Trabajo Fin de Grado

Stirring the Cauldron of Story: J. R. R. Tolkien's and Maria Dahvana Headley's Versions of *Beowulf*

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ABSTRACT

"The Cauldron of Story" is a concept developed by J.R.R. Tolkien that refers to the way in which stories blend, develop and get renewed, creating a mixture that authors use as inspiration to produce "new" works. This perfectly applies to *Beowulf*, the earliest poem in Old-English that has survived complete and that has inspired hundreds of writers since its composition, probably in the late 8th century. The aim of this dissertation is to analyse two of the many works based on the poem, one a fairy tale by Tolkien and the other a recent translation of the Old-English epic by Maria Dahvana Headley. Tolkien wrote "Sellic Spell" in an attempt to recreate what could have been the original Scandinavian folk tale that was one of the sources of the original *Beowulf*. The first section of my dissertation delves into a comparative analysis of tale and poem, carried out from the perspective of genre: Tolkien's short story is explained in the light of the characteristics of folk and fairy tales, and compared with those of the epic genre *Beowulf* belongs to. As to Headley's *Beowulf: A New Translation,* it constitutes the focus of the second section of my dissertation, where I approach it from a gender perspective. This translation is also, to some extent, a rewriting of the epic narrative that highlights the role of the poem's female characters, especially Grendel's mother and the dragon (a female in Headley's translation). Tolkien's and Headley's works illustrate the potential that authors still see in *Beowulf* as a story that can be ancient and modern at the same time, and that can be reinvented, in these particular cases, due to its malleability in terms of genre and its possibilities when it comes to exploring gender issues from a 21st-century perspective.

RESUMEN

"El Caldero de las Historias" es un concepto que fue desarrollado por J.R.R. Tolkien y que hace referencia a la forma en la que las historias se combinan, evolucionan y se renuevan, creando una mezcla que distintos autores utilizan como fuente de inspiración a la hora de crear "nuevas" obras. *Beowulf* constituye una buena ilustración, siendo como es el poema más temprano en inglés antiguo que ha sobrevivido completo hasta nuestros días, y que ha proporcionado inspiración a cientos de autores desde su composición, probablemente a finales del siglo VIII. El objetivo de este ensayo es analizar dos de las numerosas obras basadas en *Beowulf*, en concreto, un cuento escrito por Tolkien y una reciente traducción del poema épico publicada por Maria Dahvana Headley. Tolkien escribió "Sellic Spell" en un intento de recrear lo que podría haber sido el cuento popular escandinavo que fue una de las fuentes del *Beowulf* anglosajón. La primera parte de mi Trabajo de Fin de Grado desarrolla un estudio comparativo del poema original y el relato posterior, atendiendo a las características del género literario al que pertenece cada obra: "Sellic Spell" se analiza a la luz de las características del cuento (cuento popular, cuanto de hadas) y se compara con los rasgos que definen la poesía épica que *Beowulf* ilustra. En cuanto a *Beowulf: A New Translation,* la segunda parte de mi ensayo se aproxima a la obra de Headley desde una perspectiva de género. Esta traducción es también, en cierta medida, una reescritura de la historia que destaca el papel de los personajes femeninos del poema, especialmente la madre de Grendel y la dragona (un dragón en *Beowulf*). El cuento de Tolkien y la traducción de Headley prueban claramente el potencial que los escritores todavía ven en *Beowulf*, una historia que puede ser antigua y moderna al mismo tiempo, y que autores de siglos posteriores han logrado reinventar con éxito, en los casos en los que se centra mi estudio, gracias a su maleabilidad en lo que a convenciones genéricas se refiere y a las posibilidades que ofrece a la hora de explorar cuestiones de género desde la perspectiva del siglo veintiuno.

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Beowulf is an Old-English epic poem, illustrative of the genre that best represents the Anglo-Saxons and their warrior culture. It is the earliest poem in Old-English that has survived complete, in just one manuscript that has overcome dangers like the Viking raids and the fire that broke out in Ashburnham House in October 1731, an official building where it was kept together with other valuable ancient works. This single copy of the poem is part of the Cotton Vitellius Manuscript –one of the four major volumes where most surviving Old-English poetry is preserved– and dates from the end of the 10th or the beginning of the 11th centuries, although the poem was composed earlier.

Beowulf tells the story of the eponymous main character, a young Geatish warrior who leaves his home in southern Sweden in order to fight Grendel, a monster that has been terrorising King Hrothgar's hall and people in Heorot, Denmark. Beowulf will have to face and defeat Grendel and two other foes: Grendel's mother and also, years later, a dragon that threatens to destroy Geatland during Beowulf's reign. The story in the poem thus takes place in Denmark and Sweden between the late 5th and the early 6th centuries. Some earlier version of it surely travelled with the Germanic invaders of Britain and was later used as inspiration for *Beowulf*, which was at first an oral poem. It was composed between 700 and 900, probably at the end of the 8th century, that is, long before the written version we have now. The poem's roots in Germanic culture account for the fact that neither the settings nor the characters are English in this work, considered to be the highest achievement of Old-English literature. *Beowulf* has been the focus of endless academic discussions, first due to the historical information on Anglo-Saxon England it provides, but then also because of its relevance when it comes to the study of English language and literature.

