

# Seamus heaney and the translation of beowulf

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The poem *Beowulf*, edited by Daniel Donoghue and translated by Seamus Heaney, is a masterful piece of poetry. By looking at the roles that women played back in Anglo-Saxon times, one can get a better understanding into the function of Grendel's mother in the poem. By examining specific examples of other women in this time frame to Grendel's mother it helps to compare the differences from the expected behavior. In one of her essays, Jane Chance investigates some of the possible meanings behind the importance of Grendel's mother and her societal acceptance. Many people still debate the actual function of Grendel's mother, but in previously written words of Jane Chance some answers may be found.

Jane Chance, one of the many people who have examined the poem *Beowulf*, wrote an essay that provided an explanation of the important role played by the women in *Beowulf*. She states:

" The role of women in *Beowulf* primarily depends upon 'peace making' either biologically through her marital ties with foreign kings as a peace-pledge or mother of sons, or socially and psycho-logically as a cup passing and peace-weaving queen within a hall" (p. 156).

Chance also goes on to establish how each of the women in the poem are used to prove her point about their symbolic presence. The women of pagan history, mostly notably the queen, portray a symbolic gesture of peace in the form of bringing the mead cup to the men of the hall. Chance believes that as the mead cup is passed around, the people who drink from the cup are tied together. This is a symbol of weaving men and families together. The *Beowulf* poet also mentions that the women's role is to create a " peace-

pledge between nations" (2017). The standard practice to perform this was to give away daughters, or sisters in arranged marriages to order to bring strong ties with neighbouring or feuding families. Hildeburh, wife of the Frisian king Finn, sister of the Dane Hnaef (249), was given in marriage to fuse both the Danes and the Frisians together.

Freawaru is betrothed to Ingeld for this same reason; to renew alliances within families and countries. A line from Beowulf proves this point, "The friend of the Shieldings favors her betrothal: the guardian of the kingdom sees good in it and hopes this woman will heal old wounds and grievous feuds" (2026-2029). The expected role of women in this era was to provide harmony and become the symbol of peace in the hearts of men. Women also had an important responsibility to speak for her people during events; a prominent speech was the one that Wealtheow gives to the hall after the death of Grendel. She gives of blessings to the warriors, and speaks of her own children and their importance to the future as the next of kin:

Take delight in this torque, dear Beowulf,

wear it for luck and wear also this mail

from our people's armory: may you prosper in them!

Be acclaimed for strength, for kindly guidance

to these two boys, and your bounty will be sure.

You have won renown: you are known to all men

far and near, now and forever.

Your sway is wide as the wind's home,

as the sea around cliffs. And so, my prince,

I wish you a lifetime's luck and blessings

to enjoy this treasure. Treat my sons

with tender care, be strong and kind.

Here each comrade is true to the other,

loyal to Lord, loving in spirit. (1216-1229)

Wealtheow 's responsibility is that of a mediator to make everyone happy and yet ensure that she and her people survive.

In comparing the women and their purpose in society to the events concerning Grendle's mother, one can see a female does not usually take action but Grendel's mother does despite her gender. Feeling " grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge" (1278) Grendle's mother goes on the attack in order to redeem her son who was killed. In doing this she consequently exhibits more masculine traits than other women of the time. She displays quite a different reaction than the one that Hildeburh gave when she lost not only her brother but her son as well. Hildeburh did exactly what was expected of her at the time. She mourned and " Then Hildeburh ordered her own / son's body be burnt with Hnaef's, / the flesh of his bones to sputter and blaze / beside his uncle's.

The women wailed / and sang keens" (1115-1119). Comparatively Grendel's mother does not have a problem in reacting to the wrongs she felt that were done to her: " monstrous hell-bride; brooded on her wrongs" (1259). Unlike the women of the time she fights her own battles: " she has taken up the feud because of last night when you killed Grendel" (1333). This is the main difference between the women of the time and Grendel's mother since dealing with grudges was typically a job left up to that of the males in the family. Chance also believes that women's expected place in society at that time was one of non-aggression and they become the ones to make the peace as opposed to men who fight. Chance goes on to explain, " the idea is stressed that a kinwoman or mother must passively accept and not actively avenge the loss of her son" (p. 157-158).

Females do not usually take action other than in a peaceful or symbolic sense in this Anglo-Saxon time period. Though Grendel's mother proceeds like a man by acting out her revenge she is referred to in the poem as a: " ghastly dam" (2120) reflecting that she is still seen as a lady in that time period:

Her onslaught was less only by as much as an amazon warrior's strength is less than an armed man's when the hefted sword, its hammered edge and gleaming blade slathered in blood, razes the sturdy boar-ridge off a helmet. Then in the hall, hard-honed swords were grabbed from the bench, many a broad shield lifted and braced; there was little though of helmets or woven mail when they woke in terror. The hell-dam was in a panic, desperate to get

out, in mortal terror the moment she was found. She had pounced and taken one of the retainers in a tight hold, then headed for the fen. (1282-1295)

These lines from the poem help to show that even though some of the actions taken by Grendel's mother are masculine by nature, she does have some female traits. These traits include not being as strong as the men and fleeing or not staying to put up a fight once confronted. Women stereotypically were seen as being fearful of danger once it has been provoked.

The function of Grendel's mother in the poem seems to be quite different from the function that the monsters of Grendel and the Dragon play. She seems to be a symbol of the blood feuds and displays an unwillingness to act as the peace-pledge, which was the normal female role after an injustice. In her essay Jane Chance states: " As a monstrous mother and queen she perverts a role more important socially and symbolically than that of Grendel" (p. 167). The devoted mother or the feminine side of Grendel's mother comes out in her anger and her sense of loss at the killing of her son. But Grendel's mother's actions are not accepted by the people of this time, as a result there is a conflict between her actions and her purpose.

Chance writes about how the poet wishes to " stressthis specific inversion of the Anglo-Saxon ideal of women as both monstrous and masculine" (p. 155). As Grendel's mother changes roles between mother and vengeance seeker through the story one might think that the poet is against women from acting in the same manor as Grendel's mother. By making Grendel's mother feminine but also powerful and ruthless she is then referred to as a " swamp

thing from hell, the tarn-hag in all her terrible strength" (1518-1519) and "hell-dam"(1292). Grendel's mother seems to be desiring revenge over peace and her contemporaries viewed this as horrible, since women are the symbols of peace, as explained by Chance.

The essay written by Jane Chance looks at the women and the roles that they played in that time period and then comparing their behavior to Grendel's mother's ever changing role as mother to vengeance seeker. It also evaluates the function that Grendel's mother occupies in the poem. Grendel's mother in the poem seems to have the most challenging role in the poem itself. She does not seem to agree with the view of women in the time period that the poem was written. By exploring the differences of behavior in Beowulf one can see that Grendel's mother is an important addition to the poem.