

We've Sung This Song a Thousand Times Before: Reproductive Futurity in *The Ninth Hour*

By Annika Bergstrom

The story of *Beowulf* is, at its core, a story about reproduction. It is a story about a mother and a child, a story about stories, and a story about the reproduction of society into the future. In the musical *The Ninth Hour: The Beowulf Story*, specific focus is paid to the conflict between Beowulf and Grendel, using a cast of dancers to portray every other character in that section of the epic poem. Grendel's Mother and Beowulf, referred to in the musical's credits and this paper as "the Mother" and "the Hero" respectively, take different approaches to upholding systems of reproductive futurism. The Mother attempts to create the Child from her fractured body, as the Hero attempts to create the Child from herself and the stories that are told about her. Both take singular, self-focused views of reproductive futurism, rather than buying into the system of heteroreproductivity. Neither the Mother nor the Hero take normative approaches to creating the Child, and as they both attempt to reach towards the future, they end up wrapping back around to the present, creating a cycle of birth, death, and violence.

The Ninth Hour: The Beowulf Story is a modern musical which focuses on the first half of the epic poem *Beowulf*. Specific focus is paid to the relationship between Grendel and Beowulf, as quite literally, two sides of the same coin within the narrative of the musical. It stars only two actors, portraying Beowulf and Grendel respectively, as well as a cast of dancers and live musicians. The story of the musical follows Beowulf's arrival Heorot,

Grendel's attack on the hall, Beowulf's defeat of Grendel and his mother, and the hailing of Beowulf as a hero following the saving of the Danes. The epic poem *Beowulf* is already a text which deals with the inherent cyclicity of violence and the ways in which this violence is reproduced through family units. It is a text which is deeply concerned with honor, reputation, and death. *The Ninth Hour* hones these themes even more sharply, specifically focusing on the parental relationship between Grendel and his mother, and on Beowulf's intensive focus on his memory outliving him. This dual focus of the musical, alongside the imagery of monstrosity and inhumanity present in Grendel and his mother, lends it well to reading alongside Lee Edelman's *No Future*, a text about reproduction, death, and the everlasting search for a life beyond the confines of the moral. By reading *The Ninth Hour* as a reception of *Beowulf* using *No Future*, the forces of reproductivity within both *The Ninth Hour* and *Beowulf* can be better understood in all their complexity.

In *No Future*, Lee Edelman claims that the central disruptive force of queerness is its lack of engagement in reproduction and a lack of focus on the future. Edelman argues that society is structured around a constant focus on a future that will never be reached, embodied in the form of the Child. Society is structured around the creation and protection of this idealized Child, as there is an attempt to create a perfect future from an idealized past. This focus on the future centers around a

perspective that views “history as linear narrative (the poor man’s teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—as itself—through time.”¹ In order for this view of reproduction and the future to work, a narrative of linear progress must be maintained. Time must move linearly, and we must be constantly moving forward, leaving the past behind us in favor of a more unified, better future. As a result of this focus in the Child and the future, society revolves around heteroreproductivity, and what Edelman terms “reproductive futurity” or the focus on the creation of the ideal Child through heterosexual sex. Edelman claims that society is “operating in the name and in the direction of a constantly anticipated future reality, then the telos that would, in fantasy, put an end to these deferrals.”² When operating in a system and a social order focused on reproductivity, the future is the main focus of every moment, and is always just out of reach. This focus on the future imagines a world of perfect unification of meaning. In order for this future to be achieved, reproduction that drives society into this false future must occur. Without children and the Child, then there can be no future, and this unified perfect world cannot be reached. Edelman discusses how if “there is no baby and, in consequence, no future, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself.”³ This is the central threat of queerness in Edelman’s argument, as queerness is non-reproductive and rejects children, therefore rejecting the central drive of heterosexual society, the future. Queerness finds its focus in the present, turning away from meaning and the notion of progress, instead focusing in on pleasure in the present moment. Queerness centers an embrace of negativity, a turn away from the prospects of the future and of progress. The queer resists being “held in thrall by a future continually deferred by time

itself.”⁴ While the rest of society reaches towards a future that is ever further away, queerness turns away from it altogether, finding a home in a continuous present.

The Ninth Hour focuses in on the character of Grendel’s mother, and the relationship between her and Grendel. By focusing on the role Grendel and their mother play within the musical, and the ways in which they are embodied, a form of queer relatedness can be observed. The very first place the intense attention to the role of mother and child within *The Ninth Hour* can be seen is in the credits, as Grendel’s mother, known only by this name within the text, is distilled down even further, to simply “The Mother”. Mother becomes not only her role and relationship, but her only identifier. Every character in *The Ninth Hour* is generalized in this way (Beowulf becomes “The Hero” and Grendel “The Monster”) but the focus on motherhood in this description of Grendel’s mother is distinct. It is aligned with the general focus on her character (who goes unnamed in the original epic), while also being even more specific. It removes Grendel (her child, credited as “The Monster”) from the equation altogether, making her a mother without a child. She is driven forward by the family and by the idea of the Child, but lacks a concrete solid child anchoring her. Her motherhood becomes a disconnected concept, as Grendel’s mother becomes simply the Mother.

