

## A Conversation between Maria Dahvana Headley and Carolyne Larrington

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Note: American author, Maria Dahvana Headley's novel *The Mere Wife* was published in the US in spring 2018, and in the UK in autumn 2018. The book is a re-versioning of *Beowulf*, set in contemporary suburban America, and narrated from the point of view of different characters; in particular, Dana Mills, a US female combat veteran, plays the role of Grendel's mother. Roger Herot is the son of the man who has established Herot Hall, a luxury gated community, on the ancestral land of Dana's family, and part of the narrative is related from the point of view of Willa (Wealhtheow), Roger's wife. Ben Woolf is the local police officer and ex-soldier who is called to investigate the evidence that an outsider – Gren, Dana's son – has come into Herot. The novel deftly transposes themes and characters from the poem, raising important questions about who is actually a monster, and how someone might become so defined. Headley's is a boldly imaginative, provocative feminist re-imagining of the poem.

On November 12<sup>th</sup> 2018, Maria Dahvana Headley visited St John's College at the University of Oxford. Here she gave a reading of *The Mere Wife*, and she also read from her translation-in-progress of *Beowulf*. Carolyne Larrington interviewed her about the relationships between *Beowulf* and *The Mere Wife*.

**Carolyne Larrington:** Thank you so much for that [the readings from the novel], Maria, and welcome to St John's again. I'm particularly happy to be hosting you here because St John's has not always been the most friendly place towards enthusiasts for *Beowulf*. One of our former, most distinguished alumni was Kingsley Amis who, according to his friend Philip Larkin at any rate, was said to have described *Beowulf* as – and it grieves me to recite this quotation – 'a crass, purblind, infantile, featureless heap of gangrened elephant's sputum'.<sup>1</sup> That is Kingsley for you. And he did then go on to write a poem about *Beowulf*, which is perhaps not quite so hard to listen to, but he does describe the poem there as Beowulf's 'tedious journey to his ancestors, an instance of Old English harking back'.<sup>2</sup> So that's enough about Kingsley, but there's a lot of exorcism about the topic of *Beowulf* that St John's needs, I think, given this kind of cloud of anti-*Beowulf* talk that we've had in the past. So Amis and Larkin had to study *Beowulf* in their first year, and probably their second year as well, if the syllabus was, as I think it was back in the

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<sup>1</sup> Cited from Stephen Moss:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/nov/19/oldenglishnotdrearyshock>

<sup>2</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Beowulf', *Essays in Criticism* 4.1 (January 1954): 85.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/eic/IV.1.85-a>

forties when they were here – but when did you first come across *Beowulf* and what first drew you to the poem?

**Maria Headley:** Well, I think from parsing it backwards that I first encountered Grendel's mother from *Beowulf* in an image, an illustration. Without *Beowulf* – no context. She didn't have the rest of the poem around her, she was just coming out of the lake with a sword, and I thought there's a female monster: I want to know about that monster, where did she come from? What's her story? And I was little. And then I encountered – kind of in the æther – *Beowulf*, which always is floating around waiting to grab people who are interested in story by the hair. But I encountered Gardner's *Grendel* really, as a reader, before I encountered the actual text of Grendel.<sup>3</sup>

**CL:** Okay, and what did you make of Gardner's *Grendel*?

**MH:** Well, I loved it. I was a teenager when I found it first and I thought 'yes yes yes'. And then I got to Grendel's mother again and she's covered in fur and she has no voice. She's even made more monstrous by Gardner – well she's made more monstrous by everyone than she is in the original – but in Gardner's *Grendel* she's really awful.

**CL:** She kind of slumped, isn't she, in the corner of the den, and she doesn't give anything.

**MH:** She's a creature. She's a bitey creature, she's a loyal mother, but she's got nothing intellectually to say to Grendel, who is brilliant, and you know, et cetera. We've heard that story before, with the difficult mother.

**CL:** Yes, who made him a monster, yes, and I think that's familiar. So when did you actually encounter the text itself?

