



**Volume 33 (2018)**

Edited by Valerie Johnson & Renée Ward  
with Laura Harrison

The author retains copyright and has agreed that this essay in *The Year's Work in Medievalism* will be made available under the following [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#). This means that readers/users must: attribute the essay, may not use the essay for commercial purposes, and may not alter, transform, or build upon the essay.



## From *ides aglæcwif* to “shebeast”: The Loss of the *Wrecend* in Thomas Meyer’s Translation of *Beowulf*<sup>1</sup>

Sarah J. Sprouse  
University of Alabama

Thomas Meyer tells his audience from the start that his translation of *Beowulf* (1969) is not a faithful one.<sup>2</sup> His text functions as a form of *translatio studii* in which he rewrites the source material to accommodate his contemporary history, language, and aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Meyer explains in an interview, which is included with the published translation, “My excuse for bending and re-shaping the original text, often straying from it radically, is that mine are not the only available translations in English.”<sup>4</sup> That straying from his source material is evident in the lack of line numbers, the insertion of analogues such as “The Bear’s Son,” and the curious omission of specific words and passages. Taken as a whole, Meyer’s text shifts from the critically understood tripartite structure (Grendel, Grendel’s Mother, and the Dragon) to a bifurcation of “Oversea” and “Homelands,” thus dividing the poem by notions of concrete space, a modernist construction of prosody important to Meyer. This redistribution of the text obfuscates the importance of Grendel’s Mother to the narrative. Indeed, the “shebeast” in Meyer’s translation has a reduced role, although heightened in its monstrosity. Building on the work of M. Wendy Hennequin,<sup>5</sup> who identifies patriarchal expectations in scholarly work on Old English literature, this article examines the ways in which Meyer’s translation of *Beowulf* discounts any possibility of

---

<sup>1</sup> The argument advanced in this essay is made possible because of the incredible contributions to the field by Helen Damico, who recently passed away in the wake of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Her critical work on gender in Old English literature greatly advanced how we approach the period and its body of literature. See particularly *Beowulf’s Wealtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) and the collection she edited with Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). See also the more recent collection edited by Catherine E. Karkov honoring Damico: *Poetry, Place, and Gender: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honor of Helen Damico*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2009). I’d also like to thank Brian J. McFadden for introducing me to Damico’s work in graduate school and for giving feedback on an early version of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> *Beowulf*, trans. Thomas Meyer (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2012). While published in 2012, the translation was initially an undergraduate senior project in 1969.

<sup>3</sup> On early medieval practices of *translatio studii* see: Nicole Guenther Discenza, “Alfred’s Verse Preface to the Pastoral Care and the Chain of Authority,” *Neophilologus* 85, no. 4 (October 2001): 625-33; Francis Leneghan, “*Translatio Imperii*: The Old English *Orosius* and the Rise of Wessex,” *Anglia: Journal of English Philology* 133, no. 4 (2015): 656-705; Hans Thomas, “*Translatio Imperii*,” *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, ed. Robert Auty, volume 8 (Munich: Lexma, 1997), 944-6.

<sup>4</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 266. Meyer repeated this sentiment in a 2015 interview, stating, “My caveat is always having translated work that has been previously translated, that mine are not the only anglophone versions available. There’s always some of the original text in these ‘tracings’...” See Thomas Meyer and Patrick Morrissey, “An Interview with Thomas Meyer,” *Chicago Review* 59, no. 3 (Summer/Autumn 2015): 115-28.

<sup>5</sup> M. Wendy Hennequin, “We’ve Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel’s Mother,” *English Studies* 89, no. 5 (October 2008): 503-23.

humanity in Grendel's Mother in order to make the case for revision of our understanding of this figure.

Meyer composed his translation in about 1969 in the West Riding of Yorkshire.<sup>6</sup> This time and space was conducive to monstrous imaginings and the university training Meyer received would have instilled the suggestion of Grendel's Mother as a monster. Gone is any notion of the *wrecend*,<sup>7</sup> or "avenger"; indeed that term itself seems to have been elided entirely in Meyer's translation. Instead, the focus shifts to the intensified terminology of "shebeast" and mother of the "Hellbeast."

