Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*

PAUL ACKER

J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S ESSAY "*BEOWULF*: THE MONSTERS AND THE CRITICS" has for many readers achieved one of its stated intentions, that of placing the monsters at the center of the poem rather than at the periphery.[1] And yet subsequent developments in literary hermeneutics and critical theory make it clear that Tolkien also deflected certain avenues of interpreting the monsters. He begins with a claim that *Beowulf* has been studied, inconclusively, as history but not as a poem; he creates a dichotomy between the ephemeral nature of history and the timelessness of art (14–16). *Beowulf*, insofar as it is a "fairy-story" or "folk-tale," contains elements of myth, which like fantasy is apparently not susceptible to analysis. The mythic poet "feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends" and "presents it incarnate in the world of history and geography" (21).[2] The poet of *Beowulf* presents us with real monsters incarnate in a fictive world, Tolkien implies, though later faulting the dragon "for not being dragon enough, plain pure fairy-story dragon" (23). Eventually Tolkien agrees with W. P. Ker that the monsters mythologically embody (not symbolize, exactly) the forces of "Chaos" and "Unreason" eternally pitted against the gods and men (25–26). And yet the poet "was not yet writing an allegorical homily"; Grendel "inhabits the visible world and eats the flesh and blood of men; he enters their houses by the doors" (27).

While we may admire the poet for such mimetic touches, we may also wonder if history and social context have to be so effectively banished from our reading of the monsters. Myth critics other than Tolkien have been more willing to see myth and society as interrelating, even to see myths as "charters" for social action.[3] Our difficulties in finding historical and social contexts for *Beowulf* are notorious; the poem (it appears) cannot be firmly dated[4] or localized, and any

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narrowly defined historical interpretation will likely prove as ephemeral as Tolkien predicted, mere "burbl[ing] in the tulgy wood of conjecture" ("*Beowulf*: The Monsters" 17). We may nonetheless seek traces of long-term (but not timeless) cultural preoccupations as expressed in literary and historical sources; one approach to the monsters would then be to examine them as projections of Anglo-Saxon cultural anxieties.[5] I focus here on the one monster Tolkien, oddly enough, ignores almost completely: Grendel's dam, or mother.[6] I argue that through her is projected an anxiety over the failure of vengeance as a system of justice and that her "powers of horror" (borrowing Julia Kristeva's phrase) partly reside in (or are attributed to) her maternal nature. In so doing, I make use of contemporary psychoanalytic theory even while questioning to what extent such theory, based on a modern construction of the personal subject, applies to the processes of socialization and acculturation operative roughly a thousand years ago.[7] Other questions can be raised about such approaches: should they address authorial psychology (Harwood), the political unconscious (Jameson), or a textual unconscious (Strohm 165)? Given the lack of any life records for the *Beowulf* poet and of a specific political milieu, I have settled on "cultural preoccupations" as the element most likely to be discernible in a traditional work, one that begins by calling to attention ("Hwæt!") the heroic legends that "we" (the poet and the poet's Anglo-Saxon audience) have heard of (1–3).

In the past few decades, psychoanalytic theorists have begun to reinvestigate an area that Freud touched on in his essay on the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), on feelings of dread and horror, in psychology as well as in literature.[8] For Kristeva, this investigation takes the form of a book entitled *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. She creates a category called the "abject" for that which we feel compelled to cast away from ourselves, that which arouses horror, loathing, and disgust.[9] In Lacan's model of psychological development, the acculturated, "speaking subject" has become a subject of desire, of a displaced desire for the former unity with the mother.[10] How, then, do we account for our simultaneous feelings of attraction to and repulsion from the horrific, our desire for that which is demonstrably not an object of desire? As elsewhere in her work, Kristeva finds her solution in the semiotic phase of psychological development, when before its inscription in language the subject (or rather subject-to-be) begins to separate from the mother. Entering into the symbolic phase will require abjection of anything that muddies the clear distinction between the subject and its preoedipal desires; but for Kristeva the abject is not repressed into the unconscious (as it is for Freud and Lacan) but rather is excluded imperfectly, such that its effects always hover at the border of consciousness (7).

The abject is thus aligned with marginality; it "confronts us . . . with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder" (Kristeva 12–13). To connect this aspect of abjection with the powers of horror in *Beowulf*, we may recall how the murderous Grendel and his mother reside at the edges of the area of socialization centered in the hall (Heorot), beyond the marches and in a mere at the margin of which even a hunted stag (*heorot*) must recoil in horror (1345–76).[11]

Even more interesting is the relation Kristeva finds between the abject and the maternal.[12] She writes, "The abject confronts us . . . with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* identity even before ex-isting outside of her. . . . It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (13). Such contradictory feelings

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attributed to the infant are apparently echoed by a paradoxical maternal image Kristeva sees in the work of Louis-Ferdinand Céline: the mother gives us life, but since she does not give us immortality, she gives us death as well (159). Within such areas of paradox, horror exerts a perverse fascination. We find a similarly complex and evocative moment in *Beowulf* when the fight with Grendel's mother takes place in her den, a place devoted to security for the monstrous pair but death and cannibalization for human prey.[13] I will return to this moment, which I regard as in a sense the central mystery of the poem, after a consideration of events that lead up to it.