**MH:** I think, in high school. In the States it's taught in high school. I remember reading little bits of it and feeling no particular way about it; I think at the time I was a reader, as many of us are, of all of the Beat poets and they were all male, and I was accustomed of course to stories of men, and stories of transgressive men, and so reading *Beowulf* was another story of a transgressive man, and I thought okay, that's just normal reading, but also assigned reading – I was ultimately looking for something else. But as I got older I started thinking about the ways in which *Beowulf* has taught us the story of our culture, the ways that we've learned from it over the years that it's existed, because it's been around, so people have continuously read it, and it's an unusual text in that regard.

**CL:** Did you study it then at some point in college? Did you have to sit through lectures?

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<sup>3</sup> John Gardner, *Grendel* (London: Gollancz, 1971).

**MH:** No, I did not. I never studied it. I have the great, strange fortune of having never had a formal education in *Beowulf* and then suddenly writing an adaptation of it. It's been an interest in the cultural phenomenon that is *Beowulf*.

**CL:** That must be enormously liberating in a sense: not have to work your way through Klaeber's edition of *Beowulf* and having to note this emendation versus that emendation, just to encounter it as itself.

**MH:** I think it has been both liberating, and also I have a longing for an alternative version of myself that could have done those things – because so much of it is wonderful – the granular *Beowulf*-iana is really pleasing to look at – it's interesting for me working on all of this and this is how I ended up with this text that I have now, and also with this translation. Going through and thinking about the ways in which the people have worked with this text over the years has been really fascinating for me and fun for me as I've been playing with it myself. But no, I was never strapped to a desk and forced to; it was all interest in creatures and interest in how we monsterise each other as humans.

**CL:** Right so a free choice then. I don't want to give away too many spoilers about what happens in the book, though obviously most of the people in the room know how *Beowulf* ends, but that may not entirely help I guess. But I just wanted to foreground – I suppose this sort of stems from what you were just saying about Grendel's mother being the primary figure that catches your imagination in that first image – that your book seems to be very interested in motherhood. The poem is intermittently interested in it, it kind of looks indirectly, and sort of tragically at Wealhtheow (your character Willa), and what she wants for her children, and what she's probably going to get for her children; what the audience know, but she doesn't know. What Hildeburh doubtlessly wanted for her son, but then she has to lay him on the funeral pyre. And of course, Grendel's mother herself. So, looking at the story as it came to be, did you think that motherhood was going to be absolutely primary? And also refracted across different characters, for of course there's no single mother here, clearly there are lots of them.

**MH:** Yes, it's a book full of mothers. I am myself a mother, I'm a step-mother, so I raised two children from their early childhood and now they're in their late twenties. So I had some intimate experience with the difficulties of being a mother, and the fears that one has as a parent of small children, fearing that something will happen to them at any moment, that someone will snatch them or that they'd be run over by a car, or let go of your hand, that anything could happen to them. And that for me was an easy step to the fears of Grendel's mother in this book; that her son is going to be murdered by any number of people in the book, and I think that's a pretty easy leap from the notion of what happens in the original poem to Grendel, who is

hypersensitive, and hears and does not like the sounds coming from the hall: he hates the noise, and he hates the noise so much that it drives him berserk. But all of the notions of motherhood – for me, Hrothgar’s wife’s negotiation with her husband when he adopts Beowulf suddenly, he says ‘well, you killed my monster, now you’re my son’. And she comes out into the hall and says ‘maybe you’ve forgotten about our sons – I know you wouldn’t forget about our sons, husband, but just in case, you did remember that we have these sons?’ And then she goes to negotiate with Beowulf to get him not to kill her sons, which I think is really poignant in the context of a story in which we are about to see Grendel’s mother come in to get revenge for her murdered son.<sup>4</sup> There are so many murdered sons in *Beowulf*, and to me that’s an easy leap from murdered sons to – what about their mothers? And I think that in many of the adaptations of *Beowulf* that has not been as much of a consideration. The idea of a murdered son is more important to people than the grief and the difficulties that a mother has gone through in order to raise that person who now is gone, and who is sacrilegiously gone, is horrifically gone. So I think about all those things. As I was writing this, I was thinking about all of the ways you might lose your work, and when your child is the only proof of credit that you have done anything as a mother in this poem, that’s a loss, that’s an enormous loss.

