FEMININE POWER 'LOST' AND FEMININE POWER 'REGAINED': A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TALBOT DONALDSON'S (1966), SEAMUS HEANEY'S (1999) AND MARIA DAHVANA HEADLEY'S (2018) TRANSLATIONS OF BEOWULF



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Abstract

Translations of "Beowulf" often obscure the role of women in Anglo-Saxon society: formal equivalence translators, such as Talbot Donaldson (1966), replicate the text literally, but lack clarity, while dynamic equivalence translators, such as Seamus Heaney (1999), prioritize modern readability over accuracy. Both approaches diminish female authority and often reduce women to mead-bearers and mourners. Maria Dahvana Headley (2018), in her turn, breaks tradition with her subversive transcreation of "Beowulf" in the novel "The Mere Wife", which centers on female characters. This paper compares translations of "Beowulf" by Donaldson, Heaney, and Headley, so as to reclaim the female power present in the original Old English epic but lost in subsequent patriarchal renditions.

Keywords: "*Beowulf*", "*The Mere Wife*", *translation, feminine power, Talbot Donaldson, Seamus Heaney, Maria Dahvana Headley, formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence, feminist transcreation*

The act of translating the Old English epic *Beowulf* necessitates confronting fundamental theoretical questions regarding textual fidelity, cultural transposition, and ideological repositioning. This paper examines three influential translations of *Beowulf* through the lenses of their respective theoretical frameworks: Talbot Donaldson's (1966) formal equivalence, Seamus Heaney's (1999) dynamic equivalence, and Maria Dahvana Headley's (2018) feminist transcreation. Each approach embodies distinct epistemological assumptions about the nature of translation as both - a scholarly practice and

cultural intervention. Donaldson's translation approach exemplifies "formal equivalence", which is characterized by "the closest possible match of form and content between source and target texts" (Nida, 1964, p. 159), favouring morphological and syntactic correspondence, as evidenced in Donaldson's preservation of the Old English genitive plural in rendering "ides Scyldinga" (queen of the Scyldings) as "lady of the Scyldings" (Donaldson, 1966, p. 27). Methodological consistency of the sort reflects the philological tradition of "textual archaeology" (Frank, 2003, p. 112), in which the translator functions as custodian, rather than interpreter. However, this approach has been critiqued for producing, what is described as "lexically accurate but aesthetically sterile" (Bassnett, 2014, p. 33) translations. Heaney's translation utilizes Eugene Nida and Charles Taber's concept of dynamic equivalence that can be defined as "the degree to which receptors of the translated text respond to it in substantially the same manner as the original receptors" (Nida & Taber, 1969, p. 200). This hermeneutic approach manifests itself in Heaney's substitution of the Old English word "beag" (ring) with "torque" (Heaney, 1999, p. 85), thus pointing to a terminological shift that both links cultural contexts and maintains semantic integrity. Such translations "domesticate the foreign text to make it intelligible to target culture readers" (Venuti, 1995, p. 20), in this way, raising questions about the erasure of linguistic alterity. Headley's approach, in his turn, transcends traditional equivalence models through "feminist transcreation" (Flotow, 1997, p. 36) - a practice that consciously subverts patriarchal discourse. Her rendering of "folce tō frōfre" (a comfort to the people) as "the people's f*cking hero" (Headley, 2018, p. 5) represents the "reappropriation of language for feminist ends" (Chamberlain, 1988, p. 455) and aligns with the recognition of translation by contemporary translation theory as an "inherently ideological practice" (Venuti, 2019, p. 5) despite the existing risk of "overwriting source text historicity" (Bassnett, 2014, p. 47). These three approaches form fundamental tensions in translation studies between textual fidelity and cultural adaptation, when the translator must "strive for equivalence rather than identity, reproducing the message in a way that accounts for both the original text's meaning and the receptor culture's expectations" (Nida, 1964, p. 159), must keep in mind the importance of historical preservation and contemporary relevance that involves "a complex negotiation between the foreign text's historical context and the domestic culture's current values" (Venuti, 1995, p. 19), as well as focus on linguistic transfer and ideological repositioning, which is defined as "the most intimate act of reading, yet it must also confront the politics of language and the ideological framing of the original" (Spivak, 1993, p. 180). As the field of translation continues to battle with these dialectics, translations of *Beowulf* serve as paradigmatic case studies in the ever-evolving theorization of translation as a scholarly discipline and a cultural practice.

