The Women of *Beowulf*: Power and Duty in Anglo-Saxon Society

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Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in geār-dagum / þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon, / hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon," translates as, "So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by / and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness. / We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns" (Beowulf, lines 1-3). Thus begins the Old English poem *Beowulf*, which offers one of the few remaining glimpses of Anglo-Saxon culture. Oral poetry, perhaps even more so than the written word, shows a clear picture of the expectations and values of a culture; Plato, in theorizing his Utopia, proposed to ban all storytellers, as he felt they influenced society too greatly. Marijane Osborn quotes Eric A. Havelock, who referred to oral verse as "...[an] instrument of a cultural indoctrination, the ultimate purpose of which was the preservation of group identity." Even Freud found that another's story may have a serious impact on a person's identity if it is seen as a model upon which to base one's own actions (49). One could, therefore, look at *Beowulf* as not only a story of mighty deeds and monsters, but as part of a template meant to show others how to act in Anglo-Saxon society. *Beowulf* is a tale of violence and vengeance, feats of strength and acts of mercy, and, perhaps accordingly, few women. Outside of tales and boasts told within the framework of the poem (which is not an insubstantial part of the poem), there are only two major women who have a real impact on *Beowulf*'s central narrative: Queen Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's wife, and Grendel's dam, or mother; the rest, such as Hildeburh, Hygd, Frewawaru and Modthryth, are relegated mainly to side stories and cautionary tales. Given this lack of female presence, and the dearth of lines and segments given to them, one might be excused for believing that women were trivialized in Anglo-Saxon society much as they are trivialized in the story, with the women shouldered out of the spotlight to make way for the big, burly heroes who must invariably kill something. A closer and more analytical look, however, reveals a far deeper and more layered treatment of its subjects, both in regards to the characters of Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother as well as the titular hero, Beowulf.

In order to examine the depictions of Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother, one must first gain some understanding of the context they are being portrayed in as well as the usual roles of women in similar literature of the time, which includes both other Old English writing as well as the thematically and linguistically similar Icelandic sagas. While it may be tempting to label all women depicted in such literature as helpless, marginalized maidens pushed to the outside of the narrative, this is rarely the case. Despite being a highly patriarchal society, Old English culture shows that women are often depicted in roles which, while far from the equality sought for today, are invested with more importance and capability than more modern texts. In the essay "Vows, Boasts And Taunts, And The Role Of Women In Some Medieval Literature," Michael Murphy claims that, "it is, in every respect, a long way from Wealhtheow to Isabella [of Castile]. Not the least ironic of the contrasts between their two positions is the real possibility of female influence in the predominantly male world of the epic, and the joke that such an idea has become in the "feminized" world of Romance." Murphy is referring to the popular European legend that the term isabelline was created during the siege of Granada; so sure was she in her husband Ferdinand's ability, Isabella of Castile vowed not to remove her shift until the city was taken. The siege, however, lasted longer than expected, and by the time Ferdinand stood victories, it is said her shift was a sort of yellow-gray, or isabelline, color. While only a popular legend, it illustrates the somewhat farcical view of vows and women in a more modern society, contrasted with the depiction of both in the earlier, more 'barbaric' age of *Beowulf* (Murphy 112).

The most common of these duties is the role of peacemaker; indeed, women are most often found in Old English and Icelandic lore as peacemakers, both within and without. Within their families (and courts, in the case of noblewomen), women engendered peaceful relations between fathers and sons, lords and retainers, and even visiting royalty (Morey). The *Beowulf* poet states this explicitly in the tale of Queen Modthryrth, proclaiming "A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent / with loss of life for imagined insults" (lines 1942-43). In *Beowulf* this peacemaking role is aptly played

by Wealhtheow as she greets Beowulf and his entourage, then serves as cup-bearer for those present, ensuring the diplomatic relations amongst all present (lines 612-630). Wealhtheow performs a similar service a second time after she listens to the story of Finnsburg, and once more offers a goblet with splendid gifts as a sort of talisman to protect her family from the fate shared by Queen Hildeburh in the story (lines 1167-1231).