**CL:** And what about the kind of chorus of mothers, who move through Heorot – to me very strikingly different from the normative voices in the poem itself. There you have the poet saying that was a good king, or the Danes think this, but these are all masculine voices saying that this is how things should be, this is what’s appropriate. And *you* have the women really policing the community of Herot?<sup>5</sup>

**MH:** I was looking, when I put those women in, there’s a corral point of view that says sort of, women of suburbia, that mothers – and the mothers-in-law – there’s a group of them, and they are policing everyone’s actions within Herot hall. And I had them in my mind there really as the soldiers of suburbia. I wrote them almost as *Beowulf*’s soldiers coming in, but there’re also the soldiers that are already there, the hall-men. And they are making sure the structure stays as it is, but of course what’s going to be happen is it’s going to be Finnsburh, it’s going to be boom! Blood wedding, everybody dies. So, I think that the notion of keeping the structure the same has always been a thing for us as humans. If you flip the patriarchy, a lot of people die, so these women, the women in this chorus don’t want the patriarchy flipped, they don’t want the power, they want to run it from behind the scenes. They don’t want to be in charge, they want their husbands in charge.

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, it is Hroðulf, the cousin of Wealhþeow’s two sons, who will murder them, once Hroðgar is dead.

<sup>5</sup> In the book, the poem’s Heorot becomes a suburban gated community, Herot Hall, founded by Roger Herot’s father.

**CL:** But there's that occasional suggestion, isn't there, where the husband is just a little bit too troublesome – he might just fall down the stairs, or something might happen...

**MH:** Yes, in the book it's called a regular incantation of 'whoopsy-daisy', and then there's a dead husband at the bottom of the stairs, and oops, it was an accident, it was an error. But yes the women have a lot of power. And I think women always do have a lot of power, but are forced to turn their power back on themselves, which is a common theme in the history of the world.

**CL:** So that has swallowed up part of one of my questions, which was about the various Greek choruses of voices that make the novel so fascinating. We've seen the mothers of Herot Hall within the gated community there, but there's also a counter-set of voices in the mere itself, and I didn't know quite where to place those voices. For a while I thought they were the voices of those sea monsters that Beowulf fights his way down to get to Grendel's mother's hall itself, or the kind of creature that one of the actors casually shoots, just because he can, when it's sunning itself on the rocks. I always think it's a terrible shame for that monster, who's just having a great day. Maybe those voices of yours are a bit more complicated than just the voices of the wildlife. Can you say a bit more about that?

**MH:** I think it's kind of all of the above. I intended it to be an echoing collective point of view, so in parts, Dana, who is Grendel's mother, and Gren, who are alone, living in this cave on the mountain, are not wholly alone; she also has a sort of imaginary friend that travels with her, one that's a saint. But I was interested in the history of the landscape – and it's in the original poem itself, the idea that the mere is this old, very weird, very creepy place that is described with language that is very different from anything else in the poem. It's fascinating. The description feels very much like that place is a character, that that place is a ghostly presence in the poem. So I was interested in writing a ghostly presence with the voice in this case; the mountain has a point of view, the mountain is talking, the creatures within are talking, they're all talking with one voice; and they are sometimes intervening. As I think the natural world does, the long history of our relationship with the landscape is – you know, every once in a while there's a landslide, and this is part of the nature of this story, that the water has feelings, and is inhabited not just with living creatures but with the memory of the place.

**CL:** Yes, memory is really important there isn't it? The sense that these are much more ancient voices than the voices of the humans in this story.

