The suppressed goddess of *Beowulf*
A feminist reading of Grendel’s mother as a representation of Norse goddess Gefion in a changing world order

**Author:** Lisa Persson Örtman

**Supervisor:** Anne Holm

**Examiner:** Anna Greek

**Date:** Spring 2018

**Subject:** English Literature

**Level:** G3

**Course code:** 4ENÄ2E
Abstract

The aim of this study has been to investigate in feminist terms whether or not the character Grendel’s mother symbolizes early matrilineal tribes in the form of the Norse goddess Gefion, also claimed to be the Earth goddess. The claim has been brought forward in an article by Frank Battaglia on the grounds that the chthonic deity is mentioned on several occasions in Beowulf. However, Grendel’s mother’s possible connection to the goddess has not been treated extensively in a feminist context, despite the apparent link between feminism and matrilineal tribes in a patriarchal hierarchy. The modern translations of her character as a monster stand in stark contrast to the original manuscript where she is depicted as an aglæcwif, “female warrior”. The subject has given rise to a number of feminist researches on the theme of the so called “woman-as-monster” stereotype. These argue that Grendel’s mother has fallen victim to enforced marginalization due to etymological faults as well as sexist stereotypes in Anglo-Saxon literary culture. On the background of Moi’s definition of a woman and Kristeva’s concept of the abject, results demonstrate that Grendel’s mother may very well symbolize the female Other in a new social order, embodied or represented as the Earth goddess.

Keywords

Literary criticism, Beowulf, Grendel’s mother, Gefion, Earth goddess, monsters, abjection, feminism, the definition of a woman.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family and friends for all their help and support. Though failing to help academically, they have offered the greatest amount of patience and bearance when in times of doubt and difficulties. Sandra and Mathias, I cannot believe that you still tolerate my presence! My deepest gratitudes to Niklas Salmose, Anna Greek and Anne Holm for their immense understanding and support in the various makings and remakings of this essay. Four years of registrations, withdrawals and re-registrations yet again, and never once a word of reprimand. I could not have made it without all of you and I will be grateful to you for the rest of my life.
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1 Introduction

In the original *Beowulf* manuscript, Grendel's mother is described with words such as *ides* or *aglaecwif*, meaning "lady" or "noble woman". However, in the majority of modern versions she is depicted as a monster. If described as a monster, Grendel’s mother will inevitably be judged on those grounds. Evidence however suggests that she would have carried a different meaning for the original audience. Etymologically it is argued that she was represented as a fearsome female warrior. Although for the modern reader a deeper understanding of her character is complicated as many allusions in *Beowulf* to other works and legends are lost. By studying the text carefully and with history at hand we may only assume her meaning for the original reader. Therefore, the continuous usage of the word “gefion” in the poem becomes of interest. With several possible translations the word has suffered much the same treatment as Grendel’s mother, thus the less known translation as the name of the Norse goddess Gefion has been mainly overlooked. There is a connection between the two worth investigating, not the least in the context of power struggles between different belief systems in the time period of *Beowulf*. Through a feminist interpretation, the essay seeks to liberate Grendel’s mother from an enforced marginalization and further argue for her to represent Gefion and the Earth Goddess as the abject in a patriarchal society.

The analysis is divided in two major sections, the enforced marginalization of Grendel’s mother and her connection to Gefion. As there are two interconnecting reasons for the dehumanization of her character, section one is divided in two parts. The first part of section one examines through the works of Christine Alfano and Wendy Hennequin how mainly etymological faults has resulted in an enforced marginalization of Grendel’s mother in modern translations. The translations are of an enormous importance, as linguistic bias can give rise to critical bias. The section aims to demonstrate that the character has fallen victim to what Alfano calls the woman-as-monster bias. The translations used in this essay will vary
depending on the theories presented, in order not to lose certain word choices vital to the investigation in question. On the same grounds, the original Old English (OE) text will appear next to each translation, except when deemed unnecessary.

The second part of section one focuses on the sexist stereotypes in *Beowulf* and builds upon an adaptation of Simone de Beauvoir’s definition of a woman, as interpreted by Toril Moi. In order to free Grendel’s mother from the enforced marginalization, a description of her character is vital. By applying the Beauvoirian concept of the woman as a situation, Grendel’s mother escapes the semantic imprisonment of the *Beowulf* patriarchy. The reader is thereby able to approach her without any linguistic restraints.

Grendel’s mother will furthermore be investigated from different aspects of Julia Kristeva’s theory as conducted by the works of Paul Acker and Renée Trilling. Using the concept of the abject Acker investigates Grendel’s mother as the embodiment of the Anglo-Saxon fear of the maternal. Trilling rejects the approach of the abject in favour of the idea of the semiotic chora, as she claims it to be a better description of Grendel’s mother’s undefinable character. The aim of both sections is to demonstrate how both sexist stereotypes as well as etymological faults has contributed to the enforced marginalization of Grendel’s mother.

The second section examines the connections of Grendel’s mother with Gefion as the abject in a new patrilineal system, based upon Frank Battaglia’s research. Battaglia points to several occasions where Gefion’s name is invoked, and the various similarities between the two. He further claims that the Grendelkins might symbolize early matrilineal tribes, antagonized in an increasingly patriarchal society. The passages where Gefion’s name is mentioned will be examined with a complementary description of the goddess herself as well as pre-Christian religions and rituals.

The analysis ends with a conclusion where the theories discussed will be revised and examined together as applied to Grendel’s mother.
2 Previous research

Interestingly enough, there are few noteworthy papers on the subject, despite the written connection to Gefion in *Beowulf*. Battaglia is the only one known to have analyzed the connection between the goddess and Grendel’s mother. Nevertheless, he fails to connect a possible embodiment of Gefion and early matrilineal tribes with a feminist view on Grendel’s mother, which in light of the oppressed situation of the former in the time period of *Beowulf* is worth investigating. I agree with Moi as she claims that in order to understand the meaning of femininity and what is means to be a woman, it is vital to conduct historical and theoretical investigations. Grendel’s mother is no exception, especially as there are so few surviving manuscripts from early English history.