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this dissertation is mainly concerned with (at least in its first section). The story told in *Beowulf* resembles that in a group of folk tales across most of Eurasia, known as "the She-Bear's Son Tales". Friedrich Panzer (1910) compiled and studied in depth more than two hundred versions of the same core tale, which, he contended, *Beowulf* also reworks. It features a hero who was raised by bears and possesses physical strength that is superior to that of a regular human being; when he grows up, he confronts and defeats a supernatural creature, usually barehandedly. He tracks it to its (sometimes underwater) lair, where he will have to face a second enemy related to the first, one that is a female opponent in some versions of the tale (Barry 275-76). This plot outline fits what we find in the first section of *Beowulf* (on the protagonist's fights against Grendel and his mother), but also in some other tales like the German "Der Starke Hans" ["Strong Hands"], collected by the Brothers Grimm; the Italian "Giovanni dell'Orso" ["The Story of John-of-the-Bear"]; or the Russian "Ivashko Medvedko" ["John Honey-Eater"] (Chambers & Wrenn 370-72). The fight against the dragon (in the poem's second section) also recalls tales and legends, in this case of dragon slayers.

In its blending of ingredients from different sources, *Beowulf* can be seen to illustrate what J.R.R. Tolkien called "the Pot of Soup" or "the Cauldron of Story" ("On Fairy Stories" 13). The concept is partly inspired by George Dasent, whom Tolkien quotes in "On Fairy Stories" when the former refers to works that are made of a wide variety of materials as a "soup that is set before us" after its ingredients have been properly "boiled" to enrich the dish (9). This "Cauldron of Story" is a metaphor for the way in which stories develop and re-develop, blending sources of inspiration and diverse materials from which "portions are from time to time ladled out" (Cook 19) to become part of other stories. They also make their way into the cauldron to be stirred around, absorbing the flavours in the soup and adding their own. This dynamic is not different from that evoked by the more technical term "intertextuality", but the figurative cauldron especially fits the idea that there is a collective

pool of stories where old myths, legends, and tales have existed through the ages. These stories of old remain alive for countless generations, changing through time as authors keep stirring the soup and adding ingredients to it that create endlessly "new" and "appetising" versions.

This is the case with *Beowulf,* which was composed many centuries ago but has kept its ability to engage readers, conveying interesting messages, and capturing people's imagination through time. There is even a specific term, "Beowulfiana", to refer to the large number of works that use the Anglo-Saxon poem as its main intertext, and which are as varied as films, TV series, videogames, music, comic books, translations and novels. Among these are the texts that constitute the focus of my dissertation: J.R.R. Tolkien's tale "Sellic Spell" and Maria Dahvana Headley's book *Beowulf: A New Translation*. My aim here is to analyse both of them with a view to explaining the ways in which Tolkien and Headley have produced works that go back to *Beowulf* but depart from it in different ways, showing the possibilities that the poem still has for contemporary writers and readers. Tolkien moves backwards in time imaginatively, to write what could be, but obviously is not, the folk tale that the Beowulf poet used and blended with other materials in order to compose his epic narrative. My main focus here will be genre, the play between epic poem and folk tale. As to Headley, her translation is also, in some respects that I will highlight, a rewriting that invites reflection on gender issues. Both authors draw on *Beowulf* and contribute with their own ingredients to the Cauldron of Story, taking and giving, enriching the soup, and also leading us to see more layers of meaning in the old poem.

2. GENRE TRANSFORMATIONS: TOLKIEN'S "SELLIC SPELL"

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien is mainly known nowadays as the father of modern fantasy literature, the creator of Middle Earth and the author of the cult novels *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954, 1955). However, Tolkien was a philologist and a highly

reputed scholar in his lifetime, specialised above all in the language and literature of Anglo-Saxon England and Northern Europe. He made great contributions to the study of *Beowulf,* which until then had been considered as a mediocre literary work and was only studied by historians and linguists. In 1936, he delivered a lecture to the British Academy entitled "*Beowulf:* The Monsters and the Critics" that was later turned into an essay. In this lecture, Tolkien praised the work's themes, composition, style, and fantasy elements, especially the relevance and symbolic value of the monsters. His views definitely changed the way in which the poem was seen by scholars and literary critics.

Tolkien eventually wrote his own translation of *Beowulf* as study material for his university pupils at Oxford. This translation was published posthumously by his son Christopher, together with Tolkien's notes and comments on the poem. *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary* (2014) also includes several versions of the tale "Sellic Spell" (in Modern and Old English redactions). In Tolkien's own words, it is "*a* story, not *the* story […], an attempt to reconstruct the Anglo-Saxon tale that lies behind the folk-tale element in *Beowulf*" ("Sellic Spell" 355, italics in the original).[1] "Sellic Spell" tells the story of Beewolf, raised by a bear and later taken to the house of a northern king. When he grows older, this extraordinarily strong youth embarks on a journey to help the King of the Golden Hall, whose house is raided every night by the ogre Grinder. Beewolf defeats Grinder first and then his vengeful mother, gaining fame and glory. In the end, the hero returns to his homeland, marries the princess and becomes king himself. Writing a version of the folk tale that the Beowulf poet could have reworked demanded a change in genre, and so, Tolkien moves from