**MH:** Yes, and that the human timeline is very short compared to the one that the land is on. That this is just a moment in that timeline

**CL:** Yes, with all the horror and the tragedy, this too will pass in a way. So that brings me onto the question of setting. I picked up the book and thought oh! It's a suburban gated community somewhere in America, somewhere within commuting distance of the city. This not kind of what I thought this would be like. Then there's a mountain, there's a lake with hot springs, and there's that ancestral land also there. So it's the edge-lands which have been swallowed up by the ambition of Roger or Rogers's father. But it's also the Scyldings taking what is on the edge of their property, and appropriating it. And I wondered how you came up with that particular setting, rather than just going right out somewhere in the wild and in the woods, and saying: 'here's a strange place, here's some people in a cabin'.

**MH:** Because of the poem I was interested in the idea of the glorious structure that is also meant to house so many people, and the idea that the glory of it is also kind of – how do I say – general. When people come to Herot Hall there's the sense that it's the most beautiful place – but it's built within two lines. Roger gets the idea to do it, and then five lines later the hall is up and it's the most amazing building and he constantly has to say how amazing it is. Which is how I feel often gated communities or those cookie-cutter castles are, you know it feels like real-estate, even in the original poem it feels like that place to me. So I was interested in writing a place that felt like it came directly from the catalogue copy. And here it is, now you have a castle. And the idea of American society is so much that, the idea that you can now have your castle, you can be isolated from the horrifying masses that are probably going to come and steal your shit. There are monsters outside, they want to get to you. So part of the idea of American architecture is to build it up, make a wall, make a wall. And of course at the American border in this present moment. So I wanted it to be a place where certain kind of people could get in, but not everybody could get in, and it is closed off from people who are from outside the community. So if it had been a wilderness community, a log cabin for example, or anything of that kind, I feel like that's a more transgressive idea than that of a utopian planned community that has locks.

**CL:** And you wouldn't have the same sense of power if you're just out in the woods, but everybody defers to Roger and the family. They're the ones who named it. They're the ones who made it.

**MH:** They're king and queen, and it's the dream. The dream is to come and have a house like this. To have a beautiful house that is white plaster and that has all windows; you have the luxury of the view of the mountain, which has already been inhabited, and they've built on top of the city that was there.

**CL:** I think we also have a strong sense of the uncanniness of that landscape, that you want to be able to see it outside: the mere, this picturesque view, but the sense that was very strong when

you were reading, of what could be looking back in at you. And that vestigial presence of the wild, once it's come in the house and left those claw marks, I think it's one of the most uncanny bits of the novel for me. And what about the mountain and the lake itself and the railway too. Where did the idea of the railway come from? That was really intriguing.

**MH:** I woke up and I was in the middle of working on this novel, and I had been working on it for years, I had been thinking about it for years, and I know I wanted it to be a commuter community, within reach of a large city, and so probably near New York City. And that means a train. And I knew the train was in it, and I had that feeling, and to affiliate the train and the dragon with each other seemed to me suddenly out of nowhere an obvious idea, and this required a lot of reverse engineering, so I could make that a place where the dragon could be a train.

**CL:** Because Willa's watch has a dragon, doesn't it, a kind of marker of time. I think the dragon is sometimes the most difficult part of the retellings of *Beowulf*, because you have the drama of the monster, the monster-mother, the fight, and then there has to be a dragon somewhere. Where did that come from? And I saw the train and I whooped, and said 'yes and there it is underground with this hoard of the old forgotten station with its grand chandeliers and its mosaics and the forgotten splendour of the Last Survivor's hall, if you like, and then the acquisition of a new hall in that sort-of museum when the line is being reopened, I thought that was a really astonishing and unexpected move, because dragons can often be disappointing.

