The Might of Grendel’s Mother

by Martin Puhvel

The figure and role of Grendel’s Mother in Beowulf pose a puzzling paradox. When, on her revenge-attack in Heorot, she carries off the retainer Æschere, she fails to stand and fight with the Danes, who had proved such inferior opponents for her son, but flees in all haste back to her mere-retreat. Her evil exploit is thus of a rather dubious nature from the point of view of blood revenge—the actual slayer Beowulf and his men get off scot-free. While she might conceivably be thought of as being wary of the now proven might of the Geatish hero, who, though not present, is, she must realize, close by, the author makes it emphatically clear that she is as a fighter vastly inferior to Grendel:

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\text{wæs se gryre læssa}
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\[
\text{efne swā micle, swā bið mægpa cræft,}
\]
\[
\text{wiggryre wifes be wæpnedmen,}
\]
\[
\text{ponne heoru bunden, hamere geprūen,}
\]
\[
\text{sweord swāte fāh swīn ofer helme}
\]
\[
\text{ecgum dyhtig andweard scireō.}^1 (ll. 1282–7)
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And yet, when Beowulf invades her domain, she faces him fiercely and aggressively and drags him by main force to her ‘hall’. There the hero, who had scorned to use weapons against the statedly mightier Grendel, tries to kill her with his sword, fails to injure her, then attempts to overcome her with his trusty strength, which had overwhelmed Grendel in a onesided struggle; again he fails and is in the process thrown for a fall, is in dire danger of being

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^1 ‘The fear was less by just so much as women’s strength, a woman’s war-terror, is, as compared with that caused by a man, when the ornamented, hammer-forged blade, the blood-stained sword, trusty of edge, cleaves through the boar image on the helmet of the foe,’ Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment, translated by John R. Clark Hall, Revised Edition, 1950, 86.
slain, and is finally victorious only through the miraculous intervention of God.

Here, then, we are faced with a discrepancy of the first order — in her second appearance Grendel’s Mother is represented as far more fearsome and dangerous than in the first. How is one to explain this contradiction?

Klaeber has the following suggestion:

The inserted remark that Grendel’s Mother is less dangerous than Grendel in as much as she is a woman... is evidently to be explained as an endeavor to discredit the unbiblical notion of a woman’s superiority.2

The remark in question is, however, clearly born out by the action described; whereas Grendel had terrorized and slaughtered the assembled Danish champions with impunity and carried off thirty at a time, the ogress contents herself with seizing one and beats a hasty retreat when she is discovered in the course of her sneak attack. Thus the notion of female physical inferiority is here unmistakably woven into the fabric of the poem. There is, of course, nothing surprising about this inferiority, least of all to the modern reader. Furthermore, it is logically consistent with the heroic tenor of Beowulf, where the female function is to be ‘peace-weaver’ rather than fighter. That Grendel’s Mother should be represented as fleeing quickly is also understandable from the artistic point of view; otherwise one would expect an immediate showdown with Beowulf, quartered near by, and this is, of course, not ‘in the cards’ at this point. In short, there is nothing surprising about her behaviour or the poet’s comment on it — he is fond of inserting comparisons and explanatory reflections. Instead it is Grendel’s Mother’s dangerous powers in Beowulf’s struggle with her that are surprising to the modern reader, especially so after the earlier episode; they may nevertheless provide the key to an explanation of the puzzle. That there existed an ‘unbiblical notion’ is, I think, correct, but before examining its nature, let us deal with another proposed solution of the problem.

Some critics3 have suggested that the poet’s moral sensibility, his ‘sense of fairness,’ is a significant factor. According to this train of reasoning, while Grendel is a ruthless, unprovoked aggressor, his

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3 E.g., Klaeber (see preceding note), LII (Introduction), and John Leyerle, ‘Beowulf the Hero and the King’, Medium Ævum, XXXIV, No. 2 (1965), 90.
mother, again, acts in accordance with the standard Germanic code of blood-revenge; furthermore, her own domain is invaded; for these reasons a measure of sympathy on the author’s part is due to her and hence Beowulf’s revenge of revenge is made out to be a difficult and hazardous undertaking.

I think this kind of proposition is not on firm ground in the light of mythical realism discernible throughout the epic; it is the kind of theorizing about the author’s motives one might justifiably indulge in only if other avenues of explanation — based on possible mythical background material — seem positively closed. While the author does from time to time apply standards consisting of a curious mixture of elements of Christian religio-morality and heathen or semi-Christian sociology, there is little doubt that on the essential elements of the story he is largely faithful to his source material; this may indeed account for some of the puzzles and seeming inconsistencies in the poem. Even if, however, the poet does at times strongly assert his independence, this is very unlikely in this instance; it is hard to believe that a measure of what must be rather forced sympathy would lead him or, for that matter, the molders of the tradition to tarnish the glory of the great Beowulf by representing him as thwarted, in fact overmatched — save for the grace of God — by the monstrous hag, with all the loss in heroic stature this does entail. It is, after all, repeatedly stressed that his is the right cause.

