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Reimagining Beowulf: Feminist Perspectives on Maternal Matrices and Mimetic Inhabitation

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Abstract

The author explores Maria Dahvana Headley's transformative 2020 translation of Beowulf through feminist philosophical frameworks, reimagining female subjectivity in the canonical Anglo-Saxon epic. Drawing on Luce Irigaray's concept of mimesis and Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory, the analysis illuminates Headley's strategy of subverting patriarchal discourse and creating a continuum of feminine experience. Headley redefines Beowulf's female characters, granting them agency and complexity often overlooked in traditional interpretations. Grendel's mother evolves from a monstrous antagonist to a warrior-woman driven by maternal grief and vengeance, while Wealhtheow, traditionally a passive queen, emerges as a masterful negotiator. The nuanced portrayal extends to Hygd's political agency, Modthryth's transformation, and the unnamed Geatish woman's lament, presenting a rich spectrum of female resistance and negotiation within patriarchy. Even the dragon, potentially reimagined as female, becomes a symbol of violated sovereignty and maternal rage, further dismantling traditional binaries. Through the lens of Ettinger's matrixial theory, the mere is reinterpreted as a liminal, womb-like space, signifying interconnectedness and shared trauma. Irigaray's mimetic inhabitation of masculine narratives, reflected in linguistic choices like translating "hwæt" as "Bro," challenges traditional discourse and highlights the constructed nature of this patriarchal storytelling, where Beowulf's stoic demeanor and refusal to display weakness reflect a rejection of vulnerability, a core component of toxic masculinity. Headley's translation systematically blurs boundaries between monstrous and human, maternal and violent, creating a feminist reimagining that enriches Beowulf's cultural and literary significance. By employing these dual feminist frameworks, this reinterpretation exposes silenced female narratives, repositions their agency, and critiques the patriarchal underpinnings of the Western literary canon. In sharp contrast, Beowulf is revealed as a toxic

male who finds his value through violence, domination, and aggression.

Keywords: Subjectivity, Agency, Patriarchy, Maternal Ethics, Gendered Power

1. Overview

During her graduate studies at NYU, the author took a course that involved reading *Beowulf* in its original Anglo-Saxon. In the class, students read passages aloud and translated passages from the canonical text. While she had always loved the epic, she couldn't ignore the marginalization of women in *Beowulf*. As a woman, she felt the female characters were silenced and lacked agency. Inspired by Luce Irigaray's concepts of subversion and inhabiting the philosophical canon, Ms. Bloomer realized that Maria Dahvana Headley's translation of *Beowulf*—one that restores agency and voice to its women—also inhabits this epic (Hadley, 2020). Furthermore, she saw the depiction of the mere or fen and Beowulf's battle in that liminal space as resonating deeply with Irigaray's idea of mimesis and Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory (Irigaray, 2003) (Ettinger, 2006). The author was introduced to Ettinger's work in a course she took with Ettinger at EGS (The European Graduate School) in 2012. These dual frameworks provide a powerful lens for integrating a female perspective and space into *Beowulf*, fundamentally repositioning the role of women in the traditions of Western epics.

2. Introduction

Maria Dahvana Headley's 2020 translation of *Beowulf* boldly reimagines the Anglo-Saxon epic through a transformative feminist lens, directly challenging the patriarchal interpretations that have long dominated its critical reception (Headley, 2020). Headley's work not only revives the voices of female characters traditionally sidelined in the poem but also recontextualizes their roles to emphasize their agency, resilience, and complexity. By merging contemporary feminist perspectives with the ancient text, Headley redefines the poem's cultural significance, making it accessible and resonant for modern readers.

This paper draws on Luce Irigaray's concept of mimesis (Kafshgarkolaei & Kami, 2022) and Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory (Fisher & Bickel, 2023) to critically explore how Headley's translation reshapes the narrative. Irigaray's notion of mimetic strategy, which involves appropriating and subverting dominant discourses, is reflected in Headley's linguistic choices, such as her use of modern idioms and gendered language to recast traditional power dynamics. Simultaneously, Ettinger's matrixial theory, which emphasizes shared vulnerability and transformation, offers a framework for understanding how the translation constructs new spaces for feminine subjectivity, reimagining the maternal and relational dimensions of the epic's characters.