The Old English epic *Beowulf*, composed between the seventh and tenth centuries, has long been commended as a basis of early medieval heroic literature due to its thematic focus on masculine valour, kinship loyalty, as well as martial glory. However, as feminist scholars such as Helen Damico (1984) and Gillian Overing (1990) have demonstrated, the poem also contains complex representations of women, be it Wealhtheow - Queen of the Danes and wife to Hrothgar, the Danish king; Hygd - Queen of the Geats and wife to King Hygelac of Geatland; and Grendel's mother, who occupy crucial, albeit often overlooked, roles as political actors, peace-weavers, and even avenging figures. Many modern translations of *Beowulf* have minimized or misrepresented the agency of these female characters, notwithstanding their actual significance, either through rigid adherence to formal equivalence or through dynamic, yet, still patriarchal reinterpretations. This paper examines three important translations - E. Talbot Donaldson's (1966) prose translation, Seamus Heaney's (1999) poetic rendition, and Maria Dahvana Headley's (2018) radical reimagining in the novel *The Mere Wife* - to argue that while Donaldson and Heaney inadvertently suppress feminine power through their recourse to respective translation methodologies, Headley's work not only recovers, but also amplifies the covert agency of women in *Beowulf*, thus offering a necessary corrective to centuries of patriarchal readings of the epic.

Feminine Power 'Lost': Formal and Dynamic Equivalence in Talbot Donaldson and Seamus Heaney

Talbot Donaldson's commitment to the formal equivalence translation technique produces particularly problematic renderings of Hygd, Queen of the Geats, whose political wisdom in the original text becomes obscured. Where the Old English version describes Hygd as "swiðe geong, / wis, welþungen" (very young, wise, and accomplished), Donaldson translates this simply as "very young and wise" (1966, p. 52), in this way omitting the crucial term "welþungen" (accomplished) that signifies her political competence and, thus, reflecting what Clare Lees terms "the systematic undertranslation of female capability" in medieval texts (Lees, 1994, p. 134). Heaney's treatment of Hygd similarly diminishes her political role. His rendering of the kingdom offer ("Hygd him þæt beod for, sincfato sealed") as "she passed him the cup" (1999, p. 118) transforms a sovereign act into domestic service. Hence, "the cup-passing motif consistently serves to domesticate female power in translations" (Overing, 1990, p. 89). This becomes particularly evident in Heaney's handling of the mead-hall scenes, where Wealhtheow's ceremonial movements are described as "walking gracefully among them" (1999, p. 45) rather than conveying the strategic political manoeuvring implied in the original's "folcum tō frōfre" (as comfort to the people).

The treatment of Grendel's mother by the above-mentioned translators of *Beowulf* reveals even more striking erasures. Where the Old English de-

scribes her attack as "wælfæhðe wræc" (avenging slaughter-feud), Donaldson renders this as "committed murder" (1966, p. 41), thus replacing the culturally sanctioned concept of blood vengeance with criminal terminology. Heaney's version, "desperate for revenge" (1999, p. 91), while less judgmental, still frames her actions as emotionally driven rather than legally justified. Hence, even though "the original text acknowledges her right to vengeance under Germanic law, translations consistently pathologize this right" (Chance, 1986, p. 104). This pattern continues in the battle descriptions, where the "ides, aglæcwif" (lady, warrior-woman) in the Old English original becomes, in Donaldson, the "monstrous hell-bride" (1966, p. 42) and in Heaney the "towering" (1999, p. 92) woman. In this way, both versions lose the paradoxical combination of nobility and ferocity of the Old English text.

Donaldson and Heaney's handling of female speech acts proves particularly revealing. Even though Wealhtheow's imperative admonition to Hrothgar - "Bruc ðisses beages" (Make use of this ring) - carries the force of a political command in the original, Donaldson renders this as "Enjoy this circlet" (1966, p. 25), transforming a sovereign directive into a polite wish. Heaney's version, "Take delight in this torque" (1999, p. 46), similarly softens the imperative. As a result, "Wealhtheow's speeches contain at least five distinct political functions that translations routinely flatten" (Damico, 1984, p. 118), including kinship reinforcement and succession planning. This pattern extends to Hygd's few lines, in which her strategic silence about her husband's death in the original becomes, in Donaldson and Heaney, simply an absence that loses "the eloquent power of female silence" (Overing, 1990, p. 112).