The reader of *Beowulf* may be struck by how Grendel and his mother are not introduced into the narrative so much as they suddenly materialize within it. Grendel first appears after the description of the building of Heorot and the subsequent forecast of its destruction by fire once sword-hate ("ecghete"; 84) has been awakened. It is as if the prospect of feud and violence also awakens Grendel; he emerges from the shadows ("þystrum"; 87) as if stepping out of the smoke that will envelop Heorot; he materializes from the prospects of failure that haunt all human endeavors, all attempts to build a stronghold of socialization in the wilderness. Subsequently Grendel will be associated with the shadows of night. His famous approach to Heorot can be said to begin not with what Alain Renoir calls the cinematic "long exterior shot" of him gliding in the darkness (161)—"Com on wanre niht / scriðan sceadugenga" 'The shadow-walker came gliding in the dark night' (702–03)—but rather in the gliding approach of night itself, out of which Grendel materializes: "scaduhelma gesceapu scriðan cwoman / wan under wolcnum" 'shapes of the shadow-cover [i.e., night] came gliding dark under the clouds' (650–51). 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; that is, only after she has attacked Heorot does Hrothgar happen to mention that, oh yes, by the way, we have heard tell that there were two monsters from the mere, not just one (1345–61).

The sudden appearance of Grendel's mother is preceded by the narrative presentation of two other maternal figures, Hildeburh and Wealhtheow. Jane Chance describes the movement in this section of the poem as follows:

> The *past* helplessness of the first mother, Hildeburh, to requite the death of her son counterpoints the anxiously maternal Wealhtheow's attempt to weave the ties of kinship and obligation, thereby forestalling *future* danger to her sons. Later that night, Grendel's mother, intent on avenging the loss of her son in the *present*, attacks Heorot, her masculine aggression contrasting with the feminine passivity of both Hildeburh and Wealhtheow. (100)[14]

Grendel's mother thus appears on the scene as a kind of feminine antitype, but we may also notice the more immediate context for her appearance. Wealhtheow observes optimistically toward the end of her remarks, "Her is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe" 'Here each noble is true to the other' (1228), echoing her earlier observation that Hrothgar and Hrothulf were "æghwylc oðrum trywe" in the present (1165), which hints perhaps at future discord.[15] Wealhtheow's vision of unanimity contrasts sharply with the narrator's comment that the men were sleeping with their armor and weapons close by. It was their custom to be thus prepared to fight for their lord, a custom given the familiar seal of approval in the line "wæs seo þeod tilu" 'that was a good people' (1250).[16] The need to be ever in a state of readiness against attack was surely something of a drawback to the system of feuding warrior bands, but from within this system, codified in traditional formulas, the text can only voice approval.[17]

At this point Grendel's mother appears, materializing out of an atmosphere of potential strife just as Grendel materialized out of the future ashes of Heorot. Through the irruption

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of a monster, the text projects the anxieties it cannot otherwise adequately voice concerning the inherent weaknesses in the system of feuding and revenge. Killing off one opponent will only trigger the appearance of another as long as the system of revenge by kin is in place.[18]

That a female creature and more particularly a maternal one takes this revenge may have highlighted its monstrousness. Unlike Hildeburh and Wealhtheow, Grendel's mother acts aggressively, arguably in a fashion reserved for men. The similarity of her actions to that of her son, the fact that she is following in her son's (bloody) footsteps, is emphasized. We are told that one of the warriors will die "swa him ful oft gelamp, / siþðan goldsele Grendel warode" 'just as had often happened before when Grendel preyed upon the hall' (1252–53). Her approach is signaled in lines closely echoing the approach of her son: "Com þa to Heorote" 'She came then to Heorot' (1279). The poet feels compelled to add that her horror ("gryre" [1282], also translated as "force of attack") is the less even as the "war-horror of a woman" is less than that of a "weaponed man" 'wiggryre wifes be wæpnedmen' (1284). While "wæpnedmen" is used literally here, it may also connote the standard legal formula "wæpman and wifman" 'male and female.'[19] And since *wæpen* is also a word for the phallus, the poet says in effect that Grendel's mother was the less horrible simply by virtue (so to speak) of lacking a phallus. This authorial intrusion strikes a rationalizing or overdetermined note. Given that Grendel's mother will carry off a warrior just as effectively as her son did, does it really matter that her strength may be a bit less or that (as the poet also feels compelled to remark in line 1292) she is in rather more of a hurry to leave Heorot? Furthermore, it can be argued that Beowulf's confrontation with Grendel's mother is every bit as horrifying, as life-threatening, as his comparatively easy dispatching of Grendel, if not more so.[20]

A comparative look into Old Norse literature and its preoccupation with feuds may prove instructive. In the Old Icelandic family sagas, the role most often taken by women in feuds is that of an inciter to revenge, what Rolf Heller calls a *Hetzerin* (98–122). Women spur various kinsmen to avenge other kinsmen. In *Heiðarvíga saga*, for example, Hallr Guðmundsson is slain as part of a developing feud, and his mother, Þuríðr, serves each of her other sons a stone for dinner, saying they have already managed to digest their brother's death. They take the hint and ride off to avenge Hallr. When Þuríðr rides after them, her son Barði sends men to undo her saddle girths surreptitiously so that she falls into a stream and then has to return home, "eigi ørendi fegin" 'anything but pleased with the outcome of her journey' (Nordal and Jónsson 279; Kunz 105). The point of this little episode is that inciting is women's business, but revenge is men's business.

