

University of Tennessee Knoxville

Female Warriors:

Judith, Grendel's Mother, and Gender Roles in Anglo-Saxon England

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Honors Thesis

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I. Introduction

"His famous queen [Wealhtheow],
peace-weaver of nations, walked through the hall,
encouraged the striplings; time and again
before she was seated she gave gold bracelets"
(*Beowulf* lines 2016-2019).

Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen, illustrates the roles expected of literary Anglo-Saxon noblewomen. She is a *friþu-sibb*, one who creates bonds of peace (line 2017). This role of creating peace typically fell to women who were traded between warring factions, such as clans, for the purpose of intermarriage (Klein 100). In her capacity of wife as a within an enemy camp, she (and her children) were meant to bring an end to bloodfeud and maintain amicable relations between factions. Wealhtheow's encouragement of her husband's retainers represents another important portion of a typical feminine role. Women were not directly involved in the violent political shuffling of their men; in fact, they were essentially excluded from the exercise of violence (Chance 62). Rather, women were allowed (or indeed, expected) to encourage acts of violence from their male counterparts at times when socially-appropriate action has not been taken (Fletcher 124). The ability to bring shame and encouragement on the men in her society gave a woman some limited power, but prohibitions against acts of violence would restrict her ability to participate in many aspects of social and political life. However, Wealhtheow does not test these limits. Instead she takes taking typically feminine actions, such as ceremonially serving mead to her husband's men in a manner symbolic of their social status, and she then passing this traditional action down to her daughter Freawaru (*Beowulf* lines 615-624; 2020-2023). Wealhtheow maintains her position as king's wife admirably by keeping to her feminine role, and for doing so, she is praised as "excellent in virtues" (line 623). She is, in many ways, an archetypal example of proper Anglo-Saxon femininity.

However, instances arise in Anglo-Saxon literature when women act contrary to the feminine norms, in particular when they actively participate in acts of violence. These breaches of typically feminine behavior can lead to a variety of outcomes. Judith, who is a character from the eponymous book in the bible, is the central character of an Anglo-Saxon poem depicting a Hebrew noblewoman who temporarily sets aside her feminine position in favor of more masculine action. With the help of her handmaiden, Judith enters the camp of the Assyrians besieging her city and beheads the enemy general, Holofernes. She then returns to her city, the head of her enemy in tow, and uses her gruesome trophy as a banner of hope under which she rallies her people's army for a final blow against their besiegers. Though she transgresses typical expectations for women, in the Anglo-Saxon version Judith is praised for her actions and rewarded with a portion of the spoils.

Not all women who step outside their gender roles are similarly rewarded. In contrast to Judith is Grendel's Mother, from the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*. Spurred by the death of her son Grendel, killed by Beowulf in the first third of the epic, Grendel's Mother, having no man to act on her behalf, takes matters into her own hands by avenging her son on the men of Heorot. She attacks the hall at night and kills one of Hrothgar's noblemen; this falls in line with the Anglo-Saxon literary trope that "avenging the death of a friend [or in this case, her son] is better than mourning much" (Hill 12). By killing Æschere, she takes part in a traditional behavior that was considered acceptable among masculine figures. Grendel's Mother then flees the scene and returns to her own hall. Unlike Judith, she is not praised for her actions; rather, Beowulf tracks her down and slays her within the walls of her own home. This would be a natural turn of events in the case of a bloodfeud, or the exchange of violence in retaliation for violence, which was such an essential part of Anglo-Saxon literature that God would sometimes oversee it when

humans failed to carry it out (Wangerin 84-5). Additionally, Grendel's Mother's death also serves as a clear condemnation for overstepping her bounds through masculine action.

Both Grendel's mother and Judith act outside typical gendered expectations of female action by engaging directly in masculine violence. Judith is accepted for her act of violence because of her return to feminine behavior and the historical precedent for Anglo-Saxon warrior queens, while Grendel's Mother is condemned for her rejection of most feminine expectations and her act of personal vengeance.

II. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. The first goal is to examine the reasons for the differing portrayals of and reactions to a similar set of violent actions perpetrated by women. This examination involves comparing the actions of Judith and Grendel's Mother to typical, masculine standards for heroism, as exhibited in characters such as Beowulf, and it also involves comparing these women to literary feminine standards, as exhibited in characters such as Wealhtheow.

The second goal is to examine the ways in which the behavior of Anglo-Saxon literary women are portrayed by contemporary storytellers and to compare these portrayals to historical accounts of actions taken by women. By examining the implicit and explicit attitudes shown toward characters such as Judith and Grendel's Mother, the modern reader is better able to understand the attitudes and expectations that Anglo-Saxon women would have faced in their daily environment. Understanding this environment will, in turn, help give context to primary historical sources, such as *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* or *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Women

tend to be scarce within such sources, and so reaching outside historical documents can help illuminate the gaps within those records.

III. Dating Manuscripts

There is a fair amount of controversy surrounding the dates when *Beowulf* and *Judith* were composed, and in which of England's many kingdoms they were composed. They both survive in one manuscript, the British Museum's MS. Cotton Vitellius A. XV., which survived a fire in the 1730s (*Beowulf* 245). The physical manuscript was copied down by two different scribes around the end of the tenth century (*Beowulf and Judith* ix; Lucas 464; Kiernan 14; Boyle 30-1). The physical recording of the pieces, however, is less important for studying their cultural context as the time in which they were composed. Acker says of *Beowulf* in particular that, "the poem (it appears) cannot be firmly dated or localized", as indicated by the vast range of possible dates of writing and possible kingdoms of origin (702). Kiernan argues that *Beowulf* originates in the eleventh century and suggests that signs of revision indicate the poem was composed near the time it was written (20). Goffart also argues for a late date in the tenth century, due to a possible anachronism in the noun "Hugas" (100; *Beowulf* line 2914). These dates fall on the latter end of the scale and place their composition nearer to the time of their recording. Kluge gives *Judith* a similarly late date, as far along as the tenth century, on the grounds that it includes a higher volume of end-rhymes than three-stress lines than other Anglo-Saxon poetry of earlier dates, and Luick, based upon metrical evidence, also suggested the *Judith* was composed at a later period in Anglo-Saxon history (*Beowulf and Judith* lxiii-lxiv). Brown also argues that *Judith* had a later date, between the end of the ninth and the beginning of the tenth centuries (xii). As with the

dating of both poems, placing their kingdom of origin is also difficult (Orchard 6). Based upon the style of the *Beowulf* manuscript, Clemoes argues for a Mercian origin (185); Whitelock also argues for a Mercian origin (93-4). Foster, one of the earliest scholars to date *Judith* (and to whose scholarship many others after him respond), placed it in tenth century Mercia because he argued that it was written for Æthelflæd of Mercia, who ruled from 911-918 (Whitelock 79). So, while neither their dates nor places of writing can be known for certain, it is plausible that the two poems had similar origins in tenth-century Mercia.

IV. Historical Background

Anglo-Saxon women had few options for how they could carry out their lives. If a woman was given a choice at all, she would be limited to either marriage or monastic vows; Fell, Clark, and Williams refer to this choice as "the twin net of marriage/nunnery" (157). Marriages were essentially business transactions between individual men, families, or kingdoms, and frequently neither party in the marriage had any choice in the matter (Chance 61). The law of Ine, who was king of Wessex beginning in 688, describes a situation common enough to legislate in a code of only seventy-six laws, in which "*mon wif gebyccge*" ("a man buys a wife") (Law 31). Women were also usually described as being "taken" or "given" rather than using terms that would imply a more active role in the marriage process (Chance 61; "Worcester Manuscript" year 965; "Winchester Manuscript" year 853). Marriage was also an important factor in the spread of Christianity to England's pagan kingdoms (Klein 18). Often, a royal woman of a Christian house would be promised to a pagan king on the condition of his conversion, thereby tying together both political and religious aspects of such a union between kingdoms. In one

instance, Pope Boniface V sent a letter the consort of King Edwin of Northumbria, Æthelburh, in order to encourage her to keep her husband (king from approximately 617 to 633) on the right path, as he had lately been slipping back into his former pagan ways (Bede 173-5; "Petersborough Manuscript" years 617, 634). This illustrates the import of the queen's role in maintaining her husband religiously; the Pope himself would not take the time to write to someone who was not considered influential. Married women, particularly those of rank, were also expected to produce heirs (Fell et al. 78-79). Queen-regents and queen-mothers both wielded considerable power after the deaths of their husbands by using the influence of their children (*Queens* 141). Of all the roles an Anglo-Saxon woman might have, wife and mother were undoubtedly the most common.

The other option for Anglo-Saxon women was monasticism. That is, women who were not forced into marriage were able to become "virgin bride[s] of Christ" (Gulley 46). Complete celibacy was not generally expected until the eleventh century, so widows and those who had left their husbands were able to become nuns (Stephanus 153; Fell 156). Though these women would not have a husband to rule over them directly, particularly the widows, they would be beholden to the structure of the Catholic Church; Stafford compares the relative independence these dowagers enjoyed to that of a modern "career woman" (*Queens* 181). The virginity of nuns was held in high esteem and also appeared to be a source of anxiety for religious officials of the day. Bede records that nuns who made male friends and wore fine clothes were imperiling their virginity on those grounds alone (427). There was also a great deal of concern spent on what happened to nuns who found themselves stranded in foreign lands when on pilgrimage, though in discussions of this topic a greater emphasis tended to be placed on these women retaining their virginity than on these women surviving the trip (Fell et al. 36). This resulted in a number of

travel restrictions on nuns, which might have extended even to abbesses (37). Travel restrictions were not, however, the greatest lengths holy women would go to for the maintenance of their virginity. When the monastery of Coldingham was under attack by Viking raiders, the women inside mutilated their own faces with razors, cutting their lips and noses, to avoid rape (Yorke 58). They were successful in this part of their actions, though the Vikings then chose to burn the monastery down with the women trapped inside. Ironically, this is the same monastery where nuns imperiled their virginity through making fancy clothing and befriending men, which illustrates the high standards to which these women were kept. Though women faced restrictions regardless of the paths they took, some Anglo-Saxon women managed to gain real power within the structure of the social system.

Wives of kings were among the most likely candidates for female political power. Queens could exercise limited amounts of power through their influence over their husbands, as illustrated by the female responsibility for religious conversion (Klein 18). This determination of the king's religion would trickle down to the rest of his kingdom, rippling down to even the lowest levels. Queens could also use their influence to reach more personal political ends. Ecgfrith's queen Iurminburg, who he married in approximately 680, convinced him to take Wilfrid's wealth from him, thereby seriously weakening Wilfrid socially and politically (Stephanus 49, 167). Queens could also draw on religious figures as political allies ("King's" 67). Emma, second wife of Cnut, for instance, delayed the rise of her sons' rival during the succession dispute of 1035, through her alliance with the Archbishop Æthelnoth of Canterbury, who refused to crown their rival for her sake (66). Though a queen's power was limited, the way she used her position could greatly alter the amount of influence she possessed.

In other instances, kings' wives were able to wield some power independently. Seaxburg of Wessex ruled for the entire year of 672 after the death of her husband, Cenwalh, before she was replaced by a male heir ("Petersborough Manuscript" year 672). Æthelflæd, called Lady of the Mercians, ruled her kingdom independently from 911 to 918 after the death of her husband, Æthelred, and likely for some time while he was sick and still living (Wainwright 46; "Abingdon Manuscript" years 911-918). She had some success leading her forces in battle, both taking and building multiple forts; these included the destruction of Brecon Mere and the construction of strongholds at Bremesbyrig, Tamworth, and Stafford ("Abingdon Manuscript" year 916, 910; "Worcester Manuscript" year 913). Of the independent female political powers of her time period, Æthelflæd had one of the greatest legacies, as many place-names still bear traces of her conquest (Wainwright 50-52). Though a small number of Anglo-Saxon women did have independent political power, this was an unusual situation, and women who behaved in ways that did not fit with the feminine ideal were often cast as "unchaste" (Chance 53). In light of Anglo-Saxon views of female virginity, illustrated by its importance to nuns, this kind of aspersion could have caused serious social damage to a woman of power.

Another route a woman might take to power was through the structure of the Catholic Church. Some abbesses were powerful and respected members of the religious community. The abbess Ælffled was mentioned by name as a member of the religious council convened by the Archbishop Berhtwald (693-731) on the matter of the trial of the bishop Wilfrid (Stephanus 127-133, 180). Though Ælffled was ostensibly the only woman present, her inclusion in the convocation and the specific mention of her consultation indicates that she was a woman of considerable status. Holy women were also believed to be able to perform miracles, in the same way that holy men were thought to have this power. Æthelburh, the sister of the Archbishop

Theodore and the Abbess at Barking, was one such holy woman; Bede says of her "*ut etiam caelestia indicio fuere miracula*" (and of this [Æthelburh's holy life] heavenly miracles were the witness") (355-357). Anglo-Saxon England also contained the institution of double monasteries, which contained both monks and nuns; one such institution, Coldingham, was overseen by an abbess, Æbbe, rather than an abbot, placing her over both the male and female residents (Fell et al. 124). Æbbe would, of course, still be beholden to the men above her in the monastic power structure, such as the archbishop. However, to be placed in such a relatively high social position and in charge of men was unusual among women of her day.

