

# The Feminine Other: Monsters and Magic in *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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**Abstract.** Monsters are perceived as humanity's enemy that should be eradicated. However, based on Jeffrey Cohen's *Monster Theory* (1997), monsters play an important role in understanding humanity's fears and anxieties. Monstrosity hinges upon the binary opposition of the Self and the Other, in which the Other is seen as a threat to the Self. With this in mind, this article addresses the female monsters of two medieval texts: *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*. This paper aims to examine the female monsters, Grendel's mother and Morgan the Fay, as a cultural reference to unravel the patriarchal anxieties of the time. Grendel's mother represents a threat to the homosocial hierarchal bonds of Medieval society. Meanwhile, Morgan the Fay signifies danger to knighthood, chivalry, and courtly romance. At the same time, this paper also aims to continue the critical analysis and literature of the female characters in both texts with a heavy emphasis on their Otherness.

**Keywords:** *female body, female monsters, Medieval literature, Middle English Literature, Monster Theory.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Monsters are not simply the antagonist of a story, they capture a part of our culture that can be understood and dissected to provide insight into humanity's fear, anxieties, desires, and fantasies (Cohen, 1997, p. 4). The monstrosity hinges on the binary opposition of the Other and the Self, where the Other is seen as monstrous thus is a threat to the Self. Hence, Cohen (1997) defines monsters as "Others, as contrasted with the subjectivity of the Self that classes them [Others] as alien in some way" (p. 28). By utilizing Jeffrey Cohen's *Monster Theory*, this paper studies two Medieval monsters; Grendel's mother in *Beowulf* and Morgan the Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*Sir Gawain*).

Firstly, I argue that Grendel's mother signifies a threat to the homosocial hierarchical kinship of the Medieval society in *Beowulf*. This can be demonstrated through her attack on Heorot, an examination of her dwellings in comparison to the mead hall, and the overlapping qualities of the maternal and monstrous. Secondly, Morgan the Fay embodies a danger or threat to knighthood, chivalry, and courtly romance in *Sir Gawain*. This is illustrated through her cunningness and

magical powers and her feud with King Arthur. Overall, this paper is an examination of female monsters as a cultural body and reflection of society during the time, where this essay intends to unravel the patriarchal anxieties represented and embodied by two Medieval female monsters namely Grendel's mother from *Beowulf* and Morgan the Fay from *Sir Gawain*.

An Old English epic poem, *Beowulf* narrates in the tradition of Germanic heroic legend. It is considered to be one of the most widely translated pieces of Old English literature, demonstrating its relevance to the present day. While the date of composition or publication is debated by literary scholars, many believed it was written between 975 and 1025 AD. The epic verse follows the protagonist and the hero of the Geats, Beowulf, who comes to help Hrothgar the king of the Danes to defeat a monster named Grendel.

*Sir Gawain* is a late 14<sup>th</sup> century Middle English romance poem, written by an unknown author. Its narration is regarded as one of the most well-known Arthurian stories that integrate two types of folk motifs in its plot: a game of beheadings and winnings. The verse follows King Arthur's knight, Sir Gawain, who accepts the challenge of a green knight. Any challengers who lose would be struck in the head by the green knight with his ax.

## READING THE MONSTERS

Tolkien's influential monograph titled *Beowulf: The Monster and The Critics* (1963) highlights the misconception of critical scholarship surrounding *Beowulf* specifically in their treatment, or lack of focus, towards monsters in the text. He posits that this misconstrued reading is largely due to scholars taking *Beowulf* as a historical text. Tolkien pushes monsters to the foreground and this incites a shift or transformation towards the critical reading of monsters in *Beowulf*. He contends that monsters "are essential, fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas of the poem" (1963, p. 68). Bildhauer and Mills (2003) in *The Monstrous Middle Ages* agree with this notion, stating that "monsters...are not meaningless but meaning-laden" (p. 2) as there are "parallels between commonplace understandings emphasizing medieval alterity and orientalist discourses" (p. 3). Similar to how "words like 'foreign' and 'alien' can be used as markers of time as well as space", the concept of monstrous acts as a border to delineate space and time (p. 2) concerning the Self and the Other.

