

## Original article

### Poems for the women of *Beowulf*: a ‘contemporary medieval’ project

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**Abstract:** This article is centred upon seven new poems from my poetry project inspired by the women of *Beowulf*. To contextualise the project, the poems are framed with a creative-critical reflection on their genesis in my undergraduate *Beowulf* class, where I teach the original poem through modern translation, adaptation, and creative response. I discuss my indebtedness to feminist scholarship on the ‘overwhelmingly masculine’ nature of *Beowulf* (Overing 1990) and briefly survey recent feminist translations and adaptations. I propose my poetry as a form of creative close reading and an example of Lees and Overing’s ‘contemporary medieval in practice’ (Lees and Overing 2019). I also offer short notes on the poems and their relationship to questions of gender, voice, and autonomy.

*Beowulf* is a poem that gets into your bones. If you’re not careful, it changes you: both as a reader and a writer. I have been teaching the poem for fifteen years and, while my academic writing focuses primarily on Middle English literature, almost inexplicably in January 2020 I found myself writing poetry inspired by the women of *Beowulf*. The poem, its language and characters, had long been a part of my mental landscape. But as I taught the poem at the same time that I was collaborating on a feminist project in my college—to tell the history of women in our institution—I felt the pull of the female characters in *Beowulf* more urgently than ever.[1] Teaching the poem through modern adaptations, and encouraging my students

to take a creative-critical approach to their work, I felt compelled to listen to the stories of the women in *Beowulf* more intently and, moreover, to create my own lyric space for their voices to be heard anew.

This short essay accompanies and introduces a group of those poems as part of what has become for me a creative medievalism project: a contemporary critical response to *Beowulf* that takes modern poetry and story-telling as its primary form, rather than the academic article. In her essay ‘*Beowulf*: A Poem in Our Time,’ Gillian R. Overing describes the poem’s characteristic multivalence and argues that its ‘very difficulty of definition invites, if not demands, a meditation on how to read, and on the role of the reader’ (Overing 2012, 310). Approaching *Beowulf* from a deliberately creative standpoint helped me to read the poem differently by inhabiting the stories within it and translating them into my own voice. James W. Earl describes the poem as ‘fraught with loose ends, hinting (but only hinting) at a rich background, teasing us with scraps and shards of backstories’ (Earl 2006, 689). Reading *Beowulf* in search of the ‘backstories’ that might inspire my own poems enabled me to imagine and reclaim the perspectives that the poet chose not to privilege (but nevertheless enables us to glimpse from the corner of our eyes). With the multitude of stories that it contains, and its famously inventive poetic style of kennings and variation, *Beowulf* celebrates looking afresh—and askance—at its own material, both in its own time and in ours. And yet, as Overing recognises, the poem is, nevertheless, ‘overwhelmingly masculine’ (Overing 1990, 69). There are, then, opportunities for translations, creative rewritings, and critical interventions, which aim to recuperate and reanimate the marginalised female voices in the poem while also unravelling, and intervening between, the homosocial bonds that sustain both the world of the poem and its critical history.[2]

In the introduction to her field-changing feminist translation in 2020, Maria Dahvana Headley writes that ‘while there are many examples of gendered inequality in the poem, there

is no shortage of female power’ (Headley 2020, xxiii). When I began writing my poems from the perspective of female characters, I also discovered, and was keen to reflect, precisely this duality. The women in *Beowulf*, from Grendel’s Mother to Queen Wealhtheow, are undoubtedly hedged in by their circumstances, the gender roles expected of them, and the poet’s choice of language to describe them. And yet in the voices, scenarios, and affective responses that their stories generated in my creative reading, I also found undeniable power, agency, and autonomy. In her 2012 essay, Overing characterised *Beowulf* as ‘always on the move’ (Overing 2012, 323), and this mobility speaks both to the poem’s dynamic place in contemporary culture and the poem’s capacity to emotionally *move* the reader, and even to turn that reader into a writer. I had not intended to contribute to the increasing number of modern adaptations of *Beowulf*, but I felt moved by the poem, and my experience of teaching it, to do so.[3]

