

Smash the patriarchy!: Fear of feminine power structures in *Beowulf* adaptations

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Just as the antagonists of *Beowulf* may be read as symbolic of those problems which pervaded the heroic society in which the poem is set, so too can they be viewed as having deeper allegorical meaning in the modern adaptations of the Anglo-Saxon poem. These adaptations may be seen both to react to and engage with the poem as a means to express contemporary concerns about modern society. One such concern on which *Beowulf* adaptations have especially focused is that of the gendered power structures that appear in the poem, in particular the tension between the patriarchal world of Heorot and the matriarchal mere and its female occupant, Grendel's mother.

Through the employment of the theoretical frameworks put forward by Julia Kristeva and Sherry B. Ortner, this article will examine how patriarchal societies are depicted in three *Beowulf* adaptations: Gareth Hind's graphic novel *The Collected Beowulf*, John Gardner's novel *Grendel*, and Robert Zemeckis's film *Beowulf*.

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W.H. Canaway's narrative adaptation, *The Ring Givers*, published in 1958, is one of the first in a line of modern creative retellings of the *Beowulf* story which would be followed by numerous narrative, comic, and cinematic explorations of the poem, reaching a peak in the late 1990s and 2000s. There is often the temptation among scholars to write off many of these modern adaptations of the poem (especially those of the film variety) as uninformed pieces of pop culture, yet more often than not on closer inspection they reveal a surprisingly deep level of critical engagement with the Anglo-Saxon poem itself, as well as with contemporary scholarly trends and academic debate. Furthermore, these adaptations demonstrate that there is something in

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Beowulf which makes it relevant to modern audiences, the ideal blueprint on which to lay out contemporary anxieties and social concerns. One of the more obvious examples of this is John Gardner's *Grendel*, a manifestation of the increasing anxieties surrounding the Vietnam War (1955–1975), and consequently the increasing distrust of the government and the traditional image of the hero, a case study which will be discussed in further detail later in this article.

It is typically through antagonistic figures that social anxieties and concerns are expressed in literature and film. This can be seen, for instance, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where Frankenstein's monster can be read as a representation of the fear of scientific discovery in the Georgian period in England. Similarly, it is primarily through Grendel and Grendel's mother (as well as the dragon) that such concerns are expressed in *Beowulf*; these characters can be read as symbolic of problematic aspects of heroic society. As is the case with the original poem, *Beowulf* adaptations use these figures to express contemporary societal concerns and anxieties. Although many of these concerns inevitably change over the course of time, one issue that the majority of these adaptations seem to have in common is the conflict between masculine and feminine power structures present in the poem. This paper aims to explore the depictions of these gendered power structures in a number of modern *Beowulf* adaptations through the theories of Julia Kristeva and Sherry B. Ortner (specifically those of Abjection and of binary opposition, respectively). Using these theoretical models, the imagery and dialogue of three adaptations (Gareth Hinds's *The Collected Beowulf*, John Gardner's *Grendel*, and Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf*) will be examined, focusing on the representation of both matriarchal and patriarchal power structures.

Kristevan theory has, in the past, been applied fruitfully to the Anglo-Saxon poem: James Hala, followed by Paul Acker and Renée Trilling, have read *Beowulf* in terms of Kristeva's theory of Abjection. Julia Kristeva's theory (simplified for the purposes of this article), set forth in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, deals with the human reaction to the Abject, i.e. those aspects of life which threaten a breakdown in society or which lead to the loss of the distinction between subject and object. Those things that remind us of our own materiality ("defilement, sewage, and muck [...] the skin on a surface of milk, [...] the corpse", Kristeva 1982: 2–3) we exclude and reject, and therefore make Abject. The Abject is associated with the primal and that which precedes the Symbolic Order (the social world of linguistic communication, law and ideology) and therefore is often associated with the

maternal, the mother being the one the child must move away from in order to develop subjectivity. Symbolic Order is thus associated with the paternal, and is achieved through what Lacan called the Name-of-the-Father, i.e. the laws which control the child's desire (and most notably its Oedipal complex) and allow it to enter a community of others (Lacan 2006: 278).

Beowulf may be read in these Kristevan terms if we are to view Heorot and Hrothgar's realm as a civilised patriarchal society, the Symbolic Order which has separated itself from the Other¹ and the primitive maternal through the acquisition of culture, laws, and language. This is comparable to the way in which the child (through the Name-of-the-Father) separates itself from the maternal body in an attempt to become a separate subject. In order for society to do this, it must expunge that which is Abject, that which reminds us of death and materiality, or that which is a risk to civilisation, usually through the formation of laws or taboos. In this Kristevan reading, Grendel's mother may be seen as a manifestation of the maternal and also as the Abject, a female figure who transgresses gender roles and therefore reveals a weakness in a society which presumes and requires women to be passive. Grendel, then, may be seen as a figure who (without a father or means of entrance into the Symbolic Order) has not managed to separate himself from the maternal or the abject, a figure who has not gained language or culture; as James Hala notes, he is the deject, the agent by which confrontation with the Abject is brought about, as outlined by Julia Kristeva:

the one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing [...] the deject is in short a stray. He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. (Kristeva 1982: 8)

Grendel travels to Heorot, bringing death and reminding the Danes of the fragility of their society. Beowulf's killing of both Grendel and Grendel's mother, then, may be viewed as the society's final expulsion of the abject and its full separation from the maternal.

¹ The concept of "the Other", that which is different, has often been associated with the feminine (as well as with natives in relation to colonialism). Simone de Beauvoir states that "[Woman] is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (2010: 26).

