



TEACHING RESOURCES

THE WITCH'S PRINCESS

BY DON ZOLIDIS

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For

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GRENDEL'S MOTHER (a.k.a. Barb)

The character of Grendel's Mother originates from the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*. For the warrior Beowulf, she's just another monster to fight after he slays Grendel and before he gets to the dragon, since she's attacking the kingdom to avenge the death of her son. However, when we hear from Grendel's Mother in *The Witch's Princess*, things look a lot different from her point of view...

“Soon the blood-thirsty creature, she who had lived for a hundred seasons, grim and greedy, in the waters' flow, found that one was there from above seeking out the abode of monsters. She seized upon the warrior and clutched him with her horrid claws; nevertheless, she did no harm to his sound body . . . with her hateful fingers.”

- *Beowulf*¹



GRENDEL'S MOTHER DRAGS BEOWULF TO THE BOTTOM OF THE LAKE.

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GRENDEL'S MOTHER. I can still hear his little voice – well he wasn't little, he was an eight-foot-tall mountain of muscle, but still, you're always mama's little boy – “Mommy, can we have entrail soup again tonight?” Of course, baby! Of course... (*She breaks into tears again.*)

ALESSANDRA. There, there.

GRENDEL'S MOTHER. And now they've hung his arm like a trophy! I'll kill them all! I'll burn their village to the ground! I'll eat their brains and make a really nice casserole out of them and take it to the old folks home 'cause I'm really invested in helping my community! Rrrrrghgh.

- *The Witch's Princess* by Don Zolidis

1. Tinker, Chauncey Brewster, Tr. *Beowulf: translated out of the Old English*. New York, Newson & company, 1902.

2. Ford, Henry Justice, illustration 7 from *The Red Book of Animal Stories*, selected and edited by Andrew Lang, 1899.

THE JABBERWOCK



If you look at the context of the made-up words in Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky," you might think the Jabberwock seems fearsome - but in *The Witch's Princess*, the Jabberwock seems to have misinterpreted the situation...

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffing through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

- "Jabberwocky" by Lewis Carroll 3

JABBERWOCK. Ohhhhhh. You see I thought we were doing like a whole thing. Like, he puts out the treats, and then he expects me to be like a big scary monster, so I come out, and I'm just like - I channel Beyonce, you know?

(She doe some Beyonce-type moves.)

But also like a monster-type Beyonce? Which she can totally pull off because she's multi-talented. And then I do my thing and he pretends to be a warrior and we do our fun dance and that's what I need to do to get the treats. I'm all about the treats.

- *The Witch's Princess* by Don Zolidis

3. Carroll, Lewis, 1832-1898. *Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky: with Annotations by Humpty Dumpty*.

4. Rare Book Division, The New York Public Library. "Jabberwock" New York Public Library Digital Collections.

MEDUSA / MEGOOSA

In Greek mythology, Medusa is the foe faced by the hero Perseus. Different versions of Medusa appear in different versions and retellings of the story, but the snakes in her hair are the feature for which she is best known. In *The Witch's Princess*, however, it seems that popular opinion might not be quite accurate...



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MEGOOSA. Basically what happened – this knight came to kill me or whatever? And my geese scared him – I mean, they won't kill you from a distance, but they can be straight-up mean –

(She strokes her geese hair and talks to them.)

“Yes you can my little goosies yes you can. Mama loves you.”

And I guess it was a little embarrassing to admit you got beat up by a bunch of geese, so he invented this whole story about snakes and turning to stone and it's a whole thing.

– *The Witch's Princess* by Don Zolidis

Medusa had once been a beautiful maiden, whose hair was her chief glory, but as she dared to vie in beauty with Minerva, the goddess deprived her of her charms and changed her beautiful ringlets into hissing serpents. She became a cruel monster of so frightful an aspect that no living thing could behold her without being turned into stone. All around the cavern where she dwelt might be seen the stony figures of men and beasts which had chanced to catch a glimpse of her and had been petrified with the sight.

– *Bulfinch's Mythology* by Thomas Bulfinch 5



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5. *Bulfinch's Mythology*, Thomas Bulfinch, 1867.

6. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. "Medusa" The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1880 – 1881.

7. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. "Cartouche and Medusa's head adorn the keystones of round-arch windows" The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1889.

Look Who's Talking: Discussion & Writing questions on Grendel's Mother, the Jabberwock, and Medusa/Megoosa.

- In each of the quotes from the original texts, what are the specific words and phrases used to convey fearsome images of Grendel's Mother, the Jabberwock, and Medusa? Since each of the original texts tells the story of a hero facing them, how do the images conveyed of the monsters make the heroes appear?
- How are the depictions of Grendel's Mother, the Jabberwock, and Medusa/Megoosa different in the dialogue from *The Witch's Princess* than it is in the original texts? Are there similarities between the depictions? How do the "heroes" appear in contrast?
- How is it different to learn about the characters from them speaking in their own words, rather than a description from a narrator? Do you pick up this information in a different way?
- In *The Witch's Princess*, Grendel is described by several different people:
 - His mother, telling her story to Alessandra and Gabriella.
 - Beowulf boasting of his deeds to the Danes.
 - By Alessandra undercover when she tricks Beowulf into giving Grendel's arm back.

