

The Beautiful and the Monstrous: Femininity in *Beowulf* and Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval*

Madison George-Berlet

Abstract: This essay considers how Grendel's Mother from *Beowulf* (ca. 1000) and the Fairy Queen from Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* (ca. 1170–ca. 1215) function within their respective texts as examples of subversive femininity, challenging dominant patriarchal structures. Engaging with previous scholarship that considers the feminism of these characters, I investigate how Grendel's Mother and the Fairy Queen rebel against the contemporary values of their societies by holding courts, accruing wealth, and appropriating male roles, and yet ultimately submit to the needs of male protagonists.

In *Beowulf* (ca. 1000) and Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* (ca. 1170–ca. 1215), the primary female figures disrupt patriarchal hierarchies by inserting themselves into the homosocial order. In contrast to the "correct" male-centric court models in their respective societies, Grendel's Mother and the Fairy Queen subvert the traditional role of women by holding their own courts, wielding power, asserting agency, and appropriating male roles within gift-giving dynamics. Though the Fairy Queen receives praise for her exceptional beauty and wealth, Grendel's Mother is beheaded as a monster. While acknowledging the influence of the homosocial structures contemporary to these texts' respective early and high medieval compositions, this paper argues that the difference in treatment between these two examples of subversive femininity lies in the Fairy Queen's ability to uphold traditional beauty standards (thereby fulfilling the needs of the male protagonist) and Grendel's Mother's inability to do so.

The social model of the Old English epic *Beowulf* places the historic interactions of the Geats and the Danes in a heroic ethos that values homosocial bonds between men, traditionally centred around the mead-hall (the seat of Anglo-Saxon courts) and supported through gift-giving. Old English literature frequently romanticizes the role of women to that of the peace-weaver, a metaphor that links the highly valued weaving and spinning skills of women to their function in securing peace between tribes through marriage and bearing sons (Cavell 361). In *Beowulf*, Wealtheow exemplifies the idealized peace-weaver. She has a relatively passive social role, serving mead to the men to celebrate the warriors, the epitomes of Old English masculinity, and promoting male-male bonding (Cavell 360). Marie de France, writing in the twelfth century about the fantastical and romantic Arthurian Court, also situates her narrative in a patriarchal society. *Lanval* focuses on the experience of a bachelor knight and a woman, “the most marginalized members of the Norman aristocracy ... dispossessed by the system of primogeniture through which the ruling class perpetuated itself” (Finke and Shichtman 479). In the time of Marie’s writing, “patronage relationships dominated all aspects of social interaction,” including artistic, literary, and military relationships (Finke and Shichtman 479). Patronage was especially important to men and women who could not inherit wealth directly; because of its necessitation of potentially long-term relationships, patronage created networks of male-male interaction that centred around the bonds between individual men (Finke and Shichtman 484). Women in patronage relationships more commonly functioned as gifts in the gift-giving ritual than as benefactors or recipients (Finke and Shichtman 481). Marie’s Arthurian court mimics this gendered gift-giving dynamic. King Arthur is the dominant patron responsible for providing gifts and wealth to knights like Lanval in return for their services. Arthur’s failure to act as a patron to him causes Lanval to leave the court and opens a space for the emergence of a competing patron, the Fairy Queen. The socio-cultural organization of both *Beowulf* and *Lanval* prioritizes male-male relation-

ships and trades women to build patronage relationships.

Beowulf and *Lanval* are both set in patriarchal societies ordered around a central court—the Danish Heorot and the Arthurian court, respectively. Both Grendel’s Mother and the Fairy Queen, however, have their own courts. Inverting the normative patriarchal court system, these matriarchal courts lie outside of male-dominated society. *Beowulf* introduces Grendel’s Mother’s domain when she “carries the ring-mailed prince to *her* court” (*Beowulf* 1506–07, emphasis added). The description of the court as a “hellish turn-hole,” where Beowulf sees “firelight, / a gleam and flare-up a glimmer of brightness,” (151–217), mimicks the Heorot (the Danes’ hall and central hearth). Her inverted “court” lies in the depths of a lake outside the natural territory of the Danes, a space symbolically associated with the “primordial womb of life” (Morgan 56). The text thus situates the matriarchal court outside of both the Danish and the masculine realms. Marie’s Fairy Queen similarly presides over her own court. As a travelling woodland court rather than a fixed court centred around a castle, the Fairy Queen’s court lies outside of the dominant Arthurian society’s influence. Scholars Finke and Shichtman argue that *Lanval* must leave Arthur’s court “because the kind of power that the fairy mistress possesses ... cannot be maintained for long within the Arthurian world without becoming subordinate to the sexual economy of feudalism” (500). These two courts—run by female characters and beyond the reach of the dominant patriarchal order—subvert the traditionally masculine-dominated court system, imagining radical spaces where women can wield political power that otherwise would be inaccessible to them within the texts’ patriarchal societies.