In what follows I briefly contextualise my work in the context of *Beowulf* retellings, describe the genesis of my project, and offer some thoughts on the selection of poems from my sequence that are included here. *Beowulf* opens with an insistent call to attention (‘hwæt’) and a declaration that ‘we... have heard’ (‘we... gefrunon’) of the Spear-Danes. But whose attention is being claimed here? And ‘hwæt’ (what) is it that we are being strong-armed into hearing once more? I deliberately left my first use of ‘hwæt’ in this paragraph untranslated as the word is complex and multivalent in Old English, and a translator’s choice in modern English often sets the tone for their work. Tolkien’s grand, archaic ‘lo!’, for example, accords with his strong views against modernisation in translating *Beowulf* (Tolkien 2014, 13; Tolkien 2006, 54–55). Heaney’s weighty and commanding ‘so’ situates the poem in his own Irish speech community, a move that was fundamental for his ability to feel at home in the poem (Heaney 1999, xxvii and 3).[4] Thomas Meyer’s arresting and colloquial ‘HEY now hear’ also exploits proximal deixis to anchor the poem’s performance in our present moment

(Meyer 2012, 41), and throughout his modernist version of the poem, Meyer performs an additional textual and visual translation by exploiting a variety of poetic forms (see Campbell 2020).

In Maria Dahvana Headley's *The Mere Wife*, her 2018 adaptation of the poem as a novel set in the present day, she offers no less than thirteen possibilities for 'hwæt': 'say, listen, so, what, attend, hark, tell, behold, ah, lo, yes, sing, now' (Headley 2018, epigraph). Moreover, these translations form the backbone of the novel's structure, as the chapters within each section open with a variation on one of those thirteen translations. Headley's choices here not only invite us to 'listen' and 'attend' to her adaptation, they also encourage us to bear witness ourselves, to 'tell' and 'sing' of the new stories that we have encountered. Marijane Osborn's 1983 translation also opens up the poem to the reader by translating 'hwæt' as 'what' and asking: 'what of the Spear-Danes in days of yore?' (Osborn 1983, 1). Osborn answers her own question in the traditional mode ('We have heard of the glory of the great folk-leaders, / how those æthelings did arduous deeds!') but I'm tempted to take her invitation more irreverently: 'what of' the Danes indeed?

This challenge is also proffered by Meghan Purvis in her 2013 translation which, like Meyer's, employs a variety of poetic forms to tell the story.[5] Purvis does not directly translate 'hwæt', instead she immediately undercuts the familiar opening: 'HWÆT / Stop me / if you've heard this one before' (Purvis 2013, 15). In my poem below, I wanted to make way for my own version of events in deliberate opposition to 'hwæt' (what) we have been told before, time and again, by the *Beowulf*-poet. Read with an eye-roll, my translation ('indeed') suggests that we might very well be weary of that same old story of masculine heroism, privileged and endorsed by patriarchal culture. My invitation to 'listen' is also conditional and makes no bones about its subjectivity. This is what *I myself* would prefer, and I invite you to join me.

## Hwaet

Indeed.

We have heard of the Danes.  
 We never stop hearing about them.  
 Those death-and-glory Danes.  
 Them, their demons, and their glory-  
 days. Me, I'd prefer a little variation.

If you'd like to,  
 listen.

This is our [sister's-sisters'](#) side of the story.

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The most recent reinterpretation of 'hwæt' is Maria Dahvana Headley's in her explicitly feminist translation of *Beowulf*, which she tackled after the success of her novel. 'Bro!' she exclaims, 'tell me we still know how to speak of kings! In the old days, everyone knew what men were: brave, bold, glory-bound' (Headley 2020, 3). Headley's dynamic 'bro' is part of her re-examination of heroic masculinity in the poem and in her introduction to the translation she remarks that *Beowulf* reminded her of the 'competitive conversations' of men in bars, where 'bro' is 'a means of commanding attention while shuffling focus calculatedly away from hierarchy' (Headley 2020, xx–xxi). Headley's 'bro' might sound as though it is addressing an exclusively male audience but that is part of her critique of the poem's macho world: men can and do, she explains, 'erase women from power structures by speaking collegially only to other men' (Headley 2020, xxi). Her 'bro,' then, is multi-layered as it performs but also 'satirize[s] a certain form of inflated, overconfident, aggressive male behavior' (Headley 2020, xxi). It's precisely the variation I've been looking for.

