

GRENDEL'S MOTHER IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MYTH OF THE WOMAN IN THE  
WATER

BY

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes that the character of Grendel's mother in *Beowulf* is a manifestation of a mythic type, derived from studies of European goddess figures and named here as the Woman in the Water. This myth takes the form of an inherent association between femininity and water, and connotes the binary oppositions of birth and death, creativity and destruction, and the overarching themes of chaos and transience.

By examining the imagery in *Beowulf* and its contemporary literature, this thesis studies the figure of Grendel's mother in the context of this myth, looking at how the nature of motherhood and the element of water combine to form a powerful symbolic image emblematising the transience of life. These images are interpreted within a psychoanalytical framework as well as a mythic contextual one, providing the myth with an analogue in the human subconscious; that of the abject mother, a figure which represents the inevitable return of life to the void of the womb.

The thesis concludes by demonstrating how the entire poem can be read with the character of Grendel's mother and the battle against transience in mind, and how it complements the poem's overall theme and structure.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE PROBLEM OF GRENDEL'S MOTHER

Interpretative studies of *Beowulf* have reached such a level of profusion and sophistication in recent years that they almost comprise their own genre of literary criticism. The nature of the poem makes this necessarily true, being as it is the sole extant representative of a probable (or at least possible) genre of Old English literature, and the critical problems raised by the poem are peculiar to its unique existence. The poem stands alone.

In the same way, the character and the image of Grendel's mother stand alone, and if *Beowulf* criticism can be conceived of as such, then within it the issue of Grendel's mother would surely be a vast sub-set of criticism. Since J.R.R. Tolkien famously failed to represent Grendel's mother adequately in his essay *The Monsters and the Critics*,<sup>1</sup> Old English scholarship has recognised an uncomfortable problem in critical readings of *Beowulf*. The figure of Grendel's mother is problematic on every level: from the specifics of the language used to describe her to her wider contribution to the much debated structure of the poem. The problems surrounding the female monster (monster in itself being a debatable term) have been copiously discussed, and the problem has been approached with varied methodologies and from points of view which take in philological<sup>2</sup> and textual<sup>3</sup> perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Tolkien, J. R. R. (1983) *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* London: Harper Collins pp.5-48

<sup>2</sup> Menzer, M. J. (1996) *Aglæcwif (Beowulf 1259a): Implications for -wif Compounds: Grendel's mother and other aglæcan* *English Language Notes* 34.1 pp.1-6

<sup>3</sup> Chance, J. (1990) *The Structural Unity of Beowulf: The Problem of Grendel's Mother* *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* ed by Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, Bloomington: Indiana University Press pp. 248-261

One common theme runs throughout all of these; Grendel's mother is a problem. That modern scholarship conceives the character as such is indicative that the modern audience as a whole is lacking something necessary to understand the elusive meaning of this character and her episode in *Beowulf*.

This lack is a lack of context. There are no comparative works in Old English with which to reconstruct a literary tradition, no other direct mention of characters such as Grendel's mother. Speculatively, we can imagine that an audience contemporary with the poet may have had a better informed contextual framework, but that is surmise. The modern reader is confined by the isolation of *Beowulf*. For example, Jane Chance's highly influential work combines a mixture of methodologies to read the episode involving Grendel's mother in the context of the rest of the poem.<sup>4</sup> She identifies the problem as being one of structure, and demonstrates convincingly that the episode, for all its difficulties, is not an anomaly in an otherwise neatly binarised poem and is structurally coherent. She does this by comparing Grendel's mother to other females in the surrounding sections of the poem, exposing a theme of the feminine ideal and its subversion. However, Chance does not extend the theme outside of the boundaries of the poem itself, and indeed with her highly structural approach she cannot. For this reason the argument can go no further. Chance can discuss how Grendel's mother seems to function within the poem, but she cannot answer the question of her nature, of what she is. Chance makes no attempt to theorise about the strange and alien descriptions of the character herself, only about her role as a female character acting in a male world. The problem of what and why she is remains.

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<sup>4</sup> Chance, J. (1990) The Structural Unity of Beowulf: The Problem of Grendel's Mother *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* ed by Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, Bloomington: Indiana University Press pp. 248-261



The aim of this thesis is to provide a contextual reading of Grendel's mother. This context is mythic and proposes the existence of a mythic type which I have called the Woman in the Water. I believe that Grendel's mother can be best understood as a manifestation of this myth. The inspiration for this comes from the profusion of anthropological and ethnographical studies on a figure which is most commonly known as the Goddess. The logic behind these studies is that the feminine mother myths which have survived in literature throughout human history stem from a Palaeolithic belief in a unified Mother Goddess, whose dual aspects governed both life and death. Female deified or mythic figures from across Europe can be compared and demonstrated to show aspects of this birth-death dichotomy. Anne Baring and Jules Cashford's extensive study of images of this Goddess is perhaps one of the most thorough works, taking in evidence from a wide variety of places and charting the image's evolution over a vast span of time.<sup>5</sup> No doubt, the concept of this dualistic birth-death figure in the earliest known European cosmologies is relevant to my study. It is my intent, as it is theirs, to examine the survival of a myth in later literature.

However, where I mention the myth of the Woman in the Water, I am not referring to a single unified Goddess figure and attempting to find it in *Beowulf*. What I am trying to identify in the Woman in the Water is a particular set of connotative signs which indicate a certain way of thinking within the poem by virtue of their mythic context. These signs include primarily those of femininity and water. This thesis aims to look at the imagery associated with Grendel's mother, in particular the elemental imagery of her landscape, and examine how an Anglo-Saxon audience would have understood the connotations of that imagery. She is inextricable in association from her mere in a way that Grendel is not, being variously

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<sup>5</sup> Baring, A. and Cashford, J. (1991) *The Myth of the Goddess; Evolution of an Image* Bath: The Bath Press

described by the poet as “brimwylf”<sup>6</sup> [water-wolf] and “merewif” [mere-woman] (p. 119 line 1519). Equally, the mere reflects the character. It “weol” [welled] (p. 114 line 1422), and is described as “sundgebland” [surging water] (p.115 line 1450), suggesting a churning, almost internal motion that is reminiscent of the ruminations of its monstrous occupant, who “yrmpe gemunde” [brooded in mind] (104 line 1259). By this process, layers of meaning embedded in the text can be suggested, and a clearer reading brought forward.

I have avoided associating the myth as I have defined it with the Goddess of the previously mentioned anthropological works because they suggest that this set of connotations is a personality rather than a concept. In terms of what I am looking at - the survival of a particular way of imagining a myth – this is not a useful idea.

#### THE DEFINITION OF MYTH

Already in this thesis, I have given the association between femininity and water a name: the Woman in the Water. I have also called it a myth. Definitions of “myth,” some including vast etymologies of the word and detailed chapters on semiotic value, are numerous.<sup>7</sup> The entirety of this thesis could easily be dedicated to cataloguing them. Its place in the title of a thesis on *Beowulf* appears textually anachronistic; it would be a mistake to read *Beowulf* as a myth or a mythic text in the sense of the traditionally designated genre.

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<sup>6</sup> Jack, G. ed. (1994) *Beowulf: A Student Edition* Oxford: Oxford University Press p. 118 line 1506  
All further references are taken from this edition.

<sup>7</sup> Csapo, E. (2005) *Theories of Mythology* Oxford: Blackwell

Doty, W. G. (1986) *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press

Glosecki, S. O. (2007) *Stranded Narrative: Myth, Metaphor and the Metrical Charm, Myth in Early Northwest Europe* ed. by Stephen O. Glosecki, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, Tempe: Brepols pp.47-71

Leach, E. (1967) *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism* London: Tavistock

*Beowulf* is an epic, apparently unconcerned with etiological truths, cosmology or beginnings, with the exception of the brief creation song (p.34 lines 92-98). The definition of the term myth as it is used here comes from the work of Stephen Glosecki.<sup>8</sup> Glosecki's theory that that myth is inseparable from narrative is both convincing and well attested in recent mythological criticism, but he asserts that the narrative is not myth. The myth is the image, the association which implies the narrative. The example he gives is the image of the woman bearing a water jar on the Icelandic Birka Pendant, co-incidentally harmonious with the present study. By associating these symbolically charged images, Glosecki explains that the resultant myth implies a set of narratives which may be as developed as an epic cycle or as succinct as a sentence. In the case of the Birka pendant, the valkyrie tradition and its surrounding stories are invoked. It is this image, calling into being a narrative, which Glosecki calls a myth. In these terms the Woman in the Water can be defined as a myth which spans the referential sources which will be discussed below.

Of course, this is a myth set in a non-mythic narrative. It is a narrative generated by the myth, nevertheless. The myth is appearing almost second-hand, perhaps unconsciously in the mind of the poet. It is a residual memory within the culture, which is still imbued with associative power but has little or no impact on the conscious belief system of the poet or reader. These memories are what Jung would call archetypal matrices, and they can arise independently of their mythological context.<sup>9</sup> The idea that images, associations and symbolic themes can be passed through the unconscious minds of people within the same

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<sup>8</sup> Glosecki, S. O. (2007) Stranded Narrative: Myth, Metaphor and the Metrical Charm *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, ed. by Stephen O. Glosecki, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, Tempe: BREPOLs pp. 47-71

<sup>9</sup> Jung, C. G. (1953) *Collected Works* ed. by Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerard Adler and William McGuire, Princeton: Princeton University Press vol 10, pp. 120-121

culture was first explored by Jung. It was he who recognised that certain mythic images were constant in the minds of people of the same culture, in both their presence as a symbol and in meaning.<sup>10</sup> These are not transmitted directly, but are suggested to the unconscious by the implicit assumptions and associative connections made by others.