Abbesses were also well-positioned to have both social and political influence. Abbesses in Wessex were able to claim *weregild* (man-price, or reparation for crimes) (Ine Law 23). These kinds of laws allowed Cyniburg, an abbess, to act as *hlaford* (lord) for a group of men who were otherwise unaffiliated and, thereby, legally unprotected (Fell et al. 33). By gathering to her, these men were able to gain protection, which indicates that Cyniburg was able to wield some degree of power. This addition of persons to her "patronage" would also increase the abbess's influence, making the relationship mutually beneficial. The power of abbesses was likely aided by the fact that many such women came from royal or important families; the abbess Æbbe was the sister of King Oswiu of Northumbria (Bede 392-3), and the abbess Ælffled was the daughter of the same Oswiu (Stephanus 129). Also, these abbesses would typically have unquestionable chastity, with some abbesses displaying legendary levels of virginity. One such abbess, Æthelthryth, had such miraculous virginity despite her two previous marriages that her body failed to decay after her death (41). One benefit of the Anglo-Saxon preoccupation with the virginity of nuns was that nuns were given extra legal protection against rape; assaulting a nun would incur twice the fine (*weregild*) that would come from assaulting a laywoman (Fell et al. 124). However, this extra

legal protection would be a pittance in the face of a culture that would seemingly expect a group of women to mutilate their own faces to avoid rape, as was seen at Coldingham. Just as perceived unchastity could stain a woman's reputation and weaken her socially, this perception of perfect virginity could elevate these women in the eyes of those over whom they held sway.

The abbess Hild is an excellent example of a powerful female religious figure in her day. Bede noted her for her devotion to God and her teachings on peace and chastity (409, 413). As previously mentioned, the maintenance of a chaste image was important for Anglo-Saxon women, particularly those in power. She presided over two separate monasteries within her lifetime; the first was Hartlepool, and the second was Whitby (293). There she served as a teacher for the daughter of King Oswiu of Northumbria, Ælfflæd, whom he had dedicated to God to fulfill a former vow (291). This indicates a level of trust between the King and the Abbess, and this connection would give Hild extra access to the Northumbrian royal family. Additionally, she was a relative of King Oswiu, as her father, Hereric, was a nephew of King Edwin, and she was therefore a member of the Northumbrian royal house (Stephanus 157). While presiding over Whitby, she became an exceptionally powerful figure. Bede says of her

"Tantae autem erat ipsa prudentiae, ut non solum mediocres quique in necessitatibus suis sed etiam reges ac principes nonnumquam ab ea consilium quaererent et inuenirent"

["So great was her prudence that not only ordinary people but also kings and princes sometimes sought and received her counsel when in difficulties"]

(Bede 408-9)

This assertion places Hild not only in a position of respect among common people, but also among those of significant social and political power of her time. Five bishops—Etila, Otfar, Wilferth, John, and Bose—all studied scriptures under her (Chance 60; Bede 409). These men

would likely have been swayed by her way of thinking, and through them, her influence would spread.

In Eddius Stephanus's *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, there are two instances of Hild's involvement with major religious-political events of her day. In the first instance, the Bishop Colman and the not-yet-Bishop Wilfrid gathered together in the presence of Hild, two kings, another bishop, and several other abbots to discuss the best day for the observance of Easter (Stephanus 21). Additionally, when Bishop Wilfrid appealed to the Apostolic See, Hild, "*religiosiae memoriae abbatissae*" ("the Abbess Hild of pious mercy"), stood up against him alongside other figures such as the Archbishop Theodore of Kent (116-7). While both instances indicate her importance to the church, the second event places her in a greater position of power. At Wilfrid's appeal to the Apostolic See, Hild's opposition to Wilfrid's restoration is placed on-par with that of his male opponents, like the aforementioned Archbishop. After Hild has died, Bede says that a nun:

"uidit animam praefatae Dei famulae in . . . luce, comitantibus ac ducentibus angelis, ad caelum ferri. . ."

[" . . . saw the soul of the handmaiden of the Lord being borne to Heaven in the midst of [the] light, attended and guided by angels. . ."]

(Bede 412-413)

Hild's final acceptance into Heaven suggests that the Anglo-Saxons believed her to be worthy of such an honor, which was not hindered by the unusual amount of power that she wielded. Though she died well before *Judith* or *Beowulf* were written in 680 (Bede 405), the attitudes surrounding her and allowing for her power lasted well beyond her death. Essentially, Hild is a model for the proper feminine exercise of power, as understood by the Anglo-Saxons

V. Feminine Literary Roles

Having examined the roles of Anglo-Saxon women in history, it is also necessary to examine the standards to which fictional women were held by the contemporary audiences of both *Judith* and *Beowulf*. While it is understood that both Judith and Grendel's Mother participate in masculine violence, it is important to first understand the feminine roles to which they comply to varying degrees. These standards—peaceweaving, relying on words to affect change, and maintaining chastity—will ultimately help decide whether they should be praised or punished.

A. Peaceweaving

Peaceweaving is a common female trope in Anglo-Saxon literature. Until the tenth century, all types of sewing or weaving of cloth were entirely feminine activities (Crawford 124). This contemporary understanding of weaving as a feminine activity would help give rise to the metaphor of peaceweaving. In Anglo-Saxon, the primary word for a "peaceweaver" is *friðowebba* (Chance 47; "*freoðu-webbe*," *Beowulf* line 1942). An alternative word is *friþu-sibb* (one who creates bonds of peace), which carries a similar weight, and which was applied to Wealhtheow as a peaceweaver uniting warring clans (*Beowulf* line 2017). Horner defines the role of a peaceweaver as "a woman's arranged marriage to a member of a hostile tribe, as a means of securing peace between feuding factions. . .the peace-weaver is framed symbolically between two groups of men, confined by a strict kinship system, enclosed by and exchanged between the groups" (68). Overing argues that peaceweavers are meant to both create peace and "in fact, embody[] peace, in a culture where war and death are privileged values" (Klein 100). In other words, while peaceweavers were expected to tie groups together in a practical way, through

"either childbearing or verbal diplomacy," much of their power was solely symbolic (Horner 68). This "verbal diplomacy" is reminiscent of the common Anglo-Saxon metaphor of weaving terminology when it is applied to the use of language, or "weaving words" (Cavell 362; *Elene* line 1238). As will be discussed, the use of words is one of a traditional Anglo-Saxon woman's greatest tools, due to her limited ability to act on her own behalf. In addition to peaceweaving between groups, these women were also meant to keep the peace between the king and God (Klein 19). The binding of a king and his people with the Christian God calls back to the Anglo-Saxon historical practice of converting a community through a marriage alliance.

Unfortunately in both of these cases (man-to-man or man-to-deity), the peaceweaver had very limited influence over how well peace was kept. As symbols of pacts, these women could stand-in as representations of peace, but they would have difficulty actually causing peace (Klein 100). Men hold the power of violence, so the peaceweaver will "inevitably fail[]" (Horner 69). In all cases, if violence had to be done, it had to be done by men (Chance 62). This severely limited women, especially within the context of a society that values violence. In fact, those women who chose to engage in violence were typically portrayed as "immoral" or "devilish" (63). This was especially true as acts of vengeance were considered contrary to the mercy of Mary, mother of Jesus, who stood as an Anglo-Saxon ideal of ultimate feminine good (101). Judith is a notable exception to this trope of monstrous femininity, though Grendel's Mother fits comfortably within it. Some writers, such as Damico and Olsen, go as far as to say that because women were so limited in their peaceweaving role, they can only fail, and as such female lament is inevitable (14). This failure is typified by Hildeburh from *The Fight at Finnsburg*, who cannot stop the deaths of her brother or son in the inter-clan war her marriage was meant to avoid; she is only able to mourn as their bodies burn (*Beowulf* lines 1114-1120). As a whole, peaceweaving

placed a great deal of responsibility on the shoulders of Anglo-Saxon women while refusing them the tools they would need to accomplish the goals that responsibility would entail.

Though the *Beowulf* poet is not primarily interested in the lives of women, the poem has an unusual amount to say about them and their place in the context of a violent, male-dominated society. As previously mentioned, Wealhtheow is described as a "*friþu-sibb*" (*Beowulf* line 2017), a word similar in meaning to "*freoðuwebbe*," a feminine noun meaning a "peace-weaver (woman)" (Clark-Hall 109, 342). Additionally, the name "Wealhtheow" literally translates to "foreigner-slave" or "stranger-servant," suggesting that she is an outsider, as a peaceweaving queen would naturally originate from an enemy kingdom or clan, and that her presence is meant to serve a concrete purpose, which is to end a feud. Strangely, the only time *Beowulf* uses "*freoðuwebbe*" is to describe a queen named Modthrytho, who actually causes violence in her kingdom (line 1942). In Modthrytho's case, the peaceweaver name is used ironically to contrast with her unqueenly behavior of sentencing men in her kingdom to death for non-crimes.

In the immediate context of line 2017 (when Wealhtheow encourages Hrothgar's retainers to promote loyalty), her daughter, Freawaru, is seen distributing mead among the men of the hall, an action also used to promote cohesion (*Beowulf* 2020-2021). Though she is young ("*geong*," line 2025), she is already involved in maintaining peace within her father's kingdom; additionally, she has already been promised to Ingeld, the son of a neighboring king, Froda, because her father and people believe "*þæt hē mid ðy wīfe wæl-fāhðā dāel, sæcca gesette*" ("that he [Ingeld], with his wife, will settle his share of the killings and feud") (lines 2028-2029). This is a classic example of peaceweaving. Hrothgar might have any number of reasons for promising Freawaru to the son of a neighboring king, but her potential ability to put a stop to cyclical violence is foremost in his mind. This description of Freawaru is, however, somewhat double-

edged. Though ideally she and her husband will bring an end to the bloodfeud between their peoples, Beowulf, who is currently speaking, says immediately afterward, "*Of seldan hwær æfter lēod-hryre lýtle hwīle bon-gār būgeð, þēah sēo brȳd duge!*" ("But seldom anywhere, after a slaying, will the death-spear rest, even for a while, though the bride be worthy," lines 2029-2031). Here Beowulf is claiming that once a bloodfeud has begun, even a brief respite from the cycle of violence is unusual, whether or not a peaceweaver is involved. Freawaru, then, has little chance of being able to fulfill her father's hopes of ending the feud between the Scyldings, her own people, and the people of her husband Ingeld. Beowulf also implies that the responsibility for this inevitable failure of peaceweaving does not necessarily fall on the peaceweaver herself; this failure is likely even when the woman is "worthy" or "competent" ("*duge*," line 2031). So, Freawaru is almost certain to fail, no matter how well she conforms with the expectations for her role, just as Wealhtheow and Hildeburh are also doomed to fail. It is important to note that Freawaru's likely failure is not the same as Modthrytho's failure. Modthrytho falls short in her roles of queen and peaceweaver because she actively sows violence among her people; she has committed a "*fīren' ondrysne*" ("terrible crime," line 1932) by sentencing men who dared make eye contact with her to death. So, while Modthrytho and Freawaru (in her likely inability to put a stop to feud) would both be considered failures in their roles, only Modthrytho is truly to blame for her own shortcomings.

As previously stated, a peaceweaver's ability to perform her role is limited because she can only embody a symbol of peace; men are the only ones who can commit violence, and so they are also the only ones who can refrain from doing so. Still speaking of Freawaru's situation, Beowulf asserts that once peace is established, someone, likely a young man, will kill a man on the opposite side to avenge an old grievance, like the death of a father. Then, her husband and his

men will be stirred up to return the blow, and "[syb]ðan Ingelde weallað wæl-nīðas on hīm wīf-lufan æfter cear-wælmum cōlran weorðað" ("once deadly hate wells up in Ingeld; in that hot passion his love for the peace-weaver, his wife, will cool", *Beowulf* lines 2064-2066). So, it would be the behavior of the retainers of both kings and the fickle emotions of her husband which decides Freawaru's ability to succeed at her role, rather than any element over which she has true control.

The limits of peaceweaving described by *Beowulf* fit well with the assertion that female lament is inevitable (Damico and Olsen 14). Certainly in Freawaru's case, her failure would cause her significant distress, as it would lead to both the loss of the regard of her husband, as well as war between the people among whom she lives, the Heathobards, and the people of her birth, the Scyldings. While Freawaru's failure has not yet come to pass and the effects of her failure are therefore hypothetical, *Beowulf* also contains another example of a failed peaceweaver, Hildeburh. The account of Hildeburh's suffering is found in the *Battle at Finnsburg*, which is told in part during the action of *Beowulf*. In this story, Hildeburh is caught in the middle of a deadly conflict between her husband and her brother (Klaeber 231). Whether her marriage was formed for the purpose of peaceweaving or not, the conflict which has broken out between two parties (who she would traditionally have been expected to mediate between) indicates that she has failed within that role.

Like Freawaru, Hildeburh has limited power and her failure is not a result of her own actions; the "scop" ("bard," *Beowulf* line 1066) who describes the incident tells us that "unsynnum wearð" (line 1072), or "she was guiltless." Though the violence around her is not her doing, it is Hildeburh's grief that is highlighted after the battle is done and most of Finn's thanes are dead, including her brother and son. While Hengest and Finn, the remaining leaders, are able

to strike a treaty between them and create a temporary peace, Hildeburh can only weep and mourn at the joint pyre of her kin. She remains a passive figure throughout, and at the end of the bard's narrative, she is born away by the Scyldings along with the golden spoil of the kingdom. If women are depended upon for keeping for keeping peace among factions, as the role of peaceweaver would suggest, and they are simultaneously given no power to carry out that role, the continuation of the cycle of violence is inevitable. And, as relatives of the men in power, these women would also be in prime position to lose loved ones, along with any protection those loved ones could formerly afford them. These losses would naturally lead to mourning among the women who survived. Thus, if the cycle of violence is unstoppable due to the imbalance of power between violent and peaceful genders, the mourning of women who fail to keep peace is also inevitable.