Additionally, Acker, in his article titled 'Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*' (2006), considers gender in his reading of monsters by specifically focusing on Grendel's Mother in *Beowulf*. Earlier, Heng (1991) opens up a critique of the male-centric reading in *Sir Gawain* scholarship and starts to focus on the female characters in the poem. Looking into the four female characters of *Sir Gawain*, namely Guinevere, Virgin Mary, Lady Bertilak, and Morgan the Fay, Heng argues that the poem is, in reality, about men being under the control of women, or 'Feminine Knots'. This is further explicated with Lady's girdle. The Lady claims that the silk girdle possesses magical powers that could help Sir Gawain defeat the

Green Knight. However, soon it was revealed that the girdle is simply a girdle and holds no special abilities. Thus, the green girdle symbolizes Lady Bertilak's power and cunningness to trick and control Sir Gawain. On the other hand, Morgan (2002) challenges the scholarship that calls *Sir Gawain* an anti-feminist text, stating that the readings are misplaced as they fail to consider the Middle Ages contextualization.

Although monsters are often seen as humanity's antagonist or enemy, birthed only to be eradicated, I posit that monsters play an integral part in human existence and therefore could not be permanently removed or hidden in society. In his book *Monster Culture* (1997), Cohen asserts that a monster can be read as a cultural body where cultures can not only be understood and dissected but also provides an insight into humanity's fears, anxieties, desires, and fantasies. He proposes seven theses about 'The Monster'; however, in this paper, I specifically choose to focus on three of his theses namely:

1. The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis
2. The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference
3. The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible

These three theses deal with and address the process of Othering, and Binary Oppositions between the Self and the Other, and, thus, I believe to be relevant to the topic of research.

With all previous literature considered, this essay attempts to continue the critical analysis of female characters in both poems, with a heavy focus on their Otherness.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This paper focuses on two significant Medieval texts, the epic poetry *Beowulf* and the late 14<sup>th</sup> century Middle English chivalric romance poem *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, specifically on their respective monsters: Grendel's mother and Morgan the Fay. Guided by the three theses from Jeffrey Cohen's *Monster Theory* (1997) as my framework, I will be examining the female monsters specifically, their interaction with other characters, their place of dwelling, and their appearance. The motive of these analyses is two-fold. First, it is to precisely pinpoint and identify how Grendel's mother and Morgan the Fay are illustrated as monstrous. Consequently, with the understanding and insight of the monstrosity of the two female monsters, I aim to shed light on how the attributes could unravel patriarchal anxieties of the time. This article also utilizes relevant books and articles to further support my analysis and argument.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A contrast to the feudal system in Medieval society, Grendel's mother acts of her own volition without awareness or care about the established social hierarchy. Heorot, a mead hall, is a social space where the *Syld Shefing* and his knights gather to have a feast and celebrate their winnings. This space also regulates the built social hierarchy between the king and his knights:

Then to Hrothgar was granted glory in battle,  
mastery of the field: so friends and kinsmen  
gladly obeyed him, and his band increased  
to great company. It came to his mind  
that he would command the construction  
of a huge mead-hall, a house greater  
than men on earth ever heard of, (line 64-70)

As the mead hall is a place where the king and his knights celebrate and convene, thus the construction of the mead hall is not just a physical symbol of Hrothgar's strength, but also his competence as a *God Cyning* (good king). In short, the hall can be said to symbolize the power of the medieval feudal system as a whole, which is patriarchal. This also establishes a border around Heorot that signals the hall not just as a place of civilization, but most importantly it is where homosocial bonds between the knights and king are reinforced. Hence, the hall is a social space where the feudal system that is inherently patriarchal is regulated and reinforced:

