The Men and Women of Beowulf and its Adaptations

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Introduction

When I first read *Beowulf* half a decade ago, the fact that it is a translated work was not as significant to me as it should have been. Like anybody who is familiar with the text, I finished it with a good deal of unanswerable questions, questions which would require a journey to a culture that is long dead: Why did these vengeful, heroic figures live the lives they did? What does it mean to me? In the course of trying to answer the questions that I had, my approach was to break down the use of language in the translation. My intention was to pry from the text and translator some secret meaning I thought the text was obfuscating. From there I felt swept by an apparent familiarity with the modes of signification shared between this bygone culture of Old English speakers and our own. The use of alliteration and kennings brought to mind the poetry of Modern English. While my appreciation for this similarity was not entirely misplaced, using it to approach some sort of hidden meaning as I intended was foundationally wrong for two particular reasons.

For one thing, it would be a failure to properly appraise the value and significance of this translated work to attempt to corner and dissect its raw meaning in the sentences of its translated version. It would mean assuming that the purpose of a translation is to serve a cleaned up version of the original on a platter, but this is not correct. In the words of renowned philosopher and literary theorist Walter Benjamin:

> Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the

> original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language… A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved… by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade. (Benjamin 78-79)

In this last sentence Benjamin means to say that we must take a uniquely literal approach when translating. Instead of trying to imagine what the original words meant in a contemporary poetic context, one must consider words in their isolation to make a good translation. If there is anything distinct to gather from a translation, it is through the "arcade" of "literalness" that are words rather than the "wall before the language" that is the sentence (Benjamin 79). What is meant is that one must understand how the rules of syntax and the literalness of the words in the language in question must be respected in translation, rather than chewing up a sentence and spitting it out, when translating. In this way, the words are not isolated from their context, but understood as constructors of that context. Considering this it would be a mistake to forget that the interpretation of meaning is secondary, if not beneath comparison, to the conveying of how meaning would be approached in its original language. So, when approaching an understanding of a text through translation, the creative process that is translation must be respected as a necessary element of one's own understanding. A translator is necessarily breathing intention into a work so as to avoid a bad translation, a translation which does not simply "resembl[e] the meaning of original" but tries to approach reconstructing that meaning

through "lovingly and in detail incorporat[ing] the original's mode of signification" (Benjamin 79). Benjamin means to say that something serious is at stake here: faithfulness in translation. Faithfulness is to be found in the act of "allow[ing] the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original" (Benjamin 79). Translation must aim to illuminate the original text, not obscure it. Expanding upon this account of what the objective of translating a work should be, Benjamin shares a passage from writer and philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz who theorizes that "Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of foreign works," meaning that translators have mistakenly disallowed the language being translated from influencing their own in the process, they pull the foreign language all the way towards their own instead of meeting between or on the side of the foreign language in terms of reverence and appreciation of modes of signification (Benjamin 80).

This may not seem like a complication in any sense, because these guidelines are reasonable by-and-large. Surely it follows that we have a definitive translation of *Beowulf*. Rest assured the second issue will make clear how much of a problem this is for those with the objective of understanding and appreciating *Beowulf* in mind. In his review of Seamus Heaney's famous translation of *Beowulf*, Howell Chickering opens with an explanation of the second problem at hand:

> Disagreement over what constitutes fidelity to the original has prevented general acceptance of a standard Modern English *Beowulf*. This is as it should be, whether

> we mean fidelity to the letter or to the literary qualities of the original. It's not only that it is impossible to bring any poem's full literary effect across in translation. There is also a special problem in going from Old to Modern English because we cannot help but see prominent features of Old English poetry – alliteration, parataxis, and nominal compounding – as properties of Modern English poetry, when they actually create very different literary effects in Old English. (Chickering 161-162)

This complicates the task of the translator as Benjamin lays out, since the translator of Old English to Modern English is wont to misinterpret its modes of signification. Chickering calls this issue an extension of a "persistent genetic fallacy that mistakes the remote historical continuity between Old English and Modern English as an indication of their essential identity, when in reality a whole millennium separates the two culturally and linguistically" (Chickering 161). Just because Modern English is the language that survives Old English does not mean we can reach the meaning of Old English through genealogical inference alone. This does not stop translators from repeating the key mistake of ignoring the call for "a literal rendering of syntax" (Benjamin 79). Interestingly, even famous translations such as Heaney's are not without such divergences from the task of the translator. Chickering describes Heaney's translation of the scene in *Beowulf* where the Danes discover the head of Hrothgar's dear advisor Aeschere, who was slain by Grendel's vengeful mother. Chickering notes this scene as being "the most surprising periodic delay in the entire poem" with how syntax is used (Chickering 165). By this he means that the original "delays the discovery of the head… of Hrothgar's beloved counselor until the last half-line… This delivers a real narrative shock to the

reader as well as to the Danes. However, in Heaney's version Aeschere's head is displaced from emphatic final position to the 'foot' of the cliff, which isn't even in the original" (Chickering 165). So we see that a complete responsiveness to the text is not necessarily the definitive feature of a landmark translation, and by extension perhaps not necessarily the definitive feature of arguments involving the meaning of *Beowulf*. While Heaney has wandered slightly off task if Benjamin is taken into account, he has also participated in an ages-long, important tradition regarding the text. By making it his own, an example of his own poetry, he has breathed life into it in a way that is only permissible in such particular circumstances. This is what should be considered definitive, the powerful way that translating *Beowulf* interacts with Benjamin's theory and his interest in the afterlife of a text.

Chickering's observation that "disagreement over what constitutes fidelity to the original has prevented general acceptance of a standard Modern English *Beowulf*" is key to understanding what relation there is to the reader's impression of *Beowulf* through translation and what Old English scholars may argue (amongst themselves especially) to be a true understanding of the text (Chickering 161). While certain elements as laid out by Benjamin are necessarily included in the discourse in the form of axioms, such as a call for "a literal rendering of syntax" for the sake of "prov[ing] words" to be constructors of meaning, and the aim of observing "the very life of language and its works" as the essence of a piece of writing rather than the incidental "subjectivity of posterity" that it is rooted in, the debate around what and how Old English means before it is translated complicates attending to these satisfactorily, and makes translating *Beowulf* especially generative of varying impressions (Benjamin 79, 73). When a

translator puts a part of themselves into the translation of *Beowulf*, they extend its afterlife. The text is a foundling which Modern English has adopted and made its own.

Topping all the confusion that is baked into our understanding of *Beowulf* is something not concerned with translation and dead languages but confounding all the same: the text itself is foci rich, and lending weight to certain foci gives rise to wildly different interpretations. If one summarizes *Beowulf* succinctly (for the sake of conversation, perhaps), it is a fairly banal story poem. For example: *Beowulf* is a poem in which its title character kills three monsters and dies. The message is that the world is intensely entropic and only the prowess of great men can make a difference in the course of that. This summary is extremely interpretive, not because of a failure to capture the objective progression of the original narrative, but as a product of leaving out the most significant and memorable part of *Beowulf* to its readers. By way of this reductive summary, I have omitted the digressions from the motion of the plot that the poem takes at multiple points. Either by way of the poet (See Appendix) themselves interrupting the action to tell a different but related story, or characters in the narrative doing so themselves, these digressions are commonly regarded as means by which the text builds depth. But these digressions are more than modes of setting the scene or comparison, they speak to a powerful subtext which shines through upon reflection. They are points for the reader to choose to focus on. The text itself begs one to complete it with their impression of the importance of these things. The way that the modern reader engages with the text should be rooted in how these digressions allow the tale to be understood differently. The most poignant digressions in *Beowulf* build up a specific subtextual momentum that calls attention to the tension and unfairness that arises from the relationships between men and

women in the setting, and engaging with this subtextual content can help provide answers to important questions such as why Beowulf does not provide for his kingdom, and what the significance of the seemingly out-of-place mother of Grendel is.