By integrating these theoretical approaches, Headley's *Beowulf* challenges the heroic ideals at the poem's heart. It repositions figures like Grendel's mother, Wealhtheow, and Hildeburh as central figures whose experiences and emotions shape the narrative's thematic core. In doing so, the translation carves out innovative spaces where feminine subjectivity is acknowledged

and celebrated, allowing the epic to speak to issues of gender, power, and resistance in a way that resonates deeply with contemporary audiences.

Headley invites readers to question entrenched literary traditions and to consider the transformative potential of feminist reinterpretation. Her translation not only breathes new life into *Beowulf* but also challenges us to rethink how we engage with canonical texts, highlighting their capacity for reinvention and relevance in today's world.

3. Methodology

This study applies feminist philosophical frameworks—specifically Luce Irigaray's concept of mimesis and Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory—to conduct a close textual analysis of Maria Dahvana Headley's 2020 translation of *Beowulf*. Through comparative textual readings, key female characters and symbolic spaces (e.g., Grendel's mother, Wealhtheow, the dragon, and the mere) were examined for shifts in representation, voice, and agency. Irigaray's framework was used to assess how Headley mimetically inhabits and subverts the masculine heroic code through language and structure. Ettinger's matrixial theory informed the interpretation of maternal figures and relational subjectivity, particularly in passages that foreground themes of grief, interconnectedness, and embodied trauma. These lenses guided the selection and interpretation of specific passages and informed the critical readings of language, metaphor, and character transformation.

4. Redefining Female Characters

Headley's translation breathes new life into the female characters of Beowulf, offering a more nuanced and complex portrayal that challenges traditional interpretations. The recastings include:

Grendel's Mother. In Headley's version, Grendel's mother is transformed from a monstrous figure into a "warrior-woman" and "reclusive night-queen" (Headley, 2020). This portrayal humanizes her, presenting her as a bereaved mother seeking vengeance for her son's death rather than a mindless monster.

Wealhtheow. The "Canny Queen" Wealhtheow is depicted not as a passive figure but a masterful negotiator (Headley, 2020). Headley's translation reveals the subtle power dynamics at play, showing how Wealhtheow works within the constraints of her role to secure her son's future. This interpretation transforms the traditional view of women in Anglo-Saxon literature as mere peace-weavers or hostesses to females working within the system to gain advantages and power.

The Dragon. Perhaps Headley's most radical reinterpretation is the dragon as a female (Headley, 2020). By describing the dragon's lair as a "bedchamber" invaded by a thief, Headley introduces themes of violation and revenge that support the feminist reading of the text. The dragon as female adds a new layer of complexity to the final battle, transforming it into a conflict laden with gender implications. Beowulf's final battle with the dragon can be seen as a

cautionary tale about the dangers of toxic masculinity. His refusal to seek help, his insistence on fighting alone, and his fixation on glory ultimately lead to his death.

Other female characters demonstrate the nuances, injustices, and possibilities for females to subvert the patriarchy and exercise female agency. These include:

Freawaru, referred to as the "Bartered Beautiful Bride," takes the first steps into a "blood-wedding."

Modthryth, the "Bartered Bad Bride," seeks preemptive vengeance against men before entering an unexpectedly happy marriage.

Hygd, the "Self-Bartering Bride," attempts to negotiate her son's survival by persuading Beowulf to become king instead of her son.

Hildeburh, the "Failed Peaceweaver," incubates a desire for vengeance after losing her son, brother, and husband.

The Geatish woman, an unnamed character referred to as the "Mourner," grieves not for Beowulf specifically but for her future without a king. In Headley's translation, moments where other characters express emotion such as the Geatish woman's lament, are juxtaposed with Beowulf's unyielding focus on power and legacy.

5. Challenging Patriarchal Structures

Headley's translation of *Beowulf* both acknowledges and subtly challenges the patriarchal structures of Anglo-Saxon society, presenting a nuanced exploration of women's roles within this context. In the Beowulf narrative, women were subservient but occupied significant roles that underscored their influence within societal constraints (Headley, 2020).

Noblewomen, often seen as "peaceweavers," were instrumental in fostering alliances through marriage. For instance, Hildeburh married Finn to unite the Danes and Frisians, exemplifying the political significance of marital unions. Queens such as Wealhtheow and Hygd fulfilled vital roles as hostesses in the mead hall, where they maintained social order, offered drinks, and counseled kings (Vox, 2020). Wealhtheow advised Hrothgar on succession matters, demonstrating her subtle yet impactful influence.

