

# Magic Words & Monstrous Names in Old and Early Modern English

# Old English Monsters

# Monsters



Monsters and supernatural entities are described in a number of English texts, some based on folkloric beliefs indigenous to Britain, or common to the Germanic people, and some from Latin-language sources.

# Liber Monstrorum

- Late 7<sup>th</sup>-early 8<sup>th</sup> century
- Written in England, but in Latin
- Describes many Classical monsters and legends, plus more recent additions
- Main sources included Pliny, Isidore, and Augustine
- First book contains many “monstrous races” - strange kinds of people - as opposed to one-off monsters
- May have been the source for some information in Beowulf



# Liber Monstrorum

“And there are monsters of an amazing size, like **King Hygelac**, who ruled the Geats and was killed by the Franks, whom no horse could carry from the age of twelve. His bones are preserved on an island in the river Rhine, where it breaks into the Ocean, and they are shown as a wonder to travellers from afar.” **King Hygelac is also mentioned in Beowulf.**

“And we read that there were certain extremely bellicose men of huge bodily size who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. Yet they were sound of mind, and differed from other people only in the addition of four digits.”

“And we have heard of a person born in Asia from human parents with a monstrous mixture. He was like his father in the feet and stomach, but had two chests and four hands and two heads. And wide-spread rumour drew many people to marvel at him.”

“There was once a person of marvellous nature whom they called Midas, who, as the tales allege, turned everything which he touched into gold. And no one believes this unless scorning the truth.”

# Liber Monstrorum

“And they say there is a race of people whom the Greeks call Sciapods [’shade-feet’], because lying on their backs they protect themselves from the heat of the sun by the shade of their feet. Indeed they are of a very swift nature. They have only one leg each for their feet, and their knees harden in an inflexible joint.”





# Nowell Codex

- 12<sup>th</sup>-century, written in Old English.
  - Sometimes a.k.a. the Beowulf Manuscript.
  - All texts involve monsters or monstrous behavior.
1. *The Life of Saint Christopher* (fragment)
  2. *Wonders of the East*
  3. *Letters of Alexander to Aristotle*
  4. *Beowulf*
  5. *Judith* (a poetic translation of the Biblical Book of Judith)





# St. Christopher

- Sometimes interpreted as a dog-head, as in this Byzantine icon.



# Wonders of the East

- Many of the same monsters as in the Liber Monstrorum
- One innovation is the *donestre* (my favorite medieval monster)

There is an island in the Red Sea, where there is a race of people that we call **Donestre**, who have grown like soothsayers from the head to the navel, and the other part is human. And they know all human speech. When they see someone from a foreign country, they name him and his kinsmen with the names of acquaintances, and with lying words they beguile him and capture him, and after that eat him all up except for the head, and then sit and weep over the head.





# Beowulf

Beowulf contains reference to several monsters:

- Grendel - “the line of Cain”
- Grendel’s unnamed mother
- Dragon
- King Hygelac is described elsewhere as a giant

Þanon **untýdras** ealle onpocon  
**eotenas** ond **ylfe** ond **orcneas**  
spylce **gigantas** þa pið gode punnon  
lange þrage he him ðæs lean forgeald

Thence all **evil broods** were born,  
**ogres** and **elves** and **orcs**  
the **giants** also, who long time fought with God,  
for which he gave them their reward

Bridges the gap between scholarly and folk traditions.

# Wið færstice

Remedy for a sudden sharp pain found in the Old English *Lacnunga*. 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century.

gif hit wære ēsa gescot oððe hit wære ylfa gescot  
oððe hit wære hægtessan gescot nū ic wille ðīn helpan  
þis ðē tō bōte ēsa gescotes ðis ðē tō bōte ylfa gescotes  
ðis ðē tō bōte hægtessan gescotes ic ðīn wille helpan

If it was the shot of Aesir or it was the shot of elves  
or it was the shot of witches/hags, now I will help you.