Equally important is the noblewoman's duty of ensuring peace between tribes through intermarriage. Political marriages to settle disputes and put a stop to feuds was perhaps the most important role a woman could play in Old English poems. Many of the women mentioned in *Beowulf*, from Hildeburh and Wealhtheow to Freawaru, are from foreign tribes, married to their husbands in an attempt to broker peace (Morey). Though it may prove offensive to modern viewpoints, such betrothals afforded women one of the only true methods of ensuring an end to the seemingly endless cycles of violence and revenge which are so prevalent in literature from this period. This role carried such importance, it seems, that the poem itself seems to imply, according to Alaric Hall, that Hygelac, Beowulf's lord and king of the Geats, was foolish to give his only daughter to his retainer Eofor as a reward for killing the Swedish king Ongentheow. By using his daughter as a reward for further violence rather than as a peace offering to the Swedes to end their feud, Hygelac has perpetuated the cycle of vengeance that modern literary analysis has painted as such a major theme in *Beowulf* (Hall 81).

This cycle of vengeance is an important aspect of the culture, and is key in understanding the woman's role in Anglo-Saxon society. In addition to their aspect as peace-weavers, women are often shown in another light: that of the inciter. Vow-making and boast-making is an integral part of early English literature, the distinction being that boasts are made of past events while vows are pledges for the future. Women are often the 'unofficial' taunters in these situations, spurring the hero on to action (Murphy 105). Looking to the Icelandic sagas, particularly those which focus on family, women are the

ones most frequently found to insist on or cultivate the act of revenge. Thus it is seen that while inciting vengeance is considered women's work, the act itself is reserved for men (Acker 705). Murphy supports this stance, writing that "the strong-willed and forceful women of the [Icelandic] sagas have been much written about, for they are strikingly different from the women in most other medieval literature. Nevertheless, we can see traces of such female influence even in a poem as unfeminine as *Beowulf*". Though Wealhtheow does not serve as the 'taunter' per se in *Beowulf*, it is worth noting that it is only after she has spoken to Beowulf and he has made his vow to her that Beowulf is definitively set as Hrothgar's champion (Murphy 111). Accepting the cup from Wealhtheow, Beowulf says to her:

> I meant to perform to the uttermost
> what your people wanted or perish in the attempt,
> in the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfil that purpose,
> prove myself with a proud deed
> or meet my death here in the mead-hall. (Beowulf, lines 634-638)

Helen Damico goes further, and argues that Wealhtheow's act of presenting a cup for Beowulf to drink from represents a "symbolic incitement and [is] a reflex of typical Valkyrie behavior" (Acker 706). With such an ingrained sense of revenge and use of violence, one can see the dual roles of both peace-keeper and inciter are powerful responsibilities. This sense of "an eye for an eye" is so accepted in the culture of *Beowulf* that neither the narrator of *Beowulf* nor its characters ever condemn Grendel's mother for her actions, which may have well seemed not only logical, but expected after the death of her son (Hennequin 516). So the role of women in Anglo-Saxon society, at least according to *Beowulf*, is far from simple or marginalized; from brokering peace to reminding the men of their vows and pledges, women are the "'mortar that cements the bricks;' they facilitate relationships among men" (Morey).

