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# A Feminist Critique of Beowulf: Women as Peace-Weavers and Goaders in Beowulf's Courts

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A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF *BEOWULF*  
WOMEN AS PEACE-WEAVERS AND GOADERS IN *BEOWULF'S* COURTS

A Thesis submitted to  
The Graduate College of  
Marshall University  
In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of English  
by  
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Marshall University  
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## Abstract

This thesis documents the relationship between "Goaders" and "Peace-Weavers" amongst the women of *Beowulf*. These roles have a large place to play within the framework of the *Beowulf* narrative and all of its female characters fall into one of these descriptors.

Goaders are women who have the role of driving men to violence with words. They do not actually perform the violence themselves but instead induce it in others, souring relationships and compelling men to war. Peace-weavers, by contrast, urge men toward reconciliation with speech and encouragement.

Examining the poem's context for these two roles and how they relate to one another provides insight not only into the *Beowulf* poem but also the culture which created it. It, further, provides information on the nature of expected gender roles for women of the period.

## A Feminist Critique of *Beowulf*

### Women as Peace-weavers and Goaders in *Beowulf*'s Courts.

This thesis will examine the fundamental roles of women in the societies described in *Beowulf*, paying specific attention to the function as peace-weavers and goaders.

The origin *peace-weaver* comes from a similar word in Old English called *freodu-webbe* which translates as: *a peace-weaver, woman* (Bosworth 336). The dual meaning implies that women are innately peaceful and meant to bring it to their household.

Gillian Overing had this to say:

The peace-weaving role also opens up a more complex perspective on weaving as *différance*. The play of absence and presence is imaged in these supposedly active weavers of line and connections between tribes and between stories within the text, whose actual presence is shadowy, barely discernible.

It should be noted that Overing is applying Derrida's terminology. The depiction of women in *Beowulf* as shadowy and barely discernible is also one I disagree with. The presence of women (as well as their influence) in events both political and plot-driving is significant.

Overing also had this to say:

They enact and embody the process of weaving; they weave and are woven, by the ties of kinship. The identification of women with their kinship system is made clear by a linguistic equation; Earl points out that the 'terms most used to denote these kindreds in Old English are *mag* and *maegth*, which not coincidentally, are homonymous if not identical with the words for woman. (73)

Despite the idea women are meant to be obedient and docile, the women of *Beowulf* are strong, self-assured, and assertive. Hrothgar's wife Wealtheow, a historical figure named Hildeburh, Beowulf's liege Hygelac's wife Hygd, and Modthyrtho are each possessed of strong personalities that shine forth in different ways.

Overing says it best:

Enacting the ties of kinship, weaving the web of peace in *Beowulf*, is a task of infinite regression, a never-ending process that accurately reflects Derrida's concept of *différance* in that it involves the dual attributes of deferral and absence of resolution, and the attendant presence of a multitude of possibilities, a state of infinite potential. Taking the side of possibility and preferring, as I have outlined in the Introduction, to see this open-ended; they extend and revalue the multidirectionality of the web. (75)

*Différance* is described above as a willingness to defer. Likewise, peace-weavers are beings who possess “absence of resolution” which in-turn, leads to a multiplicity of possibilities.

Their role is automatically assumed to be that of the gentler sex due to the fact that the very words related to the role of peace-weaving are innately feminine. Wealtheow is the devoted mother of Hrothgar's children and exhorts his likely successor, Hrothulf, to protect his children. Hildeburh is the subject of a tragic marriage, in which she sealed an alliance only to have her family betrayed by her husband. Hygd achieves a lasting peace for her kingdom by placing Beowulf on the throne of the Geats. Even Modthyrtho goes from being a callous murderer to an exemplar of virtue and supportive wife.

It should be noted that there is an alternate interpretation of the term peace-weaver, one which is restricted to noble women. This definition is a woman who is married to a rival house as part of a bridal treaty.

As explained by Dorothy Carr Porter:

A good place to begin this discussion is with an examination of the term *peaceweaver* and its use in Old English literature. It is commonly believed that the term *freoduwebbe*, *peaceweaver*, is most often applied to women given in marriage in order to secure peace among enemy or rival peoples., *Freoduwebbe* however, is only used three times in the Old English corpus, and Larry M. Sklute has thus concluded: “[The term] does not necessarily reflect a Germanic custom of giving a woman in marriage to a hostile tribe in order to secure peace. Rather it is a poetic metaphor referring to the person whose function it seems to be to perform openly the action of making peace by weaving to the best of her art a tapestry of friendship and amnesty. (534-540)

I agree with Sklute and believe peace-weavers being a synonym for women makes more sense than the idea that custom of using women as part of bridal treaties had its own formalized name. If *peace-weaver* was the proper term for a woman given as part of a treaty, one would expect the word would appear more. Bridal treaties are an important part of the role of noble women in Danish society as marriage alliances are a central element of feudalism, allowing royal lines to secure themselves against rivals.

The concept of bridal treaties is also discussed within the text of *Beowulf*. We will discuss it further as it directly impacts several characters' lives and impacts the social role a woman plays. For the purposes of this thesis, however, we will analyze it as part of the larger role women have as a "gentling" influence.

As Overing says:

The role of 'peace-weaver' is one of the most familiar and best defined roles for women in *Beowulf* and throughout Old English poetry; it is also one of the most problematic. (74)

It is problematic in the context of being a predetermined role for women but not necessarily being shown within the context of *Beowulf*. Overing is correct that the women of *Beowulf* are not just peace-weavers; they are complex characters who do many things other than engage in this well-defined role. There is a complexity to the women of *Beowulf*. They can be dangerous as well as peaceful. Also, the concept of being a loyal and civilizing influence to one's family does not necessarily mean they are required to be weak.

Indeed, *Beowulf* is filled with a mixture of women both dangerous and mild, though scholars like James W. Earl maintain that the work is actually slanted towards the later, at least in comparison to the Old Norse epics which predate and influence. James Earl had this to say: "Also missing [in *Beowulf*] are powerful, plot-driving women--such as Gudrun and Brunhilde in

*Volsungssaga* and Olof, Yrse, and Skuld in *Hrolfssaga kraka*---perhaps because they are incommensurate with the poem's single-minded masculinism." (291)

The behavior of the women in *Beowulf* as compared to those of the Icelandic sagas is, according to Earl, oppositional. The concept of women as a gentling, nurturing influence is one that has not always been part of Nordic tradition. He maintains that women in *Beowulf* are predominantly gentle and nurturing figures as well as passive figures, certainly in comparison to their literary forbearers.

Contrasting this idea is the concept of goading women. They are powerful, plot-driving women who have a strong place in Nordic tradition. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, goad's first definition is: "A rod or stick, pointed at one end or fitted with a sharp spike and employed for driving cattle, esp. oxen used in ploughing." It comes from the Old English word *gád*, first recorded as the word "gaad" in 725 C.E. The word "goad" appears in the *translation* but not the original Old English of *Njal's Saga*.