...*Heorot* he named it  
whose word ruled a wide empire.  
He made good boast, gave out rings,  
arm-bands at the banquet... (line 78-91)

The attack of Heorot by Grendel's mother symbolizes a transgressive attack on a system that grants men power. A contrast to the Medieval feudal system that recognizes the social hierarchy, Grendel's mother acts on her own volition without concern of the king, of the hierarchy. This is in line with Cohen's fifth thesis, 'The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible' where the monster exists to "demarcate the bonds that hold together the system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot-*must not*-be crossed." (1997, p. 13). Associating a particular behavior that is autonomous and incongruous from the social structure to a monstrous body, or an Other, signals the behavior as unacceptable. In other words, the behavior of a monster becomes a reflection of a way of conduct that should never be done. In the case of Grendel's mother, the transgressive behavior is to defy the king. Cohen (1997) suggests that the boundary tied to a grotesque body are set "in place to control the traffic in women, or more generally to establish homosocial bonds, the ties between men that keep a patriarchal society functional" (p. 13). Additionally, an attack on Heorot is an attack on a social space that "validated a tight hierarchical system of naturalized leadership and control where every man had a functional place" (Cohen, 1997, pp. 13-14). Understanding this, it can be said that the existence of Grendel's mother

and her attack on Heorot unravels the patriarchal anxiety of a transgressive and subversive female figure with autonomy that disregards the male-centric social boundaries.

“Mysterious is the region they live in – of wolf-fells, wind-picked moors and treacherous fen-paths...” (line 1359-1363). A comparative examination of Grendel’s mother’s home with Heorot geographically and aesthetically reveals heavy implications of her Otherness. The distance between Grendel’s mother and medieval society exists both horizontally and vertically. The home of Grendel’s mother is located at the edge of civilization, socialization, and fraternity of Heorot. Not only that her cave sits away from the majority of society, but it is also located deep underground. She dwells in “dread waters, in the chilling currents” (line 1260-1261), deep underground. The clear distance between her home and Heorot signifies separation and thus the distinction between Grendel’s mother, as the shunned Other, and the fraternity of Heorot, like the centered Self.

Furthermore, a comparison of Grendel’s mother’s dwelling to the lively and grand Heorot illustrates a clear aesthetic distinction between the two places. The home of Grendel’s mother is described to have “overcast with dark, crag-rooted trees that hang in groves hoary with frost” (line 1364-1365), illustrating a dark, cold, and damp place. Meanwhile, Heorot, the “greatest of houses” (line 78) stands with “its arched gables” (line 82), a place of celebration, festivities, and enjoyment of the King and his knights. This is illustrated in lines 88-90, the hall is “filled with loud amusement...music of the harp, the clear song of the poet”. In sum, the geographical and aesthetic difference serves as a demarcation between Heorot as the Self and Grendel’s mother as the Other.

Despite the set distance and aesthetic distinctions, the “monstrous ogress” (line 1259) still crosses the boundary. Grendel’s mother’s disregard of the geographical distinction means she is eradicating any social or physical separations between the homes of civilization, or the space for the Self, and her untamed dwelling which is a space in which she is kept Othered. This liminality performed by Grendel’s mother is echoed in Cohen’s third thesis (1997) titled ‘The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis’, which is the “refusal to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’” (p. 6). The Mother of Grendel’s liminality acts as resistance and opposition to the system that keeps the Others Othered. Consequently, she is seen as dangerous and monstrous. When the binary opposition that demarcates the Self and the Other is ignored, such is done by Grendel’s mother, this becomes a threat to the very system that regulates the power of the King and the oppression of the Other. In short, the lack of distinguishment between the Self and the Other destabilizes the significance of the binary. For that reason, Grendel’s mother’s dismissal to the geographical and aesthetic demarcations of her home and Heorot personifies the patriarchal anxiety rooted in the fear of the breakdown of the Self/the Other binary.