Whether such urging by women has any relation to historical reality is another question. William Miller has compared the "shaming rituals" of various cultures, in which weaker members of a clan group goad stronger members into taking action on their behalf (*Bloodtaking* 212). Jenny Jochens has argued, however, that the role of the *Hetzerin* is largely the product of male fiction, a mirage of male fantasies and fears ("Heroine"). Jochens bases her conclusions largely on the fact that women play a less important role in *Sturlunga saga*, which reflects contemporary events and so is thought to be more historically reliable than the family sagas. Her point is probably not subject to proof, although it seems likely that the role of the *Hetzerin* was to some extent a literary stereotype and in part a projection of masculine feelings of shame onto a feminine figure. By the time the family sagas were written down, the role doubtless had, as Jochens says, a "resonance with the long-established ecclesiastical view of Eve" (49). But, as she also notes, the figure predates Christian views of women since it appears prominently in Eddic poetry. Further,

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Jochens does find a few instances of the *Hetzerin* figure in *Sturlunga saga*, including one that is particularly explicit about the expected male and female roles in a feud. Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir shames her husband into supporting her brother in a quest for revenge, saying, "I will take up weapons and see whether men would want to follow me, although it goes against my character, and I would give you the keys to the pantry" ("Heroine" 46; also *Old Norse Images* 195). Returning to *Beowulf*, we find the role of *Hetzerin* scarcely represented, unless we consider that, as Helen Damico has argued, Wealhtheow's presenting a cup to Beowulf (620–30) is a symbolic incitement and a reflex of typical Valkyrie behavior.[21]

Miller has isolated examples in Old Norse literature of women taking vengeance into their own hands and has observed that these women "are considered distinctly deviant" ("Choosing" 185).[22] In chapter 35 of *Laxdæla saga*, for instance, Bróka-Auðr (Breeches-Auðr) avenges her divorce by wounding her former husband (Sveinsson; Magnusson and Pálsson). But, as her name implies, Auðr was known to be a cross-dresser and by implication was viewed as abnormal,[23] a man in a woman's body in a man's clothes. Cross-dressing and reversed gender expectations figure predominantly in this entire episode in *Laxdæla saga*. The heroine of the saga, Guðrún, was married to Þorvaldr Halldórsson, although she preferred Þórðr Ingunnarson. When Þorvaldr slaps her, Þórðr suggests Guðrún make Þorvaldr a low-cut, effeminate shirt, one that will reveal his nipples; if he wears it, she will have grounds to divorce him for cross-dressing. She does so. Next she suggests Þórðr divorce his wife, Breeches-Auðr, for cross-dressing; he does so and marries Guðrún. When Auðr hears that Þórðr is sleeping alone one night, she rides furiously in her breeches and enters Þórðr's bed closet; he ignores her, thinking she is a man. She then stabs him in the arm and across the nipples with a short sword, so fiercely that the sword sticks in the bed boards. Þórðr's wounds heal, but he never recovers full use of his arm. Besides Breeches-Auðr, the other well-known exception to a strict gender-based division of avenging labor in the family sagas occurs in chapter 37 of *Gísla saga* (Þórólfsson and Jónsson; Johnston), in which Þórdís "thrusts a sword up under a table at her brother's slayer but catches the hilt against the edge of the table and succeeds only in inflicting a severe wound" (Andersson 20). As Miller observes, the attempt's failure may indicate an implicit judgment on the impropriety of the action ("Choosing" 186).

It is interesting to note, however, that Þórdís's act of vengeance is taken on behalf of a brother rather than a son or husband. When we turn to the world of Eddic poetry and the related legendary or *fornaldar* sagas, we find among others the well-known case of Guðrún, who avenged her brothers by feeding her sons to her husband, Atli, and then burning him in his drunken bed.[24] Clearly her attachment to her brothers was her strongest kinship tie. Or we may consider *Hervarar saga*, in which Angantýr inherits a powerful sword on which has been laid a curse that whoever bears it shall be killed. Subsequently Angantýr is killed, together with his eleven brothers, who might have been expected to avenge him. In their stead his posthumously born daughter, Hervör, comes to his burial mound and takes up the sword (C. Tolkien, chs. 3–4).[25] She does not seek to avenge him but uses the sword to carry on the family Viking tradition, having adopted the man's name Hervarðr. When she kills a courtier who dares to unsheathe the sword, King Guðmundr tells his men not to seek vengeance, "mun yðr þykkja í manni þessum minni hefnd, en þér ætlið, því kvennmann ætla ek hann vera" 'for your vengeance on this man . . . will seem smaller than you now think, because it is my guess that he is a woman' (C. Tolkien 20). Guðmundr's son later marries Hervör, after which her Viking days are over. The legend reflects a fascination with the anomaly of the female warrior, who

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adopts her role only in the absence of male heirs and who receives the (if you will) phallic sword from a father who even when dead is still reluctant to give it up. That Hervör/Hervarðr's career lasts only while she is a maiden, uncomplicated by adult sexuality, is likewise worth noting. The prepubescent tomboy figure was doubtless less threatening to the phallocentric power structure than was the figure of an adult woman or a mother.