Understanding Modthryth

The poet of *Beowulf* depicts a worrisome setting of vengeance and failed legacy. The world is fleshed out through stories told to contrast with the eponym, often outlining the grief brought upon truce makers as a result of the embers of vengeance being stoked repeatedly. This much is the casual flow of life in the setting, a brutal, victim generating tumult. The influence of women in the setting is often tragically overridden by the men of their lives. Men are expected to take revenge, women are expected to accept this passively. Exceptions to this are found in the first two foes of Beowulf, with Grendel being a monster who kills without need for vengeance, and Grendel's mother being a woman who does not accept her role of helplessness. To understand how the poem comments on the roles of men and women, we must turn to these aberrant exceptions and relate them to the in-group.

Women's paradoxical role is one of the more befuddling aspects of the poem. Their influence on the feud cycle is at once essential and without agency. This view is quite easily ascertained from Beowulf's report to Hygelac. In describing the hospitality of Hrothgar's court, Beowulf says the following:

> Sometimes the queen
>
> herself appeared, peace-pledge between nations
>
> to hearten the young ones and hand out
>
> a torque to a warrior, then take her place.
>
> Sometimes Hrothgar's daughter distributed
>
> ale …
>
> young bride-to-be

the guardian of the kingdom [Hrothgar] sees good in it

and hopes this woman will heal old wounds

and grievous feuds (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2016-2029)

This is the plainest expression of the expected role of women throughout the poem. The queen is indicated to be married under conditions similar to those that Hrothgar's daughter will be. Both of them fulfill the role of "peace-pledge" since their marriages are intended to be solutions to "grievous feuds" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2017, 2029). Her role as stabilizer is elaborated on through her habit of "hearten[ing] the young ones and hand[ing] out… torque[s]," that she reassures and is pleasant towards the court denizens, also being the one who delivers the king's gifts to their recipients (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2018-2019). The two women also function beyond domestic stability, being considered diplomatic prospects as is described by how "the guardian of the kingdom sees good in" his daughter's imminent marriage to a feuding clan (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2027).

This is consistent with accounts given from the poet rather than Beowulf himself. In one instance the poet describes the virtuous nature of Hygelac's Queen, Hygd. To do so he tells the story of Modthryth, recounting how:

If any retainer ever made bold

to look her in the face, if an eye not her lord's [father's]

stared at her directly during daylight,

the outcome was sealed: he was kept bound

in hand-tightened shackles, racked, tortured

until doom was pronounced – death by the sword

> slash of blade, blood gush and death qualms
>
> in an evil display. Even a queen
>
> outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that. (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* 1934-1942)

The poem outlines the status quo by providing an exception. The poet goes on to describe how Modthryth is redeemed, becoming good after her eventual marriage to Offa, but it is difficult to deny the problematic way she, as one of few women who is introduced outside the context of marriage, is characterized. It is curious how sparse the commentary on her motivation is, that she meets those who "look her in the face… directly during daylight" with furious revenge (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1934-1935). I propose that this is an example of a favorite literary technique on the part of the poet that is broad in scheme. At points such as this, the poet says very little where you would want otherwise, carefully selecting which details the reader is left without. How exactly could someone such as Modthryth eventually react with such violence to male attention? I do not think the audience is supposed to assume madness on her part, since her apparently mysterious desire for murder is cured by marriage. The poet assumes a tone of detestation for Modthryth's resistance by focusing on her reactions without discussing at any satisfactory length what provoked them. The obviousness of Modthryth's plight as a woman bound to be exchanged may have been such that it needed no outlining on the part of the poet, but instead of stating the obvious the poet creates a deeper impression through a curious absence or minimization. A patriarchal specter haunts this digression, and this is consistent with other digressions.

The difficulty is that arguments involving what is *not* said in particular areas are bound to be dismissed as conjecture. But in certain instances it cannot be ignored, and the argument for the poet of *Beowulf* using absence as a rhetorical device is critically relevant. The reader is being trained by the poet to attend to absences when they appear, and Rafael J. Pascual outlines this much in his article "Hrothgar's Warhorse and the Audience of Beowulf." In his article Pascual mentions an inconsistency between the gifts that Beowulf receives from Hrothgar and those that he gives to Hygelac and Hygd upon returning to Geatland, as an example of this use of absence to a rhetorical end. The lines of interest as translated by Heaney are:

> Next the king ordered eight horses
> with gold bridles to be brought through the yard
> into the hall. The harness of one
> included a saddle of sumptuous design,
> the battle-seat where the son of Halfdane [Hrothgar]
> rode when he wished to join the sword-play. (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1034-1039)

So to summarize, among the gifts given to Beowulf are eight horses, one of which is the king's own warhorse. When Beowulf returned to Heorot, he bestowed gifts to his king and "four horses were handed over" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2164). Right after this, Beowulf gave the queen "the priceless torque that the prince's daughter, / Wealhtheow, had given him; and three horses" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2173-2174). The astute arithmetician may deduce that only seven horses were given to the king and his family as gifts, not eight. There is a missing horse, and notably the poet

does not mention the lordly saddle when the bestowal of the others is mentioned. Pascual discusses how most scholars suggest that "the omission of a reference to this single horse implies that Beowulf decided to hold on to it for himself… a possibility raised by the editors of the fourth edition of *Klaeber's Beowulf* in their commentary" (Pascual 124). Pascual instead argues that

> The element in the characterization of Beowulf that most frequently recurs throughout the poem is his unswerving loyalty and generosity towards Hygelac. Hrothgar's warhorse, moreover, is the specimen in the team that a king would have presumably been most pleased to receive. It is therefore difficult to credit that, precisely when Beowulf's fidelity and devotion to his uncle were being brought into focus, the poet implied that the protagonist concealed the existence of this exceptional horse from Hygelac out of self-interest." (Pascual 125)

Beowulf, habitually loyal to Hygelac, would not have taken a kingly horse for himself. Pascual says that the answer to this puzzling omission can instead be found in how Hygelac is mentioned "in a contemporary source as being unable to be carried by horses since he was 12 years old" due to his gigantic stature (Pascual 126). Pascual argues that Hygelac as a giant was a part of the popular culture of the audience of *Beowulf*, as the "contemporary source" claims that the "gigantic bones" of Hygelac were on display along a pilgrimage route (specifically at the mouth of the Rhine), and so the claim "appears to be based on pre-existing material ultimately derived from the oral testimonies of eyewitnesses" (Pascual 126). By omitting the kingly warhorse, the poet is conforming to the contemporary legends regarding his gigantism. Beowulf would have discarded the royal horse so as not to embarrass the king for his inability to ride it. To a modern reader

this seems unlikely, since one would suppose that mentioning that Hygelac was a giant would help a reader "understand the absence of the warhorse," but the contemporary audience would already be well familiar with this (Pascual 127). So, the poet is communicating through absence by raising an expectation and then discarding it. The reader expects a discussion of what happened to the warhorse, and does not get one. Similarly, the reader expects some sort of genesis to Modthryth's murderous reaction to suitors, but is left to imagine it. There is an intentional lack of completeness to the expressions of the poet. This numerical inconsistency, the literal and irrefutable absence of the warhorse, is the most solid example of the poet communicating by not referencing something that should be obvious to the reader.

