

BEOWULF AND THE MERE WIFE: THE LEGACY OF MONSTROUS WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

In the introduction to her new translation of *Beowulf*, Maria Dahvana Headley writes about her first encounter with Grendel's mother. A young girl searching for a powerful woman-warrior, Headley recalls how she stumbled upon this character, a ferocious-looking monster alone on the page, where there was "no Grendel, no Beowulf, no fifty years a queen... just a woman with a weapon" (Headley vii). Her relationship with the Old English source text began there, blossoming into a full-length novel in her 2018 work, *The Mere Wife*, and, just two years later, her translation of *Beowulf*. Headley's modernizations of the original text highlight the common motif of female monstrosity in literature and how the cultural context of contemporary translations often overwrites the source text's true motives and characterizations. She further explores this idea of female monstrosity in her adaptation of Grendel's mother as Dana Mills in *The Mere Wife*. By choosing to shift a demonized woman to the center of the narrative, Maria Dahvana Headley not only speaks back to a misogynistic canon but creates an entirely new cultural product, challenging the scholarly legacy of *Beowulf* and fighting for the position of women in an intensely patriarchal society.

INTRODUCTION

In adapting and appropriating the text into modern contexts, Headley accomplishes the "decisive journey" that scholar Julie Sanders discusses in her book, *Adaptations and Appropriations*, in which she writes how an author can adapt "the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain...through the actions of interpolation and critique as much as through the movement from one genre to others" (Sanders 35). Sanders defines adaptation as a culmination of many practices, including transpositional shifts into other genres, editorial shifts that engage in trimming the text, amplificatory acts that seek to expand on the text, or an attempt to make old texts currently relevant through the processes of proximation and updating. Sanders emphasizes the good that can arise from adaptations, as these appropriating works often prolong the source text's literary lifespan rather than seeking to replace them entirely. All forms of adaptation serve different roles at different times, adding to an ongoing exploration of the source text. She writes: "For consumption need not always be the intended endpoint of adaptation: the adapting text does not necessarily seek to consume or efface the informing source or intertext... it is the very endurance and survival of the source text...that enables the ongoing process of juxtaposed readings and the ongoing experiences of pleasure for the reader" (Sanders 34). Much backlash toward newer literary adaptations is rooted in this fear of straying from tradition. However, it is often at this very crossroads that authors can accomplish something extraordinary. Through the medium of adaptation, writers and artists can speak back to the canon directly, challenging the implicit biases within and joining in the scholarly conversation.

Through her reworking of *Beowulf*, Headley proves that not only adaptation but also works of translation can act as a means of resistance and a way to recenter the narrative. Embodying the theory Sanders preaches, Maria Dahvana Headley challenges this ancient work's scholarly opinion while bringing it back into contemporary relevance. Both Headley's translation and novel adaptation of the text seek to update the original story for a new audience. Her controversial decision to modernize the poem's archaic vocabulary subverts the traditionalist mindset often seen in Old English translations that seek to preserve the cultural distance of the source text. In doing so, Headley empowers readers to connect with

the text on a personal, immediate level. In her revisioning of the text, she in no way discounts the value of preexisting translations, as she writes in her introduction to the poem: "It is both pleasurable and desirable to read more than one translation of this poem, because when it comes to translating *Beowulf*, there is no sacred clarity. What the translated text says is a matter of study, interpretation, and poetic leaps of faith. Every translator translates this poem differently. That's part of its glory" (Headley xv). Before her translation of the poem was released, she was no stranger to attempts at revamping the hero of the Geats; in *The Mere Wife*, Headley decided to undertake the great challenge of updating the conflict of *Beowulf* for modern audiences. Her retelling goes beyond simple linguistic updates; the novel completely reimagines the original characters and places them in a contemporary, politically-torn America. Headley pushes past simply updating the plot points of the poem and instead goes on to consider the concerns and complexities of the modern day. She prompts readers to examine the ongoing consequences of generational issues, highlighting the harm of unchecked power greed, and the othering of community members. Through embracing the fluidity of interpretation, Headley furthers the ongoing dialogue that exists between past and present readers of aging epics like *Beowulf*.