Examples in Old Norse literature in which a female figure actively avenges her son are few. None is to be found in the Old Norse *Beowulf*ian analogues collected and translated by G. N. Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson or those added by Peter Jorgensen ("Analogues" and "Two-Troll Variant").[26] Occasionally Old Norse trolls (to whom Grendel is sometimes compared) are accompanied by wives, daughters, and mothers (e.g., Brúsi and the "she-cat" in *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar* [Garmonsway and Simpson 316–20]),[27] but none avenges a son. In chapter 18 of *Gísla saga*, a man named Bergr hits Þorsteinn on the head with an ax. Þorsteinn goes home to his sorceress mother, Auðbjörg, who nurses his wounds, walks withershins around the house, and changes the weather so that an avalanche falls on Bergr's farm, killing him and his men (Þórólfsson and Jónsson; Johnston); such power was obviously not available to less exceptional mothers. Grendel's dam may have seemed monstrous not only because she was a female exacting revenge but more specifically because she was a mother. While the virginal figure of a sister or shield maiden was removed enough from the world of sexual difference to exert a kind of fascination, a mother, expected to be empowered chiefly through her son,[28] was too horrible to consider in the destructive role of an avenger.[29] 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.

Writers of popular fiction and cinema have long recognized the powers of horror residing in subhuman creatures against whom no appeal of reason will avail, creatures of blind protective rage. In the 1981 film *Quest for Fire*, three cavemen have almost returned home when one of them enters a cave and hears a peculiar sound, which the camera next shows to originate from an adorable bear cub. But as soon as the man reacts with relief, the mother bear erupts onto the scene and mauls him horribly. One imagines that such encounters would have been something of an occupational hazard for cave-dwelling peoples. The audience of *Beowulf*, while they may have been rather at a remove from cave-dwelling days (the "eorðscræf" 'cave' of *The Wife's Lament* notwithstanding [line 28]), would have had a more vivid, experiential sense of mother animals protecting their young than most of us do today, and that sense would have resonated in the setting of Beowulf's second fight deep in the lair of a half-humanoid, half-bearish creature.[30]

In the 1979 horror film *Alien*, the monster has descended further down the evolutionary scale, embodying in its successive metamorphoses a range of crustacean and insectoid creatures that seem ever more horrible in their relentless pursuit of (chiefly human) prey. In the 1986 sequel *Aliens*, the producers found an unusual solution to the problem of how to top themselves. First they serve up a glut of creatures, a swarm that gets in everywhere like giant roaches. An orphaned girl arouses the maternal feelings of the female protagonist, Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver), and we eventually encounter the source of the horde—a giant queen creature implacably laying the eggs of drone aliens. When Ripley, wearing hydraulic stilts,[31] threatens the eggs, the mother creature literally tears herself away from her egg-laying sac and meets the human mother in a titanic duel. Whatever one may think of the movie's other features, it exploits in a strikingly innovative fashion the powers of horror and sentiment that phallocentric culture has paradoxically located in the mother.

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Innovative, that is, until we consider that *Beowulf* tops itself in a similar way. The combat with Grendel takes place in masculine terms, with which the tradition seems more comfortable.[32] Grendel prevails until a hero with a firmer handgrip comes along, like a gunslinger ousted by a faster gun. But Grendel's mother does not play by these rules; she absconds with her prey and forces Beowulf to fight on her home turf.[33] The episode is not a pale shadow of the combat with Grendel, and the critic cannot, like Tolkien, simply gloss over it or, like Paul Taylor, treat it as a kind of appendage to the Grendel episode.[34] The combat with Grendel's mother is central to the poem not just as the second of three combats but as arguably the most mysterious and compelling.[35] The text is drawn to the mere on several occasions: when Grendel's bloody footsteps are tracked to its edge (839–56); when Grendel's mother emerges from the terrible waters, preys upon Heorot, and then hastens back to the fen (1251–1304); in Hrothgar's famous and evocative description of the hellish lake,[36] which not even a hard-pressed hart will enter (1345–76); and then again when Beowulf's men track Grendel's mother, making their arduous way to the bloody pool where they find Æschere's head (1402–23). Here at the edge one of the Geats can dispatch a water monster safely at a distance with an arrow (1432–36). But Beowulf plunges into the mere,[37] where the monsters tear at his chainmail and where Grendel's mother pins him fast (1494–1512).[38] Even his mighty sword fails him, for the first time in its long life. Trusting then to his mighty handgrip, he takes down his female wrestling opponent, but she effects a quick reversal, sits on him,[39] and draws a knife, thinking now to avenge her son.

Some critics (e.g., Chance 102–04) have detected undertones of an inverted and horrific sexuality in this scene, a sexuality that has been effectively repressed from the poem thus far, banished to the bowers outlying Heorot where Grendel exiles the men to their shame (138–43). At this pivotal moment in the poem, Grendel's mother threatens not just an individual man's dominance but the whole system of male dominance; like the abject, she does not "respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4). The system of feuding has produced a monstrous, avenging mother who carries the hero to the threshold of a mystery that cannot be assimilated, that must be cast away, abjected—the very birthplace of death. And the text does abject this moment; a *gladius ex machina* appears on the cavern wall, an old sword made by giants, larger than any man might bear to the sport of war. Beowulf swings, Grendel's mother falls to the floor, the sword sweats, the man rejoices in his work.[40] As quickly as it appeared, this transcendently large sword melts away. The hilt is given to Hrothgar and power officially reverts to the old patriarch, until the system of feuds inevitably conjures up an opponent that no hero can abject without abjecting the self in death—that is, as Tolkien puts it, until the dragon comes.