There is however since the 1990’s an increasing number of studies with a feminist approach to Grendel’s mother. Christine Alfano took the lead in 1992 with her study “The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel’s Mother”, demonstrating that etymological faults were the main cause of the modern demonization of Grendel’s mother. Wendy Hennequin followed with “We’ve created a monster. The Strange Case of Grendel’s Mother”, where she supplements Alfano’s theory with an investigation of the sexist stereotypes of *Beowulf*. Of further interest to the feminist aspect of the essay is Renée Trilling, who takes an interesting approach in “Beyond Abjection; The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again”. Using the Kristevan theory of the semiotic chora, Trilling argues for the uncontainability of Grendel’s mother, that her existence as neither male nor female, neither monster nor human poses a threat to the very foundations of the Anglo-Saxon society.

Despite a questionable feminist view on Grendel’s mother regarding the woman-as-monster bias, Paul Acker’s work will be discussed, however briefly, as he examines in “Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*” whether Grendel’s mother could represent the Anglo-
Saxon patriarchal fear of the female avenger. Choosing another aspect of Kristeva’s theory, the notion of the abject, Acker points out;

The system of feuding has produced a monstrous, avenging mother who carries the hero to the threshold of a mystery that cannot be assimilated, that must be cast away, abjected-the very birthplace of death. (708)

However, Frank Battaglia’s “The Germanic Earth Goddess in Beowulf?” is the work most historically relevant to this essay. Battaglia argues that the translation of Gefion as the deity might have been lost in modern versions, in favour of other interpretations of the same word. Gefion through Grendel’s mother could have symbolized the early matrilineal tribes, superseded by a new hierarchy based on male gods and patrilineal kinship. Another scholar worth mentioning in the field is Gwendolyn A. Morgan. In “Mother, Monsters, Maturation: Female Evil in Beowulf”, Morgan applies a different theory on Grendel’s mother yet with a similar outcome. Battaglia focuses on the connection to a specific goddess and the change of social order whilst Morgan argues that Grendel’s Mother symbolizes a generic Earth goddess, focusing on the motherhood aspect as opposed to the patriarchy. Due to practical constraints, Morgan will only be referred to briefly in the essay.

3 Theoretical framework

3.1 Toril Moi on the Beauvoirean definition of a woman

Toril Moi interprets and draws upon the work of Simone de Beauvoir in her phenomenological definition of what makes a woman. Beauvoir developed the concept of the woman as a situation to counter previous scientistic ideologies where biology justifies social
norms. To define a woman only by her female body leads to an objectification where the concrete body in a historical, situated and material meaning is overlooked (Moi 71). Moi demonstrates that the poststructuralist concept of the sex/gender division of the 1960s and 70s also falls victim to biological determinism, as it likewise fails to see the woman as whole. Beauvoir refuses to define the qualities of a woman, as she claims that in a patriarchy it would appear negative in comparison with the male characteristics (212). The woman is seen as the Other, the particular, whereas man as the Seer is the natural, the universal, being in a “direct and normal relation to the world” (214). In this context, to claim that “I am a woman” signifies giving up the subject’s humanity, for what is human is universal and therefore male (206). Likewise, the phrase “I am a human” deprives the speaker of her subjectivity; “Surely woman is, like man, a human being, but such a declaration is abstract. The fact is that every concrete human being is always in a specific situation.” (8). The body as a situation is a structural relationship between a woman’s projects (her freedom) and the world (which includes her body), where she defines herself through the way she lives out her embodied situation (65). In other words, a woman continuously makes something out of what the world makes of her. As she carries out her projects in the world she gains something Beauvoir calls lived experience, which might be described as how she makes sense of her situation and her actions. Other situations as well as the lived experience will affect future projects and therefore also the subject’s experience of her body (66). This is a never-ending process only halted when death occurs. Beauvoir’s claim of “One is not born a woman, rather, becomes one” therefore translates as the interaction between the world and the subject, and how the becoming is shaped by this relationship (77). Herein lies the difference between animals and humans, between the scientific objective of the body and the body that by gaining lived experience in interaction gains subjectivity.
3.2 Julia Kristeva and the powers of horror

Kristeva’s notion of the abject is built within the framework of Lacan. It is a complex psychoanalytic theory treating the relation of the speaking subject with the abject, the distinction between the self and the other, the cast away. The abject comes into existence when a baby, the subject, can put itself in the context of the surrounding world. Prior to the subject’s realization of its own significance, it lives in the semiotic world, the maternal world. This state before self identification is called “the thetic phase”. In this state, the subject does not yet know language as spoken words. The process of abjection takes place when the subject comes to an understanding of the spoken language, which signifies the entrance into the symbolic paternal world. Kristeva calls this the law of the father, where the subject separates from the mother and discovers that the world is not an extension of itself. It is the distinction of the self and the other, the paternal and the maternal, and the rejection of everything associated with the mother. Thus, the abjection is associated with the break with the semiotic phase, the severing of all bonds with the maternal. In contrast to Lacan and Freud, Kristeva argues that the abject is not subsequently repressed into the unconscious, but instead exists on the verge of the conscious, as a constant threat. “It confronts us ... with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal. Hence, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.” There is thus an imaginary albeit distinct boundary between the subject and the abject. Kristeva exemplifies the encounter with a corpse as when that boundary is breached and fear ensues. “These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death...If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.” (3). The corpse breaches the border between the Other and the subject, as the subject realizes its own finality. The abject is hence part of
ourselves, the part we wish to cast away but that we are unable to part with. For the adult subject, the maternal incites fear, as it signifies everything the symbolic order is not, the improper, the unclean. It signifies the state before there was an “I”, a state of disorder.

