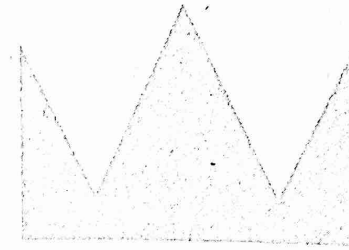
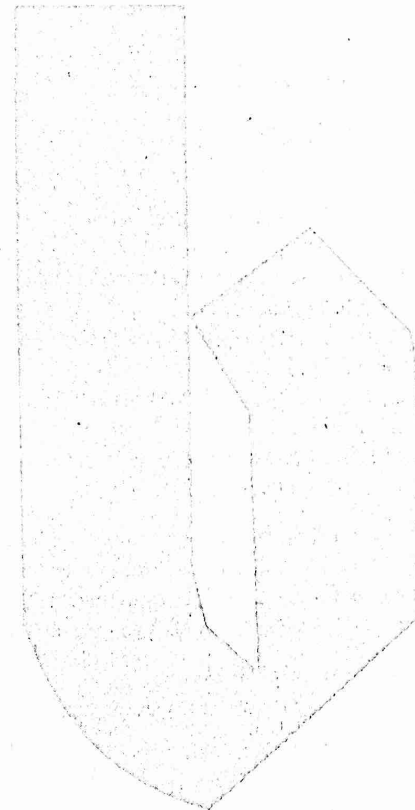


MCD x FSG Originals
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
New York



BEOWULF

A NEW TRANSLATION MARIA DAHVANA HEADLEY



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Farrar, Straus and Giroux
120 Broadway, New York 10271

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Printed in the United States of America
First edition, 2020

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Headley, Maria Dahvana, 1977– author.
Title: Beowulf : a new translation / Maria Dahvana Headley.
Other titles: Beowulf. English.
Description: First edition. | New York : MCD × FSG Originals ; Farrar,
Straus and Giroux, 2020.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020012283 | ISBN 9780374110031 (pbk.)
Subjects: LCGFT: Poetry.
Classification: LCC PS3608.E233 B46 2020 | DDC 811/.6—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020012283>

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For Grimoire William Gwennlian Headley,
who gestated alongside this book,
changing the way I thought about love, bloodfeuds,
woman-warriors, and *wyrd*.

INTRODUCTION

My love affair with *Beowulf* began with Grendel's mother, the moment I encountered her in an illustrated compendium of monsters,* a slithery greenish entity standing naked in a swamp, knife in hand. I was about eight, and on the hunt for any sort of woman-warrior. Wonder Woman and She-Ra were fine, but Grendel's mother was better. She had a ferocious look and seemed to give precisely zero fucks, not that I had that language to describe her at that point in my life. In the book I first saw her in, there was no Grendel, no Beowulf, no fifty years a queen. She was just a woman with a weapon, all by herself in the center of the page. I imagined she was the point of whatever story she came from. When I finally encountered the actual poem, years later, I was appalled to discover that Grendel's mother was not only not the main event

* I wish I could tell you which compendium of monsters it was. Hunts have revealed two images that may have been conflated into the version I remember. Brian Froud and Alan Lee's *Faeries* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1978) contains an assortment of eldritch figures from English folklore, among them the nightmare-provoking two-page spread of

but also, to many people, an extension of Grendel rather than a character unto herself, despite the significant ink devoted to her fighting capabilities. It aggravated me enough that I eventually wrote a contemporary adaptation of *Beowulf*—*The Mere Wife*, a novel in which the Grendel's mother character is a protagonist, a PTSD-stricken veteran of the United States' wars in the Middle East. That might have been the end of it, but by that point I'd tumbled head over heels into *Beowulf* itself, and was, like everyone who ever translates it, obsessed.

It's a somewhat unlikely object of obsession, this thousand-ish-year-old epic. *Beowulf* bears the distinction of appearing to be basic—one man, three battles, lots of gold—while actually being an intricate treatise on morality, mascu-

Jenny Greenteeth and Peg Powler, both child-eating greenish river hags, each depicted solo, partially immersed. Neither of these align wholly with my memory (they're unarmed), but they're similar to other (monstrous) depictions of Grendel's mother. However, I grew up in a house full of art books; my mother's a painter. J. R. Skelton's illustration of Grendel's mother, from *Stories of Beowulf* (1908), depicts a greenish, profoundly muscular warrior-woman kneeling atop a golden-armored Beowulf, raising her *seax* to slay him. It's very much like paintings of the heroic Judith (beheading Holofernes and posing with her sword) I saw around the same time, and it's possible that all these ingredients converged into the Grendel's mother I remember. On a less literary, but incidentally very *Beowulf*-related note, add some Sigourney Weaver (*Alien*, 1979) to this. All that said, I spent a lot of my childhood in library corners, looking at books no one knew I was looking at. It's still possible the image I remember exists out there somewhere. If you find it, let me know.

linity, flexibility, and failure. It's 3,182 lines of alliterative wildness, a sequence of monsters and would-be heroes. In it, multiple old men try to plot out how to retire in a world that offers no retirement. Hoarders of all kinds attempt to maintain control of people, halls, piles of gold, and even the volume of the natural world. Queens negotiate for the survival of their sons, attempt to save their children by marrying themselves to warriors, and, in one case, battle for vengeance on their son's murderers. Graying old men long for one last exam to render them heroes once and for all. The phrase "That was a good king" recurs throughout the poem, because the poem is fundamentally concerned with how to get and keep the title "Good." The suspicion that at any moment a person might shift from hero into howling wretch, teeth bared, causes characters ranging from scops to ring-lords to drop cautionary anecdotes. Does fame keep you good? No. Does gold keep you good? No. Does your good wife keep you good? No. What keeps you good? Vigilance. That's it. And even with vigilance, even with courage, you still might go forth to slay a dragon (or, if you're Grendel, slay a Dane), die in the slaying, and leave everyone and everything you love vulnerable. The world of the poem—a fantastical version of Denmark in the fifth to early sixth century and the land of the Geats, in present-day Sweden—is distant, but the actions of the poem's characters are familiar.

As much as *Beowulf* is a poem about Then, it's also (and

always has been) a poem about Now, and how we got here. 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.

There are many translations out there, enough that you could read one a day for months and not repeat. They make up a startlingly diverse corpus of interpretations and styles, with the occasional screeching veer into new plot points. (How about the transgressive and fairly persuasive notion that the last survivor of a forgotten tribe, in burying his people's gold, transforms by curse into the dragon?)^{*} Every English-language translator's take on how to translate this text is motivated by different ideas of how to use modern English to convey things inexpressible in it.

This translation, for example, was completed during the first months of my son's life. Parenting a baby is listening to someone use a language in which certain sounds mean a slew of things, and one must rely heavily on context to gain clarity;

^{*} This tempting theory is from Raymond Tripp's "The Dragon King of *Beowulf*," published in 2005 in *In Geardagum*, and also dealt with in *More About the Fight with the Dragon* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983). It's not unprecedented. In Iceland's *Volsunga Saga*, Fafnir starts out a dwarf and ends up becoming a dragon due to cursed gold. Perhaps, for a translator, more pragmatically, shape-shifting the last survivor into the dragon makes sense of difficult pronouns in that section, which create consistent bafflement about which character is being referenced—the dragon, the last survivor, or the thief.

a language in which there is no way to translate accurately the ancient sound that means "hungry," because, to the preverbal speaker, the sound means and is used to signal a compendium of things, something more like "belly hurt—longing—breast—empty mouth—bottle—swallow—milk—help."