Of course it is impossible to say whether or not the original poet, or poets, had any such intentions in mind, and applying modern theory to an ancient poem is extremely problematic. For the modern adaptations, however, which exist in a post-Freudian and post-Lacanian, and, for the most part, a post-Kristevan era, the relevance of such theories can be explored with more confidence. David Marshall, in his article “Getting Reel with Grendel’s Mother: The Abject Maternal and Social Critique”, explores a number of *Beowulf* film adaptations, such as McTiernan’s (1999) *The 13th Warrior*, Gunnarsson’s (2005) *Beowulf and Grendel*, and Zemeckis’s (2007) *Beowulf*. Marshall analyses the Kristevan imagery evident in these films and more specifically these films’ responses to the threat of Grendel’s mother, an argument which I will both build on and also depart from in this article.²

In addition to Kristeva’s theory of abjection, I will also make reference to the socio-cultural theory set forth by Sherry B. Ortner in her article “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture” (1974). In essence, Ortner’s theory revolves around the idea that woman is identified with, and symbolic of, “something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower existence than itself”, that “something” being “nature” (1974: 72). Man, on the other hand, is associated with “culture”, his physiology freeing him from the functions of nature, such as pregnancy, child-rearing, and menstruation. Ortner argues that, in almost every society, there comes a point in a child’s, and more specifically a boy’s life where his socialisation is transferred to the hands of men; the male being the only one who can enter him into the fully human world of culture (1974: 80). This idea is reflected in the theories of Lacan and Kristeva, with the patriarchal concept of the Name-of-the-Father allowing the child to enter the Symbolic Order.

Ortner’s theory may also be applied (again, with caution) to the original text of *Beowulf*: the patriarchal society of the Danes is depicted as culturally more sophisticated and central than what may be described as the more maternal, and arguably matriarchal world of the Grendel-kin. Hrothgar’s kingdom is associated with culture and language, as displayed through the importance placed on the *scop*. This can be contrasted with the mere, surrounded by and engulfed in nature, and inhabited by two characters who

² For a recent study which focuses on modern representations of Grendel’s mother (including Zemeckis’s), see Pilar Peña Gil’s “The Witch, the Ogress, and the Temptress: Defining Grendel’s Mother in *Beowulf* and Film Adaptations”, *SELIM* 18 (2011): 49–75.

never speak in the poem. As with the Kristevan reading of Grendel, unable to reach the Symbolic Order without a father figure, Grendel's lack of language, and his inability to enter "fully human status", can also be seen in terms of Ortner's theory. Due to the lack of a male figure to fully socialise and acculturate him, Grendel can never successfully enter the fully human world of the dominant culture.

Our lack of knowledge pertaining to the socio-cultural and psychological world of the Anglo-Saxons, especially that of Anglo-Saxon women, again makes the application of such a theory to *Beowulf* itself problematic. However, I would argue that Ortner provides a useful context for assessing gender in modern versions of *Beowulf*. Beginning with the analysis of one of the lesser known adaptations, Gareth Hinds's graphic novel *The Collected Beowulf* (2000), I will then go on to explore one of the most popular retellings, John Gardner's novel *Grendel* (1971), before concluding with one of the more complex re-tellings, Robert Zemeckis's (2007) film, *Beowulf*.

Gareth Hind's *The Collected Beowulf*, originally a set of three self-published books, dedicated to each of the three antagonists of the poem, is arguably one of the more artistically successful adaptations of the Old English poem. Significantly, its three-part structure demonstrates a sensitivity to the importance of Grendel's mother that is not evident in many of the other adaptations of *Beowulf*, and indeed in a large proportion of scholarship. Approaches which favour a two-part structure focusing on the two stages of the hero's life tend to reduce (or excise) the role of Grendel's mother. These adaptations are often directly or indirectly influenced by J.R.R. Tolkien's *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* (1936), which despite its focus on the monsters almost entirely overlooked her presence in the poem, thus "erroneously [creating] an exclusively male Anglo-Saxon world for a presumably all-male audience, then and now" (Lees, cited in Bennett 2012: 55).³ Numerous modern retellings and adaptations show equally little interest in her character, often viewing her as a mere structural device whose main function is to serve as a transition, or filler, between *Beowulf*'s battles with Grendel and with the Dragon. This approach is demonstrated in works such as Gunnarsson's (2005) *Beowulf and Grendel* and John Gardner's *Grendel* which, for a novel which focuses entirely on her son, devotes remarkably little space to Grendel's mother compared to the original poem. Hinds's choice to

³ The commentary in Tolkien's *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, published in 2014, also excludes Grendel's mother from more detailed analysis.

dedicate an entire book to her part in the story therefore emphasises her figure far more prominently than many other versions, adaptations or interpretations. In the collected version of this graphic novel, which contains all three publications in one book, the three-part structure is still evident, as each of Beowulf's encounters features a subtly different style of artwork. The Grendel section is drawn with extremely dark contrasts, and notably less refined black outlines, with blotches of ink appearing in many frames. The next section, dealing with Grendel's mother, by contrast exhibits more neutral tones, with Hinds focusing on earthy browns and reds; for this section, technical pen, watercolours and acrylics were used on wood panels (Hinds 2012a), with more attention-to-detail and fine lines than the previous section. Finally, the third section, which centres around Beowulf's fight with the dragon, shows fine detail and definite outline, while using the same ink as Grendel's section. Unlike the previous two parts of the graphic novel, the final section consists of only blacks and greys, setting the mood for the final scenes and Beowulf's death.