Grendel’s mother embodies maternal qualities on top of vengeance and death. Maternal traits are discerned through nurturing and caring qualities. Her

maternal quality is evident through her grief towards the death of her son Grendel. Maternal qualities have often been used as an excuse to pacify a female's power. This is shown in *Beowulf* from line 1282 to 1286, when the monstress enters the mead hall her appearance is described as "less frightful than [Grendel]: as the force of a woman, her onset in a fight, is less feared by men". Grendel's mother is first regarded by the knights as a weaker creature compared to her monster son, simply because she is a female. In other words, the power of Grendel's mother is belittled because of her gender, "evidently...to discredit the unbiblical notion of a woman's superiority" (Puhvel, 1969, p. 81). Together with her maternal qualities, at the same time, she is also near death and violence. This is evident when she grabs one of the *athelings* and killed a "hero Hrothgar loved better than any on earth" (line 1296-1297). She is then described as "a bloodthirsty monster...a wandering demon...glorying in her prey" (line 1330-1332). Her motherly instincts to care for her son Grendel are the root of her desire for death and vengeance, shown in line 1277 "savage in her grief".

This overlap of the maternal and monster is echoed by Acker in 'Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*' (2006), where he proposes that the element of monstrosity and horror in Grendel's mother is largely owed to her maternal or feminine quality that transgressively coincides with violence, vengeance, and death (p. 703). Referred to as "an avenger for their foe and his grim life-leaving" (line 1257-1258), Grendel's mother's grief reflects a protective, caring, nurturing quality; at the same time, she represents a "wrath bearing" (p. 1279) figure of death and sheer violence. The coexistence of violence and vengeance, and protective maternal qualities within the monstrous body of Grendel's mother indicates patriarchal anxiety. The existence of two traditionally opposing qualities, in this case, femininity or maternity and strength or power, in one body attests that "difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential" as captured in Cohen's fourth thesis, 'The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference' (1997, p. 12). When the behaviors that distinguish monstrous from maternal are blurred, they unravel the system that regulates and controls gendered behavior. In sum, the coexistence of nurturing maternal qualities, that often relate to giving life, on top of a feminine power that could kill warriors- thus, signifying a death in Grendel's mother's body - reveals the patriarchal anxiety towards women in power. Her existence destabilizes "the very cultural apparatus through which an individual is constituted and allowed" (p. 12).

In another display of the Othering, the contrasting appearance of two women in *Sir Gawain* illustrates the binary of an ideal Self and the grotesque Other. Morgan the Fay is illustrated as "a matron, much older, past middle age" (line 948), and her grotesque appearance is further highlighted when compared with Lady Bertilak. While the Lady is described as "winsome", cheeks with "hues rich and rubious" and her neck "kerchiefed with clear pearls" (line 951-954), the sorceress is presented as "withered", "rough wrinkles on the other rutted cheeks" and "breast and bright throat bare to the sight" (line 951-955). It is noted that Morgan the Fay is considered as the 'Other', the alternate, ugly counterpart to the Lady of the house. Between the two women, "more pleasure a man could plot with the



sweet one [Lady Bertilak] at [Morgan the Fay's] side" (line 968-969). Based on the contrasting portrayals of the two women, readers are already given the impression that Morgan the Fay is the grotesque Other as compared to the desired Lady Bertilak. By Othering Morgan the Fay, she is associated with unpleasant characteristics, such as being untrustworthy and deceitful. This 'Othered' imagery is continued, as Sir Gawain protests upon the treachery of deceit done by cunning and devious women, such as Morgan the Fay, by listing numerous men who have fallen into the trap of believing women and fallen for "the sleights of women" (line 2415) such as Morgan the Fay:

For here on earth was Adam taken by one  
And Solomon by many such, and Samson likewise;  
Delilah dealt him his doom; David later still,  
Was blinded by Bathsheba, and badly suffered for it. (line 2416-2429)