Despite the poem's present-day prevalence, every translation published today exists due to one lone manuscript. There is only one known original copy of *Beowulf*, contained in a manuscript known as the Nowell Codex, and its survival was a true miracle. The poem was copied down around 1000 CE, in a time when most could not read or write, so most scholars believe the story of the hero of the Geats was passed down orally for years prior. Only forty years after the manuscript's creation, Chinese artisan Bi Sheng invented moveable type in 1040 CE. Despite this, printing technology was not brought to Europe until nearly four hundred years later, with the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in the 1450s. Therefore, every printed book in medieval Europe was a manuscript, each being unique and painstakingly hand-drawn by scribes (Videen 62). The sole original manuscript of *Beowulf* was nearly lost in the Ashburnham House library fire in 1731. The Ashburnham House was home to the royal manuscript collection, containing not only *Beowulf* but also two of the original manuscripts of the Magna Carta, the Lindisfarne Gospels, the manuscript containing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the state papers of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I (Wellesley 61). Despite the damage inflicted on these treasures, librarians managed to save *Beowulf* and many other priceless works, but not without a few singed pages to mark the experience. Throughout the years, the original poem has undergone many translations and transformations, with authors worldwide taking the chance to retell the story of the king of the Geats.

All that modern linguistic scholars know about Old English vocabulary can be attributed to the 3.5 million surviving words from manuscripts of the time. Linguist David Crystal notes that this is only the equivalent of thirty medium-sized novels. The limited words available in these surviving works give scholars no indication of the speech of the ordinary people of the era, as the entire existing Old English corpus is "a product of the scribal elite" (Crystal 522). The poem's original language tells the epic tale of one famous warrior and his journey from aiding the Danes in the battles of his youth to his kingship over the Geats as an older man. The original language of *Beowulf* lends itself to many translations. Over many years, the poem has undergone a significant shift as different writers try their hand at translating the work. Maria Dahvana Headley's translation of the poem and her modern adaptation in *The Mere Wife* seeks to bring the story back to the closer reality of its roots. The feminist narrative Headley spins in her novel is not the product of one writer's creativity gone wild; rather, she uncovers many themes that lie latent in the source text's original language, buried by years of patriarchal translative choices, and emboldened by the feminine power she finds in the women of the poem (Headley xxiii).

Headley faced intense online criticism surrounding the announcement of her translation due to the creative differences and translational choices of her latest work. Traditional scholars approached her writing as fearful fidelity critics, agonizing particularly over her translation of the famous Old English phrase "Hwæt," the opening word of *Beowulf*, translated famously in Seamus Heaney's text as "So." The word's meaning is not precisely known, but its intent is obviously to codify the beginning of a linguistic performance. Headley highlights the many translations of the original Old English "hwæt" in her section headings throughout *The Mere Wife*. She also pokes fun at the heavy-handed masculinity of the source text and the modern day, translating this phrase in her edition of *Beowulf* instead as "Bro." She writes in her introduction how she uses this translation to highlight "the ways that men can afford (or deny) one

another power and safety by using coded language, and erase women from power structures by speaking collegially only to other men" (Headley xxi). Acts of translation deeply inspire Headley in her novel adaptation and her own version of the poem, remaining vital in the conversation surrounding both.

