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Maria Dahvana Headley's *The Mere Wife*: Diffused Satire in a troubling piece of Beowulfiana

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Focus on Grendel's Mother leads us to expect a feminist attack on male heroic narrative, but Maria Dahvana Headley offers us a complex and nuanced look at parent-child, upper-lower class, and male-female patterns of interaction in this novel symbiotic upon the Anglo-Saxon BEOWULF. Since the attacks sometimes seem contradictory, I use diffused satire theory to separate the various kinds of satire, show where contradictions and ambiguities occur, and show how they can be resolved. Headley makes the point that you need to hear from all the voices in an event, not just from the last one who writes the history. What she does is give us those various voices and goad us to work out our personal positions on the issues for which she offers no easy satiric answer.

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Grendel had his chance to challenge the Old English epic and give his view of his dealings with the Danes when John Gardner gave him a highly praised philosophical rethink in *Grendel* (1971). Gardner satirizes the sordid wars if not heroism itself and leaves us in doubt as to how heroism should function in society. In Maria Dahvana Headley's *The Mere Wife* (2018), we assume we are entering some type of feminist territory when an American female marine named Dana Mills takes the part of Grendel's mother in this contemporary resetting of *Beowulf.* Her battle experience in the War on Terror makes her a very suitable candidate for the part.

Many examples of "minor character elaboration" give voice to women and other silenced members of society: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*, and Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* are well known examples.[1] As Headley herself puts it in her introduction to her translation of *Beowulf*, "There are also stories that haven't yet been reckoned with, stories hidden within the stories we think we know" (Headley, *Beowulf*, xxxiv). Dana's working-class rural background, her war experience, and her articulate commentary make her a very prominent and promising addition to the Beowulf story. Like Grendel and his mother, she and her son Gren live in a cave that is accessible both through a crack in the cliff face and through the mysterious mere at the foot of their mountain. Gren in particular is fascinated by the gated community that has established itself near their hideout. When its inhabitants see him, they send a policeman named Ben Woolf to exterminate this supposed threat. Woolf returns to the wealthy community claiming to have killed these monstrous creatures. Some hints liken the train at the end of the story to Beowulf's dragon, but Dana is driving it, so *The Mere Wife* really focuses on the epic's first two adversaries, Grendel and his mother, and the gated community represents Heorot, the royal hall of the Danes. Insofar as Dana Mills is the most radical addition to this reconfiguration of the Old English story, we expect—and get—some undercutting of traditional male values. Because Ben Woolf is a liar rather than a true hero, our expectation of feminist attack seems justified. But then the most obvious and simple form of feminist reading itself gets undercut.

When the Wealtheow character, Willa Herot, plays a much more important part than the Hrothgar equivalent, Roger Herot, we find ourselves in puzzling territory. Reviewers note the focus on women and note the attack on the elitist snobs in the gated community, but they struggle to make sense of the various targets in the novel.[2]

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[1] For analysis of popular genre based on reuse of canonical texts reoriented to be seen through the sensibilities of minor characters, see Jeremy Rosen (2016). For the kinds of relationship between original and modern reworking, see David Cowart (1993) on literary symbiosis, and Linda Hutcheon (2006) on adaptation.

[2] Ron Charles (2018: 9) sees it as "wicked parody of privileged families and a tragic tale of their forgotten counterparts." Sarah Johnson (2018: 34) sees the topics as racial tensions, veterans' reintegration, political corruption, and female power. Several reviewers comment on the problem of who is a monster and how Headley shifts that from Dana and

Beowulf treats Grendel as a monster, someone who kills with no valid cause and who seeks no peaceful settlement. Recent scholarship has made a persuasive argument that Grendel's mother is no monster unless you are horrified at the idea of a woman who can both rule a hall and fight.[3] Past scholars biased their translations toward making her a monster, and *Beowulf* has traditionally been read as a series of three super-human threats that attack society.

What do Headley's goals seem to be as she transplants this ancient story into contemporary America? Her translation of *Beowulf* talks about seeing parallels between the senseless wars and the desperate, befuddled politics of old male leaders, but national politics do not loom large in *The Mere Wife*. Is there a monster in this modern version, or is the lack of such Headley's point? When the author excoriates the gated community's ethics, we nod at one kind of obvious satire, but most of what is attacked in that enclave is endorsed by and carried out by the white, privileged women. Some of the animus seems directed at traditional female roles that force these women to work indirectly through manipulating their men, but the women are so unpleasant and so little excuse is given for their attitudes of entitlement that we flounder around for an appropriate stance. Headley's comments on the women in *Beowulf* (xxiii) are far more positive, so this target in her novel seems independent of the original text. Headley excoriates them on class and racial grounds; does that make them the monsters? Dana as lower-class and her son as brown-skinned offer class- and race-based challenges to the white socialites, and the novel encourages readers to reject the gated community's view that Dana and Gren are monsters. However, Dana Mills herself changes from being an apparently heroic figure to being more akin to a mentally disturbed pilot who suicides by taking a whole planeload of passengers to death. With that, the concept of monster creeps back in. The nature and possible existence of monsters is clearly one of Headley's concerns.

The novel does not feel like "a satire," but it does feel "satiric," a very common characteristic of contemporary fiction. I suggest we read this novel as a symbiotic

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Gren to Willa and others at Herot Hall. Erica Wagner (2018: 47) argues that "Headley refuses the simplistic arguments of hero or heroine versus villain. Her characters are victims of circumstance: but some circumstances are far worse than others. That boy with brown skin recalls many other boys who, in Headley's native US, have found themselves victims of brutal circumstance: the names of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice—African Americans who died needlessly in confrontation with police—haunt this novel."