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[1] Tolkien uses the terms "folk tale" and "fairy tale" interchangeably and I also do so in my essay, although, strictly speaking, they do not mean the same exactly. Folk tales are transmitted orally, while fairy tales are their written, literary counterparts (Zipes xii). One thing that Tolkien does note, however, is that the expression "fairy tales" is misleading, as they are more often than not concerned with human beings and magic or marvellous events and creatures that do not often include fairies or elves ("On Fairy Stories" 4-5). Taking this into consideration, Tolkien used as the title of his story a phrase that appears in line 2109 of *Beowulf*: "*hwílum syllíc spell rehte æfter rihte rúmheort cyning*". Translated from Old English, "*syllíc spell*" means "strange or wondrous tale". This phrase is, Tolkien remarks, more consistent with the nature of fairy tales than the term "fairy tale" itself ("Sellic Spell" 358), and so, as "*syllíc*" and "*sellíc*" are forms of the same word in Old English, he entitled his tale "Sellic Spell".

epic poem (*Beowulf*) to folk tale ("Sellic Spell") in order to throw light on how the poet would have moved from folk tale to epic poem. In consequence, Tolkien had to introduce certain necessary modifications, some more drastic than others, which affect several aspects of the story as will be analysed in what follows.

2.1. CHANGES IN PLOT AND STRUCTURE

The complex structure of *Beowulf* constitutes an example of what is known as "ring composition": the plot is structured around a central, climactic element (in this case Beowulf's second fight, against Grendel's mother) and each of the surrounding episodes before the climax has a counterpart in the episodes that follow it. The poem is built on three fights and is clearly divided into two distinct sections separated by a fifty-year gap: in the first section, set in Hrothgar's kingdom (Denmark), Beowulf is a young warrior that faces first Grendel and then his mother, turning into a hero after defeating the latter monster; and in the second section, set in Geatland (Sweden), he is the old king of his country, who fights and kills a dragon to save his people although he dies in battle. Many secondary stories and digressions are also scattered throughout the narrative, as there are several passages in which the external narrator, the *scop* (the bard at King Hrothgar's court), or other characters tell about ancient heroes, earlier battles, or related episodes that widen and seem to add historical depth to the poem's main plot.

In the light of all this, the most notable change that Tolkien introduced in "Sellic Spell" was to simplify it structurally, a process that begins with the elision of the second half of the poem. Fairy tales have a simple structure, and they tend to be "mono-episodic": the plot focuses on "events taking place during one episode of the hero's life" that often includes "a transformative experience, such as marriage or the coming of age" (Honegger 252-53). This description fits the first part of *Beowulf*: here the protagonist carries out two deeds (the two battles) that gain him fame, recognition and hero status. Moreover, the plot of the poem's first

section follows the outline of "the She-Bear's Son Tales", while the second part clearly draws inspiration from a very different tradition: legends of dragon-slaying heroes. Digressions disappear as well, as fairy tales do not require the breadth and depth of epic poetry. In sum, the complexity of the ring composition is discarded in favour of a straightforward structure and a single plot line, as one expects of a tale.

Tolkien simplifies the story in a way that also makes it follow the traditional morphology of the folk tale, as some of the functions described by Vladimir Propp are clearly illustrated by "Sellic Spell". The tale starts with the "initial situation" (Propp 25-26), in which the protagonist, Beewolf, is introduced. The reader is told about his origins –a foundling raised by bears (Tolkien, "Sellic Spell" 360); his status –an outcast (360); and the main traits and actions that define him, such as his enormous strength (360-61) or his swimming contest against Breaker (361-62). After that, the main character's antagonist/opponent, the ogre Grinder, is introduced and Beewolf learns about the "villainy" (Propp 30-31) he has committed: Grinder has been raiding the King of the Golden Hall's territory and tormenting his subjects at night (Tolkien, "Sellic Spell" 33-34) but, worst of all, he has cruelly murdered people. Beewolf departs from home in order to try his luck against this ogre, becoming one of the hero types outlined by Propp: the "seeker hero", who helps the villain's victim(s), and is therefore different from the kind of hero that is a victim himself (Propp 36). On his journey, Beewolf meets two "donors" –sticking to Propp's terminology (39)– called Handshoe and Ashwood, who finally agree to accompany him (Tolkien, "Sellic Spell" 363-65). Beewolf's and Grinder's encounter is one of opponents that "fight in an open field" (Propp 52) and the latter is "defeated in an open combat" (53). This structure is repeated again when Grinder's mother attacks in order to avenge the death of her son. In the end, and closing the structure delineated by Propp, Beewolf is "recognized" (62), and then he gets "married and ascends the

throne" (63). This typical happy ending of tales, which so clearly makes "Sellic Spell" depart from the tragic and elegiac tone of *Beowulf*, will be addressed later in a separate section.

2.2. REWORKING CHARACTERS AND SETTING

There are well over fifty characters in *Beowulf*, counting those in the main plot and the digressions, even if most of them play minor roles or are just mentioned by name. The number is reduced to just ten in "Sellic Spell", which makes the story easier to follow and the relationship and dynamics between all the characters much less confusing.