What are the differences in these descriptions? What are the motivations of each to describe Grendel differently?

- Originally in Old English, *Beowulf* is one of the most translated works of all time. How is the job of translating a text from another language similar to the job of the Narrators in *The Witch's Princess*? How are the two jobs different?

Drama Class Exercise: Duelling Narrators

In a group of three, assign Players A, B, and C.

- PLAYER A begins to pantomime a normal, everyday, neutral activity (for example, raking leaves, signing papers, playing frisbee.)
- PLAYER B narrates a one-sentence story about what PLAYER A is doing.
- PLAYER C has to come up with a totally different explanation of what PLAYER A is doing and narrate the action that way to tell a different story.

Example 1

PLAYER A pantomimes signing papers.

PLAYER B: "They're a movie star signing autographs for all her adoring fans."

PLAYER C: "They're signing a birthday card for somebody they don't know that well."

Example 2

PLAYER A pantomimes throwing a ball.

PLAYER B: "They're throwing the baseball to third and theyyyy're out! Player A wins the game!"

PLAYER C: "They're hitting their brother in the head with a snowball for no reason!"

Expansions and Variations:

- Have Player A go last to narrate: "I'm actually..." - the twist is it can't be the same as what Player B or C said.
- Or, add a Player D to make groups of 4 and offer another alternate narration (this makes it harder but might add to the fun)
- If playing in front of the group, have the group vote on which version of the story they like best.

- Once the Narrators have created the first sentence of the story, have additional actors jump in to create the context of the scene - add security guards and a line of autograph hounds for Player B's story, or people passing around the card or the birthday person for Player C's.
 - Have the groups present to one another as scenes.
- Talk about (or create!) quick production elements for the scenes that might make a story look more like one version of the story or the other. For Example 1, you might come up with:
 - Lights: for Player B's story, you could add flashes of photographers. For Player C's story, they could have fluorescent lights like the school or a spotlight to show they're under pressure.
 - Props: For Player B's story, you could have them holding a sharpie and a pile of headshots. For Player C's story, you could have a birthday card or an envelope.
 - Set: Player B's story: you could have them sitting at a table, there could be a red carpet or velvet rope. Player C's story: you could have school posters to create a hallway.
 - Sound: Create music for a big event or crowd noises for Player B's story, or awkward music or hallway sounds for Player C's story.
 - Costumes: Player A puts on sunglasses for Player B's story, a backpack for Player C's

Design Challenge: Epic Scenes Onstage

Whether you're staging a production of *The Witch's Princess*, looking for an activity for a theater tech class, or introducing puppetry to a drama class, you can challenge students to bring the three main "journey" sequences in *The Witch's Princess* to life.

In his production notes at the beginning of the play, Don Zolidis suggests:

Journeying/battle/travel scenes: This play has a number of places where distance or scope can be shown through puppetry or lighting effects like shadow puppetry. The narrators can control this imagery, and feel free to use any number of other actors to create the special effects.

1) Find the three "Journey" sequences in the script:

Journey #1

Starting:

SIRI VOICE. Starting trip to the Isle of Sarpedon – You are on the best route.

(Music begins.)

(Scene change.)

NARRATOR 1. It was a long and difficult journey – traveling south from the icy wastes–

(Three figures journey through the landscape. Over hills and mountains.)

Ending:

NARRATOR 2. The next morning they sailed for Sarpedon –

(A figure sails a ship)

SIRI'S VOICE. You are still on the fastest route.

Journey #2

Starting:

NARRATOR 1. The path ahead was as dangerous as any – across the sea, and to a new, strange and terrifying land.

(Four figures now travel over the land.)

Ending:

(The JUBJUB BIRD enters while the scene is being set up. It stalks back and forth like an exceptionally awkward emu.)

JUBJUB BIRD. Jubjub! Jubjub!

(Jubjub bird exits)

Journey #3

Starting:

NARRATOR 1. With her crew intact, the companions headed for the Bog Witch's swamp.

(Figures appear again.)

Ending:

NARRATOR 2. Where they camped for the night. And everyone fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

(Firelight.)

(Stars.)

(Maybe the sound of crickets or frogs.)

2) Divide students into groups.

Choose the method that works best for your group.

- **Group by Journey:** Three groups, each responsible for one of the three "Journey" sequences. They're responsible for all the elements, but a shorter scene.
- **Group by Job:** One group creates the puppets or figures for all three journeys, one group creates the "set" or background for all 3 journeys, one group is responsible for sound and music, etc.
 - Feel free to add more depending on your focus, resources, or what the group's interests are - a lighting group, a group of performers, assign a director, etc.
 - Groups can and should work together as they discuss how all the elements will come together.

