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Sarah Kinkade

Remnants of the Past:
Grendel's Mother, Wealhtheow, and the Pagan Past

Within medieval studies, *Beowulf* is, by far, one of the most well-known and analyzed texts. While much scholarship focuses on subjects such as lexical analysis, Beowulf's actions, the symbolism of Grendel, women's roles and expectations, medieval politics, and many other notable topics, a less-popular, but significant theme within *Beowulf* is the fluctuating state of religion throughout Anglo-Saxon history. Rather than depicting a binary system between Christianity and paganism, the poem acknowledges the ongoing conversion process, which presented overlaps of both beliefs. The result of this process was folklore and this ambiguous system plays a major role throughout *Beowulf*. However, this theme is not in the foreground of the poem; rather, it is shown through the female characters, Wealhtheow and Grendel's Mother. The use of these foils reveals the anxiety concerning folklore within society without distracting from the hero and his courageous exploits. While Grendel's Mother is representative of the pagan past and its remaining influences on the culture of the poem, Wealhtheow represents an attempted reconciliation with and inclusion of that past, while also demonstrating the failures of this society of blended religious values.

The legend of *Beowulf* began within the oral tradition in England between the seventh- and tenth-century, communicated through story-tellers, known as *scopes*, both as a means to entertain and to convey important lessons to crowds of people. Although it was originally composed in Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, it centers on the deeds of the Scandinavian hero, Beowulf, and his encounters in Denmark with the Grendelkin in Denmark and with the dragon in Geatland during the sixth century. Scholars know of the poem today because of the Norwell Manuscript, written around the tenth- or eleventh-century by Anglo-Saxon scribes, which also

contains several other medieval texts, such as a homily on St. Christopher, the “Marvels of the East,” the “Letter of Alexander to Aristotle,” and the poem “Judith.” According to the British Library, the poem is set in the pagan world of sixth-century Scandinavia, containing echoes of Christian tradition.

However, since the poem is, first and foremost, an Anglo-Saxon poem, it reflects English religious beliefs more so than Scandinavian beliefs. Christianity was being reintroduced in England, which was previously Christian while under Roman rule, during the sixth-century (Norton A45). An important figure in the Anglo-Saxon conversion, Pope St. Gregory I, r. 590-604, was greatly interested in the religious beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons. He believed that the Anglo-Saxons had “remained unbelieving, wickedly worshipping wood and rocks,” leading him to send his monks to England and to initiate missionary efforts towards Christian conversion (Madigan 62). A significant factor within the conversion practices is Pope St. Gregory’s determination to convert the Anglo-Saxons; however, he also did not want to wholly destroy their previous religious structures. For example, while instructing his monks to destroy the idols within Anglo-Saxon temples, he specifically insisted that the temples themselves not be destroyed; rather, the temples were to be converted to places of worship for the Christian God (Madigan 63). This leniency and inclusion of pre-existing, formerly pagan structures represent the blending of the two religious cultures. It opened the way for future conversion measures, in which pagan beliefs and practices were transformed in varying degrees in order to be incorporated into Christian practices. The blending of the two religious cultures continued throughout the medieval period; Christianity, as it is thought of today, “was not absorbed and practiced deeply until the dawn of the modern age, after the close of the medieval era” (Madigan 91). Historically, Christianity has been evolving and adapting in accordance to various cultures.

Within the Anglo-Saxon culture, paganism played a crucial role in the practice of Christianity, highly influencing the religious principles and philosophy.

Nevertheless, in medieval studies, there has been a history of attempting to completely remove and separate Christian elements from poetry that has been traditionally classified as pagan in order to preserve the superior pagan qualities. The nineteenth-century, in particular, is guilty of this attempt. During the nineteenth-century, “There was [...] the identification of the [pagan] with all that is [...] romantically poetic, and the corresponding identification of all that is Christian and didactic with prolixity and platitudinarianism” (Stanley 41). Essentially, nineteenth-century scholars held pagan poetry in the highest esteem, while Christian poetry was criticized as being verbose and clichéd. Consequently, nineteenth-century scholars thought that, after removing Christian elements from Anglo-Saxon poetry, the poem would prove to be uncomplicatedly pagan with no trace of Christian influences (Stanley 41). This circular logic ignores the complexity of the transitional quality between the two cultures. This paper works to reject such nineteenth-century Romanticization of the past and works to depict the early medieval period accurately.

Part of the difficulty in interpreting the poem in terms of Anglo-Saxon religious beliefs is due to the views held by nineteenth-century scholars who were enormously influenced by Romanticism and, thusly, viewed paganism with greatly-biased admiration. Largely, the early field of medieval studies was used to critically view the age of Industrialization, especially to criticize the apparent progress of England (Chandler 175). The study of Anglo-Saxon England both played a hand in shaping and was itself shaped by Victorian political and moral ideals, due to the need to identify precedents for the rapidly changing period (Chandler 190). As Industrialization led towards urbanization, dramatic class separation, and lower standards of

living for the working class, the medieval period began to be viewed as a golden age of natural landscapes and unified communities (Boyd and McWilliam 30), resulting in a skewed perspective of the past in order to cast a negative attitude on Victorian society. Conversely, there was also a widely-held ideology that England needed to separate and distinguish itself from other nations as the “acme of progress” to establish a unique history and character (Hall, *Elves*, 167), thereby romanticizing the past to glorify the English nation. With these two viewpoints came the idealization of paganism. A leading figure of nineteenth-century philosophical attitudes, Thomas Carlyle notably used paganism as a tool to depict “the childhood of humanity as a period of innocence and joy” (Chandler 178). Through this lens, the period of paganism is portrayed as a comparably simpler time, one in which humanity thoroughly appreciated nature and thrived in genuine bliss, since they were wholly “uncorrupted by unbelief or false belief” (Chandler 180). The notion and apprehension of false belief, in Carlyle’s view, lies in the introduction of Christianity, causing apprehension over proper ways to worship and precisely which god(s) to worship. Therefore, the time of pure paganism was when humanity functioned at its optimal capability; paganism allowed for simplicity, which Christianity distorted and obscured.

However, the idealization of paganism does not reflect the reality of the religious conversion. The romanticized perception only takes into account the nineteenth-century perspective of paganism, simultaneously glamorizing it and viewing it as a time period of naïveté and virtue. On the contrary, Germanic paganism existed in a time of warfare and vengeance; it did not exist in an isolated circumstance of peace and prosperity. Paganism does not define the society as Romantic nor idealistically unassuming. Rather, it was a part of Anglo-Saxon society and, thus, defined by Germanic ideals of heroism and violence.

Alternatively, Anglo-Saxon paganism was also used to distinguish Victorian English identity; the emphasis of study was placed on “essentially Germanic characteristics,” separating England from its colonies and establishing superiority (Stanley 14-5). This distinction further resulted in markedly Romantic views, such as the belief that poetry reflecting paganism contained an “autumnal” quality, filled with beauty that was threatened by the looming approach of harsh winter, or Christianity, which inevitably damaged and destroyed the poetic art and caused a deep resentment within the English population (Stanley 18-9). Nineteenth-century interpretations like these largely ignore the substantial corpus of Anglo-Saxon poetry that includes and praises Christian concepts, such as *Beowulf*, which blends both belief systems and tends to favor Christianity. Furthermore, this sentiment separates Christianity and paganism in such a way that eliminates the possibility of their coexisting. While religious culture was shifting between paganism and Christianity throughout c.600-c.1000, the two became intertwined in such a way that many poems were neither purely of one religious tradition, making the separation of the two elements implausible, as well as destructive to the texts. Thus, in order to do justice to the complex religious influences within *Beowulf*, it is imperative to neither romanticize religion, nor attempt to separate the two. Rather, an examination of the combined cultures of Christianity and paganism that produced *Beowulf* will be used to analyze the text’s key structures and themes.

The historiography of medieval studies has traditions of separating the religious practices of Anglo-Saxon England into purely pagan beliefs and Christian values, after the seemingly instantaneous conversion to pure Christianity. This narrative at least partly adheres to that presented in Christian sources, which portrayed a dramatic transition from paganism to Christianity; it was sudden, yet smooth and without overlap (Jolly 9). This concept of a binary relationship between the two religious constructs is observed within such sources as Bede’s

Ecclesiastical History of the English People and is, indeed, repeated by many religious figures throughout the Anglo-Saxon period who create oppositions between pagan and Christian, magic and miracle, evil and good (Jolly 2). Therefore, it is reasonable that many modern scholars have since viewed religious conversion during the Early Medieval period with similar understandings. However, institutional Christianity is not an accurate indication of the conversion process, since those texts had clear objectives of “showing by example the rectitude of the Christian message” (Church 170). In other words, texts that fall within the category of formal Christianity were not written as an accurate portrayal of their contemporary society. In fact, advocates of formal Christianity would intentionally use Christian beliefs to explain events of the pagan past, creating an origin myth for the Anglo-Saxon culture: “When the continental past of the Anglo-Saxons was interpreted biblically, it could be remembered without risk of theological error” (Howe 50). The creation of a Christian origin myth for the English was an attempt to completely erase the pagan past from the culture in order to encourage the population to drop all forms of paganism as quickly as possible and to fully accept Christianity in its purest form. In reality, rather than textually, “conversion is a process as well as an event [;] it involves gradual transformations of existing cultural practices at the same time that new definitions of what is Christian or pagan, magic or miracle, are evolving” (Jolly 17-8). To view this Anglo-Saxon period accurately, scholars cannot solely rely on texts of institutional Christianity. The structure of religion practiced by the general population, classified as “popular religion” by Jolly, is a much more accurate depiction of Anglo-Saxon religious practices, demonstrating a much less binary understanding of the time period.

Instead of viewing Anglo-Saxon religious beliefs as a struggle between paganism versus Christianity, this time period should be viewed as a mixture of both elements, which is

demonstrated through popular religion. Popular religion fills in the gaps left by formal religion; instead of treating paganism and Christianity as a binary system, it embraces the gray areas of a gradual conversion and contains “practices that do not fit into tidy categories and are subject to differing interpretations” (Jolly 10). This allows for a unique combination of the two non-opposing religions, creating a complex religious culture. As noted above, this period of transition was not short-lived; even by the tenth and eleventh centuries, there still existed this combination of practices from both religions. Because of the long-term existence of this mixture, it is difficult to determine whether or not this extended time period can be defined as predominantly Christian with influence from paganism, or as predominantly pagan with traces of Christianity (Jolly 2); the transitional culture is too integrated in both value systems to make an accurate or beneficial determination. In fact, the two religious constitutions formed a symbiotic relationship, engaging with each other equally and correspondingly (Jolly 19). By and large, this relationship relied on the transforming definitions of specific words; the “lexical process of determining words, including references to fortune, fate, and divinity” became translated and interpreted strategically to reflect characteristics of Christianity, instead of continuing to be associated solely with paganism (Frantzen 96), highlighting the importance of lexical processes throughout history. By shifting the meaning of originally pagan concepts towards the benefit of Christian concepts, proponents of institutional Christianity were able to create the effect of a seemingly straightforward conversion, while still incorporating many pagan elements.