Motherhood was another crucial dimension of female identity. Grendel's mother, for example, embodies the fierce maternal instinct by seeking vengeance for her son's death, highlighting the societal value placed on women's roles as mothers (Pshares, 2022). These dynamics within *Beowulf* find parallels in other feudal societies, such as those depicted in *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu. In the Heian-period Japan of *The Tale of Genji*, women similarly operated within strict patriarchal boundaries. Yet, they found ways to exert influence and subvert the system through their roles and relationships with men (Sahitya, 2023). For example, women in *The Tale of Genji* wielded soft power through intellectual and emotional manipulation, utilizing cultural practices like poetry and courtly elegance to establish influence. Just as Wealhtheow and Hygd used diplomacy and subtle counsel to assert their agency, characters like Lady Murasaki and Fujitsubo navigated complex social hierarchies, leveraging their relationships with male figures to secure positions of power and ensure the survival of their

offspring (LitCharts, 2018).In both societies, women's political and social power was indirectly tied to their relationships with men through marriage, motherhood, or roles within the court. Women, such as Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother, are primarily relegated to roles that serve or contrast with men. Despite their constraints, these women demonstrated the possibility of subverting systems from within, carving out spaces for agency and influence in societies dominated by male authority.

5.1 Female Agency

In *Beowulf*, Grendel's mother and Monthryth offer complex portrayals of female violence that can be examined through the lens of Luce Irigaray's feminist philosophy. Their actions highlight female agency while challenging the patriarchal structures of Anglo-Saxon society. The power dynamics in Headley's translation highlight how patriarchal values elevate men's feats while marginalizing women's contributions and agency.

Grendel's mother is driven by a desire for revenge after Beowulf kills her son, demonstrating a fierce maternal instinct that defies traditional passive roles assigned to women. Irigaray argues that patriarchal society suppresses the maternal, positioning the mother's violent defense of her child as a transgression of societal norms (Irigaray, 1985). Her actions underscore the power and autonomy of the maternal figure, revealing a rejection of the marginalization imposed on women within this framework. In Headley's feminist reimagining, Grendel's mother is cast as a powerful figure whose rage mirrors the kind of heroism lauded in Beowulf, but her actions are demonized because they do not align with the patriarchal ideals of heroism or the acceptable roles of female behavior.

Both Grendel's mother and Monthryth disrupt the male-dominated heroic ideals by engaging in violence traditionally associated with male warriors. This defiance undermines the gendered expectations of Anglo-Saxon society and aligns with Irigaray's critique of how the "universal subject" in philosophy and culture is inherently masculine (Irigaray, 1985). By inhabiting violent roles typically reserved for men, these women challenge the paradigm of male dominance and exclusivity within the heroic code.

Additionally, their violence exists outside patriarchal structures, emphasizing their disruptive power. Grendel's mother resides in an underwater cave, removed from human society, while Monthryth's violence occurs before her marriage. This separation situates their actions as threats to the patriarchal order. Irigaray's advocacy for women developing their own unique cultural identities resonates here, as these characters demonstrate power and independence outside male-dominated spaces (Irigaray, 1993).

The ambiguity surrounding Grendel's mother further complicates her portrayal. The poem describes her with terms that could mean either "monster" or "warrior woman," reflecting Irigaray's idea that patriarchal language fails to categorize or define the feminine fully (Irigaray, 1985). This linguistic uncertainty mirrors her more significant challenge to male-dominated norms and values.

The violent actions of these women pose direct threats to male dominance. Grendel's mother nearly overpowers Beowulf, and Monthryth's lethal response to her suitors showcases her defiance of male control. Irigaray's critique of phallocentric logic aligns with these portrayals,

which disrupt fantasies of male superiority and control (Irigaray, 1985). Yet, their motivations—rooted in revenge and self-protection—offer depth to their characters, moving beyond reductive depictions of monstrousness. This nuanced portrayal aligns with Irigaray's call to recognize female subjectivity and agency (Irigaray, 1993).