In the case of an image such as Grendel's mother in *Beowulf*, it is understood by both poet and contemporaneous audiences as a signifier of an event in the cultural or individual mind. This works in the same way as a word, which is understood among people of the same language group. An event could be a realisation of knowledge about the world, a social or cultural rule or even the semiotic event of understanding a concept and the necessary step of discovering a word for it. As with semiotic expression, the poet cannot help but slip into metaphor. The ontological gap between sign and signified remains; the word is not the event. I would argue that it is the same with the myth. In realising a concept, the *Beowulf* poet attempts to bridge the ontological gap by presenting it in a commonly understood pattern of signification, in this case the myth of the Woman in the Water. The poet may be ignorant of why or what the myth means, just as a speaker may be ignorant of the etymology of his or her words and more broadly the rules of linguistics as a whole. But nevertheless the myth is expressed, outside of its mythic context and acting instead as a sign loaded with connotation.

Doty's excellent and comprehensive survey of mythology as a discipline defines this kind of mythic reference as "secondary elaborations...something more akin to arbitrary stereotypes and stenodiction than to language considered powerful enough to make the supranormal present and effective."<sup>11</sup> Doty would consider the latter function of making the

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<sup>10</sup> Jung, C. G. (1953) *Collected Works* ed. by Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerard Adler and William McGuire, Princeton: Princeton University Press vol 10, p. 120

<sup>11</sup> Doty, W. G. (1986) *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press

supernatural manifest the primary function of true myth, and relates as I do the process of mythmaking to that of semiotics. The stenodiction referred to in his definition means language which is limited to a narrow semantic range. Similarly, these secondary elaborations, these myths outside of their mythic context, are limited in their meaning by the narrative. They are, nevertheless, manifestations of a more ambivalent and multifaceted primary myths. This is yet another form of isolation which the figure of Grendel's mother has suffered from the very outset, since in *Beowulf* she is an image detached from an original mythic context but mythically charged nevertheless.

## THE SOURCES

Although I am by no means cataloguing instances of the Woman in the Water myth across *Beowulf's* contemporary texts, in order to demonstrate a common set of signs which could be commonly understood by the poet's audience I will need to examine analogous literature.

The areas of literature from which this study could draw comparison are vast and disparate. The kind of criticism engaged in by Northrop Frye and Joseph Campbell, for example, while providing several useful (arguably seminal) concepts for further study, are largely discredited because of their broad range, categories and generalisations. Broadness is something to be avoided in such a study. The only sources which will be used comparatively here are ones from cognate and contemporary cultures which could reasonably have had an influence on the composition of *Beowulf*, or failing that show a pattern of thought which could be argued to have influenced Old English writing culture in general.

It will also limit the sources to textual ones. It would be interesting to look as closely at the iconographical or archaeological evidence, for example, but it is far beyond the scope of

this study. For this reason, analogous texts can only come from cognate Germanic and Judeo-Christian writing. Other bodies of literature could perhaps be identified with careful study of literate culture in Anglo-Saxon England, but for the purposes of this thesis these three areas will serve most usefully. Chronology is not too important here, and in any case must be negotiable because of *Beowulf's* uncertain date. If a text exhibits the kind of parallels which would be useful, it is likely that it represents a broadly contemporary pattern of thinking and imagining which is relevant to the culture of the *Beowulf* poet.

This is much the same methodology as has been used by Anlezark in comparing related Anglo-Saxon texts about water and the concept of flood to gain a broader idea of what these images meant to contemporary audiences, and what hermeneutic cues they took from them. In his work *Water and Fire*,<sup>12</sup> Anlezark looks at elemental imagery across Old English literature as a whole, focusing on the motif of the flood and the associations of water with oblivion and chaos. I intend to follow a similar methodology. Where Anlezark has examined the element of water, I will examine the association between woman and water, and look at how this connection between the chaotic element and femininity is represented in Old English literature. From this, I will extrapolate new meanings behind the figure of Grendel's mother, and present a new reading for the poem itself.

#### READING THE MYTH IN BEOWULF

As I will go on to show in the following chapters, the image of the Woman in the Water would have been a potent one for audiences contemporary with *Beowulf*. She is associated with the concepts of chaos, disorder and destruction, but also with creation and

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<sup>12</sup> Anlezark, D.C. (2006) *Water and Fire* Manchester: Manchester University Press

potential. The myth is built around a central dichotomy of birth and death. This is the theme which is constant throughout its depictions, and informs all its various associative aspects.

Chapter One will explain how the figure of a woman lends itself to this duality; women are mothers and therefore give life, but by the same function they also emblematised incarnation, mortality and therefore death. This is reflected in depictions of female and maternal figures within the sources delineated above and within *Beowulf* itself. Chapter Two will look at how the element of water has been treated in these sources, and how it interacts with the overarching dichotomy of chaos and creativity.

The Conclusion will show how reading Grendel's mother in this way impacts on the rest of the poem. If she is demonstrably a manifestation of a myth of transition, birth and death, Beowulf's battle with her becomes a battle against transience. The Anglo-Saxon preoccupation with transience is reflected in *Beowulf* as well as in contemporary literature within Anglo-Saxon culture. The poem's primary themes of continuity, heritage and ultimately fame as a way of cheating oblivion in death agree with such a reading. By looking at how the myth operates within the poem on both the conscious and unconscious minds of the audience, modern scholars can read the poem as an expression of the increasing need of a society to be separate from the surrounding world and to embrace an anthropocentric Christian world view. By this process man seeks to be privileged above the cycle of birth and death which the myth embodies, and recreated as a divinely ordained *raison d'être* for the cosmos.

## CHAPTER ONE: MOTHERHOOD

The fact of motherhood is one of the distinct ways in which Grendel's mother embodies the myth. She is defined – nominally at least – by her relationship to her son. She has no name, and though she is referred to by other epithets throughout the episode in the poem, she is principally introduced to the reader in line 1258 as “Grendles modor” [Grendel's mother] (p.104 line 1258). This is not unusual. Gillian Overing in particular has discussed at length how the women in *Beowulf* are defined by their male relatives, and do not in fact have independent identities of their own. Overing refers to this state of being outside of the culturally signified world as “unsigned.”<sup>13</sup> Though Overing's study takes in all the women in *Beowulf*, the point is most apt for Grendel's mother, perhaps ironically the most proactive female in the poem, because she is entirely absorbed by her role as a mother. She acts only as a maternal figure, entering the story first vicariously through the actions of Grendel and then as an avenging relative after his death.

In fact, she is as inextricable from this role as she is from the water of the mere. It is not so much a role as an aspect of the Woman in the Water, and it should be remembered that Grendel's mother is not so much a character in her own right as a manifestation of a myth. As this chapter will explore, motherhood is integral to the myth as a representation of the overarching dichotomy of birth and death, creation and destruction and the theme of transition which runs throughout.

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<sup>13</sup> Overing, G. (1990) *Language Sign and Gender in Beowulf* Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press



## THE MOTHER IN THE MYTH

Over the past two decades or so, psychoanalytical criticism has been applied to *Beowulf* with enthusiasm. Psychoanalysis is central to the study of myths. If a myth is an association of symbols or images which implies a narrative, then it is necessary to look at how these associations operate. These myths can be transmitted, free of narrative, through other artistic means and perpetuated in the unconsciousness of a culture.

In relation to Grendel's mother, the work of James Hala has been perhaps the most focused and the most relevant to this study. In his 1998 article, 'The Parturition of Poetry and the Birthing of Culture: The Ides Aglæcwif and Beowulf,'<sup>14</sup> Hala maps the process of the formation of the ego as a separate entity from the mother onto Beowulf's journey into the mere. Hala's argument is that Grendel's mother represents the abject – a term used by Julia Kristeva to mean the aspects of life which we banish during the semiotic phase, when the subject is becoming distinct from the mother.<sup>15</sup> These aspects are the things which remind the subject of the fact that just as one day he or she was formed out of the oblivion of the womb, so he or she will collapse back into oblivion on death. The mother, therefore, takes on the dual role of the giver of life and the black hole of the before and after. She, along with all that reminds the ego of its own transience, is pushed to the liminal areas of the consciousness and identified as other. By this process the ego delineates its own boundaries as an autonomous person, separating itself from the mother in a struggle against a fear of re-absorption and loss of identity, which is of course symptomatic of the ultimate fear of death and the return to

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<sup>14</sup> Hala, J. (1998) 'The Parturition of Poetry and the Birthing of Culture: The Ides Aglæcwif and Beowulf' *Exemplaria*. 10.1 pp. 29 -50

<sup>15</sup> Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror* trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press p.i

nothingness. The ego can only identify the mother as other because it can identify with a male figure, most commonly the father figure, who represents the possibility of existence separate from the body of the mother, which the child is intimately linked to from conception. Hala argues convincingly that the mere represents the abject matter which has been pushed to the margins, and that Grendel and his mother encroach on Heorot in a similar way to the abject constantly encroaching on the defined mind and reminding it of chaos and infinity. The fight with Grendel's mother, Hala says, is the battle of the newly forming ego with the abject mother; the pulling away by identification with an idealised male, in the case of *Beowulf*, God.

Hala's argument is stronger in some places than others. His integration of Grendel's role in the conflict, for example, is expounded with less certainty than that of Beowulf and Grendel's mother. However, the basic blueprint of the independent ego versus the consuming and dangerous oblivion of the mother's body, the intervention of and identification with the phallic father and the importance of border transgression remain very convincing when laid over the plot of *Beowulf*. Grendel's mother is defined by her maternal role, but she does not represent motherhood in its entirety. She is the aspect of the abject mother, a dual persona which both gives life and takes it. As with the rhythmic transgressions of the abject over the boundaries of the ego, she creates and brings forth but also destroys and consumes. She is the unknown before and after life, she is the void of non-existence without which nothing could exist.

This duality is one of the main aspects of the Woman in the Water myth. This chapter will examine how Grendel's mother embodies this duality through her role as mother. It will demonstrate that her role as a giver of life is integral to her role as bringer of death, and therefore show that the duality present in the Woman in the Water myth is also present here.

## WOMB AND CAVE

Hala's theory of motherhood is centred on the womb and the creation of life inside the body of the mother. It is here that the person of the child is most closely tied to the mother, and here that the two individualities are most blurred. The womb and the vagina have long been imagined by psychoanalysts as an absence or a loss. Perhaps this comes from the fact that the ego of the child relates the womb to the oblivion which existed before its conception, aligning the mother's body with the void. In any case, the anxiety about the actual space of the womb is very present, both in *Beowulf* and in the literature which surrounds it. The womb is both restrictive and chasmic as it figures both the threat of re-absorption by the abject mother and the vast oblivion of non-existence.