In *The Ninth Hour*, the body of the Mother becomes the bodies of the chorus, moving and swaying together to create her monstrous form. Her embodiment becomes the embodiment of a collective, a whole created from many individual dancers. This embodiment has three main aspects: the main dancer portraying the Mother, the singer who voices the Mother, and the rest of the chorus who portray her movement and monstrosity. The form that she takes, is largely gestural, with the audience

needing to amalgamate these separate elements into one vision of what she might look like. Her form is never explicitly portrayed, and the extent of her inhumanity is left up to the audience. As her body is split amongst the dancers in the song "Family", she takes on an embodiment that cannot be fully understood or pinned down, as dancers move and shift, sing and travel back and forth across the stage, pushing and pulling, linking and separating.⁵ The Mother becomes decentralized, as her voice and movement are disconnected from her body and thrown about the space. Motherhood itself then becomes disconnected and decentralized, as the Mother loses connection to the Child. The Mother is still very much a mother, but she lacks a solid connection to her own body or her child in such a way that her motherhood shifts to focus only on reproduction. It is less about whatever child she has born or raised, and more about her continual push into the future and push against the Hero. Grendel is no longer an integral part of the characterization of *Grendel's* Mother, as she becomes a voice for continued survival and a continuation of the reproductive futurity Lee Edelman discusses.

The role of parent becomes fractured and scattered in the body of the Mother, yet the child remains intact in the Monster's singular body and voice. The Monster maintains one actor, one body, and one voice. While the Mother shifts and scatters throughout the space, becoming all encompassing, the Monster remains almost entirely still. The Monster's first song "Pile of Bones" begins with him covered in a pile of dancers, who completely envelop his body, draping themselves over and around him, a pile of flesh and red costuming. A sort of birth occurs as he pulls himself from the dancers that will become the body of the Mother. He separates himself from the dissociated, all encompassing Mother, starting to sing as he does, uniting voice and

movement into one body.⁶ The Mother never is able to achieve this same unity. The Monster alone pulls out and away from this fragmented embodiment into a singular one, taking on the role of child of the Mother as he does so. This birth per say sets the action of the musical into play, literally allowing for the future to play out. It is a moment of reproduction, of attempted creation of the perfect Child, as the dancers that make up the body of the Mother heave and crawl and writhe overtop the body of the Monster. This moment of birth, despite the unity of what is created, clearly fails, as all attempts to bring forth the Child fail, in the naming of what is born as "the Monster". Just as Grendel's mother has become "the Mother" Grendel loses his name and his connection to his mother, becoming only "the Monster". His primary role is not as child, but as monster, as a creature of awe and fear and destruction. While the child exists to push ever forward into the future, as a vehicle for constantly differed desire, the Monster exists as an active force in the present.

While the Monster is a singularly embodied child, he differs from Lee Edelman's Child in his actively destructive role. The Child described in *No Future* requires constant protection, constant observation, and constant focus, lest they be corrupted or harmed, the Monster in *The Ninth Hour* is convinced into putting himself in harm's way in order to take the passive destruction the Child wrecks into his own hands. The Mother, using the language of reproductive futurity, convinces the Child to destroy the halls of the Hero. The Monster is a child that has a focus on destruction rather than unification. As the Mother sings "I'm all that you've got/we are blood we are family" she invokes the kinship structures that Edelman critiques, of bloodline, of family unit, and of future.⁷ Her hoards of dancers surround the Monster, grabbing and pulling at his body as she attempts to get him to commit acts of violence on the idea of future

harm. She tells him “If we don’t strike first/They’ll take you away from me.”⁸ The Mother is not acting on past harm, she is taking preventive measures against a group she views as harmful to her structures of kinship and future. As she sends her child out to be the one actually doing the harm, it is clear that this is not as much about protecting him as it is about continuing a cycle of violence and reproduction. The Mother is constantly reaching towards a unification of the self that she can never fully achieve. She uses the Monster as a tool to further this future, to get closer to a Child in the way Lee Edelman describes, a Child who will unify her through the violence that she enacts against the Hero.

The Hero is convinced to take up arms against the Mother with the language of reproductive futurity just as the Monster is convinced to take up arms against her. Both the Hero and the Mother believe themselves to be the protectors of society and the future. The Hero’s investment is in propelling themselves into the future through reproductive means other than the creation of the Child. Where the Mother sings to the monster, convincing him to fight against the Hero, the Hero needs no convincing. From her very first entrance, she sings “I believe in peace/but I would go to war for you.”⁹ The Hero needs no convincing in the power of violence and destruction to perpetuate a future. She already sees inherent threat in the form of futurism represented in the Monster and the Mother, and is here to destroy it. The Hero lacks a figure analogous to the Mother, lacks a representation of anything reaching out towards the Child as she attempts to perpetuate futurism. The violence she enacts is necessary to create the reproduction she relies on, the reproduction of story. Without it, there is nothing to sing about, and so she must enact violence against other forms of futurism, in the name of maintaining her own claim to the future.