**MH:** They can be because they need to be so wonderful, and the difficulty in *Beowulf* in translation I think is that the dragon often feels unaffiliated to the rest of the story, somewhere out of nowhere the dragon is pissed off, his shit has been stolen, and he wants to come for somebody, anybody, doesn't matter who. Whereas if you entwine the ethics of *Beowulf* throughout the story with a certain kind of fated disaster that is coming for him because of theft, because of stealing life, because of the cup, and you have to entwine it as – eventually this will happen to you too, it's coming. So I think that the dragon can easily make sense in this context, but if the translation is showing Grendel's mother as a ferocious monster who is unhinged and is deserving of death, I think it changes the dynamic of *Beowulf* and the dragon. Ultimately it changes its action, it feels justified that he would go and kill her, when in fact it is as a pretty mercenary act that he goes to kill her.

**CL:** Yes, I think that's certainly right, in that it's mercenary, but it's also the action of someone – unlike the *Beowulf* in the poem who is the epitome of heroism – the *Beowulf* of the book is as deeply damaged, as monstrous a person as Dana, as Grendel's mother. It struck me that there's a kind of dialogue about war trauma going on in the book and the fate of veterans – not only these

two crucial characters, but other veterans who appear on the edges of the story. That seems to me to be – do you think it's a particularly North American theme?

**MH:** Yes, in some ways, because I'm talking about the way that American masculine status is acquired. Also throughout the history of literature, the notion is that you need to do violence in order to be a man, in order to be seen that way. And then you have Dana and she's a woman and a female soldier, for her to be a woman you don't need to do violence. That's not part of the qualifier to be a good woman, to be a strong woman, to be any sort of woman; you don't actually have to kill someone, and you don't have to fight a monster, that's not part of the lineage of storytelling. So, for me writing about war in this book was partially that I wanted to write about the poisonous qualifications that we put ourselves through in regard to gender and proof of heroics, proof of 'my deeds were worthy', 'my deeds were actually worth doing', rather than potentially wrongful deeds, which are some of the deeds that were done by Ben Woolf, the Beowulf character in this book. He did some wrong things, but he re-categorises himself as a hero throughout the book.

**CL:** Yes, and I think there are institutions in place, like having been in the army, the police, having that kind of role which allows you to do that. But Dana also went and fought and killed in war; is her case different?

**MH:** I think that she is as much a victim of the society as she is a participant in it; she's a soldier – and I don't think that being a soldier is inherently doing war crimes obviously, and nor do I think Dana commits war crimes. I think Ben does – I think that Dana is someone who's serving. She thinks it'll be okay, and it's not okay, what happens to her isn't okay, and she's not prepared for it. And ends up with an extreme story which she did not intend, and in fact with her carrying a story inside of her body which she didn't intend. I think they're different characters, but I think they both do good and bad things. He does mostly bad things. I'm not pro-Beowulf; my soul just doesn't live there. But I think Dana does both in the course of this story; she keeps her son very isolated and what ultimately happens is a result of the isolation as much as it is the world.

**CL:** I think that's true, isn't it, that they're both coming from, in some ways, similar backgrounds – she joins up because her mother's died, she's seventeen, she doesn't know what to do with herself, and the community has been destroyed. And he's an orphan and a swimming champion of course, and there've been some slightly odd episodes in his life already. But he looks like he was always meant to join up, and go and kill people – that was his destiny – whereas she kind of falls into it.

**MH:** Well, one of the things that was interesting to me in the poem was the idea of familial bonds between warriors. And the idea that if – that, even more than your family, that you might

potentially forget about your family, you might forget about your sons because you've just met a warrior whom you quite like, and you want *him* to be your child, you want him to be your heir. And your bond now as fellow fighters, or as not even fighting in the same battle together, but as knowing that you have fought, is stronger than the bond that you have with your wife. So the brotherhood of the hall, I think, is an interesting thing to think about, the brotherhood – and sisterhood – of suburbia, and the idea that the emotional bond is stronger than a romantic bond, that it is a blood-bond, the bond of defending your very isolated home territory from wickedness, and then the need to name it wicked. The need to look out from your high window and say 'wickedness is below; we're all united here'. I think this is the source of many bad deeds throughout the history of humans: the idea that you can only have a sisterhood or only have a brotherhood if you have an opponent.