Symbolically, Grendel's mother may represent the depths of the unconscious or the unknown, tying into Irigaray's exploration of the feminine as exceeding patriarchal rationality (Irigaray, 1985). However, the ultimate containment of both characters' violence—through Beowulf's triumph over Grendel's mother and Monthryth's transformation through marriage—signals the reassertion of patriarchal control. This outcome underscores the persistence of male dominance, even as these characters momentarily destabilize it. In essence, Grendel's mother and Monthryth embody a disruptive female violence that challenges male heroic ideals and patriarchal structures in *Beowulf*. Their portrayals reflect Irigaray's feminist philosophy by asserting female subjectivity, exposing the limitations of phallocentric logic, and envisioning feminine power beyond patriarchal norms. Yet, their eventual defeat or containment also illustrates the enduring strength of the structures they contest, reinforcing the ongoing relevance of Irigaray's critique.

5.2 Continuum of Female Experience

The translation redefines female characters as part of a continuum of experiences, challenging the notion of a singular "female role" in Anglo-Saxon society (Headley, 2020). Each woman in the epic—from Freawaru, the "Bartered Beautiful Bride," to Modthryth, the "Bartered Bad Bride"—represents a unique facet of female existence within a rigid patriarchal structure. Headley's emphasis on these diverse perspectives highlights the individuality, motivations, and agency of women who have often been marginalized in traditional readings of the text.

Headley's translation, adding new kennings and linguistic nuances, reveals a world where women had distinct voices, roles, and personalities, even within the confines of a male-dominated society. However, her reinterpretation shifts this dynamic. Her work portrays women like Freawaru, Hygd, and Modthryth as individuals navigating their constrained social roles while asserting their agency.

Drawing on Luce Irigaray’s concept of mimesis, which seeks to critique these societal structures by inhabiting and subverting them (Irigaray, 1985), Headley’s translation exposes the limitations and power dynamics placed on women. This mimetic strategy further enriches the multiplicity of female experiences. By emphasizing the interconnected and varied stories of *Beowulf’s* women, Headley dismantles the traditional monolithic view of femininity in Anglo-Saxon literature, creating a nuanced and feminist reimagining of the epic.

6. Theoretical Framework

Irigaray's concept of mimesis involves strategically inhabiting and subverting masculine discourse to expose patriarchal assumptions (Irigaray, 1985). Ettinger's matrixial theory proposes an alternative model of subjectivity based on interconnectedness and shared experience (Ettinger, 2006a). Both theories challenge traditional psychoanalytic frameworks while offering different approaches to feminine representation. Examining how each of these

philosophers' frameworks reimagines the dragon and the mere as a metaphoric space adds deeper analysis to this reading of Beowulf.

Headley's portrayal of the dragon as female exemplifies Luce Irigaray's concept of mimesis, which involves strategically inhabiting and subverting patriarchal discourses to expose and critique their underlying assumptions. Headley redefines the dragon, traditionally seen as a greedy, destructive monster, as a feminized figure whose lair is likened to a "bedchamber" that has been violated by the thief (Headley, 2020). This portrayal shifts the focus from the dragon's monstrousness to her status as a protector of her treasures—symbolizing a maternal or sovereign claim to agency and selfhood. By inhabiting the traditionally masculine narrative of the dragon as an antagonist, Headley reclaims and reimagines this figure to resonate with themes of violation, revenge, and feminine power.

The feminized dragon complicates the binary opposition of hero and monster, which has historically aligned with masculine and feminine traits. In Headley's version, the dragon is not simply a foe to be conquered but a figure whose motivations, such as vengeance and protection, mirror the maternal grief and loss embodied by other female characters like Grendel's mother. This blurring of boundaries mimics Irigaray's critique of binary thinking, demonstrating how the "monster" can inhabit and subvert masculine narratives of conquest and domination.

Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory provides a complementary lens through which the dragon, her lair, and her treasure can be analyzed. Ettinger's concept emphasizes shared experiences, interconnectedness, and the permeability of boundaries, particularly in maternal and feminine contexts (Ettinger, 2006a). Headley's description of the dragon's lair aligns with Ettinger's matrixial borderspace, a metaphorical "womb" where boundaries between self and other blur. The lair is portrayed as a deeply personal, protective space that houses the dragon's treasures, representing her identity and legacy. The invasion of this space by the thief echoes a violation of bodily or maternal sovereignty, paralleling the shared trauma experienced by other female figures in the epic, such as Grendel's mother and Hildeburh.