A reference to goaders appears in *Njal's Saga* or *The Story of Burnt Njal*. One of the sagas of the Icelanders, *Njal's Saga* deals with questions of integrity and the consequences of vengeance. A major theme of the saga is the fact that whenever peace is within reach, the needs of personal honor force them back into a position of vengeance-seeking. Take, for example, this scene from from Chapter 38 of *Njal's Saga*. Hallgerder is the niece of Hrútr and a woman who provokes the death of her first husband while contributing to the death of her second. Brynjolf is her kinsman and a person she can easily manipulate. Atli is someone Hallgerder perceives as an enemy. She easily manipulates Brynjolf into going and killing Atli.

As translated by George W. DaSent, from the original "Brennu-Njáls saga":

Hallgerda said to Brynjolf - "I have been told Atli is not at home, and he must be winning work on Thorolfsfell."

"What thinkest thou likeliest that he is working at?" says he.

"At something in the wood," she says.

"What shall I do to him?" he asks.

"Thou shalt kill him," says she.

He was rather slow in answering her, and Hallgerda said - "Twould grow less in Thiostolf's eyes to kill Atli if he were alive."

"Thou shalt have no need to goad me on much more," he says, and then he seized his weapons, and takes his horse and mounts, and rides to Thorolf's fell.

This reference from Chapter 39 of *Njal's Saga* also has relevance. After Atli is killed by Brynjolf, Thord thinks of avenging him. Hallgerda drives him forward to his perceived doom by challenging his masculinity but the question of whether or not she's underestimating him comes up.

Take heed," says Thord, "that the same thing does not befall him as befell Atli."

"Thou art no man-slayer," she says, "and so nought will come of it even if ye two do meet."

"Never have I seen man's blood, nor do I know how I should feel if I did," he says, and gallops out of the "town" and down to Acretongue. Rannveig, Gunnar's mother, had heard their talk.

"Thou goadest his mind much, Hallgerda," she says,

"but I think him a dauntless man, and that thy kinsman will find."

Hallgerda is not limited in this respect as a figure who literally attempts to goad men into violence. Her actions illustrate the role of a woman as the opposite of a peace-weaver, playing on the pride of men to drive them to murder. These dualities exist within *Beowulf*, coexisting uneasily in the actions of its chief female characters.

*Beowulf's* female characters are a mixture of peace-weavers and goaders. For instance, the character of Wealtheow attempts to utilize her position as Hrothgar's queen to secure her children's safety in the tumultuous time following her husband's death. Hygd offers the crown of her husband's kingdom to Beowulf in order to secure the safety of the Geatlands after her widowhood. By contrast, Modthyrtho is a murderous character who destroys the lives of

numerous men before being redeemed by the goodness of her husband.

### I. Wealtheow

Let us begin our discussion of the role of women as peace-weavers as opposed to goaders with the most prominent woman in *Beowulf*, Wealtheow. She is introduced at 1163 after the mentioning of Yrs and the establishing of Hrothgar's lineage:

Wealhtheow came forth, glistening in gold,  
to greet the good pair, uncle and nephew;  
their peace was still firm, each true to the other.

þa cwom Wealhþeo forð  
gan under gyldnum beage,      þær þa godan twegen  
sæton suhtergefæderan;      þa gyt wæs hiera sib ætgædere,  
æghwylc oðrum trywe. (1163 to 1166)

Wealhtheow's entrance is given suitable accolades according royalty. Her "glistening in gold" highlights the fact that she is a woman who is wealthy and has a regal presence. Interesting is the statement that both husband and nephew are 'each true to the other' given many scholars believe there will be strife after Hrothgar's death. Currently, in Wealtheow's presence, all is well.

Wealtheow is hostess to Beowulf's party where he is welcomed and entreated to slay the monster, Grendel. Later in *Beowulf*, Wealtheow becomes one of *Beowulf*'s key speakers. Indeed, her speech is one which has a number of interpretations based upon the beliefs of the reader regarding the narrator's intentions.

The Chickering translation of *Beowulf* refers to Hrothgar's queen as a *peace-weaver*. This word is not present in the original Old English, they use the similar term of *friðusibb*. The act of giving gold bracelets is lauded along with her encouragement. It is perhaps here that we get Chickering's opinion of what a peace-weaver is meant to represent. Going back to Wealtheow, it's important to note she is a figure who is meant to bring harmony and generosity

to a bachelor's household.

One of the most controversial questions regarding *Beowulf* is whether the character of Wealtheow is actually a great deal cleverer than she initially appears in the story. The question regarding this curious supposition begins with the one of the more interesting speeches given by a character within *Beowulf*. The context of the speech is just after Beowulf's defeat of the monster Grendel during the ensuing celebration.

The speech opens up with Wealtheow offering a toast which honors her husband, Beowulf, and Hrothulf. She shows exceptional stateliness and poise as she entreats Hrothgar to be grateful to the Weders.

Accept this cup, my noble lord,  
gold-giving king; be filled in your joys  
treasure-friend to all, and give to the Geats  
your kind words, as is proper for men;  
in your generous mind, be gracious to the Weders  
remembering the gifts you have from all tribes.

Onfoh þissum fulle,      freodrihten min,  
sinces brytta!      þu on sælum wes,  
goldwine gumena,      ond to Geatum spræc  
mildum wordum,      swa sceal man don.  
Beo wið Geatas glæd,      geofena gemyndig,  
nean ond feorran      þu nu hafast. (1169 to 1174)

This statement is one that highlights the generosity expected of a noble lord. Wealtheow, as a woman who entreats Hrothgar on behalf of the court's friends, shows herself to be simultaneously generous and a person who remembers their friendship. Her actions may be a sign of political savvy, as generosity to one's supporters can only benefit a monarchy in the long run.

I have been told you would have this warrior  
for your son. Heorot is cleansed,  
bright hall of rings; use while you may  
your gifts from so many, and leave to your kinsmen

the nation and folk when you must go forth  
to await your judgment. Full well I know  
of my gracious Hrothulf that he would rule  
the young men in honor, would keep all well,  
if you should give up the world before him.  
I expect he will want to repay sons  
only with good once he recalls  
all we have done when he was younger  
to honor his desires and his name in the world.”

"Me man sægde        þæt þu ðe for sunu wolde  
hererinc habban.      Heorot is gefælsod,  
beahsele beorhta;    bruc þenden þu mote  
manigra medo,        ond þinum magum læf  
folc ond rice,        þonne ðu forð scyle  
metodsceaft seon.    Ic minne can  
glædne Hroþulf,      þæt he þa geogoðe wile  
arum healdan,        gyf þu ær þonne he,  
wine Scildinga,        worold oflættest;  
wene ic þæt he mid gode    gyldan wille  
uncran eaferan,        gif he þæt eal gemon,  
hwæt wit to willan      ond to worðmyndum  
umborwesendum ær      arna gefremedon. (1175-1188)

If Hrothgar dies before his sons reach adulthood or becomes weak in his old age, the throne will pass to Hrothulf. This fact tells us a bit about the culture which celebrates warriors and battle prowess above inheritance law. Women must work to safeguard their children's inheritance as Wealtheow does by reminding Hrothgar of his obligations to his kinsmen. This truth shows Wealtheow has her hand on the politics of the court.