Whether a peaceweaver is currently succeeding or not, she will always be a symbol of the conflict that brought her into her husband's house. Freawaru, for instance, will be a constant memorial to the Heathobards of their former conflict with the Scyldings. Wealhtheow is a prime example of a peaceweaver who serves as a reminder of a former conflict, as her name literally translates to "foreigner-slave" or "stranger-servant." This appellation will consistently mark her as an outsider, and her presence may keep raw the memory of the violence she was meant to remedy. So, while the peaceweaver is tasked with the embodiment of peace, she would in actuality also embody the tension between the factions she is meant to unite, which would help lead to her inevitable failure.

B. Power Given to Female Speech

Though women were limited in their ability to act within the political realm, the powers these women did have usually centered on what that they would say. Female speech ties in to the peaceweaving metaphor, as peaceweavers are diplomats who weave words (Sklute 208). Elene uses the same metaphor when she says, "*wordcræftum wæf*" ("I wove with words," *Elene* line 1238). Peaceweaving and weaving with words are inextricably intertwined, as peaceweaving cannot be accomplished without speech. What powers a peaceweaver is given—passing the mead cup, encouraging the retainers, spurring on violence when it has been left undone—are all tied up in forms of speech. These utterances are expected to advance the common good of her kingdom, and typically involve the encouragement of the men of the group to make the most socially correct action. This typically occurred in two forms: the giving of wise counsel and the encouragement of socially appropriate violent action.

The first role a literary woman would fill is that of a giver of wise counsel. According to Klein, there was a "long tradition of reverence for female counsel within Germanic culture" (11). Even in more general social settings (rather than solely the upper classes), the counsel of wives was considered vital, though this practice tended to wane after Catholicism became more widespread among the common people (35). That same prevalence would also naturally lessen the female responsibility of conversion as more men would be Christians before marriage. The positive historical attitude toward the advice of women translated directly into Anglo-Saxon literature, where a woman who provides good advice is valued. Cynewulf's Elene, who leads her people on a quest for the True Cross, is described by saying, "*Heo gefylled wæs widomes gife*" ("She was filled with a gift of wisdom") (*Elene* lines 1142-3). As a result of her encouragement, her people succeed in their quest to find the True Cross. In *Beowulf*, Hyg is prized for being "wis" ("wise," line 1927), and Wealhtheow herself, as Hrothgar's queen, is noted for her being

"*wīsfæst wordum*" ("wise in words") (line 626). Her wisdom is seen in her encouragement of Hrothgar's retainers, as well as in establishing Beowulf as a protector for her sons, as insurance for their safety upon Hrothgar's death (lines 1184-1187). These actions demonstrate both an understanding of her duty and a sufficient grasp of her political vulnerabilities and the needs of her sons to try to protect them against future threats.

Other women use their wisdom for more violent ends. Judith, for instance, is described as "*gleawhydig*" ("wise-thoughtful") (*Judith* line 148) and "*gleaw on geðonce*" ("penetrating in mind") (line 13). Her handmaiden is also described as "*ðancolmode*" ("thoughtful of mind") (line 172). As will be discussed shortly, Judith uses her wise words to stir the men of her city to action, causing them to strike out against their weakened besiegers for the betterment of Bethulia. The fact that the contemporary Anglo-Saxon poets discuss the wisdom and mental acuity of Judith and women like her suggests that they were not solely valued for their place as a bargaining chip in peaceweaving transactions. The assertion that Judith's handmaiden is also "thoughtful of mind" suggests that this kind of wisdom was not limited to women of the highest classes.

Part of a woman giving wise advice included stirring her men to action when they are not accomplishing necessary tasks. For example, Elene, from the Anglo-Saxon poem of the same name, rallies her people under the dual banner of God's grander purpose and herself to lead them on a quest to find the cross of Christ (*Elene* lines 547-893). Though Elene is a woman, she is able to take the reins of this great assemblage, and she successfully wrests the Cross and nails from the Jews in Jerusalem. Additionally, she is praised throughout the narrative, and her name is consistently connected with Christianity and God Himself. This would indicate that Elene had the approval of her contemporary audience, demonstrating that a woman, particularly one of

royalty, who gains power over others for the sake of God or the common good is behaving in a socially acceptable way.

In many cases, the actions that women were responsible for pressing their men toward vengeance in the case of the wrongful death of a loved one. This type of speech act carried both literary and historical precedent (Fletcher 124). Judith is a prime example of this practice of driving men to violence for the sake of past wrongs. After she has taken partial revenge for Bethulia herself (in the form of Holofernes' death), she returns to the city and addresses the men thus: "*Nu ic gumena gehwæne byss burgleada biddan wylle, randwiggenda, þæt ge recene eow fýsan to gefeohte*" ("Now I each man of these citizens will request, of the shield-warriors that you, instantly, to you, hasten into the fight") (*Judith*, lines 186-189). Between Judith's persuasive words and the shame that would be brought on the men of the city for failing to attempt a lesser version of a greater deed completed by a woman, the men of the city are stirred to action. Here Judith is taking a leadership role among the Bethulians, which does not pose itself as a problem; Judith is consistently praised with terms such as "*ides ælfscinu*" ("women elven-shining") (line 14) and "*halige meowle*" ("holy maiden") (line 56). She also invokes God when encouraging the men of the city to act, saying, "*and gē dōm āgon, tīr æt tohtan, swā ēow getācnod hafað mihtig Dryhten þurh mīne hand*" ("and you will have every glory of battle, so to you is given a sign, from the mighty Lord through my hand") (lines 196-198). Both her positive descriptions and her ability to claim the Lord's help mark Judith as a woman who behaves in socially acceptable ways. One of her descriptors, "holy maiden," clearly is a direct reference to Judith's ongoing chastity, which is additionally helpful in maintaining the respect of her people. Heeding her words, her people then ride forth and destroy the remnants of the Assyrians who are left wandering in the chaos following the death of their general. Due to the actions completed on the

parts of God and Judith, the Bethulians can now hunt the Assyrians without significant fear. With both the masculine slaughter and the feminine encouragement finished, Judith then fades into the background in favor of the more traditional soldiers who destroy the remaining Assyrians and gather the spoils. The Bethulians, however, do not forget the bravery of Judith, which is further rewarded up on the return of the soldiers when she is presented with the choicest spoils of that day—"Holofernes sweord and swatigne helm" ("the sword of Holofernes and the bloody helm") (*Judith* lines 336-337). These gifts are particularly vital to Judith, as they represent the portion that would ordinarily be reserved for a lord (Mullally 256). So, through her actions and subsequent reward, Judith's independent social position is increased, as she now has leverage for future interactions. Though Judith also participates in masculine action by killing Holofernes, her feminine encouragement of her fellow city-dwellers is a vital part of both her personal success and the success of the kingdom. And though women's actions were limited, the active powers that women of status did receive flowed primarily through speech.

C. Role of Feminine Chastity

Just as a woman's status as a virgin was a deciding factor when considering how positively she was received in Anglo-Saxon England, a fictional woman's ability to act as a protagonist hinged on her chastity. Ideally, women would be virginal and pure, just as Mary, the Anglo-Saxon prototype of perfect femininity, was believed to have been a perpetual virgin (Chance 47). Characters like Juliana, from the eponymous poem, are able to maintain their chastity in the face of violence and great opposition. For instance, Juliana is a virginal figure who, as a Christian, refuses to marry the pagan man with whom her father has arranged a marriage (*Juliana* xxx). The pagan, Eleusius, is enraged by her refusal, as is her father, who allows her betrothed to punish her in whatever way he sees fit, even saying, "*Dem þu hi to*

deape, gif þe gedafen þince, swa to life læt, swa þe leofre sy ("Sentence her to death, if you deem it appropriate, or allow her to live, whatever may be more preferable to you") (lines 87-88). By establishing these extreme conditions for the breaking of Juliana's virginity, her father has essentially set the stage for Juliana's triumphal maintenance of her purity; the preservation of Juliana's virginity would be significantly less impressive and less inspiring had she only persevered through ordinary circumstances. Though Eleusius torments her and throws her into prison, Juliana remains resolute, resisting even the persuasion of a demon, disguised in the form of an angel. In the end, Juliana is martyred rather than lose her virginity to a pagan. This is reminiscent of the nuns of Coldingham, who mutilated themselves with razors rather than submit to rape by pagan Vikings (Yorke 58). For both Juliana and the nuns of Coldingham, the reader may observe two culturally-approved examples of Christian (and therefore ostensibly "good") women who go to extremes for the preservation of their virginity. This would indicate that the Anglo-Saxons placed an extremely high value on feminine sexual purity, to the extent that the best-conforming women would sacrifice personal safety and comfort for the sake of the maintenance of virginity.

Though virginity was the highest ideal, the vast majority of women (essentially all those outside of convents) could not live in compliance with it. As a rule, women would be married off fairly early in life, and so while they could not match the ideal, they did follow a path that was considered honorable. There were some reports of women, such as Æthelthryth, who married and supposedly maintained their virginity. Æthelthryth represents a particularly unusual case as she was married twice, supposedly maintained her virginity, became a nun and abbess, and, following her death, her corpse did not rot for sixteen years (Stephanus 41). This lack of decay, to the Anglo-Saxons, would be a miracle attributable to her incredible bodily purity in life.

Though Æthelthryth was revered for her accomplishment, other women, such as Elene and Wealhtheow, still manage to gain praise, despite their lack of perpetual virginity. Elene, for instance, is the mother of the Emperor Constantine (*Elene* lines 212-215). Wealhtheow also has three children by Hrothgar, two sons and one daughter (*Beowulf* 1126-7; 2022). Though motherhood would have been a vital role for carrying on family goods, these women are obviously excluded from the rather limited group of those who remain "pure." For example, Wealhtheow is explicitly described as Hrothgar's "*gebedda[]*" ("bed-companion") (*Beowulf* line 665). Because both Wealhtheow and Elene function within expected roles, both of them are praised despite their lack of virginity. Elene is considered a saint, and Wealhtheow is frequently praised while making appearances in *Beowulf*, such as the narrator's description of her as, "*ēode gold-hroden frēolicu folc-cwēn*" ("the gracious queen, her cloak gold-laden") (*Beowulf* lines 640-1). Praise of this kind would indicate that these women were considered practitioners of proper feminine behavior, despite falling short of the highest standard.

Judith occupies a somewhat curious position when compared to either Juliana or Elene. In the Vulgate book *Judith*, upon which the poem is based, Judith is a widow (*Douay-Rheims Translation*, Judith 8.1). Though the Anglo-Saxons would have been familiar with the source material, the poem never explicitly states that Judith had been married before, at least in the portion that is still extant. Rather, it focuses on her current attributes and actions. Though Judith falls short of true virginity, she still garners praise, earning the names "*torhtan mægð*" ("shining maiden") (*Judith* line 43) and "*halige meowle*" ("holy maiden") (line 56). Both of these nouns carry multiple meanings, spanning from "maiden" or "virgin" to the more general "woman" and, in the case of "*mægð*," "wife" (Clark-Hall 208, 214). Calling Judith a "maiden" may be a

reference to her current chastity, as apparently she refrained from sex after the death of her husband. In fact, the Vulgate says, in praise of her, that:

"Erat etiam virtuti castitas adiuncta ita ut non cognosceret virum omnibus diebus vitae suae ex quo defunctus est Manasses, vir eius."

["And chastity was joined to her virtue so that she knew no man all the days of her life after the death of Manasseh, her husband."]

(Judith 16.26)

Though the poem *Judith* makes no comment on her life after the spoils of battle are distributed, the Anglo-Saxons would have been familiar with the source material, and there would be no reason to assume that she would live out the rest of her days in any other way. On the way, she would gain a kind of second virginity and the social benefits that come with it. Assuming she did remain unmarried, Judith could maintain the kind of holiness seen in various Anglo-Saxon abbesses, such as Seaxburh, who "*habuerat in coniugem Earconberct rex Cantuariorum*" ("had been the wife of Eorcenberht, king of Kent") (Bede 392-3). While Seaxburh may have lived several hundred years before *Judith* was written (appearing in the *Petersborough Manuscript* of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the mid-600s), the cultural mores that allowed widowed women to marry and then gain the holy status of abbess remained until the eleventh century (Stephanus 153). Though Judith would naturally be excluded from a place among the clergy because she would have lived before the time of Christ (and her status as a Jew), her post-marital chastity allows her to reach levels of holiness similar to that of Anglo-Saxon abbesses, earning her the approval of contemporary audiences.

Just as chaste women would be praised, women who failed to be chaste (or who were perceived as unchaste) would receive general disapprobation. In fact, Chance argues that women who behaved unconventionally "were usually castigated as lascivious, immoral, and even

diabolic" (53). This was aided by a common belief expressed by Eddius Stephanus in his biography of the Bishop Wilfrid. Speaking of Queen Iurminburg, the second wife of Ecgrith over whom the King had no power, when she decided to act against Wilfrid's interests, he said, "*Consueta arma arripiens, vasa fragilia muliebria quaesivit, per quae totum mundum maculavit frequenter*" ("So, taking his usual weapons he [the devil] sought the weaker vessel, the woman, by whom he has constantly defiled the whole world") (Colgrave 48-49). This belief stemmed from the biblical story of Eve in which she introduces sin to humanity by taking the forbidden fruit and giving it to her husband; this action positioned her as the foil for the ideal woman, Mary (Chance 13).