One aspect of *Beowulf* which more specifically separates the women from the men is the presence of monologue, or the lack thereof. As an oral piece that was later transcribed, inner monologues and deliberations in *Beowulf* are illustrated through soliloquies and not silent thought. This technique is to be expected given the difficulties of conveying unspoken inner monologues through verbal speech. Twice in *Beowulf*, however, information is heard that results in deliberation which is, uncharacteristically, not conveyed directly to the reader. Both instances are focused on women considering stories about other women (Osborn 56). The first instance is after Wealhtheow hears the story of the Finnsburg conflict. In lines 1167 to 1231, Wealhtheow clearly takes stock of the tale of Hildeburh, and immediately afterwards, without showing any obvious signs of processing the poem, takes extra precautions to ensure her children do not share the fate of Hildeburh's loved ones. This must be a reaction to the poem as it is recited, otherwise it would make little to no sense to be placed directly afterwards (Osborn 56). The second occasion for such thought through action is in the case of Queen Hygd, who is married to Beowulf's lord, Hygelac. Initially portrayed as a generous and wise queen, the reader later learns that she has most probably based her behavior on the second half of the story of Queen Modthryth, who was wicked and vengeful before she was married to Offa, and then became just and beloved. Both of these examples show that while the inner monologue is never portrayed to the reader, the presence of these stories clearly altered the behavior of the women who saw in them a mirroring of their own situations and sought to emulate them (Osborn 56-7). Thus, the women in *Beowulf* are portrayed not only as the foundation of Anglo-Saxon society, but intelligent, decisive characters, fully ready to interpret information and change their approaches without waffling or seeking aid from others.

Queen Wealhtheow, as the poem's largest, non-monstrous female presence, deserves special consideration. Traditionally she is seen as a marginal player in *Beowulf*, an extension of Hrothgar's power and little more. In *Lady with a Mead Cup,* Michael J. Enright argues that Wealhtheow and other

noblewomen of her status have little impact on politics, with their only real power being limited to within the tribe. Wealhtheow's speech after Grendel is defeated, however, disputes this claim. Here she requests that Hrothgar honor Beowulf but not make him heir to the Danish throne (Porter). Rather than worrying needlessly, this is something Hrothgar has considered, as in her speech Wealhtheow states "and now the word is that you want to adopt / this warrior as a son" (Beowulf, lines 1175-76). She asks Hrothgar instead to take Hrothulf, his nephew, as an heir, and according to Dorothy Carr Porter in her paper, "The Social Centrality of Women in *Beowulf*: A New Context," "In this act, Wealhtheow is actively protecting her own interests, and the poet gives no indication that her words were ignored or not accepted into consideration by Hrothgar." Her closing words here do not imply a weakened or unsure woman either, as she ends with the lines, "The thanes have one purpose, the people are ready: / having drunk and pledged, the ranks do as I bid" (Beowulf, lines 1230-31).

Wealhtheow's second speech, issued soon after the hall is regaled with the tragedy of Finnsburg, deserves careful attention, as it is a key instrument in understanding her character. While in her paper, Porter pairs Wealhtheow with Hygd as a "Hostess" Queen, other scholars have paired her with Hildeburh, the Queen in the Finnsburg story. In the story, Hildeburh finds her son and brother both lying dead on the field of battle, likely members of different warring factions engaged in an old feud. This outbreak of violence results in the death of those Hildeburh loves the most. She arranges her son and brother on a pyre side-by-side as companions, and later her Frisian husband is also slain when old promises are broken (Osborn 57). It seems clear that Wealhtheow takes this lesson to heart, and understands that the fate of Hildeburh may yet befall her and her family, with an ailing husband and sons too young to take the throne. As stated previously, there can be little doubt that her following speech, where she tries to clarify the lines of succession and enforce peace in the coming upheaval, are a direct response to Hildeburh's tale of woe. In her paper, "'The Wealth They Left Us': Two Women Author Themselves Through Others' Lives," Marijane Osborn points out that W.W. Lawrence went so

far as to ask, "May it not be, too, that the story of Queen Hildeburh was here designedly brought into connection with the tragedy in store for Queen Wealhtheow, which must have been well-known to the people for whom the poet of *Beowulf* wrote?" Adrian Bonjour replies to this question by answering, "...the parallel between Hildeburh and Wealhtheow is unmistakable" (57). Osborn goes a step further, suggesting that the tale of Finnsburg as it is presented in *Beowulf* is not what the scop, or poet, is actually reciting to the assembly, but rather is filtered through Wealhtheow's concerns. Osborn claims the reader is hearing the story colored by the direct application it has to Wealhtheow's own situation, and this is why Hildeburh's tale of woe seems so applicable to Wealhtheow's current situation (59).