While this gloss is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, it's not far from the actuality of Old English translation. It's possible to make a case for more than one definition of many words, and the challenge is to land on an interpretation that braids rationally into the narrative, without translating a male warrior into a bear, or a woman warrior into a literal sea wolf rather than a metaphoric one.^{*} You must choose wisely, and then,

^{*} I do think both those interpretations are incorrect, but one of them is a generally accepted truth of text, a supporting argument for monstrosity in Grendel's mother. The other interpretation would these days be considered an embarrassing, though delightful, error—almost no one thinks that by *beorn*, and indeed by "Beowulf," as in "Bee-Wolf," as in "honey-eater," as in "Bear," the poet meant Beowulf to be (even partially) a bragging, talkative bear (never mind our hero's supernatural strength and capacity to swim long distances, dive, and hold his breath for a full day). It'd be fun, though: an armored, perpetually unwed bear, a predecessor of Philip Pullman's *panserbjørne*, especially in a narrative already populated with wonders. Friedrich Panzer's (no relation to Iorek Byrnison's tribe) 1910 *Bear's Son* thesis, surveying possible folkloric lineage for the *Beowulf* story, is a highly recommended storyzone. And if we felt like it, we could wander for a long time in bear cult ties (check out Richard Neal Coffin's 1962 PhD dissertation, "*Beowulf* and its Relationship to Norse and Finno-Ugric Beliefs and Narratives," Boston University; in warriors buried on bearskins with hounds and gold beside them; in notions of Beowulf-as-stealth-berserker.

somehow, structure those wise (or frustrated) choices into poetry.

With this text, perfection is impossible. The poem was written in the language we now call Old English, sometime between the mid-seventh and the end of the tenth centuries, and exists in a lone manuscript copy, the Nowell Codex. The version contained therein was written down sometime between AD 975 and 1025, by two scribes, A and B, with different handwriting and different tendencies toward error. Add to this the fact that the manuscript isn't intact: bits of poem were lost over the centuries—first in the gestation of the written version itself, which was at the mercy of memory and (presumably) mead, and later, in a library fire in 1731, which badly singed the edges of the manuscript. It was rebound in the late nineteenth century, and in the interim, its edges crumbled beyond resurrection. Worms feasted. Least visibly and most significantly, scribal emendations changed the nature of the story in both subtle and unsubtle ways.* Gaps were

* 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 Abel make a case for that palimpsestic edit, and for the curse—which makes of Cain a fugitive wanderer. Grendel, of course, isn’t a wanderer. His (and his mother’s) home address is well known to Hrothgar, so he’s not exactly a fugitive, either. Biblically, Ham’s kin also got cursed, because Noah’s son Ham saw a drunken, naked Noah (it’s up for grabs what that “seeing” actually consisted of), and so Noah cursed Ham’s kin with servitude. The notion of

plugged with metric maybes, and lacunae inserted into lines that appear whole, to make sense of shifts in tone. All this is to say that *Beowulf* has been wrangled with, wrung out, and reworked for centuries. It’s been written upon almost as much by translators and librarians as it was by the original poet(s) and scribes.

The original *Beowulf* was composed by an author who imagined a world in which a monster is infuriated by loud music, a dragon ripples luxuriously about beloved gold, an elderly woman is able to make viable physical war against all the king’s men, and a young warrior can hold his breath for a full day while fighting sea monsters, winning his battle only because God shines a spotlight on a slaying sword. A “perfect” translation would require the translator to time travel fantastically rather than historically—more Narnia than *Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure*. As if this weren’t enough, the

Noah’s curse on Ham persevered over the centuries into the still-cited American insistence that slavery is ideologically justified by the Bible, and onward into the potential queerness of Ham being justification for homophobia. Two for one Biblical bias support! Notions of othering lineage may be applied to Grendel either way, but the two curses, while often conflated, are different. One curse makes of Grendel a fugitive, the other, a slave. Neither gives 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. For more on this topic, see Toni Morrison’s “Grendel and His Mother,” collected in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2019).

language of the poem is as much a world-building tool as the plot is, engineered with the poet's own anachronistic filter, an archaic, lyric lexicography.*

"If you wish to translate, not re-write, *Beowulf*," J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in 1940, "your language must be literary and traditional: not because it is now a long while since the poem was made, or because it speaks of things that have since become ancient; but because the diction of *Beowulf* was poetical, archaic, artificial (if you will), in the day the poem was made."[†]

Tolkien and I wouldn't have agreed when it comes to the sort of language required for a translation of *Beowulf*—perceptions of "literary" and "traditional" language vary widely depending on who's doing the perceiving, and Tolkien

* And who was this poet, anyway? No one knows. Someone alive at some point in a three-century swath, someone (probably) in England, (probably) not a woman, but again, who knows? The poet was certainly a genius; genius defies gender. The idea that there are only a couple of poems in the Old English corpus that could plausibly have been written by female poets (specifically "The Wife's Lament" and "Wulf and Eadwacer," both because of POV) is a ridiculous one. The notion that women write only about women's business is equally ridiculous—as indeed is the idea that there is such a circumscribable arena as "women's business" at all. A wonderful thing one learns when one writes about imaginary kingdoms for a living is that, in fact, anyone can imagine anything, and if the writer is good, they can do it persuasively.

† "On Translating *Beowulf*," collected in *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

had a liking for the courtly that I do not share—but we agree that the original's dense wordplay must be reckoned with.

Amid a slew of regressions in the past half decade, I must cite a win—the democratization of information. Access to formerly gate-kept texts has been radically broadened. Until recently, it was a cotton-gloved privilege to view the original manuscript of *Beowulf*. Now a click, and there you are, looking at handwriting a thousand years old: "*Hwæt. We Gardena in geardagum, þeodcýninga, þrym gefrunon . . .*" Not only is the original accessible to anyone with an internet connection, so are a huge number of translations and volumes of evolving scholarship, many long out of print. This translation exists because of that access.

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.

And so, I offer to the banquet table this translation, done by an American woman born in the year 1977, a person who grew up surrounded by sled dogs, coyotes, rattlesnakes, and bubbling natural hot springs nestled in the wild high desert of Idaho, a person who, if we were looking at the poem's categories, would fall much closer in original habitat to Grendel

and his mother than to Beowulf or even the lesser denizens of Hrothgar's court.

I came to this project as a novelist, interested specifically in rendering the story continuously and clearly, while also creating a text that feels as bloody and juicy as I think it ought to feel. Despite its reputation to generations of unwilling students, forced as freshmen into arduous translations, *Beowulf* is a living text in a dead language, the kind of thing meant to be shouted over a crowd of drunk celebrants. Even though it was probably written down in the quiet confines of a scriptorium, *Beowulf* is not a quiet poem. It's a dazzling, furious, funny, vicious, desperate, hungry, beautiful, mutinous, maudlin, supernatural, rapturous shout.