[3] Defenders of Grendel's mother variously show how lexicographers have twisted the translation of terms to her disfavor (Christine Alfano), have claimed that cannibalism and Cain's feud with God do not apply to her (M. Wendy Hennequin in *Exemplaria*), that she is presented as king in her own hall and noble (M. Wendy Hennequin in *The Heroic Age*, Taylor), and that in various ways she is the female or liminal force that undercuts the Law of the Father or masculine hegemony (Ganguly, Oswald), though possible sexual implications argued by Oswald are undercut by linguistic arguments by Fred C. Robinson.

piece of Beowulfiana that assumes familiarity with the original story and operates in a satiric mode. Within the realm of satire, however, it is best viewed as diffused satire.[4] Symbiosis, satire theory, and diffused satire characteristics offer tools that are useful for making sense of this and other contemporary novels.[5]

A "technique that makes us grope for a satiric explanation is the retelling of a well-known sacred, legendary, heroic, or traditional story in cynical terms.... The presence of one cynical priest, *Realpolitik* leader, or posturing, self-conscious prince in a traditional, heroic, or sacred setting puts immediate pressure on us to read something as satiric" (Hume, 316). The punning title, *The Mere Wife*, evokes both the threatening female of the mere and an undervalued woman. That combination suggests feminist attack, but the novel is not just a send-up of male culture. The attack on hero stories mostly applies to the posturing policeman in the Beowulf role. If that is not the justification for the retelling, then what is? My "Diffused Satire in Contemporary American Fiction" brings together many definitions of satire by means of family resemblance theory. There, I list nine qualities that have been claimed by various satire theorists as important to characterizing and identifying satire (305); these constitute the "family." A piece of literature rarely has all of them. The more it has and the less ambiguous they are, the closer a work is to the hot, angry center of satire. The fewer or the more diluted and contradictory they are, the more it lies on the border of the family group and constitutes diffused satire. Two works may have only a few of the nine features each and not overlap in any of them yet still both be part of the larger satire family. Seven of the nine qualities are found in *The Mere Wife*—quite a large number. By identifying those that are ambiguous or contradictory, we can sharpen our sense of *how* the novel actually works. If we are looking for the hot Swiftian anger of "A Modest Proposal," this novel will not appear to be a satire; nor is it rollicking enough in its attacks to seem humorously satiric. The uneasy ambiguities and multiple targets, though, seem equivalent to the diffused satire in such works as Max Apple's *The Propheteers*, Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, and Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*.

The first quality identified by most satire theorists is *attack*. They differ mostly on whether the attack must be historically specific or can be general.[6] Readers of *The Mere Wife* can easily see that the masculine cult of bravery and strength is under some kind of attack, though a lying wannabe hero is not enough of a target unless the author is claiming that no true heroic action exists, which does not seem to be the case. Even

[4] One can, of course, relate the novel to various genres or types including minor character elaboration and symbiotic literature, disability narrative, feminism, and the anti-heroic, but I choose satire because that pinpoints the most puzzling elements of the story, the seeming contradictions.

[5] For an extremely helpful survey of Beowulfiana up to 2006, see Livingston and Sutton.

[6] Edward W. Rosenheim, Jr. (1963) represents the former; Ronald Paulson (1967), the latter.

Ben Woolf admits that men "have a code. Thousands of years of soldier's honor." He goes on to muse that "Women and children have no rules. They've been allowed to do as they please, protected and full of secrets" (Headley, 2018: 250). The behavior of the dowagers bears him out in this; they are tricky, underhanded, and perfectly willing to break rules if it suits them. Insofar as Beowulf (or any other heroic person, including Grendel's mother) braves perils, their achievements do not seem discredited by Ben Woolf's cheating, so heroism itself may not be the target.

The attack on the cultural snobbery of gated communities is much more satirically straightforward; we are clearly meant to reject their belief in their superiority and their attempts to reduce all lower-class people to roles as servants. This attack does expose vice and folly to opprobrium, though such elitist views often escape censure within white society. Insofar as these are privileged white women, the attack resonates with the criticism from feminists of color, though we are not offered an obviously non-white character through whose eyes we might view them. Their community toast, "To us, and people like us" (23), is intoned throughout the novel at the various social occasions and is clearly meant to make readers wince in disgust and rejection.[7]

The second quality is the *humor* or *wit* that makes something satire rather than mere vilification, and the third, closely related, is the author's *evident enjoyment* of his or her literary art, and the fourth is a form of *exaggeration* to the point of *fantasy*.[8] Humor appears in several forms. Simply setting the Beowulf story in the contemporary world encourages audience amusement. The various choruses that Headley assembles also strike us as funny, as well as testifying to her enjoyment of her art. The chorus of older women chants, "[Willa] tells us that Dana Mills is back and Ben Woolf is deranged, and we believe her. Murderer not dead? Check. Monster not slain? Check. Hero not heroic? Check. We take over" (268). In addition to this chorus, Headley assembles one consisting of spirits under the mountain, and even one based on a band of police dogs discussing various scents as they try to hunt down Dana and Gren: "Never mind. Long gone. Housecat, tiny, fluff and flea powder. Scratch over that, dig a moment in disgust, show them your work, boys, show them" (157). That last suggests the dog lifting his leg to pee, satiric low comedy as well as the fantasy of talking dogs that we do not expect in a story derived from *Beowulf*, but that we see elsewhere, such as Pynchon.

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[7] Headley makes readers of all races pull back from these privileged snobs and see them from the perspectives of non-white or lower-class people. Dana occasionally lets us feel what lower-class viewers might think, but we must deduce the feelings of a darker-skinned character through Dana's fear for her son and the Herot community's responses to seeing Gren.