3) Start from the script

For each Journey, look at the scene in the text and identify the following:

- Who are the characters in the scene?
- What places are depicted along the journey?
- What actions need to be shown?
- What sounds do we hear?

4) Design research and brainstorming

Below are some discussion questions to get started. Feel free to jump around as each topic will affect the others. Make lists, write on the board, start sketching!

- What style of figure or puppet do we want to use to depict the characters?

- If desired, students could be assigned to research different types of puppets and present to the class for consideration
- See resources on puppetry at the end of the exercise for design inspiration or research.
- If you think a type of puppet is the best way to convey the characters or story, why?
- How do we want to show the movement from one place to another? Will the characters move, or the background? Will there be a scrolling backdrop, performers moving pieces, projections? Will elements be 3-D or 2-D?
- What tone do we want to set for the sequence? (Exciting? Funny? Epic? Cartoony? Realistic?) How will we do that? (Colors used in the design? Performance of dialogue? Sound or music?)
- What can we accomplish onstage using puppetry that we *cannot* show another way?

3.) Construction

- Have student sketch out plans before moving forward with construction.
- Encourage communication to ensure that all the elements work together.
- Have the students experiment with or list needed materials (conversely, if you want to limit construction to materials you have available, challenge students to make their vision come to life using what's at hand.)
- Build away!

4.) Staging

- Experiment with your new creations. At every step of this phase, you can always stop to make an adjustment, try a different material, or run in with some emergency hot glue.
- Experiment with elements together. How can the puppets interact with the set elements? How can the timing of moving set pieces correspond with sound?
- Now head back to the script. If you are having people perform the characters or act as narrators, try reading aloud and getting a sense of timing.
- Layer one element on at a time, as you would in a tech rehearsal. Practice dialogue simultaneously with puppeteering, then add set pieces, then sound. How do all the moving parts work together?

5.) Performance/discussion

- Each group can film their sequence so that they can see their handiwork from the audience's perspective.

- Groups can present their work to one another.
- Discuss each group's approach. How are they similar? How are they different? What were your inspirations in the script? In research?
- What were the challenges? How did you tackle them?

Design Challenge: Creating a Puppet Character

There are several characters in *The Witch's Princess* that could be brought to life using puppetry. Each is full of possibilities. This exercise could be used for a drama class getting into puppetry, a design challenge for a theater tech class, or a way to generate ideas for a production of *The Witch's Princess*.

Have students choose one of the following:

- Meagoosa (or, rather, the geese that form her hair)
- The Jubjub Bird (Jubjub!)
- The Bog Witch's house on legs (seen from a distance)

For each:

1) **Start from the script:**

- Find specific examples of character descriptions in the script of *The Witch's Princess*?
- What actions will the character need to be able to complete, according to the script?
- What movements will the puppet need to be able to make, in order to complete these actions?
- What type of puppet might best be able to accomplish this?
 - If desired, each student might be assigned to research a type of puppet to present to the class for consideration, students might be given examples of several types of puppets to consider, or if you wish to focus on a specific type of puppetry, you could present it here.

2) **Design considerations:**

- When performing the puppet, what sound might the character make, if any? How will the puppet move? What can sounds and movements convey about a character?
- Does the character interact with human actors or other puppets? If so what size will they need to be? Will they be clearly visible onstage?
- What materials are available? If you are limited to a particular type of material (i.e. recyclables, paper mache) present it as a design challenge!
- Have students sketch their design before beginning construction.

3) **Construct your creature**

- Go bananas!

4) Performance and discussion

- Have each puppet “perform” a snippet of scene from *The Witch’s Princess* in which they appear, with other students on-book reading the other roles.
- Discuss each puppet-master’s approach. How are they similar? How are they different? What were your inspirations in the script? In research?
- What were the challenges? How did you tackle them?
- What can you do creating a character in puppetry that you can’t do in another medium?

Puppetry Resources and Inspiration

- The Center for the Puppetry Arts in Georgia is a treasure trove:
<https://puppet.org/visit/educator-resources/>
- From The North Coast Arts Integration Project, a free lesson plan on shadow puppets and video resources
<https://www.artsintegration.net/shadow-puppets.html>
- A video from PBS in 1969 in which a young Jim Henson shows how to create some simple puppets.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AC440k6iByA&t=30s>
- From the Kennedy Center, an interview and video of performances by puppeteer Hobey Ford, who specializes in animal puppets
<https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/puppetry/hobey-for-d-animalia/>
- From the the Kennedy Center, a recording of a show by the Sogolon Puppet Theater, which is a company in the Mali tradition. (The lion at 20:06 is especially cool.)
<https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/puppetry/sogolon-puppet-theater/>