That Pascual's theory emerged as recently as 2021 suggests to me that the lack of scholarly attention surrounding absences may not be limited to "Hrothgar's warhorse" (Pascual 124). The fact that these absences are meant to be supplemented by a wider cultural understanding is fascinating. Just as the reader is called upon to supplement the absence in the instance of "Hrothgar's warhorse," so also the reader is called upon to see that there is more going on in the narrative of Modthryth than is mentioned. It is clear to the reader that there is a latent understanding of the patriarchy and the crisis it creates for women including Modthryth, so the poet does not feel the need to mention the depth of her problems. By minimizing the explanation of her murderousness to a simple discontent for being looked at, the poet borrows a technique of dismissing such women by insisting on overreaction in a subtextual admission of guilt (that is, an offense is admitted to but it is not considered severe enough to warrant outrage where it likely should). The poem's contemporary audience must have been meant to attend to this lack

of explanation, the same way they are expected to attend to the lack of explanation for the missing warhorse. This is further supported by how the episode involving Modthryth follows directly after Beowulf finishes giving gifts to Hygelac. Maybe the poet intended to prime the reader to pay close attention by using the numerical inconsistency, so when further inconsistency is shown in Modthryth they know to rely on subtext to complete their understanding of the narrative.

Vengeance for Grendel

The issue of Modthryth is far from the poet's first instance of under-explaining the plight of women for a narrative effect. After Beowulf rips Grendel's arm off and the Danes correctly assume that the wound will kill Grendel, they begin a celebration. During the celebration we are told how "the king's poet performed his part / with the saga of Finn and his sons unfolding / the tale of the fierce attack in Friesland / where Hnaef, king of the Danes, met death" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1066-1069). To summarize the saga as it is shared in the poem, the Danes and Frisians have settled a feud via marriage when vengeance takes hold once again. Those involved include the Danish royals, that being King Hnaef, his son Hengest, and sister Hildeburh, whose marriage to the Frisian King Finn ties the two clans together despite a history of strife. A gathering at Finnsburg, the seat of Finn's power, somehow turns bloody by means we are not privy to in the poem, but we can assume that it is the result of a previously settled feud starting up again, as would be consistent with other parts of the poem. There is a battle between the two peoples, and during a lull they notice that King Hnaef died fighting, as well as a son of Finn and Hildeburh who goes unnamed. This drives Hildeburh to incredible grief. Seeing this as well as the thinning of his own ranks, Finn offers a truce with the following conditions: the Danes will cease the fighting, Friesland will swear fealty to the Danish throne, and protect the honor of their slain king in any discourse. Hengest, son of the killed king and heir to the Danish throne, accepts this. However, he spends the winter season brooding in Friesland since the weather does not allow them to sail home. Having spent the season in this state of misery sharing lodgings with those who killed his own kin, he is easily moved to take revenge when a kinsman, without a word, lays a renowned

sword on his lap. So, despite his mother's grief and despite Finn's promises, he takes up the feud again, exacting revenge in a spectacular fashion. Finn and his family are killed, save for the Danish Hildeburh who is returned to Daneland after Finnsburg is burned to the ground. It seems that Hildeburh's grief only momentarily delayed the deconstruction of her life, since the men seem to shift on a whim to deconstruct what they at other times admit to be fair and even, the settling of scores never truly ending. So her life as Queen is dissolved, and Hildeburh is brought home like a gift revoked from an ungrateful recipient. The peace that Hildeburh was supposed to ensure was broken up by bloodlust, something which is apparently sung about in a celebratory light. One must appreciate the irony of the fact that Wealhtheow and her daughter, both feud settlers (or bound to be feud settlers in Freawaru's case) in the same vein as Hildeburh, must listen in. Appearances of Wealhtheow even bookend the telling of this tale.

The inclusion of Finn's saga is interesting since there seems to be such an obvious disconnect between the pride of vengeful men and the clear suffering it brings to the women they traffic. As if to provide retaliation in the name of suffering women, Grendel's mother appears first in a departure from the scene of celebration:

> Grendel's mother,
>
> monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.
>
> She had been forced down into fearful waters,
>
> the cold depths, after Cain had killed
>
> his father's son, felled his own
>
> brother with a sword…
>
> –

> Broken and bowed,
>
> outcast from all sweetness, the enemy of mankind [Grendel]
>
> made for his death-den. But now his mother
>
> had sallied forth on a savage journey,
>
> grief racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1258-1263, 1274-1278)

It is an interesting choice on the part of the poet to describe Grendel's mother as "brood[ing] on her wrongs" because the audience has no reason to interpret her as having done wrong (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1259). One might think that Grendel's mother is faulted for being a willing consort to Cain, but this view appears to be rejected in how Hrothgar recounts the local legends of the denizens of the mere, where he says "They are fatherless creatures, / and their ancestry is hidden in a past / of demons and ghosts" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1355-1357). It is also unlikely that the audience would interpret the poet as describing Grendel to be fatherless simply because what father sired him left him and his mother. I would argue this because the poet makes sure to distinguish characters precisely regarding who is father to them. For instance, Beowulf is often called by the title 'son of Ecgtheow,' a straight-forward reference to his father being the legendary warrior Ecgtheow. This is an important distinction, since Beowulf was actually raised by Hrethel, father-in-law to Ecgtheow. This is not so as to suggest a rejection of Beowulf as a son, since delegating the raising of one's child was considered an honor to the recipient in the North Germanic culture the poem abides by. Those abandoned by their fathers are plainly identified as orphans, such as in the case of the legendary Shield Sheafson, who the poet describes as "A foundling to start with"

(*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 7). So the most likely conclusion to be drawn here is that the identity of whoever could theoretically be a father to Grendel is insignificant, and I would push further to say that the absence of such a figure is meant to be more literal than one might pick up. Considering Grendel's mother also falls under the umbrella of "fatherless creatures" according to Hrothgar, I would say that the audience is most likely led to conclude that the means which demons such as Grendel and his mother reproduce are not analogous to those found in natural creatures, hence the exact details of their lineage being obscured by "a past/ of demons and ghosts" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1355, 1356-1357). What "wrongs" she is brooding on may not be her own, but instead she may be brooding on the wider scope of wrongs women such as she have suffered (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1259).

Furthering this, I think that there is enough obscurity to the exact nature of these creatures that it could have worked for some vengeful father-monster to emerge from the mere to avenge Grendel. The poet is intentional in his gendering of the parent, however. The answer as to what informs his particular choice of mother rather than father can be found in how the task of vengeance, in a mother's hands, is something that the poet and his audience likely identify as unorthodox, and perhaps monstrous by extent. If the necessity of this theme of vengeful women being monstrous is not clear enough, I would once again mention the story of Modthryth, whose tendency to dispatch gazers on in an "evil display" does not in itself seem out of the ordinary in a setting where vengeance seems so commonplace (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1941). It is her divergence from her usual role that distinguishes her, just like Grendel's mother.