3.3 Renée Trilling and the uncontainability of Grendel’s mother

Both as a monster and as a woman, Grendel’s mother crosses the boundaries for what is definable. Her character defies every attempt to be pinned down into a recognizable and accessible state. As an active female avenger, undefinable even in the state of the outsider, in a patriarchy ruled by heroic values, it appears as though she would have little room for agency. However, Renée Trilling claims that this very fact is precisely what makes it possible for Grendel’s mother to remain an active body (4).

Few studies have been made of the female antagonist, and in the majority of the material available she has been dismissed and overlooked. Trilling on the other hand argues that Grendel’s mother is at the very centre of the poem, structurally as well as narratively (1). Her character holds a central position as Trilling argues that she poses the greatest threat against Beowulf, as her actions disrupt society itself (14). The heroic society in which Beowulf is set is founded upon a very strict delimitation: where culture ends, bestiality begins. It is a strictly ordered system that builds upon binary pairs; monster/human, woman/man, hall/wilderness, feud/peace. Grendel’s mother threatens the very foundations of the structure, as she continuously crosses these boundaries. Her female agency is viewed as so terrifying that the language of the poem itself tries to cover it up. When about to engage in combat, the female pronoun “she” is turned into the masculine pronoun “he”. Trilling examines whether Kristeva’s theory of the abject could be applicable to the character, as Beowulf is dominated by the symbolic and masculine world order. However, Trilling claims that abjection fails to describe Grendel’s mother since that which is abject stems from society itself: “Beowulf works hard - perhaps overly hard - to establish the Grendelkin’s origins outside of heroic
culture” (4). Instead, Trilling connects Grendel’s mother to Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic chora. The chora is an everchanging state, as opposed to the static position of the abject. Trilling argues that the fact that Grendel’s mother cannot be pinned down into a defineable state, that she continuously breaks the binary pairs upon which the abject is founded, is precisely the argument for her as a representation of the semiotic chora (20).

4 Analysis

4.1 Enforced marginalization due to etymology

An important start in approaching Grendel’s mother as a symbol for the Norse earth goddess Gefion is to look beyond the enforced marginalization of the woman-as-monster stereotype. In the original manuscript, she is described as a fierce warrior, a female avenger. Nonetheless, in the majority of the modern material written on Beowulf, she is seen as a monster. According to some critics, like Alfano and Hennequin, the discrepancy is due to sexist expectations not fulfilled.

First of all, it is vital to investigate why Grendel’s mother is perceived as an evil beast. According to Hennequin, a great deal of the fault as to why Grendel’s mother has received such a treatment is due to dictionaries and glossaries (518). Much of the material written on Beowulf approaches Grendel’s mother through glossaries or dictionaries that sometimes are incorrect in their usage of a word. For an example, the much spread translation of the word “merewif” in An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary is described as “A waterwitch, woman living in a lake”. Translated back to Old English, “woman living in a lake” is “merewif”, literally “sea-woman” (518). No connection to witch or magic can thus be seen in the compound when reversed. Furthermore, glossaries such as the above mentioned or Klaeber’s edition unintentionally contribute to the enforced marginalization of Grendel’s mother, as various meanings of a word leave room for interpretation. An example by Alfano demonstrates this
lexicographic dilemma in five translations of the phrase introducing Grendel’s mother in *Beowulf*:

Grendles Modor,

ides, aglæcwif, yrmþe gemunde (lines 1258-1259)

1. Grendel’s mother, a monster-woman, kept war-grief deep in her mind
2. Grendel’s mother herself, a monstrous ogress was ailing for her loss
3. Grendel’s dam, a monstrous woman, knew misery
4. The demon’s mother, a witch of the sea, resenting her sorrow
5. Grendel’s mother, woman, monster-wife, was mindful of her misery

(2)

The reader’s first interaction with Grendel’s mother is thus with a prejudiced constructed image of what Alfano calls the “woman-as-monster” motif. All five translations focus on a non-human appearance of the character. However, this monstrous interpretation is unjustified as the usage of both *ides* and the compound *aglæcwif* are incorrect. The introductory word *ides* lacks a modern equivalent and is translated in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* simply as “a woman”. It is otherwise applied, in a positive context, to the three queens of *Beowulf*, Wealthow, Hildeburgh and Modtryth (620b; 1075b; 1117b; 1168b; 1649b; 1941a) (Hennequin 516). Hence, both Hennequin and Alfano claim *ides* should be translated as “noble lady”. Similar to *ides*, *aglæcwif* lacks a modern correspondent. Demonstrated by the research of Melinda J. Mentzer, *wif* is shown to signify a woman and emphasized when used in a compound (Hennequin 518). The root *aglæc* or *aglac* on the other hand includes various translations, from hero and warrior to monster, depending on the context. It appears 34 times in Old English poetry, of which 19 in *Beowulf* (Alfano 5). Applied to Beowulf and Sigemund
in the poem it translates as warrior or hero, whereas Grendel’s mother falls victim to the “woman-as-monster” bias in the majority of the translations. In 1979, scholars Sherman Kuhn and E.G. Stanley found the common denominator of aglæc and further derivations to be combat or attack, therefore questioning the pejorative appellation of Grendel’s mother (Ganguly). After further critical attention from several scholars the Dictionary of Old English redefined aglaecwif as “fearsome woman” or “female warrior” in 1994. Despite this, scholars seeking a translation for a certain term can be met with various, not always correct alternatives, hence running the risk of interpretive and subjective translations.