In contrast to the methods of some previous translators, I let the poem's story lead me to its style. The lines in this translation were structured for speaking, and for speaking in contemporary rhythms. The poets I'm most interested in are those who use language as instrument, inventing words and creating forms as necessary, in the service of voice. I come from the land of cowboy poets, and while theirs is not the style I used for this translation, I did spend a lot of time imagining the narrator as an old-timer at the end of the bar, periodically pounding his glass and demanding another. *I saw it with my own eyes.*

A brief and general word about meter and style tropes:

early English verse is distinguished by both alliteration and stress patterns over a caesura (in oral versions, the caesura is a pause—on the page, a gap between the two halves of a line). Each half line contains two stressed syllables; the two stressed syllables in the first half line alliterate with the first stressed syllable in the second. Rhyme is used in *Beowulf*, but less predictably. It's typically used to emphasize sequences—waves crashing against a shore, for example. And stylistically, *Beowulf* employs a variety of compound words, or kennings, to poetically describe both the commonplace and the astounding. Hence, we've got some wonderful and distinctive things: "whale-road" for sea; "battle-sweat" for blood; "sky-candle" for sun.

Like everyone who's ever translated this text, I had some fun. After reading a variety of translations mimicking early English meter, and attempting a version myself, I decided that corpse-littered hill wasn't one I wished to die on. Likewise, attempts to translate this text into other meters, which have typically yielded inadvertent hilarity. At some point, I encountered A. Diedrich Wackerbarth's 1849 ballad translation,* here quoted in the introduction of Grendel's mother:

* Read Chauncey B. Tinker's exuberantly claws-out *The Translations of Beowulf: A Critical Bibliography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1903) for a catalog and critique of *Beowulf* translations, verse, prose, fragments, and paraphrases up to 1902. Of Wackerbarth's translation, Tinker

The mother Fiend, a Soul had she
Blood-greedy like the Gallows-tree,
And she for deadly Vengeance' Sake
Will now the Battle undertake.

I didn't desire to graft peach branches to a cactus, or vice versa, and so I gave myself leave to play with all the traditional aspects, preserving many kennings and inventing some of my own, while also employing the sensibilities of a modern poet rather than an ancient one. This translation rhymes in a variety of ways, including the occasional heroic couplet. I love raucous rhyme schemes and rampant alliteration, and the near universally derided line from John Richard Clark Hall's 1901 translation, "ten timorous troth-breakers," delights me. Sure, it's undignified; sure, it's nasty—but so are the runaway warriors it references. My alliteration (and embedded rhyme) often rolls over line breaks, which would be forbidden in early English metric rules. In this translation, though, I wanted the feeling of linguistic links throughout.

shudders: "It would seem that if there were a measure less suited to the *Beowulf* style than the Miltonic blank verse used by Conybeare, it would be the ballad measures used by Wackerbarth. The movement of the ballad is easy, rapid, and garrulous. Now, if there are three qualities of which the *Beowulf* is not possessed, they are ease, rapidity, and garrulity . . . But there is still another reason for shunning them. They are almost continuously suggestive of [Sir Walter] Scott. Of all men else the translator of *Beowulf* should avoid Scott" (48).

The poem employs time passing and regressing, future predictions, quick History 101s, neglected bits of necessary information flung, as needed, into the tale. The original reads, at least in some places, like Old English freestyle, and in others like the wedding toast of a drunk uncle who's suddenly remembered a poem he memorized at boarding school.

There are noble characters in *Beowulf*, but the poem itself is not noble. There is elevated language in *Beowulf*, but the poem feels populist. It's entertaining, episodic, and full of wonders. As I constructed the persona of the narrator, other things about the poem fell into place—the insistent periodic recaps for a distracted multnight audience, the epithets and adamant character calibrations interspersed throughout ("That was a good king"). I emphasized those things where I found them, both for the mnemonic aid factor and for the feeling of a communal, colloquial history.

There has been much debate about the level to which the translated text should be archaized to emphasize for modern readers the alien landscape of early English verse, and specifically to what degree translators should mimic the poet's own choice to use words already archaic and poetic at the time of the poem's composition. In some cases, the urge to archaize won soundly over the urge to make sense. Thus, there are plenty of crinolined "forsooth" and "ween" ridden translations to choose from, should the reader be so inclined, as well as a series of Scots-tinged selections: "mickle" has tempted

many, as has a hunger for “twixt,” and though much of this is attested in the Old English, in translation one can easily devolve into a peculiar Elizabethan pastiche.

Given that both poetic voice and communicative clarity are my interests here, my diction reflects access to the entirety of the English word-board—some of these words legitimately archaic or underknown (“corse,” “sere,” “sclerite”), others recently written into lexicons of slang or thrown up by new cultural contexts (“swole,” “stan,” “hashtag: blessed”), and already fading into, if not obscurity, uncertain status. Language is a living thing, and when it dies, it leaves bones. I dropped some fossils here, next to some newborns. I’m as interested in contemporary idiom and slang as I am in the archaic. There are other translations if you’re looking for the language of courtly romance and knights. This one has “life-tilt” and “rode hard . . . stayed thirsty” in it.

Back I come, for that reason, to *hwæt*. It’s been translated many ways. “Listen.” “Hark.” “Lo.” Seamus Heaney translated it as “So,” an attention-getting intonation, taken from the memory of his Irish uncle telling tales at the table.*

I come equipped with my own memories of sitting at the bar’s end listening to men navigate darts, trivia, and women, and so, in this book, I translate it as “Bro.” The entire poem,

* See Heaney’s wonderful introduction to his *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

and especially the monologues of the men in it, feels to me like the sort of competitive conversations I’ve often heard between men, one insisting on his right to the floor while simultaneously insisting that he’s friendly. “Bro” is, to my ear, a means of commanding attention while shuffling focus calculatedly away from hierarchy.

Depending on tone, “bro” can render you family or foe. The poem is about that notion, too. Marital pacts are made and catastrophes ensue, kingdoms are offered and rejected, familial bonds are ensured not with blood, but with gold. When I use “bro” elsewhere in the poem, whether in the voice of Beowulf, Hrothgar, or the narrator, it’s to keep us thinking of the ways that family can be sealed by formulation, 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.

There’s another way of using “bro,” of course, and that is as a means of satirizing a certain form of inflated, overconfident, aggressive male behavior. I think the poet’s own language sometimes does that, periodically weighing in with commentary about how the men in the poem think all is well, but have discerned nothing about blood relatives’ treachery and their own heathen helplessness. Is this text attempting to be a manual for successful masculinity? No, although at a glance it appears to be a hero story. *Beowulf* is a manual for how to live as a man, if you are, in fact, more like the mon-

sters than the men. It's about taming wild, solitary appetites, and about the failure to tame them. It is not, in the poet's opinion, entirely to Beowulf's credit that he continues wild and solitary into old age. Compare him with another old man, Ongentheow, whose long-form story is told by the messenger bringing ill tidings to Beowulf's people after Beowulf's death. That old man, though an enemy to the Geats, is depicted as responsible to his wife, children, and people, battling strategically on their behalf, thinking of their safety even as he is cornered and killed. The humans in *Beowulf* are communal, battling together, leaders alongside lesser-ranked warriors. Those who are superhuman (or supernatural)—Grendel, his mother, the dragon, and Beowulf—battle solo and are ultimately weakened by their wild solitude.