Just like the word ‘hwæt,’ *Beowulf* as a whole has proven to be ‘surprisingly adaptable’ in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Forni 2018, 1), particularly in its ability to cross genres, from film to children’s fiction, from novels to comic books. As Kathleen Forni has demonstrated, retellings of *Beowulf* are often driven by two, potentially conflicting, aims: the desire ‘to make the original text familiar, relevant, and pleasurable to broad audiences’ and the attempt to act as a ‘symbolic form of dissent to the status quo that a text like *Beowulf*—canonical, patriarchal, militaristic, Christian—represents’ (Forni 2018, 5). Such strategies of resistance are especially present in recent feminist adaptations in the last decade—in particular in the form of novels such as Susan Signe Morrison’s *Grendel’s Mother: The Saga of the Wyrd-Wife* (2015) and Headley’s *Mere Wife* (2018)—and I’d place my own poetry at precisely this intersection.[6] Both Morrison and Headley acknowledge their indebtedness to John Gardner’s *Grendel* (1971) but turn their attention to Grendel’s Mother and the other female characters hiding in plain sight, whose motivations and backstories are not fully elaborated in the original poem and who are (excepting Wealhtheow) denied a voice. In her novel’s prologue, Morrison rewrites the opening of *Beowulf* to place Grendel’s Mother front and centre as part of an alternative, female literary tradition: ‘Listen, we have heard of the fame of the mere-woman from days long since, how she fiercely combatted her enemies after she was first found helpless’ (Morrison 2015, 1).[7] What we ‘have heard’ is no longer limited to male heroics—and ‘fierce combat’ is not a strictly male preserve.

Headley similarly centres female experience when she dedicates her novel to ‘Anonymous and all the stories *she* told’ (my emphasis). She also includes a female-authored translation (by Ann Stanford) of a passage from the female-voiced Old English elegy *The Wife’s Lament* as an epigraph: ‘I make this song about me full sadly / my own wayfaring. I a woman tell / what griefs I had....’[8] The repeated personal pronouns and the insistent

claiming of her ‘own’ experiences foregrounds the importance of female voices in Headley’s novel, and her most significant narrative choice is to give Dana Mills, the character based on Grendel’s Mother, a first-person voice. In an interview, Headley recalls seeing an illustration of Grendel’s Mother before she had any knowledge of *Beowulf* itself and that the vision of the female monster emerging from the mere with a sword piqued her curiosity: ‘what’s her story?’, she immediately asked (Headley and Larrington 2020, 201). Analysing Headley’s choice to give Grendel’s Mother both a name and a backstory, S. C. Thomson remarks that this ‘render[s] her a subject in her own right’ and it is my intention in my poetry sequence to also foreground female subjectivity (Thomson, 2021, 217). That said, thus far I have not named Grendel’s Mother, in my own departure from Headley, despite recognising that referring to her only in relation to her son necessarily limits her identity. It has been more important to me to provide *Beowulf*’s unnamed women, such as Hrothgar’s sister, whom I discuss below, with an individual voice rather than a particular name.[9]

Headley’s other crucial choice in *The Mere Wife* is to place Grendel and his Mother at the intersection of prejudice on the basis of race, class, and sexuality. While the monstrosity of Dana’s child Gren is never fully determined in the novel, as Kathryn Hume points out (Hume 2021, 11–12), Dana herself fears that his brown skin, lower class status, and love for his double in the novel, Dylan (or Dil), would be interpreted as monstrous within the privileged white community of Herot Hall: ‘Out there, I know it, I know it, my son running down a street would be my son confessing to a crime. My son shouting would be my son attacking. My son sleeping would be my son addicted. My son in love with the boy from down there would be my son hanging from a tree’ (Headley 2018, 236). *The Mere Wife*’s explorations of monstrosity, violence, and race build on Toni Morrison’s vital essay, ‘Grendel and His Mother’ (based on a 2002 lecture and reprinted in her 2019 collection *The Source of Self-Regard*). Before she begins to tell the story of *Beowulf*, Morrison alerts the