4.2 Enforced marginalization due to sexist stereotypes

The second aspect considering Grendel’s mother’s alleged monstrosity is the thwarting of sexist stereotypes. Described as an aglaecwif in the original manuscript, her character stands in stark contrast to the typical peaceweaver stereotype of the poem. However disputed the humanity of Grendel’s mother might be, there is no doubt that her son Grendel is a monster as the poem describes him as one. He is said to be Godes andsaca, “God’s enemy”, feond on helle, “enemy from hell”, and fag wid God, “hostile towards God” among other things (Hennequin 513). Grendel is claimed to be the descendant of Cain, not his mother. When decapitated in the grand hall underwater, his tainted blood, not hers, stirs the water and melts the giant sword (514).

If Grendel is indeed a monster in the original manuscript as well as in later versions, then what is Grendel’s mother if not the beast portrayed in modern translations? A definition of her character is problematic against the background of the heroic and male-dominated society of Heorot, as it would appear negative due to her status as the female Other (Moi 212). Instead it would be more appropriate to investigate a definition of her single most important characteristic: her identity as a woman. As demonstrated above, etymologically the original manuscript is shown to portray a woman, however different from the Anglo-Saxon female
stereotype. It describes Grendel’s mother to be **micle**, “large”, and possessing the “likeness of a lady”, **ides onlicnes**. She is a ruler of her own realm, as well as a warrior and an avenger, all of which occupations traditionally held by men in the heroic society. She defends her kingdom and fights the blood feud by her own hand; taking on actions performed by kings, not queens (Hennequin 510). Her strength equals or even surpasses Beowulf’s, she can survive underwater for a long period of time and has the ability to command serpents or sea creatures. However, if these are criteria for monstrosity, Beowulf would be categorized one as well (513). Modern readers nonetheless come to know of Beowulf’s superhuman abilities as heroic traits, and Grendel’s mother’s as monstrous. Yet she is not condemned by either the poem itself nor by its characters (513). Instead she is defined by words such as **ides** or **aglaecwif**, words emphasizing a woman. Judging by the original manuscript, it would be just to assume that the enforced marginalization of Grendel’s mother is caused by a modern incorrect definition of what makes a woman. She falls victim to the woman-as-monster bias as her character does not conform to the Beowulfian female stereotype. However, one does not have to adapt either to any sexist stereotype nor any other expectations there might be in order to be called a woman according to Beauvoir (Moi p. 77). Her definition of the woman as a situation allows for Grendel’s mother to be both a woman and an active agent in a patriarchy where the peacemaker stereotype is predominant. “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes, a woman” (77) might in Grendel’s mother’s case might have signified the result of the encounter and rejection of the dominant sexist norms of Heorot. The becoming of the other women of **Beowulf** is affected by the very same norms, however here they are internalized. The notion of the becoming is similar to Kristeva’s theory of the chora, defying a clear categorization as both are continuously in the process of change. However, the chora that in Trilling’s adaption signifies the inaccessibility of Grendel’s mother becomes in the light of Beauvoir’s definition the plain fact of being a woman. Grendel’s mother might be the sort of woman that Beauvoir writes about when arguing that a “greater freedom will produce
new ways of being a woman, new ways of experiencing the possibilities of a woman’s body” (66). She carries out this “greater freedom” in her projects as a queen and a female avenger. In Beauvoir’s definition Grendel’s mother’s actions prove her a woman as well as human.

The female Other of Beauvoir’s theory resonates with Kristeva’s notion of the abject, as both suggest, in different terms, woman as perceived by man. Both come into existence when the subject realizes that the world is not an extension of his/her own being. However, the difference between the two is the static position of the abject. The abject is always the maternal, while the position of the Other depends on who the Seer is. Focusing on the woman as the Other, Paul Acker examines Grendel’s mother as the Kristevan abject, the outcast that the patriarchal Anglo-Saxon society expels in order to maintain a clear border between civilization and the primitive (708). The theory is especially applicable to Grendel’s mother as the abject is naturally linked to the maternal. “The abject confronts us ... with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal identity even before existing outside of her…It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling.” (qtd. in Acker 703). Birth and death are here seen as closely connected. What is given can just as soon be taken again, a theory developed by Morgan as she claims the first episode where Beowulf combats the sea creatures to portray a violent birth and separation from the Earth goddess (56).

Instead applying the Kristevan notion of the semiotic on Grendel’s mother, Trilling’s theory mainly agrees with Acker’s on the position of the character in patriarchal heroic society. The female agency and the undefinability of Grendel’s mother accounts for her powers of horror (20). Trilling claims the poem itself attempts to cover up her agency by portraying her less fearsome than Grendel for being a woman; “…the war-terror of a woman, is less than that of a weaponed man’s…” “…wiggryre wifes be waepnedmen…” (10). The word *waepen* can also refer to a phallus, and may be interpreted as an emphasis of a lesser
terror of the character as she lacks a penis (Acker 705). However, Grendel’s mother is met with immediate retaliation with an entire battle-clad army, in opposition to her son who is allowed to roam free for 12 years. The great masculine display of donning Beowulf’s armour tells of a mad scrambling to cover up the tear that the female outsider has caused in the heroic patriarchal universe;

“Beowulf got ready, donned his war-gear, indifferent to death;......To guard his head he had a glittering helmet that was due to be muddied on the mere-bottom and blurred in the upswirl. It was of beaten gold, princely headgear hooped and hasped by a weapon-smith who had worked wonders in days gone by and embellished it with boar-shapes; since then it had resisted every sword.” (Trilling 13)

The donning of Beowulf’s armour serves as a symbolic act, as the masculine worn and old battle-gear is used to counterattack the female threat (14). The boars on the helmet stand as a symbol for the protection of the god Frey, possibly Freya (Branston 146). Together with the hurried call for arms and the pursuing army this demonstrates that Beowulf as all of Heorot is far more troubled facing Grendel’s mother rather her son. When defeating her, Beowulf does not bring her head as customary in the heroic order. Instead, he decapitates Grendel’s corpse to display in Heorot as a symbol of victory. Trilling suggests that the refrain from the traditional victorious account of the battle and the choice of Grendel’s head as trophy might indicate an unwillingness to acknowledge such an ambiguous character as Grendel’s mother (19).