Grendel's mother makes her attack, during which "Danes lay asleep, earls who would soon endure / a great reversal, once Grendel's mother / attacked and entered. Her onslaught was less / only by as much as an amazon warrior's strength is less than an armed man's" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1280-1282). Heaney's rendering of these lines is different from older ones such as Tolkien's prose translation, which reads "Now she was come to Heorot, where the Ring-Danes slept along the hall. There suddenly now old ills returned upon those knights when into their midst crept Grendel's mother. Less indeed was the terror, even by so much as is the might of women, the terror of a woman in battle compared with armèd man" (Tolkien 50). I would say that Tolkien rendering the subject of comparison to women as "armèd man" intentionally carries phallic implications, that his rendering references not only her lack of weapons but her status of womanhood (and perhaps thereby suggesting subordinate status) (Tolkien 50). In Gayle Rubin's "Traffic in Women" she calls the reader to attend to and interrogate the various means through which women are commodified and trafficked in various cultures, and in doing so she explores different understandings of how this arrangement emerges. Rubin investigates Lacan's approach to making sense of this arrangement in saying:

> Lacan… makes a radical distinction between the penis and the "phallus," between organ and information. The phallus is a set of meanings conferred upon the penis… Castration is not a real "lack," but a meaning conferred on the genitals of a woman… The presence or absence of the phallus carries the differences between two sexual statuses, "man" and "woman." Since these are not equal, the phallus also carries a meaning of the dominance of men over women… [it] also carries the difference between "exchanger" and "exchanged"... Ultimately, neither

> the classical Freudian nor the rephrased Lacanian theories of the Oedipal process make sense unless at least this much of the Paleolithic relations of sexuality are still with us (Rubin 51)

The nature of phallic culture as summarized by Rubin relates to the difference in rendering the translation as “arméd man” or “an armed man” (Tolkien 50, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1282). Where Heaney’s rendering implies that she is outmatched by a man so long as they have a weapon (she being unarmed in the literal sense at the moment, though she later proves to own more than one bladed weapon), Tolkien’s rendering seems to imply that it is not simply weapons but the phallus that makes it so “less indeed was the terror” (Tolkien 50). The reductive duality of the phrase “arméd man” holds with it the implication that the two are not to be separated (Tolkien 50). Heaney describing Grendel’s mother as comparable to “an amazon warrior” invokes a good deal of creative license compared to the more conservative rendering “a woman in battle” (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1282, Tolkien 50).

The difference between Grendel’s mother and the other less successful women in the poem is key. To support this I would point out how the poet again speaks through absence by deciding not to give her a name outside of her relation to Grendel. I think that the purpose of this is to show how she is an exception from the male dominated world she comes from, since the poet is implying they cannot put into language her identity as it does not abide by their standard naming procedures. Unlike Modthryth there is no happy ending where she returns to her position of status and stability through her relation to a man. Instead I would argue there is the possibility of a different kind of happy ending for

Grendel's mother. The prelude to the fateful end of her encounter with Beowulf shows this much:

> So she pounced on him and pulled out
> a broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge
> her only child. But the mesh of chain-mail
> on Beowulf's shoulder shielded his life,
> turned the edge and tip of the blade.
> The son of Ecgtheow would have surely perished
> and the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth
> had the strong links and locks of his war-gear
> not helped to save him: holy God
> decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord,
> the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance
> Once Beowulf got back up on his feet (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1545-1556)

I think what is incredibly important here is how much of a lesser combatant Beowulf is. The two are not dissimilar. Beowulf's swimming contest with Breca establishes that he could reasonably be expected to contend with a "wolfish swimmer" such as Grendel's mother, and his prowess on dry land (where Grendel's mother decides to drag him despite the advantage she has in the water) is clear through how he killed Grendel. He survives what could have been a fatal blow not simply because of "the strong links and locks of his war-gear" but because "holy God / decided the victory" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1552, 1553-1554). It is certain that some corrective force has decided that

Grendel's mother will not have her final vengeance, despite her capacity to take revenge. Instead she dies fighting a battle on equal footing with a justified adversary, the most dignified death of any warrior in the poem. When Wiglaf rebukes Beowulf's cowardly retainers he expresses the nature of this well saying "A warrior will sooner / die than live a life of shame" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2890-2891). Even though Beowulf wins the day by killing her, Grendel's mother has an unsettling presence that makes the plight of women difficult to ignore. She is an argument for an exception, for the possibility of satisfaction and agency for women, and Beowulf must live with the knowledge that he is an example of what prevents this dream from living on.

The End of Beowulf

Once the episode of Grendel's mother has ended I would argue that Beowulf has entered a point of no return. With Grendel's mother Beowulf is introduced to a departure from any typical notion of a woman. The significance of this in the narrative can best be appreciated in the frame of Gayle Rubin's critique of use of the word 'patriarchy':

> the [typical] use of *patriarchy* obscures other distinctions. Its use is analogous to using *capitalism* to refer to all modes of production, whereas the usefulness of the term *capitalism* lies precisely in that it distinguishes between different systems… The power of the term lies in its implication that, in fact, there are alternatives. (Rubin 40)

The power behind the strange independence from man that Grendel's mother represents is "in [her] implication that, in fact, there are alternatives" to the ambiguous and often tragic way women interact with homosocial bonding (Rubin 40). I do not think that one needs to engage in a highly contemporary or divergent frame of thought to understand the possibility that patriarchy may be a coincidental arrangement, and not some perfect law of nature. Beowulf's encounter with Grendel's mother, whose functionality lies outside of the typical arrangement, has a long lasting effect on the narrative in that it disillusions Beowulf to the necessity of that arrangement. When Beowulf returns to Hygelac and informs him of what happened at Herot, he makes a lengthy digression that is of particular interest for its cynicism:

> Think how the Heathobards will be bound to feel
> their lord, Ingeld, and his loyal thanes,
> when he walks in with that woman to the feast:

Danes are at the table, being entertained,

honoured guests in glittering regalia,

burnished ring-mail that was their hosts' birthright,

looted when the Heathobards could no longer wield

their weapons in the shield-clash, when they went down

with their beloved comrades and forfeited their lives.

Then an old spearman will speak while they are drinking,

having glimpsed some heirloom that brings alive

memories of the massacre; his mood will darken

and heart-stricken, in the stress of his emotion

he will begin to test a young man's temper

and stir up trouble, starting like this:

'Now my friend, don't you recognize

your father's sword, his favourite weapon,

the one he wore when he went out in his war-mask

to face the Danes on that final day?

After Wethergeld died and his men were doomed

the Shieldings quickly claimed the field.

And now here's a son of one or other

of those same killers coming through our hall

overbearing us, mouthing boasts,

and rigged in armour that by right is yours.'