In conclusion, I return to a few questions of theory and method that I raised at the beginning of this essay. Kristeva's comments on the relation between horror and the maternal develop out of her revision of the Lacanian explanation of ego formation. In applying any of her perceptions, we must consider that the way in which a subject will be constituted, as well as our interpretation of that process through a particular model of psychoanalysis, will be rooted in a particular historical and social moment.[41] Did Anglo-Saxon children—like (purportedly) those in twentieth-century Paris—even before developing a sense of their own psychic boundaries, begin to reject what was hovering nauseatingly along those nascent boundaries ("sour milk, excrement, even a mother's engulfing embrace" [McAfee 46])? Might they, in Kristeva's words, in her "imagining," sometimes feel "a maternal hatred without a word for the words of the father" (6)—that is, a sense of maternal abjection that precedes Lacan's mirror stage[42]

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and the acculturation into language and patriarchal society, after which we experience a new separation from the mother and become "subjects of this loss and thus subjects of language" (Lechte 159)? Of course, such a narrative of self would not have been thus formulated in any era prior to the development of the discourse of psychoanalysis.[43] And it remains just that, a narrative, a construction, "a story created in the course of the analytical dialogue" between patient and analyst, between literature and psychoanalysis, and between past and present (Møller 21).[44] One indication that Anglo-Saxon psychodramas might have been at least comparable to ours (as described by Kristeva), however, is the preoccupation in *Beowulf* with primal loss—loss of a golden age with Scyld, loss of Heorot to Grendel and his mother and eventually to fire, loss ultimately of the heroic age of which the poem is a nostalgic mirror.[45] It might even be argued that *Beowulf* and to a certain extent the Icelandic family sagas employ a narrative of abjection, of attraction to and compulsive separation from unassimilable violence—rather than a narrative of desire, of the quest for the ever-receding object of desire.[46]

I have tried to show how abjection of the mother in particular is operative in the cultural preoccupations of *Beowulf*. It might be added that patriarchal culture will have a stake in this form of abjection in its attempt to control the means of reproduction.[47] The mother line may be effaced in the system of patronymics[48]—Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow—but the abjected mother will return to haunt the patriarchal stronghold, and in *Beowulf* she will return with a vengeance.

Notes

This article is based on a paper I delivered for the section "Theory and Method in Anglo-Saxon Studies: New Voices in the Text" at the International Congress on Medieval Studies. I thank Allen Frantzen for organizing the section, Helen Bennett for discussing the original idea with me, and Marijane Osborn for her helpful suggestions.

1. Such a focus on monsters reflects the essay's cultural anxieties, both for Tolkien, writing between the wars, and for the readers who follow him. For contemporary American readers, Cohen comments on "a society that has created and commodified 'ambient fear'—a kind of total fear that saturates day-to-day living, prodding and silently antagonizing but never speaking its own name. This anxiety manifests itself symptomatically as a cultural fascination with monsters . . ." ("In a Time" viii).

2. The earlier versions of Tolkien's essay depict the *Beowulf* poet as even more insulated from the effects of culture, as all agency and no subjectivity: the poet "feels" a myth and then "presents it as a fact in time, and bolsters it about with history" (Beowulf *and the Critics* 54; cf. 108).

3. Malinowski 89; see, e.g., Lönnroth on the Eddic mythological poem *Völuspá*. In Lacan's terms, Tolkien subscribes here to the fallacy that myth is a "pre-discursive reality" (qtd. in Lechte 55). In his own terms, Tolkien worries that the myth critic will only "be left with a formal or mechanical allegory" (22), a concern that surfaces again in his well-known distaste for reductively historical or allegorical readings of *The Lord of the Rings;* see Shippey, *J. R. R. Tolkien*, ch. 4. On myth criticism and *Beowulf*, see Niles, "Myth and History"; Howe; and Liuzza 13–19.

4. Taken together, the essays collected in Colin Chase show that the earlier consensus of an eighth-century date was based on inconclusive evidence (but see more recently Newton; Clemoes). Bjork and Obermeier summarize dating arguments through 1993.

5. Such an approach would not pretend to exhaust the significance or function of the monsters or to deny the author any agency in orchestrating or (conceivably) critiquing the cultural anxieties expressed in the poem. My approach is in sympathy with that area of cultural studies Cohen has recently named "monster theory": "A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' 'that which warns,' a glyph that seeks a hierophant" ("Monster Culture" 4).

6. Tolkien viewed the poem as consisting of two parts, contrasting Beowulf's youth and age, and dominated by two combats, against Grendel and the dragon. Grendel's mother merits only a single mention, in the appendix "Grendel's Titles" (36–37), as Bennett (26) and Clark (10) have noted. Subsequent critics have urged a tripartite structure and emphasized Grendel's mother accordingly (e.g., Bonjour; Rogers; Hume; Chance; and Vaught). For a survey of critical ideas of structure in the poem, see Shippey, "Structure." The use in the critical literature of the term "Grendel's dam," to suggest her animal aspect and a connection with "the devil and his dam" of folklore, is not strictly speaking supported by the poem's usage, which calls her Grendel's "modor" 'mother' (e.g., 1258) and

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"mage" 'kinswoman' (1391). Here and throughout, *Beowulf* line numbers refer to Klaeber's edition of the poem.