[8] Reviewers Reba Leiding (2018) and Sam Sacks (2018) both stress the exaggerated-fantastic element, Sacks finding it a bit too strong. "There's too much of the Stepford Wives in Willa. ... Ms. Headley's domestic goddess is more fantastical and unreal than her underground monsters. The idea may be to make us rethink our sympathies. In that case, her story succeeds."

The fantastic element strongly emerges at the end of the novel in the surreal stream of consciousness (291–305), partly from Willa, partly from the Herot dowagers and others who drown in the mere when the train derails, and much of it from Dana. Moments of clear vision in the finale produce phantasmal insights. Willa sees that "the monster is not a monster.... The boy is just a boy" when his head dangles from Ben's hand (294). She also sees pearlescent claws on the older women, thus implying their monsterdom. These claws make us rethink Gren; did he truly have such pearlescent talons, or had she projected those upon him? The older women somehow know, without worrying, that this trip will be fatal. They know that Willa will be arrested (one of them reported her crime anonymously). As the train plunges off the bridge, they somehow let it all go and join all the bits of history that they are aware of. Dana too seems unshaken by approaching death; her life passes through her mind as she sinks. She feels herself to be in a crowd with her ancestors, with people she knew and even those she killed when a marine, and with Gren at various of his ages, and with Gren's beloved, Dil. In her final moments, she imagines "We walk past the fire and past the graves, under the stars, up the mountain, and up, and up" (305). The end remarkably suggests movement upward. Since most of the negatives in this story stem from human selfishness, this suggests that they could be remedied and we could move upward, but Headley gives us no reason to think that human behaviors are likely to change. The only positive in this portrait of humanity is love between Gren and Dil, and we have seen that one example murdered through lack of recognition and respect.

Headley thus frequently challenges us to try to figure out what is real, what symbolic, what illusory or fantastic. We are similarly challenged by fragments of Dana's memory that suggest that her impregnation was carried out in a lost desert city, in a room furnished with a bed with white sheets, inhabited by a handsome man who greeted her warmly and offered her wine while the moon shown down on them (186–187, 215, 302). These events are possible, but not very plausible in a war from which she returns with no memories covering several months. Is her damaged mind supplying a fantasy that is more comfortable that memories of a traumatic rape? We never learn.

The fifth element characterizing satire is a *moral core*, some kind of sense of what behavior is desirable and admirable as opposed to the obvious failings being attacked. This is where *The Mere Wife* is least responsive to the demands of satire. Yes, we are told that love is wonderful and that we should be glad for Gren and Dil, whose names of course unite them as one being, Grendel. Frequently, their love is exalted as the one possible ideal in our non-ideal world. In practical terms, strong attractions rarely last unchanged over time, and the two are not in any position to make a life with one another at the point when they are killed. Loving kindness is clearly an ideal, but we are

not shown many contexts in which it can operate. Gren and Dana show it to Dil in their cave, but that cave is more fantasy than practical reality. Part of the point may be that our society supplies no such context for two loving, if young, hearts. I shall come back to this issue of positive ideal later, but insofar as this novel offers any positive vision, we must deduce it from negatives. Do not try to shape your children and force them to conform to what you want them to be. Do not be hasty to classify other humans as monsters. You need all participants' versions of a story before you have any real sense of what might have happened. Another piece of wisdom that appears only once and gets lost in the more visible issues: "You don't really own anything. Nothing is yours forever, not your body, not your youth, not even your mind" (213). Only when we excavate these shadow ideals from the negatives can we begin to make sense of this as a satire.

The sixth quality is the authorial attitude of *disgust* or *indignation*, and that we certainly see on a variety of topics: apart from those already mentioned, we see authorial anguish over white culture's willingness to consider people monsters whose skin is darker than their own or whose looks are somehow different. We also see anger at the Herot Hall group that managed to get rights to the land owned by poor locals, partly through eminent domain (21–22, 206), and force them away so that the wealthy could enjoy the beautiful view of the mountain. Such removals of the poor are all too common in urban renewal, but the argument can be made, however selfishly, that the results are better for the city as a whole. No such argument can justify destroying this hardscrabble rural community. Pure greed and complete indifference to the working-class inhabitants triumphed in this instance, even permitting the illegal bulldozing of their cemetery and turning the most recent (and therefore legally damning) tombstones into gravel (206), while the older tombstones and some plundered grave relics are displayed in a museum, as if the inhabitants were ancient history. One of those relics, a silver goblet, has been stolen from the coffin of Dana's mother. In *Beowulf*, a stolen goblet rouses the ire of the dragon, and this theft is similarly meant to rouse our disgust and anger, even if, unlike the dragon, we don't consider it our own.

The last two qualities defining satire were often touted in the eighteenth century but are now given little or no significance (Griffin, 3–5; Weisenburger, 15–29). We no longer require the presence of a person representing a *high moral norm* to serve as contrast to the target being attacked, and no one for decades or even centuries has truly believed that satire would *reform audience behavior*, although that was once the much-touted justification for the form. Neither of these two qualities is present in this novel. The only positive norm shown is the love between the boys, but they do not survive long enough to try it as a way of organizing their lives, and as teens, they do not represent any mode of living that would work for an adult. They are an ideal but not really a norm.

Headley can hope that some members of her audience might rethink a few previously unquestioned assumptions, but any changes are likely to be minuscule.