The *Beowulf* poet makes much of the description of the approach to Grendel's mother's mere. It is a vivid example of horror at work in the poem, as:

Oferode þa	æþelinga bearn
Steap stanhliðo,	stige nearwe,
Enge anpaðas,	uncuð gelad
Neowle næssas,	nicorhusa fela. <sup>16</sup>

(p.113 lines 1408-1411)

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<sup>16</sup> [Then the nobleman's son went across  
Steep rocky slopes, narrow ways,  
Narrow single file paths, an unknown way,  
Precipitous headlands, the home of many water monsters.]

(translation my own)

The language and imagery are heavily associated with constriction and narrowness, emphasising the isolating effect of the pathways on the warriors, who must travel in single file. There is more at work here than simply a fear of isolation. It is part of a much broader form of horror which exploits the audience's response to the abject mother by calling on mythic images within the cultural memory. These images, of course, deploy the myth of the Woman in the Water in such a way as to invoke a subconscious revulsion stemming from this fear.

To see how these descriptions of narrowness operate, we must first examine how they figure in the insular symbology of the poem. In my article, *Monstrous Landscapes*,<sup>17</sup> I explore the idea that landscape imagery in *Beowulf* is inextricable from the inhabitants of any one area. These landscapes are not always depicted in terms of natural realism, but instead the poet gives the audience small snapshot aspects, all of which combine to form a landscape as much of symbology and ideas as of physical features. Richard Butts has usefully referred to these as "landscapes of the mind."<sup>18</sup> The stacked phrases in the quotation above are a good example of this. The poet literally lists the aspects of the landscape without making any attempt to conjoin them in terms of either grammar or visualisation. Instead, the images presented evoke certain feelings and associations within the mind of the audience. Each space has its own set of connotations; each is a different mental landscape as well as a physical one. The geographical locations of these spaces in relation to one another remain uncertain too.

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<sup>17</sup> Ball, C. (2009) *Monstrous Landscapes: The Interdependence of Meaning Between Monster and Landscape Beowulf Hortulus*  
[http://www.hortulus.net/~hortulus/index.php/%22Monstrous\\_Landscapes: the interdependence of meaning between monster and landscape in Beowulf%22by Charlotte Ball](http://www.hortulus.net/~hortulus/index.php/%22Monstrous_Landscapes:_the_interdependence_of_meaning_between_monster_and_landscape_in_Beowulf%22by_Charlotte_Ball)  
(June 2010)

<sup>18</sup> Butts, Richard (1987) "The Analogical Mere: Landscape and Terror in *Beowulf*" *English Studies* 68 pp.113-121

However, the symbolic significance of each space in relation to the others is accentuated.

What we have are isolated vignettes, each of which reacts to, contrasts with and emphasises the qualities and aspects of the others. Grendel's mother, therefore, *is* her mere, and the mere is Grendel's mother. Once this is realised, the landscape, inextricable from a character who is inextricably a mother, becomes obvious in its manifestation as a figurative womb.

It is in this way that the poet sets up the dichotomy between Grendel's mother's mere and Heorot. This dichotomy informs the reader's understanding of the description of the path to the mere. The opposition between these two centres of symbolism is created in terms of space versus constriction, height versus depth and liberal interaction versus solitary passage.

The poet's focus when describing Heorot is to emphasise space and height: "Sele hlifade / heah ond horngeap" [hall towered / high and horn-gabled] (p. 33 lines 81-2). Words like "heahstede" [high place] (p.45 line 285) are used frequently and the phrase "sele þam hean" [that lofty hall] (p.69 line 713 and p.86 line 1016) seems to be a formula. This pre-occupation is not necessarily with the size of the hall; no mention is made of its imposing structure from the outside until the Geats arrive, and even then the focus of the description is not on dimension. The main elements here are space, the relative height of the hall's position in terms of the rest of the landscape, and most importantly, movement and constant flow of activity. It reflects the later references to the social behaviour of the Scyldings. Wealþeow "ymbeode" [wound around] (p. 65 line 620), again, emphasising the space of the hall and the intermingling of different people, families and allegiances. It is this circulation which defines the purpose of the hall. Its lofty, wide aspects make it an inviting place for these kinds of interconnections between people to take place. The connotations of height, space and light are aspects which all facilitate those functions of society which were paramount to the Anglo-Saxons and embodied in the hall. These are the maintenance of kinship bonds and the

intermingling of families and groups in a strict hierarchical setting, re-enforcing the boundaries of society and creating bonds. The poet celebrates these harmonious scenes of hall life throughout the poem, and draws attention to the positive by accentuating the negative when he contrasts the present state of the Danish royal house with the kin slaying future of Heorot after Hroþgar is dead. Therefore the image of the hall is intimately linked with the idea of society, placing Heorot at its centre with a strong emphasis on freedom and clarity of movement. It is metonymic for the people themselves just as the mere is metonymic for Grendel's mother.

If the paths to the mere and the mere itself are representations of the womb of the abject mother, then the clearly delineated boundaries of Heorot and its surrounds are certainly the domain of the defined and separate ego, which strives to be free of the mother by the process of abjection. This is placed within the audience's mind at the beginning of the poem, when the poet includes a brief recount of the *Genesis* creation story in the passage praising Heorot's glory. It is in fact less a recount than an allusion, lasting only eight lines. Nevertheless, it gives the audience the reference they need to make the link between the egocentric Heorot and God, the father figure who represents the possibility of autonomous existence, becoming saviour.

The creation song in *Beowulf* as well as its biblical source is firmly anthropocentric in its outlook, and emphasises the idea that mankind is created from and saved from the oblivion of the womb by the father. Judeo-Christian mythology thus places mankind at the centre of the cosmos, just as Heorot is placed at the centre of the social ordered world in *Beowulf*. God "gesette sigehreþig sunan ond monan // leoman to leohte landbuendum" [set up in triumph the sun and moon // light to illuminate the land dwellers] (p.34 lines 94-95). Christopher Mannes has pointed out the implications of this in his essay *The Substance of Earth in Beowulf's Song*

of Creation.<sup>19</sup> The fact that in the Christian mythology of the early Middle Ages the cosmos was figured as having been specifically created for mankind would have had an enormous impact on the view of selfhood and society in Anglo-Saxon culture. Instead of a view of humankind as part of a wider cosmos, which Anne Baring and Jules Cashford have suggested is a natural precursor to anthropocentric monotheism,<sup>20</sup> man becomes separate. This separation, facilitated by way of a deified father figure is a macrocosmic analogue to the separation from the abject mother discussed above. Heorot, like the ego, is distinct from its surroundings as a construct not only of man, but of society. For in making man the principal *raison d'être* of the universe, the Christian mythology figures its own societal order also as divinely ordained. The order of society is born from the same order by which God divided the land from the sea. Heorot, as a purely anthropocentric space, possessed of its own light in contrast to what must have appeared to a contemporary audience to be the dark unknown of the wilderness, is the emblem of that order.

The mere is everything Heorot is not. It is marginal, occupying a situation close to the edge of the ocean. Its association with water, which will be explored in the following chapter, links it closely with the water which existed before God imposed order and created the world for mankind. The physical shape of the mere is also highly suggestive of the womb, in contrast to Heorot's spacious height, the mere is a place which can only be reached by descent, as we learn when Hroþgar mentions the stream travelling "niþer.../ flod under foldan" [downwards...//flood under the earth] (pp.109-110 lines 1360-61). Hroþgar goes on to say in lines 1366-7 (p. 110) that nobody knows whether there is a limit to its depth. This

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<sup>19</sup> Manes, Christopher, (1994) "The Substance of Earth in Beowulf's Song of Creation" *English Language Notes* 31.4 pp. 1-5

<sup>20</sup> Baring, A. and Cashford, J. (1991) *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* Bath: The Bath Press p.53

fear of a limitless void inextricably associated with a mother figure is the fear of the womb of the abject mother, of the birth-death dichotomy and thus of the Woman in the Water. The narrowness of the approach to the mere is compounded by the imagery of stagnation and the lack of free movement in the mere itself. The water “standeð” [stands] (p. 110 line 1362), the trees are “hrinde” [covered with frost] (p. 110 line 1262), their “wyrstum fæst” [roots fast] (p. 110 line 1364). This stasis and imagery of constriction stems from the fear of the womb, of re-absorption into the body and persona of the mother, staved off by the clearly delineated boundaries of the ego. The dichotomous nature of the constrictive void is typical of the Woman in the Water myth, a figure who is characterised by binary opposition. Grendel’s mother displays all the contradictory interplay of signs by which the Woman in the Water is identified, associated through the facet of motherhood with birth and death, constriction and oblivion, transience and infinity.