The section of Hinds's novel dealing with Grendel's mother is of most importance for this study. Its earthy tones serve to create a softer and perhaps less-threatening atmosphere than the darker inks used of the other two sections, especially the chaotic and blotchy ink used of Grendel's section. The tones used in Grendel's mother's cave may also be described as fleshy, the colours perhaps more suggestive of feminine imagery; indeed, the cave can be described as womblike. This apparent association between the cave and the female can be linked both to Kristeva's and Ortner's theories, the cave, evocative of the womb and therefore the repressive maternal, and the female's perceived closeness to nature. John McTiernan's *The 13th Warrior* associates the cave from which the Northmen escape through a series of constricted tunnels with the birth canal, thereby implying "a final separation from the maternal figure" (Marshall 2010: 141). Similarly, Hinds's *The Collected Beowulf* portrays (in this case a lone) Beowulf escaping and emerging from the womblike cave. Indeed, the maternal imagery here is even more suggestive than that of McTiernan's film, with the water of the cave a deep red, bloodied from the death of Grendel's mother (61–63). Beowulf's emergence from the mere, covered in red gore, therefore evokes both images of childbirth and menstruation.⁴ Beowulf appears here as a Christ-like figure: the hilt of the

⁴ The image that appears on page 45, which shows the Danes' and Geats' approach to the mere, is once again, evocative of female anatomy, and unlike in the majority of the

giant-sword which he bears is evocative of a crucifix, and is surrounded by and emitting rays of light. Beowulf's separation from the maternal here can therefore be interpreted in light of Lacan's conception of the Name-of-the-Father, an idea also present in Kristeva's theory of the Abject: the hero, freed from the mother and surrounded by the paternal imagery of God, can now enter the Symbolic Order and go on to be king.

At the centre of Hinds's text is the complex figure of Grendel's mother herself. Described by the author in a personal communication as "frog-like, but with skeletal face and hands" (Hinds 2012b), she has yellow reptilian eyes, and her large sagging breasts and lack of clothes suggest a vaguely human (and vaguely female), yet wholly uncivilised being. In Hinds's view, Grendel's mother "symbolises a twisted, repressed, vision of female sexuality [...] she is meant to be somewhat reminiscent of the Venus of Willendorf and similar figures. But with claws" (2012b). We find similar imagery in Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead*, a fabricated "found manuscript" based on the historical account of Ahmed Ibn Fadlan and his experience among the Volga Vikings, as well as its film adaptation, *The 13th Warrior*, in which Grendel's mother is symbolised by a "crude and ugly" figurine found at a raided camp with "no head, no arms, and no legs; only the torso with a greatly swollen belly and, above that, two pendulous swollen breasts" (Crichton 1977: 92). An Appendix to Crichton's novel featuring fictitious notes confirms that this stone ornament is indeed meant to be reminiscent of the Willendorf Venus or the Venus of Hohle Fels.

The inclusion of the Venus image to represent Grendel's mother in both *Eaters of the Dead* and Hinds's *The Collected Beowulf* is both complex and culturally charged. The Venus of Willendorf (c. 28,000-25,000 BCE), also known as the Woman of Willendorf, has multifaceted interpretations, from fertility icon, to symbol of wealth and security, to direct representation of a female deity or mother goddess. Probably one of the most common interpretations, and the one most relevant to these two works, is that this figure is representative of prehistoric matriarchal societies. The Willendorf Venus's now-disputed name is itself a study in male-female power relations: the term *Vénus impudique*, "immodest" or perhaps "indecent" Venus, coined by

preceding pages which take place in and are dominated by images of Heorot, here we are suddenly introduced to images of nature. Once again, this imagery of the natural words resonates with Sherry Ortner's theory of the female traditionally being seen as closer to nature.

the Marquis de Vibraye in 1864 on his discovery of another such figure (Conkey 2005: 185), was arguably intended as an ironic and derisive title, playing on the *Venus pudica*, the “modest” or “chaste” Venus, of Classical and Renaissance art (e.g. Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, c. 1484–1486). Unlike the restrained and “civilised” image of the Classical Venus, the Venus of Willendorf exhibits an unrestrained and unselfconscious sexuality associated with prehistory and the uncivilised.

Hinds’s presentation of Grendel’s mother as uncivilised and uncultured is evident in the first image we see of her (40). She appears deep below the earth in a chaotic tangle of tree roots, far beneath the civilisation of Heorot and the mapped-out sky. The named constellations are a sure sign of the civilised culture above, emblematic of the Symbolic Order. This image shows the Abject maternal as a threatening and lurking force, before it is fully expunged from society, in sharp contrast to the later image of Beowulf emerging righteous and Christ-like from the mere.

The Symbolic Order, the universal structure involving language, ideologies, law and social structure, is expressed in *The Collected Beowulf* through the mapped-out sky, the intricate artwork within Heorot, and rituals such as Wealhtheow’s passing of the cup (16). The polarity between the Symbolic Order and the Abject, or masculine and feminine power systems, is made even clearer in John Gardner’s (1971) novel *Grendel* (and its own adaptation *Grendel Grendel Grendel*, directed by Alexander Stitt in 1981). In *Grendel*, the Symbolic Order can be seen in the Danes’ politics, notably their obsession with religion and philosophy, and in the privileged position of the *scop*, referred to by Grendel as “The Shaper”. Once again, this male-centred world is clearly contrasted with the maternal mere, itself reminiscent of the womb and closely associated with nature.

Unlike most other adaptations of *Beowulf*, with the notable exception of Sturla Gunnarsson’s *Beowulf and Grendel*, in Gardner’s novel it is Grendel, rather than Beowulf (or more generally the Danish community) who attempts to separate himself from the maternal. In contrast to Beowulf, who is able to join the Symbolic Order through the Name-of-the-Father with the help of both Hygelac and later Hrothgar (both of whom may be seen as adoptive father figures), Grendel, in the absence of a father, struggles to become a separate subject from his mother and from nature.⁵ Gardner’s *Grendel* thereby

⁵ The struggle to separate from the maternal, due to the absence of a father (or father figure) is a common theme in horror texts, as can be seen in Robert Bloch’s *Psycho*

differs from *The Collected Beowulf* and *Eaters of the Dead* in its treatment of both matriarchal and patriarchal power structures. While the latter two works take a relatively straightforward stance towards the perceived power of the masculine-orientated ruling system, *Grendel* questions its validity and its superiority. This aspect of Gardner's novel may reflect increasing anxieties surrounding conflict and The Establishment in the aftermath of WWII and midway through the Vietnam War, and consequently the increasing distrust of both the government and the traditional image of the "hero".⁶ Instead, the post-WWII era gave rise to the "anti-hero", evident in other protagonists of the time, ranging from Billy Pilgrim of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969) to Randle McMurphy of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1961). These characters, along with Gardner's Grendel may be viewed as being ideologically at odds with "the System", or indeed the prevailing Symbolic Order. Perhaps unlike these other examples of post-war anti-heroes, Grendel is attempting to join the Symbolic Order (and ultimately fails), while the others appear more actively opposed to the governing systems, especially the figure of Randle McMurphy. It may be argued that Grendel's persistence in trying to access the Symbolic Order is evocative of the blindness with which some young Americans glorified war and the patriarchal system of the US. Similarly, the image of Beowulf as "insane" in Gardner's novel, almost as monstrous as Grendel himself, appears to be a comment on the American government's exploitation of soldiers during the Vietnam War through the notion of hero worship.