Though Porter classifies Hildeburh as a freothuwebbe , or peace-weaver, and Wealhtheow as a hostess, it is not a stretch to consider Wealhtheow as fulfilling both roles at once. Though never explicitly stated, it may be gathered from contextual evidence that she was, most likely, married to Hrothgar from her own people, the Helmingas, as a way to brook peace between them and the Danes. In this aspect Wealhtheow is among the most successful of the poem, as many of the other peace-weaver Queens have failed to ensure peace between the tribes. John M. Hill feels that Wealhtheow is a strong counter-example to the flawed marriages and relationships of both Hildeburh and Freawaru. He writes that in the poem, "there is no suggestion that her own marriage to Hrothgar has been anything but a success." It also should be mentioned that when these other marriages fail to foster peace, it is obviously due to the flaws of men, not of the women or marriages themselves (Hall 85).

Why, then, is Wealhtheow traditionally considered a weak, minor character in *Beowulf*, when she seems to yield substantial power both as a peace-weaver and in her role as Hrothgar's queen? While one may place the blame on her name, which can be literally translated as "foreign servant/slave," this seems more a product of denoting her status as a foreigner in Hrothgar's court (Hall 85). One may be well served in more closely examining the English translation of Beowulf by Frederick Klaeber, a German philologist who, for almost a century, was responsible for the only canonical version of the

Beowulf manuscript. As Josephine Bloomfield asserts in her article, "Diminished by kindness: Frederick Klaeber's Rewriting of Wealhtheow," while Wealhtheow's appearance in *Beowulf* may be limited, "it is also powerful and revealing..." Bloomfield later points out the significance "...that in the fifty-five-line passage describing Wealhtheow's motivations and exhortations during the victory celebration for Beowulf, Klaeber glosses five separate words (milde, glaed, freondlapu, lide, gedefe) in seven occurrences as "kind" or "kindness." This translation shifts Wealhtheow "from peace weaver and power broker to tender maternal care-giver...by this series of uniform glosses to emphasize personal affection over tribal necessity." Many of these words which Klaeber translated to "kind" or "kindness" have more logical and powerful translations based on not just *Beowulf* but other Old English literature as we know it. It is telling that, rather than represent the patriarchal view of Anglo-Saxon society, the character of Wealhtheow may very well illustrate the views of the more modern societies which have studied and translated her (Bloomfield). Rather than simply an extension of Hrothgar's influence in Heorot, Wealhtheow proves herself to be a clever, intelligent woman, who is not only adept at maintaining peace in the violence-soaked world of *Beowulf*, but also at preparing for the future and learning from the mistakes of others. She is the voice of wisdom, of peace, and of welcome, and for a woman in Anglo-Saxon society, she serves as an ideal to be admired.

So far relatively little has been said of Grendel's mother, and for good cause; set up as one of three antagonists, she is far removed from the other women of *Beowulf*. Jane Chance claims that Grendel's mother is actually "a sort of anti-queen, an inversion of the peace-weaver and *ides*..." (Hennequin 503-4). Rather than perform a peacekeeping or diplomatic function, Grendel's mother plays the part of the avenger and ruler. This is notable for, in Old English and Icelandic verse, these are almost solely male domains. Though often peace-weavers, and sometimes inciters, women are rarely if ever seen as the avenging force. The aggressiveness of Grendel's mother is seen by Jane Chance as an act of "masculine aggression" contrasted against the more passive, feminine methods of Hildeburh and