Therefore, in order to fully focus on *Beowulf* without the distraction of determining which religious values held more influence, it is useful to think of the practices during this period as folklore. Specifically, “folklore” is the study of “traditional beliefs, legends, and customs” or, more generally, “popular fantasy or belief” (OED). While this definition is particular for more

general beliefs held by society, such as fairy-tales and legends, it also correlates with culturally prevalent religious customs. Because of the combination of paganism and Christianity, the culture of the transitional period was mainly determined by popular beliefs: “Part of medieval culture was a dynamic interaction between elements of the Christian faith sponsored by priests and those given life or popularity by the people” (Madigan 94). Therefore, it was the popular beliefs of the day that allowed for certain Christian practices to gain acceptance. Such popular beliefs created a new culture within Anglo-Saxon England, which embraced “traditional beliefs, legends, and customs” and integrated them into Christianity, thus creating a unique religious culture that deserves its own classification. In general, “Folklore as an areligious concept is [...] a more appropriate term than paganism or magic to describe the transmission of Germanic practices and beliefs that ultimately lost their pagan context as they were integrated into popular Christianity” (Jolly 11). In other words, due to the unique blend of the two religious belief systems, “folklore” is an appropriate, areligious term that encompasses both concepts of new Christian elements and traditional, pagan beliefs. In order to concisely refer to the combination of the two belief systems, the definition of folklore is being expanded to encompass the “traditional beliefs” of the past and the contemporary “popular belief” of Christianity. Therefore, within this paper, the transitional period that combined elements of both paganism and Christianity will be referred to as a folkloric period. Furthermore, the use of the term, folklore, allows for a clear distinction between times and practices of paganism, folklore, and Christianity. However, it is important to remember that practices of paganism and folklore are intricate because pagan customs are reallocated and modified within folklore, making the two religious systems difficult to completely separate.

A very clear example of this folkloric practice comes from Anglo-Saxon metrical charms, which exemplifies folklore through the amalgamation of pagan and Christian beliefs. The gradual shift from full paganism towards Christianity created a unique blend of both, which partially resulted in the creation and use of metrical charms. Metrical charms are fascinating due to their inimitable combination of these beliefs. They are “‘invocational or magical processes’ designed to combat disease, illness, and various other misfortunes generally attributed to malevolent external forces” (Burdorff 93). However, this definition is incomplete because it does not acknowledge the religious complexities within the charms. During the conversion process, Christianity consciously incorporated certain pagan practices in order to attract a wider portion of the population and to gain control over popular religion (Jolly 25). The line between Christian and pagan is blurred within the metrical charms to create something that is both complex and elucidating for society. They provide clearly approved conventions for respectable Christians to perform; however, the line between good and evil is thin. For example, “Certain actions, such as the animistic worship at trees, were never acceptable, popular or otherwise, even though worshipping at outdoor crosses appears as its physical counterpart in Christianity” (Jolly 26). The practices shown within metrical charms reveal the fluidity of folklore in terms of the inclusion of both religious systems, as practices were modified in order to ease the process of conversion.

One charm in particular, the ‘Field Remedy’ ritual, embodies the intricacies of folklore and demonstrates a unification of paganism and Christianity. In this charm, the participant is expected to collect organic material, such as honey and milk, and a piece of every plant and tree on the property, put holy water on all the items, and then drip the concoction onto four sides of the fields while chanting a mixture of Old English and Latin, which generally translates to, “In

the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit be blessed” (Jolly 7). The process is extensive as other steps are then required, each followed by similar chants. The desired outcome is to prevent harmful entities, such as sorcerers and poisoners, from negatively affecting the field’s prosperity (Jolly 6-8). The expressed desired outcome gives the impression of a thoroughly pagan tradition; even the charm’s purpose, to stop poisoners and sorcerers, suggests a supernatural, pagan origin. However, the included elements of holy water, Latin prayers, and specific mentions of Christ prevent this straightforward interpretation. The differences between “chants” and “prayers” is not clear-cut, as can be seen within this charm. On the whole, “Anglo-Saxon charms against the attack of invisible elves, and their demonization in late Saxon remedies, exist in sufficient numbers in the medical manuscripts to show a variety of accommodation techniques” (Jolly 11), establishing the foundation of folklore through these “accommodation techniques.” Thus, metrical charms reveal how folkloric practices exist and function within society of blended values; their prevalence in society influenced both personal beliefs and cultural products, such as literature.

In *Beowulf*, the charms do make an appearance, specifically in relation to Grendel’s Mother; however, the primary focus of the poem is the cultural system of vengeance and its subsequent premise of peace-weaving. Throughout *Beowulf*, the themes of vengeance and peace-weaving are easily identifiable. From the outset, the poem centers on tales of heroes known for epic battles and who are the protectors of their people. The first three lines unmistakably demonstrate the importance of this concept: *Hwæt we Gar-Dena in gear-dagum / Peod-cyninga Brym gefrunon, / hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon* (Hark, we Spear-Danes in the days of yore / [had] kings of the nation [who] understood the multitude, / how those princes performed with

valor).¹ In setting up the story, the narrator makes it known to the audience that this is a tale of greatness and “heroic campaigns” (Heaney 3), signifying the military culture. Even the digressions, separate from the main plot, include this theme; for example, lines 883b-915b recount the tale of Sigemund and his battle against a dragon, as well as the betrayal against him, resulting in his downfall; 1071a-1159a describe the experience of Hildeburh as a peace-weaver and the vengeance her kinsmen took on behalf of their fallen lord, resulting in grief for both the Danes and Frisians. Both of these sections recall a narrative of feuding and vengeance and both end in tragedy, representing a failure of the belligerent system of warfare, resulting in the unsuccessful attempts at peace. Hildeburh’s narrative, the “Finn episode,” includes explicit criticism of vengeful actions, indicating that vengeance is actually looked down upon in the culture (Hennequin 517). In fact, the Finn episode directly signals “the breakdown in the alliance [and] the impossibility of creating peace out of hostility” (Horner, Discourse, 71), emphasizing the breakdown of the entire Germanic code of vengeance. At first, the inclusion of this sentiment may seem contradictory to the credence of vengeance throughout the poem, especially when looking at Beowulf’s speech to Hrothgar in lines 1384-1396, where the overall message is: *Selre bið æghwæm / pæt he his freond wrece, Þonne he fela murne* (It is better for all that he avenges his friend / than that he mourns much) (1384b-1385b). In this case, Beowulf encourages Hrothgar to seek vengeance rather than mourn because he sees that as the better option for a warrior and king, completely disregarding the lesson taught by the Finn episode. However, the rest of the poem clearly shows that Beowulf’s valorization of vengeance is not sustainable and that vengeance, as a system of justice, falls apart.

¹ All translations were done by me and are more word-for-word, rather than sense-for-sense.

For the majority of the poem, the system of vengeance and feuding is largely criticized, indicating a breakdown in the system as Germanic society moves towards stronger Christian values. Beowulf himself, despite his heroic speech on the importance of seeking vengeance, indicates that vengeance and peace-weaving are ineffective strategies for peace between communities when he speaks of Wealhtheow and Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru. As a *gehaten* (2024b), or promised one to be married, her role is to foster harmony between the Danes and the Heathobards; her purpose is to *wæl-fæhðā dæl, / sæcca gesette*, to be presented as a proposition of peace to resolve the feud and to atone for the slain warriors of the Heathobards (2028b-2029a). However, according to Beowulf, this plan will inevitably fail, due to the inherent desire to retaliate, *Peah seo bryd duge!* (however good the bride is!) (2031b). This prediction of failure challenges the integrity of the peace-weaving system, due to the traditional Germanic trait of revenge and retribution, resulting in a criticism that bluntly opposes Beowulf's earlier speech to Hrothgar.

While this prediction appears inconsistent and incongruous with his earlier speech to Hrothgar, it does fit into a larger theme of the poem, which is a "preoccupation with primal loss [...] loss ultimately of the heroic age of which the poem is a nostalgic mirror" (Acker 709), with the "heroic age" fundamentally associated to the concept of paganism. Vengeance is a system that has existed within Anglo-Saxon society and, therefore, may be considered an ancient practice; within the time of folklore expressed in the poem, the concept of the peace-weaver acts as something of a bridge between the vengeance and retribution pagan systems and the policy of forgiveness found within Christianity: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matthew 5:38-40). The concept of forgiveness within

Christianity clearly does not fit into the pagan preference for vengeance; however, according to Beowulf's earlier speech to Hrothgar, 'turning the other cheek' is not necessarily an option in the culture of the poem. There still needed to be some act of retribution for harm done; thus, the role of peace-weaver became a necessity. Unfortunately, because of the continued existence of pagan values in folklore, this system is neither stable nor durable, leading to the Anglo-Saxon anxiety regarding "the failure of vengeance as a system of justice" (Acker 703). The loss of this heroic code and its pagan values is a major theme throughout *Beowulf*; as the culture moves into folklore and then embraces Christian practices, anxieties regarding the future emerge, leading to a general sense of melancholy and apprehension. The narrator of *Beowulf* addresses these concerns through the use of female characters, primarily Grendel's Mother and Wealhtheow, signifying both the horrors of paganism and the flaws of folklore. A goal of the poem is to encourage the population to embrace Christian values; it is only after this conversion happens that society can attempt to find true peace and stability. However, this process of conversion does not take place within the poem, resulting in an unresolved process of transition, as the unnamed woman mourns for the loss of Beowulf, signifying the uncertainty of the future.

In particular, Wealhtheow and Grendel's Mother epitomize the system of vengeance and clearly illustrate how such a culture ultimately collapses on itself. These females appear radically separated from one another: Wealhtheow is a beloved queen whom all respect and Grendel's Mother is an unnatural sea-dweller whom all fear. However, elements in the text reveal that the two are specifically connected to create an underlying tone of tension and anxiety. They exist within an antipodal relationship, making them both vastly separated from one another, while also familiarly connected (Damico 21). In fact, there is a theory in *Beowulf* scholarship that unites all of the poem's female figures and argues that they all act as one "cohesive set of 'retellings,'"

based on one source, which is identified as the story of Hildeburh. This theory connects all the females to one another and concludes that the figures work towards a singular purpose within the poem, to re-evaluate and improve the role of peace-weaving, thematically unifying all the women in the poem to create a singular theme behind them (Horner, Discourse, 68). However, Wealhtheow and Grendel's Mother, as explicit foils, are unique cases that deserve specific attention and consideration, since each is distinctively compared and contrasted with the other as they are specifically related to the fluid religious components of the society within *Beowulf*.

While Wealhtheow and Grendel's Mother seem to be complete inverses of one another at first glance, they are lexically linked by the repeated words *wif*, wife or woman, or even a being in the form of a woman, and *ides*, lady, forming a distinctive bond. *Ides* has a notable connotation of nobility, making it a particularly interesting word-choice for Grendel's Mother. For Wealhtheow, these word-choices are hardly surprising, considering the fact that she is Hrothgar's queen, the lady of Heorot. For Grendel's Mother, on the other hand, who is often portrayed as a monstrous, gruesome beast of the sea, to describe her using such feminine and noble words provides a contradictory image, creating a disturbing effect for the reader. Furthermore, both females have the primary function of mother; the term *modor* literally identifies Grendel's Mother, who is given no other name. Her purpose in the poem is to avenge her son; she is the grieving mother, defending the life of her son, even after his death. Wealhtheow, comparably, attempts to protect the future of her sons when Hrothgar threatens to give the Danish inheritance to Beowulf (1175-91). Although not as direct, Wealhtheow is the protector of her sons and steps out of her prescribed role in much the same way as Grendel's Mother does in order to avenge her son. Notably, Wealhtheow is the only mother in the poem who can be seen to successfully advocate for her sons (Dockray-Miller 113) and Grendel's

Mother, who has undoubtedly failed since her son is slain, is “the ultimate maternal fantasy and horror, defined completely by and devoted completely to her son” (Dockray-Miller 88-9).