While the novel is on one level certainly a criticism of this patriarchal system, we are nevertheless still shown Grendel's mother and the maternal as Abject and primitive – not necessarily a desirable alternative to Hrothgar's kingdom. The mere, once again, associated with the Abject, is filled with creatures unseen to the civilised world, such as the "fire-snakes [...] grey as old ashes; faceless, eyeless" (Gardner 1971: 8), beasts which conjure up feelings of disgust, much like the defilement, sewage and much described in Kristeva's own words. The mere, whilst being reminiscent of the womb, is

(1959) and Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974). In these novels, along with their film adaptations, the mother figure is constructed as the "monstrous feminine" (Creed 2002: 72).

⁶ See Catherine A.M. Clarke's "Re-placing Masculinity: The DC Comics *Beowulf* Series and its Context, 1975–1976" in *Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination* (ed. Clark & Perkins), for a discussion on post-war masculinity in the DC comic series of *Beowulf*.

simultaneously described in natural terms, as a “shark-toothed chamber”, Grendel describing the “black tentacles of [his] mother’s cave” (8). Grendel’s mother herself is a “life-bloated, baffled, long-suffering hag” (5), and his attempt to make the thetic break, the separation from the maternal and the development of a new self, is hinted at in the language surrounding his experience with his mother. For example, Grendel’s mother tries to “clutch at [him] in her sleep as if to crush [him]” but he “break[s] away” (5);⁷ as Grendel himself states, “she stares at me as if to consume me [...] I was her creation. We were one thing [...] she would smash me to her fat, limp breast as if to make me a part of her flesh again” (9); “she reaches out as if some current is tearing us apart” (17). The repetition of such imagery seems to make clear that what Gardner is referring to here is the oneness of the mother and child and the child’s attempts to separate himself from her in order to become his own individual self.

More Kristevan imagery can be detected in Grendel’s mother’s inability to speak – “she’d forgotten all language long ago, or maybe had never known any. I’d never heard her speak to the other shapes” (17). In Kristeva’s view, language is associated with the Symbolic Order, and this is exemplified here in the *scop*’s, or “The Shaper’s”, high status in Heorot: “he reshapes the world [...] and turns dry sticks to gold” (32). Unlike the maternal, which produces merely perishable items (Ortner 1974: 75), the Shaper, and the masculine, produces items of cultural value, enduring pieces of art.⁸ The Kristevan association of language with both the Symbolic Order and culture is further

⁷ Gardner’s description of Grendel’s mother “clutching” at her son is an echo of lines 747–749; *ræhte ongean feond mid folme; he onfeng braþe inwit-þancum ond wið earm gesæt*, “the monster [Grendel] reached out towards him with his hands – he quickly grabbed him with evil intent, and sat up against his arm” (Liuzza). It may also be read as an inversion of Beowulf’s “grim grip” (line 765) on Grendel, which is the ultimate cause of Grendel’s death.

⁸ Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal piece *The Second Sex* argues that this is because the female “is more enslaved to the species than the male” (2010: 317). Because, historically, woman’s physiology means that more of her time is devoted to the natural processes surrounding reproduction, less of her time is spent in cultural production – “to give birth and to breast-feed are not activities but natural functions; they do not involve a project, which is why the woman finds no motive there to claim a higher meaning for her existence [...] Man’s case is radically different. He does not provide for the group in the way worker bees do, by a simple vital process, but rather by acts that transcend his animal condition [...] the human male shapes the face of the earth, creates new instruments, invents and forges the future” (2010: 98–99).

demonstrated through the linguistic progression of Gardner's Grendel. As he moves away from the maternal towards civilisation and culture, he uses the formats of poetry and drama to convey his story, arguably more eloquent and "cultured" forms of writing than the prose format of the novel. Furthermore, while Gardner associates the patriarchy, in particular the Danes, with civilisation, science, religion and art, his main matriarchal figure does not "think" or "ponder" or "dissect" the "dirty mechanical bits of her miserable life's curse" (5); for Gardner the matriarchy is associated with primitivism, lives by instinct and does not better itself with science. Grendel's separation from his mother has already begun at the commencement of the novel; he has already "played [his] way farther out into the world" (8), in an image reminiscent of birth, and has at this stage also encountered the dragon, the philosophy-debating creature who begins his "civilisation" as a type of father figure. Grendel's introduction to the Name-of-the-Father, the laws and conventions through which the Symbolic Order is achieved, is evident in his criticism of his mother's primitivism and animalism. He also exhibits a general disgust with nature, for instance in the first chapter, when he asks why the mating goats cannot discover a little dignity (2). Once again, these undignified goats, and the animals which "see all life without observing it", are much like his mother who fails to "dissect or ponder".

