

Monster in the Middle: The Shifting Skins of *Beowulf*'s Monsters

When J.R.R. Tolkien first wrote of the monsters in *Beowulf* as “essential” (260), he made one omission: he ignored Beowulf as an essential monster. The process of monster construction in *Beowulf* is elusive, and monsters are often (unfairly) reduced to their visible abnormalities. However, Michael Lapidge, through the lens of modern psychology, argues that Grendel creates a nightmare quality, a sense of “looming,” due to his erased body (147)—no skin details required. The poet and Beowulf erase mother Grendel as well, creating this same sense of foreboding. The dragon, Beowulf’s final opponent, exists in scaly flesh and acts as a counterpoint to the ambiguous bodies of Grendel and mother Grendel. Yet the dragon is, despite his scales, humanized in the text, creating an unsettling hybrid of human and monster. I argue that our supposed hero, Beowulf, is also a creature often more mist than man, and through his encounter with the dragon, he is revealed as our last great monster inside the poem. In *Beowulf*, Beowulf is our most monstrous agent—a tool that directs and misdirects both the narrative audience and the reading audience, and he is our guide who reveals how monsters are made.

These vague and mysterious monsters—Grendel, mother Grendel, the dragon, and even Beowulf—are both familiar and unfamiliar to the reading audience; these *monsters* contain traces of the human fused with super-human strength and fangs, or, in the case of Grendel, unclear “egl” [claws] (Heaney; 987). In these hints of the human turned hybrid, we witness the uncanny, to borrow Sigmund Freud’s term for what is both familiar and unfamiliar, and, thereby, “frightening” (147-48). What is particularly tricky with *Beowulf* ...END OF SAMPLE

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