GENERATIONS OF WAR AND VIOLENCE

Maria Dahvana Headley's novel adaptation of the poem, *The Mere Wife*, unfolds as an unrelenting exploration of the consequences of generations of war and violence. She examines the complexities of motherhood through the story of Dana Mills, a veteran thought to have been executed after her capture in the war. She reemerges alive, pregnant, and with no recollection of what has happened to her. In fear of the government accusing her of treason and taking away her baby, she escapes captivity and flees to the mountains of her hometown, now developed into a gated community known as Herot Hall. Dana's harrowing journey is more than just a reimagining of Grendel's mother, as Headley reflects through her character the modern struggles faced by marginalized communities throughout the world. With her community demolished, her peace destroyed, and no other family left remaining, Dana becomes fiercely protective over her son, Gren. She knows the violence he will face despite his innocence, of the danger of being the monstrous "other" in America, as she says: "I saw his body categorized as an enemy body, and I couldn't breathe... To me, he looks like my son. To everyone else? A wonder? A danger?... A boy with brown skin?" (Headley 28). Dana's anguish over her son's categorization as an "enemy body" speaks volumes about the violence and bias on American soil today. Dana fears what she knows will make her son a target, and these fears come true in Gren's friendship with Dil, the future heir to Herot Hall.

The boys' friendship symbolizes the obvious clash between social and economic groups in America but also allows the reader a look into the innocence of childhood friendships. Their relationship blossoms against all odds as tensions rise for Willa, Dil's mother. She spirals into mania, believing something monstrous is living in her neighborhood after an unwelcome discovery in her living room: "...the sheathing of a claw, hooked as a tiger's, pearlescent white" (Headley 59). Willa's fear of the outside world fuels the reign of terror she goes on in the story. The discovery of the claw, whether real or imaginary, provides an interesting parallel to the standard translation choice in many versions of *Beowulf*, explored by Christine Alfano in her article, "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother." Alfano writes how translators take part in the dehumanization of Grendel's mother as a woman in their depictions of her alleged monstrosity. In many translations, Alfano notes that Grendel's mother's *atolan clomun* (line 1502), most literally translated to "terrible grasp," is often misconstrued as "horrible claws," creating a far more sinister depiction of her rage at the death of her son (Alfano 3). In the novel, Willa and the inhabitants of Herot Hall emulate this dehumanization in their treatment of Dana Mills and her son. They create monsters to justify their gross mistreatment of those they view as outsiders. As her delusion reaches its fever pitch after the death of her husband Roger, Willa screams out to her community: "It was a monster with a long tail, claws, and teeth, a huge monster with fur... like a bear, like a person, but also not like a person. The monster's name is Gren". Her call to arms rings out as she shouts: "Kill the monster!" (Headley 124). Willa and, later, Ben Wolf's actions would rank the two as monsters leagues beyond Dana, but social status separates them from her fate. By including these translational choices and turning them into adaptational differences in *The Mere Wife*, Maria Dahvana Headley continues to argue the unfair legacy of the monstrous 'other' in literature and the cultural treatment of Grendel's mother. As a character othered for her rage and difference, she is turned into a monster for the same qualities men are raised to heroism for. Headley creates Dana Mills as a living embodiment of one othered by society: a single mother suffering from PTSD and living in poverty as she raises a son she fears will face societal rejection or far worse.

Scholars who argue that Headley has gone too far in modernizing the text neglect that they, too, have entirely rewritten both character and text in all existing translations of *Beowulf*. It is impossible to separate current cultural context from one's reading and interpretation of any work of literature, as translation and adaptation exist as independent forms of creation. The monstrosity in Grendel's mother exists only through the cultural context of translations of the work. The idea of her as an anthropomorphic beast rather than a woman has come out of the translators' choices, rather than any physical description of her appearance in the text. Headley takes inspiration for Dana from the monstrous

tale woven out of this legacy of translative error, breathing new life into the ancient narrative and challenging readers to consider the contemporary relevancy of these age-old struggles. The strength and solitude of Grendel's mother perplexes both the men of the poem and its translators, as most modern interpretations still write her as a monster. Headley seeks to return Grendel's mother to her proper form through her exploration of female monstrosity in the character of Dana Mills. In this, she challenges what scholars have taken from influential female figures of literature to transform them into the monsters of their stories.