Quite enough of the qualities associated with satire are present to justify that identification, but simply calling this novel a satire does not feel quite right. The Herot Hall target is obvious and substantial enough to demand some sort of satiric label, but other targets are scattered and puzzlingly contradictory. We expect a strong statement from satire, and such a ready message is not immediately forthcoming. Hence, I would like to look at a number of dyadic relationships to see what emerges from those as a way of understanding this portrayal of a culture. The relationships between Willa and her son, Dil, Willa and her mother, Diane, and Dana and her son, Gren all highlight serious problems in our society. Whereas those relationships are vertical between generations, the ones between Willa and Roger and then Willa and Ben Woolf are horizontal, and those too suggest different social problems. Headley's unwillingness to present a positive set of behavioral rules seems to derive from the problems that emerge in these relationships.

Let me start with an interesting etymological crossover. The Anglo-Saxon bard was called a Scop or Shaper. He sings of the feuds and wars, whether they end in victory or disaster. In Gardner's *Grendel*, much is made of the Shaper's actually creating the heroic ethos and making it into his culture's ideal; his singing makes squalid and treacherous tribal quarrels into something shining and worthy.[9] His treatment of heroic death makes men willing to die.[10] Gardner's Shaper very literally shapes the culture. One can argue that making men ready and even eager to die for tribal aggrandizement and greed is less than ideal, but perhaps life is better if something *seems* worthwhile and if it creates rules of proper conduct.

Headley also fixes upon Gardner's idea of cultural shaping and greatly extends it. In *The Mere Wife*, we have no bard, but the voice that comes closest is the collective commentary from the dowagers of the Herot Hall complex, and they certainly shape

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[9] Articles on *Grendel* disagree on how Gardner means us to view the heroic. Most focus on identifying the various philosophies Gardner considers, but critics who think Gardner debunks and despises the heroic include Durrant, Fawcett and Jones, Klinkowitz, and Kowalcze. Critics who believe that heroism remains an ideal of some sort, if only because it gives something positive to life, include Mason, Merrill, Pirnajmuddin and Shahbazi, and Segedy.

[10] Tom Shippey calls the determination to die unflinchingly and wittily in Norse literature a death cult. Shippey's study concerns the pagan Viking ethos, and we have no equivalent Old English fascination with witty last words, but we do see admiration for bravery in battle. The Anglo-Saxons who might have known an oral form of the *Beowulf* story were probably pagan, but by the time the poem was written down, anyone enjoying it would have been officially Christian. That cultural change would have introduced moral qualms about fights not religiously sanctioned for some hearers but hardly for all. Warriors were still fighting for their lords or for their kingdoms against other kingdoms or against invaders. Given these ethical and cultural complexities, scholars cannot agree on how the Christian audience would have viewed the fights and the golden treasures in the poem. See Edward B. Irving Jr., "Christian and Pagan Elements" for a very helpful presentation of the arguments.

their community values. The mothers of Willa, of her husband Roger, and of others in the community are widows of wealthy men; they have cultivated a kind of female, behind-the-scenes power. To them, men are basically stupid and cowardly, but that lets them be manipulated until they produce what the women want, which is power, money, and prestige. The women mercilessly control their hapless offspring, shaping them into successful continuers of this moneyed way of life. Headley applies this concept of shaping to the Herot way of life.

We see this in the early pages in the way that Willa shapes her son Dylan. Named after the grandfather who founded their community, Dil is forced to wear classy clothes and learn to play the piano—which, with its elephant-ivory keys, is "an act of savage warfare disguised as culture" (19). Willa drives him to various approved community activities; "The car is white, and that's tempting fate, but Dil's never sticky. He knows better" (20). Willa actively dislikes children. She daydreams of breaking a baby's neck. She hates to hear Dil practicing Chopsticks. In fact, she feels "Children are monsters, but there are ways to work around them" (20–21). When Dil starts playing with the elusive Gren, she insists that Gren is an imaginary companion and tries to force Dil to admit this. With Gren, Dil plays unsupervised by a parent. They make snow angels and snowballs. Dil enjoys showing Gren how to play Chopsticks. Dil for the first time tries to build a life of his own, though thwarted at every turn by his mother. Gren seems to be the only horizontal relationship in his life that is otherwise determined by vertical control and shaping.

Having briefly enjoyed love and affection in the cave with Gren and Dana, Dil is devastated when rescued against his will by Ben Woolf, who tells him that Gren and Dana are dead. Dil's psychological response is to reject everything Willa and Ben Woolf say or do, so he is sent off to boarding school. Some years later, he runs away from school and is killed by his dreaming or hallucinating mother, who thinks him to be Gren. When the chorus of mothers arrives, Diane thoughtfully removes any fingerprints from the knife (270–271). The story the mothers put about is that Ben Woolf has gone mad and done this.

Since Dil had rebelled against Willa's shaping thanks to his experience with Gren, he had become a liability, so she coolly shapes his funeral to combine with the self-aggrandizing gala she arranges for reopening the train station under the mountain. This gala now includes black confetti and black balloons, and the train carries Dil's coffin. As she poses for the press cameras, we learn "She'll run for office, eventually. She writes speeches in her head. Willa rises, her face in the expression that will telegraph compassion, grief, and strength in the newspapers" (282). Thus, she shapes even her son's death to fit her desire for power and status. Little wonder that Dil tried to go in a completely different direction when he rebelled. His computer, sent home from his

school, shows that he collected sentimental poetry and was trying to write an opera. His brief exposure to a life of love and companionship with Gren totally reordered his priorities toward art and beauty.