Whilst the maternal and natural is treated with disgust at the beginning of Gardner's novel, as the story progresses, and as Grendel becomes more "civilised", we gradually begin to see hints of criticism of the patriarchal society ruled over by Hrothgar. For example, as Grendel becomes more like the men in the novel, he also begins to see the absurdity of their society and its obsession with religion, philosophy and general "betterment". This appears at odds with how the Danish men actually act, especially when they are drunk and their base desires come to the fore. The third chapter, in particular, critiques this male-orientated society and its treatment of both women and nature. Hence Grendel notes that "no wolf was so vicious to other wolves" (20); the men seem to senselessly kill members of other tribes simply in order to be able to return to their camps and "tell wild tales of what happened" (12). In battle they would shout:

terrible threats [...] things about their fathers' fathers, things about justice and honour and lawful revenge – their throats swollen, their eyes rolling like a newborn colt's, sweat running down their shoulders [...] all they killed – cows, horses, men – they left to rot or burn. (23)

Throughout this third chapter the hypocrisy of patriarchal society is highlighted; the warriors' reasons for fighting ("justice") appear to act simply as cover-up for their real, base animalistic needs and their desire for bloodshed and power. We also begin to see here the Danes' lack of respect for women ("no one getting hurt except maybe some female who was asking for it", 21) and nature, exemplified in their mistreatment of their own oxen and horses, "first stripping off the saddle and bridle and the handsomely decorated harness", before killing them (25). There is the implication that nature is an object for the Danes to colonise – nature is viewed by the Danes as subordinate to their will, and as with women and animals, it is treated with little respect. Much as the matriarchal was seen as a destructive power to be reckoned with in *The Collected Beowulf*, in Gardner's *Grendel* this violent patriarchal system is now presented as a threatening and unstoppable force – "there was nothing to stop the advance of man" (26). We might compare this view of the Beowulfian patriarchy with Howard McCain's (2008) science-fiction adaptation *Outlander*, in which the suggestively-named Kainan (a stand-in for Beowulf) recalls the colonisation and destruction of the Moorwen (a species of whom the last remaining seeks revenge on Kainan, much like Grendel's mother does in seeking out the killer of her son). The moral centre of this film, however, is unclear: does Kainan regret the genocide of the Moorwen, or rather his failure to kill the last one remaining, whom we discover is responsible for the death of his family? Whilst *Outlander* never seems to take a clear stance on this moral dilemma, the novel *Grendel* clearly does in condemning the transgressions of the patriarchal societies which it depicts. The violence of this supposedly civilised and cultured order is further exemplified in the figure of Grendel himself in the novel. The more he pushes away from his mother, becoming in the process more civilised, "human" and cultured, the more monstrous and violent he becomes. Ironically, this process of Grendel's civilisation leads him to become more depraved and corrupt, and ultimately leads to his death at the hands of Beowulf, who himself is presented as a bloodthirsty figure.

The flaws of the patriarchal system are further highlighted in Gardner's novel through the figure of the dragon. In other *Beowulf* adaptations, and arguably in the original poem itself, the dragon symbolises dangers which threaten heroic society itself. In *Grendel*, however, the dragon appears to symbolise the Father, or the Symbolic Order as a whole. While in *Beowulf* itself, greed (such as that displayed by Heremod) is a negative aspect of heroic

society to be avoided by the hero, in Gardner's *Grendel* obsession with material things is presented as something inherent in and inseparable from heroic society. The dragon, who acts as a father-figure to Grendel, educating him through the Name-of-the-Father, is described as being "serpent to the core" (41), an allusion to the Fall of Man. Here, the dragon, and by extension the patriarchal system, is viewed as a malevolent and devious force. Read within a contemporary context this may reflect Gardner's sense of the US government's deceitfulness and exploitation of soldiers in sending them to war in Vietnam. The government's utilisation of the concept of heroism in order to draw in recruits for the Vietnam War can be compared with the serpent's promise to Adam and Eve that they would "be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3: 5).

Gardner's Grendel, a figure separated too late from the mother, and therefore only partly civilised, provides a painful reminder to the Danes of that which is Abject and that which has been expunged from society. Because of his protean state he remains as the deject, the agent by which confrontation with the Abject is brought about. Like Grendel's character in Sturla Gunnarsson's (2005) *Beowulf and Grendel*, he is, as it were, in a state of evolution, and because of his failure to join the Symbolic Order, he is killed. There may also be the implication here that, although Grendel has become very much like the men of Heorot, physically he remains the same, and he is therefore rejected by society; his deformation and Otherness once again inspires disgust among the Danes, reminding them of their own mortality. In *Grendel's* social context, this may well be another criticism of contemporary attitudes towards war, and the intolerance of those who appear as different or Other, a criticism of the overtly patriotic, and at times xenophobic, culture of the US in the 1960s and 1970s.

To sum up, then, Gardner's *Grendel* displays a more complex view of these traditional feminine and masculine power structures than Hinds's *The Collected Beowulf*. Although the maternal here is simple and primitive, far from the cultured world of the patriarchy of Heorot which is filled with language and art, it is also safe, relatively unburdened by the violence which characterises the world of the patriarchy. The maternal is also seen by Gardner as more wholesome and genuine, unlike the hypocritical civilisation of Heorot which, despite its interest in the arts and religion, remains fundamentally violent. In Gardner's novel, we can detect a yearning for a more primitive and simple life, one more harmonious with nature and the maternal.

Another adaptation which complicates the power structures of *Beowulf*, and the last to be explored in this article, is Robert Zemeckis's (2007) film adaptation of the same name. This retelling of the Anglo-Saxon poem is no doubt the most well-known of all cinematic adaptations. Despite its sensational, Hollywood approach to the Old English poem, it is also arguably one of the most engaged with the text itself as well as attendant literary criticism. Moreover, Zemeckis's film also deals in interesting ways with both the gendered power structures of the poem and the idea of the Abject.

David Marshall's analysis of Zemeckis's film explores the base desires which drive the patriarchal system of Heorot in opposition to the more rational and discerning matriarchal system of the mere. Far from the sombre hall we are confronted with in *The Collected Beowulf* and most other adaptations, here we are faced from the outset with a hall-culture based around crude physicality and hedonistic pleasure, preoccupied with "merriment, joy, and fornication" (*Beowulf* 2007). As Marshall argues, "the power exhibited in the warrior's display, led by Hrothgar, amounts to an unconstrained freedom to act on terms of not reason and civilisation, but base physical desire" (Marshall 2010: 141). For example, Beowulf's passionate exclamation during his fight with Grendel – "mine is strength and lust and power – I am Beowulf!" – stands in stark contrast to the more sober presentation of female characters in the film, notably Wealhtheow, who refuses to be intimate with the drunken Hrothgar, and most importantly, Grendel's mother, who consistently shows a great deal more rational thought than the men of Heorot.