Meyer's decision to bifurcate the poem follows the trends of mid-century *Beowulf* scholarship. While the two halves of Meyer's *Beowulf* are oriented in space, the split has its origins in J. R. R. Tolkien's lecture and essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" (1936).<sup>8</sup> In this benchmark of *Beowulf* scholarship, Tolkien argues that the poem should be studied and appreciated as literature beyond its merits for historical and philological research. Tolkien is particularly interested in the monsters of *Beowulf* and thus he divides the poem into halves with Grendel and the Dragon as the major obstacles faced by the hero. Tolkien writes: "It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death."<sup>9</sup> Such a division subsumes the role of Grendel's Mother under the aegis of the first half of the poem and thus relegates her importance to merely another Grendel monster. She is not mentioned in the body of Tolkien's lecture, appearing only in a parenthetical note in the Appendices.<sup>10</sup>

Despite Tolkien's omission, Grendel's Mother is not completely absent from mid-twentieth-century scholarship. As early as 1955 H. L. Rogers acknowledged the idea of a tripartite structure in his article "Beowulf's Three Great Fights," though he refers throughout the argument to *Beowulf* as being divided along the lines of "the Danish part" and "the Dragon part," which reiterates Tolkien's idea that the poem consists of two

---

<sup>6</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 261-2.

<sup>7</sup> "avenger" Klaeber, I. 1256b. All references to the untranslated original are from *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., trans. Frederick Klaeber, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, & John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis Nicholson (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 51-103.

<sup>9</sup> Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 81.

<sup>10</sup> Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 91. Incredibly, a 1972 article about Grendel's descent does not even mention Grendel's Mother. This absence seems predicated on Tolkien's omission. See Niilo Peltola, "Grendel's Descent from Cain Reconsidered," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 73, no. 1/3 (1972): 284-91.

halves.<sup>11</sup> The greater struggle in contemporary scholarship was to decide the humanity or monstrosity of Grendel's Mother. She is made animalistic in 1949 when Adrien Bonjour identifies her as "Grendel's dam."<sup>12</sup> As late as the 1960s the prevailing argument for her monstrosity was the concept of human "female physical inferiority,"<sup>13</sup> which led scholars to examine *Beowulf* in the context of Scandinavian and Celtic mythologies in order to better understand how Grendel's Mother could be so physically powerful. The conclusion was that the *Beowulf* poet drew on mythological tropes of a monstrous hag or witch and that her strength lay in magic rather than actual physical prowess. Hennequin notes that monstrous interpretations of Grendel's Mother are occasioned by "faulty translations, critical tradition, and gender expectations."<sup>14</sup> In other words, scholars continue to perpetuate our understanding of Grendel's Mother as a monster because she does not adhere to specifically defined feminine attributes such as those identified in *Wealthew* or *Hildeburh*.<sup>15</sup> These qualifications are predicated on early twentieth-century expectations of femininity.

Recent scholars have noted that Grendel's Mother does not specifically, in a Germanic context, do anything to suggest that she is a monster aside from birthing Grendel.<sup>16</sup> Operating outside the boundaries of society as a woman does not necessitate the label of monster. Indeed, James Paz notes that the most monstrous thing about Grendel's Mother is her unwillingness in the text to be identified or read.<sup>17</sup> Hennequin points out that students may first encounter *Beowulf* under the tutelage of professors who already have a monster in mind, and thus these new students approach the text with expectations perpetuated from early misogynist views.<sup>18</sup> While scholars have been breaking away from this traditionalist expectation over the last twenty years, Meyer is one of those students

---

<sup>11</sup> H. L. Rogers, "Beowulf's Three Great Fights," *The Review of English Studies* 6, no. 24 (October 1955): 339-55.

<sup>12</sup> Adrien Bonjour, "Grendel's Dam and the Composition of *Beowulf*," *English Studies* 30 (1949): 113-24.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Puhvel, "The Might of Grendel's Mother," *Folklore* 80, no. 2 (Summer 1969): 81-8 (82).

<sup>14</sup> Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster," 518.

<sup>15</sup> For a thorough study of the impact of traditional gender roles in reader reception of *Beowulf*, see Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Gender Roles," *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork & John D. Niles (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 311-24.

<sup>16</sup> See Christine Alfano, "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 23 (1992): 1-16; Sara Frances Burdoff, "Re-reading Grendel's Mother: *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charms," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 45 (2014): 91-103; Megan Cavell, "Constructing the Monstrous Body in *Beowulf*," *Anglo-Saxon England* 43 (December 2014): 155-81; Olsen, "Gender Roles," 311-24; Ward Parks, "Prey Tell: How Heroes Perceive Monsters in *Beowulf*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 92, no. 1 (January 1993): 1-16; James Paz, "Æschere's Head, Grendel's Mother, and the Sword That Isn't a Sword: Unreadable Things in *Beowulf*," *Exemplaria* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 231-51; Keith P. Taylor, "BEOWULF 1259a: Inherent Nobility of Grendel's Mother," *English Language Notes* 31, no. 3 (March 1994): 13-25; Renée Rebecca Trilling, "Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again," *Parergon* 24, no. 1 (2007): 1-20.