One could make the interpretation Wealtheow is actually safeguarding the legacy of not only her sons but also Hrothulf's position. We do not know what exactly is meant by Hrothgar taking Beowulf as his "son" but the scene may well be interpreted as Wealtheow foreseeing the possibility that Beowulf might exert some claim. Her line about "leave to your kinsmen the nation" (1179) may, in fact, confirm it. By attempting to keep it "in the family" she is trusting Hrothulf to have a greater stake in protecting the legacy of her children (his nephews).

The appeal is one that may equally be taken as one meant to shame Hrothulf into being good to his cousins and not claiming the throne for himself through treachery, especially after Wealtheow publicly comes to his defense in this scene. Were he to steal the throne of his nephews, it would be a terrible act of dishonor and ingratitude which Wealtheow is reminding the court of in a way not drawing attention to it. It is one that is quite clever, playing on both masculine pride and guilt.

In either case, Wealtheow is trusting Hrothulf with the care of her sons after Hrothgar's death, which is the highest honor anyone can be given by a parent. If any treachery is expected, it is not brought up within the body of the text and there is no indication that Wealtheow is not sincere in her belief that it will be a peaceful transition of power with no harm done to her children. Beowulf may possess the height of honor but Wealtheow cannot know that and is clearly wary. This wariness alludes to a perceptiveness and intelligence others have ignored.

That does not mean others have not taken a more negative view of Wealtheow's speech. Those with a far more negative view of Wealtheow treat her as a woman lacking guile and possessing little in the way of political cunning as opposed to an embodiment of Danish royalty. Far from a soothing influence, Robert P. Creed, believes her to be either desperate or simply painfully naïve. He has this to say: "Hrothgar's queen, Wealtheow, is masterfully done: the irony of her appeals, on behalf of her young sons, must have been apparent to all who listened." (73) Hrothulf is expected to protect both children and repay the kindness shown him.

Robert P. Creed goes on to say, "Most of her speeches are full of tragic implications, well known to the Anglo-Saxon audience. Her view of the passion-filled Danish court, destined to erupt in treachery and murder after Hrothgar's death, includes such expressions of mistaken (or desperate?) good faith as this:

All men speak softly, here, speak mildly and trust their  
 neighbors, protect their lord, are loyal are loyal followers  
 who would fight as joyfully as they drink...

Her is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe,  
 modes milde, mandrihtne **hold**;  
 þegnas syndon geþwære, þeod ealgearo,  
 druncne dryhtguman doð swa ic bidde. (1228-1231)

Robert P. Creed believes Wealtheow is a fundamentally passive character, one who is only there to bear helpless witness to the tragedy which will befall both the kingdom of the Danes and her sons. He believes Wealtheow has no influence over the court and its decisions. When her husband perishes, Wealtheow and her children are going to be subject to the rule of the next monarch. Wealtheow is reduced to entreaties in order to try and protect her children after Hrothgar's death.

I disagree with this interpretation due to the fact that, as king, Hrothulf will have authority over all of them, and there is no direct move Wealtheow can make. Appealing to his vanity and honor may be the only move Wealtheow is capable of making but it is a clever one. Likewise, her inability to prevent a conflict doesn't necessarily imply that she herself is a failure.

Indeed, Wealtheow may serve as the idealized queen for early Medieval audiences. She is a capable mother, supporting wife, and a majestic queen. Wealtheow is always respectful and loving to her husband but serves as a knowing advisor as well. Ultimately, the historical kingdom of Hrothgar will be destroyed but this is not necessarily solely the result of any of the decisions made by Wealtheow or other characters within *Beowulf*.

Beowulf, in many ways the ideal king, was unable to perpetually protect his kingdom from destruction. One should not belittle his accomplishments because of this failure.

Wealtheow, whether you believe she is ultimately a passive figure rendered helpless by her

circumstances or a manipulator attempting to protect her offspring from disinheritance, is one of the most important female characters within *Beowulf*.

Helen Damico has an alternative interpretation of Wealtheow in *Beowulf's Wealtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, highlighting her belief that Wealtheow is an embodiment of stateliness and Anglo-Saxon femininity that brings courtly beauty to a place otherwise lacking it:

The traditional critical response to Wealtheow prior to Lawrence's reappraisal of her in 1928 was typified by W.P. Ker's assessment: *Wealtheow, the queen, represents the poetical idea of a noble lady; there is nothing complex or strongly dynamic in her character*. On one level, the poem substantiates Ker's sentiments. Wealtheow's munificence, stateliness, and decorousness of manner support his estimation of the queen as an exemplar of aristocratic Anglo-Saxon womanhood. Her role as a royal hostess promotes a concept of her as a decorative figure. Into a predominately masculine society, Wealtheow's presence in the banqueting scenes introduces a feminine principle with splendor and elegance. (16)

In this interpretation, Wealtheow is an archetypal example of noble femininity that exists within the structure of early Medieval Danish society. The fact that she primarily exists to reward Beowulf and speak of the coming tragedy that will afflict her household with the death of her husband doesn't undermine this. Ultimately, her words are a plea for peace and unity in a time of uncertainty and bloodshed.

Helen Damico speculates that Wealtheow, as a hostess figure, is actually more in-line with the Nordic Valkyrie tradition as opposed to merely a "helpless" figure. This proposition makes a certain amount of sense as her status as a "doomed queen" is due to hindsight.

Damico highlights the contradiction:

Underlying the revelry into which these female figures are placed is an element of foreboding that modifies and deepens the decorative aspect of the characters. The rejoicing at Valhalla, for example, is to be short lived, for the heroes assembled in the great hall are awaiting Ragnarok the gods and heroes, and the world will come to its end. On occasion, this welcoming female figure is imbued with violence. Helen embodies lust that precipitates destruction; in Dido

there lies submerged the violent passion that brings about her suicide; and Freya in addition to her role as battle-goddess, is an object of desire that instigates conflict in the court of the Aesir (18).

Although Damico goes with the interpretation that Wealtheow is entrusting the wrong man with her children's safety, there are alternative opinions on this subject. William Cooke states there is not necessarily much evidence for this interpretation:

Far too many students of Beowulf, the notion that Hrothulf usurped the Danish throne after his uncle Hrothgar's death and either killed Hrothgar's sons or drove them into exile seems to remain received dogma, while some still cling to the belief that Hrothulf killed Hrothgar to obtain the throne. But those reconstructions of the story underlying the poem have no good foundation in the text, contradict the Scandinavian traditions that give us our only recourse for elucidating it, and flow from ignorance of succession customs in AngloSaxon England and old Germanic kingdoms in general (1).