The Hero attempts to do reproductive futurism, without the Child. The Hero and the Bard replace the figure of the Child with the idea of legacy and history. The bard sings “We must sing praises/we must keep our legacy alive.”¹⁰ Verbal reproduction of the Hero’s acts, to “sing praises” is required to continue a reach towards the future. The Hero creates no Child figure, choosing rather to reproduce herself in stories and songs of her deeds indefinitely. She is equally invested in the future as the Mother is, but rather than constant attempted reproduction with no successful future, she reaches towards a future with no created child. The constant reproduction of her deeds in the mouths of others, like the Bard, becomes the Child. It must be protected, carefully molded, and nurtured. The verbal repetition of her actions is what will keep the legacy “alive”, as her deeds transform into a living breathing thing outside of her. There is a desperation to this call to song, as the Hero attempts to build a Child from her own actions. The call to reproduction is, at its core, about maintaining a drive into the future for the Hero, with the Bard singing that the “hero will never die/so long as we write history from the right side.”¹¹ The “history” that is being created through this reproductive act is what will keep the Hero from death, constantly pushing into the future and towards unification of meaning. The replacement of the Child with history and legacy creates a narcissistic form of reproductive futurism, one that focuses not on a deferred union of meaning held in the body of a Child, but in a version of the self that is constantly pushed forward in time.

The Hero maintains a version of reproductive futurity that reproduces themselves indefinitely, deferring meaning within their own body, where the Mother attempts to produce the child again, enacting violence and destruction upon failure. Neither can be said to clearly take up arms for or against reproductive futurism, both rejecting elements of it while

maintaining its core harms. The Mother rejects the future but embraces the family, actively arguing for cycles of destruction and death to maintain the Child. The Hero rejects the Child and the family, embracing reproductive futurity as a reproduction of the self and of the story. These concepts of futurity blend and overlap, but also represent two fundamentally different ways of perceiving what reproduction is and what it does. The Mother and the Hero, despite their different investments in the future, share a participation in the reproductive futurism Lee Edelman discusses. The Mother is invested in reproductivity and the family, the Hero is invested in the future. Both of them are in some ways subversive because of this, as they distance themselves from one element of this driving societal force, while continuing to perpetuate the rest. Neither half can exist without the other, as the family as a unit in society perpetuates futurism, and futurism brings about reproductivity. Prior to the death of the Mother, she and the Hero mirror one another in their outfitting and choreography, standing back to back and moving in unison.¹² Despite their vocalized and physicalized opposition to one another, the Mother and the Hero are two sides of the same driving impulse, both reaching forward, whether it be through the family or through legacy. Neither does reproductive futurism correctly, both attempting to find unity and an end to deferral, and both fail, the ultimate end of all forms of reproductive futurism. Neither can create the perfect Child, and neither goes about their attempted creation of the child in a way that is normative. The Mother heaves a child out from her body alone and uses him as a tool to enact violence against the whole, in a desperate attempt to create unity of meaning and a future for herself. The Hero attempts to shape a Child out of themselves and their deeds, using violence as a mechanism of creation and reproduction. Both end up cut off from their Children, fractured and unsuccessful at ever reaching the future.

Neither the Mother or the Hero will ever successfully reach the ever deferred future, no matter how much they reach or how many times they attempt to create the perfect Child. *The Ninth Hour* ends with the Monster and the Hero facing one another and singing “we’ve sung this song a thousand times before/we’ll now be made to sing it more.”¹³ They repeat their process of birth and death over and over again indefinitely, constantly trying to reach a moment outside of this cycle, a moment of the future they are ever reaching towards. The Mother reaches towards bodily unity, the Hero towards a unity of meaning, the Monster towards an end to the repetition of the violence he enacts. The musical ends with the Hero repeatedly singing “tell me there’s another song.”¹⁴ *The Ninth Hour* is clear though: there is no other song, as reproductive futurity reproduces itself indefinitely in the bodies of the Mother and the Hero, as they attempt to find a way out of it by reaching through it towards the future, and therefore only perpetuating it.

The future presented by *The Ninth Hour* is a cyclical one, one where progress can never be made and a true future cannot be reached. Even as the roles of mother and child break down and become hostile and destructive to the ideas of legacy and history, they cannot escape their own role in reproduction. The Hero and the Mother fracture the Child and the future in their constant reaches towards it, unable to ever really reach the unreachable, unable to create the uncreatable. They fracture more and more, losing meaning over the course of the musical, until they have become so disconnected and shattered that the future loops back around to the present and the story begins again. The Hero and the Mother reach so far into the future that they wrap back around, reaching for a unification of meaning and only succeeding back at their attempted creations of children.

Bibliography

Douglas, Kate, and Shayfer James. "The Ninth Hour: The Beowulf Story." Directed by Kevin Newbury and Troy Ogilvie. 27 June 2020. Filmed Theatrical Performance, 48:29. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhsynTXouIq>.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.