Trilling claims that the most compelling proof of her powers of horror is the treatment Grendel’s mother receives linguistically (14). As a female ruler, avenger and warrior, her actions threaten the whole Anglo-Saxon society. In an effort to diminish her female agency,
the language of Beowulf alters her sex on a number of occasions. When about to launch an attack on Heorot, she is first presented as “Grendles modor”, “Grendel’s mother”, to be masculinized only two lines later as “se þe wæregeasan wunian scolde” [he who had to dwell in the terrible waters]. Likewise, when Beowulf is about to pursue her the pronoun is yet again changed; “… no he on helm losaþ / ne on foldan ðæþm / ne on fyrgeholt / ne on gyfenes grund / ga þær he wille!” [“... he will not escape to his refuge, nor to the protection of the field, nor to the mountain wood, nor to the bottom of the ocean, go where he will!”] (Trilling 14). She is called a magan, “kinsman”, by Beowulf, an epithet only applied to men performing the act of revenge. Wrecend, “male avenger” yet another masculine word identifies her as male instead of a female (Hennequin 511). The common factor for all instances where the sex of Grendel’s mother is altered is her female agency (Trilling 15). When Hildeburh mourns her murdered sons, forced to plead to male relatives for avenge, Grendel’s mother takes action herself. Not a traditional peaceweaver, she thwarts the sexist stereotype, turning her highly uncomfortable even for the poem itself. However, the referral of both narrator and other characters to her agency as male indicates that Beowulf and his retainers pursue a man, not a woman. As Trilling argues, “it has, on the literal level, become male, because an active body in this cultural economy is, by definition, a masculine one”. (15)

4.3 The presence of Gefion in Beowulf

Having established the monster image of Grendel’s mother as a product of the patriarchal order, it is time to investigate the motive of such a portrayal and the possible connection therein to Gefion. As the Germanic goddess is mentioned five times in Beowulf, Battaglia claims the possibility of Grendel’s mother as either a representation of her or a guardian of her realm (415). The instances where Gefion’s name is used possibly indicates a shift in the belief systems of the era and an antagonizing of the old order in favour of a new one. Peaceful egalitarian and matriarchal communities based on agriculture were superseded
by a hierarchical class-based system with warlords and kings. New religions based on male
gods discarded and demonized the old ones (Näsström). It is possible that Grendel’s mother
might embody the old matriarchal tribes, whose enemy Beowulf stand as a representation for
the new, patriarchal society.

Battaglia claims that the Grendelkin may in fact be a representation of the matrilineal
tribes (426). The patriarchal fear of the active female has been discussed above mostly in the
theories by Acker and Trilling who, however different in their conclusions, draw upon the
same source. Grendel’s mother acts upon her identity as a mother and thereby differs from
other peacekeeping Anglo-Saxon mothers of the poem, evoking a fear through her very being.
Morgan argues motherhood to be Grendel’s mother’s most prominent trait, claiming the
representation of Grendel’s mother as the Earth Mother, the Great Mother as opposed to the
Sky Father (55). This is of interest to a study on Gefion since Chadwick found the Anglian
Nerthus, the Scandinavian Freya and the Danish Gefion to be local varieties of the same
female deity, namely Mother Earth (256, 263, 289). Branston supports this theory by claiming
that Nerthus was changed into the male Njord, as she was seen as a threat by the patriarchal
society (135). Her son was made into Frey, and Mother Earth herself reappeared in the form
of Freya. A closer examination of the passages where Gefion is mentioned and the connection
to Grendel’s mother will be conducted below, however a short introduction to the goddess is
in order.

Gefion is claimed to be the creator of Zealand and the whole kingdom of Denmark. As
Odin resided on the island of Fyn, he sent the goddess Gefion away up north in order to
search for new land. She met king Gylfe, who promised her that she would obtain as much
land as she could plow in one day (Näsström). Gefion thereafter bore four sons with a giant,
who she transformed into oxen. With the help of a plow she created the land called Zealand.
Zealand also happened to be the home of a cult that worshipped Terra Mater under the name
of Nerthus (Battaglia 415).
Nerthus may allude to the Irish word for strength, *nerth* and according to Turville-Petre might represent the fertility and strength of the earth (171). Etymologically it corresponds exactly to Njord. Descending from the Neolithic period, rituals were still practised within the time frame of *Beowulf* (Battaglia 422). Frey and Freya on the other hand are not names in the traditional order, but titles, meaning “Lord” and “Lady”. Snorri tells in the *Edda* of Freya as having many different names, as she traveled the world in search of her husband in disguise. One of those names is Gefn, which is related to the word *gefa*, “to give”. Another is Gefjun, which derived from the same verb might signify the fertility and riches of the goddess. Snorri thus declares that Gefion and Freya are one and the same (although the matter has been disputed since both Gefion and other goddesses mentioned are found to be independent hypostases of Freya in Scandinavian mythology) (Turville-Petre 178). However, Branston in like manner as Chadwick argues that all goddesses are upon closer inspection different attributes or ideas of the same, the Earth Mother (127).