Cooke discounts the position of Hrothulf as a usurper and instead maintains he is actually the chosen heir of Hrothgar as opposed to the vile usurper that other texts maintain him to be. Indeed, that there is no reason to consider him a potential danger to Wealtheow's sons.

To appreciate the situation at Hrothgar's court when Beowulf pays his visit, we must begin by understanding that kingship in the ancient Germanic world did not invariably pass from father to son. Kingship was dynastic, in the sense that the right to rule belonged to a particular family, but it was also elective, in that the late king's senior henchmen—his *comitatus* or *gesipas*, who later developed into the magnates of the realm—had the right to choose the member or members of the royal house whom they judged fittest to succeed. (1)

By Cooke's reckoning, Wealtheow is entirely guiltless. The scene in the hall becomes much more innocent with Wealtheow merely reminding Hrothgar of his immediate family's prior claim to the throne. Wealtheow is reinforcing Hrothulf's position on the trust he will take care of her children and has no need to fear treachery. Indeed, under the idea that inheritance doesn't necessarily go down a patrilineal line, the fact that her children will not become monarchs does not necessarily mean Hrothulf is a usurper. It merely means he was selected as king. Wealtheow

may not be hoping for her children to take the throne but simply live to adulthood in safety.

Wealtheow, in contrast to the Valkyries, is most certainly a peace-weaver. None of her actions during *Beowulf* in any way result in violence and are all designed to quell violence or toast the warriors who have done it already (bringing peace to Hrothgar's kingdom). Her request to Hrothulf is designed specifically to prevent further bloodshed, to remind him of his obligations to her children and secure a place for them in the future of the kingdom. Still, despite this element, there are critics who feel that Wealtheow is a character who represents a sort of duality which exists between being a peace-weaver and a goading figure.

Overing had this to say on the peculiar double-edged nature of her role:

As we listen to Queen Wealtheow assert the rule of language over the rule of violence, we see her own double subjugation: she is manipulated by the same rule of language that she seeks to assert, and as a speaking woman she must use and be used by the language of the masculine economy. Wealtheow's speeches offer a demonstration of the Lacanian assumption that language is our inscription into patriarchy; language embodies the Name-Of-The-Father or phallogocentric Law; and is the point at which we enter the symbolic order. In Wealtheow's language we see violence speaking and violence spoken against.

Wealtheow is acting on behalf of the kingdom as well as Hrothulf and her sons. If Hrothgar adopts Beowulf as his son, it will potentially cause questions over whether or not Beowulf should be king as opposed to Hrothulf. Although there is no indication that Beowulf has any designs on Hrothgar's throne, Wealtheow has no way of knowing that. Here she is attempting to head off any potential dispute in a light and conversational manner. Overing has further compliments to pay Wealtheow's language, highlighting her speech:

Wealtheow's language is particularly interesting because of the variety of ambiguities it causes to surface---all of which make her a formidable speaker. As a spokeswoman for the power of language, she directs desire away from literal death and speaks for desire as representation, offering, affirming, ambiguity by rejection of resolution inherent in language. (91)

Queen Wealtheow is trying to assert herself, even if she is unable to do so, within the

context of *Beowulf*. Thus, we are able to catch a glimpse of a woman attempting to drive the court through the only avenues available to her. These options may not permit her to do much about her position but still show the effort made on behalf of her two sons. In this respect, she is perhaps not all as much a pathetic figure as might be initially supposed but still one devoted to peace for her children.

Further examining the language of the peace-weaver interpretation of Wealtheow, we may come to the interpretation she is a person able to use ritual to manipulate. It is an effort which shows her devotion to peace-weaving. Gilliam Overing had this to say:

In the first part of her speech to Beowulf, Wealtheow also makes skillful use of the ceremonial context, and her own formal role as cupbearer and treasurer dispenser, to extract a promise from the hero, summoning ritual to the aid of language. She tries to translate and confine their function to the representative domain of language, arrogating their previous translatability into literal signification. Indeed this cup-bearing scene may be visualized as a wonderfully complex enactment and embodiment of the weaving of a *différance*.

The peace-weaver who is herself the representation and embodiment of her function, Wealtheow physically draws lines of connection, enacts the process of weaving, as she carries the cup from one warrior to another. This literal and representational weaving resonates in her language, where the play of her own absence and presence continues to present, to represent the echo or trace of her presence. (96)

## II. Hildeburh

Arguably, the most powerful story in *Beowulf* is Hildeburh's. She is, perhaps, the woman who best represents the role of peace-weaver as bridal offering. Her tale offers startling insights into the role of women in Nordic society by illustrating the complex politics which can emerge around bridal treaties.

Hildeburh, the daughter of Hoc, is a woman married off to Finn, leader of a group of "giants" who proceeds to treacherously turn against her father's people. Hildeburh is, thus, caught up in a feud between them that kills both her brother and son.

Her story opens with the following quotation:

No need at all that Hildeburh praise  
 the faith of the "giants"; guiltless herself,  
 she lost her loved ones in that clash of shields,  
 her son and brother--they were born to fall,  
 slain by spear-thrusts. She knew deep grief,  
 not without cause did Hoc's daughter mourn  
 the web's short measure that fated morning  
 when she saw their bodies, her murdered kinsmen,  
 under the skies where she had known her greatest joy.

Ee huru Hildeburh herian þorfte  
 Eotena treowe; unsynnum wearð  
 beloren leofum æt þam lindplegan,  
 bearnum ond broðrum; hie on gebyrd hruron,  
 gare wunde. þæt wæs geomuru ides!  
 Nalles holinga Hoces dohtor  
 meotodsceaft bemearn, syþðan morgen com,  
 ða heo under swegle geseon meahte  
 morþorbealo maga, þær heo ær mæste heold  
 worolde wynne. (1071-1080)

Lady Hildeburh's story is particularly tragic as the start of the tale points out she is the wife of a treacherous monster who has launched an unprovoked assault on a kingdom he is joined to by marriage. Hildeburh is a passive victim of the conflict. She is a figure caught up in the vagaries of politics, not a person who is in any way responsible for the disaster. Instead, she is a firm lesson regarding the potential dangers of bridal treaties. As a woman who was given up to seal an alliance, she is possibly amongst enemies as opposed to friends.

A symbol of Hildeburh's tragic situation occurs when both her brother and son are killed on the battlefield:

Then Hildeburh ordered her own dead son  
 placed on the pyre beside his uncle,  
 their bone-cases burned, given full fire-burial.  
 Beside them both the noblewoman wept,  
 mourned with songs.