And so he keeps on, recalling and accusing,

working things up with bitter words
until one of the lady's retainers lies
spattered in blood, split openjohn gardner
on his father's account. The killer knows
The lie of the land and escapes with his life.
Then on both sides the oath-bound lords
will break the peace, a passionate hate
will build up in Ingeld and love for his bride [Freawaru]
will falter in him as the Feud rankles. (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2032-2066)

In this passage, Beowulf begins by explaining who the subject of his concerns are. They are "the Heathobards" for the most part (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2032). Beowulf notes that Ingeld, lord of the Heathobards, is the subject of a peace-weaving marriage with the Danish princess Freawaru and describes how their interactions are bound to be rife with tension, since the Danes will wear "burnished ring-mail that was their hosts' birthright" or armor that once belonged to the Heathobards but was taken by the Danes after a past battle (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2037). What is fascinating is that this fact alone is not enough to inspire action in anybody. Instead, Beowulf describes a unique mechanism of how generations pass trauma and inherit feuds. The tipping point is when an "old spearman" becomes "heart-stricken" after he spots a Dane wearing something that was looted during the "massacre" the Heathobards suffered at the hands of the Danes (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2041, 2044, 2043). He employs the tactic of humiliating "a young man" by pointing out how his

"father's sword, his favourite weapon" is now in possession of "killers" who "overbear" and "mouth… boasts" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2045, 2048, 2049). The spearman "keeps on" with this humiliation until "one of the lady's retainers lies split open / on his father's account" and the marriage between the two sides falls apart as the feud resumes (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2051, 2053-2054). The idea that romance could survive in this situation is dismissed by Beowulf who predicts that "a passionate hate / will build up in Ingeld and his love for his bride / will falter" as a consequence of the feud starting again (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2063-2066). Beowulf's prediction that the marriage Hrothgar's daughter will fail to provide in the way the Danes hope is interesting for how it contrasts with Beowulf's praises and promises to Hrothgar regarding the future:

> If there is any favour on earth I can perform
> beyond deeds of arms I have done already,
> Anything that would merit your affections more,
> I shall act, my lord, with alacrity. (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,*
> 1822-1825)

While Beowulf pays his dues with his polite conversation with Hrothgar, his real reservations regarding him come out in his report to Hygelac. What is also interesting about this is that Beowulf correctly predicts the dissolution of that marriage, though he could not have known this. The downfall of Hrothgar and burning of Heorot would be a familiar story to the audience of *Beowulf*, and the poem itself assures us of the inevitability of Heorot's destruction very early on. The poet relays how:

> The hall towered

its gables wide and high and awaiting

a barbarous burning. That doom abided,

but in time it would come: the killer instinct

unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant. (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 81-85)

Even so, I would say that the act of relaying such a cynical account of Hrothgar's court is not simply a nod to history as the audience knew it, but introduces us to how the poet characterizes Beowulf from this point forward: he sees the influence of peacekeepers as fallible, and isolates himself from them as a sort of concession to the entropy of his world. If one were to psychologize him, which I would argue is somewhat appropriate because of his complicated choices later on, one might say that after his string of victories at Heorot (the second of which he won by a narrow margin) he has resolved to only fight battles he knows he can win. The struggle to keep peace, to strategically provide for the future, is one that he considers too difficult.

One might infer that such a character trait is not necessarily harmful so long as he is not expected to be in charge. Furthering this one may argue that in the process of deferring the throne Beowulf has simply rejected an unusual course of action since he is not a son of Hygelac. To do so would be to reduce a conversation noted in the narrative by Frederick M. Biggs, that being a "central theme, a contrast in two models of succession" (Biggs 710). While Biggs argues that the poet makes a "distinction… between a Germanic model of succession with its many heirs and a Christian one with its emphasis on sons" and that "Beowulf supports the second model of succession by deferring to Heardred when Hygd offers him the throne," I would argue that Beowulf was

instead making a serious gesture in his rejection of the throne since it would be sensible for him to be selected from a wider kin group as Germanic succession allows (Biggs 712, 711). It was expected that he would take the throne with Hygd's support, but his denial of this opportunity shows his disdain for the idea of being the actor in Geatland's exchange of women.

When the time comes for Beowulf to take the throne, there is a perplexing leap in time. It is written that after Hygelac and his sons die in battle "the wide kingdom / reverted to Beowulf. He ruled it well / for fifty winters, grew old and wise / as warden of the land" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2208-2210). This in itself does not seem like an issue, but when Beowulf is dying in the dragon's barrow he tells Wiglaf "Now is the time when I would have wanted / to bestow this armour on my own son, / had it been my fortune to have fathered a heir / and live on in his flesh" which introduces us to the fact that Beowulf is without children (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2729-2732). If the subtext up to this point regarding Beowulf's disdain for peace weaving and marriage as an extension is not clear enough, he seems comfortable in thinking he never made himself available to such complications in saying "doomed as I am and sickening for death; / because of my right ways, the Ruler of mankind / need never blame me when the breath leaves my body / for murder of kinsmen" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2739-2743). While the most obvious allusion included in his mention of "murder of kinsmen" is to the cainite demons Grendel and Grendel's mother, I would say that it also alludes more widely to the inevitable feuding and destruction that political marriage ends up bringing (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2743).

In his final moments, Beowulf misuses all of the resources he has gathered up until this point. His odd conception of the concept of ring-giving is accidentally outlined at the beginning of Wiglaf's rebuke, where he says:

> Anyone ready to admit the truth
>
> will surely realize that the lord of men
>
> who showered you with gifts and gave you the armour
>
> you are standing in
>
> -
>
> was throwing weapons uselessly away (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2864-2867, 2871)

While Wiglaf is blaming the cowardly warriors who fled from Beowulf, I think there is an element of irony. Beowulf fully intended upon "throwing weapons uselessly away," this much is suggested by how he not only "was too proud / to line up with a large army" when he is preparing to meet the dragon but also tells the men he brings with him to "remain here on the barrow, / safe in your armour, to see which one of us / is better in the end at bearing wounds" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 2871, 2529-2531). I would say that the significance of this lies in that Beowulf is not in a grounded state of mind when he is rallying to fight the dragon. The reasoning is undoubtedly the destruction of Geatland, but more than that it is fate calling for Beowulf in a way that is particularly frustrating for him. Hrothgar warned him that pride in his own good deeds is not enough to ensure a stable future, citing his own experience with how he "came to believe / my enemies had faded from the earth" until the monstrous Grendel brought destruction to his court (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1772-1773). If Grendel is a divine punishment

for Hrothgar's complacency in sitting on a throne ensured by feuding, then the dragon is a divine punishment for Beowulf's similar lack of adequate future proofing. Beowulf's attempt to escape the entropy that results from participating in peace-weaving only results in its manifesting differently.

When Beowulf encountered Grendel's mother, he had to confront the reality that the traditional role of women may not be necessary. The two characters outline challenges to the "double standard of interpretation" Rubin identifies in psychoanalytic evaluations of morality:

> Masochism is bad for men, essential to women. Adequate narcissism is necessary for men, impossible for women. Passivity is tragic in man, while lack of passivity is tragic in a woman (Rubin 59)

Grendel's mother rejects masochism and is far from accepting a passive role, she is a challenge to the notions of these things being naturally female. Rubin's frustration stems from a Freudian claim that does a good job explaining Beowulf's abstaining from his system of morals: "We can demonstrate with ease that what the world calls its code of morals demands more sacrifices than it is worth, and that its behavior is neither dictated by honesty nor instituted with wisdom" (Rubin 59). It is my earnest belief that the poem leaves open the interpretation that while Beowulf is held as a good king, he also fails his kingdom by failing to produce an heir, through not engaging with his system of morality. He runs through the motions of assembling a group of trusted warriors, but he apparently does not have a good enough rapport with any of them. Only one of these warriors he took into his circle, Wiglaf, could identify a self-destructive act despite his respect for Beowulf.