Readers might be inclined to condemn Willa too easily and miss a major point. We are frequently exposed to how she herself is shaped by her mother, Diane, and the other dowagers. Willa started with nothing but beauty. Rashly and secretly, she married a pop singer. "She woke up the morning after that wedding with her mother standing over her wedding bed" (22). Her mother got the marriage annulled, made Willa abort the results, and never lets her forget that stupidity. Diane knew Roger's mother, and the two arranged a match, Roger being a rising plastic surgeon, significantly a "shaping" profession. They married and Willa duly bore Dylan. "Four days after Willa gave birth, two of her mother's friends arrived with a clenching device for revising her vagina. She didn't say no, though she was startled at the implication she'd need help. The mothers acted as though she'd lost vigilance … but she was already, exhausted and faintly tearful, beginning to Kegel" (24). This is shaping down to a level the *Beowulf*-poet never dreamed of! They exert powerful shaping control over Roger too. Only once did Willa fear that Roger was tiring of her or their life; she "told her mother, who passed the omens to Roger's mother. The next day, it was fixed. No one said anything about it ever again" (84). While Willa dislikes this constant control, she thus benefits from it and has thoroughly internalized it. She exerts the same kind of control on herself. She eats inhumanly little in order to retain her fashionable figure. Nothing must interfere with her being glamorous since that is key to managing Roger. She may dislike the controls, but feels them to be necessary and proper, so she has no patience with Dil's resistance to her demands. Being properly shaped, in all senses, is crucial to their fashionable lifestyle.

We are implicitly invited to consider which form of shaping is preferable: one toward the heroic, even if it merely justifies tribal violence, or this toward glamorous wealth and social snobbery. Insofar as Beowulf risks his life again and again for his causes, he is generous and offers something of value to those he is protecting. No member of the gated community puts him or herself at such risk. Beowulf and Hrothgar's warriors were doubtless contemptuous of the serving class, but we do not see that in the poem; we do, though, see that contempt towards the lower-class community in *The Mere Wife*, and might pause to wonder what better goals society might exalt than greed for high status.

The other great vertical relationship is that of Dana Mills towards her son, Gren. He is the product of an unknown father, probably a rapist and probably a Middle Easterner. Dana's only image in her PTSD state is of a beautiful bedroom in a hidden

desert city where this man greeted her as lover, but those images are no more reliable than the many other visions that continue to afflict her, including that of a saint with a candle burning in her bosom. The American army saw a video of her apparently being beheaded, but eventually she turned up, six months pregnant, with no memories of what had happened during the past several months. Readers struggle throughout the book to determine whether Gren is abnormal enough to seem like a monster, or whether this is Dana's delusion. What we learn about his looks is that he has brown skin, dark hair, and golden eyes. He may have talons or claws rather than ordinary nails and is exceptionally tall. He is born with teeth, but that that occasionally occurs in otherwise normal human births. Dana calls his golden eyes her mother's eyes (32) and so presumably not monstrous to her. That leaves the brown skin, talons, and height. She constantly refers to the fact that his brown skin will turn society against him, and in our racist society, it would indeed cause some whites to make trouble for him. She puts it succinctly: "my son running down the street would be my son confessing to a crime. My son shouting would be my son attacking. My son sleeping would be my son addicted. My son in love with the boy from down there would be my son hanging from a tree" (238). Reviewer Erica Wagner lists some of the African Americans who have been killed in just such circumstances by police. Gren's darker skin opens him to such victimization. Hiding him away, however, keeps Gren from ever having a chance to play with other children, learn games, drive, go to school, and enter the adult world without his mother controlling him. His socialization is so limited that he might not even be able to escape this claustrophobic existence through joining the army as Dana had done.

As the novel starts, only one person other than herself has seen Gren, a woman behind a cash register. Dana had hoped for a cooing, positive response to her newborn infant that would reassure her that Gren looked normal, but something in the way the woman looked at the baby triggered war memories. "I saw his body categorized as an enemy body, and I couldn't breathe" (28). On the basis of that one exposure, she determines that they will live hidden in the mountain, separate from all other humans. Only when Gren is turning against her for having raised him in isolation does she wonder whether she misread that woman's reaction. "Maybe I read between the lines of her silence. Maybe she was scared that I had a child and that I looked so broken. Maybe she was pitying me. *Maybe I've been hiding for myself, not him*" (232). Moreover, the woman may have reacted negatively to a brown-skinned baby borne by a white woman. We never know for sure how different Gren actually is. He is extremely tall, yes, and if he has talons, that would be a problem, though probably not insuperable. His brown skin would mean that he would face racial prejudice, but not enough to

justify raising him under the mountain and forbidding him to contact humans and scaring him with stories about how they will tear him limb from limb (35). By raising him that way, Dana sets him up to seem monstrous because strangely behaved and totally unknown to the neighbors rather than letting him be the odd, tall boy who wins some renown by leading his high school basketball team to a state championship.

Dana keeps saying to herself that he is adult-sized but still a boy, still too young to deal with ordinary people. While she protects him from making mistakes, he would be much safer making them as a boy than as a man. She keeps him from gaining the experience, good and bad, that would let him learn how to deal with people. He comes to see that she has damaged him socially and tries to break away. "The only person who's ever hurt me is you," Gren says (237). "Nothing ever even happened to you... . Except that you're a coward." However much Gren wants to go away, though, their hidden cave remains a sanctuary when things go wrong, so they are often together. Insofar as she has shaped him, the shaping is negative and turned against the world. In doing this, she has robbed him of the skills needed to deal with that world, however much she loves him. She proves her equality to men as a female marine and may seem heroic in her survivalist mode, but however loving she is toward Gren, her isolating him from all others could be called abusive. That is certainly our term for people who imprison a child in their house and never let them out.