Het ða Hildeburh æt Hnæfes ade

hire selfre sunu      sweoloðe befæstan,  
 banfatu bærnan      ond on bæl don  
 eame on eaxle. (1114-1118)

This action is strongly symbolic, placing her as the mother in mourning for her son while simultaneously also placing her in the role of the scorned kinswoman. She is a double victim of this treacherous attack by her husband due to the fact that, not only has she lost her kin, but also her heir. Given the importance placed on child-rearing and motherhood by early Danish society, this is a double blow to her expected place in Danish patriarchal society.

Ultimately, the victory of Finn is short-lived and his treachery is repaid in full. The Danes' victory results in Hildeburh being reclaimed by her kinsmen, an act which does not undo the tragedy of her situation.

The exile departed,  
 the guest, from the court; he thought more of vengeance,  
 total and utter, then departure by sea ,  
 how to drive the matter to a full grief-meeting,  
 that the Frisians be deeply remembered by sword."

Fundode wrecca,  
 gist of gearдум;      he to gyrnwræce  
 swiðor þohte      þonne to sælade,  
 gif he torngemot      þurhteon mihte  
 þæt he Eotena bearn      inne gemunde. (1137-1140)

If there was any doubt of whose side that Hildeburh is on, this passage dispels it, highlighting her miserable situation:

The Scylding warriors  
 bore to their ship every good heirloom  
 they found in the house of the great King Finn,  
 gold seals, gem-brooches. Over the sea  
 they carried the queen back to the Danes,  
 brought her to her people.

Sceotend Scyldinga      to scypon feredon  
 eal ingesteald      eorðcyninges,

swylce hie æt Finnes ham      findan meahton  
 sigla, searogimma.      Hie on sælade  
 drihtlice wif      to Denum feredon,  
 læddon to leodum.      Leoð wæs asungen,  
 gleomannes gyd. (1554 to 1160)

Hildeburh is a peace-weaver who was meant to play a direct role in the settling of the conflict between her husband and her father. She is a direct example of the bridal treaty interpretation of the word peace-weaver and was probably meant to soothe the aggressions of her husband in addition to sealing their pact. Sadly, this proved impossible and led to the death of two close male relatives.

Hildeburh's story highlights the potential dangers of arranged marriages between feuding houses. Intermarriage between noble houses might temporarily alleviate war but they are not guaranteed to bring a lasting peace between feuding houses. In fact, they certainly fail in lasting peace:

The gathering rejoiced;  
 never have I seen, in all my days  
 under my days under heaven's roof, a greater mead-feast  
 of noble retainers. His famous queen,  
 peace-weaver of nations, walked through the hall,  
 encouraged the striplings; time and again  
 before she was seated she gave gold bracelets.

Ic ðær furðum cwom  
 Weorod wæs on wynne;      ne seah ic widan feorh  
 under heofones hwealf      healsittendra  
 medudream maran.      Hwilum mæru cwen,  
 friðusibb folca,      flet eall geondhwearf,  
 bædde byre geonge;      oft hio beahwriðan. (2012 to 2019)

### III. Freawaru

It is here that we are set up for the purpose of discussing Hrothgar's own daughter about to be married off. We do not know whether or not Hrothgar is feuding with her intended but we are introduced to the circumstances with a merry environment.

This is the passage in which we're introduced to Hrothgar's daughter Freawaru:

At times, his daughter took vessels of mead  
to the veteran nobility throughout the whole hall;  
I heard the men give her the name Freawaru  
when she passed to those heroes the gem-studded cup.  
She has been promised, young, gold-laden  
to the gracious Ingeld, son of King Froda.

Hwilum for duguðe dohtor Hroðgares  
eorlum on ende ealuwæge bær;  
þa ic Freaware fletsittende  
nemnan hyrde, þær hio nægled sinc  
hæleðum sealde. (2020 to 2024)

Freawaru has been "promised" to Ingeld, which implies that a marriage compact has been established between them. She is currently serving a gem-studded cup to Beowulf and his men but is meant for another. Interestingly, *Beowulf* highlights that her marriage is also coming "gold-laden." *Beowulf*'s attention to wealth indicates that the Danes are as concerned with money as modern peoples. It also implies that Freawaru is bringing a dowry to her new marriage. Furthermore, *Beowulf* highlights she is young, which is probably meant to illustrate she will be pleasing to King Froda's eyes.

The Scylding king has brought this about,  
the guard of his own kingdom accepts the opinion  
that with the young woman he'll settle his share  
of the killings and feud. But seldom anywhere,  
after a slaying, will the death-spear rest  
even for a while, though the bride be good.

hafað þæs geworden wine Scyldinga,  
rices hyrde, ond þæt ræd talað,  
þæt he mid ðy wife wælfæhða dæl,  
sæcca gesette. Oft seldan hwær  
æfter leodhryre lytle hwile  
bongar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge! (2026 to 2031)

The Scylding king is apparently the party responsible for this bridal treaty as its stated he's the one who "has brought this about." The narrator, however, believes that even though the

bride is good this plan is ultimately doomed to failure. It is here that we receive one of the most thorough descriptions of how the bridal treaty element of peace-weaving can and will fail:

The lord of the Heathobards may well be displeased,  
 and each of his thanes, his nation's retainers  
 when the Danish attendant walks in their hall  
 beside his lady, is honorably received.  
 On Danish belts swing shining heirlooms,  
 sharp as of old, and the Heathobard's ring-treasures  
 for as long as they could wield those weapons  
 till they finally lead into that shield-play  
 their beloved companions, and their own lives,  
 then at the beerfeast an old fighter speaks,  
 who sees that ring-hilt, remembers it all..."

"Mæg þæs þonne ofþyncan      ðeodne Heaðobeardna  
 ond þegna gehwam      þara leoda,  
 þonne he mid fæmnan      on flett gæð,  
 dryhtbearn Dena,      duguða biwenede;  
 on him gladiað      gomeþra lafe,  
 heard ond hringmæl      Heaðabeardna gestreon  
 þenden hie ðam wæpnum      wealdan moston,  
 oððæt hie forlæddan      to ðam lindplegan  
 swæse gesiðas      ond hyra sylfra feorh. (2033 to 2041)

It is not the bride who is responsible for the failure of the treaty. By all accounts, the matter is completely out of her hands. Instead, the very nature of bringing the wedding to the place where the victories of the past are celebrated is likely to enflame old passions.

The story goes on to describe how the veteran enflames a younger man to murdering one of the host party by playing on the fact that one of the weapons is his by right of inheritance. The young man then kills one of the guest's party and makes off with said weapon.

