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The Monsters and the Translators: An Apologia for the Study of History

Walker Cosgrove
Dordt University, walker.cosgrove@dordt.edu

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Abstract

No longer do we believe in monsters; we've reached a ripe old, disenchanted age. In the 21st century, we romance vampires, we train dragons, and we pacify Greek gods. In our enlightened state, we produce novels and films that offer the perspective of the monsters in an attempt to help us understand them and make them seem less monstrous. Yet, we continue to demonize, and the monstrous survives in the "other" with whom we disagree, fueled, no doubt, by our highly politicized society today. It appears we've learned nothing in our enlightened disenchantment. I want to consider here one such recent attempt to understand monsters in Maria Dahvan Headley's new translation of the poem *Beowulf.*

Keywords

Beowulf, monsters, translating and interpreting

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Comments

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Walker Reid Cosgrove, PhD
Associate Professor of History,
Dordt University
Walker.Cosgrove@dordt.edu

The Monsters and the Translators: an *apologia* for the Study of History

No longer do we believe in monsters; we've reached a ripe old, disenchanted age. In the 21st century, we romance vampires, we train dragons, and we pacify Greek gods. In our enlightened state, we produce novels and films that offer the perspective of the monsters in an attempt to help us understand them and make them seem less monstrous. Yet, we continue to demonize, and the monstrous survives in the "other" with whom we disagree, fueled, no doubt, by our highly politicized society today. It appears we've learned nothing in our enlightened disenchantment.

I want to consider here one such recent attempt to understand monsters in Maria Dahvan Headley's new translation of the poem *Beowulf*. But before I do, I want to be clear upfront that I am not a scholar of Old English generally or *Beowulf* specifically, and that my own academic specialty ranges south to southern France and the Mediterranean world and forward in time to the turn of the 13th century. Even so, I've taught *Beowulf* in the undergraduate classroom for almost fifteen years in a variety of settings from general education to upper-level courses. It's also important to note that I am a historian, which means that I can't help but teach a text within its particular cultural context. I'm not opposed to other ways of reading and interpreting texts, but I do think author and historical context worthwhile places to start (Edmundson 53).[1]

I say that as a frame of reference for the way I approach Headley's new translation, namely, as a teacher and historian. This translation stems from her 2018 novel *The Mere Wife*, a really fantastic, contemporary retelling of *Beowulf* that beautifully muddies the water between hero and monster, and in so doing humanizes Grendel's mother as an Iraq war veteran and rape survivor who clearly deals with some pretty intense PTSD. The novel cleverly forces the reader to grapple with many contemporary issues that confront us today, including toxic masculinity and the demonization of the other. Headley's re-writing of *Beowulf* in this way follows a long history of re-writing stories and myths going back at least to ancient Greek treatments of Homer.[2] As a historian I am fascinated with historical reinterpretations and rewritings of texts, whether in the pre-modern eras or our own.

That background is important because, not surprisingly, the issues Headley explores in *The Mere Wife* influence her translation and interpretation of *Beowulf* itself. An important reason to read Headley's translation of the poem is her foregrounding of the female in the text. Unlike other translations I've read, Headley's work brings to light the female and reveals that *Beowulf* says as much about the world of women in a hyper-masculine society as it does about its masculine heroes, for example, in Wealhtheow's speech following Beowulf's victory over Grendel (1170-1187)[3] and Hygd's attempt to protect her son and offer Beowulf the throne (2369-2378). Adjacent to this emphasis, she problematizes the monstrous in humanizing Grendel's mother, revealing her to be something of a female ruler and warrior in her own right, and ultimately a regional rival to Hrothgar (1258). Reminiscent of Mark Edmundson's treatment of the *Iliad*, Headley refuses to let *Beowulf* simply be a "period

piece," but rather "replete with vital possibilities" and "a potent guide to the present and the future" (Edmundson 70). In this way, Headley reveals *Beowulf* as timeless.

While there is much I appreciate in reading literature this way, I am, as I said above, a historian teaching history, not literature. This means that I don't stray much from the particular contexts that produced the literature, and in accentuating a text's milieu I offer my students an opportunity to safely consider the other from a distance. I say "safely consider from a distance" because in this case, the other is already dead, and in many of my courses has likely been dead for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. This is important because in our particular moment in the history of our nation, it appears that few can, or even desire to, understand those with whom they disagree, a problem that plagues every side of any spectrum. Essentializing those different from us has become the norm, partly because it is easier to demonize, and partly because it takes much effort and energy to explore the complexity of one who is different, to be willing, as it were, to step into their shoes and walk a mile.