As noted by Marshall, the concept of the Abject is transparent in Zemeckis's film – for example, the opening of the film depicts Beowulf exclaiming, "The sea is my mother! She will never take me back into her murky womb!", hinting at major plot developments to come. While Gardner had focused on Grendel's relationship with his mother, the 2007 *Beowulf* film once again returns to the theme of Beowulf's separation from the womb. However, the hero's separation from the maternal also appears here to reflect that of all Heorot, including Hrothgar, making this film also appear to deal with the progress of heroic civilisation as a whole.⁹ Kristevan imagery is certainly evident within Zemeckis's adaptation: the extremely patriarchal and masculine area of the hall is contrasted with the scenes of the mere; once again, the cave is shrouded in nature, surrounded by wildly-grown trees whose

⁹ It is worth noting that Beowulf's identity as a Geat is largely absent from the film, allowing Beowulf to more clearly symbolise Heorot as a whole.

growth has not been restrained. Much like in Hinds's *The Collected Beowulf*, the cave entrance appears reminiscent of the vaginal opening,¹⁰ the scattered bones outside showing its destructive and primal nature,¹¹ perhaps reflecting woman's ability to create "only perishables" (Ortner 1974: 75). The cave entrance leads into a chamber, which again, is reminiscent of female anatomy. Most importantly, however, the confrontation between Beowulf and Grendel's mother does not take place here, but rather in a skull-type area, which both reinforces the cave's structure of female anatomy, and brings to mind images of Ymir, the giant of Old Norse mythology whose body was fashioned into the earth. Primarily, however, this part of the cave, where we see Grendel's mother clearly for the first time, reinforces the idea that her character's power lies first and foremost in the mind, rather than the instinctual and irrational area of the womb, as is the case with both *The Collected Beowulf* and *Grendel*. It is at this point that we begin to see the contrast between the two power structures: the masculine which here is associated with uncontrollable base desire, and the feminine, associated with calculating, rational thought.

The 2007 film's sexualised vision of Grendel's mother is radically different to Hinds's and Gardner's adaptations, both of which present her as a primitive mother figure. Perhaps taking inspiration from Graham Baker's (1999) film *Beowulf*, in which former Playboy bunny Layla Roberts is cast as the second antagonist of the poem, in Zemeckis's *Beowulf* Grendel's mother appears as a "voluptuous, gold and buxom" (Marshall 2010: 135) woman played by Angelina Jolie. While Baker's *Beowulf* presented Grendel as the child of Grendel's mother and Hrothgar, Zemeckis's *Beowulf* takes this one step further: as well as casting Hrothgar as the unwilling father of Grendel, we also witness Beowulf's own submission to the Oedipal fantasy, following in Hrothgar's footsteps and fathering the dragon with Grendel's mother. In

¹⁰ The appearance of the cave as reminiscent of female anatomy is intentional and an exaggerated vision can be seen in its concept art in Mark Cotta Vaz and Steve Starkey's *The Art of Beowulf* (2007).

¹¹ The mother and woman has long had an association with death, as can be seen in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*: "(Mother) of God, even so is she of Men. She it is that taketh us when we are coming into the World, nourisheth us when we are new born : and once being come abroad, ever sustaineth us: and at the last, when we are rejected of all the World besides, she embraceth us: then most of all, like a kind Mother, she covereth us all over in her Bosom" (1847: 100). Similar imagery may also be seen in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "The earth, that's nature's mother, is her tomb./ What is her burying, grave that is her womb" (2.3.5–6).

addition to Heorot's drunken brawling, Beowulf's relationship with Grendel's mother appears as further evidence of the patriarchy's inability to control its own base desires, and while Marshall views the hero's actions as serving as a critique of the patriarchal structure (which ultimately fails), they may also be seen as a destructive result of a society which has not fully expunged the maternal. Hence Marshall argues that the film "tries to suggest power, coded in masculine terms, is corrupted by a misdirected will, one that loves the self unduly" (148). However, the film can also be read as displaying the inhibiting effect of the maternal on society: Heorot (epitomised by both Hrothgar and Beowulf) has not managed to fully enter the Symbolic Order due to its failure to reject the mother. The maternal is viewed as a threatening and manipulative force, with female sexuality seen as something to be feared, and as Bill Schipper notes, "nothing terrifies a male audience more than a physically and sexually powerful woman" (Schipper 2011: 425). Like the Dragon in *Grendel*, Grendel's mother here is a snake-like and manipulative force, the embodiment of temptation. Her true form, a lizard-type being evocative of Ridley Scott's aliens, furthers this sense of her serpentine nature. Her promises of glory, legacy and riches again echo the serpent's promise to Adam and Eve, while Beowulf's submission to temptation is a source of death and destruction for Heorot, much as Adam and Eve's is for the world. Through Beowulf's refusal to embrace Christianity, and through his surrendering to temptation, Heorot cannot move forward to become an ideal society. Beowulf's submission to the snake-like Grendel's mother banishes Heorot from the Eden of the Symbolic Order.