Readers may wish to blast her for unreasonable overprotectiveness, but she inherits an element of that from her own mother. Headley does not attribute shaping solely to the upper classes. Even as Dana trails Gren on some of his night adventures, she admits "I remember seeing my own mother waiting for me at night.... I remember seeing her car behind me, a block or two, as I made my way into town" (232). Again, we see controlling parenting inherited from the previous generation—one of the many parallels established between Dana and Willa. The sins of the mothers appear to reach down through generations, and in this instance apply to both upper- and lower-class parenting. Dana, though, was not kept from all contact with others, so she is able to escape her background by enlisting.

If we look at Gren's experience in the light of two other famous Wild Child stories, we see one major difference. Both Kipling's Mowgli and Gaiman's Bod have many social relationships, whether with wolves or ghosts.[11] Both learn from a variety of teachers (Baloo the bear, Kaa the python; Silas, Miss Lupescu). Both are trained to avoid ordinary people, but they have a wealth of social contacts, vertical and horizontal. If it takes a village to raise a child, they both have such a village; Gren does not. He focuses his whole life, therefore, on the one outside contact he manages to make: Dil.

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[11] Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *The Second Jungle Book* (1895); Neil Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book* (2008).

When it comes to horizontal relationships, Headley shows them to be far from balanced or satisfactory. This suggests dissatisfaction with current culture, but it offers no answers. Men undoubtedly force women into an adjunct and subordinated position in the gated community, but the women then manipulate men, taming and goading them, making them untrue to whatever might be natural for them. Two wrongs do not make a right. Willa's husband Roger was caressed and cocktailed into doing what she wanted most of the time, but then he had been raised by a similar woman and was conditioned to respond to that kind of manipulation. He may worry that his son is being feminized but does not manage to do anything about it.

Ben Woolf, being an orphan, does not seem to have good social relations of any sort. In a swimming contest when he was a boy (equivalent to Beowulf's swimming match with Breca, which he recounts in Heorot), the other boy drowned. "*Luck* was what he [Ben] said, when he knew that part of what had taken the other boy down was Ben's elbow" (252). Ben also tells Willa in bed that a scar comes from saving a child from a fire, but "She polygraphs his breath and beats, and finds him to be veering away from truth and into myth" (151). When Willa finds he has lied about killing Dana and Gren, she and the dowagers instantly reject him, because he is a socially worthless local policeman once he has lost status as a hero. During their marriage, Ben and Willa both feel they can use the other to rise socially and politically, so are content with their bargain. She, though, reads all his emails and sets all his computer passwords (259), so he can do nothing on his computer without her being able to check it. That sort of control is not part of the heroic life. The golden ideal of heroism may still exist, but he falls short again and again, and her managing of him diminishes his claims even further.

The only satisfactory horizontal relationship that Headley gives us is that between Dil and Gren. It seems based on play and enjoyment, not shaping. They hammer at the piano or frolic in the snow after bedtime. They get into mischief before a party and bite the heads off gingerbread men—an amusingly diminished version of Grendel's killing Hrothgar's warriors in Heorot. When Dil is carried off to hide out in the mountain, Gren shows him how to hunt and how to make a fire. They teach each other skills and enjoy the process. Gren is much taller, but his lack of social experience makes the younger Dil his equal in ways that would otherwise not be the case. Since Dil feels loved in the cavern rather than pressured to conform to social rules, he loves them back and is quite content to snuggle down with Gren, dirty and ragged but happy. When they meet years later and Dil finds that Gren is not dead as he had been told, they bond in love, and hope to lead the rest of their lives together (246–248).

Given Headley's critical stance on almost all of the characters, what, if anything, does she offer as morally desirable? Clearly, she treats love as worthwhile. Perhaps it is

preferable to the implicit business deals seen in the other marriages, but the likelihood of romantic love's lasting is not exposed to the same satiric pressure offered other relationships. Similarly, she seems to approve of parents loving and accepting their child rather than just trying to shape it to fit some socially desirable ideal, be that elitist or troglodyte survivalist. How do you draw the line, though, between love and overprotectiveness? We see that problem in both Willa and Dana. Also dimly present is an implied honor code; we are clearly meant to despise Ben Woolf's elbowing his competitor, causing him to drown, and lying about it. Likewise, his lying about killing Dana invites contempt. If anyone is heroic in this novel, it first appears to be Dana; her managing to live and function in hiding is amazing to the point of edging into fantasy but it also involves stealing and ultimately involves gruesome misjudgment on her part on how to bring up an unusual child in our society. She seems heroic at the outset, but increasingly appears to be deeply flawed. She does not represent a convincing moral kernel of the sort that sometimes characterizes satire.

In a surreal postmortem consciousness, Dana pours out a number of important points. "If something's happened once, we could all find love again. If something's happened once, none of us are done for. None of us are the last of us. The story is all of the voices, not just the voice of the one who tells it at the end" (304). Dana feels herself to be joined by ghosts of her dead female relatives, of dead marines and enemies she killed, and the figures from her PTSD visions. The connectedness of everyone matters. The telling of any event from all viewpoints matters. As a last message to us, this seems to point toward some positive values. Applied to many situations, our listening to a range of accounts might make us think twice about some action. Perhaps some kind of openness and willingness to consider alternatives needs to be listed among the ideals implicit in this negative moral mapping of our society. None of the characters, including Dana, really pays attention to anyone else's viewpoint. They all act to reinforce their own. Almost everyone is being attacked to some degree.