It would, I think, be a more plausible suggestion that Beowulf’s difficulties in his struggle with Grendel’s Mother are due to the writer’s desire to create suspense and prevent this encounter from being a mere carbon copy of the struggle with Grendel. Even this kind of theorizing ought, however, to take second place to an investigation of possible mythical background to the puzzle at hand, especially since, as just pointed out, these difficulties introduce a rather jarring note into the heroic theme of the epic. Could it be that some tradition of supernatural female creatures of superior might has influenced the story of Beowulf’s struggle with Grendel’s Mother?

Lehmann4 thinks to discern an echo of ancient Indo-European traditions. He points to the concept of mighty female devils in Persian mythology, who were regarded as the original demons,


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alluring men to sin and thus turning some of them into devils. He also points to evidence that Persephone was initially regarded as ruler of the Underworld, Hades being a subordinate, corpse-eating demon, who only in Homeric times was by masculine pride elevated to the dignity of lord of the nether kingdom. Lehmann further draws attention to an appellative of Thor, ‘Slayer of Giantesses’, indicative of the power and dignity that, presumably at an early stage, must have been attributed to females in Scandinavian demonology. A striking example of the gradual lowering of the status of the female demon in Indo-European mythology is, Lehmann suggests, the masculinization of the originally female demon Gron in Celtic myth.

Lehmann views the roles of Grendel and his mother as reflecting a transitional stage, embodying the concept of duality, within the process of development in question, a stage marked by lack of uniformity in the relative attribution of powers to demons along lines of sex.

Panz er\(^5\) thinks Grendel’s Mother to be derived from the old woman the hero meets in the demon’s underground lair in the folktale of the Bear’s Son.

It seems to me, however, that any similarities between the two ladies are of a very superficial nature. True, both are old, are met by the hero in the dwelling of the demon the hero has overcome, and in many instances of the folktale the hag is said to be the demon’s mother, but her ‘personality’ seems very different indeed from that of Grendel’s Mother. Far from being a fierce, murderous fighter, the old female in the subterranean dwelling never puts up a serious fight; in the few variants where she makes a menacing gesture, she is easily slain. She is far from always killed; often she is merely threatened or beaten by the hero so as to be made to reveal the whereabouts of the tiny demon or of the captive princesses; at yet other times she is feignedly or genuinely friendly towards the hero. Nor does she, of course, venture out of her lair on a revenge expedition or any other sort of mission. While she may indeed have some connection with the Devil’s Grandmother and thus, if Lehmann is right,\(^6\) the two female figures under consideration may


\(^6\) Lehmann believes the Devil’s Grandmother to be a degenerate descendant of the mighty female demons in early Indo-European mythology.
possess a degree of common ancestry, to accept the claim that the fierce 'she-wolf of the water' of Beowulf is derived from the rather pathetic hag of the folktale one would have to indulge in an act of faith rather than a logical conclusion.

Lehmann's basic proposition with regard to the origin of Grendel's Mother is far more interesting and plausible. But what particular body of tradition could, one must ask, have directly influenced Beowulf in the matter in question?

The demonic hag more dangerous in fight than her similarly evil son or sons, not manifest in Germanic tradition and literature (outside of Beowulf),7 turns up in a number of instances in Celtic lore. Thus a modern Irish folktale, an early version of which was, as Murphy has shown, followed, with some modifications, by a twelfth-century literary tale, Acallam na Senorach, tells of Feonn MacCumhail's successful battle against a hag and her three sons living 'on the eastern side of the world,' in defence of a king's castle, burned down each night8 by the youngest son. With the help of his hound Bran, Feonn overcomes, successively, the three sons in rugged battles, each more severe than the preceding one; yet the fight with the mother, who comes to heal and restore to life, as well as avenge, her sons, is described as, beyond comparison, the hardest and most perilous:

Then followed a greater battle than the world had ever known before that night, or ever has seen since. Water sprang out of the grey rocks, cows cast their calves even when they had none, and hard rushes grew soft in the remotest corner of Erin, so desperate was the fighting and so

7 In the Icelandic Orm Storolfsson's Saga the man-eating giant Brusi has for mother 'a coal-black she-cat, and as big as the sacred oxen, which are the biggest' (Chapter V). This monster is said to be 'even worse to deal with' than Brusi. On entering the cave of the monsters, Orm is set upon by the cat-monster, knocked over and fiercely clawed, and escapes only by vowing to God and St Peter to go on pilgrimage to Rome if he is to prevail over the monster and her son, whereupon her strength dwindles and he slays both her and her son Brusi (Chapter VIII).

There is a distinct possibility that we here glimpse an echo of the fight with Grendel's Mother or a story of the same type. And the cat-monster's being 'even worse to deal with' than her son may well echo the Celtic tradition of the superior fighting powers of the monstrous mother; her feline nature, which lacks tangible parallels in Icelandic saga, adds weight to the likelihood of borrowing — in the absence of a local tradition of the more dangerous female, the fearsome mother may be represented as a monstrous beast in order to lend credibility to her powers.

