods will recognize their own power.

This, then, creates the necessity for erasure that occurs in both the death of Grendel's Mother, as well as the exile of the nameless Wife of *The Wife's Lament*. Beowulf reacts to his victory over Grendel's Mother, as Molter (2016) agrees, with considerably less enthusiasm than he does the defeat of her son, despite her duel being the objectively more challenging of the two. Returning to Herot, Beowulf presents Grendel's head without further mention of his more worthy opponent, in an act that dismisses her as a genuine threat to those following the rules of their culture; in refusing to acknowledge that she had skill enough to threaten him physically, it denies that Grendel's Mother had skill enough to threaten the status quo to begin with. Thus, the act works to right the wrong that she presented through denying her that thing most important to the male heroes of old: a legacy. Just as exiling the nameless Wife presents an act in which the status quo is maintained by choosing to remove her from its domain rather than acknowledge her actions as a thing to be addressed, so is Grendel's Mother removed from the narrative that the victor tells his world. In the wake of masculine victory, the actions of these two women become not only things they refuse to address, but no longer a thing that can be addressed. And, if their actions remain unspoken, they lose their power as a demonstration of behavior that other women could potentially

come to see as acceptable. In this way, a denial of existence becomes almost as effective as if these behavioral deviants had never existed to begin with, as other women would either never learn of their actions, or, if they did, could be frightened back into submission through the learning of their punishments.

RETURN TO STATUS QUO

When faced with women such as Grendel's Mother and the nameless Wife who are not only willing to break from gender norms, but prove themselves capable of matching their male counterparts in traditionally masculine feats, the patriarchal class is brought to confront a lack of "clear differentiation between women and men" (sec. 18), what Morganroth (2021) deems a "distinctiveness threat" (Table 3). As the system of patriarchal gender norms is so deeply ingrained, "reactions to distinctiveness threat can include identity uncertainty (feeling uncertain about what it means to be a man or woman), which has been shown to be associated with lower collective self-esteem and higher collective angst and anger" (sec. 18), and so the very existence of Grendel's Mother as a gender non-conformist becomes a threat to the very foundations of her culture's core power dynamic. While women in this dynamic tend to go unaddressed, threats to men are things that must be dealt with, and there are several ways that the men of Old English literature attempt to neutralize the threat they face to return to the status quo that favors them.

This raises the critical point of address that neither of these social deviants were given the right to a name. It is not an unfamiliar sentiment that names have power; particularly in a culture of heroics, such as that of Beowulf, where one's entire reputation depended on their name. Their name was their legacy, which was, in many ways, the primary motivator in attempting great deeds, though what's more is that names are often a crucial aspect of a person's identity, and removing one's name works to discourage their memory from persisting. In a poem such as *The Wife's Lament*, it is reasonable to assume the effectiveness of this method of alleviating a threat through erasing it from public knowledge, even as the poem is narrated by the one offending the patriarchal values in place. The way she describes how her society exiles her, denying her a name to be remembered by, the intensity of her misery at being cast away from everyone that knew her to a place apart from the order she threatens paints a clear and tragic picture of the ease with which one would have been able to forget her. A name would have immortalized a hero such as Beowulf, and so it is not a far leap to view the absence of Grendel's Mother's name as it functions to make her role in a male hero's story more forgettable, to deny it had any value over that of her son's, just as Beowulf himself takes only Grendel's head as a trophy of his masculine prowess. In such a move, it is as if Beowulf attempts to shift the focus of his peers back to the realm of men, rather than a woman who could compete with them, an active attempt of stripping Grendel's Mother of her story within the narrative, attempting to strip her memory from any that may have taken inspiration from her, or taken offense.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that:

> Her lack of a name, whether a factual namelessness or the poet's deliberate omission in an attempt to further dehumanize her, emphasizes her deviant status as an outsider who does not conform to society's gender roles. She exists outside the parameters of all that is considered normal and good with a nameless identity that defies categorization. (Molter 2016, p. 2)

The denial of her name works then to shape her memory in such a way that denies those traits that would have been considered natural, or human had the binary not been so strict in its groupings, nor would modern readers be entirely unfamiliar with the concept of removing one's humanity through the removal of their name. In the modern day, this mode of punishment is often associated with murderers, school-shooters, and other criminals that are denied the privilege of public naming in order to avoid the glorification of their actions or ego. And yet, it perhaps signifies the threat that a woman such as Grendel's Mother posed to the status quo of her world that denying her a name, attempting to erase her memory from the narrative was not seen as enough work against her.

From the moment she is introduced, one notices the way the poet and the characters around her must work so diligently to vilify her every characteristic. Grendel's Mother is attributed as being a direct relation to Cain, the original murderer, said to have given birth to a dragon, said to live under the water and a myriad of other things that set her apart from what may even remotely be considered human. In her essay on gender in *Beowulf*, Temple (1986) does an excellent job of examining how the diction surrounding Grendel's Mother can be just as telling as the descriptions of her biblical relations. In particular, she examines the use of the Old English word "ides", a word used for "woman" that she claims is, "the poet's description which has been overlooked by commentators is the epithet applied to the troll-wife in 1259a; *Ides agle^cwif*. The latter compound means 'monster woman,' or, less specifically, 'powerful woman.'" (p. 10). One may argue that in the Anglo-Saxon world the terms "monster" and "power-ful" become synonymous when describing women, particularly one such as Grendel's Mother who is deemed either or both for her independence in a man's world. It is notable that she has been given this word to describe her when considering, as Temple (1986) notes, that the typical word for "woman" was "wif," modern "wife." In a way, it is the double-meaning of this word "ides" that demonstrates the patriarchal thoroughness of weaponizing every aspect of the culture it controls, down to decisions of rhetoric.

Conclusion

There is no denying the impact of a given culture on the values and prejudices it comes to reinforce through the literary works it produces. Of these, the English literary canon has demonstrated time and again the import of gender roles in each stage of its history, presenting patriarchal values as some of the most lasting one may come

across while reading. By looking at characters such as Grendel's Mother in *Beowulf* and the narrator of the elegiac poem *The Wife's Lament*, one may see the ways in which Old English literature prefaced the patriarchal trend of demonizing women as a means of empowering men that has yet to abate from present societal trends. Through studying the treatment of these characters in their respective poems, one may better understand what it looks like for patriarchal fragility to manifest as the encouragement through shame or fear for women to remain dependent upon the men of their world as not entirely human, but as things that are inherently "other."

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