This for you as a remedy for the shot of Aesir; this for you as a remedy for the  
shot of elves,

this for you as a remedy for the shot of witches/hags; I will help you.

# The Grant

- Described in *Otia Imperialia* (c. 1211)

There is in England a certain kind of demon which they call **grant** in their native idiom. It is like a yearling colt, prancing on its hind-legs, with sparkling eyes. This kind of demon very often appears in the streets in the heat of the day or at about sunset, and whenever it is seen, it gives warning of an imminent fire in that city or neighbourhood. When danger is looming on the following day or night, it sets the dogs barking by running to and fro in the streets, and feigning flight, lures the dogs on its tail to pursue it in the vain hope of catching it. An apparition of this kind makes the townspeople take care to guard their fires, and thus, while this obliging variety of demon frightens anyone who sees it, its coming regularly serves to protect people who would otherwise have been unaware of their danger.

Let's skip ahead a few centuries...

# Early Modern English Familiars



# Witches' familiars

- Central component of 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> century English witchery.
- Toads, cats, dogs, ferrets, &c.
- Not *really* animals, but demons (or the devil!) in the *form* of animals.
- Killed people, livestock, spoiled cheese and beer. Bad stuff.
- Ate bread, milk, witch-blood.
- Described in *lots* of witch pamphlets.



The Wonderful Discovery of the Witchcrafts  
of Margaret and Phillip Flower (1619)





A Rehearsal both Strange and True (1579)

# Tests

- Tests to identify witches often hinged on their familiars.
- **Searching Test** — Mark of the familiar feeding on the witch's blood.
- **Watching Test** — Witch isolated in her home and watched for a few days, watchers waiting for familiars to arrive (to feed, take orders, hang out, etc.).

# Matthew Hopkins

- Witch-hunting in England was never as big as on the continent, except during the English Civil War...
- Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne, 1644–1647, tried and executed 300+ women.





The Discovery of Witches (1647)

## *The Discovery of Witches (1647)*

- Hopkins' pamphlet, addressing critics.
- Got his start with the watching test of Elizabeth Clarke in 1645.
- After a few days, Holt, Jarmara, Vinegar Tom, Sack and Sugar, Newes all entered the room.
- Clarke also named Elemauzer, Pyewacket, Peckin the Crown, and Grizzel Greedigut.
- Names “which no mortall could invent,” wrote Hopkins.
- Scholars still regard these names as “bizarre,” but little effort to put them in historical context.

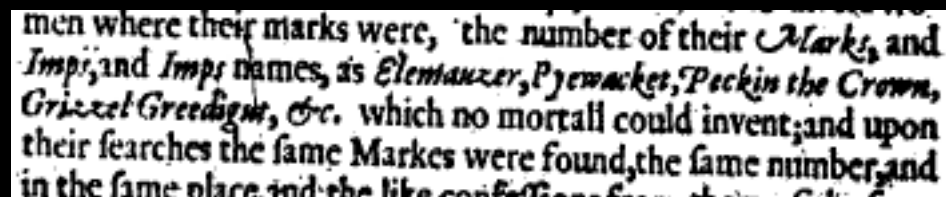
# Other Accounts

Clarke's watching test also written about in:

- *A True and Exact Relation* (1645)— pre-trial testimonies of Hopkins and others.
- *A Confirmation and Discovery of Witchcraft* (1648) — Stearne's self-vindicating book.
- *None* of the unseen familiars named anywhere but Hopkins' *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1647).

# Grizzel Greedigut

- *Discovery of Witches* (1647)
  - Grizzel Greedigut (text)
  - Griezzell Greedigutt (woodcut)
  - Some modern transcriptions say “Grizzel, Greedigut” (i.e. 2 familiars) in the text but this is totally wrong. Unfortunately, these are the most accessible editions of the pamphlet.



men where their marks were, the number of their *Marks*, and  
*Imps*, and *Imps* names, as *Elemauzer*, *Pjewacker*, *Peckin the Crown*,  
*Grizzel Greedigut*, &c. which no mortall could invent; and upon  
their searches the same *Markes* were found, the same number, and  
in the same place, and the like confessions from the same *Witches*.