There's a geomythological theory that the larger-than-life men in this poem—Hygelac, mentioned in other texts as a giant; Beowulf; Grendel—came into the poetic imagination due to medieval discoveries of fossilized mammoth bones, which, when incorrectly reassembled, look like nothing so much as tremendous human skeletons.* The theory is tempting in a variety of ways, among them the notion that these giant men were literally made of monsters. These physical "mistranslations" bear some similarity to the poem's con-

* See: Timothy J. Burberry, "Fossil Folklore in the *Liber Monstrorum*, *Beowulf*, and Medieval Scholarship," *Folklore* 126, no. 3 (2015). See also:

struct (and interrogation) of impervious masculinity. An emotional wound can send a previously powerful man into a swift, suicidal tailspin. See Hrethel and Hrothgar, and even Beowulf, rushing solo at a dragon, attempting to prove himself to an audience of young men who turn out to be mostly cowards.

Beowulf is usually seen as a masculine text, but I think that's somewhat unfair. The poem, while (with one exception) not structured around the actions of women, does contain extensive portrayals of motherhood and peace-weaving marital compromise, female warriors, and speculation on what it means to lose a son. In this translation, I worked to shine a light on the motivations, actions, and desires of the poem's female characters, as well as to clarify their identities. While there are many examples of gendered inequality in the poem, there is no shortage of female power.

Grendel's mother, my original impetus for involvement with this text, is almost always depicted in translation as an obvious monster rather than as a human woman—and her monstrosity doesn't typically allow even for partial humanity, though the poem itself shows us that she lives in a hall, uses weapons, is trained in combat, and follows blood-feud rules.

Adrienne Mayor, *The First Fossil Hunters: Dinosaurs, Mammoths, and Myth in Greek and Roman Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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“Ogress . . . inhuman troll-wife” —Tolkien, 1926,
published 2014

“That female horror . . . hungry fiend” —Raffel, 1963

“Ugly troll-lady” —Trask, 1997

“Monstrous hell-bride . . . swamp-thing from hell”
—Heaney, 1999

It makes some sense that she'd be translated that way. Her son, Grendel, eats people and can carry home a doggie bag full of warriors. It's just the two of them living in their under-mer hall, and for many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century translators of this text, it would only have followed for the monstrous portion of Grendel's parentage to be his mother rather than his absentee father. For most of those translators, the difficulty of imagining a human woman fully armed, fully elderly (she's been ruler of her kingdom as long as Hrothgar's been ruler of his), would have been insurmountable. There are other explanations for monsterhood in Grendel's mother, of course—some interesting ones. I'm somewhat persuaded by adjacent lore surrounding troll-transformation due to rape,* if only because the poisonous myth that a raped woman is a

* For more on this, see the wonderfully titled chapter “Bone-Crones Have No Hearth: Some Women in the Medieval Wilderness,” by Marijane Osborn and Gillian R. Overing, in *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). See also: Osborn's original poem “Grendel's Mother Broods Over Her Feral Son,” *Old English Newsletter* 39, no. 3 (2006), based on a 1914 scrap

ruined woman, thus an abomination and thus, all too possibly, evil, has persisted as long as women have. Grendel's father is an unknown. That said, though, Grendel's mother doesn't behave like a monster. She behaves like a bereaved mother who happens to have a warrior's skill.

The tradition of monstrous depiction assisted by monstrous physical descriptors persevered in translation (though not necessarily in scholarship) into the later years of the twentieth century and beyond, particularly after Frederick Klaeber's 1922 glossary defined the word used to reference Grendel's mother, *aglaec-wif*, as “wretch, or monster, of a woman.” Never mind that *aglaec-wif* is merely the feminine form of *aglaeca*, which Klaeber defines as “hero” when applied to Beowulf, and “monster, demon, fiend” when referencing Grendel, his mother, and the dragon. *Aglaeca* is used elsewhere in early English to refer both to Sigemund and to the Venerable Bede, and in those contexts, it's likelier to mean something akin to “formidable.” Fair enough. Multiple meanings to Old English words, after all.

Grendel's mother is referred to in the poem as “*ides, aglaec-wif*,” which means, given this logic, “formidable noblewoman.”

of philological interpretation by William A. P. Sewell, the notion that Scyld Scefing decimated the Erel, the tallest people of Scandinavia, who “fought like wild beasts.” In Osborn's poem, Grendel's mother is part of that massacred tribe, and Grendel's father, by rape, is Scyld's descendant the Halfdane, making Grendel brother to Hrothgar, and Grendel's war on Heorot Hall an act of blood-feud vengeance. Also, the poem is in Grendel's mother's voice, which is reason enough to read it.

She isn't physically described, beyond that she looks like a woman, and is tall. The Old English word for fingers, *fin-grum*, has frequently been translated as "claws," but Grendel's mother fights effectively with a knife, and wielding a knife while also possessing long nails is—as anyone who's ever had a manicure knows—a near impossibility. The word *brimwylf*, or "sea-wolf," is also used as a supporting argument for monstrosity, but it's a guess. The manuscript itself reads *brimwyl*, which may have been meant to be *brimwif*. Elsewhere, Grendel's mother is referred to as a *merewif*, or "ocean-woman," so it's very possible that scribal error introduced a wolf where a wife should be, and that traditions of gendered hierarchy made a monster of a mother. In any case, "sea-wolf" is a poetic term, and might be as easily applied to Beowulf as it is to Grendel's mother. In *Beowulf*, it seems likely to me that some translators, seeking to make their own sense of this story, have gone out of their way to bolster Beowulf's human credentials by amplifying the monstrosity of Grendel's mother, when in truth, the combatants are similar. They're both extraordinary fighters, and the battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother is, unlike other battles in the poem, a battle of equally matched warriors. God's established soft spot for Beowulf is the deciding factor, not physical strength.

Ecgtheow's heir would've been filleted, recategorized as MIA, and left to rot in her cavern, had not his suit

saved him. That, too, was God's work.

The Lord, maker of miracles, sky-designer,
had no trouble leveling the playing field
when Beowulf beat the count and stood.

He glimpsed it hanging in her hoard, that armory
of heirlooms, somebody's birthright. A sword,
blessed by blood and flood . . .

The poet's depiction of Grendel's mother is complex: as admiring as it is critical. The proximity in the text of the heroic Hildeburh, whose narrative of loss and vengeance is only a step and a knife removed from Grendel's mother's story, isn't accidental. In terms of narrative balance, I'm interested in versions of the *Beowulf* story that emphasize Grendel's mother's right to recompense for the death of her son—early English feud rules allow blood for blood, and, in killing one of Hrothgar's advisers, Grendel's mother exacts a legal revenge. Later in the story, Beowulf himself takes feud-rule vengeance for the death of his young king Heardred, arming rebels to eliminate Heardred's killer, Onela.