Although both experience contrasting outcomes in the events of the poem, their allegiances to their sons unite them in a bond of motherhood.

Moreover, both exist as a type of foreigner within the culture. Grendel’s Mother is an obvious outcast, existing on the perimeter of society and only appearing in the name of vengeance; nonetheless, Wealhtheow is also a foreigner in Heorot, having married into the Danish kingdom as a peace-weaver. This status connects Wealhtheow to the “dark, restless, corrupt outcasts of society” (Damico 61), like Grendel’s Mother. The two females undoubtedly occupy corresponding roles to one another as female, mother, and foreigner. Specifically designated as *ideses*, “ladies,” within the poem, these two women are intimately connected, sharing similar circumstances and outcomes.

However, while Wealhtheow is explicitly a *folccwen* (640a), a folk queen or queen of the people, Grendel’s Mother is a *merewif* (1521a) or *wælgæst wæfre* (1331), a woman of the mere or wandering demon. Wealhtheow belongs to the people, to the *londbuend* (1347a), or earth-dwellers; she is grounded to the earth and has a temporal presence. Grendel’s Mother belongs to demons and is associated with water; her home is host to *ellorgæstas* (1349), to alien spirits. Their dwellings and the creatures that surround them highlight their key differences and mark them as foils of one another. They are the exact opposite in these concepts: land versus water, earth-dwellers versus alien spirits. Nevertheless, they share crucial connections as wife, lady, mother, and foreigner.

Therefore, together, these two characters share a significant role within *Beowulf* and, when looking at them individually, a common theme emerges. Grendel’s Mother is clearly

associated with the past; she is directly and exclusively linked to silence and monsters, which represent the ancient past due to their silence and mystery (Phillips 41). Wealhtheow, conversely, is much more grounded in the folkloric period; she is the epitome of contemporary society's expectations as she performs her role as peace-weaver and queen. However, her name and the behavior she exhibits in the poem also relate her to the past. Wealhtheow is a representation of an attempt to reconcile with the past and, as a result, her existence in society demonstrates a flaw in terms of the progression towards Christianity. Both Wealhtheow and Grendel's Mother are key to analyzing the representations of the past and present. Both females share a complex connection to the past and paganism. When looking separately at these two females and their specific roles, an evident pattern of anxiety emerges in regards to the transition between paganism and Christianity.

The persona of Grendel's Mother is intentionally engulfed with mystery and ambiguity. The narrator uses many techniques to highlight these factors: the lack of a name, her silence, her sudden appearance within the poem, and the lack of a cohesive description, literally making her indescribable. In fact, the mystery surrounding her is one of her key traits; due to the mystery, the reader is unaware of her entire background, including how long she has existed within the world. The text has many indications that hint at her age and imply that she has existed since before the time of Cain, making her an ancient being of near-immortal status. Due to this implication, Grendel's Mother has, logically, lived during times that existed without the influence of Christianity, making her connected to paganism. Moreover, that connection makes Grendel's Mother a specific representation of the pagan past within *Beowulf*; her presence coerces the society into accepting folkloric practices. She is the remnant influence of ancient paganism, expanding herself into an increasingly Christian society, resulting in the gray area of

folklore. Although she is not textually described as a monster, this association with paganism makes her more monstrous than all other opponents of Beowulf, especially in regards to her son, Grendel.

One of the techniques used by the narrator to emphasize her monstrous qualities is through the comparison to her son, Grendel; although it is stated that Grendel's Mother is the lesser warrior of the two, it is clear to the reader that she is, in reality, a far greater opponent. One of the key differences between Grendel's Mother and her son is the sense of ambiguity as well as the known history surrounding the two. Grendel has a known origin; he is a descendent of the line of Cain, who killed his brother, Abel, and was cast out of God's favor (Genesis 4:8-15). Therefore, Grendel's evil is plainly known to all, especially since he has continued the tradition of cold-blooded murder; there is no question about his role throughout the poem or why Beowulf must kill him. Grendel's Mother, on the other hand, presents a slightly different history. Some critics have raised questions about whether or not she is, likewise, a descendent of Cain.² The text is strangely vague on the subject, since lineage is so important elsewhere. While Grendel is repeatedly identified as a descendent of Cain in lines 107a, 711b-712b, and 1261-1268, Grendel's Mother is only mentioned in reference to Cain in lines 1260a-1263a: *se ðe wæter-eges an wunian scolde, / cealde streamas, siþðan Cain wearð / to ecg-banan angan breþer, / fæderen-mæge* (she occupied the awful water, / cold streams, since Cain came to pass / the slayer with the sword to the sole brother, / paternal kinsman). At first glance, this appears rather straight-forward: from the moment that Cain killed his brother, Grendel's Mother has been banished to the mere. However, this indicates that both lived at the same time; once Cain killed, both he and Grendel's Mother were banished, suggesting that she is not a descendent of Cain.

² For more information, see Hennequin's research, who explores this theory further and mentions the work of Edward Irving and George Clark as well.

Rather, she could be his mate, banished with him, resulting in the creation of Grendel. In fact, Grendel is a creature who was explicitly a demon of fate that awoke from Cain: *Þanon woc fela / geosceaftgasta; wæs Þæra Grendel sum* (from [Cain] awoke many / demons sent by fate; there was one Grendel) (1265b-1266b). Grendel's Mother, on the other hand, is never 'awakened;' she merely exists and has clearly existed before Cain committed his sinful act, yet she has also lived beyond Cain, since she terrorizes the people of Heorot long after Cain's death. Therefore, her origin is left unclear; the audience does not know where she came from, how long she has lived, or what species of being she is.

Following patterns of lineage, if Cain was human and Grendel is a monster or demon, then Grendel's Mother would have to be some sort of monster as well, but the text never directly defines her as one. All that is known is that she must be somehow similar to the human Cain, since "the ability of male and female to procreate is one of the marks of comembership in a species" (Parks 9). This is the only clue to what Grendel's Mother is; she is both similar to and different from Cain and she has no background information regarding her origin, leaving it unclear as to whether or not she is, herself, human. This places her in the category of a being who has, at the very least, rejected God, due to her choice to be with Cain, placing her within the confines of paganism, which, from the perspective of Christianity, is a rejection of God. More specifically, the ambiguity surrounding her places her within ancient paganism, creating tension and fear. Based on these correlations, Grendel's Mother is a direct representation of the pagan past and her presence within an increasingly Christian culture enforces the continuance of pagan beliefs, resulting in a folkloric period. It is because of this embodied paganism that she is portrayed as a monstrous force that must be destroyed.

As previously mentioned, the description of Grendel's Mother is multifaceted precisely because of word-choices such as *wif* and *ides*, "wife/woman" and "lady" respectively. In many cases, translators have chosen to simplify her depiction by removing these conflicting signifiers and viewing her solely as a monster. For example, the literal translation of *merewif* is "mere-woman" or "mere-wife," which is how Liuzza translates it in his work (84); in other words, Grendel's Mother is straightforwardly a woman belonging to the water, without any monstrous or particularly supernatural connotations surrounding her. However, this same word is translated by Heaney as "tarn-hag" (105) and as "sea-demon-woman" by Morgan (40). Furthermore, *ides aglæcwif* translates literally as a "female adversary" or a "great female warrior;" however, translators have transformed this phrase into "monster-woman" (Liuzza 81), "monstrous hell-bride" (Heaney 89), and "monster in woman-sex" (Morgan 33). All three translations take the root word *aglæca* and relate it to "monster," instead of "adversary" or "warrior." These examples reveal a modern tendency to translate Grendel's Mother as a non-human villain, based on pre-conceived notions of her. The result is the "textually unjustified monstrosity" of Grendel's Mother (Burdorff 95), who is not specifically described as a monster or demon within the poem.

In fact, one of the words used to describe her are used for other, noble human characters as well. Aside from *wif* and *ides* referring to both Grendel's Mother and Wealhtheow, *aglæca* is additionally associated with both Grendel's Mother and Beowulf. In Beowulf's case, *aglæcean* is used to describe both him and the dragon in line 2592a, which can be translated as "formidable ones" or "combatants," indicating the two as equals in battle. Heaney and Liuzza follow this logic in their translations: "the fierce contenders" (Heaney 175) and "those two great creatures" (Liuzza 98). However, Morgan separates the two beings, preserving the identification of *aglæca* as monstrous: "The warrior and the monster" (68). Overall, when Beowulf is associated with

aglæca, the portrayal remains positive; either the two creatures are both great and fierce combatants or Beowulf is separated, preserving his human heroism while maintaining the dragon's evil ferocity. Therefore, when used in relation with Grendel's Mother, the translation of "monster" or "hell-bride" is both inconsistent and inaccurate.

Unfortunately, this practice has led to the assumption that Grendel's Mother is monstrous primarily due to the notion that her violence and her gender are contrasting qualities: "The interpretation of Grendel's mother as monster and demon rests on faulty translations, critical tradition, and gender expectations" (Hennequin 518). The overwhelming assumption is that, based on her lack of traditional femininity and her role as avenger, Grendel's Mother is purely monstrous. To base her monstrosity on her seeming lack of gender conformity is, in itself, a dangerous assumption to make. While it is easy to compare Grendel's Mother to the other females of the poem and observe that she is noticeably more aggressive, that does not necessarily indicate that her behavior is wrong for a female, and critics cannot analyze her based on modern gender stereotypes either. It is important to keep in mind that gender is not a universal or pre-determined construct: "gender is historically variable and contingent [...] dependent upon shifting local, temporal, and cultural specifications" (Horner, Discourse, 6). Therefore, the role of Grendel's Mother as a female in this medieval textual society cannot be based on pre-conceived or modern notions of gender; it must be solely based on the text. Thus, an accurate translation of her as a simple combatant rather than a monster is required in order to better understand this character and her role within the poem.

Since the poem does not specifically describe Grendel's Mother as a monster, it is important to look at the other linguistic indication, which emphasizes that she is no ordinary female. Far from being contained within the gender binary, the poem complicates her character

with the insertion of masculine demonstrative pronouns and descriptions. One of the most noticeable occurrences is in line 1379a, where Hrothgar claims that Beowulf will find the *sinnigne secg*, the sinning man, in the mere. Part of the confusion in this section is the lack of certainty of whether or not Hrothgar is referencing Grendel's Mother. At this point in the poem, Beowulf has faced Grendel in battle and ripped off his arm, and Grendel has fled to seek shelter within his *wic* in the *fen-hledoðu*, his dwelling-place in the fen-banks (820-1); the reader knows that this is the mere occupied by Grendel's Mother, since Beowulf later finds Grendel's body there after battling her. Neither Hrothgar nor Beowulf know whether or not Grendel is still alive, so it could be that Hrothgar is warning Beowulf that he may find the "sinning man," Grendel, in the mere. However, this identification seems rather odd given that Beowulf is going to the mere specifically to kill Grendel's Mother for attacking Heorot. Therefore, it seems more likely that the *sinnigne secg* is a reference of Grendel's Mother, which is further supported by her masculine behavior and the masculine pronouns that surround her.