MONSTROSITY IN LITERATURE

This idea of monstrosity in literature is far from new. Used as a common motif in literature, the female monster reflects a patriarchal society's worries about powerful women. The existence of characters like Grendel's mother as warrior women rather than beasts would significantly contradict the traditional gender and social roles of women of the time. These women were seen as transgressors of the natural order, violating the social hierarchy created and upheld by men. Translation allowed male writers to alter details about these female characters, morphing their actions from inspiring resistance to frightening monstrosity. Hana Videen notes in her book *The Wordhord* that, in Old English, no one term translates simply to 'monster.' She writes: "Monster didn't enter the English language until the influence of French in the late fourteenth century, with the Middle English 'monstre' defined as 'a deformed human being or animal' but also 'a wonder'" (Videen 223). Maria Dahvana Headley nods to this linguistic history in the novel's final pages, as Dana hallucinates riding the bus with the old woman from the novel's beginning. In the imagined conversation, she hears the woman say: "Maybe every monster is a miracle meant to change the world, and maybe every monster is just an accident of biology" (Headley 304). At this point in the novel, Headley truly carves out a new fate for historically demonized women in literature. She challenges the long-held beliefs of female monstrosity and proposes instead that beings beyond our understanding may not be monsters, but miracles.

In her modernization of *Beowulf* and her exploration of monstrous women in *The Mere Wife*, Headley challenges the traditional portrayals of female characters in literature, reclaiming agency and giving voice to those silenced by the implicit biases of the canon. Through this, she allows readers to rediscover the potential and power of female monsters to act as empowering figures. Much like Grendel's mother, the people of Herot Hall marvel at Dana's survival in the novel. She and Gren live outside of the acceptable society within Herot Hall, and with the neglect and ignorance they face, it is a miracle that they persist. Gren is a wonder to Dana, but to Willa, he is a monster; he is an animal she fears will sink his claws into Dil. Dana emulates many of the original character qualities of Grendel and his mother, labeled as a *mearc-stapa*, translated today as 'boundary-stepper.' Dana and Gren are ostracized for their difference, as Videen notes:

It is not Grendel's physique that makes him a monster, for though he is enormous and supernaturally strong, so is Beowulf. It is the fact that Grendel is a *mearc-stapa* that makes him monstrous; he is someone who moves outside the limits of civil society... He is a monster, not simply because he has glowing eyes, but because he breaks those boundaries, intrudes into human society, performs acts forbidden by society, and thus threatens society's very existence. How easily those we perceive as outsiders inevitably become our monsters (Videen 223).

For those like Willa, bias can blossom into something much more sinister, seeing claws where there are only children and monsters where there are only mothers. In a webinar for the Center for Fiction, Headley discusses the long tradition of societal failing of formidable women with translator Emily Wilson and author Madeline Miller (*Radical Translations* 16:11). Not unlike Miller's Homeric reimagining in her novel, *Circe*, the men of both *Beowulf* and *The Mere Wife* cannot understand how a single mother, alone in the woods, could manage by herself without the idea of magic or monstrosity, filling in the gaps of the text with a misogynistic worldview. This legacy of monstrosity plays out like a childhood game of telephone as Grendel's mother morphs in translations from a grieving warrior-woman to an otherworldly

beast. As Toni Morrison writes in an essay about Grendel's mother from her collection, *The Source of Self-Regard*: "In true folkloric, epic fashion, the bearer of evil, of destruction, is female" (Morrison 257).