reader to its contemporary relevance: ‘The story is this. As I tell it you may be reminded of the events and rhetoric and actions of many current militarized struggles and violent upheavals’ (Morrison 2019, 255). Dorothy Kim argues that ‘as a black feminist reader, Morrison examines *Beowulf* as political, current, for *any* reader’ and that in focusing on ‘the racialized, politicized, and gendered figures of Grendel and his mother, who in Tolkien’s read would have been black,’ Morrison ‘decenters the white male hero’ (Kim 2019). For Morrison, and for Headley’s version of Grendel’s Mother (the war veteran Dana Mills), the violence at the heart of *Beowulf* is an urgent and contemporary challenge: ‘we are being asked to both recoil from violence and to embrace it; to waver between winning at all costs and caring for our neighbour; between the fear of the strange and the comfort of the familiar’ (Morrison 2019, 261). Likewise, crucial questions of race and belonging, which are bound to violence as expressed so poignantly and fearfully by Headley’s Dana, are currently being raised with urgency in early medieval studies and rightly so, considering the historic whiteness of the field that has silenced and deterred the presence of so many marginalised voices. As Mary Rambaran-Olm, M. Breann Leake, and Micah James Goodrich write in their introduction to the special issue of *postmedieval* on race, ‘when we talk about the stakes of the field, we must ask ourselves not only what do we care about, but also *who* do we care about? *Who is this field for?*’ (Rambaran-Olm, Leake, and Goodrich 2020, 361).

Adaptations, translations, and essays with a political—even antiracist and feminist—drive enable *Beowulf* to act as both a reading experience and an object of criticism to be opened up to more diverse voices and interpretations. In my cycle of poems I aim to contribute to that diversity by giving voice to the silenced female characters in the original poem. This aim is realized in my poems below in the voices of Grendel’s Mother, Freawaru, and, crucially for my project, Hrothgar’s nameless sister, whose voice I offer as an alternative ‘scop’ or poet and who offers fresh perspectives on familiar events. This inclusion of female

perspectives is crucial for teaching *Beowulf* in the twenty-first century classroom, so that the poem feels accessible to our students and accommodating of their responses to it. Meghan Purvis writes that Beowulf the hero ‘only had one choice, and one chance; but we have more. We can tell as many stories as we need to, raise up as many voices as it takes– and it will take all of our voices, mine and yours and voices neither of us have heard yet’ (Purvis 2020, 151). Those voices can, and in my view should, be heard first in the classroom.

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My introductory class on *Beowulf* with my first-year undergraduates at University College, Oxford, is, in many ways, all about diverse voices and variation. I ask the students to read the original poem (in Liuzza’s translation) alongside a number of modern adaptations in order to debate and begin to define the categories of ‘hero’ and ‘monster,’ ‘king’ and ‘queen,’ both for the *Beowulf*-poet and in our modern world.[10] This activity is one way of approaching that ‘strange likeness’ that Chris Jones (quoting Geoffrey Hill) identifies in Old English poetry, and also bridging the gap between the time(s) of the poem and our times (Jones 2006, 4–5). In our study of *Beowulf*, ‘if we cannot dissolve the boundaries between text and reader, between its past and our present, we can engage them in open-ended and creative interaction’ (Overing 2012, 311), and I aim to show the students through discussion of modern adaptations that ‘creative interaction’ is a valuable method of approach for a canonical epic such as *Beowulf*, which can appear intimidating and remote to first-time readers.[11]

In the introduction to his translation of the poem, Seamus Heaney famously said that the Old English word ‘þolian’ (to suffer), which is cognate with the verb ‘to thole’ in the dialect of Heaney’s Irish community, had ‘opened [his] right of way’ as a translator (Heaney 1999, xxvi). In my experience, students’ enthusiasm for and engagement with the poem

really takes off when they too find that word, image, line or idea that hooks them in and catches their imaginations. In the last few years of teaching my class, I have deliberately encouraged my students to identify such moments and describe them in class to their peers. It could be something that excited them, repulsed them, puzzled or confused them, or it could be a moment glimpsed in passing that they wished the poet had told them more about. My students' responses to this prompt generated some fascinating discussions, which in some cases led directly to the topics for their research essays in subsequent weeks. I found that it provided students with a foothold in the poem, which gave them the courage to scale it in their own individual ways, without feeling burdened by the poem's extensive critical history.

It was in this context in January 2020—before I had time to say *hwæt!*—that my own creative medievalism project came rattling at the door of my bone-house. After we had gone around the room and my students had shared their chosen moments of interest, in a flash it felt as though the baton had passed to me, and I suddenly declared: 'You know, the moment that I'd like to hear more about is when Hrothgar's brothers are introduced by name and his sister only appears as a queen because the line in the manuscript is apparently "defective." Who is this nameless queen? I'd like to know more about her!'[12]

Heorogar ond Hroðgar ond Halga til;  
 hyrde ic þæt [... .. On]ela cwen,  
 Heoðo-Scilfingas healsgebedda.  
 (61–3)

Heorogar, Hrothgar, and Halga the Good,  
 I heard that... was Onela's queen,  
 dear bedfellow of the Battle-Scylfing.[13]

George Jack's student edition of the poem, which I use for teaching, notes that the usual emendation of the line leaves 'Healfdane's daughter unnamed but stat[es] that she was Onela's queen.' Furthermore, Jack asserts that because 'the manuscript form *elan* is not known as a feminine name,' it must be the 'concluding part of an inflected masculine name':

in this case, the Swedish king Onela who appears in the poem in lines 2616 and 2932 (Jack 1994, 31).