I don't know that Grendel's mother should be perceived in binary terms—monster versus human. My own experiences as a woman tell me it's very possible to be mistaken for monstrous when one is only doing as men do: providing for and defending oneself. Whether one's solitary status is a result of

abandonment by a man or because of a choice, the reams of lore about single, self-sustaining women, and particularly about solitary elderly women, suggest that many human women have been, over the centuries, mistaken for supernatural creatures simply because they were alone and capable. For all these reasons, I've translated Grendel's mother here as "warrior-woman," "outlaw," and "reclusive night-queen."

Throughout the poem, I've also encouraged moments in which the feminine might already be poetically suggested. Thus, lines 1431-1439, wherein Hrothgar and Beowulf's men arrive at the mere and kill a sea monster, become:

A Geat drew his bow and struck
a slithering one. An arrow piercing its scales, it
struggled
and thrashed in the water. The other men, invigorated,
sought to join the killing; a second shot, a third,
then they slung themselves into the shallows
and speared it. *This* monster they could control.
They cornered it, clubbed it, tugged it onto the rocks,
stillbirthed it from its mere-mother, deemed it
damned,
and made of it a miscarriage . . .

Similarly, in lines 1605-1610, as Beowulf discovers that the sword he's used to kill Grendel's mother is melting, I

used the existing lines, which could suggest a literal defrosting of springs, to suggest a situation in which Spring is a captive, chained and released by God. There is plenty in the world history of pagan seasonal myth to support such a reading, and similar references to captivity and power abound in the poem, including in the scene these lines are from:

Below, in Beowulf's hands, the slaying-sword
began to melt like ice, just as the world thaws
in May when the Father unlocks the shackles
that've chained frost to the climate, and releases
hostage heat, uses sway over seasons to uncage
His prisoner, Spring, and let her stumble into the sun.

I see the women in this story as part of a continuum of experience, just as the men are. Freawaru, the Bartered Beautiful Bride, who takes the first steps into a blood-wedding. Modthryth, the Bartered Bad Bride, who seeks preemptive vengeance on the world of men before entering an unexpectedly happy marriage. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, Modthryth is often the only character cut from children's versions of *Beowulf*.) Hygd, the Self-Bartering Bride, who attempts (and fails) to negotiate her son's survival by persuading Beowulf to ascend to kingship over him. Hildeburh, the Failed Peaceweaver, who incubates overwinter a yearning for vengeance,

after her son, brother, and ultimately her husband are killed. Wealhtheow, the Canny Queen, who is often depicted as acquiescent. In fact, her speech to the hall during the post-Grendel celebration is a masterpiece of negotiation. Within her role as an obedient wife, she works the room to her own advantage, attempting to gain security for her sons from the hero her husband has become smitten with. I translated Wealhtheow's speech to clarify the threats I think have always been part of it. Grendel's Mother, the Un-Husbanded Warrior, who rules her own kingdom until she is elderly, losing her son, but succeeding in exacting bloody vengeance. To that coven, I've added the dragon,* curled about her hoard, her bedchamber invaded by someone seeking to burgle. Her vengeance for that theft lights the sky and land on fire. After vengeance comes grief. The last woman in the story is the Geatish woman, the Mourner, not mourning Beowulf so much as her own future without a king, new versions of old horrors—blood, swords, and men. That this occurs just prior to Beowulf's funerary tribute, his men repeating variations on "That was a good king," is no accident. Her agonized inclusion here renders that final round of tributes ironic.

In the end, *Beowulf* depicts edge-times and border wars, and we're in them still. As I write this introduction, and as I worked on this translation over the past few years, the world

* Often depicted as male, rather than as ungendered.

of the poem felt increasingly relevant. I regularly found myself muttering speeches written a thousand years ago as I watched their contemporary equivalents unfold on the news. This moment, and the moments before it, the centuries of colonialist impulse and kingdom-building, the peoples being built upon, are things that concerned the *Beowulf* poet and concern this translator, too.

The news cycle is filled with men Hrothgar's age failing utterly at self-awareness, and even going full Heremod. Politics twist paradoxically into ever more isolationist *and* interventionist corners, increasingly based in hoarding and horde-panic. The world, as ever, is filled with desolate places and glittering ones, sharing armed borders. Children are confiscated. Refugees are imprisoned. The people doing the imprisoning claim they're persecuting criminals, monsters, but some of those are infants, and most of those are running from worse wars in their own homelands. We are, some of us anyway, living the Geatish woman's lament, writ large.

In the United States of 2020, everyone, including small children, has the capacity to be as deadly as the spectacular warriors of this poem. The teeth, swords, and claws of the Old English epic have been converted into automatic possibilities, the power to slay thirty men in a minute no longer the genius of a select few but a purchasable perk of weapon ownership. The kings and dragons of the poem possess hoards akin to those of basic American households: iPhone idols, nonstick

cookware, unused goblets counted by the dozen. Queen- and king-size beds for the queens and kings of small halls in the suburbs, fake feathers and swansdown like the reclaimed wings of minor monsters, bought and shipped overnight by Amazon Prime—itsself a corporation named for a legendary tribe of female warriors, though in this case the title of warrior stands in for consumer convenience, sorcerous shipping speeds, access to the great, luxuriant, on-sale *everything*.

And yet.

Possessions bring no peace. So many wars, so many kingdoms, so much calamity. As I write this, the noncorporate Amazon is burning, and Australia is burning, too. In the north, closer to the places of this poem, icebergs calve into already-brimming seas, and formerly frozen lands reveal the bones and treasures of the dead, melting into mud. COVID-19, a coronavirus, sweeps across the world's population, shifting our understanding of normalcy daily, if not hourly. Rulers stand shaking their fists and shouting, and though the shouting is done these days on Twitter, the content is the same as it ever was. *We will come for you. You don't know who God is. You can't have the riches of the world. Everything is ours.*

Though *Beowulf* is written from the corner of the people in power, we can see the impoverished and imperiled in the exposition. The farmers looking up, fearing the blast, as a dragon scars their fields. The commoners who live abutting the mere, who watch Grendel and his mother and report to

their king. The slave who steals a goblet from a dragon, hoping to use it to pay off some unwritten debt to his master. Those who report in this poem often report because they're hoping desperately to change their status, to come in from the cold to a position nearer the fire. And on the other side of it? Kings froth at the mouth and care nothing for their citizens. A hero dies by dragon, and leaves his kingdom to invaders. The home that a soldier or a bride dreams of returning to, when the war is finally over, may be a scorch mark on the earth when they finally make it back.

Storytellers spit a lot of truth in *Beowulf*. They bear dire reports, recaps, and comparisons, or as the Geatish woman does, lament horrors to come. They're also the ones doing the burying, the last survivors. I can only imagine the living role of the *Beowulf* poet—but the poem itself gives us some intriguing examples of scops declaiming material at odds with celebrations. In an oral tradition, even a king's poet would've needed to flex to get the floor. *Beowulf* itself is a flex by the poet, dazzle-camouflaging early English actuality in an imagined elsewhere of monsters and boar-helms. If nothing else, the history of stories is a history of fantastical versions of what we might be and become.