All the ten characters in "Sellic Spell" appear in *Beowulf*. Tolkien did not introduce any new character into his tale –with the exception of the princess– but he made a number of changes, starting with the characters' names. Apart from Grendel/Grinder's mother (unnamed in both poem and tale), every other character is given a new name that better fits generic conventions. Fairy-tale characters tend to have names that are indicative of their appearance or inner qualities. In this way, names are easier to remember and/or they highlight their bearers' most prominent traits. One can think, for example, of Cinderella, Snow-White, Puss in Boots and endless others. Similarly, Beewolf's name makes reference to the character's bear-like strength: it reflects in a clearer way the hypothesis that Beowulf's name derives from a kenning meaning "bear" ("bee-wolf", a wild animal that enjoys bee honey, that is, a bear), which in turn relates the protagonist to "the She-Bear's Son Tales". As to Handshoe and Ashwood, their names come from the magic gloves and spear that they respectively use as weapons. Unfriend's name highlights his hostile attitude towards Beewolf, like that of Unferth in the poem, and Grinder's underscores his violent and destructive nature. Both kings are unnamed, and also the princess, as most fairy-tale princesses do not have a name.

The addition of Handshoe and Ashwood as the protagonist's companions constitutes an interesting change. They are based on minor characters in *Beowulf*,[2] but they play a more central role here and the differences with their counterparts in the poem are greater than in other cases. They enable Tolkien to introduce more magic and fantasy elements into his tale, as pertains the genre. They carry extraordinary weapons and, together with Beewolf, they make three in all, a magical and omnipresent number in fairy tales. They also play the role of Beewolf's "helpers", recalling the protagonist's typical "skilful companions" that join fairy-tale main characters during their journey and aid them to complete their task. In that, however, Tolkien plays with conventions: Handshoe and Ashwood respectively take the first and second turns against Grinder, and they both fail spectacularly in their fights, actually hindering Beewolf's progress instead of helping him as expected of this fairy-tale character type (Beal 18). From another perspective, their failure magnifies Beewolf's deed, who fights with no weapons as the poem's protagonist does, and also allows to connect success with the *third* attempt.

As to Grinder, he differs from Grendel in *Beowulf* in that the latter is a character with a background and complex motivations. He and his mother are said to be descendants of the biblical Cain (Heaney 9),[3] who was condemned by God to wander forever alone in punishment for the sin of murdering his brother Abel. Grendel attacks Heorot because the Danes have invaded his territory, but he also hates the light, the gatherings, the songs and poems, resenting men, above all, because they are able to share and celebrate together while he and his mother remain forlorn (9). The Grinder of "Sellic Spell" is just hungry and wants food to eat (Chance 99). In this way, he becomes a flat and simple villain, which makes sense

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[2] Hondscio, the Geatish warrior that is killed by Grendel, and Æschere, Hrothgar's counsellor murdered by the monster's mother, respectively (Acker 36).

[3] I am using Seamus Heaney's verse translation of *Beowulf*, considered to be among the best translations of the Old-English poem. In the sections of this dissertation where I deal especifically with Maria Dahvana Headley's *Beowulf*, parenthetical references can be to Heaney's version, for the sake of coherence with other sections, and also to Headley's translation, when the particularities of the latter's version are discussed. The source is always made explicit to avoid confusion.

in the context of a fairy tale. In contrast to other narrative genres with round characters and complex stories, fairy tales are built on clear-cut dichotomies and offer a simplified view of the world in which pure good and pure evil do exist and good will invariably prevail when they clash. It is precisely this comforting triumph of light over darkness that captures, as Tolkien puts it, the true essence of fairy tales ("On Fairy Stories" 33), as will be later discussed in more detail.

Regarding the general time and place where the action unfolds, the events in *Beowulf* happen in Sweden and Denmark, and the epic poem contains several historical references that help to situate the story in time. The clans that are portrayed existed at the time of the events, and King Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle, was also a real Geatish king (Chambers and Wrenn 2-3). The battle in which Hygelac's son Heardred is killed by Onela and the Swedes, as well as the episode in which the latter are murdered in revenge, probably took place in real life, although these events are told with great narrative freedom (5-8). The same goes for the destruction of the Danes at the hands of the Heathobards, which Beowulf predicts (20-24).

This historical framework is absent from "Sellic Spell". There are no references to any specific nations or clans, and the tale's version of Hygelac is just "a King in the North of the World" (Tolkien, "Sellic Spell" 360). With no historical characters, and no digressions that narrate historical or pseudo-historical events, it becomes impossible to establish a sense of time period or a connection between events and place. Thus, the setting of "Sellic Spell" lacks definition, as in most fairy tales: places are devoid of realism and the action occurs in an undetermined past, maybe a diffused version of the Scandinavia of the Middle Ages.

Religious references are part of the cultural context of *Beowulf,* but there are no elements related to religion in "Sellic Spell". The legend behind the poem was pagan, as the Anglo-Saxons were pagan when they invaded England. Unlike the poem's raw material, the poem itself dates from a time in which England had already been Christianised, and so, the

poet that composed it added references to Christian faith and the Bible in order to adapt his work to the audience's beliefs, also shared by the *scops* that recited the poem and the scribes that finally wrote it down. The blending of the Christian and the pagan in the poem has to do with beliefs, but also with temporal frames, which means that, by removing all Christian references, Tolkien was consistently moving backwards in time: to recreate, in "Sellic Spell", the tale on which the epic poem may have been based means to produce a story potentially brought by the Germanic tribes and that therefore predates the Christianisation of England.