I discussed this moment with my students, the class concluded, and I went about the rest of my day—only, the unnamed queen had taken a hold of my imagination and her voice began to take shape in my mind. She wanted, *needed*, to be heard. And so I began to play around on the online Bosworth-Toller dictionary. I discovered the literal meaning of *healsgebedda*: ‘a consort around whose neck the arms are thrown.’ I found that *elan* existed as a verb: ‘to trouble, pain, grieve.’ By the end of the day, I had a draft of my poem.

### **I am the Queen without a Name**

Unnamed, I am no-name.  
*Saga hwæt ic hatte?*  
 What the scribe had heard  
 Did not concern me.

My bound-brothers, Healfdene’s boys,  
 Hold their heads high,  
 But the Battle-Scylfing’s bedfellow  
 —*þæt wæs god cwen?*—

Misses her mark in the manuscript.  
 If Onela threw his arms around my neck,  
*Healsgebedda* (a neck-laced lover),  
 I slipped the noose and skittered away.

*Elan: to trouble, to pain, to grieve*

I was *nama-geornost*, name-yearning,  
*Geomuru ides*, a sorry lass,  
 Until I found my fight,  
 My *ellen* (courage!) in your *elan*.

I’ll not be your hall-game.  
 Your after-dinner entertainment,  
 Gold-laden in your gold-hall.

Your poetry’s not my bone-home.  
 I cannot settle there.

*Healsfæst* (stiff-necked and stubborn)  
I'll shape this song myself.

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Susan Signe Morrison's *Grendel's Mother* and Meghan Purvis's translation of *Beowulf*—both of which I read a year after writing my own poem—recognise the role of the original 'scop' ('poet') in shaping (perhaps misshaping) the narrative of *Beowulf*. Morrison identifies the prejudice of heroic narrative and the marginalisation of 'woman's truth': 'He sings of the hero's exploits, the warrior's wandering, the attacker's act. The killer is sung as an avenger, the pirate's a tribute-seeker, the rapist a good king. Only the peace-weaver is sung of with praise, her cup a tapestry doomed to unravel, her words of welcome weak [...] The hero's triumph overshadows the woman's truth. She records history, witnesses woe' (Morrison 2015, 189). Purvis explains that she divided her translation into a series of poems in order to 'mak[e] space for the many voices within *Beowulf* that are often drowned out by a single narrator describing a single hero.' She argues that 'this story is about Beowulf, yes; but it is also about the narrator of the poem, and about Modthryth and Hildeburh, about Grendel's Mother' (Purvis 2013, Preface). This foregrounding of not just the female characters but the narrator's agency encourages us to pay attention to *who* is telling the story, both in the original and in modern adaptations. Like Purvis, I too am conscious of 'writing as a woman' (Purvis 2013, Preface), and as a white woman from the north of England working in Oxford. When creating a new 'bone-home,' within which the dominant, masculine ideologies of the poem can be challenged and alternative voices can be heard, I hope to be aware of my own privilege and necessarily circumscribed viewpoint. As Marjorie Housley writes, 'even when medieval texts invite us to insert ourselves into the past, attending to these attachments and at times deconstructing or [re](#)constructing them is necessary' (Housley 2020, 435 and sidenote 3

on 436). The ability to ‘shape this song myself’ is a privilege and, therefore, one that we have a responsibility to pass on.