Similarly, the recurring masculine pronoun *he* in lines 1392-4 refers to Grendel's Mother:

Ic hit ðe gehate: no he on helm losað, / ne on foldan fæþm, ne on fyrgen-holt, / ne on gyfenes grund, ga ðær he wille (I vow this: he does not escape in protection, / nor in the earth interior, nor in the mountain-wood, / nor in the ocean bottom, go where he would). Due to Beowulf's language and his vow that the enemy will not escape, the reader knows that he is speaking specifically of Grendel's Mother, who has recently fled Heorot and has sought shelter in the mere; he cannot be referring to Grendel, especially since the people of Heorot have already celebrated the end of Grendel's reign of terror: *Ne gefrægen ic ða mægðe maran weorode / ymb hyra sinc-gyfan sel gebæran. / Bugon ða to bence blæd-agande, / fylle gefægon; fægere geþægon / medo-ful manig magas Þara* (No nation rejoiced to greater company / to better bear

of themselves near the treasure-giver, / the prosperous ones sat down on the benches, / rejoicing with feast; the kinsmen / fittingly drinking from many mead-cups) (1011-1015). The presence of the masculine pronoun creates a sense of confusion because it definitely refers to Grendel's Mother. However, the gender distinction between masculine versus feminine is, itself, a binary system. It is a general and misleading assumption that Grendel's Mother belongs within this strict gender binary system; to view her as exclusively female puts her into a "system whereby she must function solely as 'not male' and so be subsumed into a masculine identification" (Hala 33), giving the impression that she can be controlled by the males of the poem. However, Grendel's Mother defies gender restrictions; she is literally described as a creature who has the *idese onlicnes*, the likeness of a woman (1351), but perhaps is not completely a woman, making her an ambiguous figure belonging to neither gender. In the world of *Beowulf*, gender does not conform to biological traits; on the contrary, it is determined by one's abilities. Masculinity, in particular, is displayed through the power to control the actions of others (Dockray-Miller 79), which is exactly what Grendel's Mother does; her deliberate actions cause fear and despair. However, neither do her actions indicate that she is a wholly masculine figure. In actuality, she does not belong to any gender system within the culture of *Beowulf*. She is "Nameless, indescribable, and illimitable," and "stands outside of the institutional enclosure that governs the other women in the poem" (Horner, Discourse, 81-2), making her an outcast on the borderlands, supposedly unable to participate in society.

Despite being on the outskirts, she is still able to have a prevalent presence within the society, including its system of vengeance. In psychoanalytic terms, she is a representation of the abject: that which both attracts and repulses, a type of forbidden desire. According to Kristeva, it is "the sense of the horrible and fascinating abomination which is connoted in all cultures by the

feminine or, more indirectly, by every partial object which is related to the state of abjection” (Kristeva 90). Grendel’s Mother is this interesting combination of things; she is repulsive due to her monstrous, violent nature, but because she represents the familiar pagan past, she is also somewhat recognizable and, therefore, fascinating and alluring. This odd attraction is important precisely because abjection “is a reminder that our boundaries, our distinctions and dichotomies, are not inviolable, but rather are [...] fluid and interpenetrable” (Hala 33). Through the combination of feminine and masculine qualities, Grendel’s Mother becomes this embodiment of the abject: that which must be kept away and yet, somehow, remains present throughout society, making her a terrifying figure of limitless possibility.

Grendel’s Mother is not textually given the classification of a monster and is, in fact, specifically described to be weaker and less of a threat than men; however, Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s Mother is far more intense and difficult than his fight with Grendel. When she enters the halls of Heorot to avenge her son, the text states:

Wæs se gryre læssa
efne swa micle swa bið mægþa cræft,
wiggryre wifes be wæpnedmen,
þonne heoru bunden, hamer geþruen,
sweord swate fah swin ofer helme

(Her terror was lesser / by even so much as be the strength of women, / the war-horror of woman, than that of man / whenever the sword is joined, the hammer forged, / the shining sword made to sweat over the boar-imaged helmet) (1281b-1286b). There is a direct comparison between Grendel’s Mother’s strength as a female and the strength of men, asserting that men are

fiercer in battle. However, Beowulf clearly struggles more with Grendel's Mother than he did with her son.

In addition to her general character and background, her dwelling-place of the mere emphasizes her ambiguity and threatening persona. Much of the scholarship that focuses on the mere takes the critical perspective of psychoanalysis. In the realm of psychoanalytic critique, the mere is representative of a myriad of concepts. First and foremost, the mere is unique particularly because of its contradictory elements. Everything about the mere defies logic and interpretation. Hrothgar names it as a *wulfhleoðu*, a retreat of wolves (1358), suggesting a place located within the forest. However, it is also beneath the *fyrge stream*, fire-stream (1359), or a *fyr on flode*, a fire on water (1366), a body of water that literally contains fire. Additionally, there are frost-covered woods that somehow hang over the mere, *ofer Bæm hongiað hrinde bearwas* (1363), while simultaneously having firm and fixed roots to the ground as water overshadows the landscape, *wudu wirtum fæst wæter oferhelmað* (1364).

In fact, its description is similar to the landscape of a dream, where unfeasible things happen and it is impossible to fully interpret the surroundings (Butts 115-6). In psychoanalytic criticism, dreams may be representative of primal fears because of the contradictory and unsettling images. These fears threaten to conquer the individual attempting to perceive the landscape; the "conflation of lake and sea imagery thwarts any clear picture of [the] mere; each cluster of imagery undermines the signifying power of the other" (Butts 116). The shadowy and ethereal description is a direct response to the fear of the unknown because each image destabilizes the clarity of the mere, creating a deliberately incomprehensible scene. Another identification for the mere, then, is the 'chora,' defined as "the site of undifferentiated heterogeneity, [...] a place impossible to describe save by analogy" (Hala 37). Originally defined

by Kristeva, the chora is a place of vastly different elements that combine in order to create this seemingly impossible, yet existent landscape. It is “a reminder that our boundaries, our distinctions and dichotomies, are not inviolable, but rather are, [...] fluid and interpenetrable” (Hala 33). The folkloric period is similarly fluid in relation to religion; various elements within folklore are neither specifically pagan nor specifically Christian, making the mere the epitome of the transitional, folkloric period.

Consequently, since the mere is the dwelling place of Grendel’s Mother and it is on the very border of society, it serves to highlight her pagan presence within an increasingly Christian environment. The mere is more than a projection of primal fears; it is specifically reminiscent of legends surrounding mythical creatures, such as sea nymphs, who lived in underwater halls, making the mere correlated to ancient beliefs of mythological, demonic creatures (Damico 70). Due to the presence of other indescribable, demonic creatures and the ancient hoard located within, the mere indicates the connection that Grendel’s Mother has with the ancient past. The mere is a mysterious, frightening realm that fully belongs to Grendel’s Mother and she controls everything that happens within.

The true monstrosity of Grendel’s Mother lies not within the text, nor in her gender and its contradiction with patriarchal codes; rather, her monstrosity stems from her connection to the pagan past and her existence within an evolving Christian culture; her insistence to co-exist with the people of Heorot, even if it is on the boundary, enforces the creation of folklore. The entirety of *Beowulf* attempts to distinguish the virtues of Christianity from heathenistic paganism; it clearly differentiates between references to God as opposed to idols: *Hwilum hie geheton æt hærg-trafum / wig-weorþunga, wordum bædeon, / [...] Swylc wæs þeaw hyra, / hæþenra hyht* (Sometimes they vowed at a heathen temple / to honor the idols, asking with

words / [...] Such was their way, / the heathenish hope) (175a-179a). Here, there is clear criticism of the “heathenish” people, emphasizing the perceived wickedness of paganism.

However, Grendel’s Mother defies this effort of distinction as her presence enforces paganism into an increasingly Christian culture, thereby, creating anxiety within the culture. She brings the past and paganism with her and, thereby, insists upon its continued existence, implementing a blended culture. Notably, a monster may be recognized through “the bloodthirstiness with which it views [people] and hence by which [...] it likely declares its consanguinity with [people]” (Phillips 42). Monsters are sources of terror due to several components: their difference from humanity, violence towards humanity, and their similarity with humanity, which makes them somewhat recognizable. Grendel’s Mother is terrifyingly different from the people of Heorot. She belongs to neither gender, lives in a foreign underwater hall, and originates from a vastly different time. In regards to religion, her form of paganism is no longer fully recognizable to the people. However, due to the very nature of folklore and its inclusion of various pagan practices, she is somewhat familiar. Nevertheless, instead of this familiarity being a source of ease, it aids in her horror as she holds great influence over this society and appears determined to inflict paganism on a society that is striving for Christianity.

She also appears to possess adaptive qualities. Her general use of weapons, compared against Grendel’s refusal to use weapons, and her participation in the established system of vengeance suggests her knowledge of the workings of the community and their expectations. Her ability to adapt makes her far more dangerous than Grendel, who appears immovable and fixed in ancient practices of warfare, based on his lack of weaponry and lack of knowledge of societal customs of battle. Where the rest of the poem works to distinguish between the two religious systems of paganism and Christianity, Grendel’s Mother combines them and, therefore, must be

demonized and destroyed. This demonization is reminiscent of how members of formal religion would mark certain practices with the Devil, instead of unreservedly acknowledging folklore; the classification between God and the Devil created a binary way of thinking about religion in an attempt to verify the superiority of Christianity (Jolly 25). Grendel's Mother, who is otherwise an *ides*, a lady, similar to Wealhtheow, is personified as a monster as a way to associate her with evil. With this association, it is easier for the poem to dehumanize and, inevitably, destroy her. Additionally, as a monster, Grendel's Mother provides a means of "moral correction" (Phillips 43); by destroying her, Beowulf is attempting to eliminate the flaws of the pagan past so society can move towards a purer Christian future.

Further evidence of the association of Grendel's Mother and the pagan past lies in the fact that she is intimately connected to the magical forces that metrical charms warded off. As mentioned above, metrical charms were Christian-approved rituals used to prevent or defend against evil entities, including beings like Grendel's Mother. Contextually, Grendel's Mother is linked to metrical charms through lexical techniques, "specifically those addressing the supernatural agents behind various afflictions," or medical problems (Burdorff 94). Part of her preternatural qualities comes from her abrupt materialization into the poem. The first acknowledgment and description of Grendel's Mother starts in line 1330, whereas her attack occurs in lines 1233b-1309b. In fact, after Grendel's defeat, the Danes act as if the danger is over. Lines 1233b-1237a state:

wyrd ne cuþon,
geosceaft grimme, swa hit agangen wearð
eorla manegum, syþðan æfen cwom,
ond Hroþgar gewat to hofe sinum

rice to ræste.