<sup>17</sup> Paz, "Æschere's Head," 232.

<sup>18</sup> Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster," 521.

who approached the *Beowulf* poem with these engendered expectations of Grendel's Mother. Therefore, there is little surprise that he simultaneously diminishes her importance to the text and emphasizes her monstrosity beyond the original material.

To that end, Meyer notes his influences in an interview included with his translation. When asked about his early translation work, Meyer states that Apuleius's *Herbarium*, which he translated prior to *Beowulf*, "had a certain occult edge to it [he] liked, obviously, plus an element of British folklore that got appended during the rendering of the Latin original into Anglo-Saxon."<sup>19</sup> There are two aspects of this appeal that are relevant to our understanding of his interpretation of Grendel's Mother. The first is Meyer's evident interest in matters of folklore and the mysterious. He was living in the countryside at the time that he was working on this translation and, like Tolkien, Meyer had an apparent affinity for the British landscape and the liminal possibilities it invokes. Meyer stresses throughout the interview his fascination with the mystery of Old English literature and legends and the connections he found in the works of avant-garde poets of the early twentieth century. This enchantment seems apparent in his own translation of *Beowulf*, though, as seen below, he revokes the liminal possibilities that at first seemed so captivating to him. The second important element of the above quote is Meyer's clear understanding and acceptance of Old English *translatio*. Meyer appears quite comfortable with the ways in which early medieval writers revised Latin works to suit their needs, such as Alfred's interpretation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. That level of comfort seems to play a role in Meyer's revisionist treatment of *Beowulf*. His own work breaks from the source material in drastic ways as he restructures, omits, and inserts vocabulary and analogues as it suits his own needs. Meyer expresses greater concern with the recto/verso of the concrete page than with faithful translation.<sup>20</sup> As Meyer states, his work does not need to be a faithful translation because so many others already exist. It should also be noted that Meyer did not initially translate *Beowulf* with publication in mind; rather, his translation was part of a senior project in college. Thus, Meyer's work is likely the most experimental of all currently published *Beowulf* translations.

That prominent, experimental interest in the visual form permits an obscuring of the original poem. Meyer chose to not number his lines, which effectively hides his restructuring, omissions, and additions. Indeed, numbering his lines would add to the confusion of the reader. The only aspect of the original structure to which Meyer adheres is the fitt numbers. Tracking Meyer's work against the Klaeber edition is a cumbersome task, but this concern for the concrete page and restructuring of the work makes Meyer's *translatio* of *Beowulf* unique and perhaps as medieval in imaginative effort as any such translation could be. As Hugh Magennis points out, "Each translation [of *Beowulf*] is . . .

---

<sup>19</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 262.

<sup>20</sup> Given this level of revisionist effort from Meyer, this paper will refer to his text as a *translatio*.



in any corner of the earth, another man  
with a greater handgrip, he was afraid for his  
life in his heart, but none the sooner might he escape from him.)<sup>26</sup>

Meyer shifts the emphasis from the power of Beowulf to the horror experienced by the monster, utilizing form to heighten monstrosity in the narratives of Grendel, Grendel's Mother, and the dragon. In each case, he reworks the language to suit his desire for the visceral, exaggerating the sensations of the monster or Beowulf in the encounter.

Similarly, Meyer also heightens human connections, providing greater distance between man and monster. For example, Beowulf's introduction in Fitt Five assumes a whole page:

BEOWULF  
my name<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Meyer adds an additional reward to Hrothgar's list of inducements to encourage Beowulf to defeat Grendel's Mother. Along with "gifts, goldbraids, old treasures," he adds "my thanks."<sup>28</sup> The original passage reads:

Ic þē þā fæhðe fēo lēanige,  
ealdgestrēonum, swā ic ær dyde,  
wundnum golde, gyf þū on weg cymest. (ll.1380-3)

(I will reward you for that feud  
with ancient riches, as I did before,  
with wound gold, if you come back.)

There is no mention here of Hrothgar's thanks, though it could be inferred through the rewards used to incentivize Beowulf. This addition marks a more direct connection between the men, indicating a possible strengthening of their bond, which is suggestive of the disconnect between man and monster and thus elevates humankind over the Grendelkin for their civilization. In this way, Meyer solidifies what could otherwise be liminal disjunctions between Beowulf and the Grendelkin. Reduction of liminality seems to be a core function of this *translatio*. Meyer's concern with the visual carefully divides humanity from the Other, emphasizes movement and wordplay, and deftly evades the textual constraints of the original narrative as he obscures omission and insertion alike.

---

<sup>26</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

<sup>27</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 126.