In addition, the long-hoarded and guarded dragon's treasure takes on new symbolic meaning when viewed through Ettinger's framework. It becomes more than material wealth and a repository of the dragon's history, emotions, and losses. Its theft triggers the dragon's wrath, which can be read as a maternal response to the destruction of her legacy and identity. This interpretation ties the dragon to a continuum of feminine experiences of loss, protection, and vengeance, resonating with the broader narrative arcs of women in Beowulf.

Through the feminization of the dragon and her space, Headley utilizes mimesis and the concept of the matrixial borderspace to rewrite Beowulf in ways that foreground feminine subjectivity and agency. The dragon is no longer just a destructive force but a symbolic figure representing the multiplicities of the female experience.

In a similar fashion, Headley's portrayal of Grendel's mother as a "warrior-woman" and "outlaw" humanizes this character, emphasizing her grief and desire for vengeance rather than depicting her as a monstrous other (Headley, 2020). Headley's translation also employs contemporary language and slang, with Beowulf speaking more like a modern "frat boy" than a noble warrior (Shea, 2020). This stylistic choice highlights problematic aspects of masculine

behavior. The use of phrases like "locker room talk" draws parallels between ancient and contemporary expressions of toxic masculinity (Headley, 2020).

The mere, traditionally portrayed as a foreboding place, is reframed by Headley as a "womb-like space" (Headley, 2020). This maternal imagery subverts the typical masculine narrative of conquest. The underwater battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother symbolizes a clash between patriarchal aggression and maternal protection (Irigaray, 1985). Headley's approach can be understood through Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory, which posits a space of interconnectedness where boundaries between self and other blur (Ettinger, 2006). The mere, as depicted by Headley, becomes a site of shared grief and trauma, challenging traditional binaries of hero versus monster (Pollock, 2009). Headley's translation critiques masculine heroism by centering women's voices and resistance to violence while avoiding valorizing violence (Osborne, 2020). This approach aligns with contemporary feminist discourse that deconstructs traditional narratives and offers alternative perspectives on classic texts (Treharne, 2019). By intertwining Irigaray's and Ettinger's theories, Headley reframes the epic's final battle not as a clash of heroism versus monstrosity but as a confrontation laden with gendered implications—of violation, protection, and the struggle for sovereignty. This reinterpretation subverts traditional patriarchal narratives while creating new spaces for feminine representation and interconnectedness in the epic tradition.

7. Language and Translation Choices

This translation of *Beowulf* incorporates bold linguistic strategies that modernize the text while offering a contemporary feminist perspective. Below are key aspects of her translation choices, organized for clarity and emphasis:

7.1 Modern Slang and Colloquialisms

Headley integrates contemporary slang and expressions to make the text more relatable to modern audiences. Words like "swole" and "stan" coexist with traditional Old English terms, creating a dynamic and unique interplay between ancient and modern language. In addition, Headley's modern phrasing, such as "bro" or "flex," emphasizes a masculine culture that focuses on strength and bravado, which still resonates with contemporary forms of performative masculinity. Headley's translation amplifies the camaraderie among warriors with modern slang and emphasizes the competitive posturing among male characters. This "bro" culture may foster loyalty but also perpetuates an exclusionary and competitive environment where relationships are defined by power and dominance.

7.2 Poetic Reframing of Female Characters

Grendel's mother is depicted as a "warrior-woman," "outlaw," and "reclusive night-queen," moving away from the monstrous archetype often seen in traditional translations. Feminine elements are brought to the forefront in Headley's poetic imagery. For example, her translation of lines 1605–1610 personifies Spring as a female prisoner freed by God:

> *"Below, in Beowulf's hands, the slaying-sword began to melt like ice,*
> *just as the world thaws in May when the Father*

unlocks the shackles that've chained frost to the climate,
and releases hostage heat, uses sway over seasons
to uncage His prisoner, Spring, and let her stumble into the sun."

In her depiction of the dragon, Headley introduces another feminine perspective. The dragon is described as:

"Curled about her hoard, her bedchamber invaded by someone seeking to burgle. Her vengeance for that theft lights the sky and land on fire."

Headley preserves many traditional kennings (compound poetic phrases) while inventing modern equivalents. This blending of old and new sensibilities makes the translation accessible to modern readers.

Headley translates Wealhtheow's address to Beowulf with a tone that emphasizes her political acumen and subtle power:

"She brought him the cup. She called him friend.
She gave him gold. Her will was wrought in rings.
She offered armlets, garments, a neck ring:
A collar larger than any I've ever seen" (Headley, 2020, lines 1192-1195).