Wealhtheow. This sense of wrongness may be what makes Grendel's mother so terrifying; in an age where women were empowered primarily through their sons, a situation where the son is slain and the mother seeks revenge must have seemed horrifyingly alien. Paul Acker writes, "That a female creature and more particularly a maternal one takes this revenge may have highlighted its monstrousness. Unlike Hildeburh and Wealhtheow, Grendel's mother acts aggressively, arguably in a fashion reserved for men" (704-5). Acker later highlights the sheer wrongness of the situation, comparing the relationship between Grendel and his mother to something so far removed as the animal kingdom: "...such a figure could only be a monster from the frontiers of the human world, on the borders of the animal world, in which for instance a mother bear might come roaring from her den to protect her cub" (707). Though it may seem strange to modern audiences, the notion that a female would play the role of an avenging kinsman, and thereby assume the mantle of masculinity (and a sense of noble masculinity at that), must have made the Anglo-Saxon listeners very uncomfortable, and this was no accident. The link between Grendel's mother and masculinity was no mistake or subtle reference. The poem twice labels Grendel's mother's vengeance as masculine; first, the narrative refers to her as a "wrecend", which is a masculine form of "avenger"; second, Beowulf refers to her as Grendel's 'kinsman', and uses masculine pronouns to refer to her in that passage (Hennequin 512).

In addition to assuming a masculine role in seeking vengeance for her son, Grendel's mother also takes on the role of male nobility in that she, not Grendel is the ruler of her realm, the mere. Notably, it is said that she has ruled her realm for the fifty years, which happens to be the same amount of time both Hrothgar and, later, Beowulf, rule their respective kingdoms (Hennequin 511). She is not a noble woman, meant to maintain peace among both her own family and neighboring tribes, but a nobleman, of the business of shattering that peace and managing aggression. By serving as a ruler, Grendel's mother assumes yet another masculine stereotype, and as a ruler, when she returns to Heorot

to take revenge, she is not committing murder, nor even seeking justice; she is "þa fæhðe wræc" - "avenging the feud" (Hennequin 512).

This is really where Grendel's mother becomes most terrifying, and not simply in the story, but as a message to Anglo-Saxon society. Grendel's mother is the horrible but inevitable pinnacle of a society built of feuding tribes and uneasy peace: a mother so fiercely protective of her son, so empowered with rage and a drive for revenge, that she's capable of threatening "not just an individual man's dominance but the whole system of male dominance... she does not 'respect borders, positions, rules'" (Acker 708). This is the true source of her power, both in the narrative and as a cautionary tale to Anglo-Saxon society. Her threat to male dominance is very real in her fight with Beowulf; if he embodies the masculine ideal, it is here when, for once, that ideal fails him. His battle with Grendel is presented simply, as Grendel is "out-manned" by someone with greater strength than his own; the battle with his mother, however, takes a different form, as she refuses to face Beowulf in such a basic contest of strength and instead lures him into her den, where his armor is torn from his body and his sword proves ineffective for the first time in his life (Acker 708). Indeed, one could see undertones of a reversed sense of sexuality in the battle: Beowulf is disarmed and then wrestled to the ground, where Grendel's mother sits on him and attempts to skewer him with a large knife. Though she is eventually defeated, the encounter is perhaps the most memorable of Beowulf's three battles, the instance when the fury of a mother seeking revenge threatens to overwhelm the male ideal and, possibly, the gender roles of their society.

The fight with Grendel's mother is not the only time Beowulf's masculine role in the story may be called into question. In Robert Morey's essay, "Beowulf's androgynous heroism," he posits that "when he crosses tribal lines to aid Hrothgar's Danes, however--even though his conduct there includes some sweaty brutality--Beowulf becomes distinctly feminized." Morey's argument is that, by killing Grendel and ensuring the peaceful existence of Hrothgar's mead-hall, Beowulf is forging a bond

between Geats and Danes, one which shares many similarities to the previously mentioned bonds forged through marriage. This relationship is perhaps even stronger, as Hrothgar proclaims, "So now, Beowulf / I adopt you in my heart as a dear son" (Beowulf, lines 945-946). Beowulf seems to echo this sense of kinship, as before he dives into the mere he asks if Hrothgar "would act like a father to [him] afterwards" if he is slain (line 1479). In this case, establishing a bond that can be seen as a blood relationship, Beowulf is acting almost as, to quote Morey, a "commodified bride" (Morey).