8 In the twelfth-century version Tara is burned down annually, on Samhain night.
awful, between Feonn and the old hag. Feonn would have died that night but for Bran.\(^9\)

Not until daybreak does Feonn manage to strike off the head of the hag.

While the twelfth-century literary tale introduces the mother of the slain burner\(^10\) in a non-violent role — she merely comes to heal — Murphy convincingly shows that this represents a departure from the original motif in the story of 'the burning of the court,' which motif survives in the modern version.

In a story in the Book of Leinster the Fian invade the subterranean dwelling beneath a spring of Sen-Garman, a hag with the strength of nine men, who has imprisoned Oissin there. After digging their way down to the lair, they slay the inhabitants, the hag and her son Slechtaire — who is not credited with extraordinary strength — as well as another hag, named Criblach, also with the strength of nine men, and her son Crimthand. Murphy concludes that Criblach — Crimthand is clearly a doublet of Sen-Garman — Slechtaire, inserted to explain the place-name Aires-Criblaige.\(^11\)

In a Scottish folktale\(^12\) Feonn comes to the land of Big Men, a gigantic race, where, in defence of the daughter of the king of the land, demanded by a 'Big Monster,' he fights, in turn, the monster, his father, and the 'Big Hag,' his mother. The combat with the hag is, by far, the most perilous; only when 'she had nearly done for Feonn' with her 'tooth,' does Feonn's trusty hound Bran slay her, as he had the others, with his venomous 'shoe' (claw).

In an Irish folktale Wishing Gold, son of the King of Erin, comes to an island where he slays, in succession, three five-headed giants. Then he sits down and says to himself: 'As these three were in one place, their mother must be in it too.' And indeed, soon a 'dreadful hag' turns up. The battle with her lasts three days and nights:

Wishing Gold was doing no harm to the old hag, but the old hag was

\(^9\) Duanaire Finn, III (Gerard Murphy), pp. LIII–LIV.

\(^10\) Here no brothers of the burner turn up after he is slain, as is the case in the modern folktale.

\(^11\) Duanaire Finn, III, p. LVIII.

squeezing the heart out of him, until at last he was thinking: 'It is here that my death is.'

At this point his mother, who seems to have been a fay or perhaps a magician, turns up and advises him that the hag is invulnerable as long as she 'has the long net on her.' The hero then cuts off the net, she loses her strength and is slain.

Here, then, the hag's powers, rather than being conceived of as an inherent quality, are credited to a magic object. This presumably represents a latter-day explanation of the tremendous strength of the hag, the original motif having apparently been lost sight of in the modern folktale.

In modern Celtic folktale it is not always her male offspring that the mighty demonic hag tries to avenge. For a variation we may note an Irish tale wherein a monstrously ugly hag lives with her three daughters in an under-water castle. After killing her similarly foul daughters on an island, the hero fights with her in the castle, is in mortal danger from her seven inches long steel nails, and prevails only by transforming himself into a bear and breaking her backbone.

Not always is the demonic hag in Celtic tradition represented as mightier than her offspring; frequently no criteria for comparison are provided. Nevertheless, enough instances of this kind of superiority turn up for us to recognize the existence of a well-established motif, very possibly related to the early Indo-European tradition discerned by Lehmann (see pp. 83–85 above), which motif, in the absence of such in the larger Germanic tradition, stands out as a likely influence on Beowulf or its source material, thus providing twentieth century readers with a puzzle and paradox.

It hardly seems profitable to try to speculate why the motif of

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13 The Son of the King of Erin and the Queen of the Moving Wheel. Irish Folktales, collected by Jeremiah Curtin, 1943, 4–5.
14 The Fishermen of Kinsale. Curtin (see preceding note), 35–44.
15 The submarine setting, the terrible nails, and the ferocious strength of the hag may well remind one of Grendel's Mother in her fight with Beowulf.
16 It may be noted in this connection that various elements of the second adventure in Beowulf, the foray against Grendel's Mother, have seemed to a number of scholars to point in the direction of Celtic influence; for references, see Klaeber (note 2), Intr. XXI.

Subsequently James Carney has argued (Studies in Irish Literature and History, 1955, 97–8) that Beowulf's under-water monster-fight represents an Irish type.
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the superlatively mighty hag turns up only in connection with Grendel's Mother's second appearance on the scene of action and not the first; we know nothing definite about the process of genesis of the poem, even if recent scholarly opinion tends to credit one single poet with composing the epic. Whatever the truth of this matter, there is no denying the occasional presence of apparent inconsistencies and illogicalities. This phenomenon need, however, not necessarily be due to carelessness or artistic ineptitude, or even excessive reverence for source material; the author, as a free agent, may at times purposely deviate from the original tradition or motif or even independently create new elements — where it suits his artistic purpose of creating a lengthy poem with an elaborate plot, possibly out of a great number of isolated stories and traditions.

17 He may, of course, also choose between divergent existing traditions on one and the same issue.