This translation emphasizes Wealhtheow's agency by making her the subject of active verbs, highlighting her role in diplomacy and gift-giving.

Headley portrays Grendel's mother as a warrior seeking justified vengeance rather than a mere monster:

"Grendel's mother, warrior-woman, outlaw, meditated on misery.
She'd been forced to live in fearful waters, cold streams,
since Cain slew his only brother, his father's son" (Headley, 2020, lines 1258-1262).

This description provides Grendel's mother with a deeper motivation and backstory, aligning with Headley's feminist interpretation. It highlights how the legacy of male violence has ruptured her role as a mother, forcing her to embrace violent behavior in response. Unlike the Geat Woman, who succumbs to hysteria and resigns herself to an acceptable female role and the inevitability of male violence against her body and the lives of her descendants, Grendel's mother chooses a path of resistance.

In contrast, the Geat Woman laments and reacts:

"She tore her hair and screamed her horror
at the hell that was to come: more of the same.
Reaping, raping, feasts of blood, iron fortunes
marching across her country, claiming her body.
The sky sipped the smoke and smiled" (Headley, 2020).

This passage powerfully illustrates the impact of violence on women, a theme Headley emphasizes throughout her translation.

In addition, Headley combines raucous rhyme schemes and rampant alliteration with modern poetic sensibilities, creating a linguistic flow that extends across traditional line breaks

(Headley, 2020). This stylistic choice enhances the rhythmic and thematic continuity of the text.

Headley often employs unexpected rhymes that create a playful, almost rap-like rhythm:

"He was our man, but every man dies.
Here he is now! Here our best boy lies!
He rode hard! He stayed thirsty! He was the man!
He was the man." (Headley, 2020)

This passage demonstrates Headley's use of end rhymes (dies/lies) and internal rhymes (hard/thirsty), creating a modern, energetic flow.

Headley maintains the Old English tradition of alliteration but applies it more freely:

"The ring-collector was too proud to bring a war-band,
to march an army against the firmament flier.
His plan would be his pyre — he imagined the dragon
a dimwit, clocking neither her courage nor her grit." (Headley, 2020)

Here, the alliteration in "firmament flier," "plan" and "pyre," and "dimwit" and "dragon," extends across lines and creates a sense of continuity.

Headley skillfully incorporates contemporary language and idioms: "Meanwhile, Beowulf gave zero shits" (Headley, 2020)

This line exemplifies Headley's use of modern slang to convey the hero's attitude, creating a stark contrast with more traditional translations.

And using her poetic skill, Headley's translation often ignores traditional line breaks to create a more fluid narrative:

"Suddenly then
The God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
Greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
From their resting places and rushed to his lair,
Flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
Blundering back with the butchered corpses." (Headley, 2020)

These examples illustrate how Headley combines traditional elements of Old English poetry with modern linguistic techniques to create a fresh, engaging translation that maintains the spirit of the original while appealing to contemporary readers. Through these linguistic and stylistic choices, Maria Dahvana Headley's translation of *Beowulf* challenges traditional interpretations. These stylistic elements shed new light on themes of gender, power, and narrative voice, presenting a version of the epic that resonates with contemporary audiences and creates an opening for a new and deeper interpretation of *Beowulf*. Headley's translation doesn't just retell the story; it interrogates it, showing how cultural ideals of masculinity can be both glorified and critiqued. By using contemporary language and framing, she underscores how elements of toxic masculinity in *Beowulf* remain relevant and problematic today. This recontextualization invites readers to question the societal norms surrounding masculinity both in the past and present (Headley, 2020).

7.3 Challenging Binary Oppositions

The translation systematically dismantles traditional binaries, particularly the monster/human dichotomy. This approach aligns with Irigaray's critique of binary thinking and Ettinger's concept of borderspace. The blurring of boundaries is particularly evident in the portrayal of Grendel's mother's hall as a legitimate social space.

Headley (2020) rejects the traditional monstrous depictions of Grendel's mother, instead presenting her as a "warrior-woman," "outlaw," and "reclusive night-queen." This humanizes her character and blurs the line between monster and human. Headley writes: "Grendel's mother doesn't behave like a monster. She behaves like a bereaved mother who happens to have a warrior's skill" (Headley, 2020).