As Tolkien himself explains in the introduction to "Sellic Spell", his main aim was to remove all that was "heroic and historical" in the poem and make the story "timeless" (355). The lack of concreteness as to place and time makes the tale feel universal. It also enables almost any kind of reader to build a connection with the story in order to feel "Recovery, Consolation and Joy" (Chance 94), an experience that Tolkien was convinced every fairy tale should afford its readers.

2.3. THE TRIUMPH OF HAPPINESS: FROM TRAGEDY TO EUCATASTROPHE

In his essay "*Beowulf:* The Monsters and the Critics", Tolkien asserts that *Beowulf*'s greatest merit is the way it ultimately depicts human life and suffering. It narrates the rise and fall of a hero that is also a man, and vulnerable therefore: he defeats and is in turn defeated by monsters that are never definitely done away with because they represent humanity's universal, collective, and deepest fears (17-18). Beowulf "is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy" (10), explains Tolkien as he praises the epic poem's overarching sense of fatality and its tragic ending, which depicts Beowulf's death and burial, and also his people's pain and deep fear of what is to come.

The poem's general ominous tone is created not only by the ending, but also by the various digressions that cast a shadow on events, even when they are not exactly sad. For instance, when Beowulf is ready to return to Geatland just after his triumph over Grendel and

his mother, the narrative advances the eventual destruction of the now free and happy Danes, as well as the tragic relationship of Freawaru (the Danish king's daughter) and Ingeld, whose marriage will prove unable to end the feud between their clans (Heaney 139-41). Earlier in the poem, after the victory over Grendel, king Hrothgar's *scop* sings several lays to celebrate Beowulf's feat, among them the stories of Sigemund, the dragon-slayer (59-61), and of the Battle of Finnsburg (71-81), both of which end tragically. These lays, strangely recited during victory celebrations, foreshadow Beowulf's defeat against the dragon at the end of the poem, as well as the fall of the Geats as a whole. In this way, listeners (now readers) are gloomily reminded that all that is good (youth, strength, triumphs, celebrations) is transient and that tragedy is always lurking nearby. This tragic element that goes well with the epic poem is completely absent from "Sellic Spell", whose tone is much lighter and never lets the reader feel real fear for the main character. Indeed, it has a typical happy ending.

As Andrew Lang had previously proved with his fairy-tale adaptation of the epic *Volsunga Saga*, tragic endings do not suit the genre of fairy tales (Honegger 254-55). Indeed, Tolkien believed that the happy ending is a necessary element for any fairy tale, key to its true form and ultimate purpose ("On Fairy Stories" 33). He even coined the term "eucatastrophe" (33) to describe the final consolation and happy turn of events that overcomes sorrow and failure: the outcome "denies […] universal final defeat" and gives "a glimpse of Joy" (33) to those who read the tale.

Cutting out Beowulf's fight with the dragon is a drastic change, but one that, together with other modifications that have already been discussed, serves a key purpose here: making a happy ending possible. "Sellic Spell" contains no ominous digressions and it does not end with a Beowulf past his prime that is eventually defeated. The tale ends, rather, with his victory over Grinder and his mother, that is, with the protagonist at the peak of his life. His success enables him to return home, where he was once an outcast, as an acclaimed and

accomplished individual that eventually marries the king's only daughter (Tolkien, "Sellic Spell" 385) –another addition to the poem's story. Marrying the princess and becoming the new king is the fairy-tale ending *par excellence* and the culmination of the traditional hero's quest. This is also the ultimate recognition of the protagonist's achievements and evolution, as "marriage usually signals the re-integration into society by means of a change in status from independent-irresponsible bachelor to that of a responsible member of society" (Honegger 253). Or from a grumpy, awkward and ignored child to a great and respected warrior king in "Sellic Spell", where the eucatastrophic joy of the tale's outcome replaces the sadness and elegiac tone of the epic poem's ending.

3. RETHINKING GENDER: FEMALE CHARACTERS IN MARIA DAHVANA HEADLEY'S *BEOWULF*

Maria Dahvana Headley is a North-American author, translator, editor, playwright, screenwriter and "monstermaker", as she describes herself in her website. It was precisely that interest in monsters, together with gender, that led her to *Beowulf*. As she herself explains in her introduction to *Beowulf: A New Translation* (2021), her first contact with the epic poem was through a picture of Grendel's mother in a book about monsters. Then she was only eight years old, but she was impressed by her, especially because she was a female warrior. Although she then thought that she was the main character of some work, he later discovered that Grendel's mother was just one of the hero's enemies, with not even a name of her own (*Beowulf* viii). The lack of appreciation and insufficient focus on the figure of Grendel's mother led her to write the novel *The Mere Wife* (2018), her first *Beowulf*-inspired work. This retelling of the old epic poem is set in 21st-century America and gives centre stage to two of the poem's female characters, Grendel's mother and Queen Wealhtheow (King Hrothgar's wife), who become Dana –an Iraq war veteran– and Wylla –a wealthy suburban housewife– in a modernised story told from the perspective of these women.