(They could not know the fate, / that which has been grimly determined of old, thus it came to pass / since [Grendel] had come in the evening, / and Hrothgar departed to his residence, / the powerful [went] to bed). The indication of normalcy seemingly signifies that the warriors had not known about nor did they expect Grendel's Mother. Yet, Hrothgar has known about her, which is demonstrated in lines 1345a-1349a: *Ic Ðæt londbuend, leode mine, / selerædende secgan hyrde / Ðæt hie gesawon swylce twegen / micle mearcstapan moras healdan, / ellorgæstas* (The earth-dwellers, my people / I heard them tell / that they perceived two such / large wanderers that guard the waste borderland, / alien-spirits). Hrothgar is clearly aware of her existence, based on the fact that he knows about her habitation of the mere and has had reports of her from his men, yet his first mention of her only comes after her attack. The sudden appearance of Grendel's Mother, especially emphasized by Hrothgar's failure to mention her existence until after her attack, is similar to the portrayal of sudden attacks and illnesses that the charms combat, especially in regards to feminine magic (Burdorff 97), suggesting that Grendel's Mother functions as something of a malevolent sorceress within the poem. Her goal is to harm and prevent growth and progress in society, similar to the presence of the sorcerer or poisoner in the Field Remedy charm. Her relation to metrical charms places her "above and beyond implications limited to her gender and maternity into a magico-medical paradigm that offers room for ambiguity, liminality, and multivalent significance well beyond her connections to her son" (Burdorff 102). Grendel's Mother is more than her gender and, although she is not specifically described as a monster or demon within the text, her connection to the evil within the pagan past makes her a dangerous threat that must be destroyed in order to allow change in the religious culture. A closer look at her specific actions and their long-term effects reveal specific

strategies used by the narrator to convey the flaws of paganism and the superiority of Christianity.

Although the critical focus of Grendel's Mother is often her fight with Beowulf, her monstrous actions begin with her choice of victim: Æschere. First and foremost, Æschere is indicated as Hrothgar's *hæleða leofost*, the dearest of warriors (1296). Moreover, he is further described as *rice randwiga* (1298), a powerful shield-warrior of high rank, and *blædfæstne beorn* (1299), a glorious warrior. These three phrases emphasize his importance in Hrothgar's court; he is the most beloved, glorious, high-ranking warrior, making him invaluable in battle. Grendel's Mother takes only a single victim and her choice is devastating for Hrothgar. Compared to Grendel's, which killed countless warriors, this attack is much more focused and receives more attention from the narrator.

Furthermore, besides being an important warrior, Æschere is also Hrothgar's *run-wita* and *ræd-bora* (1325), his knower of runes and counsel-bearer. This context is crucial, since *ræden* is "to give advice or counsel," "to explain something obscure," or "to exercise control over something" (Paz 232). Grendel's Mother is the very embodiment of obscurity; she never speaks throughout the poem, she is cloaked in ambiguity, and her full intentions regarding the people of Heorot remain unknown. It is Æschere's responsibility to interpret the obscure, making him the person most qualified to explain her existence to the population. Because of his death, she remains a mystery to the people, a concept that is extremely unnerving and adds to her horrific qualities. In fact, through the act of killing Æschere, Grendel's Mother is intentionally attempting to destroy the progression of society and, by extension, Christianity. Æschere's role as rune-knower and interpreter combats and explains the unknown and brings the community together; with Æschere, "the community of Heorot is 'literate' in its ability to exclude and

control that something that does not belong within its bounds” (Paz 241). As an entity of the pagan past, Grendel’s Mother clearly does not belong in this time period of transition and movement towards Christianity. She threatens all that society is gaining and directly attacks Æschere in order to keep the people ignorant of her being.

Grendel’s Mother’s treatment of Æschere’s corpse speaks volumes of her intentions from the outset of her attack. The scene in which the troop finds Æschere’s head at the entrance of the mere is heart-wrenching; after following the blood-trail of the warrior, not knowing what specific fate Æschere met with, they find only his head before the *dreorig on gedrefed*, the blood-disturbed water (1417), marking a unique intention of Grendel’s Mother. She not only wanted to avenge her son by taking Æschere; she wanted to deeply hurt the Danes by showing them his head, the most effective identification of a person. Moreover, instead of leaving an arm as an indication that she is only avenging Beowulf’s action of ripping off Grendel’s arm, she leaves the head, escalating the significance of her message. The head and face are symbolic of the capability to be part of and understand one’s surroundings (Paz 240). It is through the head that an individual can see, hear, and generally perceive the world; the head also contains the brain, symbolizing the ability to analyze and interpret. By removing Æschere’s head, Grendel’s Mother has precisely threatened to destroy this ability and thus deprive the Danes of the capability of knowing and, thereby, controlling her.

She brilliantly executes this threat since she is unmentioned before her attack and remains physically unknowable even after Beowulf performs close combat with her. Overall, “By killing and decapitating Hrothgar’s reader, Grendel’s mother highlights an anxiety within *Beowulf* about ‘things’ that defy human interpretation and convey monstrous, marginal, or unknowable messages instead” (Paz 231). She is, herself, uninterpretable because she remains silent

throughout the poem; the other characters are, thus, coerced to interpret her actions, especially because of Æschere's death. However, they cannot interpret her, which is evident in the fact that no one expects the atrocities she commits. This is clearly demonstrated through lines 1417b-1421b:

*Denum eallum wæs,
winum Scyldinga, weorce on mode
to geþolianne, ðegne monegum,
oncyð eorla gehwæm, syðþan Æscheres
on þam holm-clife hafelan metton.*

(It was to all the Danes / to the friends of the Scyldings, grievous to the spirits / suffering, for many of the warriors, / the distress of each of the men, because the head of Æschere / they found on the sea-cliff). The emotion of these lines emphasizes the shock caused by the actions of Grendel's Mother, stressing the total inability of the people to anticipate or understand her. Her treatment of Æschere expresses the level of her fury and her abject desire to be unknowable. Furthermore, she explicitly challenges the system of vengeance and highlights its flaws; through the exchange of body parts, she lets it be known that she both understands and participates in this system while also proving her defiance of those laws by killing Æschere, the interpreter, knower, and reader (Paz 239). This combination of knowing and defying makes her particularly dangerous. Her acknowledgment of the changing culture and her refusal to wholly submit to it is a symbol of the effects that paganism has on an increasingly Christian system. The intention of including pagan practices during the conversion practice was to make converting to Christianity easier; however, this inclusion also prevented society from wholly embracing Christianity. Therefore, as a representation of the persistent pagan past, Grendel's Mother must be defeated,

regardless of whether or not she poses a direct threat to Heorot. Paganism is an influence that must be destroyed in order for the culture to move past folklore and embrace Christianity.

The battle between Beowulf and Grendel's Mother is a pivotal point of the poem. Not only does it mark the nearly precise middle of the poem, but it is also one of the more dramatic elements. Looking at Beowulf's two other fights, a significant pattern emerges. Before engaging in battle, Beowulf mentions God and acknowledges His providence; it is only before his encounter with Grendel's Mother that he fails to reference God. Before the fight with Grendel, Beowulf clearly and repeatedly states that God will determine the outcome of the battle. He declares in lines 440b-441b that *ðær gelyfan sceal / Dryhtnes dome se ðe hine deað nimeð* (there to believe / the lord will judge the death to take), and, in lines 685b-687b, *siððan witig God / on swa hwæðere hond, halig Dryhten, / mærdō deme, swa him gemet þince* (since God has wisdom / on whichever hand, the holy Lord, / judges honor, to consider which should appear proper to Him). Beowulf is fully entrusting God to decide the outcome of his duel with Grendel, whether or not it ends in his favor, signifying his full faith in God's plan. Similar words are found when he is preparing to face the dragon in lines 2525b-2527a: *ac unc furður sceal / weorðan æt wealle, swa unc wyrd geteoð / Metod manna gehwæs* (but the two of us shall further / arise at the wall, thus fate assigns the two of us / God of all men), clearly indicating that God is the decider of fate. In both cases, Beowulf places faith in God to decide the outcomes of the battle and he is, ostensibly, at peace with whatever God determines.

However, in lines 1473-91, when he is preparing to face Grendel's Mother, there is a noticeable lack of reference to God. Instead, he puts all his faith into the sword, Hrunting: *ic me mid Hruntinge / dom gewyrce, oþðe mec deað nimeð* (with Hrunting / I will achieve glory or death will carry me away) (1490b-1491b). This moment immediately before the battle thus

signifies a rift between Beowulf and God. Subsequently, the dangerous and nearly-fatal battle is a religious crisis for Beowulf as he attempts to battle with the representative pagan past and mistakenly relies entirely on his own strength, becoming vulnerable to the strong influence of paganism.

Beowulf's battle with Grendel's Mother is unquestionably more dangerous and challenging than his fight with Grendel. During his battle with Grendel's Mother, Beowulf experiences a religious crisis and, as a result, nearly loses both his physical and spiritual life. Because he declares that he will either achieve glory or death with Hrunting, his full reliance is on a man-made weapon, instead of with God. This ill-placed reliance quickly fails him, as *Ða se gist onfand / Pæt se beadoleoma bitan nolde* (1522b-1523b), he discovers that the flashing sword will not bite or cut Grendel's Mother. The oddity of this occurrence is emphasized through the sword's history: *ðolode ær fela / hodgemota, helm oft gescær, / fægges fyrdhrægl; ða wæs forma sið / deorum madme Pæt his dom alæg* (it had endured many battles, / often cutting-through the helmet, / the doomed to die war-garment; this was the first time / the precious treasure failed) (1525b-1528b). Grendel's Mother is not simply impervious to weapons, as Grendel was, as is evident by the later effectiveness of the giant's sword. Therefore, Hrunting's notable failure, for the first time, is simultaneous with Beowulf's sudden departure from God and his full reliance on his own abilities. It is made very clear that Hrunting has a victorious past; it has never failed in any of the numerous battles it has performed in (1457-1464). It is significant that the first time it fails is concurrent with the one fight in the poem that Beowulf does not mention God beforehand. This separation from God is further demonstrated by the status of Grendel's Mother as the abject; since she is the abject, then Beowulf becomes the deject, one who places, separates,

and situates himself and, as a result, strays from the path (Hala 34). In this case, he is straying from the path of God, resulting in failure and near defeat.

Throughout the struggle, Beowulf quickly finds himself ever-closer to defeat, as he is placed in compromising situations, reminiscent of the struggles of martyrs before becoming saints. First and foremost, although Beowulf is by no means perfect, he does represent the Christian hero battling against that which opposes the religion, both paganism and folklore, making him a saint-like figure. Furthermore, Grendel's Mother, as a *merewif*, bears a striking resemblance to that of a *mæra*, or a supernatural creature who appears throughout the metrical charms and presses down upon or rapes people (Burdorff 98), threatening the purity of the victim. This is precisely what she does as she *Ofsæt Ða Ðone selegyst, ond hyre seax geteah / brad ond brunecg* (1545a-1546a); she sits or presses down on Beowulf and draws her broad and brown-edged dagger. The use of *brunecg*, or brown-edged, signifies that the blade is either rusty or covered in dried blood; either image is vastly unpleasant and adds to the discomfort of the scene. In this instance, Grendel's Mother becomes a domineering figure who is threatening Beowulf's virtue with a phallic object, a concept that has caused many translators and critics discomfort. The uneasiness of this section is justified since potential rape and sexual assault are serious offenses within in Anglo-Saxon literature (Horner, Language, 152); the scene is intended to be unnerving. However, the ideology of chastity is "not restricted to women, but rather [...] appropriate to any situation in which a Christian finds her- or himself the object of sexual desire and assault" (Horner, Language, 177), enforcing the significant concept of Beowulf being in this position as a Christian hero against the pagan entity. This scene in *Beowulf* is markedly sexual since Grendel's Mother is the "phallic and castrating woman [...] who takes on a phallic object in order to penetrate" Beowulf and, by doing so, "threatens the [...] integrity of the male body by

maintaining a body that is at once feminine and phallic” (Oswald 67). Through this combination of femininity and masculinity, Grendel’s Mother poses as the ultimate peril to Beowulf’s honor, as both an emasculating female and an aggressive masculine opponent. This combination is particularly lethal because of Beowulf’s wrongful placement of faith on Hrunting, instead of depending on God’s will. This moment tests the Christian hero’s faith, representative of how martyrs are tested before becoming saints. It is only with God’s intervention that Beowulf does not succumb to the violation of Grendel’s Mother.