7. For archetypal and psychoanalytic approaches to *Beowulf*, see Helterman; Foley; Earl, chs. 4–6; Canfield; John Hill, ch. 5; Overing, *Language*; Nagler; Lapidge; Thormann; White; and Hala (a Kristevan reading).

8. E. Wright 124–39, Cixous, and Lydenberg provide further references. In book-length studies of horror film and literature, Prawer, Grixti, and Carroll each discuss Freud's uncanny and other psychoanalytic approaches to horror. McCaffrey, interestingly, suggests that Freud represses the figure of the uncanny woman.

9. On abjection, see also Gross; Overing, "On Reading"; Creed; Lechte 158–67; Oliver, *Reading* 55–62; Reineke 21–22, 42–48; and McAfee 45–57.

10. Lechte 158–59; for a review of Lacan's work in reference to Kristeva's response, see Lechte, ch. 2; and Reineke 18–27.

11. "[T]he hall symbolizes cosmic and social order, holding off the opposing forces of chaos, identified to some degree with Nature" (Earl 120). On the equation of Heorot and the hart at bay and on the overall concern with liminality, see Higley.

12. On the abject and the maternal, see Reineke, ch. 4, and McAfee 47–49. On the maternal in Kristeva's writings, see Gallop 113–81; Moi 167–68; Stanton; Cynthia Chase; Lechte; Doane and Hodges, ch. 3; Oliver, *Family* 112–14 and *Reading*; and Mazzoni 139–53.

13. The collocation of nurture (or security, at least—do we know that Grendel's mother was nurturing?) and cannibalism has led some scholars (e.g., Foley 151, Canfield 7, and White 77) to compare Grendel's mother to the archetypal Terrible Mother discussed by Neumann (I will discuss cannibalism further in an essay on Grendel). With regard to nurturing, Smith mentions a few instances of solicitous mothers (including Wealhtheow) in the Anglo-Saxon written record but feels compelled to add, "Demonstrations of loving relationships between mothers and their adult children tend not to lead to violence and litigation and consequently appear less frequently in the literature than manifestations of hostility" (114). Dockray-Miller asserts that Anglo-Saxon mothers "protected, nurtured and taught" their children, with reference to the "abbess-mothers of Kent, the queen-mothers of Wessex and Mercia, and the fictional mothers of *Beowulf*" (117); see also Lees and Overing, ch. 1. Ariès and his followers argued that medieval mothers were reluctant to grow attached to their infants because of the high mortality rate among the young, but the claim has been disputed (Huneycutt; Nelson 82, 94; and Crawford 115–17).

14. Joyce Hill relates this literary emphasis on female passivity first of all to the historically delimited (but nonetheless significant) sphere of activity of Anglo-Saxon royal women, "operating through and on behalf of the royal men, whose power is initially won and then sustained on the battlefield." As history is transformed into legend, female power is reduced further: "the highlighting and stereotyping of an idealized male heroism has as its counterpart the highlighting and stereotyping of female helplessness" (240). Overing, however, argues that this critical emphasis on female passivity ignores the "trace" of their unassimilated otherness (*Language*, ch. 3). On antifeminism elsewhere in Old English literature, see Belanoff. For bibliographies of feminist studies of Old English, see A. Olsen, "Gender"; Bennett; and the articles collected in Damico and Olsen.

15. Similarly, the beer-cheery picture she paints—"druncne dryhtguman doð swa ic bidde" 'the retainers flushed with drink do as I bid' (1231)—is belied by the narrator's comment that one of the beer drinkers was fated to die that night (1240–41).

16. Similarly constructed gnomic summations include "þæt wæs god cyning" 'that was a good king' (11) and "þæt wæs geomuru ides" 'that was a sad lady' (1075). See also the gnome in *Maxims I*: "A scyle þa rincas gerædan lædan / ond him ætsomne swefan" 'The warriors should always carry their equipment with them, and all sleep in a body' (Shippey, *Maxims I* 72–73; C.41–42).

17. The text voices reservations about some aspects of the system of revenge, chiefly in the area of conflicting loyalties (as in the Finnsburh episode), but not about the entire system. John Hill prefers to follow the text's surface claims about the successful settlements of feuds (ch. 1). Earl, however, sees Grendel's mother as revealing "the antagonistic relation of the warrior class . . . to the kindred and its system of revenge" (123). Thormann suggests that feud in *Beowulf* "is a system of justice based on revenge that finds its transcendent, primal sanction in an originary act of divine revenge. That founding act [the biblical flood] is inscribed in runes on a magical sword hilt Beowulf retrieves from his battle with Grendel's monstrous mother" (69).

18. The text states clearly that her motivation is revenge; she is called a surviving avenger ("wrecend"; 1256) and is said to undertake her "sorhfulne sið" 'sorrowful adventure' to avenge her son's death ("sunu deoð wrecan"; 1278 ["deoð" is Klaeber's emendation from the manuscript's "þeod"]). Hrothgar says she avenged the feud Beowulf started (1333–34), coming to Heorot to avenge her kinsman (1339). In retelling his exploits to Hygelac, Beowulf likewise emphasizes that Grendel's mother sought vengeance (2117–21).