Headley repeatedly implies that we can all be called monsters in a variety of ways, raising, of course, the question of who determines what is monstrous and who is a monster or whether we should use that term at all. Her point, though, is that those labeling Gren a monster thereby qualify themselves for that title. Willa, for instance, claims that Dana had a gun when she burst into their party looking for Gren. Although Willa is not sure, she lies and insists to the police that she saw a gun and thus multiplies the pressure for police to shoot the criminal on sight; she makes Dana out to be a monster that must simply be killed. Likewise, Gren is reasonably ordinary other than his height and his possible claws. Willa finds a claw sheath in the carpet, "pearlescent white" (59), but toward the end, Willa sees her own nails as curved, and the nails of

the widows seem "talons long and curved, pearlescent" (295). How real are Gren's talons? If his talons scratched the ivory piano keys, then he may indeed have claws, but by the end a great many people are seen with such claws. Gren has not done anything monstrous or harmful, yet people quickly project their fears onto him and imagine him to be furry or scaly and have a tail. Conceivably, the word monster can be used for some people—a psychopathic murderer of random strangers, perhaps like the original Grendel—but unless the deeds come first, the name should not even occur to us, yet it does. This seems one major point in the satire.

What of Dana herself? When driving the train, her excessive speed causes the train to plunge off the track into the mere and drown all aboard including herself (301). She is also deliberately trying to smash Ben Woolf under its wheels. Since he killed her son Gren and was trying to shoot her at that moment, that could be called justifiable homicide by the means available. The Herot Hall dowagers all drown, again arguably (but more marginally) "justifiable" in terms of harms their collective attitude has done to her and, more directly, to her hardscrabble birth community. However, she simply drove it too fast for the curvature of the track, so may not have deliberately murdered everyone, though she is unlikely to have felt remorse, given her frantic state after Gren's death. The person who did her the most personal harm, Willa, is not on the train, so Dana achieves vengeance in the sense of getting others of the clan but not the actual enemy, as does Grendel's mother when she raids Heorot. She kills Æschere but not Beowulf, the murderer of her son. What of the conductor, bar-tender, and other servitors on the train? They have done her no harm and are working class. Although we are often invited to admire and sympathize with Dana, her isolating her son and her mass murder, however inadvertent, verge on the monstrous. This undercuts any simple assumption that the novel is a feminist attempt to give voice to suppressed female presence in the Old English epic.[12] When Grendel's mother kills someone in vengeance for her son, she is following that society's rules, and this has gained her new critical respect. Dana's society does not permit personal vengeance. Recent critics (see footnote 3) have largely cleared Grendel's mother of being monstrous, but some heavy charges cling to Dana.

What does Headley gain by erecting her satiric novel on top of a heroic epic based on a totally different world picture and cultural ethos? Well, readers may enjoy the game implicit in much symbiotic literature: if Roger is the head of Herot Hall, then he must be Hrothgar, so Willa must be Wealtheow. Readers who know Gardner's *Grendel*

[12] From a modern perspective, the women in *Beowulf* seem important primarily in ceremonial ways and as tokens exchanged to cement truces. Headley acknowledges the importance of such roles when she says of the original poem that it contains "extensive portrayals of motherhood and peace-weaving, marital compromise, female warriors, and speculation on what it means to lose a son" (xxiii). For what information we have on the importance ascribed to women's functions in pre-conquest England, see Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Gender Roles."

will pride themselves on seeing the emphasis that Headley puts on a different kind of shaping and shapers. Such readers relish having the cultural capital to make the connections not only to the original epic and *Grendel* but also to the Zemeckis film, since there too Beowulf marries Wealtheow after Hrothgar's death, and he also lies about having killed Grendel's mother. Noting such repetitions and appropriations is a pleasant literary game.

Another part of that game is noting half-echoes, bits that invoke an original but transpose or alter it. The train is likened to a dragon. Dana, like Grendel, loses an arm. A goblet is taken from Dana's mother's grave, as from the Dragon's hoard. Grendel's head is brought back by his killer. Dana's images of a romantic tryst rather than rape may be such a half-echo of the Zemeckis film showing Beowulf being seduced by Grendel's sexy mother. Headley's emphasis on shaping plays off of Gardner's initial insight and runs it through variations.

Headley also gains by setting the modern world up against the idea of heroism, but this is also where contradictions emerge. Granted, the feuds and tribal wars were often sordid and needless, sometimes driven by the unappeasable element in a shame culture that cannot accept a compromise truce but must get vengeance. Nonetheless, these wars provided an outlet for men trained to fight in a weaponized culture to feel good about themselves. Furthermore, anyone fighting for his lord's cause was risking his own life, and so not obviously or immediately selfish. Such wars also contributed to a code that defined fair and unfair behavior. The fighters' heroism may strike us as wasted in tribal feuds, but in Beowulf's fighting monsters, it seems admirable enough. In favor of the heroic outlook is the fact that devoting your life to your leader or your clan or tribe was at least devoting yourself to something other than yourself and personal financial gain. Roger and other men in the Herot circle only serve themselves. They have no greater or finer or more worthy cause than their own advancement in income and status, and their womenfolk similarly serve only their own interests, not even those of their husbands except insofar as their husbands' success improves their wives' status.

Headley's use of a monster story raises key issues. Instead of an obviously fantastic ogre, we must ponder the meaning of calling a person a monster, of proclaiming someone as Other and unacceptable. We never really know how different Gren may be, given his mother's traumatized convictions. Since he speaks English perfectly well, we cannot just label him animal, our standard way of demoting a creature with whom we cannot communicate. From the many ways in which Headley shows the Herot crowd seeing others as monsters, we assume that the habit of Otherizing and debasing is central to her satiric anger. Her classist anger thus echoes the traditional part of her feminist anger, given patterns of Otherizing and restricting women by men—but women also

restrict their children, so they are not free from this mode of power. The many deaths in this novel seem mostly to stem from actions based on Otherization. Gren would be very strange in a strictly realistic novel, but because we know the *Beowulf* background, we accept his oddity and do not just write him off as fantasy.

