

Women in Villainy: How *Beowulf* Set the Stage for Sexist Female Antagonist Roles

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Heralded as the oldest heroic epic of all time, it is no surprise that *Beowulf* is thought to hold the classic formula for a high-quality fantasy story. Replete with heroic battles, glimmering armor, and terrifying monsters, *Beowulf* has been retold countless times due to its triumphant nature. But what of its strange depictions of women, especially those in antagonist roles? Despite having extremely questionable portrayals of women in villain roles, no translation of the story has thought to question this gender role until the inception of Maria Dahvana Headley's modern translation of *Beowulf* in 2020. Through the lens of feminist criticism, we examine whether the relationship between traditional *Beowulf* portrayals of the female antagonist and future depictions of female villainy in media is directly correlated, as exemplified in Chickering and Heaney's traditional translation, Robert Zemeckis' 2007 film adaptation, and Headley's modern translation of *Beowulf*.

The lens through which we must examine the complex relationship between traditional depictions of Grendel's Mother and modern portrayals of monsters lies in feminist criticism. Literary critic Johnathan Culler provides the following definition regarding feminist criticism in literature: "[It is] the name that should be applied to all criticism alert to the critical ramifications of sexual oppression, just as in politics 'women's issues' is the name now applied to many fundamental questions of personal freedom and social justice" (56). In his definition, Culler argues that feminist criticism lays the groundwork for critiquing not just "women's issues", but also any problems where general injustice arises. With Culler's observation in mind, it is essential to examine the depiction of Grendel's Mother through the perspective of not simply

how this depiction affects women, but how it influences society as a whole. From hulking monsters to hypersexualized seductresses, portrayals of Grendel's Mother embody some of the most extreme and unnuanced stereotypes about women that still persist today. Therefore, feminist literary criticism is essential when analyzing the relationship between the traditional depictions of Grendel's Mother and later portrayals of her.

Key examples of the traditional monstrous depiction of Grendel's Mother are most prevalent in the translations of Howell Chickering Jr. and Seamus Heaney. Chickering's translation of the heroic epic, which was published in 1977, includes the following description of Grendel's Mother: "Soon enough she the kingdom of waters fierce and kill-greedy [...]" (135). This description takes a sea-monster approach in illustrating Grendel's Mother by referring to her as "she the kingdom of waters". Chickering further dehumanizes Grendel's Mother by calling her "kill-greedy". In this translation, Chickering chooses to depict Grendel's Mother as a mindless, bloodthirsty sea-monster as opposed to the protective mother that she truly is. Furthermore, Heaney's 1999 translation of *Beowulf* takes a similar approach to the portrayal of Grendel's Mother. Heaney illustrates the following scene that includes Grendel's Mother: "That wolfish swimmer carried the ring-mailed prince to her court" (10). The description of Grendel's Mother as "wolfish" takes a slightly different approach than Chickering's in that Heaney is depicting the female villain as more of a werewolf. The stylistic choices of both Chickering and Heaney are telling in how they view typical maternal instincts. For some, a woman is justified in defending herself, her home, and her son's honor when a band of soldiers attack. However, for authors Chickering and Heaney, a protective woman acting on maternal instincts is meant to be painted as a villain, which is manifested in traditionally fearful creatures such as sea-monsters or

werewolves. Therefore, Chickering and Heaney have set false examples of what being a female villain truly means in literature.

The pendulum has also been known to swing the other way in terms of how Grendel's Mother is depicted in the media. Robert Zemeckis' 2007 film adaptation of *Beowulf* stars Angelina Jolie as Grendel's Mother. In the film, "the director portrays Grendel's Mother as more seductress than monster or warrior, with Angelina Jolie highlighting the sensual attributes of the character. The exposure of the actress' naked golden body emphasizes Beowulf's penchant for flesh and wealth" (Gil 147). While the portrayal of Grendel's Mother in the film stands as a stark contrast to the monstrous descriptions from past translations, the animation of Jolie in the film presents an entirely new issue with depictions of the female villain. Instead of portraying Grendel's Mother as a looming monster who is at least twice the size of the men she attacks, she is instead portrayed as a hypersexualized seductress.