In addition to obtaining political power by holding their own courts, Grendel’s Mother and the Fairy Queen also appropriate male roles in their societies by adopting a warrior ethos and gift-giving. As Martin Puhvel explains, “In the heroic tenor of *Beowulf* ... the female function is to be ‘peace-weaver’ rather than fighter” (82), as exemplified by female characters such as Wealhtheow. Grendel’s Moth-

er, however, denies this traditional role and instead takes action as a warrior, slaying Aeschere and battling Beowulf. After her introduction into Heorot, provoked by the defeat of her son, she also adopts the traditionally male prerogative of blood revenge. Most provocatively, Grendel's Mother "pounce[s] upon [Beowulf] and pull[s] out / a broad, whetted knife," a man's weapon and traditionally phallic symbol, to "avenge / her only child" (1545–47). Grendel's Mother directly contradicts the traditional role of women in *Beowulf* as peace-weavers in favour of participating in the male warrior tradition. While Grendel's Mother adopts the role of the warrior in courtly society, the Fairy Queen, by contrast, takes on the role of the patron. A woman's "correct" position within the homosocial structure was to mediate male-male interaction, as Guinevere does for Arthur by acting as a "surrogate" patron to a wealthy male (Finke and Shichtman 486). The Fairy Queen acts as an independent patron to Lanval, promising him that "anything he might wish to have / was his to hold and to possess; should he bestow great gifts, largesse, / she would find a sufficiency" (136–39). The Fairy Queen is unique as a patroness because her wealth is her own, and she participates in the patronage-based economy without the supervision of a man. To emphasize her value as a patroness, the text gives detailed descriptions of her personal wealth: her lavish tent is "worth a castle" (98), and "no king exists beneath the sky / who could afford all" of what she possesses (91–92). These references to castles and kings directly allude to the Arthurian court, suggesting that the Fairy Queen is successfully appropriating Arthur's role as gift-giver to Lanval.

Grendel's Mother and the Fairy Queen further transgress subservient female stereotypes by exerting agency within the poems. Grendel's Mother exhibits agency in her pursuit of a blood debt against Beowulf, while the Fairy Queen exhibits agency in her courting of Lanval. When the Fairy Queen reveals herself to Lanval, the text characterizes her actions as a product of her agency, describing how she has "come for [him]" and "left [her] land to seek [him] here" (111–12). The Fairy Queen also defines the terms of

their relationship and chooses to come to Lanval's rescue when he breaks those terms. Lanval, in comparison, is a passive figure: notably, in her feminist analysis of *Lanval*, Sharon Kinoshita compares the tale to a "male Cinderella story" (269). The Fairy Queen therefore functions as Lanval's "Prince Charming": she drives the plot and "carries off this fine young man" (Marie 644), and whisks Lanval away from the patriarchal Arthurian court on horseback, reins in hand.

Grendel's Mother and the Fairy Queen, while occupying ostracized positions outside of their dominant societies, receive vastly different treatment from the men around them. Grendel's Mother, described as a "tarn-hag" and a "swamp-thing from hell" (*Beowulf* 1518–19), is pursued and killed by Beowulf. The Fairy Queen, by contrast, is the "loveliest / of all the women who exist" (Marie 590–91). Notably, when describing these female characters' treatment by men, both texts emphasize the characters' physical appearances. In *Beowulf*, the speaker debases Grendel's Mother to something that merely "looks like a woman ... as far as anyone ever can discern" (*Beowulf* 1350–51). Conversely, in *Lanval*, Marie describes the Fairy Queen as the epitome of feminine beauty. The text repeatedly describes the Fairy Queen's figure as "lovely" and provides an in-depth catalogue of her physical features that aligns her appearance with rigid standards of classical beauty: "Her form was fine, her hips were low, her neck as white as a branch in snow, / brilliant her eyes, her face was white, / lovely her mouth, nose set just right, brown her eyebrows, her forehead fair, / her head of curly, quite blonde hair" (Marie 563–68).