The slayer will escape,  
 get away with his life, he knows the country.  
 Then, on both sides, broken like swords,  
 the noble's oath-swearing, once deadly hate  
 wells up in Ingeld; in that hot passion  
 his love for his wife, will cool.  
 So I count it little, the Heathobard's loyalty,

friendship so fair, peace-sharing with Danes,  
think it less than truth.

                  him se oðer þonan  
losað lifigende,      con him land geara.  
þonne bioð abrocene      on ba healfe  
aðsweord eorla;      syððan Ingelde  
weallað wælniðas,      ond him wiflufan  
æfter cearwælmum      colran weorðað.  
þy ic Heaðobeardna      hylde ne telge,  
dryhtsibbe dæl      Denum unfæcne,  
freondscipe fæstne. (2061 to 2069).

Beowulf's denunciation of the bridal treaty concept is a rather cruel one for women in the world of *Beowulf*. It informs us that Freawaru is doomed to the same sort of sadness that Hildeburh endured as part of her life if there is an ongoing feud between Ingeld and Hrothgar.

The *Beowulf* narrator goes further into the description of the horrible effects weddings between enemy families has on a marriage and suggests they are doomed to fail. The hearts of husbands will invariably cool, even if the women are good.

Apparently, many of Freawaru's kinsmen will perish in the same manner that Hildeburh's son and uncle did. It is doubly tragic because it means that the sacrifice Freawaru is making, giving up her freedom and homeland to marry the enemy of her people, is ultimately a pointless one. Even worse, it is a counterproductive action.

The acts of such marriage alliances buy a temporary truce between two warring powers but the fundamental point of dispute, past bloodshed between the two powers and unreturned treasures, still remains.

Really, the marriage ceremony is described as becoming an exercise in humiliation for the husband rather than a joyous union of two houses. A humiliation of guests the hosts want to make sure feel welcomed and well-treated. They have stolen treasures and trophies paraded in front of them (and their men) when they should be working toward reconciliation.

When faced with greed and a lust for vengeance, the poet pessimistically believes greed and vengeance will triumph. It is a vicious cycle exposing the evils of society and even the narrator, a man of the early Middle Ages, seems to agree that it is an excessively cruel thing to do to a young woman.

As Harold Bloom states on the issue in *Analysis of Beowulf*:

But Beowulf is not convinced that their enmity can be overcome by such a match. (His caution as the poem's original audience would know is justified. In 520, Ingeld attacked and burned Heorot before being routed by the Danes. (21)

As such, history proves Beowulf is not only a great warrior but eerily accurate in his presumption of the fundamental causes of such war.

Still, the system which affords wives the position by being the socializing influence on their husbands is also one that is meant to serve their interests. In a world where a woman's place is determined by the strength and position of her husband, as shown by Wealtheow's speech; marrying them to the strongest warriors possible is a benefit to them.

There is also a practical, if Machiavellian, benefit to such bridal treaties. Should a feud continue beyond a marriage, the line of the household defeated will continue onwards in their enemy's ranks. This plan provides a way for a dynasty to continue even if one side is totally destroyed by the end of the conflict.

I believe the assumption of bridal treaties being dangerous is incorrect. The society depicted in *Beowulf* is one in which violence is a daily part of life. Even a temporary truce brought about by a bridal treaty is one to be savored. Likewise, it guarantees that a household will continue no matter the outcome of a war. Dismissing the benefits of a bridal treaty despite the possibility of war later breaking out between rivals seems disingenuous, even within the context of the narrative.

The daughter of Hrothgar serves as a hostess to the victorious warriors under the command of Beowulf. This is an honored position, serving as the cupbearers to warriors like Beowulf and his men. The act of serving mead is an unspoken part of the “peacemaker process” as the hostesses contribute to the peaceful mood and merriment. After the battle, the celebration eases the tensions and horrors of the war. It is also possible that the hostesses may attract the attention of warriors and marriage alliances be formed.

#### IV. Grendel's Mother

The character of Grendel's mother is one of the most fearsome in the *Beowulf* poem. She is an active character who physically engages the hero in battle as opposed to attempting to trick or subvert him. Her introduction in *Beowulf* highlights her monstrous supernatural nature:

Grendel's mother,  
 lady troll-wife,    remembered misery,  
 she who the dreadful water    had to inhabit,  
 the cold currents,    after strife arose through him,  
 a sword-slayer to    an only brother,  
 father's kin;    he went then stained,  
 marked by the murder,    fled human pleasures,  
 lived in the wilds.    Then awoke many  
 fated spirits;

Grendel warode,  
 unriht æfnde,    oþþæt ende becwom,  
 swylt æfter synnum.    þæt gesyne wearþ,  
 widcuþ werum,    þætte wrecend þa gyt  
 lifde æfter laþum,    lange þrage,  
 æfter guðceare.    Grendles modor,  
 ides, aglæcwif,    yrmþe gemunde,  
 se þe wæteregesane    wunian scolde,  
 cealde streamas,    siþðan Cain wearð  
 to ecgbanan    angan breþer,  
 fæderenmæge;    he þa fag gewat,  
 morþre gemearcod,    mandream fleon,  
 westen warode.    þanon woc fela  
 geosceaftgasta;    wæs þæra Grendel sum,

heorowearh hetelic; . (1253-1267)

Instead, of the largely supportive and gentle women of the court previously introduced, Grendel's mother is a monster every bit as savage as her son (albeit not quite as powerful).

Bloom states this about Grendel's mother:

The ominous tone [for the evening] is made more explicit as the thanes settle down in Heorot for the night (lines 1241-1299). One will be killed, the poet reports, because Grendel has a mother. As the thanes sleep, Grendel's mother comes to Heorot seeking revenge for the death of her son. Although not as strong or terrible as Grendel, she bursts into the hall and quickly kills a thane, escaping with his body—and with Grendel's arm. (18)

The mention of vengeance by Bloom is interesting as it highlights the difference between mother and son. Unlike Grendel, who is seemingly motivated by a pure hatred of good and joy, she is a figure who is instead motivated by something that might well be sympathetic to audiences: the love of her son.

Grendel's mother is, far from being a peace-weaver, a creature of tremendous evil. Still, being a villain doesn't necessarily preclude her having sympathetic qualities. There is a strong indication that she is also not a bringer of great destruction and chaos like her son, but only begins her attacks against Hrothgar's men because of her child's loss.

Despite Grendel's mother's capacity for destruction, she is not a goading figure. She does not encourage others to do acts of murder but commits them herself. Instead, she is a unique figure who does not fall between these two states. She, like her son, exists apart from Nordic society.

#### V. Hygd and Modthyrtho

The role of women as peace-makers and goaders gets no greater example than both Hygd and Modthyrtho. They are, arguably, the two best examples of the peacer-weaver/goader contrast with Hygd representing peace-weavers and Modthytho representing goaders. Modthyrtho serves

as a perfect contrast to Hygd through her many dark actions. Discussing these two women gives a great deal of insight into the nature of women's roles in Danish society.

The two women, (especially Hygd), have an important role in defining how noble women relate to the characters within Beowulf.