The text makes it very clear that Beowulf only survives this battle because of God’s intervening presence, ensuring the defeat of Grendel’s Mother and the destruction of all that she represents. Throughout the majority of the fight, Beowulf is in a state of failure; Hrunting fails, his mighty strength fails as Grendel’s Mother pushes him to the ground, and he is nearly defeated as she looms over him with the phallic dagger. The narrator accentuates the desperation of the moment: *Hæfde ða forsiðod sunu Ecgþeowes* (He would have perished, the son of Ecgtheow) (1550). However, in this moment of total crisis, *halig God / gewold wig-sigor, witig drihten, / rodera rædend, hit on ryht gesced / yðelice, syþðan he eft astod* (holy God / brought about the victory, wise Lord, / ruler of the heavens, / He easily and rightly decided / from the time when [Beowulf] stood again) (1553b-1556b). This is the pivotal moment of the fight; it marks the turning point immediately before Beowulf defeats Grendel’s Mother. Notably, the text makes it clear that Beowulf achieves victory only through God’s help. Almost instantaneously, Beowulf catches sight of the instrument that will not fail him, the giant’s sword, as though God himself has pointed him towards it (Hala 46), emphasizing the need for God’s assistance in order to achieve victory. The text supports this conclusion, since God directs the battle “from the time when [Beowulf] stood again.” Moreover, Beowulf recognizes this fact as he recalls the battle to

Hrothgar: *Ic Bæt unsoften ealdre gedigde / wigge under wætere, weorc geneþde / earfoðlice; ætrighte wæs / guð getwæfed, nymðe mec God scylde* (I engaged in deeds / with difficulty; immediately I would have been / put an end to in battle, except that God protected me) (1656b-1658b). Although it is not directly mentioned during the battle, this statement is evidence that it is only after Beowulf reconciles with God and re-instates his faith in Him that he is able to gain the upper hand.

Significantly, Beowulf needs assistance from God, not only to win against Grendel's Mother, but to also completely destroy any trace of her ancient paganism. After she is defeated, *Lixte se leoma, leoht inne stod, / efne swa of hefene hadre scineð / rodores candel* (The light gleamed, the light emanated within, / just as [the light] of heaven brightly shines / the candle of heaven) (1570a-1572a). The repetition of God's light entering the mere, the place of ancient paganism and hellish symbolism, marks the obliteration of paganism's influence over the residents of Heorot, who have been plagued by it ever since Grendel first attacked. Now the mere has been wholly cleansed and the darkness has been expelled, allowing for the light to enter and overpower it.

Nevertheless, the long-term effects of Grendel's Mother's actions remain a haunting factor through the existence of the giant's sword. The most intriguing weapon within *Beowulf* is the magically appearing giant's sword, oxymoronically representing both the lasting influence of paganism and its destruction. Presumably, the sword has been in the mere throughout the entire battle; moreover, it has been in the mere for an indeterminable amount of time, being of ancient origin and possessing an ambiguous history. In this way, the sword is a near-perfect representation of Grendel's Mother. However, one of the problems with the sword is the very fact that Grendel's Mother never wields it. In all likelihood, since it is part of the mere's loot,

Grendel's Mother should have been aware of its existence; yet, instead of using this weapon of awesome power, a weapon *Ðæt wæs wæpna cyst* (1559b), that was the best of weapons, she only uses the dagger, which is brown and rusted. This hardly seems like a smart or deliberate decision on her part.

A solid explanation lies in the fact that Beowulf, through God's will, is the only one who can wield this weapon, signifying his superior Christian affiliations: *buton hit wæs mare ðonne ænig mon oðer / to beadu-lace ætberan meahte* (it was greater than any other man [besides Beowulf] / was able to carry to battle) (1560-1561). In other words, the sword contained so much power and weight that all other beings, including Grendel's Mother, would have been unable to use it, emphasizing the both the physical and spiritual strength of Beowulf. Furthermore, the sword has been described by scholars as a "gladius ex machina" (Acker 708), a weapon from the machine, indicating its magical qualities and its sudden, miraculous, and contrived appearance, similar to the "deus ex machina." The sudden appearance of the giant's sword characterizes it as a tool from God, making it the most significant weapon within the text.

Additionally, the sword itself provides clues to the anxieties of Anglo-Saxon society in relation to the pagan past. The very fact that it is found within the mere indicates its ancient history; furthermore, similar to Grendel's Mother, the hilt is "an irresolvable enigma" (Paz 242), which cannot be contained within the customs of folklore. More specifically, the hilt is of great significance, due to its written runic history, which contains "the tale of God's destruction of the giants [...] as well as an origin and a history of the now absent blade itself" (Hala 48). Perplexingly, the sword has been described as being *eotenisc* (1558a), made by giants, yet it also contains a tale of the destruction of giants, through a flood sent by God (1689-1693). The hilt presents a problematic paradox within its origin and the story it holds and, therefore, requires a

skilled reader to interpret it; however, Grendel's Mother previously assured that interpretation would be impossible by depriving Heorot of Æschere, the rune-reader. In this way, the lasting effects of her toxic presence within the community are felt even after her destruction. Just as she was a major pagan resistance to an ever more Christian society, the hilt is "an object that preserves the past and hence serves as a beginning, with the sword as a weapon, an object of destruction and ending" (Frantzen 110). The paradox of serving as both an ending and a beginning relates to the end of pure paganism and the beginning or creation of folklore.

The transitional period of folklore contains a myriad of contradictory elements, explaining this apparent paradox. The hilt is representative of a preservation of the pagan past, due to its connection with giants and its runic history, and the destruction of the blade removes its most threatening aspect from society. Nevertheless, it was Æschere's responsibility as the rune-bearer to diminish threats of this kind, thusly, to control and contain them within the realm of understanding, making it wholly non-threatening to the increasingly Christian community. Instead, it is left to Hrothgar to decipher the runes, and he barely seems to look at them before warning Beowulf against becoming monstrous himself through the tale of King Heremod (1709b-1768b). This deviation from the main story appears oddly placed; it is as if he is implying that Beowulf is in mortal danger, even after defeating the powerful Grendelkin and solidifying his heroic reputation. The significance of Hrothgar's words is related to the theme of time and progress: "Having examined the hilt and seen an alien history that he cannot rightly read or resolve, Hrothgar is warning Beowulf against becoming monstrous to future generations who will read his story" (Paz 248-9). Just as Grendel's Mother is ancient and grotesque within the age of folklore, Beowulf and his tale are in danger of becoming distorted and misconstrued by a future Christian audience. Hrothgar is revealing his own understandings of the time,

acknowledging that folkloric ways are imperfect and, to some extent, heathenistic and monstrous. He warns Beowulf against the pagan and folkloric ways, encouraging him to choose the path of *ece rædæs* (1760a), eternal counsel.

On the whole, Beowulf attempts to follow this advice by leading people away from paganism through distraction and erasure, as is evidence through his retellings of the battle. Despite the clear challenges provided during Beowulf's battle with Grendel's Mother, Beowulf attempts in his retellings to diminish the effects of this fight and, consequently, the effects of ancient paganism and its hold over the current transitional culture of folklore. There is a crucial aspect to the retellings as the fulcrum of the poem and as a possible experience of coming of age for Beowulf (Schwetman 136). While this element does hold some merits as it depicts Beowulf's reflection on important events of his life and lessons learnt, it also dismisses his portrayal of Grendel's Mother and the lack of details shared concerning her. One of the primary characteristics of his fight with Grendel's Mother is that it is entirely unwitnessed (Oswald 66), unlike his battles against Grendel and the dragon. Therefore, he has the ability to change or highlight the details in whatever way he wants. Normally, the tradition of retelling battles is to employ an ironic tone of understatement in order to boast through modesty about one's strength and victory; however, Beowulf does not engage in this tradition when recounting his fight with Grendel's Mother. Instead, he downplays her actions and the challenges she presented by pluralizing the enemy, through the inclusion of Grendel (Oswald 73), and transforming her character into an immaterial after-thought.

Primarily, the action of beheading Grendel and providing the head as a symbol of victory immediately changes Beowulf's account of the battle, diminishing the confrontation with Grendel's Mother. When entering Heorot after the battle in the mere, Beowulf's men present the

head of Grendel, resulting in absolute reverence and distraction: *Ɔa wæs be feaxe on flet boren / Grendles heafod, Ɔær guman druncon, / [...] wliteseon wrætlic; weras on sawon* (There was the head carried on the floor of the hall / Grendel’s head, where the men were drinking, / [...] it was a wondrous sight to gaze on; the men looked upon it) (1647-1650). From the outset, the attention is focused on Grendel, even though it should be on the recent battle with his mother: “While the reading audience knows that Grendel was dead when Beowulf beheaded him, the audience within the poem must believe that the enemy of greatest threat was Grendel” (Oswald 74). From there, Beowulf further reduces the impact of Grendel’s Mother by pluralizing his enemy, primarily in lines 1665-1670, giving the impression that she was not the sole opponent:

| | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Ofsloh ða æt Ɔære sæcce,</i> | <i>Ɔa me sæl ageald,</i> |
| <i>huses hyrdas,</i> | <i>Ɔa Ɔæt hildebil</i> |
| <i>forbarn brogdenmæl,</i> | <i>swa Ɔæt blod gesprang,</i> |
| <i>hatost heaƆoswata.</i> | <i>Ic Ɔæt hilt Ɔanan</i> |
| <i>feondum ætferede,</i> | <i>fyrendæde wræc,</i> |
| <i>deaðcwealm Denigea,</i> | <i>swa hit gedefe wæs.</i> |

(I destroyed in the conflict, when I had the opportunity, / the guardians of the house. The battle-sword / the damascened sword burnt up, from the blood that arose, / hottest battle-sweat. From that hilt / I carried away the fiends, I avenged wicked deeds, / the death of the Danes, thus it was proper). The word choice in this section, particularly in the case of *hyrdas*, *feondum*, and *fyrendæde*, pluralizes the enemy; he is literally stating that he destroyed the guardians within the mere, fought the fiends, and avenged wicked deeds, instead of fighting the sole guardian and fiend and avenging the one act of vengeance. With this phrasing, Beowulf successfully “mask[s] the exact identity of his opponent” (Oswald 73), making the enemy extremely vague. Through

generalization and the suggestion of fighting multiple opponents, Beowulf acknowledges the lethality of the fight without crediting Grendel's Mother, the being who made it nearly-fatal. He pluralizes the enemy to suggest that he fought with both Grendelkin and drags back Grendel's head, giving the impression that Grendel was the deadliest combatant, when the audience knows that this is not the case. By minimizing Grendel's Mother's impact on himself, Beowulf is essentially rescinding her power over Christianity and erasing his own flaws as someone who strayed from God.