When I think about *Beowulf* these days, some thirty-five years after I first saw Grendel's mother standing alone with her knife and her rage, I often find myself thinking about *Beowulf*'s barrow. Some think it's just meant to be a monu-

ment. Others think the barrow is intended to be a beacon, meant to warn ships of jutting land. My interpretation varies depending on the day, but I tend to think that the stories themselves are the lighthouses.

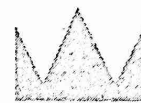
Sometimes, I picture a map of the world, the kind of map I used to pore over as a child, obsessing over the now-familiar warning: *HIC SUNT DRACONES*. On that imaginary map, I've added story-lighthouses. They're all over the place. *Look here*, their light tells us. *Here's a safe spot to tie up your boat and disembark. Here's a spot to watch out for.* Out here are dragons. Out here are the stories of those dragons, and of those heroes—and more.

There are also stories that haven't yet been reckoned with, stories hidden within the stories we think we know. It takes new readers, writers, and scholars to find them, people whose experiences, identities, and intellects span the full spectrum of humanity, not just a slice of it. That is, in my opinion, the reason to keep analyzing texts like *Beowulf*. We might, if we analyzed our own long-standing stories, use them to translate ourselves into a society in which hero making doesn't require monster killing, border closing, and hoard clinging, but instead requires a more challenging task: taking responsibility for one another.

MDH

New York City

March 3, 2020



BEOWULF

Bro! Tell me we still know how to speak of kings! In the old days,
everyone knew what men were: brave, bold, glory-bound. Only stories now, but I'll sound the Spear-Danes' song, hoarded for hungry times.

Their first father was a foundling: Scyld Scefing.
He spent his youth fists up, browbeating every barstool-brother, bonfiring his enemies. That man began in the waves, a baby in a basket,
but he bootstrapped his way into a kingdom, trading loneliness for luxury. Whether they thought kneeling necessary or no, everyone from head to tail of the whale-road bent down:
10 There's a king, there's his crown!
That was a good king.

Later, God sent Scyld a son, a wolf cub,
further proof of manhood. Being God, He knew

how the Spear-Danes had suffered, the misery
they'd mangled through, leaderless, long years of loss,
so the Life-lord, that Almighty Big Boss, birthed them
an Earth-shaker. Beow's name kissed legions of lips
by the time he was half-grown, but his own father
was still breathing. We all know a boy can't daddy
20 until his daddy's dead. A smart son gives
gifts to his father's friends in peacetime.
When war woos him, as war will,
he'll need those troops to follow the leader.
Privilege is the way men prime power,
the world over.

Scyld was iron until the end. When he died,
his warriors executed his final orders.
They swaddled their king of rings and did just
as the Dane had demanded, back when mind
30 and meter could merge in his mouth.
They bore him to the harbor, and into the bosom
of a ship, that father they'd followed, that man
they'd adored. She was anchored and eager
to embark, an ice maiden built to bear
the weight of a prince. They laid him
by the mast, packed tight in his treasure-trove,
bright swords, war-weeds, his lap holding a hoard

of flood-tithes, each fare-coin placed by a loyal man.
He who pays the piper calls the tune.
40 His shroud shone, ringed in runes, sun-stitched.
I've never heard of any ship so heavy, nor corpse
so rich. Scyld came into the world unfavored;
his men weighted him as well as the strangers had,
who'd once warped him to the waves' weft.
Even ghosts must be fitted to fight.
The war-band flew a golden flag over their main man;
the salt sea saluted him, so too the storms,
and Scyld's soldiers got drunk instead of crying.
They mourned the way men do. No man knows,
50 not me, not you, who hauled Scyld's hoard to shore,
but the poor are plentiful, and somebody got lucky.

Finally, Beow rolled into righteous rule,
daddying for decades after his own daddy died.
At last, though, it was his turn for erasure:
his son, the Halfdane, ran roughshod, smothering
his father's story with his own. He rose in the realm
and became a famous warlord, fighting ferociously
dawn to dusk, fathering his own horde of four,
heirs marching into the world in this order: Heorogar,
60 Hrothgar, Halga, and I heard he hand-clasped his
daughter

(her name's a blur) to Onela. Tender, she rendered that
battle-Swede

happy in fucking, where before he'd only been happy in fighting.

War was the wife Hrothgar wed first. Battles won,
treasures taken. Admirers and kin heard of his fight-fortune,
and flanked him in force. Strong boys grow into stronger men,
and when Hrothgar had an army, his hopes turned to a hall
to home them—a house to espouse his faithful.
More than just a mead-hall, a world's wonder,
eighth of seven. When it was done, he swore,
70 he'd load-lighten, unhand everything he'd won,
worn, and owned, pass to his posse all God's gifts,
save lives and land. He'd keep the kingdom, of course.
He gave far-reaching orders: carpets, carpentry, walls and gables,
tables for seating a clan, rare gifts plated like rare meat,
all for his men. So it rose: a greater hall than any other!
Hrothgar filled it, blood-brother by blood-brother,
and named it Heorot. His words were heard and heralded,
and yes, yes, bro! The man was more than just talk:
he gave good gifts. His war-wedded wore kings' rings,
80 and drank their leader's mead. Nightly, he feted his fight-family
with fortunes. The hall loomed, golden towers antler-tipped;
it was asking for burning, but that hadn't happened yet.
You know how it is: every castle wants invading, and every family
has enemies born within it. Old grudges recrudescence.

Speaking of grudges: out there in the dark, one waited.

He listened, holding himself hard to home,

but he'd been lonely too long, brotherless,

sludge-stranded. Now he heard and endured

the din of drinkers. Their poetry poisoned his peace.

90 Every night, turmoil: raucous laughter from Heorot,

howling of harps, squawking of scops.

Men recounting the history of men like them.

The Almighty made Earth for us, they sang.

Sun and moon for our (de)light,

fens full of creatures for our feasting,

meres to quench our thirst.

Heorot's hall-dwellers caroused by candlelight,

stumbling to sleep with the sunrise, replete,

lambs bleating comfort, ease-pleased,

100 until the night wakefulness moved their watcher to wrath.

Grendel was the name of this woe-walker,

Unlucky, fucked by Fate. He'd been

living rough for years, ruling the wild:

the mere, the fen, and the fastness,

his kingdom. His creation was cursed

under the line of Cain, the kin-killer.

The Lord, long ago, had taken Abel's side.

Though none of that was Grendel's doing.

he'd descended from bloodstains.

110 From Cain had come a cruel kind,
seen by some as shadow-stalked: monsters,
elves, giants who'd ground against God,
and for that, been banished.

Under a new moon, Grendel set out
to see what horde haunted this hall.

He found the Ring-Danes drunk,
douse-downed, making beds of benches.

They were mead-medicated, untroubled
by pain, their sleep untainted by sorrow.

120 Grendel hurt, and so he hunted. This stranger
taught the Danes about time. He struck, seized
thirty dreaming men, and hied himself home,
bludgeoning his burden as he bounded, for the Danes
had slept sweetly in a world that had woken him,
benefited from bounty, even as they'd broken him.