Here is the introduction of Hygd, wife of King Hygelac:

His buildings were splendid, the king a great ruler,  
mighty in hall, and Hygd very young,  
wise, and courteous, although few winters  
Haerethes' daughter as yet passed  
within that stronghold. Nor was she thereby  
the more close-fisted, a niggard in gifts  
to men of the Geats.

Bold wæs betlic, bregorof cyning,  
heah in healle, Hygd swiðe geong,  
wis, welþungen, þeah ðe wintra lyt  
under burhlocan gebiden hæbbe,  
Hæreþes dohtor; næs hio hnah swa þeah,  
ne to gneað gifa Geata leodum,  
maþmgestreona. (1925 to 1931)

Hygd is described in glowing terms. She is considered wise, courteous, and generous by the author, which makes the contrast with Modthyrtho, introduced here by the poet, all the more telling.

Modthyrtho, however, that mighty queen,  
did terrible crimes.  
None of the boldest among the retainers  
dared to approach her, unless a great lord.  
Whoever looked into her eyes in broad daylight  
could count on the garrote, the death-bonds prepared  
woven by hand, an arrest, and thereafter  
the charge was quickly settled with the edge of a sword;  
the sharp-shadow pattern would suddenly fall,  
make known its death-evil. Not queenly  
customs in a lady, however beautiful--  
to take the live of beloved men,  
a woman, peace-weaver, inventing false charges."

Mod þryðo wæg,  
 fremu folces cwen, firen ondrysne,  
 Nænig þæt dorste deor geneþan  
 swæsra gesiða, nefne sinfrea,  
 þæt hire an dæges eagum starede,  
 ac him wælbende weotode tealde  
 handgewriþene; hraþe seoþðan wæs  
 æfter mundgripe mece geþinged,  
 þæt hit sceadenmæl scyran moste,  
 cwealmbealu cyðan. Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw  
 idese to efnanne, þeah ðe hio ænlicu sy,  
 þætte freoðuwebbe feores onsæce  
 æfter ligetorne leofne mannan. (1925-1945)

The contrast between Modthyrtho and Hygd is one of almost complete opposites in term of feminine ideals. Hygd is the more traditionally feminine of the two women and held up as an ideal. Hygd is a woman, like Wealtheow, who is simultaneously generous as well as regal. Special note is made several times in *Beowulf* of her generosity, highlighting that this is an important quality for queens. Even her name is a clue to her nature. *Beowulf* scholar Robert P. Creed describes that her name means "thoughtful" or "prudent" which properly describes her personality.

Bloom highlights that Hygd is a woman who has comparisons to great queens of the Geat's past:

The poem praises their hall, their king, Hygelac; and especially their young and generous queen, Hygd, who is compared favorably with Modthyrtho. Modthyrtho is a fourth-century queen who, in her youth, had any thane who looked at her face in the daytime put to death. (21)

Even Beowulf, the protagonist, honors Hygd. As Bloom states in his summary of *Beowulf*:

He is ever-loyal to Hygelac, his lord and kinsman, and generous towards Hygelac's queen, Hygd, giving her the gold necklace that Wealtheow bestowed on him. (21)

Still, Beowulf's honor of her ultimately pays off in a grand way later in *Beowulf*. Bloom summarizes how Hygd is notable in Beowulf's rise to power as King of the Geats:

After the battle in which Hygelac was killed (which took place in Frisia, in what is now the Netherlands), Beowulf swam back to southern Sweden carrying as trophies the armor of no less than thirty warriors he had slain. He so impressed Hygd that she offered him the throne over her own son, Heardred. (23)

This action is actually a very canny political move by Hygd because it indebts Beowulf to her. It also protects her son by taking him out of any chaos which might arrive post her husband's death. By offering Beowulf the throne of the Geats, she helps solidify his claim and brings lasting peace to the realm.

Overing's treatment of *différance* is interesting to remember here. Because of Hygd's actions, the fate of Hygelac's kingdom is changed forever. Her presence is hardly "barely discernable" nor is it "shadowy." Indeed, it is front and center at the heart of a major political power struggle. She manages to weave peace from a potentially explosive situation in a direct and forthright manner. Hygd is a king-maker.

One theory even goes so far to state that Beowulf may have married Hygd. This idea is taken from the idea that the woman who mourns Beowulf at the end of *Beowulf*, read as *geomeowle* and interpreted as "old (married) woman" in an earlier edition, is actually Beowulf's widow. Given the prominent place of Hygd in the story and the scene where there is a debate about how he is to assume power in the region, it is possible Beowulf married her and raised her former husband's son as his own.

John C. Pope, disagrees with this assertion in *Queen Hygd and the word "Geomeowle."*:

By thus taking it for granted that *sio geomeowle*, which as will appear, has been very dubiously supposed to mean "the old (married) woman," must refer to Beowulf's widow, whether or not this woman was Hygd, Bugge introduced a notion that is at variance with all other indications in the poem and confused the issue almost disastrously. (78)

Pope's idea of Hygd being Beowulf's widow is one which has no real textual support within the poem and is one I must agree with. Despite this, she is in no way less important. She overrides her son's claims and, although he initially refuses her offer to help, her support significantly helps Beowulf gain his kingship.

Pope doesn't necessarily disregard the possibility that Queen Hygd is the old woman mourner at Beowulf's funeral. As Pope points out in his article, once you remove Engelhardt's idea that the mourner is Beowulf's widow, the idea becomes far more plausible.

Queen Hygd having a place at Beowulf's funeral would be symbolically important. The widow of Hygelac serves as a person who recognizes the importance of Beowulf in bringing peace to the Geats. If Queen Hygd is the widow, she is a woman who has managed to alter the course of a nation through her actions.

It is interesting to examine how Queen Hygd *is* able to wield so much power within Geatish society. Not only is she a woman but she is apparently capable of influencing the court enough that it is her doing that allows Beowulf to ascend to the throne as opposed to her son. She is influential in her role as queen and not just the consort of the king. This status points to a respectable place for women not only within Geatish society but within the halls of power.

It is Hygd who defers to Beowulf and helps him become king. As a peace-weaver and queen, she is able to maneuver events which will guarantee a great protector for her realm and a peaceful transition of power directly rather than indirectly. Had Hygd been more like Modthyrtho, then she would have been able to dispose of Beowulf through her influence as queen or, at the very least, make it very difficult for him to establish himself as monarch without bloodshed.

Modthyrtho, on the other hand, is an embodiment of everything that Hygd is not. She is

less a character than a deliberate contrast. Modthyrtho is established with qualities that a modern audience might initially sympathize with, like her strong will. However, these positive elements are undercut by the fact that she is a murderer.

Interestingly, the author doesn't have her murder individuals directly but uses a more manipulative corruption of her position. As a princess, she is believed over the young warriors who offend her and this allows her to engage in causal murder of individuals around her.