Even minor female characters suffer a reduction in these translations. The "ides Scyldinga" (lady of the Scyldings) in the Old English *Beowulf*, referring to Hrothgar's daughter, becomes simply "Hrothgar's daughter" in Donaldson (1966, p. 48), thus losing the honorific. Hence, the reduction from "ides Scyldinga" (a poetic, elevated term) to "Hrothgar's daughter" strips away the dynastic connection (Scyldinga = of the legendary Scylding lineage), as well as the gender-specific honorific (ides = noblewoman/lady, used for queens and goddesses in Old English poetry). Donaldson may have aimed for clarity, as modern readers might not associate "lady" with political status. However, this aligns with criticisms of formal equivalence sometimes "flattening poetic register" (Frank, 2003, p. 112). Heaney similarly reduces her to "the princess" (1999, p. 102) and omits the aristocratic connotation. Even though "the princess" conveys nobility, it anachronistically medievalizes the term (Old English "ides" lacks the feudal connotations of "princess") and omits the tribal affiliation ("Scyldinga"), which is crucial to her diplomatic role in *The Finnsburg Episode*.

Hence, even though Heaney gives precedence to accessibility, he arguably "oversimplifies the socio-political nuance" (Trask, 2005, p. 77). As a con-

sequence, "the cumulative effect of these small elisions is the gradual disappearance of female nobility from the text" (Lees, 1994, p. 142). This illustrates how even 'faithful' translations can erase gendered poetic language (ide → daughter/princess), diminish political dimensions (Scyldinga → neutralized) and flatten hierarchical distinctions. A compromise might be "the Scylding lady" (1977, p. 89) (retaining both status and lineage), as in Howell D. Chickering's translation, or Maria Dahvana Headley's "queenling" (2018, p. 72), which creatively portrays youth and nobility. Yet, such choices seem to "domesticate the text's alterity" (Liuzza 2013, p. 23), smoothing over the cultural distance that defines the aristocratic world of *Beowulf*. This becomes most apparent in the funeral scenes, in which "ides... geomrode" (the lady mourned) of the original Old English text becomes in Donaldson "a woman sang" (1966, p. 60) and in Heaney "a woman wailed" (1999, p. 127), in this manner transforming formal lament into unstructured emotion. The consistent pattern across both translations reveals "the patriarchal grammar of translation" (Chance, 1986, p. 110), systematically reconfiguring female agency to fit modern gender expectations.

Feminine Power 'Regained': Maria Dahvana Headley's Feminist Reclamation in *The Mere Wife*

The reworking of *Beowulf* in the novel *The Mere Wife* by Maria Dahvana Headley transforms the traditional epic gender paradigms through its recourse to what contemporary translation theorists might call 'feminist transcreation' – the term that refers to a transformative and ideologically motivated rewriting, rather than a strictly literal translation of the original text. Where Donaldson and Heaney diminish female voices, Headley intensifies them, as seen in her treatment of Grendel's mother. The original Old English "aglæcwif" (monstrous woman) becomes Dana Mills, whose military background – "she came back from the desert with sand in her bones and a head full of war" (Headley, 2018, p. 15) - redefines her violence as trauma of the war in Iraq rather than simple monstrosity. By recasting her as a soldier suffering from PTSD, Headley aligns with feminist scholars, who read the original Grendel's mother as "a wronged woman exercising her legal right to vengeance" (Orchard, 2003, p. 142), a perspective obscured by centuries of translations that reduce her to a bestial "mere-wife" (Klaeber, 1922, p. 189).

Headley's transcreation extends this feminist reclamation through Dana's interiority, which is absent in the original, for if *Beowulf* offers only a "gifre ond galgmod" (greedy and grim-hearted) caricature, *The Mere Wife* grants Dana lyrical vulnerability: "Her blood isn't water. It's fire. It's a language no one else speaks" (Headley, 2018, p. 92). This subsequently echoes with the modern argument that the voices of medieval women are often "textually repressed but hermeneutically recoverable" (Dinshaw, 1989, p. 23). Headley performs this recovery by reifying the metaphor of marginalization, thus

making Dana literally live in a cave, but one lined with books and wartime mementos. *The Mere Wife*, thus, bridges medieval and modern discourses of gendered rage, illustrating how "female monstrosity is often a construct of male narrative anxiety" (Finke, 1992, p. 211). Where Donaldson's translation describes the lair of Grendel's mother as "a hateful place" (1966, p. 27), Headley's Dana claims her space as a sanctuary: "This isn't a hole. It's a home" (2018, p. 114).