The translation portrays Grendel's mother's underwater hall as a legitimate social space rather than just a monster's lair. Headley notes that "she lives in a hall, uses weapons, is trained in combat, and follows blood-feud rules" (Headley, 2020). This presents her domain as an alternative but valid social structure—a place of her agency and importance as an alternative leader. Headley upends previous translations that enforced a strict monster/human binary, noting how "aglaec-wif" has been unfairly translated as monstrous when applied to Grendel's mother but heroic when applied to male characters (Alfano, 1992, as cited in Ganguly, n.d.). She argues for more nuanced interpretations that allow for complexity and lean toward translations emphasizing the character's strength and formidability rather than monstrosity (Alfano, 1992, as cited in Ganguly, n.d.). The term combines "aglaeca" (which can mean "formidable one" or "adversary") with "wif" (woman) (Fulk et al., 2008, as cited in Vinsonhaler & Oswald, 2023).

In other words, Headley (2020) portrays both Beowulf and Grendel's mother as warriors, seeing the combatants as similar. They are both extraordinary fighters, according to Headley (2020). In feudal society and culture, Grendel's mother seeks “blood for blood” (Headley, 2020). This perspective aligns with Irigaray's critique of binary thinking by refusing to categorize characters into simple oppositions (Irigaray, 1985). It also resonates with Ettinger's concept of borderspace by creating a more fluid, intersubjective space between categories traditionally seen as separate (Ettinger, 2006). The underwater hall becomes a borderspace where human and monstrous qualities coexist and interact.

8. Maternal Themes and Symbolism

The imagery of birth and rebirth is represented in the underwater battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother, in a cave symbolizing a womb. As Headley (2020) translates, "She dragged him, armor and all, to her home, That watery hell. He couldn't use his weapons" (lines 1506–1507). This "mere," described as having depths "never been sounded by the sons of men" (Headley, 2020, line 1367), evokes the mysterious and unfathomable nature of the womb. Beowulf's emergence from the cave, victorious, symbolizes a form of rebirth, emphasizing the transformative nature of the encounter.

Grendel's mother embodies maternal grief and vengeance, her actions driven by profound loss. As Headley (2020) portrays her: "Grendel's mother, warrior-woman, outlaw, meditated on

misery. She'd been forced to live in fearful waters, cold streams, since Cain slew his only brother, his father's son" (lines 1258–1262). Her fury is a response to her son's death: "Now his mother was here, carried on a wave of wrath, crazed with sorrow, looking for someone to slay, someone to pay in pain for her heart's loss" (Headley, 2020, lines 1276–1279). This portrayal aligns with Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory, which proposes a maternal-feminine dimension of subjectivity rooted in shared vulnerability and transformation (Ettinger, 2006a). Ettinger's concept of the "matrixial borderspace" reimagines the maternal not as monstrous but as a source of life, empathy, and change (Ettinger, 2006b). Grendel's mother, therefore, can be seen not merely as a monster but as embodying what Ettinger calls "matrixial compassion," a form of empathy born from shared suffering (Ettinger, 2006c).

This lens extends to other maternal figures in the poem. Hildeburh, for instance, laments the loss of her son and brother in battle, mourning them through ritual as "the greatest fire of the slain, roared before the mound" (Headley, 2020, lines 1117–1120). Her grief connects her to Grendel's mother and other female figures like Wealhtheow, who voices fears for her sons' futures in a volatile world. These maternal narratives create what Ettinger might describe as a "matrixial network," a web of shared loss and transformation that challenges the poem's masculine heroic ethos (Ettinger, 2006d). While Beowulf focuses on individual glory, the maternal experience highlights the devastating effects of violence on families and communities.

Ettinger's theory sheds light on the poem's complex portrayal of maternal figures, who are depicted as both sympathetic and threatening. Grendel's mother's grief and vengeance, Hildeburh's mourning, and Wealhtheow's anxieties reveal an Anglo-Saxon ambivalence toward maternal power. Ettinger's ideas also align with the poem's exploration of maternal grief and its transformative potential. For example, her concept of "metramorphosis" describes the process of change and becoming through encounters with others, as seen in how the mothers in Beowulf respond to their losses and fears (Ettinger, 2006e).