The idea that landscapes such as this one could be included in the symbolic register of human subconsciousness is not new. With these aspects of Grendel’s mother’s maternity in mind, the comparison between the paths to the mere and the womb caves described by Baring and Cashford is compelling.<sup>21</sup> The caves in question exist naturally all over southern France and northern Spain. They were sites of spiritual behaviour from the Palaeolithic through to the middle of the Neolithic era, and the vast system known as Les Trois Frères is thought to have been used in the same way for 20,000 years.<sup>22</sup> They display a consistent and coherent use of images, suggesting well developed and widespread religious practices and an etiological mythic structure. Various anthropologists have surveyed the wall paintings, relief murals and

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<sup>21</sup> Baring, A. and Cashford, J. (1991) *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* Bath: The Bath Press p.15

<sup>22</sup> Baring, A. and Cashford, J. (1991) *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* Bath: The Bath Press p.16



artefacts which characterise these cave systems, and Baring and Cashford have built on the substantial interpretative work of G. R. Levy.<sup>23</sup>

The caves are comparable to the depiction of the approach to the mere by virtue of their narrowness and need for single file travel. Their structure is natural, but the significance attached to the winding and difficult paths by the Palaeolithic people is exemplified by the presence of drawn mazes, spirals and meanders on the walls of the caves, on the ground outside and on various sacred objects of unknown usage. Levy's detailed descriptions of just how difficult these paths are mirror the descriptions of the *Beowulf* poet with surprising continuity. When describing early twentieth-century anthropologists rediscovering the cave systems in the modern age, she writes of:

...the formidable nature of these defences of twisting, often very narrow, always slippery corridors along which the intruders groped their way, clinging to curtains of stalactite, descending into chasms, negotiating waterfalls or chimneys, into the gigantic darkness of halls such as those of Niaux, whose dimensions their tiny lamps could never have revealed.<sup>24</sup>

It is widely agreed that these caves were figured as wombs within the earth by the people who used them. They were certainly areas of transition, as their continual association with shamanism and ecstatic ritual in the wall paintings shows.<sup>25</sup> They were also associated heavily with a pregnant female deity, who symbolised both birth and death; birth, because of

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<sup>23</sup> Levy, G. R. (1963) *The Gate of Horn* London: Faber and Faber

<sup>24</sup> Levy, G. R. (1963) *The Gate of Horn* London: Faber and Faber p. 11

<sup>25</sup> Baring, A. and Cashford, J. (1991) *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* Bath: The Bath Press p.32

the heavily pregnant state and exaggerated breasts and hips of the effigies painted and crafted in various materials throughout Europe; and death because of the practice of burying people within the caves in the foetal position. This, anthropologists such as Baring and Cashford,<sup>26</sup> Ellis-Davidson<sup>27</sup> and Levy<sup>28</sup> argue, is the archetypal figure out of which the dualistic feminine myth arose.

Without doubt, the myth which I have identified as the Woman in the Water is related heavily to this concept of the mother as the dualistic, transitional figure of both life and death. The modern critical literature devoted to tracing this myth is vast and far too wide-ranging in both subject matter and volume to survey here. However, it is sufficient to say that there is an agreement that the winding pathways of caves such as Les Trois Frères, leading to vast caverns which symbolised the transitional spaces between birth and death, are associated inextricably with a female figure whose womb the caves symbolise. The similarity between these spaces and the journey of Beowulf into Grendel's mother's mere is striking. She represents the chaos of the unknown but also potential energy. Once again we see the myth as representing the raw matter of creation and the giver of life, but also the rawness into which all life will one day collapse. Here, the primordial mother is also the primordial womb of the earth, which the Palaeolithic people believed was part of a living cycle surrounding the two polarities of the mother figure.

The poet in *Beowulf* calls upon this polarity. Of course, it is unlikely that the poet or the audience would have known anything about the cave systems of Les Trois Frères or the

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<sup>26</sup> Baring, A. and Cashford, J. (1991) *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* Bath: The Bath Press

<sup>27</sup> Ellis Davidson, H. (1998) *Roles of the Northern Goddess* London: Routledge

<sup>28</sup> Levy, G. R. (1963) *The Gate of Horn: A Study of the Religious Conceptions of the Stone Age, and Their Influence Upon European Thought* London: Faber and Faber

etiological beliefs of the Palaeolithic people of Old Europe. Nevertheless, the association remains within the poem, and it has clearly remained within the human psyche. It is reasonable to suppose that the association may, therefore, be unconscious, passed on both as a myth without a narrative through artistic perpetuation, such as *Beowulf* itself, and as a constant in human developmental psychology. The myth, the connotation between the mother, the womb-cave and transition, is preserved in the cultural unconsciousness. This is what Jung may have referred to as an archetypal matrix. The consistency of the myth across a vast temporal gap points to the fact that the myth has been transmitted separately from narrative or doctrine as an association of images in the minds of widely differing groups of people. The paths to the mere and the mere itself, like the cave systems, are figured as the vagina and womb of the mother. In the case of Les Trois Frères, this is the all pervading mother Goddess of the Palaeolithic era. In the case of *Beowulf*, it is Grendel's mother.

#### THE MATTER OF ABJECTION

The final aspect of motherhood by which Grendel's mother can be read as a manifestation of the dualistic Woman in the Water myth is that of the grotesque imagery surrounding her mere.

When Beowulf has traversed the difficult route and reaches the mere, he is confronted with a stomach-turning image of bloody water welling up: "Flod blode weol – folc to sægon – // Hatan heolfre" [flood welled with blood – people looked - // hot with gore] (p. 114 lines 1422-23). We are to presume that the mortally wounded Grendel has plunged back into the mere, back into the oblivion figured by the mere womb, staining it with blood. Once again the imagery is indicative of the process of abjection, the necessity of deciding what is external to

the self. The body's waste products and externalised fluids are viewed with horror, as they figure for the ego the return of itself and the internal body from a complex organism to reduced and disordered matter. These fluids which were internal, now externalised, cause an often disproportionate revulsion precisely because they are abjected in the same way as the body of the mother. Obviously, the most potent of these abject fluids is blood or gore, because it has the equal horror of the wound and the implication of death - the cause of the fear in the first place. This rather grim use of abject imagery can be seen elsewhere in connection to both the female body and death.

In Scandinavian sources such as Snorri's *Edda* and memorably in the prose *Gylfaginning*,<sup>29</sup> Hel, the female ruler of a kind of pre-Christian underworld, is described as having the blackening skin of the dead, a wide, carnivorous mouth and a drooping posture. She hangs rotten meat on the walls and is naked but for bloody human heads hanging from her arms. Here the images of decomposition work in the same way, expressing the innate fear of all life of that return to oblivion, the decomposition of the body and the disintegration of the self back into disordered matter. Hel's nakedness makes her unmistakably and aggressively female despite her inhuman appearance, just as Grendel's mother's maternal role does. There is a strong dismemberment motif in both *Gylfaginning's* description of Hel and *Beowulf*. Like Hel, Grendel's mother decapitates her victim - schere, leaving his head on the paths to the mere for the Geats and Danes to discover in lines 1420-21 (p.114). The literal taking apart of the body plays on the fear of breaking down, the physical un-making of a human being and the reduction of the whole into its constituent parts. This combines here with the imagery of decomposition to provide the explicit and repulsive suggestion of transience, the breaking of the physical self and its return to non-existence as a whole.

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<sup>29</sup> Sturluson, Snorri, *Edda* ed. and trans. Anthony Faulkes (1987) London: Everyman

The wide mouth of Hel, much like the “hildegrap” [hostile grip] (p. 115 line 1446) and “inwitfeng” [malicious grasp] (p. 115 line 1447) of Grendel’s mother, is suggestive of the predatory consumption which is also associated with the Woman in the Water myth. The fear of consumption by the mother figure is the fear of being re-absorbed into her body, to effectively be un-created and returning to the oblivion before conception. It combines with the images of dismemberment and decomposition to express the respective female figures of Hel and Grendel’s mother as internalising, digestive forces. In *Beowulf* this is made even more explicit with the churning waters of the mere, the figurative womb, an internal motion which seems to be reflective of the brooding ruminations of Grendel’s mother and the hunger which characterises the deathly aspect of the Woman in the Water. Hel, who is explicitly associated with death and the transition to the afterlife, shares both this and a strong connection to abject imagery with Grendel’s mother. Both live as chthonic figures, associated with abjection in the most grotesque way.

## CONCLUSION

The themes associated with the Woman in the Water, then, are present when we examine the imagery of motherhood surrounding the character of Grendel’s mother. Motherhood as a concept displays the dual connotations of birth and death, creation and destruction and the overriding themes of transition and chaos through the psychoanalytical concept of the abject mother. The imagery in *Beowulf* supports a reading of Grendel’s mother as a manifestation of this, as the motifs and images which surround and are inextricable from her all point to these aspects of feminine nature and the role of the mother in myth.

## CHAPTER TWO: WATER AND FIRE

The association between water and Grendel's mother is a strong one. As I have demonstrated in my article *Monstrous Landscapes*,<sup>30</sup> this association between the character and the imagined space which she occupies is central to her conception within the reader's mind. The landscape is constructed from associations linked to the character, and at the same time the character is constructed from an anxiety which is deeply linked to the landscape. The sea and natural formations of water in the landscape must have been at the forefront of the minds of the Old English poet and audience of *Beowulf*. Not only were the Anglo-Saxons a people with a long history of seafaring, the landscape of the British Isles was more altered by the rising water tables of the early middle ages than it is in modern times.<sup>31</sup> The fluctuations of the boundaries between land and water must have had an effect on the minds of those people living in an insular culture. The shifting edges of the land as well as the unpredictable landscapes of the south-eastern fens must have strengthened the idea that water could be compared with the abject and the marginalised, encroaching upon the central consciousness and retreating as the sea encroaches upon and retreats from the land. The image of water and its relation to the chaotic, the creative then destructive and the transitional, is a powerful mythic image in Old English literature. Combined here with femininity and motherhood in the Woman in the Water myth, its connotations both support and compound

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<sup>30</sup> Ball, C. (2009) *Monstrous landscapes: The Interdependence of Meaning Between Monster and Landscape in Beowulf Hortulus*  
[http://www.hortulus.net/~hortulus/index.php/%22Monstrous\\_Landscapes:\\_the\\_interdependence\\_of\\_meaning\\_between\\_monster\\_and\\_landscape\\_in\\_Beowulf%22by\\_Charlotte\\_Ball](http://www.hortulus.net/~hortulus/index.php/%22Monstrous_Landscapes:_the_interdependence_of_meaning_between_monster_and_landscape_in_Beowulf%22by_Charlotte_Ball)

(June 2010)

<sup>31</sup> Wickham-Crowley, Kelley (2006) "Living on the ecg: The mutable boundaries of land and water in Anglo-Saxon contexts," *A Place to Believe in: Locating Medieval Landscapes* ed. by C. Lees, and G. Overing, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press

those of motherhood discussed in chapter one. It is integral to the myth. It is on the one hand a necessary supporter of life, and on the other the unknown as it exists as the sea. The ocean, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, is frequently figured as a place without social reference, a figurative desert and a place where human beings could come into closest contact with the other, whether that is God, the afterlife, or manifestations of those marginalised forces like Grendel's mother.