I think that another reason we essentialize is that we mistake understanding those unlike us as necessarily agreeing with them. This need not be the case. Theologian Henri Nouwen suggests that true hospitality requires receiving the other completely on his or her terms alone, because to add conditions to hospitality is to manipulate and do violence. And yet, true hospitality also requires confrontation, "because a space can only be a welcoming space when there are clear boundaries, and boundaries are limits between which we define our own position" (Nouwen 69). Thus, in my classes I try to help students move beyond essentializing and develop habits and postures by which they can move toward

understanding those with whom they disagree. When faced with the other, I want my students' first reaction to be something other than judgment. I want them to see one unlike themselves as a fellow human in all his or her complexity. In this, I hope to arouse a life-long posture of charity, humility, and hospitality when engaging those, living or dead, with whom they disagree.

Despite an alleged feud between poetry and philosophy,[4] about which I'm sure there are many strong opinions in a room full of English professors, one reason I like Plato is that he truly understood the power of poetry in any given society. Poetry is the thing that casts a vision for, and is the true educator of, any culture, which is to say that poetry tells us how to be human, at what our hopes and dreams ought to be directed, why pain and suffering exist, and how we might overcome the pain and suffering to find peace, stability, wholeness, and ultimately human flourishing. Though often attributed to him, Plato didn't hate poetry so much as he hated the epic and tragic vision cast for his fellow citizens, and in his philosophical poetry he attempted to counter it with a new vision for human life, complete with a new Socratic hero to replace Achilles, Odysseus, Herakles, and the like.[5]

So, what's all of this got to do with *Beowulf*? If Plato is correct about poetry, then *Beowulf* furnishes a powerful vision for the Germanic peoples.[6] It presents the key to peace, stability, wholeness, and flourishing in the powerful warrior who can unite the people and struggle against the violent, threatening forces outside the community, be they monsters, other marauding clans and tribes, or even nature itself. Yet, and this is where *Beowulf* is unsparingly frank, by the end of the poem it is so clear that its vision ultimately and invariably fails. This is why the poem is dark, melancholic, heavy, and elegiac, and requires

such language. To my mind, the majority of the poem serves as a prologue for line 3137 to the end with Beowulf's funeral pyre and the Geat woman's lament, which reveals that any peace and stability is fleeting and temporary. The greater forces may be held at bay for the moment but are never ultimately defeated or destroyed. Without fail, the violence and destruction return (Tolkien, "On Translating" 127-128). This impression is foreshadowed earlier in the poem with the Saga of Finn (1070-1158) as well as Beowulf's remarks about the attempt to control feud through marriage alliances (2027-2031), and both of these examples disclose the relentless nature of violence and feud in the Germanic world that *Beowulf* enacts in its entirety.

Accordingly, in my reading, *Beowulf* is a text critical of its own context and hyper-masculinized framework for life and reality through a serious treatment and consideration of that very context and framework. Of course, the original audiences wouldn't have recognized the gendered categories that we use when reading the poem. But it would have been perfectly clear to them that while Beowulf the hero provides 50 years of peace and stability, in the final analysis his kingdom still collapses into violence and chaos at his death. The monsters always return, again, foreshadowed earlier in the poem with Hrothgar's own peaceful reign over his people that is eventually spoiled in Grendel's nightly visitations (81-100). In each of these examples, and the poem in its entirety, *Beowulf* reveals the futility of this Germanic vision, and thus we don't need to turn Beowulf the character into a joke to reveal how stupid and destructive toxic masculinity is. I struggle with Headley's translation at this point, because to a certain extent that is what she has done. More on this below.

Part of the challenge with Headley's translation is that she provides no scholarly apparatus offering insight into her philosophy of language and translation. Hence, we have little direction for her methods and linguistic choices, outside of a 27-page introduction. It is clear from this introduction that Headley is familiar with literature surrounding *Beowulf* and a number of other translations (ix-xv). She presents a long discussion about *hwæt* and why she translates it as she does—she renders it "Bro," in case you were wondering (xx-xxi). She also offers what I found to be an extremely insightful and helpful discussion on *aglaec-wif* (xxv-xxviii). But nothing else.

The most guidance we get concerning her method of translation is that she does not interpret the poem as an elegiac or heroic epic, but rather as "a manual for how to live as a man, if you are, in fact, more like the monsters than the men. It's about taming wild, solitary appetites, and about the failure to tame them" (xxi-xxii). Her language throughout, which is intentional on her part, seems to be spoken by deplorables in a redneck bar out in the middle of nowhere, filled with all things Trump. The reason Headley uses such language is that she wants to expose and criticize the toxic masculinity of our own day. Therefore, males in *Beowulf* are no longer great warriors but "dudebros" worthy, not of our understanding, but of our complete and utter disdain. Her translation shows little sensitivity or understanding for the cultural situation that produced the language and the poem. This is disappointing because it is the very sin for which she derides previous translators as committing against the female and monstrous characters (xxiii-xxxi).