# Grissell, Greedigut

- *The Witches of Huntingdon* (1646)
  - Joan Wallis had Grissell and Greedigut, “in the shape of dogges with great brisles of hogges haire upon their backs.”
  - Stearne and *possibly* Hopkins were involved in this trial.
  - Wallis and Clarke probably didn’t know each other. They lived 95 miles apart, and Clarke was elderly, poor, and had one leg.
  - Almost definitely Hopkins’ direct source.



# Grizel (a.k.a. Grissil)

- *The Witches of Northamptonshire* (1612)
  - Describing Arthur Bill of Raunds:

It is said that he had three spirits to whom he gave three special names (the Devil himself sure was godfather to them all). The first he called **Grizel**, the other was named **Ball**, and the last **Jack**, but in what shapes they appeared unto him I cannot learn.
- *Guide to Grand Fury-Men* (1627)
  - Probably Arthur's familiar was meant in a paragraph about familiars' names, here spelt Grissil. (Ball is also mentioned.)

# Grissell

- *OED Online*: grizzle/gryssell/grissel/etc. could mean “of a grey colour” or “a grey animal.”
- *Pleasures of Princes* (1614) describes grissell as a good color for gamecock breeding hens.
- Traditional ballad “J. Armstrong’s Last Goodnight” (~1620):

But little Musgrave, that was his foot-page

With his bonny grissell got away untain

- Pets and familiars were often named for coloration. *Guide to Grand Fury-Men* (1627) also lists Swart, Blue, White, and Callico as familiar-names.

# Grissel

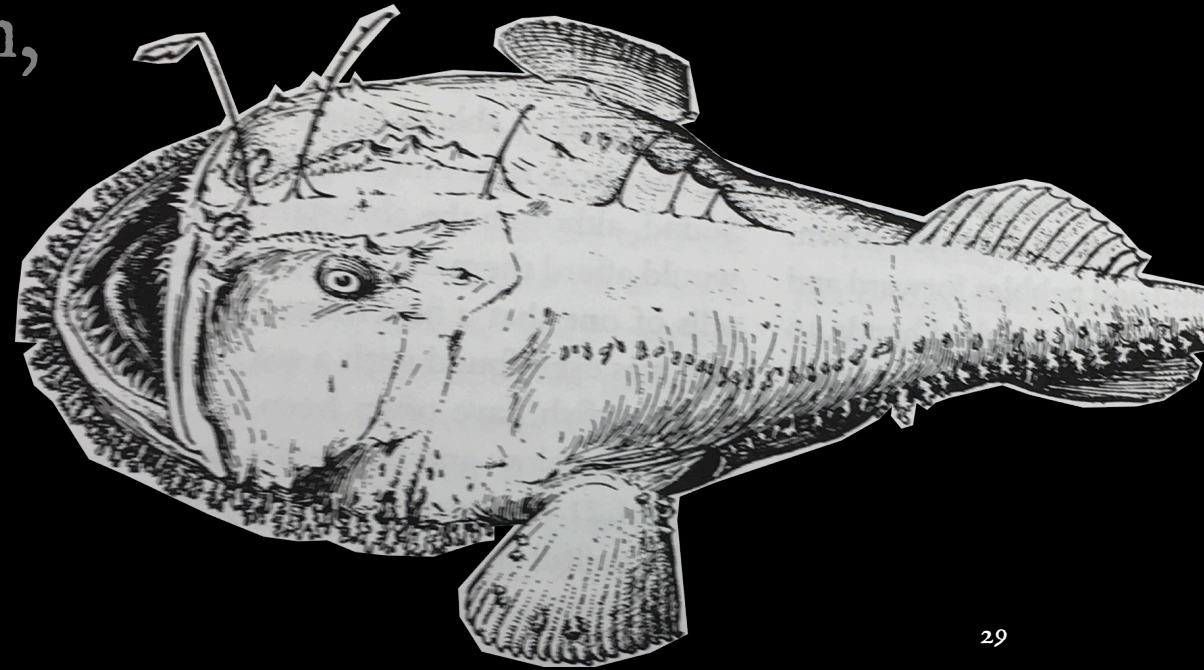
- *OED Online*: Grissel also the “later form of the proper name Grisilde [...] the proverbial type of a meek, patient wife.”
- *Taming of the Shrew* (1623)
- *Patient Grissil* (1603)
- Spelt Grizel in Scotland and England’s north.