Water in *Beowulf* plays a highly mythically charged role, both in direct association with Grendel's mother and when invoked in separate but complementary contexts. In this chapter, I will discuss how water is inextricable from the figure of the mother described in chapter one, how the connotations of water support the connotations of the Woman in the Water myth, and how this myth is embodied within the poem by the character of Grendel's mother. To do this, I will look first at water as a creative element, then as an element of chaos and transition, and finally at its links to the ultimate destruction at the end of the world.

## WATER AND CREATION

Creation stories as the Anglo-Saxons knew them derived from two main sources. These were the Judeo-Christian myths transmitted via the complex literary and oral patterns of the conversion, and the pre-Christian Germanic myths of which modern scholarship has little evidence. Of course, there is likelihood that other influences were also present, but these two strands of cosmological thought must have been by far the strongest. There is a great amount of literary evidence for the first of these in biblical translations, commentaries and artistic endeavours such as *Beowulf* itself, which contains a brief recount of the biblical creation story. Germanic etiology, however, is harder to discern. To begin with, most of the extant evidence for pre-Christian belief in northwest Europe is not Anglo-Saxon but

Scandinavian in origin. Even if these sources are accepted as representing something closely cognate to Anglo-Saxon mythology, they cannot always in and of themselves be trusted, as many of the manuscripts date from the high and late Middle Ages. The Eddic poem *Vǫluspá*, for example, one of the most famous and mythically rich sources for Germanic creation myth, is found in a thirteenth-century manuscript, the *Codex Regius*. Depending on the date of original composition, the fidelity of those instrumental in its transmission and ultimately the decisions of the scribe, the poem could have been influenced by later Christian cosmology in its references to water. The important thing to discern here, however, is not the origin of each mythic thread. It is to recognise that the core association between water and creation is present; that it pervades differing types of literature at different times and that Anglo-Saxon people would have had at least some cultural knowledge to provide a context for their understanding of *Beowulf*.

It is logical to begin with *Beowulf* itself. The poet describes the construction of the Danish hall Heorot in the first fit of the poem, and in one of the rare allusions in the poem to non-secular beliefs, recites the story in reported speech between lines 90 and 98 (p.34). The simple description with which the creation story is retold is indicative of an audience who would have known the biblical myth already, well enough that a small collection of references to the original could have invoked it sufficiently. The single reference to water in these lines is perhaps one of the most important of the poem. The poet says that “se ƿlmyhtiga eorðan worhte, // wlitbeorhtne wang, swa wæter bebugeð” [the Almighty made the earth, // bright shining plain, surrounded by water] (p.34 lines 92-93). Of all the elements of the biblical creation story which the poet could have included here, the fact that the land is surrounded by water has been chosen. This, of course, is inspired by the fact that the poet’s audience would have known that in the biblical story God separated the land from the water. This separation is



vital, as it sets up early the binary opposition between land and water in Christian cosmology, just as it does in *Beowulf*. The *Beowulf* creation song occurs so early in the poem, that like *Genesis* it makes the audience aware of the nature of all order being embodied in this dichotomy. The allusion here allows the contemporary audience to recognise this dichotomy, and to apply it contextually to the rest of the poem.

The water is figured as both the element out of which creation came, and the margins which surround God's order. This fits beautifully with Hala's application of abjection theory discussed in chapter one. The water effectively is the mother, the void out of which the father creates life, and something which is also abjected to the margins, delineated via the process of the separation of the ego as other than the self. The self is the order of creation, the father is God and the marginalised mother figure is the water which created, surrounds and always threatens to swallow once again. In the case of *Beowulf*, the water of the mere is as inextricably linked to Grendel's mother as the waters of creation are to the figurative primordial mother. In the poem the mere is literally outside of the margins; its location is "feor heonon" [far from here] (p. 110 line 1361), close to the boundary with the ocean and difficult to reach.

Of course, the creation song in *Beowulf* points the audience to the more detailed accounts of the creation story in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Here too, the conception of the birth of the world from water bears comparison with the description of Grendel's mother's mere in *Beowulf*. The text of *Genesis* itself may have been available in several forms. The biblical text would have been restricted in its direct audience, probably to a learned and mostly ecclesiastical demographic. Whether this demographic was the intended audience of *Beowulf* is almost impossible to discern, but since *Beowulf's* style and cultural setting suggests it originated in oral tradition it seems more useful to examine the versions of the

Judeo-Christian creation story which also stem from an oral context. The existence of the Old English texts known as *Genesis A* and *Genesis B* in the Junius manuscript are extant examples of an oral tradition centring on such core biblical texts. They are not to be read, as Bradley notes in the preface to his translation, either as “mere vernacular translations”<sup>32</sup> or “rhetorical elaborations”<sup>33</sup> of scripture, but as literary works in their own right. *Genesis A* in particular is written in a strictly traditional metrical form, *Genesis B* only deviating a little in style. It is reasonable to assume that most contemporary people’s access to the poems came in this form, and it is certainly poems like these to which the *Beowulf* poet alludes at the beginning of the text.

In *Genesis A* there is more elaboration on the separation of water and land which the poet points to in the *Beowulf* creation song. In fit II, the *Genesis A* poet details the creation of the world, how God primarily created sky and earth and water, as in the biblical text. But then between lines 103 and 117 there is a lengthy elaboration, describing the darkness of the world.<sup>34</sup> Although the precursors for creation, water, sky and land have been conceived of, nothing has yet been created, “ac þes wida grund // stod deop and dim, drihtne fremde, // idel and unnyt”<sup>35</sup> [but this wide earth //stood deep and dim, far from the lord, // idle and unknown]. The important aspects to note here are the references to depth and darkness. The connotations are of the unknown, the alien and the unfathomable, even when the poet is speaking from God’s point of view as he looks down on this strange pre-creation. The presence of “wonne wægas”<sup>36</sup> [gloomy waves] covered by darkness, referred to shortly

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<sup>32</sup> Bradley, S. A. J. (1982) *Anglo Saxon Poetry* London: David Campbell Publishers p.11

<sup>33</sup> Bradley, S. A. J. (1982) *Anglo Saxon Poetry* London: David Campbell Publishers p.11

<sup>34</sup> Doane, A. N. ed. (1978) *Genesis A* Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press p. 111 lines 103-117

<sup>35</sup> Doane, A. N. ed. (1978) *Genesis A* Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press p.111. lines 104-106.

<sup>36</sup> Doane, A. N. ed. (1978) *Genesis A* Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press p.113 line 119.

afterwards calls to mind the image, invoked in the *Beowulf* creation song, of the desolate waters which both bring forth and surround the world. The similarity of this primordial ocean's features to those of Grendel's mother's mere and thus Grendel's mother herself are striking. There mere is unfathomably deep, since “No þæs frod leofað // gumena bearna þæt þone grund wite” [There is none so wise // among the children of men that knows the bottom] (p. 111 lines 1366-67). It, too, is covered by darkness, as the ice covered trees “oferhelmað” [overhang] (p.110 line 1364).

The references to water as an element in creation in Germanic myth are numerous, but tangled. The problematic *V luspá* makes reference to an elusive story about the sons of Burr, who literally lift the earth from the sea,<sup>37</sup> suggesting perhaps a coherency with the same theme in *Genesis*. The poet of *V luspá* also dedicates a verse to the world before creation, describing how “gap var ginnunga, enn gras hvergi”<sup>38</sup> [the gap yawned wide, grass grew nowhere], a description which is strikingly similar to *Genesis A*, which refers to the same uncreated world as “græsungrene”<sup>39</sup> [not green with grass]. The similarity between the texts at this point is striking, enough perhaps to suggest a formula present in these two creation myths at least. The explicit reference to chaos in the comparable verse in *V luspá* compounds theory that the poet of *Genesis A* had the notion of chaos and the abyss when he was composing his biblical account. However, there is no more clear detail about creation in *V luspá*, and the poem *Vafþrúðnismál*, which follows after *V luspá* and the gnomic poem *Hávamál*, actually acknowledges the confusion of myths in Germanic traditions; Oðinn

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<sup>37</sup> Kuhn, Hans ed. (1914) *Edda: Die Lieder Des Codex Regius Nebst Verwandten Denkmälern* Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag (rev. G. Neckel 1983)p.1 v. 4

<sup>38</sup> Kuhn, Hans ed. (1914) *Edda: Die Lieder Des Codex Regius Nebst Verwandten Denkmälern* Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag (rev. G. Neckel 1983)p.1 v. 3

<sup>39</sup> Doane, A. N. ed. (1978) *Genesis A* Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press p.113 line 117

questions the creation of the world and the first kingdoms, and is given obscure answers, all of which refer to a wider tradition, mostly lost. Through the confusion, nevertheless, the element of water is present. *Vafþrúðnir* alludes to the primordial spring *Élivágar*, out of whose poisonous coagulated droplets were formed the first living things.<sup>40</sup> Here as in the Judeo-Christian mythos, there is a conception that water is the element which brings forth life.

The similarities here in the use of water as not only a physical element but a mythically charged image are striking. Water and creation are linked in the mythic interplay between Judeo-Christian and Germanic myth. The facet of creation is inextricably linked with that of water, and the water of the mere is inextricably linked with Grendel's mother, adding a macrocosmic aspect to the connotations of birth which were explored in the last chapter as part of her role as mother. If we read the creation story itself as a macrocosm of the abjection process, we can literally read water as the mother and the mother as water, just as the audience of *Beowulf* is left in little doubt that mother and mere are one in the case of the Grendel's mother episode. Again, the character's strong association with water leads the contextually informed mind to the same ideas of creation and birth, but also the marginal and the abject. This supports a reading of Grendel's mother as a manifestation of the Woman in the Water myth, deployed in these other contexts to invoke the same connotations of creative potency and threat to both the ego and to order from without.

### WATER, CHAOS AND TRANSITION

The dichotomy between birth and death discussed above has alluded already to the idea of chaos. Chaos is disorder and is without pattern, and therefore it has infinite potential.