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After writing the poem above, my project quickly took shape as a form of the ‘contemporary medieval in practice,’ a cross-disciplinary and creative mode, outlined and enacted by Clare [A. Lees](#) and Gillian [R. Overing](#) in their book of the same name. A form of writing based upon a creative-critical exchange between past and present, they argue that:

Contemporary arts, both practice and methods, offer medievalists innovative ways to examine, explore and reframe the past. Medievalists offer practitioners of contemporary studies insights in to cultural works of the past that have been made or re-worked in the present. Creative-critical writing invites the adaptation of scholarly style using forms such as the dialogue, the short essay and the poem. (Lees and Overing 2019, 8)

Lees and Overing state that their ‘book “does” medieval studies differently by bringing it into relation with the field of contemporary arts and by making “practice” [...] central to it’ (Lees and Overing 2019, 8). My own project aims to work in a similar way by using poetry as a practice-based method of exploring, responding to, and reframing the female characters in *Beowulf*. [14] Writing my ‘scop’ poem, giving the unnamed queen an identity and a poetic voice, got me thinking about all the other women in the poem who are not allowed to speak for themselves: most notably, of course, Grendel’s Mother but also Freawaru, Hrothgar’s daughter. This approach to the women of *Beowulf* enabled me to reread the poem with fresh eyes. I began to reimagine moments in the narrative from a female perspective and to create new scenarios for the characters, inspired by hints and suggestions made by the poet. Writing back to, and from within, *Beowulf* became an intimate form of close reading that took

inspiration from the poet within the poem who ‘word oþer fand’ (‘devised other words,’ 870) for the familiar stories that they already knew.

What follows are five more poems from my collection, each with a brief introduction. The first gives Grendel’s Mother a voice and imagines how she might answer back to the poet, both to his pejorative descriptions of her (and those of modern translators) and to the striking moment in lines 1265–76 when the poet becomes nervous of describing her approach to Heorot head-on and so redirects his gaze onto her son and his fight with Beowulf instead.[15] I aim to puncture the misogynistic, boasting style (or ‘braggadocio’) of the original poem and to recognise that the *Beowulf*-poet both fears and needs Grendel’s Mother to control and reinforce the borders of his poem.[16] Here, as in other poems in the collection, I use alliteration and the compounding of words both to imitate and subvert the style of the original poem, and I make deliberate use of my own northern English dialect (‘nesh,’ ‘any road’) in representing the marginalised female voice.

### **Grendel’s Mother**

For all your bluster, warrior-poet,  
Your puffed-up preening,  
Your sword-swagger and shield-shuffling,  
You still won’t look at me.

Petrifying people? That’s not my style.  
It’s not my stare that needles your braggadocio.  
Any road, you started it.

Edging me out, making me your *mearcstapa*,  
your boundary-stalker, border-controller.  
I never wanted to shoulder those lines.

You kettle me into the corners of your compounds,  
Tuck me into the bottom drawer of your wordhoard,  
Shushed and smothered by your fabrications.  
*Water-witch, she-wolf of the deep, troll-dam?*

Give over. Don't be so nesh.

The next poem stands at the funeral pyre beside Hildeburh in the Finnsburh episode of *Beowulf* and responds to what I've come to see as the poet's gruesome delight in depicting that bloody scene. Introduced by the poet as a 'healgamen' ('hall-entertainment,' 1066), Wealhtheow listens in the hall as the 'lindplegan' ('shield-play,' 1073) that claimed her fellow queen's male relatives is depicted with relish. I wondered when writing this poem just how entertaining this scene would feel from both women's perspectives. The *Beowulf*-poet does foreground the consequences of feuding for female peace-weavers, more so than does the fragmentary *Fight at Finnsburh*, which deals with the same feud from a traditionally heroic perspective (Liuzza 2000, 163–64). Nonetheless, the violence on display in *Beowulf* might be seen as aiming to whet our appetite as much as to turn our stomach.[17] The tone of my poem attempts to register the queens' repressed anger, in imitation of the *Beowulf*-poet's use of litotes, and I invoke the dragon as an image of (potentially volatile) female power. S. C. Thomson remarks that the *Beowulf*-poet is 'interested in female figures as reflexes of one another, having similar experiences while also being individualized' (Thomson 2021, 211–12), and it was important to me to show Hildeburh and Wealhtheow sharing the same poetic space here, at different stages of their journeys as queens within *Beowulf*.

### **Hildeburh (*Battle-Stronghold*)**

Hildeburh was heart-sick.  
 She was heartily sick of it.  
 Husband, brother, son,  
 A family feud fuelling the flames.  
 The stink of it was famishing.

While you watched the pop and crackle  
 Of bone-vessels burning, heads blistering,  
 Body-bites bursting, sizzling, stewing

—you really went to town on it—

Hildeburh's mind curled in on itself  
 Like a serpent's tail.  
 And as the smoke spewed skywards,  
 Inside that stronghold the dragon roared.