The consequences of Beowulf's passing are best understood in the context of the digression his mourning contains. While it seems that everybody in Geatland is mourning in the fashion of "extoll[ing] his heroic nature and exploits / and g[iving] thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing" since he was so "gracious and fair-minded," we are also told of someone mourning for different reasons:

> A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
> with her hair bound up, she unburdened herself
> of her worse fears, a wild litany
> of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
> enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
> slavery and abasement (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 3173-3174, 3181, 3150-3155)

The Geat woman, as part of the course of her mourning, focuses on the "nightmare and lament" that will result in the power gap that Beowulf has left (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 3153). In this divergence we are once again reminded of Beowulf's failure to ensure a stable future for the kingdom. I would say that similar to the Geat woman, I cannot help but lend importance to the tragedy of Beowulf's interaction with the other gender over his heroism.

Interlude: A Brief Word on Adapting *Beowulf*

The artistic interest in conveying a personal impression of *Beowulf* goes beyond the desire to provide one's own faithful translation. I suppose that the afterlife of *Beowulf* is best found in these pieces, which provide commentary through the means of their own intentionality. When an artist retells *Beowulf* in whatever medium, they are providing a sort of commentary on how they interpret the importance of the original. While these adaptations do not all pertain to the interests and arguments of the majority of this analysis, the reader would doubtless be enriched to be familiar with how the story of *Beowulf* has transformed in the words of others not just through translation. In John D. Niles' article "Rewriting *Beowulf*: The Task of Translation" he offers an excellent piece of advice not only for experiencing translations but adaptations as well:

> In reading any rewriting of *Beowulf*, one should ask, 'Who is translating, and what power is he or she trying to assert over the text?'… as long as the poem is being rewritten by translators who are also strong poets in their own right, the process of misprision or 'strong misreading' that is the driving force in terms of literary tradition… is at work. [Otherwise] someone, somewhere, is wanting to raise *Beowulf* from the dead and set it in motion again before a new generation of readers. (Niles 875-876)

Niles is arguing that translations of *Beowulf* should be appreciated in terms of the unique creativity that translators inevitably include since they are "strong poets in their own right" (Niles 876). By taking an intentional leap away from the core narrative of *Beowulf* the authors of works meant to adapt rather than translate *Beowulf* are engaging in the process of "misprision" as a literary tradition or the raising of "*Beowulf* from the dead"

for the sake of sharing the narrative. I would argue that *Beowulf*'s afterlives in forms that are not necessarily true to the original in form or narrative fidelity are interesting for how they connect to the essential reasons for continued interest in *Beowulf*. It is like a creative canvas for artists of various forms who engage in “the process of misprision” and express themselves in the process while also offering perspective on the original text (Niles 876).

John Gardner's *Grendel*

In his novel *Grendel*, John Gardner complicates the events that lead to the narrative of *Beowulf* by expanding upon the motivation provided for Grendel in the original text. By changing Grendel from a murder-crazed monster to a thinking and feeling outcast, the story begs the reader to question the effect of using storytelling to produce a partisan cosmology. The issue of Grendel's origin is a curious one outside of Gardner's adaptation. Toni Morrison puts it well in her essay "Grendel and his Mother" by saying "who was Grendel and why had he placed them [the Danes] on his menu? Nowhere in the story is that question put. The question does not surface for a simple reason: evil has no father. It is preternatural and exists without explanation" (Morrison). There is no explanation given or perhaps needed for Grendel's badness, no deep or dedicated interrogation of where or what exactly Grendel comes from. It is not included because the poet may interpret it as a matter of course, just as the reasons for the fighting at Finnsburg as discussed after Grendel's death are not included.

The reader may only gather a murky impression of Grendel's origin from Gardner's adaptation. He is described as living in the company of his mother, same as in the original poem. In the case of the adaptation we are given detailed accounts of Grendel's experiences, as well as being exposed to his dialogue, but his mother is without speech and is unable to communicate outside of the most primitive forms of expression. This leaves us (and more importantly Grendel) in the dark as to his origins. Because of this, Grendel develops an interest in how humans tell stories, especially when these stories are betrayals of the reality Grendel knows.

In the narrative, Grendel spies on Heorot and Hrothgar. Grendel comes to witness the court poet, referred to in the narrative as the Shaper, as he relays an account of Hrothgar's origin. This is a reference to the beginning of Beowulf, which does the same through sharing the legend of Shield, herald of the Shielding family which Hrothgar currently heads. In summary, the story is about Shield's rise to prominence from orphan hood, his legacy being ensured through his son, who grew beyond his father thanks to the gifts of wealth he was lent. By distributing these gifts to loyal followers, he ensured that the kingdom would only grow when it was time for him to lead. Upon hearing this story about Hrothgar's legacy, Grendel questions how it pertains to his experience of his own origins and events in his life, considering his experiences predate their recounting in Gardner's narrative:

> I remember the ragged men fighting each other till the snow was red slush, whining in winter, the shriek of people and animals burning, the whip-slashed oxen in the mire, the scattered battle leavings… Yet I also remembered, as if it had happened, great Scyld [Shield], of whose kingdom no trace remained, and his farsighted son, of whose greater kingdom no trace remained. (Gardner 44)

Grendel staunchly believes that his personal experiences regarding the origin of Heorot, the gritty and petty violence of "ragged men fighting in the snow," are essentially betrayed by the poet possibly describing the same history in a more glorious light (Gardner 44). Grendel questions whether there is good reason to distort the truth in this fashion, and this inquiry only grows in depth as the narrative progresses.

In *Grendel*, Hrothgar's court poet catches Grendel's passive interest for years. Grendel continues to question what the value of his contributions is, shifting between

opinions on the Shaper. At one point, Grendel derides him by saying "He sang for pay, for the praise of women – one in particular [Wealhtheow] – and for the honor of a famous king's hand on his arm. If the ideas of art were beautiful that was art's fault, not the Shaper's" (Gardner 49). Grendel's derision of the Shaper is interesting in that one can argue that it could be understood as an attack on storytelling in general, that non-literal renderings of reality could only be products of persons who would fraudulently reap "pay… praise… honor' (Gardner 49). This is an extreme argument, and its presence here in a retelling of an already told story with a whole different intentionality is confounding. For context, I would point to an interview with the author, John Gardner, where he was asked "Is the contribution of literature as important as the contribution of chemistry [Gardner's earlier field of study]?" (Christian 70) to which Gardner replied "A story is the most valuable thing in the world. Nothing is as precious as a good story, a perfectly told story… The relationship between a writer and a reader ought to be a model love relationship… in which you give the reader the best story you can think of" (Christian 70-71). His response is a resounding yes, but it is importantly qualified by his argument for the perfection of storytelling, that it "ought to be a model love relationship" concerning "the best story" (Christian 71). On the surface, and perhaps in the perspective of Grendel, it seems there is disagreement here between Grendel's derision of storytelling and Gardner's hailing of it. I would argue that this is not actually the case. The connection lies in Gardner's call for good storytelling, and Grendel's presence as a critical element. If the Shaper represents a primitive form of literature, Grendel represents a primitive form of literary criticism. This inclusion is consistent with Gardner's argument for the value of literature. It seems that Grendel's fault is his combative stance

towards storytelling, but this much cannot be helped since he is an outsider. Moreover, his dissatisfaction with the stories told only comes to grow as *Grendel* progresses.