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<sup>40</sup> Kuhn, Hans ed. (1914) *Edda: Die Lieder Des Codex Regius Nebst Verwandten Denkmälern* Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag (rev. G. Neckel 1983) p.50 v. 31

When order is imposed on chaos by an outside force as we have seen above, creation is possible. On the other hand, like the oblivion of the womb, the oblivion of chaos infringes on order and threatens to swallow it again. Water is an element which is inherently of chaos, and embodies the threat of collapse back into the primordial abyss as much as does the womb.

This chaotic threat is an ever present force in *Beowulf*. The most obvious way it manifests itself, both within the poem and in contemporary literature, is in relation to the diluvial flood of the biblical *Genesis*, which God allowed to consume the world after mankind had become too corrupt in the wake of the fall and the discovery of murder by Adam and Eve's son Cain. God literally undoes what he did when he created the world, imposing his order on the dark, watery depths, allowing only Noah and his family to survive.

The association between the mere and the biblical flood waters of Genesis has already been set up within *Beowulf*, as Grendel and his mother are referred to as "Caines cynne" [Cain's kin] (p.34 line 107). Grendel and his mother, as Cain's children, are outside of God's ordered creation. The poet constructs this race as having survived the flood when God returned the earth to the chaos of water in order to cleanse it: "se þe wætereges an wuinion scolde, // ...siþðan Cain wearð to ecgbanan angan breþer..." [who had to inhabit the terrible water, //...since Cain became sword-slayer to his only brother] (p. 104 lines 1260-61). There is nothing in the biblical text to suggest that anyone or anything outside the ark survived the diluvial flood, nor is there any suggestion in contemporary apocryphal literature. The *Beowulf* poet is imagining Grendel and his mother as survivors of the flood, and in a sense this is true. The receding waters of the flood and the re-population of the earth with mankind could once again be argued as the re-imposition of order, a second abjection of the forces of primordial chaos. However, as I explained in chapter one, complete expulsion of the abject can never be achieved and it constantly encroaches on the delineated ego, or in this case on the ordered

anthropocentric world. Grendel's mother, as an embodiment of this chaos, cannot be destroyed. She is less a survivor of the flood as the flood itself. She is the mere, and the mere is the flood.

The cause of the flood and the reason given to associate Grendel's mother with it is the biblical character of Cain. Cain's story is alluded to in *Beowulf* when the poet reminds the reader that he became his brother's slayer in line 1261(p. 104). Within Anglo-Saxon culture Anglo-Saxon, this, the first murder, would have been an example of this encroachment of chaos onto the divinely-ordered world to the contemporary. Anderson's essay, "Gæst, Gender and Kin in Beowulf: Consumption of the Boundaries," examines the Grendel's mother episode in light of the association with Cain, explaining that she represents the tension within the kinship bond system which held Anglo-Saxon society and culture together.<sup>41</sup> Anderson shows how kinship ties kept a society which worked on an ideology of violence stable. As transgressors of the boundaries of the hall and as the remnant of Cain, Grendel and his mother are the constant violence which threatens to erupt should the kinship bond system be breached. Her work is supported by the references throughout *Beowulf* to kin-slaying, occurring as early as the construction of Heorot, when the poet alludes to the troubled future of the hall, "ne wæs hit lenge þa gen // þæt se ecghete aþumsweoran // æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde" [It was not yet the time // when the sword-hate between son-in-law and father-in-law // deadly enmity must arise] (p. 33 lines 83-85). Anderson interprets the entire poem as a discourse about this tension, and the ever present possibility of a breakdown of society. Grendel's mother is this fear manifest; as a woman she has no place in the essentially

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<sup>41</sup> Anderson, C. (2001) "Gæst, Gender and Kin in *Beowulf*: Consumption of the Boundaries" *Heroic Age* 5

<http://www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/5/Anderson1.html>

homosocial world of Heorot and transgresses the boundaries of her gender role by taking up violence.

The theory fits well with the idea of Grendel's mother as a manifestation of the Woman in the Water myth. If she is the mere, and the mere is a mythic trope embodying the chaotic and threatening facets of the element of water, then we can read her as the flood. The poet's association of her with Cain enforces this. She does encroach on the hall as Anderson says, but rather than the threat being a purely social one it is a cosmological one also. She represents not only the breakdown of society into chaos, but the breakdown of all creation into oblivion. I would argue that far from subverting her gender role as a female in a masculine homosocial world, Grendel's mother fulfils her role, not as a literal woman but as the feminine principle present in the Woman in the Water myth. She is that abject void of birth and death represented both by the literal mother and the element of water.

The conception of the flood waters of Noah as the threatening abject is compounded by Bede's commentary on *Genesis*, *In Genesin*. Bede was writing for a mostly ecclesiastical and learned audience, one which would have had a background in typology and religious philosophy as well as a good knowledge of the bible in Latin. Bede's audience would have been very restricted as the content of his work is exclusively scholarly and accessible only to a trained readership. However, while Bede's interpretative notes would certainly have been beyond at least some of the commonly imagined audience of *Beowulf*, the associative processes remain fairly constant. Bede relates a similar set of connotations with water as found in *Genesis A*, *Beowulf* and the Scandinavian texts such as *Völuspá*. Bede says the flood waters of Noah were *abyssi magna*<sup>42</sup> [of the great abyss]. In describing the waters as an

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<sup>42</sup> Bede, *In Genesin* ed. by C. W. Jones (1967) *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* Turnhout: Brepols Book II v.1778

abyss, Bede has made the same link between water and oblivion. The notion of abyss is central to Hala's interpretation of the abject mother and the creative-destructive oblivion she represents. Bede also makes consistent typological reference to the biblical apocalypse, which he associates with both the diluvial flood and the waters which existed before creation. Water is the raw state of potential present at creation and at the end of time, and as Anlezark demonstrates, Bede and contemporary philosophers and commentators consistently make the explicit typological link between the flood of creation, the diluvial flood and the apocalypse described in *Revelation*.<sup>43</sup> The water, like Hala's abject mother, is both the origin and the end of life. This context gives weight to the reading of Grendel's mother as a manifestation of the primordial disorder which her mere represents. This is significant in her simultaneous embodiment of the role of mother and monster.

The Old English seafaring elegies, *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, also show evidence that an Anglo-Saxon audience conceived of the ocean as a place of chaos, located spatially and figuratively outside of and around the centre of God's divinely ordained social order. Both elegies make much of the isolation of the sea, and its opposition to life in the hall. The speaker of *The Seafarer* longs for "hleahre weras"<sup>44</sup> [laughter of men], just as the speaker in *The Wanderer* dreams about his dead lord and *duguð*<sup>45</sup> [band of elite warriors]. The ocean is figured spiritually as a desert, a place removed from the anthropocentric world in which the speakers of the elegies move closer to God and to wisdom. Frederick Holton in his essay

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<sup>43</sup> Anlezark, D.C. (2006) *Water and Fire* Manchester: Manchester University Press

<sup>44</sup> Krapp and Dobbie ed. (1936) *The Exeter Book* London : Columbia University Press p. 144. Lines 21

<sup>45</sup> Krapp and Dobbie ed. (1936) *The Exeter Book* London : Columbia University Press p.135. lines 41-45



Old English Sea Imagery and the Interpretation of *The Seafarer*<sup>46</sup> sets out the wide ranging and almost formulaic uses of the sea as an allegory for the spiritual journey of life. The flux of the ocean, as Holton sees it, is representative of the world as it is after the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, a poignant breach of God's law.

Not only is the ocean envisaged as an element devoid of anthropocentric reference and order, it is also a place of transition, much on one side of which is life on the created earth and on the other God, the afterlife, and spiritual fulfilment. Water's associations with birth and death are exemplified by this portrayal of water as an arena of change and transition. It is also figured here as the space between, the void, perhaps the same gap referred to in *V luspá* as existing before creation. Kelley Wickham Crowley's essay about spiritual and literal landscapes, *Living on the Ecg: The Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo-Saxon Contexts*<sup>47</sup> briefly surveys the locations of many of the influential monasteries during the Anglo-Saxon period and their tendency to be situated near the ocean or the shore, at the edges of the socially ordered world and therefore near to the ultimate spiritual transition to heaven.

The desolate seascapes of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* share imagery with Grendel's mother's mere, as the water of the mere is stagnant and restricted, the water standing, the banks constricted by the fast roots of the overhanging trees and the ice covering the branches. In *The Wanderer*, the speaker's feet are "forste gebunden"<sup>48</sup> [bound with frost]. The connotations of cold are reminiscent here of the stasis and restrictive nature of the mere discussed in relation to the narrow pathways in chapter one. The isolation serves to further

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<sup>46</sup> Holton, F. (1982) "Old English Sea Imagery and the Interpretation of *The Seafarer*," *Yearbook of English Studies*, 12 pp.208-217

<sup>47</sup> Wickham-Crowley, K. (2006) *Living on the Ecg: The Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo-Saxon Contexts*, *A Place to Believe in: Locating Medieval Landscapes* ed. by C. Lees and G. Overing, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press pp. 85-113

<sup>48</sup> Krapp and Dobbie ed. (1936) *The Exeter Book* London : Columbia University Press p.134 line 9

distance both the speaker of *The Wanderer* and Grendel's mother's mere from the freely moving space of the hall.