A further link between the primitive and Grendel's mother is suggested by her appearance. Although conceived in a different manner, Zemeckis's *Beowulf* shares with both *Eaters of the Dead* and *The Collected Beowulf* in reimagining Grendel's mother as an ancient matriarchal and goddess-type figure. However, as Zemeckis's adaptation is very much catering towards its main target audience – young men – the crude image of the Willendorf Venus is replaced with that of a goddess from Germanic cosmology, Gefion, a Danish form of Anglian Nerthus and Scandinavian Freyja, whom H.M. Chadwick notes are "local forms of the chthonic deity [...] whose cult was known to all Teutonic peoples" (Chadwick 1907: 263). Frank Battaglia argues that the appearance of Gefion in *Beowulf* "highlight[s] the championing of a new order antagonistic

to goddess worship [...] Grendel and his mother may stand as types of earlier, matrilineal tribes” (Battaglia 1991: 415).¹²

The depiction of Grendel’s mother as a naked, voluptuous woman is an example of what the popular-culture critic Anita Sarkeesian calls the modern trope of the “Evil Demon Seductress”:

a supernatural creature usually a demon, robot, alien, vampire most often disguised as a sexy human female. She uses her sexuality and sexual wiles to manipulate, seduce, and kill, and often eat, poor hapless men, by luring them into her evil web. (“Tropes Vs. Women #4”)

This trope can be seen in various films contemporary with Zemeckis’s *Beowulf*, such as *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (Bay 2009), where Isabel Lucas plays an alien robot disguised as an attractive college student; in *Jennifer’s Body* (Kusama 2009), in which Megan Fox plays a man-eating demon; and more recently, although to a different effect, in *Under the Skin* (Glazer 2012), where we see Scarlett Johansson portraying an alien who seduces men in order to eat them.¹³ Probably one of the closest parallels is with Louis Letterier’s

¹² Frank Battaglia, in “The Germanic Earth Goddess in *Beowulf*?”, argues that there are five “Gefion passages” in *Beowulf*, in the form of the strong neuter noun *geofon*, where it refers to the sea as well as the Goddess who has power over it. Battaglia notes that *geofon* is an Old English word for “ocean”, creating a link between her and Grendel’s mother, whose figure is overwhelmingly associated with water (in words like *brimwylf* and *merewif*). Her association with water is seemingly exaggerated in Zemeckis’s film, in her appearance to Beowulf during his fight with the sea-monsters, in her appearance to Wiglaf from the ocean, and in Beowulf’s exclamation at the beginning of the film: “The sea is my mother! She will never take me back into her murky womb!”.

The influence of Battaglia’s work appears more evident in the novelisation of the film, *Beowulf*, by Caitlín Kiernan, based on the screenplay written by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary. Grendel’s mother is said to place her son’s body on “a shrine built by men to honour a forgotten goddess of a forgotten people” (Kiernan 2007: 155), and tells of how “[l]ong before the coming of the Danes, there were men in this land who named her Hertha and Nerthus, and they worshipped her in secret groves and still lakes and secret grottoes as the Earth’s mother, as Nerpuz and sometimes as Njördr of the Ásynja, wife of Njörd and goddess of the sea” (2007: 156), Hertha, Nerpuz (Nerþuz) and Njördr, all possible forms of Nerthus.

¹³ Even more recently, we see a backlash to this trope with Alex Garland’s (2015) *Ex Machina*, where Ava (Alicia Vikander), an A.I., seduces Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson) as a means to escape her abusive creator.

(2010) remake of *Clash of the Titans*, itself influenced by the original *Beowulf* in its structure. While in Davis's original *Clash of the Titans* (1982) Medusa is characterised as a repulsive figure, Leterrier's remake chooses to sexualise her character, turning her into an attractive seductress-type figure played by Russian model Natalia Vodianova. With so many instances of the "Evil Demon Seductress" appearing in film around the 1990s and early 2000s, both Baker's and Zemeckis's films can be viewed as products of their time, in which fears of female sexuality and sexual liberation evidently still ran high. The 1990s also saw the rise of so-called "Raunch culture", or "Lad culture", a backlash against feminism which saw an increase in the objectification of women, and also encouraged women to objectify themselves and one another. As Ariel Levy argues in *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, "some version of a sexy, scantily clad temptress has been around through the ages [...] but this was once a guilty pleasure on the margins" (Levy 2006: 34). The sexually objectified woman is a common sight in the media of the late 1990s and 2000s, in music videos, magazines, film and even restaurants, such as Hooters. While this objectification was (and still is) disguised as female empowerment, these forms of media still reflect latent fears of female sexuality, when this sexuality is in the power of women.

Sarkeesian argues that the "Evil Demon Seductress" allows audiences to objectify women while also perpetrating negative stereotypes regarding female sexuality – in both Baker's and Zemeckis's interpretations, Grendel's mother is not empowered, but rather serves as a vehicle to demonise female sexuality and depict autonomous women as manipulative and untrustworthy. This trope of female characters appears to be based on a misconception regarding praying mantises' mating rituals put forward by Leland Ossian Howard in 1886, who argued that the female of the species will eat the male's head either during or after intercourse (Howard, as cited in Brown 1986: 421). The depiction of Grendel's mother in Baker's *Beowulf* certainly fits this mould, as her character indeed transforms into a praying mantis-type being in the latter half of the film. Although Grendel's mother plays a larger (and, importantly, a speaking role), and in general is presented as a more powerful and dignified creature, both Zemeckis's and Baker's films still demonise women in a way that the poem does not, and in a way that differs from other adaptations. In its depiction of her character, the Zemeckis film chooses to portray women as manipulative and controlling, using sex to fulfil ulterior motives, in this case the birth of a child, an arguably "maternal" and therefore primitive motive.