Just as Mary, the model women, embodied the height of virginity, the women who fall short of (or reject) the model must be unchaste. Grendel's Mother is among those cast as unchaste. When speaking of Grendel and his mother, Hrothgar specifically mentions that "*nō hīe fæder cunnon*" ("they [the people of Heorot] know [of] no father [for Grendel]") (*Beowulf* line 1355). Evidently, Grendel's Mother's marriageless sex is of sufficient importance to merit specific note when Beowulf is given instructions on how to find and kill her. Her lover must also be of supernatural origins, as she herself is "*idese onlīcnæs*" ("in the likeness of a woman") (line 1351), while her son is "*earm-sceapen. . . māra þonne ænig man oðer*" ("misshapen. . . larger than any other man") (lines 1351, 1353). This would suggest that not only has Grendel's Mother had sex without having a husband, but, as she bears a resemblance to a human woman, her lover must have been a creature even larger and more monstrous than her in order to create such a monstrous son. He is also "*Cāines cynne*" (kinsman of Cain") (line 107), which may connect him to the giants who made the sword found in his mother's lair (line 1558). Though her sexual improprieties have little to do with her current acts of violence and the threat she poses to

Beowulf, Hrothgar determines that they are sufficiently unusual to be noted in her brief introduction to the hero.

VI. Masculine Literary Roles

As stated previously, Judith and Grendel's Mother do not strictly comply with traditionally feminine behavioral expectations while simultaneously perpetrating one great act of masculine violence. It will therefore be useful to also compare these women to typical standards for masculine behavior to see if their brief forays into violence cause them to comply any better with standards for a gender not their own. While expectations for women are often passive, the masculine ideal tends to be one of aggressive action. So, explorations of Anglo-Saxon heroism and the masculine perpetuation of bloodfeud will be made illustrate the standards by which the masculine deeds of Judith and Grendel's Mother would be judged.

A. Standards of Masculine Heroism

While the Anglo-Saxon literary standard for women was one of passivity, focusing primarily on words and the encouragement of action, the masculine literary standard was one of action, bravery, and violence. Beowulf, in many ways, represents the archetypical masculine hero, just as Wealhtheow represented the Anglo-Saxon feminine standard (Magennis 1). As such, the following will be an examination of Beowulf and his actions over the course of the epic poem.

To begin with, Beowulf consistently chooses bravery and action over cowardice and inaction. Before going out to hunt down and kill Grendel's Mother, he makes a speech before

Hrothgar, filled with what could be his final requests, such as instructions for the proper destination for his treasure. He ends this speech with "*ic mē mid Hruntinge dōm gewyrce, oþðe mec dēað nimeð*" ("With Hrunting [Beowulf's sword] I will find a deserving fame or death will take me") (*Beowulf* lines 1490-1). This demonstrates Beowulf's drive to accomplish necessary action, even at the cost of his own life. This proclamation is in direct contrast with Unferth, son of Ecglaf, who refused to speak up. The narrator says, "*selfa ne dorste under yðra gewin aldre genēpan driht-scype drēogan, þær hē dōme forlēas, ellen-mærðum. Ne wæs þæm oðrum swā*" ("He did not himself dare risk his life among the clashing waves, test his courage; he lost his fame for that, his name for valor. It was not so with the other [Beowulf]") (lines 1468-1471). By failing to volunteer himself, Unferth has proven himself unworthy of the title of hero and demonstrates that the boasts he had made earlier in the poem were entirely empty. This quote also explicitly states that Beowulf's subsequent speech and action are in direct contrast with Unferth's cowardly (and arguably feminine) inaction. The narrator further ratifies Beowulf's actions as a hero by making the blanket statement, "*Swā sceal man dōn, þonne hē æt gūðe gegān þenceð longsumne lof, nā ymb his līf cearað*" ("So must a man, if he thinks at battle to gain any name, a long-living fame, care nothing for life") (lines 1534-1536). The narrator here has just confirmed that self-sacrificial action is necessary for heroic fame and, as this line is inserted in a scene about Beowulf's battle with Grendel's Mother, that Beowulf is acting in line with that standard. Toward the end of Beowulf's life, immediately before the fight with the dragon, Wiglaf, Beowulf's retainer who is his sole companion in that battle, shames the rest of Beowulf's men for their cowardly inaction by saying, "*dēað bið sēlla eorla gehwylcum þonne edwīt-līf*" ("Death is better for any warrior than a shameful life") (lines 2890-2891). This willingness to act at the cost of one's own life is a defining characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon hero. Beowulf proves

himself especially worthy in this regard, as he ultimately gives his life in battle against the dragon, at a time in his life when lesser heroes (such as Hrothgar) have given themselves over to the feminizing inaction of age. Beowulf resists whatever impulse he might have to rest, and he continues to fight until the bitter end.

Another related aspect of heroism is the protection of others. After Beowulf rids the land around Heorot of both Grendel and Grendel's Mother, he announces to Hrothgar:

"Ic hit þē þonne gehāte, þæt þū on Heorote mōst sorh-lēas swefan . . . þæt þū him ondrædan ne þearft, þēoden Scyldinga, on þā healfe, aldor-bealu eorlum, swā þū ær dydest."

["Now I can promise you safe nights in Heorot without further sorrow. . . you will have no need, Lord of the Scyldings, for fear in that matter, dark man-killing, as you did before."]

(*Beowulf* lines 1671-2, 1674-1676).

Here Beowulf announces his heroic triumph over all that has plagued Hrothgar's hall, and, by doing so, he is also adding to his personal fame and preparing to receive his reward from Hrothgar. This is evidently an appropriate action, as shortly thereafter Hrothgar says, "*Blæd is ārcæred geond wīd-wegas, wine mīn Bēowulf, ðīn ofer þēoda gehwylce*" ("Your glorious name is raised on high over every nation, Beowulf my friend, your fame spreads far") (lines 1703-5). Here Hrothgar praises Beowulf for what he has done, legitimizing Beowulf's actions and thanking him for freeing his people from their hunters. It is important to note that Beowulf also receives abundant physical rewards from Hrothgar in the form of copious riches for both himself and his lord Hygelac. Essentially, it is the duty of an Anglo-Saxon hero to take up arms when he or his allies are in danger, but he also can reasonably expect a reward at the end of his feat.

B. Bloodfeud

The Anglo-Saxon literary standard for men would often require them to continue cyclical bloodfeud. While speaking to his king, Hygelac, about the court at Heorot, Beowulf clearly lays out the typical progression of events that occur within a bloodfeud. This sequence was sufficiently common that Beowulf feels assured in speaking about the described events in a hypothetical sense (the union that he describes as a failure has not yet begun), and based upon his assertions on what has not come to pass, he feels justified in saying, "*þ̃ ic Heaðobeardna hylde ne telge*" ("So I count it little, the Heathobard's loyalty") (*Beowulf* line 2067). So, the cycle of events Beowulf describes is common enough that he is willing to discount potential allies (for Hrothgar) without the appearance of an actual conflict.

Initially, some initial act of violence or conflict must crop up between the groups. In Beowulf's narrative, war and killings already have been taking place for some time, and those involved (or at least Hrothgar) are willing to sue for peace. Beowulf tells us, "*wæl-fæhðra dæl, sæcca gesette*" ("he'll [Hrothgar will] settle his share of the killings and feud") (*Beowulf* lines 2028-9). At this early point in Beowulf's account of Hrothgar's actions, the king of the Scyldings is already tired of mutual killings and is ready to set violence between himself and the Heathobards behind him. King Froda of the aforementioned Heathobards evidently agrees with him, and the two seal their new pact by Hrothgar promising to marry his daughter, Freawaru, off to Ingeld, the son of the king. To a modern audience, the cost of a leader's child might seem a steep price; however, this practice of a wife exchanged as a peaceweaver was a common part of bloodfeud for the contemporary Anglo-Saxons. Though the concept behind peaceweaving was clearly to maintain accord among squabbling neighbors, Beowulf says darkly that, "*Oft seldan hwær æfter lēod-hryre lýtle hwīle bon-gār būgeð*" ("But seldom anywhere, after a slaying, will the death-spear rest, even for a little while") (lines 2029-2031). This indicates that the calm

between bouts of killing is temporary, and whatever power has caused the warriors to lay aside their spears will not be enough to force them men to keep their weapons put away.

The next step is set initially during the brief peace between bouts of violence. In this particular instance, the war seems to be stirred up across a generational divide; the old men stir up old hurts and expect the new men to take up their mantels. Beowulf tells us that it is the "*eald æsc-wiga*" ("old spear-man") (*Beowulf* line 2042) observes the spoils on the belt of an enemy fighter from ages past, and he recognizes the symbols that he observes as having belonged to old friends. Rather than attempting to take vengeance himself, this old fighter seeks out a "*geongum ceman*" ("young warrior") (line 2044), and he incites that young man to previously-unfelt violence. The old man accomplishes this by appealing to the young warrior's sense of personal honor, pointing out a token on his enemy and saying, "*Meaht ðū, mīn wine, mēce gecnāwan, þone þīn fæder to gefeohte bæc under here-grīman hindeman sīðe*" ("Can you, my comrade, now recognize the sword which your father bore in the final battle, under the grim war-mask for the last time") (lines 2047-2049). Here the old man is suggesting that the young man's father has gone unavenged, as his father had died in battle before the peace was made, and now his enemy (or his enemy's sons) dares to carry his sword within the presence of the man's son. The old man also appeals to the young man's sense of entitlement for the goods his father should have left for him, as now these treasures are carried by, "*hēr þāra banena byre nāt-hwylces*" ("some son or other of your father's killers") (line 2053). Between his jealousy of those who have his father's heirlooms and the righteous anger burning in the young man's heart, solely as a result of the old man's meddling, conflict will shortly break out.

After the young man is sufficiently angry about the injustice of his father's death (and the subsequent plundering of his body), conflict will break out between two factions of ancient

rivals. Beowulf might treat the young man's attempt at vengeance with a more positive attitude if the young man were in any way successful in his quest. However, Beowulf tells us that once the young man goes to win justice for his father, he will "*billes bite blōd-fāg swefeð, ealdres scylding*" ("sleep[] bloody-bearded, hacked by a sword, his life forfeited," lines 2060-1). So, the young man is killed following a conflict with his father's killer. His father's killer, on the other hand, "*losað lifigende*" ("[will] escape with his life") (line 2062). Though this initial conflict obviously goes poorly for the young man who still retained the strength to attempt such a feat, the old man, who wished for the old enemies to return to war, achieves his end.

After fresh blood is spilled between the once-warring factions, it is essentially inevitable that they go to war again, in spite of any previous peace agreements. Old treaties are disregarded, as "*þonne bīoð ābrocene on bā healfē āð-sweorð eorla*" ("then, on both sides, broken like swords the nobles' oath-swearing") (*Beowulf* lines 2063-2064). So it is through the one sharp conflict between the old killer and the young man that breaks open the rift that presses along the cycle of violence, which was briefly halted by the peaceweaver's addition to that kingdom. There is a glaring absence of women throughout the active parts of this process; the peaceweaver is present, but she is merely a symbol of what the men of both parties have already decided. Additionally, she is never consulted or asked to act in any way through the escalating violence. As such, she cannot be blamed for the events that transpire, though she will still be branded a failed peaceweaver. As the violence picks up again, it is likely that after enough time, the men will choose to strike another accord, and yet another powerless peaceweaver will be chosen. The inevitable cycle of violence will continue as long as the men are willing to perpetuate it, regardless of the number of peaceweavers they may use.

VII. Scale of Masculinity

As has been demonstrated, the Anglo-Saxon literary expectations for men and women varied widely based upon the gender of that person. To be considered a success, a character must align, at least to some degree, with their gender's standards for behavior. However, in several instances throughout the Anglo-Saxon corpus (and especially within *Beowulf* itself), the modern reader can find clear instances of both men and women behaving in ways commensurate with the standards for the opposite gender, rather than (or in addition to) their own. Stacy S. Klein argues that when a character within Anglo-Saxon literature behaves in ways that align with those of the opposite gender, that person becomes (at least in part) identified with the performance of that gender (89-91). The typical male-female gender dichotomy thereby becomes somewhat blurred, creating a gradual scale of masculinity upon which all characters may fall. This scale can serve as shorthand for considering how well a character aligns with the expected actions of their own gender, which frequently also determines how well his or her actions are received by the majority of Anglo-Saxon society. This scale can be a useful tool in understand contemporary responses to Judith and Grendel's Mother, as neither of them land cleanly on one end of the scale.

When examining typical literary expectations for either gender, *Beowulf* is an excellent place to begin. *Beowulf* contains an unusually high number of women, both good and bad, and masculine excellence is essentially embodied by Beowulf. In true masculine form, Beowulf declares of himself (after his return from Heorot) that:

"...ic ðæt eall gewræc, swā begylpan ne þearf Grendeles māga ānig ofer eorðan ūht-
hlem þone, sē ðe lengest leofað lāðan cynnes fācne bifongen."