Zemeckis' casting choice seems to be intentional for the role of Grendel's Mother, as Angelina Jolie is a conventionally attractive actress. Jolie is no stranger to overwhelming publicity and media coverage due to her physical appearance. Author Pradeep Thakur writes the following on Angelina's presence in the film industry: "As one of her most distinctive physical features, Jolie's lips have attracted notable media attention and has been described as 'the current gold standard of beauty in the West'" (8). Thakur states that Angelina Jolie embodies the standards of Western beauty, and thus she becomes all the more desirable for film directors to cast in oversexualized female roles. Since certain misogynists cannot fathom the idea of a woman holding a significant amount of power, they instead choose to highlight the more sensual qualities of the woman to commodify her and to make the idea of her as a villain more comprehensible in light of the male gaze. While the depiction of Grendel's Mother in the 2007

film is a stark contrast to how Grendel's Mother has always been portrayed, the animation choice for the female antagonist in the film shows no progress away from the overall chauvinist sentiment of women in villainous roles. Therefore, while the 2007 film adaptation of *Beowulf* exhibits a meek attempt to revolutionize the long-established illustration of Grendel's Mother, the film still presents an entirely new issue with the portrayal of female villains that is just as harmful as its predecessor.

Zemeckis' stylistic choice for Grendel's Mother may be unlike anything audiences have ever seen with the classic heroic epic; however, that does not mean that the stylistic choice is effective by any means. In a 2008 news article, author Margaret Rees points out the following flaw with Angelina Jolie's portrayal of Grendel's Mother: "Zemeckis depicts her as a golden beauty clad in nonsensical high heels and played by Angelina Jolie. There is no sense of the malignancy of her character in the original, and the introduction of the element of guilt to Beowulf make-up, for succumbing to her wiles, distorts the importance of the poem of his single-minded pursuit of his foes" ("Beowulf: Tenuous Relationship Between Movie and Poem"). Rees remarks that Zemeckis adds a poorly-executed complexity to the character of Grendel's Mother in the film.

While traditional *Beowulf* translations portray Grendel's Mother as a shallow murderer, Zemeckis adds a malicious connotation to the seductress side of Angelina Jolie's character in an abysmal attempt to add complexity to the character. In the film, Jolie tells Beowulf that if he gives her a son, she would make him rich and powerful beyond anyone else in the kingdom. As Rees pointed out, this layer to Jolie's character is unnecessary and skews the original sentiment of Beowulf's character. While the addition of the seductress to the film attempts to deepen the element of Beowulf's shallowness, it instead creates a more chauvinist view of women and their

role in villainy. This unique take on the depiction of Grendel's Mother begs the questions: Why is the only way of adding nuance to female characters in contemporary media rooted in the archetype of sexual objectification? If a director or an author is to properly reform the classical portrayals of Grendel's Mother, they must do so in a fashion that breaks the binaries of women being either monsters or seductresses.

Author Maria Dahvana Headley released her own translation of *Beowulf* in 2020. Headley's transformation of the traditional misogynistic depictions of fantastical women are prevalent in the physical portrayal of female characters in her own modernized version of the text. In Headley's introduction to her translation of *Beowulf*, she reflects on her inspiration behind her unique depiction of Grendel's Mother: "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" (28). According to Headley, this physical description of Grendel's Mother in earlier translations of *Beowulf* epitomizes how solitary women are often portrayed in literature, especially in the canon of early British literature. Given the extreme disparity in equality between men and women that was prominent in the Anglo-Saxon period, an autonomous woman was thus viewed as threatening. Consequently, a woman's unorthodox state of solitude manifested in the form of monstrosity in Anglo-Saxon texts, as is exemplified in *Beowulf*. Grendel's Mother is a prime example of this phenomenon.

Seamus Heaney's 1999 translation of *Beowulf* depicts Grendel's Mother's physical traits as "savage talons", being a "wolfish swimmer", as well as a "swamp-thing from hell" (10). The physical description of Grendel's Mother in Heaney's text encompasses Anglo-Saxon people's perceptions of women who were self-sufficient. In contrast, Headley's 2020 depiction is a reclamation of a woman's power in solitude. Headley writes that her first impression of the

illustration of Grendel's Mother was that “she had a ferocious look and seemed to give precisely zero fucks” (28). Headley’s remarks on Grendel's Mother more or less summarize the entire aura that Headley assigns to Grendel's Mother in her new and improved translation of *Beowulf*. Headley's translation embraces the self-sufficient aspect of Grendel's Mother, and further amplifies it to depict her as a strong warrior as opposed to an estranged monster. Therefore, Headley takes the outdated physical descriptions of autonomous women and accurately transforms Grendel's Mother into a powerful woman in combat, as she should have been depicted from the beginning.