We see further images of the threatening maternal in Beowulf's encounter with Grendel's mother, and particularly in the image of the sword. This scene may be influenced by Jane Chance's article, "The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel's Mother", which explores the sexual undertones apparent in this passage, or indeed directly from the Exeter Book's Riddle 20, which describes a sword in phallic terms:

Me bið ford witod, gif ic frean hyre,
 guþe fremme, swa ic gien dyde
 minum þeodne on þonc, þæt ic þolian sceal
 beargestreona, ic wiþ bryde ne mot
 hæmed habban, ac me þæs hyhtplegan
 geno wyrneð, se mec geara on
 bende legde; forþon ic brucan sceal
 on hagatealde hæleþa gestreona.
 Oft ic wirum dol wife abelge,
 wonie hyre illan; heo me wom spreceð,
 floceð hyre folmun, firenaþ mec wordum,
 ungod gæleð. Ic ne gyme þæs compes

(It is ordained for me henceforth, if I obey my master, wage war as I have hitherto done, according to lord's pleasure, that I must forego the procreation of children. I may not have sexual intercourse with a bride; [...] Often, reckless in my wire-ornaments, I enrage a woman, diminish her desire; she speaks shame/injury to me, curses (me) with her hands, reviles me with words, screams evil. I pay no heed to battle. (trans. Tanke 2000: 410–411)

The phallic undertones in Riddle 20 are exaggerated in Zemeckis's *Beowulf*; we see Grendel's mother gently caressing Beowulf's sword, seducing him with riches and fame, and finally, when he has succumbed, she disintegrates it with her hands. This melting of Beowulf's sword is interpreted by Chris Jones as a "post-ejaculative waning of manhood", connected to line 1606 of the poem, *where þæt sweord ongan æfter beaþoswate bildegicelum, wigbil wanian*, "then the sword began, that blade, to dissolve away in battle-icicles" (Liuzza) once Beowulf has completed his visit to the mere (Jones 2010: 23). This scene, as well as evoking a "waning of manhood", also brings to mind the more threatening castration motif, prevalent in horror films such as Lichtenstein's (2007) *Teeth* and Zarchi's (1978) *I Spit on Your Grave*, both of which serve to

terrify a male audience with images of female revenge and power.¹⁴ As with these films, Zemeckis's *Beowulf* also depicts female-led sexual encounters as dangerous and as literally emasculating.

Although Marshall argues that it is the masculine rather than the feminine power structures which the film aims to criticise, the depiction of Grendel's mother suggests otherwise. As we have seen, Zemeckis's *Beowulf* emphasises the destructive power of female sexuality. Whilst Grendel's mother is viewed as more rational than other figures in the poem, she uses this to achieve natural and "primitive" goals, for the sake of having a child, with whom she will cause further destruction. As opposed to the film being a critique of patriarchal structures, it appears instead to show a society which has not fully matured, which is still controlled by the maternal.¹⁵

The repressive maternal appears quite differently in these three modern *Beowulf* adaptations: Hinds's graphic novel is the most straightforward, in which the monstrous form of Grendel's mother is clearly a primitive and negative force. Zemeckis's *Beowulf* also presents female power as destructive in its repressive hold over Heorot – while the image of Grendel's mother is modified, from the Venus of Willendorf-type figure of *The Collected Beowulf* to

¹⁴ Lichtenstein himself notes, in an interview for *Emanuel Levy*, how the castration-motif, and more specifically the vagina dentate myth, is a metaphor for male fear of women: "Most she-monsters can be seen as representations for the toothed vagina, itself already a metaphor for male fear of women. This additional remove is what I always found disturbing because it masks the original fear, assuring that it never be resolved and allowing monstrous qualities to continue to be attributed to women" (Levy 2008).

¹⁵ It is also worth noting other works by that of author Neil Gaiman, who, alongside Roger Avary, wrote the script for Zemeckis's *Beowulf*. The monstrous feminine materialises also in his novels *American Gods*, in the figure of Bilquis, who ingests her partners during intercourse, and in *Coraline* in the form of the "Other Mother", who

incarnates all that we need to set aside in order to live, but which will continue to shadow us, and which, indeed, can at times seem appealing [...] Coraline spends the rest of the book trying to re-establish a distance, to rebuild the fantasmatic screen that allows her to function in the world. (Rudd 2008: 166–167)

In other words, the "Other Mother" represents the Abject Maternal, and as with imagery found in *Beowulf* adaptations, Coraline escapes through a "hot and wet" passage back to her parents' house, which as Rudd states, is reminiscent of the birth canal.

the beautiful and seductive Angelina Jolie, the implication remains the same. John Gardner's *Grendel* is the only work of these three which criticises the Symbolic Order and the patriarchal power system. This being said, Gardner's novel does not necessarily extoll the maternal as a desirable alternative; although it is portrayed as more peaceful, it is also primitive and uninspiring.

Consideration of the influence of contemporary social contexts allows us to examine gender power relations in more detail. As Linda Hutcheon notes, "an adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context – a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum [...] Context can modify meaning, no matter where or when" (Hutcheon 2006: 142–147). By observing the employment of common tropes, such as Sarkeesian's "Evil Demon Seductress", we can situate Zemeckis's *Beowulf* within the culture of contemporary horror movies. Similarly, Gardner's novel can be seen as a manifestation of the growing concerns with the traditionally patriarchal system in the US in the 1960s and 1970s.

By drawing on the psychoanalytical and socio-cultural frameworks set forth by Julia Kristeva and Sherry Ortner we can also view these adaptations on a deeper level. As a result of viewing *Beowulf* and its adaptations through the use of these theories of Abjection and cultural binaries, we come into contact with age-old imagery and symbolism; although the application of these methodologies to ancient texts is itself problematic, it serves as a useful and legitimate tool for exploring modern adaptations themselves influenced by contemporary ideas about psychology and society. In particular, we can identify Kristeva's concept of the Maternal Abject versus the Symbolic Order, and Ortner's association of the female with nature and of the male with culture, as a common thread in these adaptations: Heorot is often seen as the cultural and civilised centre (with the exception of Zemeckis's *Beowulf*), and the cave and Grendel's mother is typically imagined as a primordial site which must be expunged in order for civilisation to continue.

Each modern *Beowulf* adaptation treats the Abject to different effect, and while the majority of these adaptations figure the maternal as a negative and repressive force, not all show the civilised patriarchy as the ideal. Ultimately, these retellings use the story of *Beowulf* as a means by which to express their own culture's social anxieties about sex and gendered power structures.¹⁶

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