The theme of transition is one which must have been immediately associated with the sea for an Anglo-Saxon audience. Water would have been the primary medium of transport, as Wickham-Crowley has shown.<sup>49</sup> Scyld Scefing is brought to the Scyldings rather miraculously from across the sea. The descriptive language about the sea is accordingly structured. It is first named figuratively as "hronrade" [whale-road] (p.28 line 10). The use of this kenning is not random; the suggestion is of movement, dynamism and most of all purpose. It suggests a productive fluidity of movement both for a literal sailor and for the narrative, which relies on the sea as both a means of travel and as an unknown by which to define the known. Once again, at Scyld's death, the sea is referred to as "flodes æht" [the power of the flood] (p.30 line 42), a term which attests neutrally to its power. In this instance, the power is once again a productive force, taking Scyld's body and his measure of gold away over the waves and becoming the fabric out of which the *Beowulf* poet figures a literal journey in place of Scyld's figurative journey into death. Like creation itself, Scyld comes from and returns to the sea. It both creates him and swallows him. Of course, the sea also brings Beowulf to the Danish lands. Again the description is one of movement, likening the ship to the "fugle" [bird] (p.41 line 218) and emphasising the dynamic motion of the waves with such phrases as "streamas wundon, // sund wið sand" [streams wound, // the sea with the sand] (p.41 lines 212-213) in short paratactic clauses reminiscent of the motion of the waves. There is no mention of danger here, although the possibility of it could be taken to be implicit. Instead the productive traits of the ocean are emphasized, preventing the narrative from stasis.

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<sup>49</sup> Wickham-Crowley, K. (2006) Living on the Ecg: The Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo-Saxon Contexts *A Place to Believe in: Locating Medieval Landscapes* ed. by C. Lees and G. Overing, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press

This dynamic contribution of the narrative is compounded by the sea's inherent connotations to wilderness and disorder, lending it a literal and figurative fluidity to be at one moment a bringer of fortune and at the next a pathway away from life.

The sea's dynamism in this instance is in direct opposition to the static and churning character of the mere, but that is the essence of the dichotomy. The mere is both stagnant as Beowulf sees it, and open to the sea and the tides as the poet explains. Water embodies both the productive dynamic of creation and the isolating restrictiveness of destruction and death, as does the figure of the mother. The description of movement in the mere is quite different from that of the sea. The mere is fluid, but it "weol" [welled] (p. 114 line 1422), and is described as "sundgebland" [surging water] (p.115 line 1450), suggesting a churning, almost internal motion that conserves power and is fraught with conflicting currents. It is easy to see why Richard Butts has come to the conclusion that this is none other than the deep subconscious of the landscape of the mind.<sup>50</sup> This welling, churning movement is highly reminiscent of the ruminations of its monstrous occupant, who "yrmþe gemunde" [brooded in mind] (p.104 line 1259). This is consistent with Butts' theory that the mere represents the parts of the mind which are outside of conscious control, and therefore outside of society and its order of cultural signifiers. Grendel's mother is inseparable from the mere. Equally the mere, with its internal welling and potential violence, is inextricably linked with Grendel's mother. Here the destructive potential of the water is emphasised. It churns like the chaotic thoughts of the subconscious, the abject and marginalised mother beyond the ordered ego. It is almost digestive, threatening to consume Beowulf, just as the occupant literally consumes

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<sup>50</sup> Butts, R. (1987) The Analogical Mere: Landscape and Terror in *Beowulf* *English Studies* vol. 68

the Danes, the womb of the abject mother consumes the ego and the chaos of the primordial waters consume the created world.

The dual-natured chaos of the sea is exemplified within the poem by Beowulf's account of his swimming contest on the open sea. Once again the water is described in terms of its dynamism, with short paratactic sentences which give the impression of movement in the rhythm of the poem: "wado weallende, wedera cealdost" [waters surged, coldest of weathers] (Press p.61 line 546). The addition of coldness into the aspects of the sea recalls the seafaring elegies, and the function of the water here is much the same. It is a place outside of human or divine control, a chaos and a wilderness which in this instance provides a place for challenge. In the case of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* this challenge is a spiritual one. In *Beowulf* the sentiment is altered slightly; the goal is not spiritual, but heroic. In any case, it is the disordered sea which provides the appropriate wilderness for the race against Breca. As the contest goes on, the imagery of chaos and disorder outside of what was created for mankind becomes more intensely layered. The "nipende niht" [darkening night] (p. 61 line 547) bringing with it darkness, another aspect of the raw chaos which existed before God's will imposed light. The sea maintains its motion, but ceases to be a neutral force, becoming instead "hreo" [fierce] (p.61 line 548). The presence of water monsters solidifies the danger of chaos in physical form, as though the disordered ocean itself is attempting to consume the swimmers. One even drags Beowulf to the bottom, enveloping him in the unsignified matter. The direction of the movement has altered from progressively forward to downward, in a way which seems to consume. Relief only comes with the return of the sun and light, which the poet specifically aligns with the creation story by using the kenning "beorht beacen Godes" [God's bright beacon] (p. 62 line 570). There is a similar aspect to water in the form of meres

and inland fens in *The Anonymous Life of St Cuthbert*,<sup>51</sup> which similarly describes them as places where the otherworld meets the ordered world of man, and like *Beowulf* depicts serpents, monsters and faint lights on the water.

In a sense, this episode is a precursor to the poem as a whole. It shows Beowulf's will to prove himself, his necessary journey, descent into chaos and battle with the creatures outside of society, culture, language and understanding. It is as though the poet is preparing the reader for the subject matter of the narrative, and of Beowulf's already proven aptitude for venturing into the literal and figurative unknown. In this way, water provides both literal and figurative journeys within the narrative, driving the poem forward in the dynamic, fluid movements of the disordered sea.

#### WATER AND APOCALYPSE

Water is as closely linked with death and endings as it is with beginnings. This latter transition is a strong facet of the conceptions of water in *Beowulf*. Grendel's mother and her mere are strongly associated with death, and the element of water would have been one already associated with death in Anglo-Saxon cultural imagery contemporary with *Beowulf*.

Daniel Anlezark's contextual survey of attitudes towards floods in post-conversion Anglo-Saxon England takes in a wide range of texts.<sup>52</sup> Anlezark deals very briefly with *Beowulf*, focusing on how it fits into a wider eschatological framework based around biblical and patristic material. He gives a detailed analysis of Bede in particular, and examines how structurally, both in the Bible and in the interpretative minds of the Anglo-Saxon learned audience, the floods of *Genesis* pre-empt the final apocalyptic flood in *Revelations*. This is the

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<sup>51</sup> Colgrave, B. ed. (1940) *Two Lives of St. Cuthbert* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press p.92

<sup>52</sup> Anlezark, D.C. (2006) *Water and Fire* Manchester: Manchester University Press

flood of fire, the ultimate destruction of the world and the culmination of creation. He demonstrates that Bede and his contemporaries viewed the Bible typologically, and that both the primordial waters and the diluvial flood point to the final destruction of creation. He points in particular to Ælfric's *Judgement Day* homily, which warns that the judgement will come quickly: "And swa swa gefyrn gelamp on Noeys flode"<sup>53</sup> [and just so it happened with Noah's flood]. Images of purgation abound in these texts, as the flood of fire cleanses the earth of sin, destroying those judged to be unworthy and returning creation to a state of purity and eternal cleanliness in heaven.

The combination of water with fire in this instance is intriguing, as it also occurs in *Beowulf*. Hroþgar describes Grendel's mother's mere, and in particular the strange occurrence of "fyr on flode" [fire on the flood] (p. 111 line 1366). The image of these two conflicting elements occurring together adds to the dream-like atmosphere of the landscapes in *Beowulf*. It is a befittingly unnatural phenomenon to occur in a place which is outside of God's natural law, and one which carries connotations of the supernatural in its similarities to the allusions to phantom lights on the fens in *The Anonymous Life of Saint Cuthbert*.<sup>54</sup> Once again the audience of *Beowulf* is presented with a dichotomy.

Fire figures destruction and purification simultaneously, whereas the water of the mere positively overflows with life and potential in the "nicras" [sea-monsters] (p. 114 line 1427) and is described as welling with "blode" [blood] (p. 114 line 1423) in the most impure terms possible. Perhaps here the emphasis is not on the fire's ability to purify, but on its reductive properties. The fear of the water, of the unknown both external and internal to the psyche, is perhaps the fear of a return to those elements which create the body and the mind as a whole,

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<sup>53</sup> Anlezark, D.C. (2006) *Water and Fire* Manchester: Manchester University Press p.159

<sup>54</sup> Colgrave, B. ed. (1940) *Two Lives of St. Cuthbert* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

a fear which fire embodies for its properties of reduction. Fire is also the medium of funerary rites in an Anglo-Saxon context. Once again, we see that the female monster of the mere, defined by her motherhood and her relationship to the mere, shares the psychological properties of her landscape in that she microcosmically figures both the beginning of all things in her watery primordial lair, and the end in the fiery allusion to apocalyptic imagery. Macrocosmically, the events in *Beowulf* too begin in water and end in the fiery encounter with the dragon, which represents the last monster and the last monstrous landscape in the poem. The fire here alludes to the end of creation and to the return of all matter back to its base and raw form. Once again the imagery surrounding the figure of Grendel's mother points to the fear of oblivion, un-creation, chaos and ultimately the transience of everything. Just as in *Revelation* it is God the father who saves the worthy souls from this oblivion, it is he who intervenes and saves *Beowulf* from certain death in the cave at the bottom of the mere. The imagery fits with the theory of abjection, that identification with a father figure as other than the mother allows the ego to differentiate itself and existence from her and marginalise her.

There is further evidence of this association of apocalypse with water and fire in Germanic mythology. In the Germanic tradition as in the Judaeo-Christian, the apocalypse is imagined in terms of flood; the water closing back over the created world as it returns to the un-created oblivion of the waters. However, once again scholars face the same issues; firstly whether or not the Scandinavian sources are transferrable to Anglo-Saxon culture and secondly how, when and whether they have been cross-contaminated with conversion-era Judeo-Christian mythology. However, once again the fact that the myths exist at all in their present form shows that the connotative links between the images of water, fire and oblivion were strong enough to generate mythology. The infamous but problematic *Völuspá* is once again the most outstanding source to discuss. In verse fifty-seven it describes how:

Sól t r sortna, s gr fold   mar,  
 hverfa af himni hei ar stior nor;  
 geisar eimi vi  aldrnara,  
 leicr h r hiti vi  himin si lfan.<sup>55</sup>

In the sun turning black and the disappearance of the stars there is the connotation of darkness also associated with Grendel's mother's mere, which is overhung by trees. The earth sinking into the sea is a powerful image, explicitly figuring the sea as the element of un-creation reabsorbing the world which came out of it like the womb of the abject mother, suggesting the depth which is also present in Hro gar's description of the supposed bottomlessness of the mere. The presence of flame in the last line and the resultant steam bring the dichotomy into sharp relief, combining the elements of reductive fire and chaotic, raw water just as in *Beowulf*, in this instance in an explicitly apocalyptic context. All these images are together in Grendel's mother's mere and in this single verse of *V lusp *, showing beyond doubt that these elements are working together in associative interplay, pointing clearly to the end of the world and the return of all ordered matter to the oblivion of its uncreated form, a perfect macrocosm of the theory of the abject mother.