**CL:** Yes. That's what you identify yourself against. We've already talked about John Gardner's *Grendel* and the extraordinary effect that it has, when it makes you look at the poem again and think yes, you can take that story and re-vision it in a way, even if the poor old hag just stays in the corner of the den there. But are there other versions of *Beowulf* that you've particularly enjoyed? A few years ago now I had a *Beowulf*-film day and I showed all the versions of *Beowulf* I could get my hands on, including the amazing animated *Grendel Grendel Grendel*, which has Grendel as a kind of pink dinosaur with yellow spots, voiced by Peter Ustinov, and he looks really cuddly in the film, but marches into Heorot and eats his way through the assembled warriors.<sup>6</sup> And you think, 'oh yes, not so nice after all'. But there are a bunch of other *Beowulf* movies, but have any particularly caught your eye, any that you've found interesting? The Zemeckis one of course is a kind of case in point, which you were talking about earlier.<sup>7</sup>

**MH:** As this book was beginning to gestate in me, the Zemeckis movie came out, and basically I became so aggravated by the Zemeckis movie, and by also *Revolutionary Road*, which is an American suburban novel about misery in the suburbs – the two things aggravated me in different directions, but ultimately resulted in this book.<sup>8</sup> But it was because I wanted the Zemeckis movie to be awesome, I wanted the awesomeness that was not in it, and there was Grendel's mother again, painted gold and naked and a seductress

**CL:** Angelina Jolie, with those integral high heels that just grew out of her feet

**MH:** Like a strange golden Barbie. But I think that even more – and maybe this is just human – I've been as inspired by the things that I've hated as I have by the things that I've loved in this

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<sup>6</sup> *Grendel, Grendel, Grendel* (1981), dir. Alexander Stitt. [www.imdb.com/title/tt0082478/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082478/)

<sup>7</sup> *Beowulf* (2007), dir. Robert Zemeckis. [www.imdb.com/title/tt0442933/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0442933/?ref_=nv_sr_1)

<sup>8</sup> *Revolutionary Road* (2008), dir. Sam Mendes. [www.imdb.com/title/tt0959337/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0959337/). Based on the novel by Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (London: Methuen, 1961).

regard. And the things that I wanted to be glorious that weren't as glorious as I wanted them to be, caused me to do a lot of thinking about the nature of feminine monstrosity, the Angelina Jolie version in that movie is a femme fatal, and she's a seductress, and all kinds of sex happens with Grendel's mother in that book with seemingly everyone – she's just banging it out. I was thinking, how did this happen? But also thinking about the spectrum of monstrosity that has been available for female characters, which has really led me to a lot of thought on that topic, which has led to my career. It was good that I watched that movie that I didn't like, in terms of thinking about the voices that I ultimately in my work have been wanting to really amplify, and to reveal characters that didn't have voices in these stories. You know, Grendel's mother doesn't say anything, and that's of course very strange to me that she doesn't say anything – it doesn't make me think that she doesn't have anything to say. I think in the original version of many of these stories, I just thought well, in my early career anyway, it didn't occur to me that I could just make these women talk, that I could shine the light on them, and just have it all about them. Like to take on *Beowulf* seemed very daunting to me when I first had the thought – I thought I don't know enough about *Beowulf* to take it on, people have written about this for hundreds of years, it's really, it's the big thing to take on. And then watching something like integrated high heels on Grendel's mother, I thought, why not take this on? Why not go in? Because it seems that maybe lots of women have been neglected from the larger power plays in the study of *Beowulf*, like they haven't gotten the light shone on their work, or seen in popular culture, so that aggravates me. And I want more of that work to show, I want a more diverse spotlight on scholarship in this field.

**CL:** Fantastic. So talking around *Beowulf*, as well as recasting it, we can see different kinds of people now beginning to engage with it, and to ask the questions which it provokes in this particular period differently from twenty or thirty years ago. Maria, thank you very much indeed!

Thanks to Maria Dahvana Headley for the opportunity to record this interview and for agreeing to its publication, and to Felix Taylor for transcription.