19. Fell discusses the underlying sexually defined roles of warrior and weaver suggested by the collocation (40). With regard to aggression and gender roles, Fell makes the interesting point about the Anglo-Saxon queen Cyneðryð that while the scanty historical record seems only to indicate she was a woman of considerable power, "the only queen in the whole of Anglo-Saxon history to have had coins struck in her name," in later legend she became "a stereotype figure of the evil woman and was accused . . . of instigating the murder of Æðelbert of

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East Anglia, king and saint." Fell sums up this development: "it is a common folk-tale pattern that women of secular power are held to have misused it either directly or by influence" (90–91).

20. On the poet's systematic "discrediting" of Grendel's mother, see Irving, *Rereading* 70–73.

21. Miller discusses a number of cases in Old Norse literature in which female goading is intensified by the perhaps ritualized presentation of the head of a corpse or its blood-stained clothes ("Choosing"). He also discusses two remotely comparable instances in *Beowulf* (in the Finnsburh episode, lines 1142–45, and the digression on Wiglaf's armor, lines 2616–25), in which men (not women) present inflammatory swords (agents, not relics, of destruction). On a female inciter in the fragmentary Old English poem *Waldere*, see Joyce Hill 243–44.

22. See also Miller, *Bloodtaking* 354–55, and A. Olsen, "Women" 153–54.

23. Clover disagrees, claiming of Breeches-Auðr that "her actions are approved of, legal injunctions against transvestism notwithstanding." In Clover's analysis of gender in Norse society as seen primarily through the family sagas, "'masculinity' always has a plus value, even (or perhaps especially) when it is enacted by a woman" ("Regardless" 372). Any authorial critiques of such role reversals she blames on the influence of Christianity; but she glosses over the way in which her texts mark such occurrences as anomalous, and I am more in sympathy with Miller's analysis. In a footnote Clover cites Margaret Clunies Ross's statement that in the *fornaldarsögur*, "a dominant woman was more to be feared than a man, for she was able to strengthen herself magically in order to usurp male roles" (qtd. in Clover, "Regardless" 381n64).

24. See the Eddic poems *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál* (Dronke 1–12; 75–98) and chapter 40 of *Völsunga saga* (M. Olsen; Byock). The Eddic Guðrún is usually considered to have been the model for the Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga* (e.g., Andersson 66–71).

25. For an interpretation of Hervör, see Clover, "Maiden Warriors." On warrior women in Anglo-Saxon, Viking, and Celtic culture, see Hollis (86–91), who concludes that "the warrior woman can never have been other than a rarity, always liable to be construed as uncanny" (91).

26. See Fjalldal for a (polemically) skeptical view of these analogues.

27. Chadwick feels that the similarities in *Grettis saga* between Glámr, who haunts Þórhallsstaðir (chs. 32–35), and the troll woman who attacks the hall at Sandhaugar (ch. 65) imply "a unity in the original tradition" (190), in which presumably (but unverifiably) the troll woman would have avenged Glámr. In the absence of a clear Germanic tradition of a "demonic hag more dangerous in fight than her similarly evil son or sons," Puhvel has suggested the influence on *Beowulf* of Celtic motifs (85). For a putative Indo-European origin of the motif, see Fontenrose 525–28.

28. Cf. Hrothgar's comment, after Beowulf has just defeated Grendel, that the God of old was gracious to Beowulf's mother in her childbearing (945–46). Wealhtheow, as noted above, seeks to ensure that the power she now enjoys through her husband will transfer to her sons, her blood kin. On kinship, mothers, and revenge in the poem, see John Hill: "What is wanted in malignant feuds, apparently, is dark joy with the mother at the expense of all rivals when the loaned energies from the father weaken" (128).

29. Schrader notes that Anglo-Saxon hagiography, on the other hand, could allow for female saints who took up masculine, aggressive roles, including the wrestling of demons (ch. 1). Such saints were considered to act *werlice* (Lat. *viriliter*, "in a manly fashion"), spiritually fulfilling the masculine role of Christ's champion even as they fulfill the feminine role of Christ's bride. The Christian spiritual gender roles are so clearly hierarchical (masculine reason, feminine passion, etc.) that exceptional women can act "like a man" and pose no threat to the system. See also Overing, *Language,* ch. 3.

30. Irving ("Heroic Experience") and Osborn ("Vixen") discuss Exeter Book riddle 13 (sometimes numbered 15), which portrays an animal mother (badger? vixen?) defending her children. I assume there is some zoological basis for such observations, although they may quickly give way to a "fiction of maternal ferocity" (Freccero 118, writing of the film *Aliens*). Wachsler compares Beowulf's fight with Grendel to Grettir's fight with a bear in chapter 21 of *Grettis saga*; the motif of the bearish hero who defeats a bearish monster helps define a cluster of tales known as "The Bear's Son" (Stitt).

31. The device Ripley wears, called a loader, also has hydraulic arms that act as a forklift. The whole apparatus suggests a kind of mechanical carapace that puts Ripley on an equal footing with the insectoid monster, pitting technology against nature. For more on gender in the *Aliens* trilogy (now tetralogy), see Doherty.

32. On masculinism in *Beowulf* (and its critics, including Tolkien), see Lees; in Old English and Old Norse heroic poetry more generally, see Harris.

33. As Joyce Hill notes (244, 247), Beowulf, like other heroes, lets his enemies dictate some of the terms of the encounter; he travels to Denmark to fight Grendel (but does so in Hrothgar's hall) and to the dragon's lair (or rather just outside it) to fight the dragon. Nonetheless, the mere of Grendel's dam seems a more treacherous locale than the other battle sites, as I argue below.