["I avenged all that so well that none, no kinsman of Grendel wrapped in foul sin, not any on earth who lives the longest of the evil race can boast of that dawn-clash."]

(*Beowulf* lines 2005-2009)

So, not only is Beowulf a hero brave enough to face Grendel and his mother, he is effective enough as a warrior that by his actions, he has single-handedly struck a blow against all the evil in the world. Beowulf's vengeance is so complete that Heorot is now free of the threat of the children of Cain (i.e. the kinsmen of Grendel). His violent actions have achieved what all peaceweavers may only aspire to accomplish, which is to truly formulate a lasting peace between opposing factions or peace to one's own people, as in Judith's case. The immediate text of this passage also praises Beowulf for what he has done; the reader is told that "*setl getæhte*" (the gathering rejoiced") (line 2013). Beowulf's rewards for the ultimate destruction of Grendel and his mother indicate contemporary approval for his actions, and it is Beowulf who is held up as a standard when the narrator needs a foil for any lesser or weaker men, such as the coward Unferth. Interestingly, Beowulf is so thoroughly masculine that time and age do not stop him for fighting against the enemies of his people. As one of his final actions, Beowulf leads a two-man attack against a great dragon. Of his sword the narrator says, "*ecgum ungleaw*" ("the edge is not dull") (line 2564). Here the undamaged and useful state of Beowulf's weapon reflects Beowulf's own remaining strength; he is an old man now, but he is still strong enough to fight, unlike Hrothgar in his old age. When the dragon moves against Beowulf's kingdom, he remains unbreakable and does not fade, unlike some other men from the same poem, like Hrothgar, who decline in valor and action as they age. Through his consistent assertive behavior, Beowulf illustrates the Anglo-Saxon standard for masculine heroic action; if danger threatens, it is the

responsibility of the literary man to perpetrate whatever violence is necessary to remove that menace.

Just as it is the role of the Anglo-Saxon man to assert himself and carry out necessary acts of violence, so is it the role of the Anglo-Saxon woman to remain a passive observer of violence with her influence confined to her speech. As has been previously observed, Wealhtheow is an archetypical Anglo-Saxon literary woman. Upon Beowulf's arrival at Heorot, the queen carries out her traditional role of passing the communal cup down through the ranks of her husband's retainers, and she greets her husband's guest. The narrator says that, "*grētte Gēata lēod, Gode þancode wīs-fæst wordum, þæs ðe se willa gelamp, þæt hēo on ænigne eorl gelȳfde fyrena frōfre*" ("She greeted him [Beowulf] well, gave thanks to God, wise in her words, that her wish came to pass, that she might expect help against crimes from any man," *Beowulf* lines 625-628). Though the reader is not given Wealhtheow's precise words, her words are "wise," and they prompt Beowulf pledge his life in service to her husband, saying, "*Ic gefremman sceal eorlīc ellen, opðe ende-dæg on þisse meodu-healle mīnne gebīdan*" ("Tonight I will do a heroic deed or else I will serve my last day of life here in this mead-hall") (lines 636-638). Because Wealhtheow cannot take up arms against Grendel herself, exacting an oath from one whose use of violence is socially acceptable and who has the strength to defend her people is the best she can do for herself and Heorot.

After Beowulf successfully defeats Grendel, Wealhtheow repeats the same cup-ceremony, and she also presents Beowulf with part of his reward for his heroic deed. As she thanks him, she makes a request of him in passing, saying, "*Bēo þū suna mīnum dāedum gedēfe, drēam-healdende*" ("Be to my sons gracious in deeds, winner of hall-joys, in your great strength") (lines 1226-1227). This appeal to Beowulf's strength is especially vital for

Wealhtheow, as her husband is quickly declining into weakness and will soon be dead; her sons, who are not yet men, will not be able to defend either themselves or their widowed mother.

Hrothgar's imminent death places Wealhtheow in a precarious position; she is a foreign woman with two young sons and a royal nephew who has already grown to manhood. To keep her sons alive after Hrothgar's death, she will need powerful political and military allies, like Beowulf.

Wealhtheow is given limited political mobility, but she does the best she can by her husband's people, her sons, and herself using her words. Evidently her behavior is considered acceptable, as she is consistently praised throughout the poem in terms such as, "*frēolīc wīf*" ("glorious woman") (line 615). Though Wealhtheow is allowed a certain degree of freedom within the bounds of her role, she is rarely the center of attention, and once she has spoken her piece, she will promptly return to her seat (both physically and metaphorically) (lines 641, 1232). And, though Wealhtheow takes advantage of what powers she does have, the majority of her role is passive; as previously discussed, peaceweavers like Wealhtheow or her daughter Freawaru have little practical power once war or bloodfeud begin.

In spite of the attacks by Grendel and Grendel's mother, the scenes involving Wealhtheow take place during a time of relative peace. Hrothgar has difficulty defending his men from the creatures that stalk outside his hall, but within his court there is no open bloodfeud. Though she has little actual power over these circumstances, Wealhtheow is (for the moment) a successful peaceweaver, while Hildeburh, who is equally helpless in her own circumstances, would be considered a failure. Hildeburh, originally one of the Danes, was given to Finn as a wife to bring an end to a conflict that has already taken place at the opening of the bard's narration. Unfortunately, Hildeburh's peaceweaving fails, and old wounds reopen in bloodfeud. The narrator does not say to what lengths Hildeburh went to keep the peace; a peaceweaver's

power is found in her words, and none of Hildeburh's words are recorded. However, among the dead is her son by her husband Finn, the king of the Frisians, so she clearly fulfilled her role as mother and cemented the bond between their peoples in the person of her son. Additionally, the narrator says that Hildeburh, in the deaths of her loved ones, "*unsynnum wearð*" ("was guiltless") (*Beowulf* 1072). While she was able use her words to influence her male relatives, she did all that she could to maintain peace; to be "guiltless," she must have fulfilled the requirements of her position, in spite of her inevitable failure.

While Hildeburh is not explicitly praised in the short narration of her tragedy, she is portrayed in an extremely sympathetic light. The narrator says of her:

"Nalles hōlinga Hōces dohtor metodsceaft bemearn, syþðan morgen cōm, ðā hēo under swegle gesēon meahste morþor-bealo māga, þær hēo ær mæste hēold worolde wynne."

["Not without cause did Hoc's daughter [Hildeburh] 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."]

(*Beowulf* lines 1076-1079)

In this account of death and destruction, Hildeburh's grief forms the emotional backbone of the story. Her pain is highlighted and treated as legitimate, and it is meaningfully contrasted with the happiness she once had. If she had been considered at fault, it would be unlikely that she would garner so much attention. Though sixteen of the ninety lines in this narrative are spent on Hildeburh, she performs very little; her only assertive action occurs when "*Hēt [] Hildeburh Hnæfes āde hire selfre sunu sweoloðe befæstan*" ("Hildeburh ordered her own dead son placed on the pyre beside his uncle Hnæf") (lines 1114-5). Hildeburh represents the passive Anglo-Saxon woman during a time of crisis; the time for her limited actions is past. She is not expected to take up arms or to choose between her blood relatives and her husband's family. Rather,

Hildeburh is to weather the storm and wait; she may mourn, but to actively involve herself in the conflict would overstep her bounds.

Essentially, Wealhtheow is considered proper because she takes advantage of her limited opportunities to benefit her children and her husband. Through no actions of her own, she lives in a time of peace, and as such she would be considered a success. Limited power is given to her through her words, and she uses them to her best advantage. She does, however, consistently keep out of the limelight, and when she does more to the fore, she steps back once her work is done. For Hildeburh, the time for words is past, and therefore whatever power she might have had is gone. Like Wealhtheow, Hildeburh follows the proper literary rules for Anglo-Saxon woman, though, in her case, this manifests itself as mourning. Wealhtheow's end will be the same as Hildeburh; her husband is nearing his death through age, and her sons will soon thereafter be killed by their uncle, notwithstanding Beowulf's pledge (*Beowulf* 333). As a whole, the golden standard for female behavior in Anglo-Saxon literature is passivity and inaction, especially in times of masculine conflict.

As has been established, the typical gender dichotomy of behavior in Anglo-Saxon literature assigns aggressive action to men and passive acceptance, with some limited action, to women. However, not all characters follow these typical gender roles. In cases when male characters behave passively or act primarily through their words, they can be cast as feminine, while women who behave in aggressive or violent ways can be cast as masculine (Klein 89-91). Similar to the examples of archetypical male and female behavior, both the feminized male and the masculinized female can be seen in the text of *Beowulf*.

The feminized male figure, seen multiple times within *Beowulf*, tend to be men weakened by age and time. In Beowulf's cautionary hypothetical tale about Freawaru's future failings as a peaceweaver, it is an "*eald æsc-wiga*" ("an old spear-man") who stirs up the conflict. This old man does not bring back the feud through his own direct actions (*Beowulf* line 2042); rather, he decides "*geongum cēpan þurh hreðra gehygd higes cunnian, wīg-bealu weccēan*" ("to search out a young man in the depths of his heart, to test his resolve, strike blade-spark in kin [i.e. the young man]") (lines 2044-46). The old man continues to try to persuade this younger man to violence, and he "*manað swā ond myndgað mæla gehwylce sārūm wordum*" ("continually whets the young man's mind with cruel words") (lines 2057-8). The old man has limited power over the young man, just as any Anglo-Saxon female would have limited power over any male. The similarities between his actions and typical female actions are significant. In fact, the old man's actions clearly mimic those of Wealhtheow, who represents the Anglo-Saxon feminine literary ideal. Both have personal concerns that can only be resolved by a strong, active male (Beowulf, in Wealhtheow's case), and they both resolve their needs through verbal persuasion. Though the old man could, from a social point of view, take up arms and plunge his people into bloodfeud whenever he chooses, his weakness, as a result of his age, causes him to instead seek outside help for a task he would once have performed personally. This feminine behavior places the old man closer to the feminine end of the gender scale than the young man he presses into action, but certainly closer to the masculine end than Wealhtheow. He is still consistently spoken of as a man, and he at one time did participate in deeds of valor, though those days are past.

Much of the same weakness can be said of Heorot's king, Hrothgar. Speaking to Beowulf, he says of himself, "*Swā ic Hring-Dena hund missēra wēold under wolcnum, ond hig wigge belēac manigum mægþa*" ("Thus, fifty winters, I ruled the Ring-Danes under these skies and by

my war-strength kept them safe") (*Beowulf* lines 1769-1771). This previous strength, from a time when Hrothgar could defend his people from all comers, is contrasted sharply with his current weakness; now, the people of Heorot suffer nightly raids from Grendel, and their king must appeal to foreigners for aid. Speaking to Beowulf, Hrothgar says:

"Nū is se rǣd gelang eft æt þē ānum. . . Ic þē þā fāhðe fēo lēanige, eald-gestrēonum, swā ic ær dyde, wundini golde, gyf þū on weg cymest."

["Now again, you alone are our only help. . . I will reward your feud with payments, most valued treasures, as I did before, old twisted gold, if you live to return."]

(*Beowulf* lines 1376-7, 1380-1382)

Hrothgar finds himself in a position of weakness brought on by his advanced age, and it is only through his supplication to Beowulf that his people are defended. It is true that, in the past, Hrothgar was strong enough to have accumulated sufficient wealth to pay for the aid his people currently need, but now he is forced to rely on others. Beowulf tells his king Hygelac that Hrothgar had begged for his aid, and "*hē mē mēde gehēt*" ("he [Hrothgar] promised full reward") (line 2134). Because Hrothgar can buy help, his own strength having failed, he is in a stronger position than both the unnamed old spear-man and Wealhtheow. While the latter two can only use their persuasive speech to aid them, Hrothgar can back his requests with the remains of his youthful wealth. However, Hrothgar is still diminished from the thoroughly masculine figure he would have been as a young war leader; throughout the poem, Hrothgar remains in the relative safety of his kingdom, and he does not directly engage with his enemies. Hrothgar's current lack of violent action places him in approximately the same place on the masculinity scale as the old spear-man; he is less masculine than the active Beowulf, but he is allowed to take greater action than his young wife. As can be seen in the instances of Hrothgar and the old spear-man, age functions as one of the most feminizing influences in Anglo-Saxon literature. Interestingly,

Beowulf avoids the change from masculine to feminine through the maintenance of aggressive action until the point of his death.

Though the shift between masculine and feminine action appears to be largely dependent upon age for men (which brings with it passivity), it is typically a woman's aggression that can portray her as masculine. One such woman is Modthrytho, who eventually marries the king Offa. In her younger years, Modthrytho was known for sentencing men to death for the crime of making eye contact with her. Naturally, this pattern was considered ridiculous. The narrator, when describing her homicidal habit, says

"Ne bið swylc cwēnlīc þēaw idese tō efnanne, þeah ðe hīo ānlicu sý, þætte freoðu-webbe fēores onsāce æfter lige-torne lēofne mannan."

["Not queenly customs in a lady, however beautiful, to take the lives of beloved men, a woman, a peaceweaver, inventing false charges."]