(Queen Wealhtheow, stuck listening,  
 Flames catching in her golden crown,  
 Pursed her lips as she approached husband  
 and nephew. *Battle-play, indeed.*)

In 'Wealhtheow on the Whale-Road,' I imagine a sea-journey that the poet does not describe but which is implied by the meaning of Wealhtheow's name ('foreign-servant') and her marriage alliance to Hrothgar. Just like Beowulf, Wealhtheow travelled to Heorot to assume and perform a new identity, in a world in which feuding could cause a woman to be shipped back to her people, just like Hildeburh (1157–59). A woman's fortunes can easily turn like the tide and here I wanted to allow Wealhtheow a brief moment to speak for herself before she is swept up in the poem's plot. In tandem with patrilineal identity, kinship ties are crucial in *Beowulf* ('Scyldings, Scylfings') but what if the journey of the peace-weaver sounded a new association ('shield-maiden')?

### **Wealhtheow on the Whale-Road**

Feud-flotsam,  
 I washed up here  
 On the turn  
     of the tide,

Stepping to shore,  
 Sea-legs judder,  
 My foot floats  
     suspended

Over sand. For  
 A second,  
 I am stateless,

buoyed

With possibility.  
An empty shell,  
I susurrate

*Scyldings*  
*Scylfings*  
*Shield-maiden.*

In a parallel movement, we hear from Beowulf himself that Wealhtheow's daughter, Freawaru, is to be married off to Ingeld, a Heathobard prince, as part of a future peace-weaving alliance (2020–69). Beowulf, however, doubts the success of such a strategy, 'though the bride be good' (2031). Silent in the original poem, I give Freawaru a voice here to reflect upon her fate and to reclaim it as her own.

### **Freawaru: Peace-Pledge**

Land-locked and hand-bound,  
I am waiting it out.

Packed off over the whale-road,  
gold-armoured and hand-tied,  
my body their truce-anchor.

Truth is, it won't be long  
'til they're at it again,  
(*however game the bride,*  
as Beowulf slyly gibed).

So I'll be shipped back,  
stripped back,  
loose-locked and husbandless.

But salt-sprayed and sea-sick,  
I'll be my own safe-harbour now.

Finally, in ‘Queen Wealhtheow: Cupbearer,’ I consider the hall rituals performed by the queen and whether a Heorot filled with rowdy warriors would feel like a safe space to her. Swords are a recurrent catalyst for the reignition of feuds in the original poem, hence my use of the image here (for example, in the Finnsburh section, 1141–47; in Beowulf’s reflections on Freawaru’s impending marriage, 2036–56; and in the description of Wiglaf’s sword as the heirloom of Eanmund, 2611–19). My poem also gives a nod to the twentieth-century Scottish poet and *Beowulf*-translator Edwin Morgan’s extraordinary poem ‘Grendel,’ in which he recasts Bede’s metaphor of the sparrow flying through the hall. Morgan’s poem was one of the first creative re-imaginings of *Beowulf* that I encountered, and I appreciated his reframing of Bede’s imagery as well as the *Beowulf*-poet’s representation of Grendel’s character.[18]

### **Queen Wealhtheow: Cup-Bearer**

I watch her pacing the patterned floor,  
 Passing the cup to punch-drunk brawlers,  
 Side-stepping swords, the too-familiar fumble.  
 A mead-hall manoeuvre so mechanical  
 I can tell: she’s done this before.

And tomorrow? Until the footfalls measure out  
 Another winter, when enough will still be too little,  
 And the chink of a blade sets frosty tempers stirring,  
 Spoiling for a fight. That familiar footfall spells shelter.

Left out, sleet-struck, a single sparrow scoffs.  
 This, here, is what you should fear. The ritual dark.