When golden teeth tasted the sky,
Grendel's silent skill was seen. His kills—
grim crimson spilt on banquet-boards.

The war-horde wailed at the spoiling of their sleep,
130 at the depths they'd dived in darkness, while their enemy ate.
A mournful morning. Their leader sat at his plate, old overnight,

impotent at this ingress. The band tracked the invader, but not
to his lair.

They had prayers to call out, and pains to bear.

Grendel did not stay himself from slaughter. The next night
a second slaying, and then another, his rope played out and
rotted through, a cursed course plotted without mercy,
and corse after corse cold in his keep. Bro, it was easy
after that to count the weepers: men fleeing to cotes
beneath the king's wings. You'd have to have been a fool to miss

140 the malice of the Hell-dweller, now hall-dwelling. Those who
lived, left—

or locked themselves in ladies' lodgings, far from fault lines.

Those who stayed? Slain.

For twelve snow-seasons, Grendel reigned over evening.

Hrothgar suffered, Heorot buffeted, no hero to hold it.

Every outsider talked shit, telling of legends and losses.

Hrothgar's hall became a morgue, dark marks on
floorboards.

No songs, no scops, no searing meat, no blazing fire.

And Grendel, incomplete, raided relentlessly.

Dude, this was what they call a blood feud, a war

150 that tore a hole through the hearts of the Danes.

Grendel was broken, and would not brook peace,

desist in dealing deaths, or die himself.

He had no use for stealth—he came near-nightly,
and never negotiated. The old counselors knew better
than to expect a settlement in silver from him.
Ringless, Grendel's fingers, kingless,
his country. Be it wizened vizier or beardless boy,
he hunted them across foggy moors, an owl
mist-diving for mice, grist-grinding their tails
160 in his teeth. A hellion's home is anywhere
good men fear to tread; who knows the dread this
marauder mapped?

Grendel, enemy to everyone, waged his war
without an army, lonesome as he lapped
the luxurious lengths of Heorot. He howl-haunted
the hall at night, the gold-gifter's throne throwing
shade at him, his soul burning with dark flame.
He couldn't touch the treasure, or tame
his yearning, for he'd been spurned by God.

170 Times were hard for the prince of the Scyldings, too,
heart-shattered, battered spirit spent.
Men came to advise, bringing pithy plots
and plans to arrest Hrothgar's awful guest.
They bent themselves to idols, and offered up
their own spells, that a soul-slayer might suddenly
show up and save them. That was their nature,

these heathens, hoping at the wrong heavens,
remembering Hell, but nothing else.
They knew no true Lord, no God, no Master.
180 They, too, were cursed, yet thought themselves clear.
Bro, lemme say how fucked they were,
in times of worst woe throwing themselves
on luck rather than on faith, fire-walkers
swearing their feet uncharred, while
smoke-stepping. Why not face
the Boss, and at death seek
salves, not scars?

So it went for years, the Hell-sent raider harrowing
the Halfdane's son, who sat in silence, brooding
190 over unhatched hopes, while in the dark his
people shuddered, salt-scourged by weeping,
by nights spent waking instead of sleeping.

News went global. In Geatland, Hygelac's right-hand man
heard about Grendel. Bro, here was a warrior
like no other: massive, mighty, born of noble
blood. He called for a ship to be readied
for his band, and boasted he'd try his teeth on this tale,
sail in as a savior over the swan-road, seek that king
and lend a hand as defender. His elders
200 understood his quest, and though he was dear to them,

they knew better than to spear him with speeches.
They augured the omens—ooh!—and ushered him onward.

He found fourteen fists for hire, the boldest men
of the Geats, and enlisted them as fighters.

He, as their captain, went aboard to pilot
the vessel, with sea-skill, through
keen currents and mean depths.

Soon it was time to depart:
the boat's belly was wet,

210 and beneath the land-locks
these warriors met, cheering,
bringing battle-gear into her bosom.

As sand spit and surf sang, they pushed off
and sent themselves to sea, made men.

The wind sent them surging.

With a foam-feathered throat,
their bird flew free, sailing with certainty
over salt waters. On the second day,
she sought a shore, and the men saw cliffs,

220 crags uplifting from the ocean:
the end of the voyage. Overboard
the Geats leapt, shifting from sailors to soldiers,
the moment their soles touched solid earth.
Their weapons rattled as they moored the boat,
their mail unveiled in sunlight.

They thanked God for easy passage
and sweet seas.

Far above them, the Scylding's watchman
waited. It was his duty to keep
230 these cliffs unclimbed. When his gaze hit
gleam: swords and shields glittering
across the gangplank, passing without permission,
Hrothgar's man set out for the sand on horseback,
straight spear in hand, to stand
formally and question them:

"How dare you come to Denmark
costumed for war? Chain mail and swords?!
There's a dress code! You're denied.
I'm the Danes' doorman; this is my lord's door.

240 Who are you that you dare steer your ship
for our shore? I'm the watcher of these waters,
have been for years, and it's my duty to scan the sea
for shield-bearing dangers to Danes. I've never seen
any force come so confidently over swells, certain of welcome,
no welcome won. Did you send word? No! Were you invited?
No! You're not on the guest list. And, also, who's the giant?
What weapons does he hold? Oh, hell no.
He's no small-time hall-soldier, but noble!
Look at his armor! I'm done here!

250 Spies, state your secrets, or be denounced.

Who are you, what's your business,
where'd you come from?

I'll ask one more time.

You're not coming past this cliff.

Answer now, or bounce.

You, men: Who? Where? Why?"

Their leader unlocked his word-hoard.

He was the senior soldier, so he spat certainty:

"We are Geats, born and bred, bound

260 to Hygelac. My father was Ecgtheow.

No doubt you've heard of him. He was famous.

He lived through winters that would've

pressed the life from a lesser, and though

he's long since left us, everyone, the world over,

knows my daddy's name. We come in peace,

looking for your lord and land-shield,

the son of the Halfdane. Kindly give us

directions and we'll get gone.

We're here to offer ourselves up

270 to the Dane's lord, and our plans

are open, no secrets from you.

Is it true that something savage

walks at night? We've heard the stories,

that misery stalks and rages here,
that good men are endangered here,
by a stranger in this country.

We come to counsel your king
on how to cleave his reaver,
and court calm. If there's respite

280 to be had, I'm the lad to bring it.

Otherwise, Hrothgar will be grieving
and desperate as long as his
hall hangs—I see it there—
at the horizon."

The watchman was unmoved, his authority innate.

He sat tall on horseback. "I know
the difference between words and deeds,
as anyone with half a brain does.

Thus far, I'll endorse your scheme:

290 you seem a troop true to my lord.

The rest is in the proving.

Come, then, bring your battle-gear.

I'll lead you to my leader,

and send my guards to circle

your new-tarred ship on the sandbar,

until it's time for her to rise ring-prowed

over this rolling road and be boarded again

by whichever of you—if any?—
survive the sword-storm you've sought."