That is not to claim that no part of the story feels fantastic. The mere is both mostly frozen yet has hot springs at the bottom, so it steams even though iced at the edges. The elaborate, ornamented, beautiful train station under the mountain that has been abandoned and closed off comes close to fantasy at times, but abandoned lines and stations do exist in various transport systems, if not usually so beautiful. Dana's survival for all those years is also something that shades into the fantastic; successful hunting and foraging for edible weeds and avoiding all conditions that would need medicine seem improbable, but Headley was raised in a survivalist community, so may well know what would be possible.[13] Dana does once need medical help when her bullet-shattered arm turns gangrenous, but she has Gren chop it off with the sword, and she survives (172). She is one very tough character, so we accept her survival, even if very few people could do so on the same terms. Any time the story seems to slide into fantasy, we can tell ourselves that this event derives from the *Beowulf* underpinnings; that symbiotic relationship renders such questions unnecessary. The symbiotic element guides us away from irrelevant questions and helps keep us focused on what Headley wants us to see, which is mostly the social and gender satire and our tendency to project monsterdom on those who differ from us.

One great virtue of symbiotic literature is that it introduces contradictory values and thereby pressures readers to identify their own stances. The older literature's values no longer work in our world, but our own values come to seem as flawed. In *Grendel*, Gardner seems to think that believing in something is better than the nothing of nihilism, and yet he denigrates the values implicit in the warfare of the ancient Scandinavians. We are left to try to figure out what the something meaningful might be—for the ancient Danes or for us. In another novel based on a mythic story, Richard Powers' *Orfeo*, the contemporary Orpheus figure is both a composer and a biochemist, and he introduces musical notations into bacterial genes. Many readers recoiled at the idea of such experimentation carried out unsupervised, fearing unintended biological consequences. Others were more concerned over the modern equivalent to the Maenads' dismembering Orpheus, since the police blow him to fragments with their assembled

[13] In the introduction to her translation of *Beowulf*, she says she "grew up surrounded by sled dogs, coyotes, rattlesnakes, and bubbling natural hot springs nestled in the wild high desert of Idaho, a person who, if we were looking at the poem's categories, would fall much closer in original habitat to Grendel and his mother than to Beowulf or even to lesser denizens of Hrothgar's court" (xv–xvi).

guns, although he is not in fact a bioterrorist as they assume. Like Gren and Dana, he has been Otherized as a monster by irresponsible media and mob ignorance. How free should our use of knowledge be? What limits should be placed upon it? Powers supplies no easy answers, and any we come up with will have to arise from our own struggles with the issue. Writers who reimagine an Edenic situation in the present often pummel us with contradictory or ambiguous values. Both Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* trilogy and Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos* show our world in the process of being destroyed by humans and show us what changes in human nature would be necessary for some form of humanity to continue to survive on earth. Both so simplify and limit the mental capacities of their new humans that most readers will recoil and yet be unable to say how humans as they currently operate will be able to continue. The interweaving of two value systems can thus function to make us rethink our values. Contemporary authors with a satiric bent feel no need to supply answers; they focus on questions and try to make their readers think about answers.

Let me sum up what satire theory can tell us about *The Mere Wife* and how to read it. We probably come with two expectations: a fleshed-out Grendel's mother leads us to expect a feminist argument of some sort, and a lying Beowulf-figure creates some sense of attack on the heroic. Those expectations get confused by the attacks on many women characters. Yes, we can say that their patterns have evolved as a response to male domination, but that does not make them good or admirable. The privileged white women are obviously targeted for their self-centered arrogance, but one working-class mother we briefly hear about is similarly given to trying to control her offspring. The implied male dominance and female subversions just result in contempt felt by each gender for the other. Dana herself looks like a heroine at first, but we gradually see that her decision to isolate Gren and make him afraid of other people is abusive in its effect if not its intention, and her final actions result in mass murder. Even if she does not intend that result, it upsets readerly desire to like and admire her. Ben Woolf invites contempt for his lying about killing Gren and Dana, but that need not undercut the respect normally given to truly heroic action. Our very disgust at his lies means we are protecting a belief that positive heroic decisions and actions are possible, even if pure and shining heroes with no vices or weaknesses are an improbable ideal.

We expect a satire to offer us a moral kernel, some positive value. In a diffused satire like this, what we get is several such values, but they only emerge through our rejecting what we see. Love, care, and play with a child; don't just shape it to fit your social ambitions. Do not Otherize people who have not provably done serious wrong. Projecting the term monster makes the accuser the real monster. Along with treating all people as fellow persons is the statement at the end that we should not just believe

the last one left who tells the story but should hear all parties' versions of events. While getting all versions may not always be feasible, listening with open mind and serious attention to the views of others on anything would make a major difference to social relations. This satire does offer some messages, but we must dig for them. Headley makes us work because solutions are not going to be easy, as Western civilization's experience with gender and race interrelations and increasingly polarized societies make very clear.

This kind of satire aimed in various and unpredictable directions, satire without oversimplified targets, is best thought in terms of diffused satire. By focusing on each possible element, we can see where the contradictions creep in. That does not mean that Headley has no idea what she is doing. Rather, she is listening to various voices and hearing their dissatisfactions, male and female, upper class and lower, different racial groups. She is not simplifying in the way a traditional heroic story would, or indeed the way a traditional satire usually does. Instead, she presents their various voices and forces us to make our own judgments.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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