I highlight here a few examples of these transgressions. After Scyld dies we're told his men mourn as men should, by getting drunk instead of weeping (48). Headley's narrator

doesn't tell us of the elegiac poems composed upon Heorot suffering Grendel's attacks, but instead that "Every outsider talked shit" (145). Scyld Scefing "spent his youth fists up, browbeating every barstool-brother" (5). Beowulf introduces himself to Hrothgar with, "Anyone who fucks with the Geats? Bro, they have to fuck with me" (421). As the titular hero dressed for battle against Grendel's mother, she translates "Beowulf gave zero shits," presumably about death, but that isn't clear in her interpretation (1441). And Headley's rendering of the heroic code begins with "Beowulf…was open for business: / 'No worries, wise one, I've got this'." (1383-1384). Admitting to Hrothgar that Grendel could kill him, Beowulf exclaims, "Horrors happen, I'm grown, I know it. / Bro, Fate can fuck you up" (453-454). I've cited "bro" twice already, and she uses the word at least two dozen more times on my count. The pissing match between Unferth and Beowulf early in the poem descends into bro this and buddy that, with Beowulf's mic drop "He's got no fear / of beer-hall brothers, but, this you can quote—he'll fear me. / There's no guns of note on anyone but me and my Geats" referring, presumably, to their muscular arms (599-601). Multiple times in her rendering she announces what "real men" do (for example, see 48, 311, 635, 1534). As Beowulf begins his boast about his battle with Grendel's mother he says "Here's to glory! And now my story. / I don't mean to say this shit was no thing" (1654-1655). I could go on.

Perhaps Tolkien went too far when he said that to translate *Beowulf* well one must use "literary and traditional" language because "the diction of *Beowulf* was poetical, archaic, artificial (if you will), in the day the poem was made" (Tolkien, "On Translating" 55). Headley disagrees with Tolkien on this point (xiv-xv), and I'm willing to admit that there is no single definition of "literary and traditional" language. Yet, as a historian, when I

examine the Germanic world of the early medieval era before the coming of Christianity, I do think that the language ought to approximate the grand, majestic, and dignified vision that the poem casts for its audience, and for this reason the language must be melancholic and elegiac, and ultimately tragic to truly capture the *geist* of this early Germanic world and culture.[7]

I understand Headley's desire to bring the poem to life, and she is correct that "Even though it was probably written down in the quiet confines of a scriptorium, *Beowulf* is not a quiet poem. It's a dazzling, furious, funny, vicious, desperate, hungry, beautiful, mutinous, maudlin, supernatural, rapturous shout" (xvi). *Beowulf* is, indeed, a lively poem, though I disagree with her as to when it was "written," as it was likely composed orally in the mead halls of now-anonymous warrior chieftains like Hrothgar long before a monkish scribe put pen to parchment.[8] And, as such, I don't think she's justified in turning the poem into a braggadocious and drunken monologue of "an old-timer at the end of the bar, periodically pounding his glass and demanding another" (xvi).

Guiding her translation and interpretive choices is the notion that "There are noble characters in *Beowulf*, but the poem itself is not noble. There is elevated language in *Beowulf*, but the poem feels populist. It's entertaining, episodic, and full of wonders" (xix). Therefore, she writes, "I'm as interested in contemporary idiom and slang as I am in the archaic. There are other translations if you're looking for the language of courtly romance and knights" (xx). At this point, I'm not even sure we're talking about the same poem anymore. I think that our contemporary language is rich enough to not be forced to choose between "forsooth" and "fuck," and as there is nothing in *Beowulf* that suggests courtly romance or knights,

surely we can be elevated and serious without descending into faux medieval or courtly language.[9] No doubt, the slang and contemporary idioms make the text approachable to a new generation of readers, which non-academic reviewers fall all over themselves celebrating.[10] But, I wonder if it makes the text something other than what it was in either its oral or written form. I wonder if it tells us more about ourselves and our day than about the poem or the Germanic world itself.