(*Beowulf* lines 1940-1943)

Though her actions could easily be condemned if seen in either gender, they are exceptionally bad in light of her gender-specific role of peaceweaver, which here is equated with women in general. Through her violence, Modthrytho behaves in an unwomanly and unacceptable manner. This changes, however, once she is married. The narrator says that she caused, "*læs gefremede, inwit-nīða, syððan ārest wearð gyfen gold-hroden geongum cempa*" ("less harm to the people, malicious trouble, once she was given, adorned in gold, to the young champion") (lines 1946-1948). After her marriage, she is more firmly locked into her feminine role, and she diminishes somewhat to give place to her husband. Interestingly, she is also "adorned in gold," which references a common Anglo-Saxon trope of comparing women to wealth (Belanoff 822). This emphasizes that her husband now essentially owns her, and she will no longer do harm, because she has been put on his leash.

Because of her unwomanly behavior, Modthrytho would be significantly more masculine than Wealhtheow, the ideal woman. However, she would be much less masculine than Grendel's Mother, who is so masculine that she actually merits the use of masculine pronouns from time to time (*Beowulf* line 1392). Much can be said of Grendel's Mother's comparative masculinity, but that will be discussed at length in a later section.

As a whole, many Anglo-Saxon characters fall to one end of the gender dichotomy or the other, particularly in terms of flat characters. However, there are a sufficient number of exceptions to that rule that a more fluid understanding of gender roles is necessary. Some characters whose actions differ socially from their biological gender, such as Hrothgar, are generally approved of, while characters like Grendel's Mother are universally condemned. It is the difference in societal reaction to Judith and Grendel's Mother as breakers of gendered role expectations that will be explored below.

VIII. Judith

Now that Anglo-Saxon historical and literary contexts have been established, the violent actions taken by Judith and Grendel's Mother will be examined in terms of their respective ends. The former kills an enemy general and gains acclaim and material wealth, while the latter kills an enemy lord and is rewarded with her own death. The two cases are remarkably similar on the surface, and so an exploration of the circumstances around their single acts of violence must be made to fully understand the causes of their outcomes. The first of these women is Judith, the titular character of a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poem of the same name. Of the two

women who will be analyzed, she falls more in line with literary standards for feminine behavior, though she does stray from them when the situation requires masculine action.

A. Summary of Source Text

Though the beginning of the poem is no longer extant, the remaining fragment begins with a brief introduction to Judith as a servant and dependent of the Lord. The narrator then introduces Holofernes, an Assyrian general and an enemy of Judith's people who is "*nergende lað*" ("hateful to the savior") (*Judith* line 45). Holofernes is holding a large, drunken feast for his men, and he himself is seriously inebriated when he orders Judith, who is a prisoner in his camp to be brought to his tent. He intends "*beorhtan idese mid widle ond mid womme besmitan*" ("to defile the shining woman and pollute her with sin") (lines 58-9). Before he can do so, he falls unconscious, giving Judith the opportunity to take up arms against him. Judith prays for the Lord's favor, and "*genam ða þone hæðenan mannan fæste be feaxe sinum, teah hyne folmum wið hyre weard bysmerlice, ond þone bealofullan listum aledre*" ("then she seize[s] that heathen man fast by his hair, she pull[s] him towards her with her hand disgracefully and to the baleful place[s] skillfully") (lines 98-101). She then strikes him twice on the neck with his own sword, and his head rolls free onto the floor. Judith and her maidservant (who has entered the enemy camp with her mistress) place the head in a sack and walk back to their city, Bethulia. Upon approaching the wall, Judith hails the men inside and tells them that they need no longer worry. The people of the city gather at the wall, at which time Judith, "*gleawe het . . . hyre ðinenne þancolmode þæs herewæðan heafod onwriðan ond hyt to behðe blodig ætywan þam burhleodum*" ("wisely commanded her handmaiden, thoughtful of mind, to uncover the head of the warrior to display it, bloody, as a sign to the citizens") (lines 171-175). Judith then gives a grand speech, informing the citizenry that she was able to kill Holofernes with the help of God,

and she encourages the men of the city to take up arms against their remaining, leaderless enemies. The men of Bethulia arm themselves and easily rout the remaining Assyrians, who find themselves helpless without their general. The Hebrew men gather up Holofernes sword and armor as spoil, which they then give to Judith, who "*sigorlean in swegles wuldre, þæs þe heo ahte soðne geleafan to ðam ælmihtigan*" ("glorifie[s] in the bright reward of victory this which she passes in righteous faith always to the Almighty") (lines 344-5). Thus with Judith and the Lord both appropriately thanked, the narrative ends.

The text of the poem *Judith* is based on a biblical book of the same name. Interestingly, the Anglo-Saxon poet makes several significant changes. For example, the narrative is significantly contracted from the biblical version, which contains many more speaking parts and spends much more time examining the actions of the Assyrians; in fact, Judith herself is not introduced until the eighth chapter out of sixteen (Judith 8.1). Additionally, it is explicitly stated that Judith is a widow, and she enters the Assyrian camp after having extensively prepared to make her appearance appealing, though the text does note that this behavior is "*ex virtute*" ("out of virtue") rather than from "*libidine*" ("sensuality") (Judith 10.4). The biblical text also gives much less emphasis to the Hebrew rout of the Assyrians. Though the poem ends abruptly after the giving of spoils, the book does not end until several notes are made about the end of Judith's life, including the fact that she never remarried, and that the people of Israel mourned for seven days after her death.

These differences between the narrative of the poem and its original iteration are important because the discrepancies help illustrate the biases of the Anglo-Saxon poet. The practice of retelling biblical stories while altering the text to better fit contemporary tastes was a fairly common practice; other examples include *Exodus*, *Genesis*, and *Daniel*, all of which only

include part of their original source material ("Place" 477). Several of the changes found in *Judith* may have served to make its titular character's unusual actions more palatable to the Anglo-Saxons. For example, the biblical narrative is clear that Judith makes herself beautiful for the purpose of capturing Holofernes' attention, so that she can get close enough to kill him. The text says:

". . .et lavit corpus suum et unxit se myrro optimo et discriminavit crinem capitis sui et inposuit mitram super caput suum et induit se vestimentis iucunditatis suae induit[] . . . et omnibus ornamentis suis ornavit se."

["and she washed her body and anointed herself with the best ointment and plaited the of her head and put a bonnet on her head and clothed herself with the garments of gladness [as opposed to the widow's garments she had been wearing]. . .and adorned herself with all her ornaments."]

(Judith 10.3)

Clearly, Judith is making extensive preparations to make herself attractive, ostensibly so that she can get close enough to Holofernes to kill him. The poem fragment leaves out Judith's preparations entirely, instead focusing on the danger present in the camp and her holiness. The extant fragment of the poem begins with "[] hēo āhte mǣste þearfe hyldo þæs hēhstan Dēman" ("He against this highest threat her protected, the Lord of foundations") (*Judith* lines 4-5). The focus here is upon Judith's relationship with God rather than any physical preparations Judith may or may not have made in the missing fragment. Had Judith intended on seducing Holofernes in the poem, she would have been considered unchaste, which would have brought down the disapproval of the poet's audience well before she makes any other unfeminine behaviors, specifically the killing of Holofernes. So, it seems logical that the poet would have found it preferable to alter the details of the narrative and keep the heart of the story intact rather than lose major narrative elements, such as the plot-essential killing, in order to maintain the approval of his audience.

B. Judith Compared to the Female Anglo-Saxon Literary Standard

Women in the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition were expected to be passive symbols of peace who, if they did act, confined themselves to the spoken word. Though Judith ultimately brings peace to her people, she does not go about this in the same manner as a traditional peaceweaver. To begin with, Judith is not married and has no children, which would prevent her from perfectly fulfilling that role; though she is a widow, this is never mentioned in the course of the poem. While a peaceweaver like Wealhtheow might have called upon a man of Bethulia to vanquish Holofernes, Judith herself takes action when no one else will. Judith does not act like Hildeburh, who resigns herself to sorrow and who does nothing to strike back. "Grant me, Lord of the Heavens, victory and true faith that I with this sword might cut down this author of murder," a prayer made by Judith before decapitating Holofernes, does not represent the words of a typical peaceweaver ("*Forgif me, swegles ealdor, sigor ond soðne geleafan, þæt ic mid þys sweorde mote geheawan þysne morðres bryttan*") (*Judith* lines 88-90). That the men of Bethulia have not gone to war already would indicate that traditional peaceweaving, in the form of the encouragement of violence by women, has already failed. Essentially, Judith is forced into her masculine position by the failure of the men from whom socially-appropriate violence is expected. And, ironically, Judith does succeed in creating peace through war. In his own poem, Beowulf expresses a lack of faith in peaceweaving, saying, "*Oft seldan hwær æfter lēod-hryre lýtle hwīle bon-gār būgeð, þēah sēo brȳd dūge*" ("But seldom anywhere, after a slaying, will the death-spear rest, even for a while, though the bride be good") (*Beowulf* 2029-2031). It is possible that the Judith poet felt a similar skepticism about the efficacy of peaceweaving and then used Judith to demonstrate an alternative method of keeping peace. Or, rather, a way that combined the masculine and the feminine, as Judith performs actions in line with both gender's ideals--the

death of Holofernes on the masculine side, and the encouragement of the men of Bethulia on the feminine side. In any case, Judith does bring her people peace, the primary goal of a peaceweaver, through her one great act of masculine violence.

Though Judith does not behave in ways commensurate to the standards laid down by traditional peaceweavers, she does embrace speech as a form of power. After her act of violence is done, Judith returns to Bethulia with her handmaiden, at which point she uses Holofernes' head to prove to the people that he is no longer a threat. She then takes part in the typically feminine activity of encouraging violence in which she plans to take no part, saying, "*Nu ic gumena gehwæne þyssa burgleoda biddan wylle, randwiggendra, þæt ge recene eow fýsan to gefeohte*" ("Now I, to each man of this city, will request of the shield-warriors, that you immediately hasten into the fight") (*Judith* lines 186-189). She also encourages them to action by telling them that God is on their side. Encouraged by the death of the Assyrian general and divine support, the men do take up arms and quickly destroy those who had laid siege to their city. These scenes are particularly important when considering Judith as a female character, as she is simultaneously putting away her atypical, violent behavior, and adopting a more traditional role.

Finally, Judith, though chaste herself, has a moderately complicated relationship with the Anglo-Saxon ideal for chastity. As previously observed, the biblical version of the story includes Judith's preparations for facing Holofernes; she knows herself to be a beautiful woman, and she does all that she can to enhance her beauty with beautiful clothes and jewelry (*Judith* 10.2-5). While this portion of the narrative is ostensibly left out of the Anglo-Saxon retelling (the fragment begins with Judith already in the Assyrian camp), she has still clearly come to the camp for the purpose of killing Holofernes, as indicated by her actions immediately after the general loses consciousness, and she, as a woman who is "*ferhðgleawe*" ("wise") (*Judith* line 41) must

have understood the danger to her chastity. The text of the poem clearly states Holofernes' intentions, saying, "*Het ða niða geblonden þa eadigan mægð ofstum fetigan to his bedreste*" ("he then commanded, the evil man, corrupted, that blessed maiden be brought near with haste to his bed-rest") (lines 34-36) in order to "*mid widle ond mid womme besmitan*" ("defile and pollute [her] with shame") (line 59). Especially in light of culturally ideal cases, like the nuns of Coldingham who chose self-mutilation over rape, Judith's holiness is temporarily put into a precarious position. However, she does manage to avoid rape, and she is repeatedly given epithets like "*halgan mægð*" ("holy maiden") (line 260). So, though Judith risk her chastity in order to reach her ends, she is evidently justified in the Anglo-Saxon mind, as she is never shamed for her actions, and she is consistently described as both holy and wise.

As a whole, Judith conforms fairly well to traditional feminine literary roles. She cannot be an entirely typical peaceweaver, as she has no husband or children, and she chooses to take violent action into her own hands. However, she quickly abandons violence in favor of the acceptable female use of words to encourage masculine action. And though she does risk her chastity by venturing into Holofernes' camp, she remains chaste and is ultimately praised for her actions.

C. Judith Compared to the Masculine Anglo-Saxon Literary Standard

Just as Judith conforms partially to the feminine Anglo-Saxon standard to a large degree, so she also fits comfortably into parts of the masculine heroic standard as well. To begin with, Judith is directly described as an "*ides ellenrof*" ("brave woman") (*Judith* line 146). This assertion is important because bravery, while not expressly necessary for meeting traditional feminine standards, is a vital trait for heroic male characters. This same Anglo-Saxon word

"*ellenrof*" appears four times in *Beowulf* (lines 340, 358, 1787, 3063), and each instance refers to masculine characters. Additionally, though Judith's act of wandering into an enemy camp to kill the general while risking her chastity might be portrayed negatively in terms of traditional female ideals (i.e. mutilation before rape), from a masculine heroic perspective the same set of actions could be portrayed as brave and admirable. Though Beowulf's chastity was never an issue, his willingness to venture into Grendel's Mother's lair is counted as a brave act; the narrator says, "[] *wæs ān-ræd nalas elnes læt*" ("he was resolute, not slow in courage") (*Beowulf* line 1529). Clearly, Beowulf is taking an action that puts his person in danger, so his bravery is praised. Judith's venture into her enemy's lair would have require similar amounts of bravery, as the narrator says, "*Hi ða se hehsta dema ædre mid elne onbryrde . . . þa wearð hyre rume on mode, haligre hyht geniwod*" ("Then the highest Judge inspired her [Judith] with courage. . . then was she, the abundant in mind, renewed holy hope") (*Judith* lines 94-5, 97-8). Though Judith's courage seems to stem directly from God, which is not seen in Beowulf, she stills possesses this positive moral trait commonly seen in heroic male characters. And though risking her chastity could have been construed negatively, she is never condemned for her actions, and rather is praised as "*ellenpriste*" ("heroically bold") (line 133). The bravery necessary for her actions outweighs any impropriety in Judith's case, and she appears to handily meet this standard of masculine heroism.