The first occasion where Gefion is mentioned in *Beowulf* is at the very beginning of the poem, and treats the background of *Beowulf* and Scyld’s funeral (all further OE citations are derived from Klaeber as quoted in Battaglia);

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þā gēt hīe him āsetton} & \quad \text{segen gyldenne} \\
\text{hēah ofer hēafod,} & \quad \text{lēton holm beran,} \\
\text{Gēafon on gārsecg;} & \quad \text{him wæs geōmor sefa} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Then they set for him a golden banner high overhead, let water bear him, Gefion, on the waves; the heart was sad for them

(Battaglia 417)
The word *Geofon* means ocean and is a kenning of the goddess Gefion, referring to the power to divide land and sea. The word could also be translated as “to give” or capitalized as Gefion’s proper name. Battaglia chooses to apply her proper name since Scyld was Gefion’s husband in Old Norse mythology. According to the *Edda*, Gefion first lived alone in Zealand, then she lived together with Scyld in Leire, believed to be the place of Heorot. Both Scyld and Heorot symbolize change as we will see below.

Scyld was the eponymous father of the great line of kings in Denmark, the Scyldings. In the passage of Scyld’s funeral, it is told that it was conducted by his warband according to Scyld’s wishes, making Gefion passive and the Scyldings active agents (418). Even though Scyld’s body is placed in a boat, Gefion as the sea goddess is denied an active part.

Evidence of matrilineal and egalitarian tribes has been found in Denmark where a female goddess, believed to be Nerthus, played a primary role (419). One study showed that grave urns from Bad Segeberg dating from between 500 and 50 B.C. showed traces of household use (422). No distinctions could be made between men and women and no signs of stratification or weapons could be found. Among the tribes venerating Gefion/Nerthus, women held prominent positions and matrilineal kinship was applied up until the middle of the iron age (Chadwick 340). This included the inauguration of so called fertility kings, a tradition believed to have been practised before the fifth century in Scandinavia (Battaglia 418). Hrothgar assumed to be one of them, called *frea Ingwine*, their claim to regality consisted on being the mate of the goddess, the chosen one. Battaglia proposes that line 15 could portray the remaining portion of the matrilineal and egalitarian system in a growing patriarchal society (422).

The Scyldings translates as “sons of the shield”, a name signifying the importance of warfare for the new order. In the time of *Beowulf*, there would have been several Scylding warlords with permanent retinues residing contemporaneously with tribes of the old order in Denmark. One of those camps could have been Leire, home to Scyld and Gefion and believed
to be Heorot (Chambers qtd. in Battaglia 424). The “heart hall” of the Scyldings may symbolize the new social stratification following the patrilineal society. By describing Heorot as “the greatest of hall buildings”, “the Beowulf poet claims central power for its king in a hierarchical social order” (Battaglia 424).

Scyld is described in the Ynglinga Saga as a “son of Othin”, indicating that besides male kinship and a class-based society, Heorot also may have symbolized a new worship of male gods. The latin chronicler Thietmar described a ninth-yearly sacrifice which included both animals and men as a ritual performed at Leire, and which Chadwick found to be a tradition of the cult of Othin (qtd. in Battaglia 424). Further strengthening the theory, an account of the Scyldinga king Healfdane claims he held midwinter blots where human sacrifices were made (Snorri and Saxo as qtd. in Battaglia 424). The ritual was only performed at courts, which further strengthened the social stratification.

However, the most significant social change that took place was the shift from female to male prominence, from matrilineal kinship to patrilineal. Battaglia emphasizes the very first utterance by Beowulf, where he presents himself to the shoreguard, as predicting the theme of the whole epic; “Wē synt gumcynnes Gēata lēode ond Higelāces heorōgenēatas”, “we are of male kin, people of the Geats and Higelac’s hearth companions” (426). Along with the words cyning and Ætheling (patronyms signifying the glory and courage of rulers in patrilineal kinship systems) in lines 2 and 3 the passage strongly indicates the supremeness of male heredity (425). Further emphasizing this fact, Beowulf finishes his greeting by identifying himself as “the son of Ecgtheow”. The Grendelkin on the other hand does not include a male dominant character and are shunned from society and doomed to dwell in “terrible water” ever since Cain killed Abel (430). Grendel specifically is said to have been driven mancynne fram, “from man kin”, which Battaglia specifies as “male kin”, and described as being an enemy of the same.
When Grendel was made an outcast, it was said that “every misbegotten thing awoke”, taken to mean giants, elves and other such creatures. Especially the first two are seen as having a strong connection to large stones in Scandinavian mythology, and from there it can be deduced that the belief around these creatures originates from the Neolithic period (425). As this period saw the predominance of the matrilineal tribes, it might be that the original audience saw the giants, elves and other as representing them alongside the Grendelkin (426). Battaglia suggests that the Christian pretext of Cain killing Abel may have replaced an earlier theme where they represented a matrilineal tribe superseded by the male dominated hierarchy now residing at Heorot.

The second section where Gefion is mentioned takes place where Beowulf and his retinue are welcomed to Heorot. Wulfgar asks for an audience for the Geats with Hrothgar by way of further introducing themselves;

Hēr syndon geferede,  feorran cumene
ofer Geofenes begang  Gēata lēode.

Here have arrived,      come far
over Gefion’s realm,    people of the Geats.

(Battaglia 426)

In the light of the patrilineal kinship Scyld’s death implied, this extract may be interpreted as a perilous travel over enemy land. The new order of male inheritance signified a break with the earlier tribes (425). According to the vernacular record, the Geats were the first people in the North to worship Othin, the war god of the religion following the paradigm shift (429). The name Geat is the exact duplicate of Gautr, one of Othin’s names in Old Norse. He was
also called Gautatýr, the “God of the Geats”. This passage might have symbolized the antagonism between the two opposite systems by alluding to the dangers of the ocean.