# Greedigut

- Widespread term for glutton.
- In *The Trial of Treasure* (1567), Greedigut advises Lust to eat houses and lands.
- Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1567) features a "brach called Greedigut with two hir puppies by hir."
- *Thomæ Thomasii Dictionarium* (1644), Latin-English dictionary, defines L. *glúto* as "a glutton, a greedigut, one that devoureth much meate."

# Greedigut (the fish)

- Also the name for the large-mouthed Goosefish in the American colonies.
- In 1634, William Wood poetically celebrated New England's many fish species, praising  
The scale fenc'd sturgeon,  
wry-mouth halibut,  
The flouncing salmon,  
codfish, greedigut



# Review

## Familiars

- Grizzel Greedigut (1647) - *Discovery of Witches*
- Grissell and Greedigut (1646) - *Witches of Huntingdon*
- Grissill (1627) - *Guide to Grand Jury-Men*
- Grizel (1612) - *Witches of Northamptonshire*

## Animals

- Greedigut (1634) - *New Englands Prospect*
- Grissell (adj.) (1620) - *J. Armstrong's Last Goodnight*
- Grissell (adj.) (1614) - *Pleasures of Princes*
- Greedigut (1567) - *Metamorphoses*

## People

- Grissel (1623) - *Taming of the Shrew*
- Grissil (1603) - *Patient Grissil*

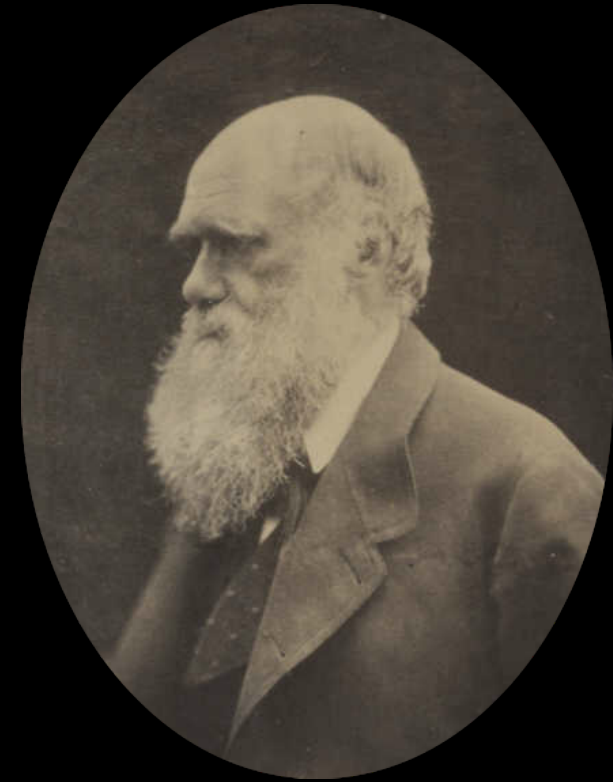
# Monstrous Naming Conventions

Let's talk about **phonesthemes**.

- Can sounds convey meaning?



snore, snout, snot, sneeze, snort



beard, brain, back, body, brow



goblin, gremlin,  
Grant, grizzel  
greedigut...

any other scary *g*- words?

any other monstrous phonesthemes?



# Phonesthemes

- Can we come up with any other phonesthemes?