Similarly, the treatment of Wealhtheow as Willa Herot exposes the performative nature of medieval queenship and reimagines the Anglo-Saxon "freoðuwebbe" (peace-weaver) as a modern celebrity whose power is both curated and constrained by spectacle. Headley's stinging description – "Her smile costs forty thousand dollars. Her children are accessories. Her husband is a trophy" (2018, p. 71) - modifies the diplomatic queen of the original Old English text into a figure whose value is quantified in capitalist terms, where even her grace is commodified. This reflects the tension existing in *Beowulf* between Wealhtheow's "public role as a unifying hostess and her private anxieties about succession" (Niles 2008, p. 112), which is translated by Headley into Willa's meticulously managed Instagram aesthetic. Indeed, "Anglo-Saxon noblewomen were political actors whose domestic roles carried significant power" (Enright, 1996, p. 178). Headley underscores this fact through Willa's strategic performance of femininity: "Instagram ready before dawn. Hashtag blessed, hashtag wife" (2018, p. 89). Here, ceremonial cup-bearing of the medieval queen, standing for "a ritualized assertion of authority" (Overing, 1990, p. 64), becomes a viral moment, with her goblet swapped for a champagne flute clutched in a manicured hand.

The parallels deepen if one considers how both queens circumnavigate patriarchal systems: Wealhtheow's speeches in *Beowulf* "artfully challenge Hrothgar's decisions" (Hill, 1990, p. 203), while Willa's influence is similarly veiled, as her authority is expressed through hashtags and staged photos, rather than open confrontation. Headley's choice to frame Willa's children as "accessories" critiques how medieval queenship tied a woman's worth to reproductive labour. This theme is particularly evident in *Beowulf* when Wealhtheow pleads for her sons' inheritance. The transposition of these dynamics onto a Silicon Valley-adjacent elite allowed Headley to reveal how little the expectations of gendered performance have shifted over the centuries, as the peace-weaver's loom is now the smartphone, while her threads are replaced by pixel-perfect imagery. Indeed, "medieval queenship was always a public performance, but one that masked its own artifice" (Carruthers, 2020, p. 91). Headley materializes this claim in Willa's Botoxed smile and sponsored posts. In this way, the novel bridges the gap between eras by showing how the legacy of "freoðuwebbe" endures in the paradoxical demand that women wield power, but only as long as it looks effortless.

Headley's most radical intervention manifests itself in her expansion of the female community and transforming the fragmented glimpses of women in the original Old English epic into continual networks of power. If *Beowulf* consigns women to isolated moments of mourning, as in the Geatish women's elegy, *The Mere Wife* constructs a chorus of suburban women whose collective declaration - "We bake casseroles. We organize charity events. We know everything" (Headley, 2018, p. 134) - satirizes and subverts the silences in the original epic. As a result, female characters in *The Mere Wife* mobilize domesticity, with their performative unity masking a culture of surveillance: "We see who comes and goes" (Headley, 2018, p. 134). Thus, Headley's approach aligns with the assertion that women in *Beowulf* are "strategically muted, not marginal" (Bennett, 2018, p. 72) and reflects the findings of archaeologist Heinrich Härke on "women's vital communal networks" (2003, p. 156) in early medieval communities. At the same time, the novel creates a link between medieval and modern gender dynamics. The solidarity of the female chorus, "posting tributes online, then whispering offline" (Headley 2018, 201), echoes the idea that the power of premodern women often resided in "unseen collective knowledge" (Lees, 1997, p. 112). Nevertheless, Headley exposes the ambiguity of such alliances, as their casseroles and charity events often mask complicity with patriarchal violence. Hence, although Wealhtheow and Hildeburh in the original *Beowulf* stand alone, *The Mere Wife* portrays women collaborating (though not always ethically) and reframing female community as a place of refuge and mechanism of control.