The same interpretation could also be applied to the third instance where Gefion’s name is invoked. Unferth recounts the swimming match between the young Beowulf and Breca invoking the fertility goddess’ name. "Geofon ðæm wēol”, “Gefion welled up in waves”, where the two were separated by the agitated ocean, and Beowulf was attacked by sea monsters. The Geatish hero was dragged to the bottom, overcame the attackers but was yet again dragged down. He defeats them and thereafter boasts that he “had more sea strength than any other man” as he tamed both ocean and sea monsters. (428). However, the two swimmers carried unsheathed swords, that Beowulf claimed were brought in order for protection from whales. Battaglia however argues that there might be a hidden cause behind this explanation (427). As Gefion ruled the ocean wherein Breca and Beowulf swam, the episode might have mirrored a past Scandinavia where the patrilineal dominion had not yet reached all areas and the conflict was ongoing. Thus the swords demonstrate the need to manifest patriarchal attributes (428).

Further boasting of his abilities, the next instance the name of Gefion is invoked is in an assertion of Beowulf, after Grendel’s mother’s attack on Heorot. Following the theme of patrilineal kinship as predominant, the episode begins with a list of charges against the Grendelkins. They are both accused of descending from a line of fæderenmæge “father-kin” murderers, seemingly making the crime worse for being on the father’s side. Furthermore the lack of any father to Grendel is seen as an offense, and he is yet again called an enemy of male kin. Battaglia argues that if the Grendelkin represent the matrilineal tribes, the list of accusations is in fact crimes committed against the patrilineal dominion (430). Hrothgar continues to describe their lair, protected by the trees and surrounding landscape and claims that “no children of men” has seen the “ground” of the lake (Beowulf 45). Referring to the binary opposition of patrilineal-matrilineal kinship; Heorot symbolizes the hierarchical
society whereas the lake represents the uncivilized realm of the old order. Another observation describes the water as disappearing underneath the ground. The references to the ground both of the lake and earlier of the ocean to where the sea creatures dragged Beowulf can be seen as an allusion to the female deity (Battaglia 431). Battaglia argues that although connected to water, Gefion remains first and foremost a chthonic goddess (432). Water disappearing underneath the earth might signify the supremacy of earth power over water power. Beowulf answers by boasting that not even an eerie landscape like this might protect the perpetrator (hereby referring to Grendel’s mother by a male pronoun, see Trilling above);

Ic hit þē gehāte: nō hē on helm losāþ,  
nē on foldan fāeþm, nē on fyrgenholt,  
nē on Gyfenes grund, gā þær hē wille

I promise it to you: he will not escape into refuge.  
Neither in the embrace of the earth, nor in the mountain wood,  
Not (even) in the ground of Gefion, go where he will.  
(Battaglia 432)

Here is another aspect of Grendel’s mother as a possible guardian of Gefion’s realm. We have seen her mentioned before as grundhyrde, “ground-keeper” and Battaglia claims this a possible connection to the female dísir in Old Norse mythology (433). It has been found that O.N. dísir and O.E. ides might signify the same female guardian (433). This is of interest since Grendel’s mother is called an ides twice in the poem. The dísir were simultaneously guardian angels as well as bringers of death (433). Their feared ability as highly skilled warriors might be embodied in Grendel’s mother, along with other aspects of feminine power. They are believed to stem from the Neolithic period, the same age that Gefion is strongly
linked to (434). A *dis*, believed to be an ancestor, is thought to have functioned as a female
guardian for a family with matrilineal kinship (435). Battaglia suggests that the whole concept
of the *disir* might derive from a veneration of dead forebears combined with the funerary
customs of the Neolithic (434). Megaliths carried a great deal of importance in this era, and
place names indicates that the *disir* might have been represented by a large stone at a
communal burial ground. In Northern Germany some of these are indeed called “guardians”
(434). The presence of such a stone, a *bjarg*, in the Icelandic saga of Orm, one of the two
Germanic tales very similar to *Beowulf*, is seen as a very strong connection between Grendel’s
mother and the Neolithic (436). The hero Orm fights to the death against a female monster
and her son in a cave blocked by a megalith. Another link between the *disir* and Grendel’s
mother lies in the symbolic importance of snakes in the epic. The *disir* used poisonous snakes
to kill Ragnar Loðbrók in *Krakumāl* for an example, whereas Grendel’s mother’s mere
contained a great number of snakes as well as the sword on the wall with engravings of said
animal.

The fifth and last instance where the name of Gefion is invoked is believed to be an
aim to cause a crisis of faith in the fertility goddess, portraying her as the originator of strife
(437). The description Tacitus wrote of the peaceful Nerthus stands in stark contrast to what
*Beowulf* claims of her otherwise treacherous action;

```
Hrōðgar mađelode - hylt scēawode,
ealde lāfe, on ðæm wæs ūr writen
fyrngewinnes, syðfan flōd ofslōh,
Gifen gēotende gīgante cyn;
frēene gefērdon; þaet wæs fremde þēod
ēcean Dryhtne; him þæs endelēan
þurh wæteres wylm Waldend sealde
```
Hrothgar spoke - looked at the hilt
old remnant, on which was the beginning written
of ancient strife, when a flood slew
Gefion gushing, the race of giants;
they suffered terribly; that was a people foreign
to the eternal Leader; to them for that a final payment
through water's whelm, the Wielder gave.

(Battaglia 437)

The passage thus argues that Gefion was responsible for the massacre of the giants. Instead of a referral to the Christian theme of Noah, Battaglia suggests that the episode should be considered in the light of the connection between the female deity and the giants (438).