In the narrative, Grendel reflects on the value of the Shaper's contributions more, asking "Did they murder each other more gently, because in the woods sweet songbirds sang" (Gardner 49). His ponderings continue until he comes across isolated lovers on the countryside, giving way to a key scene:

> They talked nothing, stupidities, their soft voices groping like hands. I feel myself tightening, cross, growing restless for no clear reason, and I made myself move more slowly. Then, circling the clearing, I stepped on something fleshy, and jerked away. It was a man. They'd cut his throat. His clothes had been stolen. I stared up at the hall, baffled, beginning to shake. They went on talking softly, touching hands, their hair full of light. I lifted up the body and slung it across my shoulder. (Gardner 50-51)

This scene is interesting for how it leads the reader to believe that Grendel is about to kill the two lovers and begin his war on Heorot, only for his determination to be broken when he discovers the murdered man, who he picks up for food after reflecting on his own feelings of terror. After Grendel takes up the body of the murdered man and makes for home, he stops when he hears the Shaper tell a story that involves him, inspired by Grendel's raids on the livestock of the hall:

> The harp turned solemn. He told of an ancient feud between brothers which split all the world between darkness and light. And I, Grendel, was the dark side, he said in effect. The terrible race God cursed.

> I believed him. Such was the power of the Shaper's harp! Stood wriggling my face, letting tears down my nose, grinding my fists into my streaming eyes, even though to do it I had to squeeze with my elbow the corpse of the proof that both of us were cursed, or neither, that the brothers had never lived, not the god who judged them. (Gardner 51)

The "power of the Shaper's harp" is its ability to rearrange reality into a version that is more interesting by way of organization and accompaniment (Gardner 51). This speaks to the process of adaptation considering one could imagine the Shaper's songs as an adaptation of reality considering the degree of license he employs. License is not a novel tactic on the part of the Shaper, and is inherent in the telling of any story. Grendel's entrance to Heorot with the corpse is a culmination of the love-hate relationship Grendel has with the world the Shaper forms through the power of literature. It is a crisis that results from him learning how he fits into what he could have excused as banal. Grendel then makes his way towards the hall, roaring with grief, eventually leaving the body after he is attacked, earning him his murderous reputation and reinforcing the believability of the Shaper's stories about him.

In the act of retelling this portion of Beowulf in its own context, and with Grendel as a listener, Gardner poses some interesting questions: could someone come to terms with the benefit of storytelling in the particular manner shown if that someone was necessarily demonized and understood as evil through those stories? Is there hope for reproach against the real time formulation of prejudice, or does struggling against it only lend weight to harmful accounts? I would say that all of these questions amount to the same end, that being an effective call to criticize stories which attempt to set the margin,

to attend to the divergence between stories which are empowering and stories which empower through the necessary outing of arguably innocent individuals, like poison slipped in with sugar. This is not so as to say that the original poem uses Grendel in this way. The best explanation for his out casting is that he is “anathema” forced to “haunt… the marches” because of his relation to Cain (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 110, 103). Still, the curious issue of damnable Grendel is one that modern adaptations gravitate towards, and for good reason.

Maria Dahvana Headley and Contextualizing Wealhtheow

In the name of understanding what role women play in the poem one should consider how Maria Dahvana Headley retells *Beowulf* in a modern setting in *The Mere Wife*, faithfully conveying the impression of the original while also making decisive changes which are part of a new narrative intentionality. The novel is written with a distinct appreciation for not simply what meaning the original may have had, but for how the narrative expresses these meanings. This is most clear in the narrative's interesting mode of translating the characters of the original into a modern context.

Headley's mode of character adaptation is exemplified best through her depiction of the character analogous to Wealhtheow. In the original poem, Wealhtheow is an example of "the bonding role of women between hostile war bands" since not only does her marriage to Hrothgar ensure peace between the Wulfings (Wealhtheow's clan) and the Scyldings (Hrothgar's clan), but her presence at Heorot underscores the social obligations of the courtiers there (Fee 289). In his article "'Beag & Beaghroden': Women, Treasure and the Language of Social Structure in 'Beowulf'" Christopher Fee outlines how the original poem consistently describes Wealhtheow and other peace-weaving women with the language of "objects of material value" which are servile to men in a similar fashion to their treasure hoards (Fee 290). Fee discusses different approaches to understanding exactly what this functional analogy is meant to be, and settles on one which again roots itself in the language of the original. Fee points out an argument made by Tom Hill, that there is a "controversy concerning the exact meaning and derivation of the name of Hrothgar's queen" in that "the most obvious rendering of 'Wealhtheow' is 'foreign servant or slave'" (Fee 290). While the implication that Wealhtheow is a name meant to

suggestive servitude is clear enough, Fee pushes the argument in saying that "[Wealhtheow's] name also serves to remind the audience of [her] status as war booty… Wealhtheow is unique in *Beowulf* in that her very name reinforces the association between women, even (or perhaps especially) queens, and objects of material value" (Fee 290). The most salient point to retain in order to understand how Wealhtheow has been adapted is how she represents the particular objectification of women of high status.

We are introduced to Willa, the counterpart to Wealhtheow in *The Mere Wife*, as she is reminiscing on her journey so far as part of the dullness of her daily life. She had a tumultuous encounter with a musician, which led to a failed marriage and an abortion, all of which is recalled in the tone of a distantly remembered fiction. Willa recovered and started life again with a different husband, but the transactionary means by which this came to be suggests a malicious quality to it. It is described that "after the requisite recovery, Willa's mother handed her Roger's phone number, procured from Roger's mother" (*The Mere Wife,* 23). Clearly Willa's mother did not waste any time getting her into the pipeline for another marriage, only waiting for the "requisite recovery" to pass before hooking her up with another date (*The Mere Wife,* 23). Headley makes it clear that the recovery of Willa, and her eventual marriage to Roger (Hrothgar's analogue) are driven by her mother's desire to save face rather than out of a care for Willa as a person. This much is reinforced when Willa grows a little older and we are informed that "when there's anything that looks like a wrinkle or a spot, her mother notices before she does" (*The Mere Wife,* 24). Her mother's interest in her appearance is compounded by her flat out telling Willa "You have a man to keep" (*The Mere Wife,* 24). Since Roger is a plastic surgeon, he has even "done some work on Willa" (*The Mere Wife,* 24). It is plain to see

how this adaptation of character is true to the original in how Willa upholds representing "the association between women, even (or perhaps especially) queens, and objects of material value." (Fee 290) The modernization of the character helps the contemporary audience understand a possible impression of how these characters function in *Beowulf*.