In addition, the language itself becomes a feminist act in *The Mere Wife*, with Headley crafting what she terms "a shieldmaiden's syntax - sharp, economical, deadly" (2020, p. 12), which manifests itself as a stylistic revolt against the patriarchal frameworks embedded in traditional translations. Hence, if Talbot Donaldson's translation imposes Latin-like constructions and Seamus Heaney's version offers lyrical embellishment, Headley's prose, as in Dana's declaration, "I'm not the monster here. The monster is the American Dream" (2018, p. 204), asserts autonomy through brevity and blunt force. This affiliates with the feminist claim that the translator must "hijack language to expose its gendered violence" (Simon, 1996, p. 15). Headley succeeds in performing this task by erasing euphemisms that soften the rage of Grendel's mother in traditional renderings and, thus, epitomizing the duty of the feminist translator "to make visible what patriarchal language obscures" (Carruthers, 2018, p. 34). For instance, if Beowulf in Donaldson's translation describes the mere as "a cursed place" (1966, p. 27), Dana redefines it as "a home that men call a cave" (2018, p. 92), so as to subvert the monstrous 'othering' in the original epic. Furthermore, this linguistic resistance mirrors the theory of "performativity as subversion" (Butler,

1990, p. 147), as Headley's fragmented and visceral syntax personifies Dana's trauma: "War isn't hell. War is war. Hell is afterward" (2018, p. 117). At the same time, the asyntactic flow in *The Mere Wife* forces confrontation with its gendered implications, resulting in "a translational counter-narrative" (Chamberlain, 1988, p. 456), in which economy of words becomes an armament against the silence in the traditional epic.

Perhaps the most radical departure in *The Mere Wife* lies in its ending, which subverts the masculine funeral pyre in the original Old English *Beowulf* into a vision of the collective female rebirth. If *Beowulf* concludes with the Geats mourning the death of their king and "the glow of [his] pyre [lighting] the sky" (Heaney, 1999, p. 213), *The Mere Wife* offers a sharp feminist counterpoint: "We rise from the ashes of their mead-hall" (Headley, 2018, p. 312). This imagery constitutes "a feminist reclamation of the heroic ethos" (Trilling, 2009, p. 201), and, hence, replaces solitary male glory with communal female resurgence, which is both literal and symbolic, since the ashes at the end of *The Mere Wife* evoke not just the destruction of Heorot, but signal the incineration of patriarchal narratives. This stands in stark contrast to traditional translations. Donaldson's version preserves the emphasis of the original Old English epic on Beowulf's "burning bones" (1966, p. 87) as the locus of meaning, while Heaney's lyrical "heaven swallowed the smoke" (1999, p. 213) phrase openly aestheticizes male sacrifice. Headley rejects both, as she creates "a saga for the silenced" (2020, p. 15), in which the collective "we" (2018, p. 312) of the female chorus answers the original solitary "I" of heroic boast, for when "there is no such thing as woman; she must be invented" (Wittig, 1985, p. 49) through the alchemy of feminist transcreation.

Conclusion: Translation as a Feminist Praxis

To conclude, this study portrays the realm of translation as an ideological battlefield, challenging and rewriting centuries of patriarchal interpretation. Considered that the philological rigor of Talbot Donaldson and the poetic sensibility of Seamus Heaney, each in their way, preserved the masculine heroic tradition of the original Old English *Beowulf*, Maria Dahvana Headley's *The Mere Wife* performed the crucial feminist intervention aimed "not merely to translate differently, but to translate difference itself" (Chamberlain, 1988, p. 468). By reimagining Grendel's mother as a traumatized veteran of the war in Iraq and Wealhtheow as a suburban influencer, Headley exposed the cultural assumptions embedded in previous translations and, subsequently, recovered "the erased grammar of female power" (Overing 1990, p. 132) characteristic of the original Old English text. Headley's novel established a focal precedent for how medieval literature might be revisioned as both a historical artifact and a living tradition capable of speaking to contemporary struggles for gender equity. As medieval studies continue to contend with issues of representation and inclusivity, the translation

approach elaborated by Headley offers a challenge and an inspiration to the scholars of the field. As a consequence, if the women of *Beowulf* could be made invisible through translation, they can equally be made visible again through deliberate, feminist re-creation.

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