Moreover, in order to solidify the destruction of Grendel's Mother and her influence, Beowulf tactfully transforms her entire character into nothing more than an afterthought. Once he is back in Geatland, Beowulf recounts his adventures to Hygelac, changing many details of his encounter with Grendel's Mother. Notably, Beowulf declares: *Ða se ðeoden mec ðine life / healsode hreohmod Ðæt ic on holma gebring / eorlscipe efnde, ealdre geneðde, / mærdō fremede* (The king, fierce of mind, / implored me on your life that I perform acts of heroism / in the tumult of the waters, that I venture on life, / I would perform the glorious deed) (2131a-2133a). According to this testimony, Beowulf's primary reasons for going after Grendel's Mother were to assuage Hrothgar's distress and to bring honor to Hygelac. However, the reader knows that Beowulf is the one who encouraged in Hrothgar the desire for vengeance, making this declaration entirely false. By portraying these alternate motivations, Beowulf is downplaying the danger of Grendel's Mother and implying that he fought her solely due to Hrothgar's grief. Furthermore, when speaking of the actual fight, he compresses it to only five lines:

*Ðær unc hwile wæs hand gemæne;
holm heolfre weoll, ond ic heafde becearf
in ðam guðsele Grendeles modor*

eacnum ecgumunsoften Ðonan

feorg oðferede

(There I was for a while with an equal hand; / the water surged blood, and I cut off the head / of Grendel's Mother in the battle-hall / with an immense sword; from there with difficulty / I bore away life) (2137a-2141a). The length alone is enough to weaken the impact that the fight with Grendel's Mother had on Beowulf as a moment of religious crisis; the original fight takes place in lines 1251-1309, approximately 50 lines, versus Beowulf's account of 5 lines. Moreover, instead of admitting his moment of weakness, he makes Grendel's Mother an equal or lesser opponent, comparable to his grappling match with Grendel. The beheading appears smooth and uncomplicated and he only briefly implies that there was any difficulty throughout the entire battle. He successfully diminishes her character by changing the story into an aggrandizing account of his heroism, rather than acknowledging its full weight.

Furthermore, he attempts to force Grendel's Mother out of memory altogether during his conflict with the dragon (Oswald 78). In lines 2518b-2521b, he only makes mention of Grendel and completely leaves out Grendel's Mother. By doing so, he ensures that all the attention rests on the less-threatening opponent, instead of remembering the power of paganism. Through this strategy, Beowulf is erasing all memory of Grendel's Mother and, thereby, destroying the power of paganism on his society.

Grendel's Mother is thus the representation of the evil pagan past and its potential hold over the text's society; however, *Beowulf* is set within the folkloric period, not paganism. Therefore, Wealhtheow is the idyllic personification of folklore. As a foil to Grendel's Mother, Wealhtheow is the ideal female of the poem. She is an elegant queen, a loving and effective

mother, and she is respected by all. While, Helen Damico has correlated Wealhtheow to the Valkyrie figure, correcting the corruption and acting as an advisor, guide, and arranger of destiny (Damico 50), her ambitions within the text prove to be more complicated than this. Far from being the ideally passive female, she skillfully manipulates and threatens those around her in order to preserve her own power, while still giving the appearance of the adored, virtuous queen. Overall, Wealhtheow is a complex character as she exemplifies the folkloric period and highlights its weaknesses. With her connection to the Valkyrie tradition, legal and political principles, and her lexical connection to the military, she is an Anglo-Saxon attempt to reconcile with the pagan past and adopt those practices into a Christian future; through this attempted reconciliation, she reveals the fatal flaws of folklore.

As the queen of Heorot, Wealhtheow's main role within the poem is to be a figure of peace, one who brings people together and creates strong bonds; while she performs this duty admirably, she also steps outside of this role, recognizing the limits of such a position, and exposes the flaws and weaknesses of the system. Primarily, Wealhtheow's duty is to promote goodwill and encourage the bond between warriors; her passing of the mead cup signifies the order of social position among the troops and is representative of each warrior's dependence and responsibility towards the overall company (Nitzsche 289). With this role, Wealhtheow is given an immense amount of responsibility; despite the evidence of the failing system of peace-weaving in favor of violence, she is expected to maintain harmony among the Danes. When it comes to the expressed uneasiness concerning folklore and paganism, Wealhtheow's role expands past its intended boundaries within the blended system, juxtaposing the monstrosity of Grendel's Mother and revealing the uneasiness concerning women's role in folklore.

For example, one of the characteristic issues within Hrothgar's court is the struggle over succession. Previously, succession was determined solely by blood inheritance; however, in the folkloric time of *Beowulf*, there is a new importance placed on deeds as well, making succession determinable by both qualities (Drout 202). This shifting system becomes a major conflict within Heorot as Hrothgar suddenly attempts to deed the throne to Beowulf based on his heroic deeds and, in effect, to take it away from his sons whose sole claim is that of blood. As a result, Wealhtheow steps outside of her prescribed role as queen to address the recklessness of such an action, which is also the first time she speaks in the poem. While appearing generous and cheerful, she cleverly reproaches Hrothgar for his hasty words, reminding him of his duty to his sons:

Me man sægde Ðæt Ðu ðe for sunu wolde
hererinc habban. Heorot is gefælsod,
beahsele beorha; bruc Þenden Ðu mote
manigra medo, ond Þinum magum læf
folc ond rice Þonne ðu forð scyle,
metodsceaft seon.

(A man told me that you desire to have [Beowulf] in the place of the son / [you desire] to have the warrior. Heorot is cleansed / the ring-hall is glorious; enjoy as long as you have / many rewards, and leave to your blood-relatives / the nation and realm, then you can go forth / to look upon death) (1175a-1180a). Wealhtheow almost imperceptibly threatens Hrothgar by indicating that he will only be able to rest in peace if he does his duty and gives the throne to his sons. Her words expose “the potential instability that could result from Hrothgar’s rash promise of his kingdom to Beowulf” (Horner, Discourse, 79), and, by extension, the instability of the overall

culture. Her criticism of attempted inheritance by deed instead of inheritance by blood reflects the anxiety concerning change within folklore.

Furthermore, the narrator makes it clear that Wealhtheow has, in fact, stepped outside of her fixed gender role. Ideally, in this society, the king holds at least the majority of power, but Wealhtheow implies that she holds the real power, since she claims that the troops *doð swa ic bidde* (1231b), do as she bids. Immediately after she speaks, the text is quick to return her to her proper place, as is evidenced in lines 1188a and 1232a, respectively: *Hwearf Ða bi bence* (She went near the bench), and *Eode Ða to setle* (She went to her seat). In both cases, Wealhtheow's power is reduced by consigning her to a seat on a bench, indicating that she does not have the full right to stand and address the warriors. By speaking, Wealhtheow "trespasses in language as she is also trespassing in the masculine warrior stronghold of the hall" (Overing 97). She is actively stepping outside of her expected gender role, becoming part of the masculine world; this activity makes her gender somewhat fluid, similar to how gender relates to Grendel's Mother. However, she does not intrude as far into masculine behavior as Grendel's Mother does. On the contrary, within her speech, her "style is functionally distinct from Hrothgar's speech in her focus on kin and does not replicate his authoritative code [...] Wealhtheow does not engage in all the features of heroic diction that are authoritatively performed by Hrothgar" (Davidson 149). The fact that she does not fully encroach upon masculine speech and authority indicates her willingness and ability to perform her traditional role as queen; the question remains whether or not she wants to submit to such conventions. Nevertheless, the narrator appears to struggle with Wealhtheow's outspoken nature, anxiously striving to limit her power through her physical position. In fact, "although we might today read her actions as positive examples of female assertiveness, within the poem they represent disintegration of society" (Horner, Discourse, 79).

Wealhtheow's very act of speaking reveals the flaws of society on multiple levels; not only does she expose the complications of the inheritance system, but her actions also defy the culture's gender expectations, causing discord and instability. Her complex role within the poem foreshadows the end of the folkloric culture, even as she endeavors to protect it.

A close analysis of her name is a prerequisite in order to fully understand the nature of her character, since it reveals many composite qualities. Many scholars have written about the possible origin of Wealhtheow's name; however, it has been very problematic trying to determine an origin and translation that appears to fit with her character (Breen 2). Traditionally, scholars have separated the two elements of her name, *wealh* and *Deow*, with *wealh* primarily meaning "foreigner" or "servant" and *Deow* translating into "slave," "servile," or generally "not free" (Damico 59). These translations indicate that Wealhtheow, although she is a noble lady of royal status, functions or has a background of a slave; she does not enjoy extensive freedom. An additional analysis stems from the term *Deowwealh*, from the Legal Code of Ælfred the Great, defining a "group of people who, while not natives, existed in the kingdom and had certain limited legal rights" (Breen 2), further supporting the claim that Wealhtheow is a foreigner with limited rights in Heorot. Oddly, these interpretations appear to be in direct conflict with her regal and dignified character; nevertheless, her name is the sole hint provided for her background, making her another supplementary figure with an ambiguous past, like Grendel's Mother.

Beowulf expounds upon this information when he describes her as the *friðusibb folca* (2017a), the pledge of peace for the nation, suggesting that she is acting within the traditional role as a peace-weaver between two potentially feuding groups, directly placing her as a foreigner in Heorot. Furthermore, *wealh* connects her to "a people on the periphery of society and conveys the sense of reprehensible moral or social behavior" (Damico 62), strengthening her

connection to Grendel's Mother, who undoubtedly displays reprehensible behavior and primarily exists on the fringe of society. Interestingly, *Beow* may also have the slightly more intricate connotation of being "a servant of" someone; many scholars take this meaning to view Wealhtheow as a "servant of the chosen" (Damico 64-5); whether or not this relates to being a servant of God is uncertain. In this context, Wealhtheow's connection to Grendel's Mother becomes vastly more elaborate; the narrator is using her name in order to remind the audience "of certain censurable qualities, moral or social, peculiar to the character that either aesthetic considerations or public or private censorship prevented him from revealing more explicitly in the narrative itself" (Damico 62). Therefore, Wealhtheow's character has the immense responsibility of conveying suppressed themes, including the premise of religious anxiety, without overpowering the main plotline, which is the legend of Beowulf and his heroic campaigns.

Furthermore, the narrator may have been employing word-play with her name and the phonological connection between *wealh* and *wæl*, which translates to "slaughter," indicating that Wealhtheow is actually associated with the idea of destruction (Damico 67), an especially hidden part of her characterization. Overall, Wealhtheow is not a figure who represents perfect peace and harmony or the continuation of the established folkloric society. Instead, she embodies "the problematic dialectic of a major social transition" (Overing 88), namely, the religious transition. Her destructive association is related to the folkloric culture; through Wealhtheow, the narrator exposes the inherent flaws of folklore and the dangers of preserving pagan components.