Headley gives us a version of *Beowulf* for the 21st century, of that there is no doubt. There are as many "fucks" and "shits" here as a Quentin Tarantino film with the violence to match. She brings *Beowulf* to life and makes it contemporary, which reveals the ongoing power of literature. One can imagine Charles Péguy speaking about *Beowulf*, "Homer is new this morning, and perhaps nothing is as old as today's newspaper" (Singleton 371), or the Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri could have included *Beowulf* when he said, "Literature doesn't have a country. Shakespeare is an African writer.…The characters of Turgenev are ghetto dwellers. Dickens' characters are Nigerians.…Literature may come from a specific place, but it always lives in its own unique kingdom." They, and others, could speak of *Beowulf* in this way because they pointed to the universal nature of literature and the human condition, but I'm not sure either would say the same about Headley's translation which is hyper-particular.

And so, in her treatment of the hero Headley commits the very sin about which a close reading of *Beowulf* actually warns the audience, namely, that nothing changes when we answer violence with violence. In this, *Beowulf* enacts the very words of Martin Luther King, Jr., who preached:

> As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence. If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.

Dr. King's words offer a concise synopsis of *Beowulf* in its entirety. And this leads me back to my attempt to encourage and model for my students a posture of charity, humility, and hospitality when dealing with the other. The world today is already hyper-polarized, with every side demonizing their perceived enemies. If democracy is going to work, then we need a different way forward. We have to figure out how to interact with one another from a place other than fear and loathing. Instead of essentializing the other, we must say with Saint Francis "let me not seek as much . . . to be understood as to understand."[11] I want my students to listen carefully to the text as it speaks to them, to be respectful of the thoughts, ideas, and visions it offers, even, or especially, if they have serious misgivings about them. I am quite aware that this is not the only way to approach and read texts, nor even the final way. But it's not a bad place to start.

It would seem Headley agrees with these ideas, as she ends her introduction with the following paragraph:

> There are also stories that haven't been reckoned with, stories hidden within the stories we think we know. It takes new readers, writers, and scholars to find them, people whose experiences, identities, and intellects span the full spectrum of humanity, not just a slice of it. That is, in my opinion, the reason to keep analyzing

> texts like *Beowulf*. We might, if we analyzed our own long-standing stories, use them to translate ourselves into a society in which hero making doesn't require monster killing, border closing, and hoard clinging, but instead requires a more challenging task: taking responsibility for one another. (xxxiv)

This is a beautiful statement, a voice of clarity for our dark times. But her translation, sadly, does not fully embody it. Yes, Headley clearly prompts us to take responsibility for typically marginalized characters, in this case the female and, to a certain extent, even the monsters. She fails, however, to understand or convey the nature of heroism in the early Germanic world. Instead, she turns the hero into a washed-up has-been, sitting at the end of the bar, nursing a fifth of cheap bourbon, reliving his high school glory days for anyone who will listen, and mansplain to any female unfortunate enough to materialize in his presence. Of course, she is more than free to translate and interpret the text this way, but in the words of the late Joseph Frank, "one should be aware that in giving this sort of interpretation, we are using the work for our own purposes, in terms of our own contemporary cultural concerns, but not understanding it" (74).

I'm fully aware of the destructiveness of toxic masculinity in our own day, and think we need to address and criticize it whenever we see it, but this translation does not offer us a place from which we can move forward. And while clearly Beowulf is not a hero to emulate in our contemporary world, certainly he, and the pagan Germanic poets who cast this vision, deserve more. They deserve to be understood. *Beowulf* can help us move toward understanding as it pulls back the veil on a world very far removed from our own, a Germanic world in which all authority is personal not official, and where justice is found

along the blade of an ax. The poem enacts a story of violence and death, and in so doing exposes the never-ending cycle of blood feud, which even *weregeld* fails to end.[12] This helps us to make sense of how a culture can celebrate heroes such as Beowulf. If we refuse this opportunity to understand, to love our neighbor as it were, we do so to our own peril and to the peril of our entire society, as Dr. King so eloquently warned. I close with the words of the eminent Slavist Gary Saul Morson, who wrote concerning these matters, "The worst evil arises not from wrong philosophy, or from economic exploitation, or from anything we do. No, as often as not, it arises from what we neglect to do, from the failure to put ourselves in another's place when we might readily do so" (58).

Endnotes

[1]This notion of the importance of a literary text's context is not the province of historians alone. The late Joseph Frank, professor emeritus of comparative literature at Stanford and Princeton, provides a very fine example of this idea in his momentous and award-winning five-volume biography of Dostoevsky. He succinctly summarizes his perspective on historical context in a lecture on the *Underground Man* in this way:

> We can, of course, use the work of the past any way we please. But let us not confuse this use of the work with attempting to understand it in its own historical terms. It is now fashionable to say that, since we can never really know the past on its own terms, we might as well stop trying and consider it in our own. We do this inevitably in any case whether we want to or not. And the question is a very complicated one. My own position is a very simple one. We may not be able to know the past as it really was, but there's no reason we should not make the effort to do so as far as possible. There is no harm in trying, and in doing so, we may be able to avoid egregious historical errors (Frank, 75).