That emphasis on the page also cultivates the different treatments of Grendel and Grendel's Mother. In his *translatio*, Meyer regularly ascribes dialogue and movement to specific characters by left-adjusting the figure's name in all-capitals:

GRENDEL came  
from his moors<sup>29</sup>

However, Grendel's Mother, a character Meyer seems desirous of obscuring, gets neither an all-capitalized name nor a left-adjustment on the page:

Grendel's mother  
burst in upon Danes,  
dead to the world,<sup>30</sup>

While "Grendel" is capitalized, "mother" is not, emphasizing that her role in the poem is directly linked to Grendel. This identifier is indented and made secondary to her actions. This could be due to the fact that she does not have a name in the narrative, as the dragon too does not receive the left-adjusted treatment. However, the narrative progression from Beowulf's encounter with Grendel to the appearance of Grendel's Mother reinforces the contrast of the two Grendelkin. Meyer treats Grendel's Mother as a sub-character, as is suggested in the mid-century scholarship resonating from Tolkien's essay, in terms of concrete text on the page as well as his revisionist translation of the terms used to describe her.

At the heart of Meyer's revisionist treatment of Grendel's Mother is his descriptive terminology. While some of his selected vocabulary is supported by the source text, much of it is not. For example, he renders "pā hēo tō fenne gang" (Klaeber, l. 1295; when she went to the fens) as "The confused shebeast fled, / ran for her swamps" (Meyer 121). Meyer reconstructs the simple pronoun "hēo" as an insidious "shebeast," a translation clearly not supported by the source material. While most other modern translations correctly render "hēo" as "she," Meyer is not alone in translating this term beyond a pronoun. Charles W. Kennedy (1940) offers "the hag," Stanley B. Greenfield (1982) suggests "the monster," and Seamus Heaney (2002) translates the term as "hell-dam."<sup>31</sup> This revision supports the kind of figure Meyer wishes to create in his simplified portrayal of Grendel's Mother, which seems to connect more with the figure in John Gardner's novel *Grendel* than it does with the source poem.<sup>32</sup> Gardner's novel is roughly contemporary with the initial date of Meyer's composition, although he does not mention it as an

---

<sup>29</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 87.

<sup>30</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 120.

<sup>31</sup> See the chart in Hennequin, "We've Created a Monster," 520.

<sup>32</sup> John Gardner, *Grendel* (NY: Knopf, 1971).

influence or as a contemporary. Yet both are clearly indebted to Tolkien's influence on mid-century *Beowulf* scholarship, and both represent a bestial, monstrous figure as Grendel's Mother. Indeed, Gardner's rendering is less humanly conscious than even Meyer's representation given his descriptions of her as a "Life-bloated, baffled, long-suffering hag" who is unable to think, let alone communicate in complete sentences like the articulate protagonist Grendel.<sup>33</sup> She can make simple utterances with her "fat lips," but mostly sleeps in her cave.<sup>34</sup>

Meyer's characterization of Grendel's Mother is one of mindless beast, and her first appearance in his *translatio* is peppered with such descriptors as "lumbered," "blood clouded her eyes," "fumbled," "smashed," "frightened fist."<sup>35</sup> None of these terms are derived from the language in the source text, but rather are inventive insertions that further cultivate a creature that could not possibly be anything but a monster. This deviation supports Meyer's depiction of an Otherworldly creature who is both terrified of men and bloodthirsty, thus completely eradicating the sense of purpose in her attack on Æschere. Indeed, the critical term "wrecend" (avenger) is reduced to "something":

They all knew  
something  
outlived the Hellbeast,  
survived the battlenight:<sup>36</sup>

That "something" is the "wrecend" at line 1256. This word is crucial to much of the recent gender theory scholarship on the *Beowulf* poem because it suggests not only something more richly human about Grendel's Mother, but it also posits an action that would likely be sanctioned by an early medieval audience as appropriate feuding activity. "Wrecend" emphasizes Grendel's Mother's actions as responsive rather than bewildering because she attacks Heorot specifically in reaction to the murder of her son. The retribution is calculated rather than a mass slaughter. She kills one man since they killed one individual from her clan. The action makes Grendel's Mother a "wrecend" or avenger rather than a monster or murderer. To substitute such a highly charged, important word with "something" completely rewrites the character.

When Meyer does introduce the idea of revenge, his translation still denies Grendel's Mother the legal action of feuding. In an approximation of the conversation between Hrothgar and Beowulf after the death of Æschere, Meyer ignores Hrothgar's first use of

---

<sup>33</sup> Gardner, *Grendel*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Gardner, *Grendel*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 119-20.