34. Taylor claims that the sole function of the Grendel's dam episode is to allow Beowulf to obtain the head of Grendel as a trophy. Irving sees such a reading as distorted, attending only to the poet's "[e]ngrained and unconscious assumptions of male superiority" and not the "demonstrated energy and power" of Grendel's mother (*Rereading* 73).

35. Referring to this combat as "the fight at the center," Vaught argues that Beowulf only here achieves his

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stated goal, to cleanse Hrothgar's court of (both) its demons. Only in the mere does the heroism of Beowulf attain cosmological status, when he confronts the forces of chaos by entering "willingly and alone" the "symbolic landscape of the irrational" (134). Nagler regards the fight with Grendel's mother as central mythically, in that Beowulf uses the weapon of God to destroy (for a time) God's enemy, and psychologically, in that Beowulf's will triumphs over the enemy within.

36. On the hellish qualities of Grendel's mere, see, e.g., Niles 16–19 and C. Wright 117–31.

37. The mere actively seizes or receives Beowulf ("brimwylm onfeng / hilderince" 'the sea surge received the warrior'; 1494–95); on the play of grammatically active and passive roles in this passage, see Huisman.

38. An illustrator of *Beowulf* (Charles Keeping) has rendered this moment in unmistakably phallic terms (with "Grendel's Ma" as the Jungian devouring mother?); see pl. 13 in Osborn, "Translations" (372).

39. Robinson argues that "ofsæt" in line 1545 means not "sat on" but "attacked." This gloss (if correct) would modify one aspect of the putative sexual inversion discussed below.

40. It might be argued that at this point Beowulf has in fact solved the feud against the Grendel kin; Beowulf makes that claim to Hygelac (2005–07). But he has done so by wiping out their entire race, a final solution that is not ordinarily available.

41. In her focus on the (transhistorical?) narrative of early child development, Kristeva does not always keep questions of historical and cultural specificity at the fore, as Doane and Hodges have complained (76–77, 80, 89). Occasionally, however, she sees psychodrama and history interacting. In discussing the "semiotics of biblical abomination" (a form of abjection), Kristeva asks whether there are "subjective structurations that, within the organization of each speaking being, correspond to this or that symbolic-social system" (92), thereby making a slight nod toward what Cole calls "cultural psychology." Oliver specifically rejects "any normative claims" made for "structures of identity based on abjection. Theories of abjection are useful in describing some of the oppressive logics of patriarchy but abjection cannot be a part of a theory of liberation" (*Family* 99).

42. Lacan 1–7. Abjection begins in the semiotic realm but is known through irruptions into the symbolic, after the mirror phase. It would be interesting to investigate, perhaps on a comparative basis with modern-day societies, what influence wet nurses and foster parents—both much in evidence during the Anglo-Saxon period—would have on the mirror stage (Crawford 70–71, ch. 9). With regard to Old Norse literary examples, Jochens argues that "affective motherhood" (such as figures prominently in *Grettis saga*) was introduced by Christianity ("Old Norse Motherhood" 201), and Grundy finds examples of close mother and son relationships "especially when the mother appears as a witch who protects or promotes her son" (223). A little-known example of parental gender switching occurs in chapter 23 of *Floamanna saga*, in which Þorgils, after the death of his wife, is miraculously able to nurse his infant son. When the child later dies, Þorgils says that he would no longer blame women "þótt þær ynni brjóstbörnunum meira en öðrum mönnum" 'for loving the children they had suckled at the breast more than anybody else' (Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsson 312; Acker 299).

43. For E. Wright, Foucault's notion of history as a discourse disposes of the problem of situating "psychoanalysis in the domain of cultural history" (143).

44. Møller's first chapter (3–27) negotiates well the oppositions of "narrative truth" versus "historical truth" in the analytic construction of psychoanalysis. She critiques psychoanalytic literary interpretation as a "discourse of mastery" and proposes instead a "discourse of mutual entanglement" (26).

45. "The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being" (Kristeva 5).

46. Desire in narrative and narrative as desire are frequent topics in semiotic approaches to literature and film; for a discussion and application to *Beowulf*, see Overing, *Language*, ch. 3. The shift to a narrative of desire may have resulted along with other changes or emphases sometimes characterized (hyperbolically) as the discovery of the individual—or, as Bond prefers, of the "loving subject"—that occurred (so the argument runs) just after the Anglo-Saxon period.

47. On the role of Anglo-Saxon queens in the attempt to determine succession (much as Wealhtheow and Hygd do in *Beowulf*), see Joyce Hill 236–40 (who references Stafford) and Dockray-Miller 74–76, 102–15.

48. Overing (*Language*) and Kliman note that many women in the poem are nameless, including Beowulf's mother (we are told a daughter of Hrethel married Beowulf's father). Grendel's mother is also nameless, but his father is utterly unknown ("no hie fæder cunnon" 'They do not know of a father'; 1355); Grendel's monstrous nature may be underscored by his apparent matrilinearity (Canfield 7–8). On putative vestiges of matrilinearity in *Beowulf*, see Bohrer; Luecke; but see also Bremmer, who suggests that the uncle-nephew relationship is often foregrounded in Old English texts at the expense of naming the mother (see Thormann 68 as well).

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