Headley's concern with gender and women in *Beowulf* did not stop there. Three years later she published *Beowulf: A New Translation,* a loose translation of the poem in which she took many liberties. Even though it preserves to some extent the original elevated, poetic and archaic tone of *Beowulf,* Headley's work paradoxically blends that with a much more colloquial style, full of everyday language and slang, references to popular culture, social media expressions, and other elements from our present-day world. In her own words, she imagined the poem as a story told by "an old-timer at the end of the bar, periodically pounding his glass and demanding another" (*Beowulf* xvi), something alive and attractive to contemporary readers. One only has to compare the beginning of Heaney's and Headley's respective translations of *Beowulf* to understand what this means:

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
And the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.
There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,
A wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.
This terror of the hall-troops had come from far.
A foundling to start with ….
(Heaney 3)

Bro! Tell me we still know how to speak of kings! In the old days
everyone knew how men were: brave, bold, glory-bound. Only
stories now, but I will sound the Spear-Danes' song, hoarded for hungry times.
The first father was a foundling: Scyld Scefing.
He spent his youth fits up, browbeating every barstool-brother,
bonfiring his enemies ….
(Headley 3)

Presented in most reviews as a feminist rewriting (see, for instance, Hines and Franklin), the book aims to give women a more prominent role, and also to highlight the many times they are ignored or disregarded. Gender is to a great extent what introduced Headley into the world of *Beowulf* and the way in which her translation throws new light onto female roles can be considered as her greatest contribution to the boiling cauldron of the poem. Therefore, it is this aspect of the work that I am dealing with in this dissertation,

mainly by focusing on the figures of Grendel's mother and the dragon. But first, in the following section, I will provide an introduction to the poem's representation of women.

3.1. THE FORGOTTEN ONES: WOMEN IN *BEOWULF*

Anglo-Saxon epic poetry is essentially a male genre: its protagonists are male characters and the stories are about male deeds and male bonding, about men that fight, celebrate and die together. Consequently, *Beowulf* is considered to be a male poem. Almost all its characters are men and the topics it deals with, among them war, violence, revenge, heroism, fame and glory, are usually regarded as traditionally masculine (even if they are not necessarily so). Female characters, on the other hand, are generally considered to be background figures, as they often have minor or anecdotical appearances and are only superficially developed. However, some critics and scholars, as well as Headley herself, have argued that women are actually much more complex and important for the poem than they may seem at first sight (see Porter and Pate on this).

    Beowulf provides a good insight into the roles women played in Anglo-Saxon society and culture. They are portrayed as queens, mothers, hostesses, mourners and even warriors, and, perhaps most importantly, as the only figures able to unite different peoples or put an end to disputes between clans through marriage (Headley, *Beowulf* xxiii). Moreover, there may be few females in the story but they are varied and diverse, from the unnamed female mourner at Beowulf's funeral and her striking lament, to King Hrothgar's wife Wealhtheow, a stately woman and the perfect hostess. Even if briefly, the poem does dwell as well on their feelings and concerns, such as Hildeburh's[4] sorrow over the loss of her son, brother and husband (Heaney 71-77) or Hygd,[5] who tries to protect her son and royal heir by offering the throne to Beowulf (Heaney 161). Nevertheless, while they might provide an accurate representation of

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[4] One of the characters in the story of the Battle of Finnsburg, recited in Hrothgar's hall during the celebration of Beowulf's victory over Grendel.
[5] The wife of Hygelac, Beowulf's king and uncle, and leader of the Geats.

some of the roles women had in Anglo-Saxon culture, it is still true that they mostly play a very small part in the story and its main conflicts, which is something that Headley sought to change to some extent in her translation. Given the scope of this dissertation, I will focus on the two female roles that are the most relevant in Headley's *Beowulf:* Grendel's mother and the (now female) dragon.

3.2. GRENDEL'S MOTHER, THE MISINTERPRETED WARRIOR

In 1971, John Gardner published *Grendel,* a revolutionary novel about the first monster in *Beowulf* that provided a complex insight and analysis of his nature, motivations, feelings and thoughts. *Grendel* was a turning point in the perception of the poem's hero and villain, as readers and scholars started questioning Grendel and Beowulf's respective monstrosity and heroism, as well as the clear-cut dichotomy that the poem establishes between the two (Livingston & Sutton 3). However, *Grendel* and other rewritings of *Beowulf* that followed its lead only focused on Grendel himself with a view to problematising his monstrosity and humanising him. As to Grendel's mother, she has remained almost forgotten and treated as an extension of her son. Her character has never been explored or deconstructed to the same degree as Grendel and, even if in the story they are both depicted as monsters with human traits, gender issues have not been the main focus of later versions of the poem (except for the above-mentioned novel by Headley, which rewrites the story in another time and setting, not like her translation in that sense).

    Beowulf: A New Translation changes that approach to some extent. The importance of Grendel's mother for Headley has already been mentioned, so it is natural that her translation should aim to provide a deeper insight into her character and her role as a female in an eminently male world. Headley tries to humanise her, and she does so in the first place by referring to her always as a woman, and therefore a human being. This establishes a clear contrast with other previous translators of the poem, such as Heaney or Tolkien, who portray

her as a monster by using terms such as "monstruous hell-bride" (Heaney 89) or "Ogress" (Tolkien, "*Beowulf"* 49). According to Headley, there is no evidence in the original poem to support such reading, as she is never physically described and the language that the author used when telling about her is not necessarily connected with monstrosity. Most of the times, she is just described with the feminine forms of the adjectives used for Beowulf and other warriors, such as *aglaec-wif* or *aglaeca*, which are translated as "hero" or "formidable fighter" when referring to the main character (*Beowulf* xxv). In sum, translators made decisions when faced with certain terms and expressions that were rendered into English by choosing words with negative connotations. They made Grendel's mother truly monstruous, while other translations were possible. They were nonetheless discarded, even if the same terms were used for male characters on the side of goodness in the poem and therefore translated in a more positive or neutral way.