Much of the misunderstanding about Grendel's mother and the argument for her humanity or monstrosity comes about in the liberties taken in past translations. In both her novel and her translation, Headley spoke about her interest in the Old English term traditionally used to describe Grendel's mother, *aglæca-wif*, translated by Seamus Heaney as "monstrous hell-bride" (Heaney 89, line 1259). Headley notes that, in the original Old English, it is simply the feminine form of *aglæca*, a term used for Beowulf himself, translated as "warrior" and "hero" in its most common context. This translation discrepancy inspired her to transform the word instead to "warrior-woman," highlighting the legacy of feminine power buried by the patriarchy for hundreds of years (Headley 56, line 1258). In highlighting the power of Grendel's mother, Headley also pokes fun at Beowulf's over-the-top performance of masculinity. Much of Beowulf's heroism is, by modern standards, rather ridiculous; as Hana Videen points out, "One of Beowulf's heroic qualities, according to the poem, is that he would never 'drunkenly slay hearth-companions [also known as] *heorð-geneatas*.'" She and Headley share similar sentiments about the heralded hero, with Videen joking: "Don't get drunk and kill your friends. The bar for heroism is lower than you think" (Videen 105). The qualities for which Beowulf and Ben Wolf are raised beyond human standards are the same qualities that subject Grendel's mother and Dana to subhuman treatment. By beginning *The Mere Wife* with examples of her selected translations of these contentious words, Maria Dahvana Headley acknowledges the multiplicity of meanings that exist both in literary translation and in female existence. Unlike masculinity, feminine power and rage cannot be understood without the idea of monstrosity. Like her character, Dana Mills, Headley notes that "Grendel's mother does not behave like a monster. She behaves like a bereaved mother who happens to have a warrior's skill" (Headley xxv).

THE SOLITARY WALKER

In the Old English corpus, there is a word to describe this so-called "other": the *ān-gengea*, translated most literally as "solitary walker" (Videen 112). Grendel is described in the poem as the *ān-gengea*, with his solitude often being linked to his perceived evil nature. His existence as a recluse posits a seemingly impossible question: is Grendel the *ān-gengea* because he is seen as an enemy, or is he seen as an enemy because he walks alone? Dana Mills, too, is subjected to a life of violent rejection because of her status as a "solitary walker." Her solitude and social status give the people of Herot Hall a sense of unease. Despite the trauma she has suffered and her unorthodox way of life, Dana's solitude does not make her a monster. She is no greater a monster than the character of Willa, yet it is their class and social differences that determine whose life is worth living. Dana and Willa are two sides of the same coin, facing their carnal fears and desires as they make their way through a society that demonizes women endlessly. All that separates them is the social expectations forced upon them: living on the outskirts of society, Dana is removed from the rules that govern Willa's choices, living externally the carnal perspective that Willa lives internally. The chorus of wives in Herot Hall says toward the end of the novel, in a simple yet powerful moment: "This is what the story of Herot Hall is...revised from fairy tale into horror. The flip side of hero is monster" (Headley 270). One is no different than the other, yet society determines who will be allowed to live.

The concept of the *ān-gengea* serves as the thematic bridge between both Headley's adaptations of the poem, tying together the ancient world of *Beowulf* and the modern struggles of *The Mere Wife*. Headley's successful revision of the text urges readers to consider the patriarchal pressures and prejudices that govern their own biases and to question their paradigm as members of "a country of claws" and a "mob of monsters" (Headley 302). This 'solitary walker' resonates beyond the pages of her writing, echoing back to readers in the history of sexism in translation and the othering of marginalized spaces in the modern day. Headley sheds light on the contemporary relevancy of *Beowulf*'s narrative in her exploration of how wealth and social capital have not changed but merely taken on new forms of monstrosity, as she writes: "The poem is, after all, a poem about willfully blinkered privilege, about the shock and horror of experiencing discomfort when one feels entitled to luxury" (Headley x). Headley invites readers to reconsider the monstrosity so often prescribed to women in literature and to rethink how translation cannot exist untouched by the current cultural context.

CONCLUSION

As written by Alfano and lived out through Headley's adaptations, "It is time to relieve Grendel's mother from her burden of monstrosity and reinstate her in her deserved position as *ides aglæca-wif*: 'lady, warrior-woman'" (Alfano 12). In her recreations of the poem, she brings Grendel's mother back from disgrace, giving her character the chance to live anew. As authors like Maria Dahvana Headley create stories that honor the weight and social importance of their original epics, they enrich the cultural dialogue that surrounds the literary canon. Headley propels the ancient themes of Beowulf back into contemporary relevance through her narrative, honoring its legacy and prolonging future interest in the source text for generations to come.

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