The depiction of female villains perpetuates the notion of independent women being ostracized, as described by Headley. The previous translators of *Beowulf* made it their mission to depict Grendel's Mother as inhumanely as possible to complement the monstrous physical descriptions included in the *Beowulf* texts. Headley argues the following on the behaviours of the women in the text: “The poem, while 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 these motivations, actions, and desires of the poem’s female characters, as well as to clarify their identities” (44). This passage from Headley’s introduction clarifies the true behaviours of women in this Anglo-Saxon text, and works to remove the negative connotation that was placed upon powerful women, especially those in solitude.

Authors such as Headley efficiently attempt to sever female characters from the sexist prejudice that was assigned to them in previous translations of *Beowulf*. When Beowulf launches an unwarranted attack on Grendel's Mother, her violent response is completely out of self-defence and out of vengeance for the death of her son. However, translators of *Beowulf* that came

before Headley blatantly antagonized Grendel's Mother for defending herself, her home, and her late son. This hostile portrayal of Grendel's Mother connects to a larger conviction that a woman who fights back against an attacker is perceived by society as gruesome and horrific. For example, many sexual assault cases are wrongly dismissed, and often the media and society will villainize the woman for defending herself. Headley touches on this idea in her introduction: "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 ruined woman, thus an abomination and thus, all to possibly, evil, has persisted as long as women have" (46). This notion is thus perpetuated by Anglo-Saxon literature, and can be traced back many centuries to texts such as *Beowulf*. Therefore, Headley's translation of *Beowulf* takes the proper steps in unraveling the sexist depictions of formidable women in Anglo-Saxon literature, and separates the female characters' behaviour from misogynistic assumptions.

The depictions of a "monstrous" female character's environment in literature are often dramatically misconstrued through a chauvinist lens, and Headley's text works to further humanize the female characters through their living space. In past *Beowulf* translations, the lair of Grendel's Mother is typically depicted as: "A bewildering horde came at him from the depths, droves of sea-beasts who attacked him with tusks [...]" (10). This description of Grendel's Mother's lair illustrates it as a vague and ominous cavern riddled with hostile defenders of the lair. The portrayal of the lair is thus used in traditional *Beowulf* texts to accompany the inhuman characterization of Grendel's Mother.

As a contrast to this questionable world-building of Grendel's Mother, Headley states the following in her introduction: "To that coven, I've added the dragon, curled about her hoard, her bed chamber invaded by someone seeking to burgle. Her vengeance for that theft lights the sky

and land on fire. After vengeance comes grief” (51). As opposed to creating a lair for Grendel's Mother that is foreboding and threatening such as that of an archetypal villain, Headley depicts the environment of Grendel's Mother as simply a home. Her choice of diction such as “bed chamber” insinuates that her “lair” is but a harmless place where she resides with no extraneous elements of malice. The effect that Headley therefore creates with this description instead depicts Beowulf as more of the antagonist instead of Grendel's Mother. Headley properly recognizes that Beowulf is committing the greatest injustice in this scenario by intruding on her home to destroy her after already ending her son’s life. By shifting the focus onto Beowulf as a trespassing intruder rather than Grendel's Mother as a malevolent scoundrel, the audience is able to perceive Grendel's Mother for what she truly is: a grieving mother. Therefore, Headley’s changes to the description of Grendel's Mother’s environment are essential to further depicting women in Anglo-Saxon texts in a way that diminishes sexism, and amplifies female strength.

In conclusion, the classic portrayal of the female antagonist in *Beowulf* has set a corrupted example of how women in roles of villainy are still depicted today, as exemplified in the classic Chickering and Heaney texts, the 2007 Zemeckis film adaptation, and Headley’s rectification of this classic portrayal. While certain examples discussed earlier demonstrate significant critiques of the traditional monstrous female antagonist, there is still significant work that needs to be accomplished if society is to truly break free from chauvinist sentiment. The misogynistic portrayals of women in Anglo-Saxon literature are ultimately rooted in fear: fear of how powerful and influential a self-sufficient woman truly is.

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