Some critics have argued that, leaving her origins aside (the monsters as Cain's progeny), her behaviour is not that of a murderous monster either. In fact, it is very similar to that of the "properly" human characters, and quite in tune with the customs of Anglo-Saxon society and culture. Unlike her son, Grendel's mother had never caused trouble or killed anyone before Grendel's death. The only knowledge that the Danes have of her is because they have seen her roaming the mere with her son, without disturbing anyone (Heaney 95). As Bari puts it, she only attacks after Grendel is killed, avenging him as it would have been legitimate and even expected according to Anglo-Saxon blood-feud laws (37). Beowulf himself explains that "it is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning" (Heaney 97), and he behaves in the same way by tracing Grendel's mother to her lair and attacking her after she murders Æschere –King Hrothgar's best friend and counsellor– in revenge for her son's death. It is true that she fights the hero, but that is because he has

invaded her home with the intention of killing her. Beowulf will also fight back to defend himself and his people when the dragon attacks his kingdom in the second part of the poem.

The similarities between the hero and the villain do not end there. For example, they both possess incredible physical prowess, even at an advanced age, and are able to breathe and fight underwater (Hennequin 513). These and other points in common lead Headley to assert that early translators of the poem manipulated language to "bolster Beowulf's human credentials by amplifying the monstrosity of Grendel's mother" (*Beowulf* xxvi). It is the translators and scholars and not the poem who describe her as monstruous, they deprive her of her individuality and treat her as an appendix to her son, making her even more monstruous than him. Interestingly, this can be accounted for by the fact that she transgresses gender expectations and roles, and behaves in a way traditionally regarded as "manly" and improper for a woman (Hennequin 513, 521). Moreover, as Toni Morrison explains in her essay about *Beowulf,* "in true folkloric, epic fashion, the bearer of evil, of destruction is female" (257). Headley acknowledges the often-overlooked heroic nature of Grendel's mother's actions by describing her as the powerful figure she is, as a "night-queen" (66) or "mighty mere-wife" (66).

Another possible reason for the view of Grendel's mother as monstrous is, according to Headley, that she is a single mother. The original text makes no reference at all to Grendel's father, which opens the possibility of him being the product of a rape, and a raped woman has traditionally been considered as a "ruined woman, thus an abomination and thus, all too possibly, evil" (Headley, *Beowulf* xxv). Headley explores this hypothesis in her translation. She associates Grendel's mother, and women in general, to the land as both one's homeland and home. The Danes seem to have settled in the best part of the territory, while Grendel and his mother have to live in the inhospitable moors. Moreover, the men's intrusion reaches its peak when Beowulf and a group of selected warriors attack her in her lair, which

could be seen as an invasion of her home and her body as well, as the mere in which she lives is presented as an extension of Grendel's mother herself. Her home is in a cave under a lake that is like a uterus, which makes it possible to regard the water-beasts that inhabit it almost as her children (Olesiejko 710). This can be seen in the passage in which the Danes kill one of the monsters of the mere, described as an abortion practised on her against her will: "They cornered it, clubbed it, tugged it onto the rocks, / Stillbirthed it from its mere-mother, deemed it damned, / And made of if a miscarriage (Headley, *Beowulf* 63). When Beowulf breaks into the underwater cave, he finds there the dead body of Grendel, who took refuge in the cavern (in the safety of the mother's womb) when he was mortally wounded by Beowulf. Then, the language used to describe the fight between the protagonist and Grendel's mother is also reminiscent of domestic violence at some points, with the hero "twisting her hair around his fist" (67) and "his fingertips blueprinting her skin" (67). As I will show in what follows, this approach to Grendel's mother is in important respects echoed in Headley's version of the dragon episode, in the second part of the poem.

3.3. THE FEMALE DRAGON

Headley's greatest departure from the original *Beowulf* is perhaps the fact that she decided to turn the dragon –the third opponent, which Beowulf fights as an old king– into a female. The dragon is usually presented as male, but the text makes no explicit reference to this, so it may be valid to assume, as Headley does, that it is a she-dragon. Moreover, this allows Headley to establish connections between the she-dragon and Grendel's mother, thus producing a translation with two females that are warriors, independent and powerful.

Men are never portrayed as a threat for Beowulf, but women are. Throughout the poem, the hero is always shown to be easily able to overcome the challenges posed to him by other male characters. He swims furthest and fastest than Breca, all while facing a terrible storm and slaying hordes of sea monsters (Heaney 37-39). He defeats Grendel without

weapons, armour or protection, and tears his arm off without much effort, performing in a night and with his bare hands a task that others had been unable to accomplish in the course of twelve years (49-56). Beowulf is also victorious in all of the battles and wars against other clans or kings that he fights throughout his life, first as a young warrior and later as a king. The only episodes in which he feels afraid of the foe facing him are the ones in which he confronts female opponents. Grendel's mother is presented as being much more capable and dangerous than her son. Beowulf fights her in full armour and with a sword, and she holds the upper ground against him until God's double intervention enables the hero to win (63-64, 66-69). The she-dragon seems to be an even more fearsome foe. Just as he did in the fight against Grendel's mother, Beowulf uses weapons and a shield, but he is nevertheless presented as hopeless and completely overwhelmed by his enemy during the battle. He needs the help of Wiglaf, one of his thanes, to kill the dragon, although the young warrior cannot prevent his king from being mortally wounded (109-16).