Like traditionally heroic masculine characters, Judith engages in violence for the sake of protecting others. Just as Beowulf defeats Grendel and his mother to free Heorot, Judith defeats Holofernes for the liberation of Bethulia. Speaking to the people of Bethulia, Judith says of Holofernes, "*ac him ne uðe god lengran lifes, þæt he mid læððum us eglan moste; ic him ealdor oðþrong þurh godes fultum*" ("but God did not grant him a longer life so that with wrongs he

[would] not be able to trouble us more; I deprived him [of life], the prince, through the help of God") (*Judith* lines 183-186). Though this quote does focus on God's role in Holofernes' death, it also explains Judith's motivations; that is, Judith slew Holofernes so that he would not be able to trouble Bethulia, in accordance with God's design. Though women participating in violence was an unusual occurrence in Anglo-Saxon culture, an action of this kind (i.e. female involvement in killing or war) is not without precedent. For example, Æthelflæd, the Lady of the Mercians, was directly involved with the wars her army waged against both Vikings and her neighbors (*Queens* 118). The Abingdon Manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that Æthelflæd "took possession of the stronghold which is called Derby" in 917. The same manuscript also explicitly states that she was with her army when they went Tamworth and built Lammas and Stafford in 913. Though Æthelflæd's action is not an individual action like Judith's, her military's conquest is attributed to her. Additionally, neither Æthelflæd's seizure of Derby nor Judith's assassination of Holofernes are for their own benefit. This benefit to the common good evidently outweighs typical prohibitions against female violence. And though Æthelflæd is a historical figure while Judith is literary, the same kinds of public attitudes that would accept Æthelflæd's actions would be necessary for the acceptance of Judith as well. Essentially, Judith meets the masculine standard for heroic violence by perpetrating murder for the sake the protection of others, and this same motivation may also make her action more palatable to her contemporary audience.

Just as Judith does not perfectly fit into the role of peaceweaver, so she does not neatly fit into the role of the masculine avenger in the cycle of bloodfeud. Though she does kill Holofernes in reaction to prior acts of violence, as would be typical in cycles of bloodfeud, her motivations were not personal, as previously discussed. This contrasts with the hypothetical case of the young man and the old man in reference to Freawaru's impending marriage, which Beowulf uses

as an essentially archetypical example. It is interesting that both in Beowulf's example and Judith's case, there is an imbalance of power between the would-be avenger and the object of the avenger's anger. In the first case, the initially-angry party is the old man, who has lived past his prime and therefore finds that he must recruit an avenger to act on his behalf—a typically feminine action. Judith, on the other hand, is at a disadvantage when facing Holofernes on two primary counts. First, Holofernes is surrounded by an army, while Judith is only accompanied by a single maidservant. Second, Judith is a woman, and she is therefore physically weaker than Holofernes, who is both a man and a warrior. So, lacking the ability to call upon another avenger (as apparently the entire city of Bethulia could not produce a male champion), Judith must instead slay Holofernes when she has the advantage. *Judith's* narrator says, "*þa wæs nergendes þeowen þrymful, þearle gemyndig hu heo þone atolan eaðost mihte ealdre benæman ær se unsyfra, womfull, onwoce*" ("Then was the glorious handmaid of Christ greatly mindful how she might easily deprive the terrible one of life before he, unclean and full of sin, awoke") (*Judith* lines 73-77). Rather than trying to meet Holofernes in any kind of open combat, Judith must instead use her wits and kill him while he lies in a drunken stupor.

Though she does not perfectly align with the masculine standard in this instance, she is still rewarded for Holofernes' death. It is even possible that beheading Holofernes in his sleep would have seemed a more appropriately feminine action to the poem's contemporary audience. When speaking of the division of the spoils after the battle against the Assyrians is done, the narrator says:

". . .sylfre brohton, eorlas æscrofe, Holofernes sweord ond swatigne helm, swylce eac side byrnan gerenode readum golde. . .beaga ond beorhtra maðma, hi þæt þære beorhtan idese ageafon gearoþoncolre . . ."

["they [the Bethulian soldiers] brought themselves from the renowned Holofernes the sword and grey helm, moreover in like manner the extensive hauberk, each side decorated in red gold . . . [and] the rings and bright jewels they gave to that shining lady ready-witted. . ."]

(*Judith* lines 335-338,340-341)

From this passage it is apparent that the people of Bethulia value the deed Judith has done, and she is richly rewarded. In the same way that Beowulf can accept rewards from Hrothgar for saving Heorot, Judith is able to accept the spoil from the battle that was precipitated from her actions. Though Judith does not keep to every standard for masculine heroism, her actions are sufficiently acceptable that she can accept a man's reward.

D. Judith's Place on the Scale of Masculinity

Based on the presented evidence, it is plain that Judith does not fit neatly into either gendered category. The beheading of Holofernes is a markedly masculine action, and Judith certainly displays masculine levels of courage in venturing into the Assyrian camp. However, Judith's masculine actions tend to be isolated incidences surrounded by feminine actions. Immediately after Holofernes is dead, Judith returns to her people to become an impetus for the violence of others rather than a perpetrator of violence herself, and she remains a chaste figure throughout the poem. Though she does not meet all the traditional requirements of a peaceweaver, her actions bring peace to her people rather than an endless cycle of violence. She is driven to masculine action by both the inaction of the men of the city and, perhaps, frustration at her own inability to accomplish her expected goal of peace through feminine means. Because she relies on tactics from both genders, she serves as a kind of bridge between the two roles. Altogether, Judith remains a primarily feminine character. She is not as feminine as ideal

peaceweavers like Wealhtheow, but the prevalence of her feminine actions keeps her firmly on the feminine side of the Anglo-Saxon literary gender scale.

IX. Grendel's Mother

Though Judith and Grendel's Mother both fail to be solely feminine, Grendel's Mother is the more ambiguously gendered of the two. While Judith only temporarily deviates from proper Anglo-Saxon feminine behavior, Grendel's Mother never adheres to a base-female state. Essentially, Grendel's Mother, though biologically female, ignores Anglo-Saxon standards for feminine behavior, and she suffers dire consequences as a result.

A. Summary of Source Text

Before Grendel's Mother enters the story in *Beowulf*, Beowulf arrives at Hrothgar's hall, Heorot, and offers to end Grendel's reign of terror. When Grendel next attacks the hall, Beowulf is ready for him, and he defeats Grendel without any weapons. The people of Heorot rejoice, and Beowulf is rewarded. Then, Grendel's Mother appears in the narrative. Immediately before her arrival at the hall, the narrator says, "*Ond his mōdor þā gýt gífre ond galg-mōd gegān wolde sorh-fulne sīð, sunu dēoð wrecan*" ("And now his mother, still greedy for slaughter, wanted to visit, make a grievous journey, avenger her son's death") (*Beowulf* lines 1276-8). Her mission is successful, as she catches the hall-dwellers by surprise, and she kills Æschere, a favorite of the king in exchange for the life of her son. Hrothgar says of her, "*Hēo þā fāhðe wræc, þe þū gystran niht Grendel cwealde*" ("She avenged that feud in which, last night, you killed Grendel") (lines 1333-4). Hrothgar further describes Grendel's Mother to Beowulf, preparing Beowulf to face her, saying, "*gewitan meahton idese onlīcnæs*" ("one of them walked in the

likeness of a woman") (lines 1350-1). Grendel's Mother's description is important because she is equated with human women; her son, on the other hand, has of an unknown father and walks about misshapen. Beowulf chases after her and swims through a dark mere, where Grendel's Mother takes him into her claws and drags him into her hall. When his sword fails to harm her, Beowulf tries to grapple with her, as he did her son. The narrator asserts early on that, "*Wæs se gryre lāssa efne swā micle, swā bið mægþa cræft, wīg-gryre wifes, be wæpned-men*" ("Terror [produced by Grendel's Mother] was the less by just so much as the strength of women, attack of battle-wives, compared to armed men") (lines 1282-4). This is meant to indicate that Grendel's Mother is weaker than a man of commensurate size, but the text would indicate otherwise. While Beowulf was able to successfully defeat Grendel unarmed, when he attempted to take down Grendel's Mother by gripping her shoulder, she turns the tables on him. The narrator says, "*Ofsæt þā þone sele-gyst ond hyre seax getēah, brād, brūn-ecg; wolde hire bearn wrecan, āngan eaferan*" ("She sat on her hall-guest [Beowulf] and drew her broad knife, a sharp weapon, to buy back her son, her only kinsman") (*Beowulf* lines 1545-7). After Grendel's Mother holds Beowulf down, only his shirt of mail saves him from her blade. Beowulf manages to stand up again, at which time he lays hold of a giant-forged sword sitting amongst the hall's treasures. Using this magnificent weapon, he beheads Grendel's Mother with one stroke. Once the danger is past, Beowulf then decapitates Grendel's corpse and takes his head as a trophy, foregoing taking any part of Grendel's Mother herself. He then returns to Heorot, collects his reward, and returns home to the court of King Hygelac.

B. Grendel's Mother Compared to the Female Anglo-Saxon Literary Standard

While Judith has a complex relationship with Anglo-Saxon standards for feminine behavior, Grendel's Mother tends to flatly fail in almost every respect. Grendel's Mother falls

short in every area of traditional feminine behavior; in fact, it would seem that only her motherhood and biological gender cause her to be spoken of as a female at all.

To begin with, Grendel's Mother is a categorical failure as a peaceweaver. While she does have a son (children being a necessary part of cementing peace between factions), she does not have a husband or a people who depend on her to keep peace; she is an outcast without a place in any society. When she is first named, the narrator said:

"Grendles mōdor, ides, āglāc-wīf yrmþe gemunde, sē þe wæter-egesan wunian scolde, cealde strēamas, siþðan Cain wearð tō ecg-banan āngan brēþer. . ."

["Grendel's mother, a monster woman, kept war-grief deep in her mind, dwelt in terrible waters, icy cold streams, since Cain raised the sword against closest kinsman, put blade to his brother . . ."]

(*Beowulf* lines 1258-1262)

Logically, she cannot serve as a symbol of peace like Wealhtheow when she is isolated in her mere and simultaneously unmarried. And though she seems to have no direct contact with her own family or clan (outside her son), it is interesting that her family, the descendents of Cain, are historically famous for murder, which is noted toward the beginning of the poem (lines 108-114). Additionally, she herself commits murder, which, without the kinds of extenuating circumstances Judith experienced, is an action entirely antithetical to the role of peaceweaver. As a whole, Grendel's Mother fails as a peaceweaver.

Intimately connected with the role of peaceweaver is the feminine use of words as a form of power. This power tends to be tied to a woman's role as peaceweaver, which Grendel's Mother does not fulfill. Grendel's Mother also does not speak for the entirety of her appearance in *Beowulf*, and her penchant is for masculine action rather than feminine passivity. The narrator's first reference to her reads, "*þætte wrecend þā gýt lifde æfter lāpum, lange þrāge, æfter gūð-*

ceare" ("his avenger still lived after that battle, for a long time, in hate, war-sorrow") (*Beowulf* lines 1256-1258). Already, her assigned role is a masculine one; she is not initially called "woman," "peaceweaver," or even "mere-wife" (line 1519). Rather, her identity is tied into an action that would have been off-limits to a traditional female character. Instead of being a passive encourager of violence, as would have been expected, she "*wolde hyre mæg wrecan*" ("would her kinsman avenge") (line 1339). Again, she has rejected the trappings of a peaceweaver by participating in violence rather than inspiring action from others. Her divergence from feminine behavior is so marked that is actually given masculine pronouns, such as in, "*nō hē on helm losað*" ("he [Grendel's Mother] will find no escape") (line 1392). Essentially, she fails as a peaceweaver, choosing to take part in masculine action instead.

The last aspect of traditional feminine characters which will be examined here is the maintenance of chastity. While Judith retains her chastity in the face of potential rape, Grendel's Mother fails to be chaste, ostensibly voluntarily. Speaking of Grendel, the Hrothgar says, "*nō hīe fæder cunnon, hwæþer him ænig wæs ær ācenned dyrnra gāsta*" ("they [the people in the surrounding area] know of no father from the old time, before them, among dark spirits") (*Beowulf* lines 1355-7). Grendel's Mother is unmarried with a son, and no one knows the identity of his father. Additionally, the father seems to be one of the "dark spirits". This intercourse with demons would cast her as even more unchaste than intercourse with human men; Grendel is even more monstrous than his mother as a result of his father. Also, Grendel's Mother's association with these spirits would seem to mark her as even more unholy than she would be otherwise. One of the epithets given to Grendel's Mother by Hrothgar is a "*fela-sinnigne secg*" ("much-sinful warrior") (line 1379). This places Grendel's Mother with Judith's "*halige meowle*" ("holy maiden") (*Judith* line 56). Not only does Grendel's Mother's description remark on her

sinfulness, but it additionally casts her as a masculine person, "*secg*," meaning either "man" or "warrior" in similar contexts. Essentially, Grendel's Mother falls short of Anglo-Saxon standards for feminine chastity, as well as most other traditional female ideals, which brought down the disapproval of contemporary audiences.