300 Off they went, agreed, leaving
their own mount, that wide wave-rover,
hitched to rope and anchor.
Boars bristled from their cheek-shields,
gold forced into fierce forms by fire.
The watchman led them toward their war.
Fifteen men heeded him and marched
with speed, until the timbered hall
was before them, shimmering, golden,
the structure best known under the sun and stars

310 to every citizen of Earth.
This was a place real men could be rebirthed,
and their guide pointed the path to it,
then turned tail, saying:
"I've been away from my sea-view too long.
May the Father leave you living.
For me, I return to my ocean-post,
to scan the shore for
other enemies."

The road was stone-cobbled, and kept them
320 coming correct, a straight line of marchers,

war-garb gleaming, chains linked by hardened hands,
their armor ringing, loud as any hall-bell. By the time
they arrived in Heorot, dressed for demons,
they were sagging, sea-stung. They stacked shields,
wood-weathered, against the walls, then sat down
on benches, their metal making music. Their spears,
they stood like sleeping soldiers, tall but tilting,
gray ash, a death-grove. Each maker of armor-din
was twinned to his weapon. A man of Hrothgar's
330 company, admiring them, inquired:

"What kingdom sent you here, boys, with your crests
and shields, your gilt helmets and gray-clothed
chests, your sharpened spears? I'm Hrothgar's
herald and officer, and in all my years
I've never seen such an impressive
assembly of outlanders. You've too much style
to be exiles, so I expect you must be
heroes, sent to Hrothgar?"

The man—we know him, his name means nerve—
340 the leader of the Geats, hard-core in his helmet,
spoke their mission succinctly:
"We're Hygelac's reserve, trained
and ready. Beowulf's my name.

If the Hafdane's son, your leader and lord,
will allow me to come to him,
I'll explain my errand in a few words."

Wulfgar, a Wendel warrior, renowned and warranted
for wisdom and for the tempered edge of his nature,
replied: "I'll ferry your request to our king
350 and ring-giver, Lord of the Scyldings,
and see what, if anything, he offers
in response. I'll return with his answer
as quickly as he
gives it me."

He went with haste to Hrothgar's throne.
The old man was gray, huddled in pain
with his retainers. Bold Wulfgar
stood submissive at his shoulder—he knew the score.
He whispered the matter to his lord:
360 "Geatlanders have come ashore, sea-sullied
from their long sail. Their captain and compeller
is called Beowulf, and he petitions for words
with you. Hrothgar, most generous,
don't deny them. They're well-dressed,
thus well-born, and thus worthy.
And the man who led them here—
he looks so right! His chest, broad in girth,

his armor blazing, bright!
Blatantly of noble birth."

370 Hrothgar, the Scyldings' helm, lifted his head:
"Beowulf? I knew him when he was a boy, and
I knew his daddy, too, Ecgtheow, with whom
Hrethel the Geat bedded his daughter down.
Their son and heir is here to bring health to me!
A crew of mine once crossed to Geatland
with gifts from me to his father, and they
brought back a cargo of stories.
Ecgtheow's boy, they said, had a handgrip
as strong as that of thirty men! As for his band
380 of Geats—hurry, let them in! Holy!
How good is God?! A hero's been sent here
by Heaven to defend the Danes from Grendel!
At least, that's what I hope he's come to do.
If he relieves the pressure on our Paradise,
I'll pay him in gold! Go back before he comes
to his senses and runs. Bid him appear
before his father's friend: he's more than welcome
here in Denmark!"

Wulfgar returned to the Geats, stood at the door,
390 and said: "My king, the East-Danes' leader-in-arms,
tells me he knows your father, and that

who never backed down. At last, a shaft sounded his depths,
pursuing the barb as it primed his heart,
feathers fanning across his breast.”

3120 The son of Weohstan summoned seven
of the best men to descend again into darkness,
and went alongside them, the eighth man,
entering that cursed place. One soldier,
the man in front, carried a light.
No one sought to gamble or grab.
The guard was gone and the challenge
was pointless. They carried it all out,
dazzle-draped, a heaving hoard of gore-bought
gold, unprotected, and piled it in public.

3130 It was easy to enact their leader's last wish.
Then they heaved the dragon over the cliffs
into the sea, brine-bedding that beast-bride,
that ring-taker. The endless accursed treasures
they stacked on a cart, and bore them
with their dead leader, his skin gone gray
as a barnacle, to Whales' Cape.

The Geats began the pyre, howling over
Beowulf, their best brother, hanging hoard-helmets
about it, shields and steel-shirts, as he'd insisted.

3140 They placed him in the center of all this treasure,
their lost love, and built a bone-fire worthy
of men's ends. Storm-smoke shuddered
from the blaze thick and dark, and the flames
keened louder than any man's weeping.
The whipping winds momentarily stilled,
until Beowulf's heart-helm broke. His bones
blackened as his boys bellowed their grief.

Then another dirge rose, woven uninvited
by a Geatish woman, louder than the rest.
3150 She tore her hair and screamed her horror
at the hell that was to come: more of the same.
Reaping, raping, feasts of blood, iron fortunes
marching across her country, claiming her body.
The sky sipped the smoke and smiled.

The Geats got down to it, driving the materials
of the memorial into a mound, a promontory
crowned with Beowulf's marker, lit so sailors
could see it from afar. Ten days it took to make
their hero's new home. It contained, walled up,
3160 the remnant of his hoard-gold, wrought to remain
long after Geats were gone. Rings of kings,
and torcs, jewels clouded with black smoke,
the dragon's darlings—and before her, that lost tribe's,

a trove of treasure trespass-cursed from out of earth,
now gone to ground again. They covered it over
with gravel, and I hear it's there still, a leftover lament,
lacking living hands for spending.

Twelve thanes, battle-tested sons of worthy men,
took themselves to horseback and coursed
3170 around the tomb, weeping, wringing
the old songs from their tongues, dirge-chanting,
telling the legend of Beowulf, their king.
His courage, his fury, his wars.
They did all this grieving the way men do,
but, bro, no man knows, not me, not you,
how to get to goodbye. His guys tried.
They remembered the right words. Our king!
Lonely ring-wielder! Inheritor of everything!
He was our man, but every man dies.
3180 Here he is now! Here our best boy lies!
He rode hard! He stayed thirsty! He was the man!
He was the man.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 2017, I was nominated for a World Fantasy Award, and two of the award jurors, Betsy Mitchell and Elizabeth Engstrom, attended a reading at which I read from *The Mere Wife* and talked about my research for the novel, the translations of *Beowulf* I'd read, and the ways in which late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century translations by men had shaped our understanding of the female characters in the poem. During the Q&A, they asked when my translation would be out. I laughed and said there wouldn't be one—I wasn't qualified—and both jurors laughed back and said it sounded like I was as qualified as many of the other people who'd translated it over the years. "Qualified," to my mind, meant I'd certainly need a PhD, perhaps a Nobel Prize. This perception, obviously, didn't come from nowhere. Despite the significant work of female and other marginalized scholars, despite several excellent translations by women, the fact remains that *Beowulf*, at least for publication, has longstandingly been aggressively marketed as an off-limits area. I'd adapted it into a novel, but somehow it still seemed off-limits for me to dig into the actual poem. Well, fuck that. The notion of *Beowulf* through the lens of the bro-story had been rattling around in my head for a decade. I took the idea to a writing retreat a few weeks later and pitched it to a group of