As is the case with Headley's rendering of Grendel's mother, the she-dragon's lair is presented as part of her body, described as "a stony womb […] impregnated with treasure" (Headley, *Beowulf* 132). The dragon is the keeper of an old treasure hoarded in a cave and, therefore, when a thief breaks into this cave, "the stealing of the goblet is another masculine invasion on a world in which women's values prevail" (Olesiejko 713), an invasion portrayed as a rape of sorts. The "split" (Headley, *Beowulf* 96) on the ground through which the thief falls is reminiscent of a vagina and female reproductive organs. A lot of emphasis is made on the facts that everything happens while the dragon sleeps and that she wakes up to find out she has been wronged, something precious taken away from her. She is "stripped while sleeping" (96) and smells "the sour scent of an enemy man" (99) who has "invaded her bedchamber" (99) and "desecrated her delights" (99). Moreover, the last survivor of the people who were the original owners of the she-dragon's treasure had consecrated it to

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Mother Earth (97), which once again links the female opponent with the land, and also with earth and nature. She reacts to male offence and theft by attacking Beowulf's people and burning the royal hall. Grendel's mother was an enemy initially considered weaker for the fact that she was a female, while then she turns out to be a most terrible opponent. The same happens with the she-dragon, whom Beowulf insists he wants to fight alone although she has showed how much destruction she can cause: she "swoop low and spat flame, destroying / both manor and hovel, scrawling red RSVPs in the sky" (100). Indeed, she is described by using weapon terminology and modern military jargon, which adds to her complexity, and magnifies the menace she represents and the terror she inspires. In the end, she dies, but not before killing Beowulf as well.

4. CONCLUSION

Throughout history, *Beowulf* has been, and still is, one of the most prolific literary pieces, serving as the main source of inspiration for countless works in basically every artistic field imaginable. In spite of its age, it is still very much alive and kicking. The fact that Toni Morrison uses *Beowulf* to make a point about violence or the contradictions present in American culture, or Headley's project to reflect on gender roles through the poem, speak in favour of its ability to stand the test of time, reinvent itself, and convey a relevant message to present-day society. Its story has been boiling for many centuries, and fresh ingredients are still being added and removed from its "cauldron of soup", renewing a story that only keeps getting richer and richer.

A perfect example of this are the works that have been analysed in this dissertation. Tolkien's fairy-tale adaptation of the poem shows the work's malleability and scope in terms of genre conventions. *Beowulf*'s origins as a folk tale allow for this experiment, in which the poem's distinct flavour is still present and recognisable but, at the same time, it blends perfectly with other existing fairy tales due to the use of eucatastrophe and the changes

affecting plot, structure, characters and setting. Tolkien is able to successfully transform the epic poem into a tale, a believable source for the original poem. In fact, some of the most notable inconsistencies present in *Beowulf* are solved in the light of this change in genre: most of them were likely the result of the original shift from folk tale to epic poem, as sometimes elements of one and the other type of narrative blend well while other times they irremediably clash.

As to Maria Dahvana Headley, one of her most remarkable contributions to the pot of *Beowulf* is the gender perspective from which she reworks some characters and episodes, something never done by previous translators. Also innovative are her style and use of language, which preserve the essence of the original but at the same time manage to make it modern and closer to the reader. Her translation reinterprets and humanises the often forgotten or misread figure of Grendel's mother, and she turns *Beowulf*'s fearsome dragon into a she. By presenting *Beowulf*'s two most threatening foes as females, Headley restores power to them. Since its publication in 2021, as has already been mentioned, most reviews have labelled *Beowulf: A New Translation* as a feminist rewriting of the original poem. It is true that the author has introduced conscious and careful modifications but, considered as a whole, her translation does not depart a long way from its original source in as far as contents are concerned. It certainly gives a more relevant role to (some) women in the poem, while criticising at the same time the ways in which the original work disregards them. However, the book never truly subverts the power dynamics and gender hierarchy in the original *Beowulf*. The point of view remains primarily male and the action still focuses on men, even if in a critical way at some points. Therefore, while it is true that the work does engage with gender issues and perspectives, I sometimes felt that its being described repeatedly, mainly, and sometimes exclusively, as a feminist rewriting ultimately brings to the fore an aspect of it at the cost of a broader view of the poem's translation. There is no denying that feminism

influences Headley's work. There is no denying either that feminism sells well and can even become a good marketing strategy.

I will conclude by saying that the key to the poem's universality and agelessness could be, as Tolkien suggests in *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,* that *Beowulf* possesses the ability to resonate with human nature, as it deals with many elements that are intrinsic to it (13, 16). Violence and the best way to confront it. Fear of death and the need to be remembered after it. Coexistence and clash between different peoples and cultures. According to Headley, it is essentially a poem that deals with facing the fears and adversities that we all encounter in life while we try to become the best possible version of ourselves in the process, no matter what new "monsters" we have to fight as time goes by (*Beowulf* viii-ix). If this was regarded as difficult to achieve in the 8th century, when the poem was composed, it seems to be even harder nowadays, in our 21st-century world.

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