Grendel's Mother is essentially a total failure when compared to traditionally feminine characters. She is not in a position to peaceweave, and she serves as a source of violence. She does not even attempt to use her words to influence others, choosing instead to take direct masculine action, and she is never a chaste figure. So, while both Grendel's Mother and Judith kill once, Judith has several redeeming feminine characteristics, while Grendel's Mother essentially lacks all of them.

C. Grendel's Mother Compared to the Masculine Anglo-Saxon Literary Standard

While Grendel's Mother essentially rejects traditional feminine literary standards, she does conform to part of the masculine literary standard. Her relationship with the first masculine standard—that of bravery—is somewhat complex. After her son's death, "[] *his mōdor þā gýt gǫfre ond galg-mōd gegān wolde sorh-fulne sīð, sunu dēoð wrecan*" ("now his mother, still greedy for slaughter, wanted to visit, make a grievous journey, to avenge her son's death") (*Beowulf* lines 1276-8). To venture into her enemy's stronghold would seem to be an act of courage on par with those of Beowulf and Judith. Beowulf's bravery upon entering Grendel's Mother's mere is praised, in contrast with Unferth's refusal to enter, and Judith is certainly praised for entering the stronghold of her enemies. However, if it were a brave action, her courage fades, as, "*hēo wæs on ofste, wolde ūt þanon, fēore beorgan, þā hēo onfunden wæs*" ("In a rush she came in, and left quite as soon, to save her life, once they discovered her") (lines 1292-3). Rather than staying to

fight her enemies as Grendel did, Grendel's Mother leaves as quickly as possible to avoid open conflict and instead snatches one of Hrothgar's men before running off. Grendel's Mother's bravery is less than Beowulf's. While she would not stay to fight the men of the hall, Beowulf "[] *wæs ān-ræd nalas elnes læt*" ("was resolute, not slow in courage") (line 1529), staying to fight against her even after his sword proved to be useless against her. Grendel's Mother, on the other hand, simply leaves the scene of the murder for the purpose of saving her own life; her motivations are personal rather than altruistic, so only a cowardly interest in her own wellbeing can explain her hasty retreat. While Grendel's Mother was able to kill Æschere and thereby avenge her son, she is not particularly brave as an ideal, masculine literary figure should be.

The second aspect of the active Anglo-Saxon hero is the focus upon the defense of others. Grendel's Mother is alone; her son is dead, and now she inhabits the mere on her own (save for the dangerous serpent creatures guarding the entrance). She has no people or family to defend. Her motivations are laid out clearly on multiple occasions. Hrothgar says, "*Hēo þā fæhðe wræc, þe þū gystran niht Grendel cwealde*" ("She avenged that feud in which, last night, you killed Grendel") (*Beowulf* lines 1333-1335). Unlike either Judith or Beowulf, Grendel's Mother has no kind of altruistic intentions. She has no one else for whom to fight. She does not even fight for valor or esteem, as ideal masculine characters do. Speaking of Unferth, the narrator says, "*þær hē dōme forlē, ellen-mærðum. Ne wæs þæm oðrum swā syðþan hē hine tō gūðe gegyred hæfde*" ("he lost fame for that, his name for valor. It was not so with Beowulf, once he was dressed, prepared for battle") (lines 1470-2). So, even the parts of heroic action that are not altruistic are at least social; in this instance, part of a hero's motivation is fame or reputation, which Grendel's Mother does not seek. Rather her focus is fixed upon avenging her kin and the continuation of bloodfeud, an endeavor in which she is more successful.

While Grendel's Mother fails to meet Anglo-Saxon literary standards for masculine action in most respects, she partially meets those governing the workings of bloodfeud. She does not have anyone else to encourage to violence, unlike the old man in the hypothetical story surrounding Freawaru's impending marriage. However, she is able to take matters into her own hands, like Judith. As previously discussed, Grendel's Mother enters Heorot quickly, snatches up the noblemen Æschere, and leaves immediately afterward.

The narrator describes Æschere saying, "*Sē wæs Hrōþgāre hæleþa lēofost on gesīðes hād be sām twēonum, rīce rand-wiga, þone ðe hēo on ræste ābrēat*" ("To Hrothgar that man was the dearest warrior he had among liege-men between the two seas, a mighty shield-fighter whom she tore from his bed") (*Beowulf* lines 1296-98). Here Æschere is described as one who is unusually precious to Hrothgar, just as Grendel would have been precious to his mother. However, Hrothgar argues that "[] *geor hafað fāhðe gestæled, þæs þe þincean mæg þegne monegum, sē þe æfter sinc-gyfan on sefan grēoteþ*" ("too long a way has she pushed her revenge, as it may seem to many of these thanes who grieve, mind-deep, for their treasure-giver") (lines 1340-2). While Hrothgar says that killing Æschere was too extreme an action to avenge her son, he also admits that this judgment is based in the grief of those who cared for Æschere, his retainers in particular. In fact, the killing of Æschere in exchange for Grendel's life fits comfortably into the "revenge ethic" displayed throughout *Beowulf*, and would therefore be a socially justifiable killing (Hill 4). However, the manner of Æschere's killing does deviate somewhat from the masculine ideal.

Several aspects of Grendel's Mother's participation in bloodfeud fall outside of prescribed masculine action. As previously mentioned, Grendel's Mother fled the scene of the killing before any of Heorot's men could fight against her, and she did not face Æschere in any kind of combat. Rather, Æschere, "*þone ðe hēo on ræste ābrēat*" ("whom she tore from his bed")

(*Beowulf* line 1298), died in a moment of weakness and vulnerability, as did Holofernes, who was killed while drunk to the point of unconsciousness. Holofernes' helplessness does not keep Judith from being praised, so it can be assumed that this imbalance alone is not enough to condemn Grendel's Mother. However, it would not seem ideal from the perspective of Anglo-Saxon literary standards. *Beowulf* faces all his adversaries when they are conscious, while the villain Grendel attacks Heorot while the men are sleeping (lines 729-30). So, while killing *Æschere* will not make Grendel's Mother heroic, it would also not seem to have a feminizing affect on her.

Grendel's Mother does not fit neatly into the masculine ideal. She does at least share some aspects of it, which align her more closely with the masculine standard than the feminine. This connection is still somewhat tenuous; after all, she is not characterized as particularly brave, and she acts solely on her own behalf. However, she participates directly in the violence of bloodfeud, rather than encouraging violence from a champion, and she exacts a cost from Heorot that is commensurate with the loss she sustained. This is enough to characterize her, even as a biologically female character, as partially masculine.

D. Grendel's Mother's Place on the Scale of Masculinity

Like Judith, Grendel's Mother does not succeed at following the strictures for either ideal literary men or women from the standpoint of the contemporary Anglo-Saxon audience. She falls short on nearly every count when considering feminine roles. She is unmarried and is believed to have wanton sex with dark spirits; she does nothing to create peace, instead causing further violence and feud; and she does not use her words to accomplish her ends, choosing rather to take violence into her own hands. Only the existence of her son helps keep her tethered to her

feminine side. After all, it is because of Grendel that she is consistently called "*mōdor*" ("mother") (*Beowulf* line 1683), which serves to constantly remind the listener or reader of her biological gender. On the side of the masculine, she still fails in multiple categories. Though she is brave enough to enter Heorot for vengeance in the first place, she does not have sufficient courage to stay until the men fully recognize the threat she poses. Her motives for the slaughter of Æschere are personal; she has no one left to defend. However, the price she exacts is at least arguably appropriate, and while she falls short of the masculine standard by attacking sleeping men, this action would not necessarily be sufficiently outside of heroic, male behavior to cast her in a more feminine light.

Though Grendel's Mother does not meet all of the Anglo-Saxon masculine standards that are represented archetypically by Beowulf, he still labels her as one of his own gender, saying:

"Ārīs, rīces weard, uton hraþe fēran, Grendles māgan gang scēawigan. Ic hit þē gehāte: nō hē on helm losað, nē on foldan fæþm, nē on fyrgen-holt, nē on gyfenes grund, gā þær hē wille. . ."

["Arise, guard of kindgoms, let us go quickly, and track down the path of Grendel's kinsman [i.e. his mother]! I promise you this: he will find no escape in the depths of the earth, nor the wooded mountain, nor the bottom of the sea, let him go where he will. . ."]

(*Beowulf* lines 1390-1394)

Here Beowulf uses masculine pronouns to describe "Grendel's kinsman," who can only be his mother. This is no mistake on Beowulf's part; Hrothgar has already given his speech detailing who Grendel's Mother is and where she lives. This usage of masculine pronouns clearly labels Grendel's Mother as a masculine figure to a degree that Judith never matches. It is important to note that Grendel's Mother is unequivocally punished for taking violence into her own hands; Beowulf splits her in two before taking her son's head as a trophy. Had she remained a passive figure like Hildeburh, Beowulf would likely have overlooked her entire existence altogether, and

had she had access to an army of supporters, like Judith, she would likely have been safe from Beowulf's attack. Because she walks a dangerous line between genders and favors the side of the masculine—despite her biological femininity—her life is taken from her and her killer earns the spoils of the day.

X. Conclusion

In the end, it is the degree to which Judith and Grendel's Mother comply with typical standards for feminine behavior that decides whether they face praise or condemnation. Though Judith does not fall precisely in line with traditional Anglo-Saxon standards for feminine behavior, her non-traditional actions are confined primarily to one episode, after which she quickly returns to and maintains a more passive, feminine role. While she is accomplishing her one masculine deed, she maintains her chastity. All of her actions ultimately contribute to peace, which would have been her responsibility regardless of the circumstances. Additionally, independent, female political powers who participate in violence during times of need, while rare, were not unheard of by those for whom the poem was originally recited. One such example is Æthelflæd of Mercia, for whom the poem may have been written. The attitudes that this audience must have sheltered to accept aggressive action from a historical queen would be needed to accept the same kinds of actions from Judith. Just as Æthelflæd could garner praise for her preservation of her people, so can Judith receive their approbation. All of these elements contribute to the general approval for Judith's actions by the contemporary Anglo-Saxon audience of the poem. This approval is vital to the outcome of Judith's poem. Had the original *scop* found Judith's actions too inappropriate for their culture, he would have had a difficult time

convincing his listeners that she was a great, holy woman, as she is in the biblical account of the story. This desire for approval could also easily explain the differences between the prose, book version and the Anglo-Saxon poem; the poet wished to make the story as familiar as possible while retaining as much of the source material as he dared. And so, by retaining the death of Holofernes while altering other elements of the story, like Judith's initial beauty preparations, he constructs a Judith that is both approved and worthy of praise. Naturally, the cleanest way to gain the approval of his contemporaries would be to cast her in the same mold as the approved female characters who make up other parts of Anglo-Saxon canon, such as Wealhtheow. And, once all of her actions are considered both acceptable and worthy, it only stands to reason that she should be rewarded, rather than scorned.

The same logic holds true for Grendel's Mother. The story of *Beowulf* demands that she be a villain. So, she is cast in a negative, unnaturally masculine light. She has no husband, and she is also known for her unholy relations with demons and other dark creatures, one of whom likely fathered her son. She acts selfishly, rather than with an altruistic bend, like Judith, and unlike Judith she has no kind of historical precedent. Grendel's Mother is a wholesale failure as a peaceweaver, as she not only fails to keep peace, but she reopens the channel of bloodfeud after Beowulf closed it with her son's death. She uses actions, rather than passive words, to accomplish her ends, and she does not remain still when Beowulf comes to end her life, as a proper feminine figure like Hildeburh might. Just as the storyteller must convince his contemporaries that Judith is a hero worth honoring, so too must he persuade the audience of *Beowulf* that Grendel's Mother is vile and must be destroyed. Grendel's Mother is an unholy creature, a creature so unnatural that it must be called "mother" for lack of a better name while simultaneously requiring the use of masculine pronouns. By portraying her as such, the poet

makes Beowulf's swift justice more sensible within its cultural context. Just as women who are unfeminine are cast as unchaste, so is Grendel's Mother, as an unchaste and masculine woman, cast as monstrous and deserving of punishment. Though her end might have been the same as the young man in Beowulf's story posturing Freawaru's marriage, she would likely have escaped epithets such as "*grund-wyrgenne*" ("witch of the sea-floor") (*Beowulf* line 1518) which alert the listener or reader to the high degree to which Grendel's Mother is deserving of death.

In conclusion, the degree of acceptance for acts of female violence varied in the Anglo-Saxon culture, depending largely on how well these women complied with traditional gender roles, excepting their notable aberrant behavior (i.e. manslaughter). Judith is a positive figure who acts as a peaceweaver through masculine violence, rather than solely through passive, feminine words. Her actions are for the good of her people and her goal of peace goal is reached, though she uses unorthodox means. As a result, she is ultimately praised. Grendel's Mother is a negative figure who only uses masculine aggression. Her actions bring harm and disrupt the social order. She is not a vessel of peace, but a catalyst for violence. She is the opposite of a proper peaceweaver, and she is rewarded only with scorn and death. It would therefore seem that the Anglo-Saxon culture, while strongly valuing its traditional social structure, would allow for certain incongruities, as long as these lead to a positive outcome for others. Gender was also a fluid concept grounded in a person's actions, which allowed a certain amount of leeway for those who needed to bend expectations. However, this grey area had its limits, and social retaliation would find those who pushed the boundaries too far.

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