While the women's respective abilities to replicate normative beauty standards certainly alter their portrayal in each text, what is most significant is their relation to the male protagonists. In her analysis of feminine evil in *Beowulf*, Gwendoline A. Morgan argues that Grendel's Mother's monstrosity lies in her motherhood: "the Great Mother becomes the Terrible Mother, a monster which dominates, threatens, and in some manifestations actually devours the male ... but the archetype is here expanded to include all the major dangers the female holds for the Anglo-Saxon

male" (55–57). Morgan points to how the text characterizes Grendel's Mother as an "Eve-Circe-Ishtar temptress" during her fight with Beowulf and thereby conflates her with the temptress figure's erotic implications. Grendel's Mother must be destroyed because she embodies male anxieties surrounding women in *Beowulf*: she not only functions as a challenge to male independence and a sexual temptress but also embodies unbridled femininity. She is not governed by a father, husband, or son, and thus embodies the anxieties regarding unmarried women presented in the story of Queen Modthryth, who was "less of a bane to people's lives, / less cruel minded, after she was married" (*Beowulf* 1946–47). Grendel's Mother lies outside of, and in direct opposition to, the male-run society in both her values and her actions. She fails as a peace-weaver (the "correct" position of a woman in society) and instead instigates further bloodshed. She even directly opposes Beowulf's "sexual dominance" as a male, seen in his inability to defeat her with his sword—a phallic symbol that "fail[s] the man in his need" (*Beowulf* 1524–25). Her only potential value to Beowulf is as his conquest, which would add to his glory as a warrior, and so she must die. The Fairy Queen, by contrast, compensates for Lanval's deficiencies in wealth and status. King Arthur fails as a patron when "good land, / and wives to wed, he gave them all / save for" Lanval (Marie 16–18). Providing Lanval with the wealth he has been denied, the Fairy Queen gives him an outlet to express his sexual desire. The Fairy Queen identifies her own wish as "do[ing] all that [Lanval] requires" (127). Therefore, despite her relative agency compared to the knight, the Fairy Queen functions to fulfill the needs of the male protagonist.

While the subversive women of *Beowulf* and *Lanval* challenge the traditionally submissive roles of women in their contemporary societies through their actions, their textual portrayals resign them to functioning in service of the men around them. Both women hold their own courts,

appropriate traditionally male roles, and exert agency over their lives; however, one is beheaded and the other is praised. Grendel's Mother produces anxieties in men by flouting normative roles for women: because she does not marry and, therefore, cannot be controlled, she must be killed. She serves Beowulf best by providing him another opportunity for honour. The Fairy Queen, however, is praised for her ability to satisfy the needs of Lanval and conform to traditional beauty standards. My analysis reveals that these women, despite exerting their own agency throughout their texts, are ultimately submissive to their male-centric narratives.

Works Cited

- Beowulf*. *Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 2018, pp. 42–109.
- Cavell, Megan. "Formulaic *FriPuwebban*: Reexamining Peace-Weaving in the Light of Old English Poetics." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 114, no. 3, 2015, pp. 355–72.
- Finke, Laurie A., and Martin B. Shichtman. "Magical Mistress Tour: Patronage, Intellectual Property, and the Dissemination of Wealth in the 'Lais' of Marie De France." *Signs*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2000, pp. 479–503.
- Kinoshita, Sharon. "Cherchez la Femme: Feminist Criticism and Marie de France's *Lai De Lanval*." *Romance Notes*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1994, pp. 263–73.
- Marie de France. "Lai de Lanval." *Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 2018, pp. 171–85.
- Morgan, Gwendolyn A. "Mothers, Monsters, Maturation: Female Evil in *Beowulf*." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1991, pp. 54–68.
- Puhvel, Martin. "The Might of Grendel's Mother." *Folklore*, vol. 80, no. 2, 1969, pp. 81–88.