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Matrons, Mothers, and Monsters: The Heroine in *Beowulf*, *Grendel*, and *The Mere Wife*
A College Honors and English Honors Thesis

Grace Lucier
Advisor: Professor Sarah Stanbury
Reader: Professor Susan Sweeney
College of the Holy Cross
Worcester, MA

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I would like to dedicate this thesis:

to Professor Stanbury, Professor Sweeney, and Professor Schoenberger, thank you for guiding me through this project for the last year, it has been a pleasure learning from you;

to my Mom and Dad, for all those trips to Barnes & Noble when I was a kid, you fostered my education in more ways than you know;

to Will, Maggie, and Teddy, for teaching me to put my books down sometimes;

to Anna, Caroline, Morgan, and Luke, for showing me that retellings are sometimes the best part of a story;

to Mr. Jason McCabe, for unknowingly sparking this project my senior year of high school;

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thank you.

Abstract:

This thesis examines the relationship between gender and heroism in the *Beowulf* tale and two of its modern retellings. It includes an exploration of the medieval gender roles of the original epic using Seamus Heaney and E. Talbot Donaldson's translations. This thesis also addresses the ways in which some characters disturb gender binaries and social roles — especially in the case of Grendel's mother. The second and third chapters focus on two retellings of the *Beowulf* text respectively: John Gardner's *Grendel*, told from the perspective of the monster Grendel; and Maria Dahvana Headley's *The Mere Wife*, which is a modern, feminist retelling that highlights the female voices of the medieval poem. By including these retellings alongside the original story, this thesis analyzes the ways in which female heroism has been represented in modern retellings of *Beowulf*. This thesis also uncovers the problems and successes of these retelling's gendered heroics, and whether or not these understandings mimic or alter those of the source text. The overall goal of this thesis is to reflect on the place of the heroine in *Beowulf* and discern how that position has changed with the story's modernization.

Introduction: Setting Up the Opposition

Beowulf, despite being a 1,000 year old story and written in an ancient language, has retained its place in modern classrooms and film as a story of literary importance. Written by an unknown poet between the eighth and tenth centuries, the story is an imaginary but nostalgic remembrance of pre-Conquest England. It follows a man named Beowulf in three major trials of his life: the battle with a monster named Grendel, a battle with Grendel's mother, and his ultimate and fatal trial with a dragon. The tale is a conglomeration of glory, vengeance, and death, featuring a cast of mostly male characters.

As a narrative that has been retranslated and rewritten hundreds of times, the *Beowulf* tale has accumulated a unique opportunity for redefinition. *Beowulf* has been repossessed by literature, film, video games, music, TV, and even children's books, making it a text that has outlived its initial publishing in a variety of new forms. The original story itself is heavily focused on male relationships, whether that's between Beowulf and his retainers, past kings and their subjects, or warrior to warrior. Unfortunately for the women of *Beowulf*, they are relegated very little breathing-room alongside their male counterparts. My own intervention in *Beowulf*'s continuous history will explore the ideas of heroism implicated in the epic, looking at both male and female characters. This includes analysis of two things: first, a definition of both male heroism and female heroism, and second, how these gendered heroics interact with each other. I will also be conducting an examination of characters that invert or break with gender tropes, as they bring a new level of complication to heroism.

To complicate my analysis of heroism I will be looking at two retellings of *Beowulf* in my second chapter. The first is John Gardner's *Grendel*, in which the hero-villain dynamic is

flipped and corrupted, situating the monster Grendel as the protagonist of the narrative. My second text is the 2018 novel, *The Mere Wife*, by Maria Dahvana Headley, a contemporary, suburban version of *Beowulf* that moves the female characters to the forefront of the action. By including these works alongside the original epic I aim to provide a nuanced examination of heroism — as the *Beowulf* poet, Gardner, and Headley position different characters as ‘heroes,’ and yet present each version’s allocation of heroism in compelling ways.

I aim to advance that the non-male characters of *Beowulf*, *Grendel*, and *The Mere Wife* allow for a questioning and reflection on what can be truly heroic in the *Beowulf* story. In the following chapters I will lay out definitions of male, female, and nonbinary heroism across all three texts. Using these definitions as guides, I will map out how heroism is constructed and deconstructed.