[2]Gregory Nagy, an eminent philologist and professor of classics at Harvard University and the Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies at Harvard, explores the various ways that the Greeks read, interpreted, and re-wrote Homer from the Archaic to the Hellenistic age, for example, see Nagy (1990), Nagy (2002), Nagy (2010), and Nagy (2017). This process of rewriting Homer continues through the Latin world of Late Antiquity with the Neo-Platonists as illustrated in Boethius (2010) and his various retellings of myths, including Orpheus, Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Hercules, as well as into the medieval world, illustrated by Dante (2002) and his reconfiguring of Ulysses' story in *Inferno* 26.

[3]All line numbers (Arabic) cited are from Headley's translation of *Beowulf*. Roman numerals refer to her introduction to the translation.

[4]The clearest place in Plato's work for the relationship between poetry and philosophy is the *Republic* where Socrates bans the poets from the polis. Perhaps it goes without saying, but when Plato refers to poetry here, he is talking about the stories any culture tells itself to explore the great questions of meaning and purpose.

[5]For one good example of reading Plato's Socrates in this way, see Nagy (2020). See also Boethius *Consolation of Philosophy* I. P.1 for what initially appears to be an attack on poetry, but rather upon deeper reflection seems to have a similar, more nuanced, view of the relationship between poetry and philosophy as Plato, at least as I read him.

[6]By Germanic peoples I mean those tribal peoples from northern Europe who share certain broad cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic ties. This would include those speaking Germanic languages, but also further north to the Scandinavians speaking Norse. There are similarities between this Germanic context of Late Antiquity and the Greek Dark Ages before the advent of writing in the 8th century BC. Despite the similarities, the cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic ties in the Greek world at that time were tighter and allowed the formation of a more centralized Greek culture and identity with the development of writing, which we do not see in the Germanic world except in a loose and decentralized way. So, unlike the Greek world which developed a shared repository of stories in Homer and Hesiod (as well as in the no longer extent Epic Cycle), the Germanic peoples had a more diverse poetical output including *Beowulf*, but also the *Nibelungenlied*, the Icelandic Sagas, and the *Elder Edda* for example—there are, however broader thematic similarities between these stories. See, for example, Tolkien (2002), where he says, "With due reserve we may turn to the tradition of pagan imagination as it survived in Icelandic. Of English pre-Christian mythology we know practically nothing. But the fundamentally similar heroic temper of ancient England and Scandinavia cannot have been founded on (or perhaps rather, cannot have generated) mythologies divergent on this essential point…. (w)e may suppose that pagan English and Norse imagination agreed" (117; see also 121).

[7]See Tolkien (2002). I agree with Tolkien that the poem tells us little about the historical events of 6th century Denmark, Sweden, or Geatland (124), and thus I agree with him that many earlier critics put too much emphasis upon a historical reading of the poem as opposed to the literary value of the poem. I do think, however, that the poem tells us plenty about the "social imaginary" of the Germanic world before the

arrival of Christianity, but it seems to me that this notion still fits with Tolkien's ideas because I still try to understand the poem as a poem, as well as keeping the important things in the center (103-105). Finally, I also think I answer Tolkien's call to properly treat *Beowulf* as a historical document to reveal the *mentalité* of this Germanic world (116-117).

[8]In fact, *Beowulf* itself gives clues to its own genesis as oral poetry in the mead hall with the tale of Sigemund slaying the dragon (884-914) and the Saga of Finn (1071-1158), as well as the genesis of *Beowulf* itself (867-876). In this way, *Beowulf*'s origin more closely resembles that of Homer's poetry than Virgil's.

[9]See Tolkien (2002). I agree with Tolkien's interpretation of the centrality of death to the poem, which gives the poem its "lofty tone and high seriousness" (115).

[10]For example, see the following reviews: Sheehan, Franklin, Grady, Guran, and Ball.

[11]As a medievalist, I'm aware that Francis of Assisi probably never uttered these words.

[12]And *Beowulf* is not an outlier from this broader Germanic world, as can be seen in other Old English texts such as *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Wife's Lament*, and, to a certain extent, even *Dream of the Rood*, as well as the broader Germanic world represented in the Middle High Germanic *Nibelungenlied* and the Old Norse *Elder Edda*. See also footnotes 6, 7, and 9 above.

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