<sup>36</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 119. Emphasis is mine.

the word “fǣhðe” (feud) (ll. 1333b & 1340b), but translates the second occurrence as “revenge” in the context of the following lines:

a beast’s lips suck the bloody  
stump of Yrmenlaf’s brother  
in revenge for that hard grip  
of yours<sup>37</sup>

Meyer’s use of the term “revenge” here is not in the context of the *Beowulf* poet’s “wrecend,” but instead shifts away from the acceptable Germanic idea of a feud. This one occurrence is couched in the language of a monster feasting on the spoils of animalistic action approximately in line with Gardner’s rendering of the same character. Grendel’s Mother is not a woman engaged in a feud with Heorot, but instead a monster who attacks the Danish hall out of malice.

The mid-century concern with Grendel’s Mother drudges up a translational problem that continues to face scholars in the twenty-first century. Meyer excises any thoughts or emotions attributable to the character beyond anger, producing a monstrous figure in the following lines:

Grendel’s mother  
lumbered from her lair,  
blood clouded her eyes.  
The shebeast hurried to Heorot<sup>38</sup>

R. M. Liuzza similarly renders this passage as:

Grendel’s mother,  
monster-woman, remembered her misery,  
she who dwelt in those dreadful waters,  
the cold streams, (1258b-1261a)<sup>39</sup>

This term that Meyer renders as “shebeast” and Liuzza translates as “monster-woman” is “ides āglǣcwīf” in line 1259a. While there was perhaps not a lot of scholarly thought reserved for this problematic phrase in the immediate post-Tolkien years, there has been greater emphasis in the last two decades. J. R. Clark Hall’s dictionary, originally published in the late nineteenth century and still a standard in common usage, defines “āglǣcwīf”

---

<sup>37</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 123.

<sup>38</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 119.

<sup>39</sup> R. M. Liuzza, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000).

as “female monster.”<sup>40</sup> However, the term “āglǣca” is clearly an ambiguous one since it is also used to describe Beowulf as a warrior, not a monster. Pointing to issues of tonic prominence, Keith P. Taylor suggests that “ides” is the important term in this half-line because its deliberate placement denotes for a contemporary audience “a woman of gentle birth or a woman who performs some brave deed.”<sup>41</sup> Christine Alfano likewise notably defines “āglǣcwīf” as “warrior-woman.”<sup>42</sup> If we accept the gloss “warrior-woman” and pair it with “noble” or “brave,” then Grendel’s Mother becomes a very different, almost positive figure in the text. She seeks vengeance, a valued trait for a warrior. However, these reconsiderations of Grendel’s Mother are occurrences of recent scholarship that would not have existed for Meyer when he wrote his *translatio*, even if it was published in 2012. Clark Hall’s dictionary imposes a notable linguistic bias on this term that then surfaces in translations such as those of Liuzza and Meyer. The gloss offered by the Bosworth-Toller Dictionary is not much better: “A wretch of a woman, vile crone.”<sup>43</sup> The problem does not begin with Meyer, but rather is endemic to a patriarchal hegemony in the scholarly community that is desirous of defining Grendel’s Mother by the ways in which she does not conform to gendered expectations. According to Hennequin, most translations of *Beowulf* render the term as “monstrous woman,” with some minor variations.<sup>44</sup> The most prominent deviations contemporary with Meyer include Kennedy’s “monstrous hag” (1940) and Constance B. Hieatt’s “she-monster” (1967). Nonconformance seems to anticipate monstrosity in this context. However, Meyer further condemns Grendel’s Mother to monstrosity by specifically calling her “shebeast.”

In the spirit of furthering that animalized treatment of a character who is not strictly defined as a monster in the source material, Meyer not only repeats “shebeast,” but also cultivates the gory imagery of a carnivorous animal:

A bitch’s bare hands crushed  
that model man. Somewhere now  
a beast’s lips suck the bloody  
stump of Yrmenlaf’s brother<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> J. R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), 15. The term unfortunately does not appear in *The Dictionary of Old English: A to I*, available online from the University of Toronto. In the entry for “ides,” the reference to Grendel’s mother states “1.f. referring to Grendel’s mother / her likeness,” but does not provide any further gloss of the term or explanation of its meaning.

<sup>41</sup> Taylor, “*BEOWULF* 1259a,” 20.

<sup>42</sup> Alfano, “The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity,” 2.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Bosworth, “Ag-lǣc-wif,” *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, ed. Thomas Northcote Toller and Others, comp. Sean Christ and Ondřej Tichý (Faculty of Arts: Charles University in Prague), 30. Available from <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/001255>.

<sup>44</sup> Hennequin, “We’ve Created a Monster,” 520.

<sup>45</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 123.