One of the methods used to convey this warning of the dangers of folklore is to implicitly associate her character with the Valkyrie tradition. With her relation to foreigners and servants, she is directly linked to the Valkyrie figure, who is charged with protection over mortals

(Damico 41). More specifically, her name suggests that she is a female of possible southern origin, she has an ambiguous history of possible servitude or enslavement, and possesses power and influence over others, all of which are characteristics of the Valkyrie (Damico 65). The Valkyries are portrayed within Icelandic and Old Norse literature as fierce, elemental beings and guardians of religious beliefs relating to Odin (Damico 41), making them a significant part of non-Christian, pagan history. Beyond her name, Wealhtheow's primary action of passing the mead cup is archetypal of the Valkyrie's act of welcoming warriors to Valhalla with an outstretched horn or cup (Damico 42). Therefore, as a figure of this tradition, Wealhtheow is more connected to paganism than Christianity, placing her closer to values associated with Grendel's Mother on the continuum of shifting religious values; her Valkyrian function is to ensure the continuation of pagan loyalty, prompting a protective position of folklore and, consequently, Grendel's Mother. However, she also strives to redefine herself through the use of her language (Overing 92), separating herself from both her Valkyrian status and her role as queen. In fact, within folklore, Wealhtheow actually possesses more power than she could as a Valkyrian member within paganism or as a mere queen of a Christian community.

Having the status of this mythical and powerful entity in a folkloric system gives Wealhtheow an immense amount of responsibility throughout the text. This is evident in her first speech, in which she appears to pray, using words such as *eadig* (1225a), blessed, and *dreamhealdende* (1227b), the ability to have power or influence over gladness or 'joy-holding-ness.' She appoints Beowulf with a "charge (which seems divinely sanctioned) that he cleanse Heorot," essentially giving her "the position and powers of a priestess" (Damico 71). This theory is supported by Wealhtheow's speech involving her gift of the *beages* (1216a), a significant piece of jewelry which has come to be known as the Broosing necklace. Her speech "culturally

contextualize[s] gift exchange as that moment when the gift ensures an outcome desired by the speaker,” which implies that Wealhtheow is able to “express both socio-political necessities [...] and individual projects” (Davidson 145). With this ability, Wealhtheow has the power to express a myriad of desires without directly overstepping her place. While this power does not give her the sanctity of a priestess, it certainly gives her an immense amount of influence and control as she can direct Beowulf to do as she pleases without the hindrance of societal gender expectations. With this unique position, Wealhtheow has more influence over others, since she can bestow blessings and supervise over their spiritual actions, than as a servant of Odin or as the queen of Hrothgar. In both of these alternatives, her power is directly linked to a male figure, limiting her influence and making her a secondary figure. In fact, as a Valkyrie of Odin, she is compelled to follow orders and, as a queen, her sole function is to be a peace-weaver through the exchange of her body.

However, Wealhtheow is able to temporarily transcend these roles as an anomalous Valkyrian figure within the folkloric period. As this powerful, pagan-like figure, she has more influence in this transitional period than as a queen would in a purely Christian society. As a Christian queen in Heorot, she would not have the ability to address Beowulf in the manner that she does, as is evidenced by the discomfort of the narrator whenever she does speak. Furthermore, because society is moving away from paganism, her position as queen gives her more power than as a servant of Odin would. Therefore, Wealhtheow has a unique and novel role that would not be available to her in either paganism or Christianity, and she clearly wants to protect her newfound status. Unfortunately, Wealhtheow does not know how to protect this status and her solution is to ensure the destruction Grendel’s Mother, the representation of

paganism. By encouraging the end of pure paganism, Wealhtheow is attempting to safeguard her position as a folkloric queen and prevent society from returning to paganism.

With her unique form of authority, Wealhtheow incites Beowulf towards battle, instigating violence instead of peace (Damico 19), in an effort to destroy paganism and solidify her own unique position. Valkyries have a reputation for pushing warriors into action that will establish their immortal fame and will bring about their destruction (Damico 42). She instructs him to *þisses hrægles neot* (1217b), to make use of the mail shirt, and to *cen þec mid cræfte* (1219a), to declare himself with strength. Although she does not precisely command him to engage in battle, her deliberate choice of words clearly communicate her intentions. By sending him to battle, she is provoking violence in the hopes of eliminating Grendel's Mother and, therefore, paganism, which will allow her to transcend her common duties of servitude. Nevertheless, she must maintain certain elements of paganism for the continuation of folklore, elucidating some of the reasons behind her reproach of Hrothgar's near adoption of Beowulf; she cannot allow fundamental alterations of society, including the movement towards inheritance by deed. This would threaten the established system of folklore, jeopardizing her power and influence.

Interestingly, Wealhtheow is described as *goldhroden* (614a, 640b), gold-adorned, or *beaghroden* (623b), ring-adorned, and Beowulf calls her the *mæru cwen* (2016b), the illustrious queen, when recounting his experiences to Hygelac. All of these depictions portray her as a wealthy, adorned queen; although her character is instilled with violence, these details facilitate this quality, rather than impeding it. In particular, *hroden* is concomitant with the etymological history of *hrust*, which carries the significant connotation of martial ornament or armor (Damico 29). Hence, the narrator's recurring portrayal of Wealhtheow as gold- and ring-adorned is a

continued assertion of her militaristic capabilities. Furthermore, the “gold-adorned female is a source of both man’s magnificence and his destruction” in Old Nordic literature (Damico 81), reinforcing Wealhtheow’s malevolence. *Hroden* also has a double meaning of both “adornment” and “stained with blood,” indicating that Wealhtheow is “literally adorned with gold and, by an association of words, stained with the blood of the slain” (Damico 77-8). This association makes Wealhtheow a very menacing presence in Heorot, especially since her violent nature is solely revealed through word-play, instead of outright stated. The subtlety behind it emphasizes the potential danger, similar to the mystery of Grendel’s Mother and her threatening presence over Heorot. It also raises a question about who Wealhtheow has potentially slain and why, creating more ambiguity surrounding her character. In regards to her being a *mæru cwen*, the imagery of Wealhtheow being illustrious follows the radiant and bright physical presence of the Valkyrie as well (Damico 37). Therefore, Beowulf is not solely giving compliments to the queen; he is also subtly acknowledging her preternatural nature. With this characterization of the battle-ready Valkyrie, Wealhtheow possesses a much greater responsibility over Beowulf’s status as hero than is superficially shown in the text, emphasizing the power she possesses as a folkloric figure.

Beyond Wealhtheow’s Valkyrian background, the narrator correspondingly reveals Wealhtheow’s aggressive nature through dexterous terminology. In lines 614a and 625a, the word *grette* is used when Wealhtheow is moving towards people. This word has multiple meanings; it can be to approach someone, but it can also have the meaning of attacking a person as well. With this connotation, Wealhtheow is presented as a menacing figure, antagonizing those in the hall, emphasizing her presence to the men in order to enforce her will. Even her title as a *folccwen* carries a substantial connotation of political and military influence and places her in conjunction with Beowulf as a *folccyning* (Damico 28). The significance of this comparison is

to accentuate the amount of influence Wealhtheow has, despite her depiction of servility; her Valkyrian connection naturally places her in a secondary position, which is why she endeavors to break out of her prescribed role whenever she can.

It is also worth mentioning that the comparison between *folccwen* and *folccyning* directly insinuates that Wealhtheow's political and military skill is analogous to Beowulf's. She even has her own troop separated from Hrothgar's thanes, the *mægÐa hose* (924b), her company of women. Akin to all else that surround her, this company may also be viewed as a "troop of maidens," with its own significant connotation to the military (Damico 5). More specifically, *mægÐ* is associated with the virgin attendants of the Valkyrie and *hos* is broadly related to military troops (Damico 73). With her own group of female followers, Wealhtheow threatens the very stability within Heorot; instead of acting as a peace-weaver, she is asserting her own strength of character over the community, essentially ensuring peace through a state of violence. In fact, Beowulf also uses the word *friðusibb* to describe Wealhtheow to Hygelac, meaning "pledge-of-peace" (2017a); however, *frið* specifically translates to "protection," "defense," or "armed," indicating that Beowulf is, once again, insinuating that Wealhtheow is not as peaceful as she appears to be; she is preserving peace through a state of arms and violence (Damico 85). With such a strategy, Wealhtheow is destined to failure and destruction. Not only does her speech concerning the protection of her sons fail, which is known by the audience even as she warns Hrothgar against taking the throne away from them (Dockray-Miller 109), but her objective of preserving folklore inevitably fails due to its inherent flaws. No peace-maker succeeds in *Beowulf* and Wealhtheow is no exception.

The concept of peace-making through marriage is a movement away from paganism, yet still fails because of the residual Germanic value of vengeance; the breakdown of this system is

largely due to the fact that the people are placing their faith and trust in peace-weavers, women, instead of God, similar to Beowulf's struggle in the mere owing to his misplaced fealty. A significant message in *Beowulf* is that "the efforts of the peacemaker, while valuable in worldly and social terms, ultimately must fail because of the nature of this world. The peace exists not in woman's but in God's 'embrace'" (Nitzsche 298), and Wealhtheow inadvertently embodies this concept impeccably. Since Wealhtheow is the only female in the poem who speaks (Dockray-Miller 106), it is noteworthy that she is reduced to a silent entity after the death of Grendel's Mother (Horner, Discourse, 80). Once Grendel's Mother's threat of paganism is exterminated by Beowulf, Wealhtheow is relegated to a position as another woman in the crowd, staring at the loot brought back from the mere: *Egeslic for eorlum ond Pære idese mid* ([the head] was horrible for both the earls and the woman [Wealhtheow]) (1649). Wealhtheow receives a special mention here so that the reader does not forget her, but she remains a silent figure, staring at the evidence of Beowulf's success, her voice taken away from her by the narrator.

Wealhtheow's folkloric reign must come to an end, allowing for the progression of society, towards the superiority of Christian values. Despite her efforts, Wealhtheow is unsuccessful in her goals to preserve folklore and, thus, her authority in Heorot; part of her failings lie in her violent, militaristic nature, foreshadowing the inevitable end of folklore in a Christian belief system that ostensibly valued peace and mercy. Despite Wealhtheow's desire to eliminate paganism in favor of folklore to solidify the unique position she has procured for herself, the conclusive death of Grendel's Mother indicates the end of all forms of paganism, leaving Wealhtheow relatively powerless and, therefore, silent. Her silence "leaves us with the riddles of unresolved and unresolvable ambiguity" (Overing 100), causing the audience to feel a sense of uneasiness and hesitation in regards to the future. Wealhtheow's relation to the pagan

past and connection to Grendel's Mother reveals Wealhtheow to be a perilous threat to Heorot. She desires to prevent society from moving forward, towards a purer form of Christianity, because she possesses more power within the culture of folklore. Her failure to effectively embrace both religious cultures, paganism in particular, is indicative of the enigmatic future: how society will change and what that change will mean for the role of women in society.

Both Wealhtheow and Grendel's Mother demonstrate the related apprehension regarding the role of women in a transforming and new society. The uncontrollable nature Grendel's Mother and her relation to the pagan past present clear problems for the society within *Beowulf*, as her very presence threatens to destroy the community. Nevertheless, Wealhtheow is also an example of an outdated ideal for women; the role of peace-weavers is increasingly failing as the culture shifts towards Christianity. Unfortunately, no alternative or solution to this problem is given within *Beowulf*; women are intentionally left without a place in society, compelling them to continue to discover and define their roles as society progresses beyond the text. Grendel's Mother is destroyed by Beowulf and Wealhtheow is demoted to a silent entity, highlighting the lack of power and influence that women will have within the future. Nowhere is this better represented than in the unnamed, Geatish woman at Beowulf's pyre as the poem ends. She sings a *song sorg-cearig* (3152a), a song of sorrowful anxieties, filled with all her fears and trepidations concerning her own vulnerability and that of the future.

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