Beowulf offers a nuanced exploration of heroism, violence, and grief through these themes, complicating traditional heroic ideals. By applying Ettinger's matrixial theory, we uncover deeper layers of meaning, where the maternal-feminine is no longer a source of death or abjection but a vital force of empathy, transformation, and interconnectedness (Ettinger, 2006f). The poem thus challenges the primacy of the masculine heroic ethos, inviting a broader understanding of the impact of violence on human relationships and communities.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, Headley’s translation of *Beowulf* is a compelling example of how Irigaray’s mimetic strategy and Ettinger’s matrixial theory can redefine the spaces available for feminine subjectivity within canonical texts. By bringing the marginalized voices of female characters to the forefront, Headley crafts a translation that reimagines these women and satisfies a deep longing to see, empathize with, and understand their struggles. Through this lens, *Beowulf* becomes a medium to explore themes of gender, resistance, and power dynamics in a violent patriarchal society—issues that resonate strongly with contemporary audiences.

Headley's deliberate focus on feminine narratives disrupts traditional interpretations of the poem, often dominated by masculine heroics and violence. Her translation highlights the agency, grief, and resilience of female figures such as Grendel's mother, Wealhtheow, and Hildeburh, who have long been overshadowed in prior readings. These women are no longer peripheral characters; they are central to the poem's commentary on power and loss, offering insights into the socio-political dynamics of their world.

By weaving Irigaray's focus on mimicry and Ettinger's matrixial concepts of shared vulnerability and transformation, Headley uncovers previously obscured narratives. Her translation suggests that these women are not passive victims but active participants in their societies, grappling with the consequences of violence and asserting their agency within oppressive structures (Diamond, 2017; Hreinsdóttir, n.d.). Irigaray's concept of "mimesis imposed" highlights how women are often positioned as mirrors to men, reflecting their centrality while erasing female subjectivity (Diamond, 2017). Headley's translation challenges this by giving voice to female characters, allowing them to express their desires and perspectives. Ettinger's theory of the matrixial borderspace provides a framework for understanding these characters as interconnected subjects rather than isolated individuals (Ettinger, 2007).

While these insights originate in feminist theory and psychoanalysis, their implications extend well beyond academic discourse. Headley's stylistic choices—her use of contemporary slang, poetic reframing, and cultural allusions—open the epic to wider readerships, enabling more accessible forms of critical engagement. In this way, her translation fosters a form of public feminist criticism, inviting readers from diverse backgrounds to reflect on the emotional, political, and symbolic functions of gendered storytelling. The issues raised—grief, sovereignty, monstrosity, motherhood—resonate with contemporary questions of gender justice, media representation, and collective memory.

This translation also draws attention to the linguistic and interpretive power wielded by translators and critics alike. Scholars such as Alfano (1992) and Ganguly (n.d.) have explored the interpretive ambiguity around terms like *aglaec-wif*, and how those terms have been historically used to elevate male heroism while diminishing female power. As Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (2008) suggest in *Klaeber's Beowulf*, the lexicon of the poem is deeply entangled with the assumptions of its interpreters—something Headley actively disrupts through her recontextualization of these figures.

Ultimately, Headley's *Beowulf* reclaims feminine subjectivity in a revolutionary and human way. It transforms a traditionally masculine epic into a dialogue about the interconnectedness of gender, power, and emotion, inviting modern readers to reflect on the enduring relevance of these themes (IvyPanda, 2024). The poem takes on new and profound meanings in today's world through her bold reimagining. This rethinking of a male-dominated epic uncovers gender and power struggles, unsilences the suppressed voices of women in *Beowulf's* world, and reenergizes their stories. By doing so, Headley makes *Beowulf* not only still relevant today but newly urgent, revealing parallel power dynamics in our own cultural moment (A Phuulish Fellow, 2019). Her translation demonstrates how women in *Beowulf*, far from being mere decorative wallflowers, have designated spheres of influence and crucial roles in their societies (A Phuulish Fellow, 2019).

This study contributes to feminist literary criticism by offering a model of how mimetic inhabitation and matrixial theory can uncover submerged female agency in epic literature. It also enriches medieval studies by demonstrating how contemporary feminist translation can serve as both a critical intervention and a creative act of recovery, making the *Beowulf* narrative newly relevant in the 21st century. By engaging with theoretical frameworks not traditionally associated with medieval texts, this paper expands the methodological toolkit available to scholars working at the intersection of gender and historical literature—and bridges these scholarly tools into public discourse and accessible cultural analysis.

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