The term Meyer seems to render as “bitch” is “wælgæst wæfre” (wandering death-spirit) (l. 1331). This passage is a product of Meyer’s imagination rather than a faithful translation of the *Beowulf* text. It serves to further remove from Grendel’s Mother any sense of humanity, devolving her into a carnivorous beast enjoying the spoils of her raid. Coupling this term with his omission of “wrecend,” it is evident that Meyer wishes to elide the specific, mindful motivation that guides Grendel’s Mother in the source poem.

Meyer omits two half-lines from the original poem that offer some insight into Grendel’s Mother’s intentions behind her attack on Heorot. The lines connect the idea of revenge to motherly duty to protect a child: “wolde hire bearn wrecan, angan eaferan” (she would her child avenge, only offspring) (ll. 1546b-1547a). The sense of these lines is that Grendel is her only child, so now she must avenge that loss of her offspring. This omission in Meyer’s *translatio* denies Grendel’s Mother a maternal connection and motivation, instead maintaining the notion that she is a mindless monster on the outskirts of civilization. As noted above, all three characters (Beowulf, Grendel, and Grendel’s Mother) are identified as “āglæca” in the source text. This level of ambiguity is eschewed in Meyer’s *translatio* as he seeks to break down the liminality of the borders separating the Grendelkin from Heorot and instead reinforces the distance between them. This act produces a work of man versus monster rather than a feud-driven encounter. *Beowulf* scholarship contemporary with Meyer’s *translatio* reinforced the connection between the physical prowess of Grendel’s Mother with monstrosity and mythological precedents.<sup>46</sup> More recent scholarship and translations of *Beowulf* ascribe human emotions to Grendel’s Mother that better contextualize the idea of the “wrecend.” Liuzza, for example, translates the lines sympathetically as: “she would avenge her boy, her only offspring” (100). Imagining Grendel as “her boy” reminds the reader that Grendel’s Mother had a specific agenda in mind, not the mindless slaughter Meyer suggests in his translation of this passage.

The difficulty in reducing such liminalities is that Grendel’s Mother in the source text is difficult to constrain in terms of identity and location. Even her gender is construed grammatically as a point of fluctuation, though that could be due to scribal error.<sup>47</sup> Meyer neatly boxes Grendel’s Mother into the realm of definition by establishing boundaries that are otherwise permeable liminalities. Paz suggests that the threatening ambiguity of Grendel’s Mother’s gender is a source of her agency in *Beowulf* and that she heightens uncertainty in the text by slaying Æschere, who is described as Hrothgar’s “runwita” (“rune

---

<sup>46</sup> See Rogers, “Beowulf’s Three Great Fights,” 339-55; Bonjour, “Grendel’s Dam and the Composition of Beowulf,” 113-24; Puhvel, “The Might of Grendel’s Mother,” 81-8.

<sup>47</sup> It is always possible that such discrepancies can be attributed to a simple error on the part of the scribe copying down the text. However, the editors of the *Klaeber* edition suggest that it might be intentional because the poet also describes Grendel’s Mother as a warrior, “a category that is customarily gendered male.” See Fulk, et al., *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 197.

knower”), which prevents Hrothgar from being able to read the runes on the sword that Beowulf uses to behead Grendel’s Mother.<sup>48</sup> She deprives Hrothgar and, by extension, Beowulf, from being able to make sense of their situation. Beyond creating uncertainty, Jane Chance remarks that Grendel’s Mother acts counter to her gender role because of the masculine nature of her feuding and avenging activities.<sup>49</sup> This reversal of gendered expectation heightens her ambiguity. At each stage, she resists definition and lives in ways that the realm of human men would not expect. Further, Shari Horner contends that her lack of enclosure, due to Grendel’s mother existing outside the realm of society, engenders fear precisely because she is female.<sup>50</sup> This, again, is a gender problem. A woman becomes a monster when she is exiled beyond the borders of society.

Whether it is a scribal error or the intention of the *Beowulf* poet, the ambiguous nature of Grendel’s Mother’s gender further arises in the form of grammatical gender. We assume ostensibly that she is female because she is “Grendles modor,” but lines 1392b-1394 in Fitt 21 specifically utilize masculine grammatical gender to describe her:

nō hē on helm losað,  
 nē on foldan fæþm,     nē on fyrgeholt,  
 nē on gyfenes grund,     gā þær hē wille!

(he will not in protection escape,  
 not in earth’s embrace,     nor in mountain-wood,  
 nor in ocean’s bottom,     he goes where he will!)