Here, Morgan the Fay is associated with numerous female figures that have caused the downfall of male biblical figures. She is aligned with the image of Eve who is traditionally known to take the role of a temptress in the Bible and the cause of Adam's, and consequently, humanity's, downfall. It is only revealed to Sir Gawain in the last 100 lines of the poem that the game given by the Green Knight is constructed by the cunning Morgan the Fay, revealing Morgan Fay's capability and power to trick Sir Gawain. Hence, it can be said that Morgan the Fay is the real challenger to test Sir Gawain's chivalry. Heng (1991) states that "it has disturbed many...that the founding fiction of the poem turns on the inexplicable design of a woman, the infamous Morgan la Fee" (p. 501). Morgan the Fay is subverting the Medieval gender norms which, at the time, expects women to be pure, honest, and virtuous just like Virgin Mary. Saul agrees with the sentiment, where Morgan the Fay is described as "medieval symbol of the potential danger of uncontrolled female power" (Saul, 2010, p. 85). In Cohen's fourth thesis (1997) 'The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference', he proposes that "the woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, weird sister, Lilith..., Bertha Mason or Gorgon" (p. 9). In other words, women who transgress the expected boundaries of gendered behaviour will be seen as villainous or monstrous. In sum, Morgan the Fay embodies a threat to the Medieval patriarchal anxiety not just due to her magical and cunning ability to trick men but also her deliberate disregard of Medieval gender norms.

The Green Knight gets his supernatural abilities from Morgan the Fay, "through the might of Morgan the Fay...through the wiles of her witchcraft" (line 2446-2447). Consequently, the Green Knight has been acting as a puppet to the sorceress, as shown in line 2459, "she bewitched me in this weird way to bewilder your wits". Here, Morgan the Fay proves her cunningness by utilizing her Othered power to take control over Lord Bertilak. The sorceress has power over a man, whose power he utilizes to control the rest of the Green castle. She is not only portrayed as a challenge to the chivalric knighthood but also the patriarchal power, by disregarding the existing Medieval gender norms that expect women to be compliant, yielding, and dutiful. This is in line with Cohen's fourth thesis (1997)

where he argues that the “monster slipped into significations of the feminine and the hypermasculine” (p. 8). It is not only signified by Morgan Fay’s intentional trickery to Sir Gawain and power over the Green Knight but, most importantly, the act of using Lord Bertilak as a form of the mouthpiece to her dubious plan. For that reason, Morgan the Fay is viewed as an embodiment of the patriarchal anxiety due to her awareness of power to trick the men in the castle leading to manipulation of patriarchal power through Lord Bertilak to her advantage.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Grendel’s Mother and Morgan the Fay are Othered characters being positioned as the monster or antagonists of the respective texts. Their position in the texts as villains or monsters unravels deep patriarchal anxiety. The image of Grendel’s mother reflects a threat to the homosocial bond between men that regulates a patriarchal system. On the other hand, Morgan the Fay is projected as a challenge to Medieval knighthood and chivalry. Grendel’s mother and Morgan the Fay are seen as monstrous not simply due to them being the Others in their respective texts, more than that it is due to their destructiveness to deconstruct systems (Cohen, 1997, p. 14). Their existence destabilizes and breaks the existing social boundaries and norms which regulate a patriarchal system.

While this essay provides an alternative, feminist insight to two well-studied Medieval texts, to gain deeper reading and insight on female monsters, specifically in the reassessment of their portrayals in literature; Christina Santos’ *Unbecoming Female Monsters: Witches, Vampires and Virgins* (2016) sets out a multicultural and interdisciplinary close reading to the construction of female monsters in various works of literature. Santos posits that female monsters are an embodiment of the socio-cultural fears of female sexual liberation and reproductive powers. *Classic Readings on Monster Theory* (2018) edited by Mittman and Hensel presents a more general reading of monsters in classic literature. Dana Oswald in *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature* (2010) sets out a brilliant interrogation of monstrous bodies in Old and Middle English literature, and its relationship with transgression to sexuality and gender expectations.

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