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<sup>55</sup> Kuhn, Hans ed. (1914) *Edda: Die Lieder Des Codex Regius Nebst Verwandten Denkm lern* Heidelberg: Universit tsverlag (rev. G. Neckel 1983) p. 13-14. v. 57

[The sun turns black, earth sinks into the sea  
 The bright stars vanish from the sky,  
 Steam rises up in the blaze,  
 A high flame plays against heaven itself.]



## CONCLUSION

By examining the image of Grendel's mother in the context of her mere, it is demonstrable that her relationship to the water is more than an association. The two are inextricable. The mythical properties of water emphasise those of her role as mother, and vice versa. The mere both reflects her and is an extension of her, and she is a manifestation of it. Having established this relationship, it is evident that Grendel's mother displays all the same facets as the Woman in the Water myth, those of creation, destruction, transition and chaos.

## CONCLUSION: READING *BEOWULF*

Having explained how Grendel's mother is a manifestation of the Woman in the Water myth, emblematic of the dual qualities associated with the myth and demonstrated throughout this thesis, the matter remains of how this betters our modern day understanding of *Beowulf* as a piece of art in which the myth plays a part. To conclude, I will explain how a reading of *Beowulf* can be arrived at by looking at the character of Grendel's mother as a pivotal figure, the rest of the poem's motifs, events and images reflecting on her episode to strengthen and be strengthened by its associations. The poem can be divided into roughly three sections, each of which represents part of the narrative's interaction with the myth of the Woman in the Water.

## THE ABJECT AND THE TRANSGRESSION OF THE BORDERS: HEOROT AND THE MERE

Between the bright, lofty ordered Heorot and the complete externality of Grendel's mere are the margins and border areas where the majority of the action in the early part of *Beowulf* takes place. These are the areas of conflict between order and chaos, and it is here that first Grendel and then Grendel's mother come into contact with the Danes. The transgression of the clearly marked border between what is within the anthropocentrically signified world and what is not is similar to the delineation of the ego, including what is figured as the self, and abjecting what is not to the margins.

The border is crossed in violence, first by Grendel, a character deeply associated with the abject both in the particularly gory imagery surrounding both his attacks and the loss of his arm, another example of abjection when what is part of Grendel's self becomes externalized by force. He is also heavily linked with the idea of consumption, as he eats his victims. Grendel represents those aspects of the physical world which the forming ego abjects

along with the mother, and which also encroach upon the self, demanding and making possible the maintenance of strict borders and the clear identification of what is the self and what is other.

Beowulf destroys Grendel and maintains these borders. It is significant that Grendel does not die in Heorot, but crosses back to the liminal edges before he dies. Grendel's mother, though not as strong as Grendel, transgresses the borders too. She is much more identified with the margins than he is, however, and only crosses into the world of Heorot in his absence. This is because she is the ultimate figure of abjection, one which is defined clearly as other. She is the abject mother, and unlike the other aspects of life which encroach on the ego's selfhood such as bodily fluids and excretions, she is the emblem, the very definition of otherness. She is the first thing which the ego separates from, both literally in the act of birth and in the early stages of the formation of the ego. The appearance of Grendel's mother at Heorot is a serious breach of the boundaries.

#### PARTURITION AND THE FATHER FIGURE

In order to take on Grendel's mother, then, Beowulf must cross the borders himself. As the hero, he does the seemingly impossible, and returns to the figurative womb of the mere in order to destroy the abject mother, and escape the inevitability of eventual death, return to non-existence and transience which she emblematises. The literal struggle of birth here is figured backwards, as Beowulf battles his way back into the primordial waters of the mere-womb to confront the mother figure within.

The fight itself is, by this stage of the poem, highly mythically charged. After an improbable day of swimming which emphasises the depth and the enveloping nature of the abject mother's womb, Beowulf finally reaches the elusive cavern at the bottom of the mere

where the fight takes place. He seems to be losing and cannot break her skin. There is a strong emphasis on her grasp, calling to mind the threat of consumption, re-absorption into the primordial womb which she figures. It is only with God's intervention that Beowulf succeeds. God gives Beowulf the strength to throw Grendel's mother off and stand, and what is more provides him with a sword, possessed of its own light, with which he defeats her.

The sword of God, the ultimate Father, is a powerful phallic symbol. God the father figures the phallic father of the abjection process, who embodies for the child the possibility of separation from the mother. By identifying with the father as a separate entity, the child realises its own separation just as Beowulf destroys the hungry and hostile abject mother with the help of God. God created the ordered cosmos from the water, the macrocosmic mother of creation myth from which Grendel's mother is inextricable. He is the ultimate figure to save a masculine hero from the oblivion of the womb. The creative and ordering force of the phallic sword, associated with it by the same image of light which identifies Heorot, is the only means by which Beowulf can win the battle against the abject mother, escape the womb once again and complete the abjection process.

This victory seems final within the narrative, and indeed if it had ended there the poem would have been as a kind of mythic wish-fulfilment exercise, in which the abject is not only marginalised but destroyed. But the audience has already been made aware from early on in the poem that there is a future after Grendel and his mother have been destroyed, and that that future is one no less dogged by transience, death and the threat of a breakdown into chaos than the present of the poem's beginning. Glimpses of the chaotic and socially destructive future of Heorot occur early on in the poem. However, it is Beowulf's narrative that the poet follows.

## TRANSCIENCE AND DEATH: THE DRAGON AND BEOWULF'S BARROW

Ultimately, of course, Beowulf can no more escape death than the Danish people. Beowulf famously meets his end with in his battle with the dragon. He does not succeed in avoiding the ultimate horror figured by the mere – that of the return to nothingness, the decomposition of the body and the end of the delineated and identified self in death. Beowulf is not cremated, but interred inside a barrow, which encloses him and his treasure as the waters of the ocean will enclose the earth. The metaphorical womb re-absorbs him. Like the standing, internally churning waters of the mere surrounded by the fast roots of the frost bound trees, or the narrow and isolating paths to the mere, the barrow is a constrictive place. It is separate from society, situated on the sea cliffs, the same boundary between land and sea where the womb of the mere was located.

The dragon's lair, like the mere, is an extreme elemental setting. Like the mere and the swamps which were Grendel's environment, it is situated in the margins, "wæteryðum neah / ...be næsse" [near the water waves / ...by the headland] (p. 159 lines 2242-43), but its qualities are quite different. Here the audience is reintroduced to the elements which signify the inevitable transience of everything; water and fire. It recalls the mere in its imagery of stagnation, a state which accompanies the breakdown of society in the Anglo-Saxon mind. The dragon's lair is full of the "deore maðmas" [dear treasures] (p. 158 line 2236) of an unknown people, something inextricably bound up with mankind and with the treasure giving society of the Anglo-Saxons. But there is no free flow of treasure, alliances and speech as there was in the realisation of a good hall, Heorot. Instead, the descriptive language surrounding the lair is of stasis. It is "nearocræftum fæst," [secured by difficult craft] (p.159 line 2243) and is a guarded place, to the extent that any movement of the hoard incites the dragon's wrath and causes destruction for mankind.

The destructive fire emanates from the dragon, which is the “hordweard” [hoard-guard] (p.160 Line 2254) who preserves the stony stasis of the hall by guarding against the free movement of treasure and people. In both cases, the reductive power of fire is invoked alongside the antithesis of social order and function. The two come hand in hand, one ensuing from the other; the deterioration of the values of the hall and ultimate, reductive destruction. There is water in the description, too, flowing out from the hall. The imagery is again of movement: “stream ut þonan // brecan of beorge” [the stream flowed out from there // breaking out of the barrow] (p.159 lines 2245-46). The violent outburst of the water from the barrow recalls the associations of disorder and chaos which were implicit in the “fyrgenstream” [mountain stream] (p.109 line 1359) which descended to Grendel’s mere. The dragon’s lair, then, is representative of the stagnation of hall life; the stasis of the economy of treasure and alliance, the ultimate disintegration of society in the fire and the resultant chaotic violence which will ensue when mankind is reduced from the divine order of God to its most basic material self, the raw matter before creation. Beowulf has not escaped, death is still inevitable, and transience is something which cannot be avoided.

One could argue that the theme of the end of the poem is inevitability. Beowulf’s imminent death is known to both the fictive character and the poem’s audience.

The barrow also signifies the end of the Geatish people. The poet makes explicit the struggles which will ensue after Beowulf’s death without an heir, and just as the stasis of the dragon’s lair figured the inevitability of Beowulf’s demise, his barrow figures the same for the Geats. Like the dragon’s lair it is “beworhton” [encircled] (p. 210 line 1361), giving the immediate impression of enclosure. In response to the hopelessness of the situation, the Geats re-inter the treasure with Beowulf so that the dragon’s lair is almost re-created, a symbol of stagnation and the collapse of hall life with the static treasure: “forleton eorla gestreon eorðan

healdan, // gold on greote, þær hit nu gen lifað // Eldum swa unnyt swa hit æror wæs”  
[They left the wealth of earls in the hold of the earth, // Gold in the dirt, there it still lives now  
// As useless to men as it was in older times] (p.210 lines 3166-68).

Like the gold, Beowulf’s body and self returns to a previously occupied state, a state which means he can no longer interact with the delineated, anthropocentric world of society. He has returned to the womb of the abject mother, Grendel’s mother, the Woman in the Water, and the poem leaves the future as uncertain as it was when it began.

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