Meyer is careful to mitigate this ambiguity by regendering the pronouns:

she will not lose us to  
 earth’s bowels, mountain’s woods  
 or ocean’s depths,  
 wherever she may go!<sup>51</sup>

This passage already expresses liminal spaces, but Meyer chooses to contain Grendel’s Mother, preventing her from also expressing such ambiguity. Liuzza’s translation remains faithful to the grammatical gender put forth in the source text, using both “he” and “him,”

---

<sup>48</sup> Paz, “Æschere’s Head,” 231.

<sup>49</sup> Jane Chance, “The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*,” *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico & Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 252-3.

<sup>50</sup> Shari Horner, “Voices from the Margins: Women and Textual Enclosure in *Beowulf*,” *The Postmodern Beowulf: A Critical Casebook*, ed. Eileen A. Joy & Mary K. Ramsey (Morgantown, WV: University of West Virginia Press, 2006), 482.

<sup>51</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 127. Emphasis is mine.

though he also includes a footnote to draw the reader's attention to the issue, suggesting that the error is Beowulf's.<sup>52</sup> Illustrating Horner's argument of gendered border-crossing, Meyer seems to articulate such anxieties by suppressing the gender of Grendel's Mother into specifically concrete terms. On the same page, Meyer includes the lines: "Quickly, let us go / track down that woman."<sup>53</sup> This is in fact the only place in Meyer's *translatio* where he specifically identifies her as a "woman," using that term as a replacement for "Grendles māgan" at line 1391. Elsewhere in the text, Meyer actively chooses other terminology to elide any sense of humanity, but here where the gender of Grendel's Mother comes into question, Meyer asserts firmly that she is female. This self-conscious expression of gender seems to be more evocative of Meyer's choices than Beowulf's, further cementing Meyer's connections to mid-twentieth-century expectations of Grendel's Mother. Of course, shortly thereafter she is again "terrible mother of floods" and "lake shewolf."<sup>54</sup> The brief touch of humanity is only in use to erase further anxiety-provoking ambiguities.

Meyer's interpretation of Beowulf's anxieties regarding the encounter with Grendel's Mother moves far beyond what is represented in the source text. Scholars generally accept that Beowulf expresses anxiety in the poem while recounting his encounter with Grendel's Mother.<sup>55</sup> His confrontation with Grendel is attested by several onlookers, including Beowulf's own Geatish men. However, the battle with Grendel's Mother is a closed affair without any spectators to witness the seemingly provocative encounter. In theory, only two individuals could tell the tale and, as Dana M. Oswald notes, Beowulf prevents Grendel's Mother from having that opportunity by soundly chopping off her head.<sup>56</sup> Oswald points to this confrontation as a sexualized one replete with double entendres, which would give Beowulf's anxiety a specific and sympathetic context. Scholars tend to point to Beowulf's heavily truncated versions of events as told to both Hrothgar and Hygelac in the original poem as evocative of his unease in revealing the full extent of the events, including the brief moment when Grendel's Mother takes control.<sup>57</sup> However, Meyer further emphasizes this disruption of Beowulf's comfort by heavily abridging the retelling to Hrothgar and then eliminating the retelling to Hygelac. To Hrothgar, Beowulf states:

---

<sup>52</sup> Liuzza, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, 96.

<sup>53</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 127. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>54</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 134-5.

<sup>55</sup> See Dana M. Oswald, "'Wigge unde Wætere': Beowulf's Revision of the Fight with Grendel's Mother," *Exemplaria* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 63-82; Elise Louviot, "Translations from Direct Speech to Narration in Old English Poetry," *Neophilologus* 97 (2013): 383-93; Trilling, "Beyond Abjection," 1-20; James W. Earl, "The Forbidden *Beowulf*: Haunted by Incest," *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (2010): 289-305.

<sup>56</sup> Dana M. Oswald, "'Wigge unde Wætere,'" 70.

<sup>57</sup> See Oswald, "'Wigge unde Wætere,'" 63-82; Louviot, "Translations from Direct Speech to Narration in Old English Poetry," 383-93; Trilling, "Beyond Abjection," 1-20; Earl, "The Forbidden *Beowulf*: Haunted by Incest," 289-305.



his adventure oversea.<sup>60</sup>

As with the source poem, Meyer then transitions to Beowulf's recollection of Freawaru and his foreknowledge of the resumption of feuding between the Danes and the Bards; but Beowulf does not again return to any discussion of the Grendelkin. If Beowulf was tight-lipped in the source material, he is completely silent here in this *translatio*.