These crimes show her as the exact opposite of what the narrator believes to be the proper place of a noble woman. Instead of being a peace-maker, she is a goader. Modthyrtho is a person who incites men to violence against other men, using her position to command them. Curiously, this state doesn't last long. The situation dramatically reverses itself later in Modthyrtho's life:

The kinsmen of Hemming put a stop to all that.  
Men round the table told more of the story  
said that she caused less harm to the people,  
malicious trouble, once she was given,  
adorned in gold, to the young champion  
of the highest nobility, once she arrived  
on Offa's bright floor over shining seas;  
she made the journey at her father's bidding.

Huru þæt onhohsnode      Hemminges mæg;  
ealodrincede      oðer sædan,  
þæt hio leodbealewa      læs gefremede,  
inwitniða,      syððan ærest wearð  
gyfen goldhroden      geongum cempan,  
æðelum diore,      syððan hio Offan flet  
ofer fealone flod      be fæder lare  
siðe gesohte; (1944-1955)

We see the use of the marriage as a way to civilize the behavior of someone else. Modthyrtho causes no trouble once she is given away as part of an arranged marriage, which is done by a man described as being 'of the highest nobility.'

There she used well the days of her life,  
famous for goodness upon the high-seat,

kept noble love toward the leader of heroes,  
 the best chief, as I have heard  
 in all the world, from sea to sea.

ealles moncynnes mine gefræge  
 þone selestan bi sæm tweonum,  
 eormencynnes. Forðam Offa wæs  
 geofum ond guðum, garcene man,  
 wide geweorðod, wisdomes heold  
 eðel sinne. (1955 to 1960)

The transformation of Modthyrtho is complete. She goes from being the polar opposite of Hygd to strongly resembling her. This transformation is surprising since one would assume that Modthyrtho would become a “goading” influence on her husband, Offa. Instead, the reverse is true. In this respect, a man is serving as a peace-weaver to his wife in a curious reversal.

Truly, the treatment of her seems to be primarily a means of expanding on the characters of Offa and Hygd. Offa is treated as a near demigod by comparison to normal men and successfully manages to romance a heinous murderess, a heinous murderess whom he promptly redeems to the side of good simply by being so wonderful. Equally so is Hygd, who is treated by *Beowulf* as a woman who is great.

In fact, the intentions of the author to view the reformation of Modthyrtho as something brought about by Offa’s greatness is expanded upon here:

...Therefore that Offa was honored by nations,  
 spear-waving warrior, received a multitude  
 of victories, gifts; in wisdom he held  
 his homeland long. From him sprang Eomer,  
 comfort for heroes, kinsman to Hemming,  
 grandson of Garmund, strong man in battle.

Forðam Offa wæs  
 geofum ond guðum, garcene man,  
 wide geweorðod, wisdomes heold  
 eðel sinne; þanon Eomer woc  
 hæledum to helpe, Hemminges mæg,  
 nefa Garmundes, niða cræftig. (1957-1963).

Nowhere is a female character given anywhere so close a positive description. In this, we see the Beowulf author is willing to give the role of a peace-weaver to a man.

Offa is a man who is able to redeem by the power of his love. Beowulf, himself, doesn't possess this sort of role. However, he is a figure who brings peace in masculine ways. He seeks out creators of strife and monstrosity such as Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the Dragon before destroying them. This heroism allows him to bring peace and prosperity to the land.

The role of women as peace-weavers and the contrast between individuals like Wealtheow and Hygd versus destructive females like Modthyrtho is a running theme throughout *Beowulf*, highlighting the violence of the later is alien to the female nature.

Modthyrtho, for example, goes from being a purveyor of evil to a woman every bit as just and good as Hygd. She is reformed by her marriage and ceases to be a threat to men or women. Wealtheow is a woman who cannot affect the doom awaiting her house, though she attempts to do so with flattery. Only Hygd, by offering the crown to Beowulf, is able to bring peace to her homeland by giving the land (via marriage or political support) to a warrior strong enough to maintain the peace until the Dragon kills him. The fact that Hygelac's son had died also clears the way for Beowulf.

If Hygd really did become Beowulf's wife despite the arguments of Engelhardt and Pope, it is interesting to speculate on whether her influence is meant to have resulted in a long-lasting peace for the realm as opposed to Beowulf's natural heroism. It is possible she might have served as a civilizing influence on him. Either way, with Beowulf as king, the third part of *Beowulf* implies the kingdom enters a period of peace for the vast majority of his reign. In other words, Hygd's decision has resulted in something that probably saved the realm from civil war. Even if she didn't marry him, her support was probably vital to the solidification of Beowulf's

status as king.

Ultimately, it is questionable whether any normal warrior or number of normal warriors would have been able to stop the dragon in the third act as opposed to Beowulf.

Although Beowulf's kingdom is doomed as the one Wealtheow lives in, it is something that has less of a trace of inevitability about it than Heorot. Hygd is able to buy a relatively long time of prosperity and peace for the Geat people, fundamentally solidifying her role as a peace-weaver.

The discussion of women as passive figures in *Beowulf*, even in comparison to previous Old English poetry, is something notable.

Damico has this to say about the subject:

No one can deny that women suffer a great deal in Old English poetry. What I am objecting to in these arguments is the basic conceptual assumption of woman as a passive, suffering victim, which is then in binary opposition to, and measured against male aggressivity. Men are violent, women are weak, the other is always destroyed, literal death or the closure of desire as appropriation will always prevail. (80)

Damico actually lists the above ironically, going further to highlight that the women of *Beowulf* are an exception to this perception. Far from being purely “civilizing and ordering” forces, they are actually forces of change beyond this definition.

This denies the power of the hysteric and the vitality of the poetry, especially of *Beowulf*. Many, perhaps all, of the women of *Beowulf* do not qualify as ‘civilizing, ordering’ forces in the sense that they cannot be defined or even perceived in contrast to the masculine economy that negates them; they resist simple definition by contrast, by means of opposition. This point is made curiously clear in the case of Old English Christian poems, where the women ‘disappears’ completely, leaving no trace even in paradox. (80)

I think Damico overstates her case, in this respect, as Hygd and Wealtheow are, in fact, civilizing and ordering forces who are attempting to bring a sense of justice and prosperity to their respective kingdoms. In the case of Hygd, she actually succeeds and brings about an age of peace until the time that Beowulf perishes fighting the dragon. Even Modthyrtho is a woman

who is ultimately redeemed to the side of good and becomes a figure who brings goodness by her very presence.

## V. Conclusion

The women of *Beowulf* have an important role to play in Medieval Danish society. Like the men around them, they hold an important position in relationship to the court. The men are meant to be bringers of violence and protectors of the hearth, whereas women are meant to be extinguishers of male fire and brutality. This is not always the case, as Modthyrtho shows, but they are overall positive influences on the men around them.

Indeed, the women of *Beowulf* are human and fully fleshed out characters as opposed to mere archetypes. Sometimes they use their position to incite violence. That doesn't mean that they are failures in their role, any more than a warrior who falls in battle is.

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