This can serve as a precursor to the fight with Grendel's mother, which is certainly the most obvious instance of gender swapping in *Beowulf*. Grendel's mother, who as previously mentioned acts with a characteristically male drive and intensity, temporarily manages to subdue Beowulf and inverse their positions. As he lays on his back and attempts to avoid being stabbed by Grendel's *dam*, the roles have obviously been reversed. It is only after this, when Beowulf manages to break free and regain his "manhood," in this case a sword "from the days of the giants," that he manages to prevail (Beowulf, line 1559). The language which follows, proclaiming the sword "one that any warrior would envy" and closing the fight with the line, "The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated," is highly suggestive of the sexual act; the poet seems almost amused at the similarities (lines 1560, 1569). This is the moment where Beowulf is shown, as Morey puts it, "...the feminized object of his antagonist's male-imagined sexual violence."

It is important to note, at the end of the poem, it is not Beowulf's violent antics the Geats speak of in mourning their great king. Never is the subject of Grendel or his mother, or his battle against the sea serpents, or even the fight with the dragon mentioned as they say farewell to him, except to regret the tragedy of that encounter. Rather, Beowulf is remembered as "the man most gracious and fair-minded, / kindest to his people and keenest to win fame" (Beowulf, lines 3182-83). Even in his fierceness, he can be seen as a peace-weaver; the messenger who delivers the news of Beowulf's death predicts that soon, without Beowulf to stop them, the Geats shall be at war with the Franks and the

Frisians, and even the Swedes will want their revenge from Hygelac's actions. So the warning of feuds comes full circle, as without Beowulf as a balancing chip to keep the peace, the Geats shall be overrun by their enemies in a culmination of the feuds he had helped to deter with his very presence. It is perhaps, then, no coincidence that a cluster of the words spoken to eulogize Beowulf in the final two lines of the poem had been placed together in only one other instance - the speeches of Wealhtheow. One can only guess that this is done purposefully, and Robert Morey claims "the image of the hero that closes the poem hearkens back to what is arguably the most sublimely peaceful scene of the poem, and the image links Beowulf with the poem's finest female peace-weaver, Wealhtheow." In doing so, the Geats look not to the violence and heroic exploits of Beowulf, but to the aspects of his character which make him a great king: his kindness, his fairness, and his ability to broker peace -- aspects that he shares with the women of *Beowulf.*

The traditional view of the women in *Beowulf* as weak, extraneous characters used only to pass mead and worry about their children is patently false. Wealhtheow is a strong, intelligent character, shown to be both shrewd and competent in her duties as peace-weaver and hostess, and plays a pivotal role in the narrative. Grendel's mother, on the other hand, is far from the mindless monster modern reader may think of her as, and serves as both an amalgamation of gender roles and, perhaps more importantly, a grim warning to society if feuding remains unchecked. On the other hand, Beowulf is not nearly the unrestrained image of masculinity that he is often depicted as; never marrying, often coming in peace, he is perhaps one of the most successful "females" in the poem (Morey). If one is to understand Anglo-Saxon culture from *Beowulf*, it is necessary to avoid superficial analysis of both its women and men. An oversimplified rendering of the themes of *Beowulf* into an easy-to-swallow pill of "men are powerful, women are weak" is a disservice both to *Beowulf* as a piece of literature and Anglo-Saxon society as a whole. The characters and themes of the poem are far too complex, even those who appear for only a handful of lines, to be accurately reduced to simple caricatures. The women of

Beowulf have had their legacy damaged by biased translators and surface-level analysis. Hopefully one day new translations and literary analysis will return them to a position of respect, and by extension, the position of *Beowulf* as a whole.

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