The reader is then confronted with an analogic digression that is not in the *Beowulf* poem.<sup>61</sup> Meyer titles it "The Bear's Son." Briefly, this tale gives the narrative of a possibly monstrous boy named Beewolf, born to a woman who is apparently impregnated by a bear. Beewolf exhibits all the signs of being a bear-child by seeking out honey and being generally ignorant of human customs despite being raised in a human household with brothers. Beewolf suddenly comes into his humanity when a king is attacked by a beast and Beewolf takes charge by beheading the creature. Despite not appearing in the source poem, this analogue bears resemblance to Beowulf and seems to justify its insertion by remedying the hero's "āglæca" qualities. By beheading a beast, which Beowulf does to both Grendel and his mother, he further solidifies the line between man and monster. In other words, if all three are "āglæca," then Beowulf must choose to distance himself from the Grendelkin through some kind of action. As mentioned above, this is one place in the *translatio* where Meyer utilizes, perhaps without being aware of the theory, the suggested purpose of interlaced narrative. Despite being a digression, the Beewolf analogue reflects back on the events of the primary narrative by amplifying Beowulf's own encounters with monsters. Whether or not it is a conscious effort from Meyer, his text works seemingly at every moment to move away from concerns of liminality by establishing and maintaining impermeable boundaries between man and monster.

Ultimately Meyer's translation reveals the patriarchal expectations of the *Beowulf* scholarship contemporary with his project. Meyer imagines himself as a neo-Modernist poet and thus his interests were prosody and concrete form rather than attentive, direct translation. Like Seamus Heaney's translation, commissioned by Norton, Meyer's *Beowulf* is a construction, a *translatio*. Heaney's *Beowulf*, as many scholars have noted, is a product of his Anglo-Irish heritage.<sup>62</sup> In the same way, Meyer's *translatio* reflects his educational background, interests in English legends, and perhaps most importantly, his

---

<sup>60</sup> Meyer, *Beowulf*, 166.

<sup>61</sup> According to Daniel C. Remein, the editor of Meyer's *Beowulf*, this analogue is from the Old Icelandic *Hrolf's saga kraka*; see Meyer, *Beowulf*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> See particularly: Hugh Magennis, "Other Post-1950 Verse Translations," *Translating Beowulf: Modern Versions in English Verse* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), 191-216; Sandra M. Hordis, "What Seamus Heaney Did to *Beowulf*: An Essay on Translation and Transmutation of English Identity," *LATCH* 3 (2010): 164-72; Chris Jones, "Old English Escape Routes: Seamus Heaney—the Caedmon of The North," *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2006), 182-237.

poetic style. Meyer is influenced, as noted above, by the poetics of Ezra Pound and James Joyce amongst others. Due to that influence, Meyer consciously utilizes the page as concrete object to visually convey that which he wishes to emphasize. His concern for the aesthetic seems to predominate this work, taking priority over the accuracy of translation.

Meyer works against the source poem when it comes to developing the figure of Grendel's Mother. Utilizing the page and his own imagination, Meyer distances the Grendelkin from his hero and indeed from the rest of society in a way that is reminiscent of Gardner's novel, *Grendel*.<sup>63</sup> Both Meyer's *translatio* and Gardner's novel revoke any claim to humanity that Grendel's Mother may have in the source poem. Erasure of that identity seems to ease textual anxiety about her ambiguity by cementing her role as a product of the Otherworld or a hell-mouth mere. Meyer's *Beowulf* relies on such binaries even as he utilizes the interlace theory posited by Leyerle by substituting analogues and rearranging the text to suit his own aesthetic interests. That binary is even emphasized on the cover of the book itself, which depicts two identical Scandinavian boats mirroring one another and a man freefalling between them from the one to the other in the middle of the page. We can assume the man is Beowulf as he navigates between the binaries (and hovers as a silhouette over the title) in order to more firmly establish boundaries in the world of the narrative.

The revisionist nature of Meyer's *Beowulf* seems to call for a new interpretation of Grendel's Mother. Meyer paints the portrait of a monster on the outskirts of humanity, waiting to prey on the men of Heorot. By strengthening these divisions, Grendel's Mother becomes a reductive figure that seems to be waiting for a contrasting interpretation. If Meyer's *translatio* is a product of mid-twentieth-century engendered notions of patriarchal expectations of women, then certainly recent scholarship that has liberated Grendel's Mother and indeed reclaimed her right to the title of "warrior-woman" and "avenger" needs to put forth a revised translation to accommodate such work. Meyer's *Beowulf* was a product of student experimentation with poetic form that inculcates Tolkien's perpetuated ideals. Just as Grendel's Mother seeks revenge on the men of Heorot, so too do scholars need to revise the interpretation of her that is taught in the classroom. That reinterpretation appears to necessitate a new translation that supports contemporary expectations of the terms "ides āglæcwīf" and "wrecend" rather than twentieth-century impositions of the "shebeast."

---

<sup>63</sup> Gardner, *Grendel*, 25-48.