\*

In her chapter ‘Feminism and Early English Studies Now,’ Stacy S. Klein quotes the feminist writer Audre Lorde from her essay ‘Poetry is not a Luxury’: ‘there are no new ideas, There are only new ways of making them felt’ (Klein 2019, 5). My poetry is indebted, gratefully, to

feminist scholarship in Old English literature. Critics such as Jane Chance, Stacy S. Klein, Toni Morrison, Renée R. Trilling, Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing opened my eyes to questions of gender in *Beowulf* without which I would have been unable to conceive of writing my poetry. My ideas in this context are, therefore, not new but expressing the female characters' experiences in my own words has, nevertheless, enabled me both to read *Beowulf* from a new perspective and to be moved by it in surprising ways. Shari Horner argues that *retelling* women's stories is an integral strategy in the original poem and that examining those retellings in our critical work 'allows us to better understand the poem's constructions of (and the limits it imposes on) femininity' (Horner 2006, 469). My own retellings aim to approach—and push back—on that understanding creatively and, furthermore, to remind us of the power that the women in *Beowulf* can possess to speak for themselves (and for us) in our contemporary moment. At the end of *Grendel's Mother*, Susan Signe Morrison writes in the voice of her scop, 'I have sung this lay, wrought this riddle, to preserve the past, understand the present, change the future' (Morrison 2015, 204). Raising up the voices of women, the oppressed and the marginalised, demonstrates to our students that there is space for their voices in *Beowulf*, and that the poem's 'hwæt' does, and must, include them in the present and for the future.

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[1] With Elizabeth Adams and Robin Darwall-Smith, I co-curated the 'Women at Univ 1249–2019' exhibition, celebrating and uncovering the hidden histories of women at University College, Oxford, from the Middle Ages to the present. The exhibition was part of the fortieth anniversary of the admission of women students in 1979.

<https://www.univ.ox.ac.uk/news/women-at-univ-exhibition/>

[2] On the poem's masculine critical history, see Lees (1994, 129–48) as well as Chance (2019), with reference to Chance (1980), a foundational essay on the 'problem' of Grendel's Mother.

[3] See Gíslason (2021) on the unexpected affective impact of creative engagement and performance, especially 61, 64, 69.

[4] For an examination of translations up to 2011, see Magennis (2011).

[5] Purvis discusses her translation of the poem in detail in her essay 'From Scop to Subversive: *Beowulf* as a Force for Inclusivity' (Purvis 2020).

[6] Forni's monograph (Forni 2018) surveys adaptations 'focused on female experience' on pages 59–65. See also Killilea (2015–16) for discussion of gendered power structures in male-authored adaptations.

[7] In Morrison's version, Brimhild (Grendel's Mother) washes up, unidentified, on the shores of the Scylding kingdom. She marries Hrothgar but is banished with her son when it is revealed that Hrothgar is her father, having raped her mother on a raiding expedition. See Forni (2018, 62–63) on the incest motif.

[8] Morrison also translates the opening of *The Wife's Lament* as an epigraph to the fourth of her five sections in *Grendel's Mother*: 'This riddle, my personal experiencing, I put about my most melancholy self' (Morrison 2015, 169).

[9] Purvis (2013) also declines to name Grendel's Mother in her translation. In other poems in my work-in-progress collection I have explored the significance of the *Beowulf*-poet's naming strategies, including with reference to Wealhtheow, discussed in the introduction to 'Wealhtheow on the Whale-Road', and the title of Hildeburh's poem ('Hildeburh (*Battle-Stronghold*)').

[10] Credit (and my gratitude) for this idea must go to my peer as a graduate student, Bethan Tovey, who introduced me to many adaptations of *Beowulf* and suggested that I use them in teaching. Texts that I have used include Gardner (1971), Hinds (2007), and Morpurgo and Foreman (2006).

[11] See Brookman and Robinson for a similar creative approach to teaching Old English translation in an Oxford context (2016).

[12] 'Defective metrically and in sense' is George Jack's description of the line (Jack 1994, 31).

[13] The translation here is Liuzza (2000, 55).

[14] For a recent example of practice-based engagement with medieval texts, see Gíslason (2021).

[15] My reading of this episode is indebted to Trilling's article in which she outlines how the poet's anxieties about Grendel's Mother's gender and maternity inform the narrative strategies of marginalisation and repression whenever her character is represented in the poem (Trilling 2007, 1–20).

[16] See Miyashiro (2020) for an important academic discussion of the role of the Grendelkin in challenging the Danes' territorial sovereignty.

[17] Purvis narrates this scene from the perspective of the Danish warriors, and when Hildeburh is shipped back to her people, she gives her a voice to express her experiences herself (Purvis 2013, 48–50).

[18] ‘Grendel’ is included in ‘*Uncollected Poems (1976–1981)*’ in Morgan (1996, 427–8). Morgan’s translation of *Beowulf* was originally published in 1952 (see Morgan 2002).