A Closing Word

In conclusion, I would say that regardless if the points laid out in the course of this piece have been wholly agreeable, they are exemplary of what a wealth of meanings one can yield from *Beowulf*. It would be a deception not to mention my fondness for my own theories as a product of my fondness for the text, which may be perceivable as ignorance to contrary arguments. This is an inevitable aspect of my own process of "misprision or 'strong misreading'" as described by Niles, in that my interest in keeping it alive and showing how we connect to it foundationally is bound to be a literary process which is partially a personal expression and not a perfect representation of the text (Niles 876). Just as one should "see no reason to lament the publication of new translations of *Beowulf*" they should appreciate those who come to provide new criticism in a decades old field of critique (Niles 876). The new translations of *Beowulf* are contributions to its "new lease on life," appreciation for its various modes of signification should follow to complete its transition into being "news again" (Niles 876). But if there is any impression I desire leave on those less familiar with *Beowulf*, and a refreshment I might provide to those deeply invested in *Beowulf*, it is that the text's relationship to you as a reader and the impression it leaves is not necessarily subordinate to the richness of its context. *Beowulf* is apt and ready for the appreciation of a modern audience, and personal appreciation for it will guide its continued rise in popular culture.

Appendix

A brief word about the origins of this piece, and the nature of the "poet" is long overdue. For the sake of clarity whatever creative forces put together the writing as it appears in the Nowell Codex will be referred to as "the poet" throughout this essay. But even that phrase carries implications that are contested. It implies that a single scribe wrote the poem down, but this is accepted as untrue, that rather it was written down by two. One scribe began the piece, another finished. There is not a general consensus on whether the poem as written in the Nowell Codex is a faithful copy of a poem possibly originating in the eighth century, or if it was a reworking containing intentionally archaic language that was a new creative product from the eleventh century. Adherents to the former theory tend to cite "Max Kaluza's 1896 comments on a link between etymology and metrical resolution in Old English verse, marshaling 'Kaluza's law' as proof of an early date for *Beowulf*" (Weiskott 443). However, not all scholars agree on the significance of Kaluza's observations:

> Since speakers normally know very little about past states of their own language, when a phonological distinction disappears, one might expect a metrical rule based on it to disappear straightaway. Yet, poetry being mysterious stuff, it is not at all clear that this is how things work in practice. Early composition is not the only plausible explanation for Kaluza verses. (Weiskott 447).

Proponents of the latter theory believe that dating the origin of *Beowulf* as poetry is as simple as adhering to carbon dating to determine how old the manuscript itself is. It is theorized that the two scribes of *Beowulf* were not copying at all, and were generating a new work. My personal take is that the latter theory is more sensical, and that the Kaluza

verses are not proof of an early composition. I would argue that drawing the conclusion that they do is far more a stretch of the imagination. Christianity is so incredibly prevalent in the poem that the Norse elements the scribes associate it with seem to be for the purpose of novelty and appealing to a wider body of spoken legend that other medieval accounts arise from. There is a longstanding search for some conceptualization of a "pure" *Beowulf* that predates the surviving manuscript, but ultimately the idea that such a piece existed is incredibly restrictive from a critical standpoint. Discrepancies and arguments regarding the text typically circle around to the idea that the origin of the text is mysterious, a product of a strange and lost culture whose very basic means of expression is similar yet alien to our own. I think that criticism of the text is best done in the framing of egress from interpreting the text as something that sparks a nostalgia for a more heroic age unintentionally. Critics may have suffered a misdirection by the poets, down to Kaluza, whose etymological assessment I suppose is accurate but a product of reading writing intended to read as archaic. It is sincerely doubtful that the Christian monks who wrote the Nowell Codex would be unfamiliar with and thereby unable to replicate linguistic archaism, given that medieval monks are generally accepted as those whose charge is producing and maintaining bodies of text that are often copied painstakingly, perhaps from older dialects of English.

Given that one accepts the theory that *Beowulf* was composed in the eleventh century rather than being an eleventh century copy of an eighth century composition, I would argue that the text becomes even more generative of appreciation for what creativity went into it. For example, scholar and award winning author Maria Dahvana Headley explains an edit made during the poems eleventh century writing:

> In the original manuscript, for example, Scribe A wrote that Grendel was doomed because he was descended from *chames cynne*– or ‘Ham’s kin.’ That got scratched out, presumably by Scribe B, and replaced with *caines cynne*, ‘Cain’s kin.’ Subsequent references to Able make a case for that palimpsestic edit, and for the curse–which makes of Cain a fugitive wanderer… Neither [lineage] gives us the full story of Grendel’s grievance, but the two curses, while often conflated, are different. One curse makes Grendel a fugitive, the other a slave. Neither give us the full story of Grendel’s grievance, but the cursed lineage has often been used to simplify Grendel’s identity through association, rendering him irrationally and indubitably evil, rather than someone provoked by specific Danes. (*Beowulf: A New Translation,* xii-xiii)

So it appears that at the very least the first introduction of Grendel in the Nowell Codex had a word scratched out and replaced. One argument for why this would have happened is that it was simply a mistake owing to the similar appearance of the two words in Old English script. This could be as a result of the scribe misreading an older manuscript that they were copying from. Alternatively it could be that the second scribe, more rigorous in how he intended to weave Christianity into the folk tale, found that having Grendel descend from Cain rather than Ham was more generative for the purpose of storytelling. In his painstaking survey of appearances of Cain in contemporary sources, Oliver F. Emerson outlines how biblical apocrypha and rabbinical sources amount to an argument that “the giants were… descendant[s] of Abel’s murder” (Emerson 921). Emerson notes the apocryphal scripture narrative in which it is said that angels came to earth and seduced human women, the product of this being tyrannical giants which are part of what

prompts God to enact his flooding of the world. The relevance of this is how the poet of *Beowulf* seems to leave hints to this being the genuine origin of our monsters. We can draw this conclusion from the fact that Beowulf only manages to kill Grendel's mother because he "saw a blade that boded well, / a sword in her armoury, an ancient heirloom / from the days of the giants, an ideal weapon" (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation,* 1557-1559). One may be eager to assume that the inclusion of these giants is a nod to Norse mythology, but considering the presence of giants in these religious texts and their relationship to Cain therein, it seems more likely that the sword is a keepsake of Grendel's mother from before the biblical flood. This could even mean that she is supposed to be a survivor from before the flood. This theory is compelling thanks to her consistent association with water. This is not a definitive theory, considering how complex the interactions between Norse and Old English tradition may have been. Perhaps the presence of giants in both of their traditions makes mentioning them a useful element of synthesis.

I think one could argue that this amounts to these scribes having formulated this version of *Beowulf* for the first time in the eleventh century, and that part of this process was deliberation over how the scribes will explain the origin of the demons in the narrative in Christian terms. One of them originally supposed Ham would be a good explanation, as they would have seen that correlation of Ham with heathen monsters as reasonable since "heathen gods were connected more directly with Ham, who was thought to be the first idolator" (Emerson 928-929). The second scribe decided that it was not too late to adjust the narrative in its infancy, and edited the first inclusion of Grendel

to be a reference to Cain, not Ham, afterwards fleshing out this relationship and how it culminates in Grendel’s mother being killed with her own heirloom sword.

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