The tradition of giants have a long history in Scandinavian mythology, and especially the females carried a special significance (439). Freya, as the exception, was the object of desire of many giants, whilst her brother Frey had sexual intercourse with the giantess Gerd. After the gender conversion of Nerthus, her male counterpart Njord married a giantess called Skadi (438). One tale in the history of Norway recounts Thor fighting to cleanse the country from a tribe of female giants (439). The giantesses were also accused of having caused the flooding of the river dividing the world of men and the world of giants through their urine or menstrual blood. Last should be considered the tale in the Ynglingasaga of Gefion who bore four sons to a giant (438). Another important link between the chthonic goddess and the giants is the large stones dating from the Neolithic age from which both originate. The names of the many large Neolithic passage graves found in Denmark and Northern Germany bear evidence of the antiquity of the tradition of giants (438). Going by the name of jættestuer,
“giants tombs” in the former and “giants’ beds” in the latter are probably caused by their immense size.

Judging by their close connection and the allusion of betrayal in the poem, the giants were probably seen as allies or followers of Gefion by the contemporary reader. The aim of the accusal might be to create doubt with those readers still believing in the female goddess. According to Battaglia, this may refer to an account of treachery on the goddess’ behalf amongst a people in the North called the Chauci (439). An egalitarian society based on matrilineal kinship, they venerated the fertility goddess. However, due to climatic changes lasting from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D., the sea level rose and the tribes had to abandon their old ways as farmland as well as drinking water was affected. This resulted in a loss of faith in the fertility goddess and a change to a hierarchical society amongst the Chauci in the second century A.D.

5 Conclusion

The character of Grendel’s mother has and will continue to be an object of discussion inciting as many reactions as there are readers. Awe, shock, terror, admiration, each reader has come to know her differently throughout the years. The fact that Beowulf is pulled out of its context with an anonymous writer arises the question of which reading is the right one. Is there even a right one? One might argue that the beauty of the poem is precisely the lack of knowledge around its origins, allowing each reader to find his/her own values and meaning clad in one of the various themes and characters. The fascination and many works around the composition might not have existed were it not for the many questions unanswered. We do not know what motif lies behind the creation of Grendel’s mother other than what the poem reveals. On these grounds it is problematic, yet intriguing, to conduct an investigation on any of the characters. The conclusion depends on which understanding one chooses to be the valid
one. Is it the author’s intention, or the reader’s interpretation? The scholars who examine Grendel’s mother according to different theories are yet other readers with interpretations, as I myself am as the writer of the current essay. The important thing to remember is on what theoretical grounds an interpretation is made. By choosing theories such as the abject and the chora to apply on Grendel’s mother, Trilling, Acker and also Battaglia inexorably fall victim to a suggestion of the author’s own aim of the poem as a glorifying ode to the heroic order. This comes as a result by the fact that these theories are conceptualized within patriarchal standards and thus becomes trapped by it, as opposed to Beauvoir’s concept of the woman as a situation. To define Grendel’s mother as a situation removes her from the confinement of the enforced marginalization at the same time that it avoids the dilemma of an interpretation/intention. The concept of the Other differs from the theory of the abject, as the latter is static in its position of the maternal as submissive to the paternal, whereas the former is mobile as it depends on the identity of the Seer. Thus, in Beauvoirean terms Grendel’s mother can be both an antagonist as a hero, depending on what values and norms the reader possess. However, Moi and Beauvoir has yet to be extensively discussed in relation to Grendel’s mother, as the alteration of Grendel’s mother’s sex in relation to the definition of a woman.

The two scholars succeeding both in reading *Beowulf* objectively and liberate Grendel’s mother from her enforced marginalization is Alfano and Hennequin. By studying the linguistics of the original manuscript, their results show clearly that her character is in fact a woman who is misinterpreted in modern translations, giving rise to the woman-as-monster bias. Named only Grendel’s mother, emphasis lies on her status as a mother, the very embodiment of a female, which despite her anti-stereotypical appearance unites her with the other women in the poem. Applying the theory of the female Other on Alfano and Hennequin’s linguistic findings, we find that not only Grendel’s mother but in fact all women are victims of the patriarchal system, united by maternity. As Trilling noted, the other females
are merely passive agents, which might signify that they have no real existence in the Anglo-Saxon world, they are mere objects. Indeed Hildeburh, Modtryth and Wealtheow, not Grendel’s mother, are more similar to animals as they are imprisoned in their childbearing capacities and offered as peace treaties among countries. Their lived experience and situations are hindered by the patriarchy that shapes them and they are denied the possibility of defining themselves. Grendel’s mother has escaped this shaping of the heroic order as she, of what we can tell of the poem, has had sparse contact with the civilization of Heorot. I would claim that it is precisely this absence, the lack of the patriarchic set of norms, demands and values, which allows Grendel’s mother the freedom to experience what Beauvoir calls the “new ways of being a woman”. The other women might be objects in the patriarchal society whilst Grendel’s mother symbolizes the abject, as not a real person but an idea, a concept. This portrayal might be the result from the Anglo-Saxon cultural anguish as Acker noted, the fear for the maternal and by proxy the abject. However, the theory he presents might in fact further support the current study’s main argument, as Grendel’s mother as the embodiment of Gefion has been shown to portray a patriarchal suppression of the earlier matrilineal tribes. The climate changes shown to have caused the initial disbelief in the Norse goddess antagonized her from the beginning in male dominated societies, from which point of view the author by historical evidence wrote. Gefion as either embodied or represented by Grendel’s mother could have signified the male fear for a possible uprising of the still existing matrilineal tribes who venerated the goddess. Cast in this light Grendel’s mother is indeed the abject of Beowulf and she could very likely symbolize the female deity venerated as the Earth goddess. However, guess as one may, these are but different interpretations of the work at hand. Further research is needed in the field of Grendel’s mother’s representation of earlier matrilineal tribes, however we may find that it will never be enough to answer our questions. The answer might instead be found in each reader’s interpretation, demonstrating the true
legacy of the author and the reason as to why *Beowulf* continues to fascinate 1000 years after its creation.
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