In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell defines the hero’s journey in several stages. Many might recognize the stages of “departure,” “initiation,” and “return” from a high school literature class. Or perhaps the “call to adventure” or “supernatural aid” might ring a bell? The “departure” or “call to adventure” marks the beginning of a hero’s quest — in which an outside force might motivate him/her to embark on a quest — while the “return” rounds out the hero’s quest, hopefully through procuring a desired end or goal. In any case, Campbell’s distinctions could in theory be superimposed onto any heroic story. While highly applicable to literature, his research into heroic dynamics goes further than the pages of *Gilgamesh* or comic books, as Campbell himself says:

The whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero’s passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women, wherever they may stand along the scale... the individual has only to

discover his own position with reference to this general human formula, and let it then assist him past his restricting walls.

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 121

As products of a community, heroes are often cast as exemplars of the best possible traits of humanity. In other words, unless they are bitten by a radioactive spider, they are people with traits that others should emulate. At face value, Campbell's heroic model seems to fit most stories, making heroism accessible to anyone and everyone from naïve Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* to methamphetamine dealer Walter White in *Breaking Bad*. While the heroic journey seems highly accessible, it turns out being a 'hero' is a highly exclusive category. To be worth worship and mimicry, one must fit the 'hero' moniker first — which makes Campbell's model disingenuous in terms of its universality. This discriminatory nature of heroism is revealed in the definition of the word 'hero' itself. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a hero is “a man (or occasionally a woman) of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods.” Women, although they are included by the OED, are relegated to a parenthesis and only seen as “occasionally” heroic. While verging on nearly offensive, this definition does reflect a reality of female heroics — namely, that 'heroism' is often only attributed to men in literature.

To more fully understand the OED's definition of hero, it seems fitting to turn to the word “heroine.” The OED defines a “heroine” as “a woman distinguished by the performance of courageous or noble actions; a woman generally admired or acclaimed for her great qualities or achievements.” When compared with her male counterpart, a “heroine” seems to be defined with connotations of restraint — as “superhuman strength” and favor of the gods is left out of her definition. Instead, she is “distinguished” by her “performance” of “noble actions,” as well as

“admired” for “qualities or achievements.” These qualities are striking for their humanity as well, which separates heroic men and women on the basis of their superhuman qualities. It would seem that the hero can exist as both part of the godly and the human, while the heroine is mostly bound to the mortal. While “hero” and “heroine” both have a similar meaning in the dictionary, there are some characteristic differences in *how* either a man or woman can be heroic. Again, there seems to be exclusionary elements to heroism when women are the subject in question.

The average person’s idea of a ‘heroine’ is highly subjective. Some might turn to history books or their own mothers for what heroines are supposed to embody. Others, myself included, might be reminded of a Disney princess or two they used to watch. Disney’s 1998 *Mulan* is still my favorite. Her story is very fitting for this thesis, as she pretends to be a man in order to enter a male dominated sphere: the Chinese army. She quite literally is embodying male heroism. However, Disney is not always so willing to transgress gender boundaries. In fact, according to a study of Disney princesses’ effect on modern three to five-year-olds, “the majority of the Disney Princesses continue to reflect many antiquated notions of femininity” (Golden and Jacoby 300). Just as *Mulan* was so impressed on my childhood — especially its lesson that I could be brave, tough, and also a girl — so too are the other ten princesses “tokens of an idealized girlhood” that teach young girls what it means to be a heroine (299). Looking at the wealth of examples, the majority of Disney’s princesses advance that “landing a love interest” is the most important goal of a young woman’s plot (Cavna 6). This even pervades the more modern stories like *Frozen* (2013) and *Tangled* (2010). Even my beloved *Mulan* plays with this “happy ending dependent upon their one true love” by involving not one but *four* marriages in the sequel *Mulan II* (Golden and Jacoby 299). It seems that the message to young female viewership is one that touts

marriageability over all other personality characteristics — a message that Disney shares with the nearly 1,000 year old story of *Beowulf*, where most of the women feature as tokens of a marriage economy. The heroine's story, it seems, must involve a marriage or at least the promise of one. This consistency across *Beowulf*, Disney, and beyond erases the opportunity for heroines to be recognized for their individuality, rather than their success in finding a suitor.

If history is examined instead of fiction, the same lack of recognition for female heroism follows. In terms of awards, fame, and legacy, women have received far less recognition for valor than their male counterparts. This follows from a 2004 study done by Becker and Eagly — of the University of Chicago and Northwestern University respectively — in which Carnegie medalists, saviors of Jews during the Holocaust, live kidney donors, Peace Corp members, and Doctors of the World were all examined. The study lays out an observation about heroism in contemporary literature, film, TV, and journalism: namely, the “striking... feature of the heroes who have achieved public recognition is that they are almost exclusively male” (Becker and Eagly 163). Becker and Eagly think this gap in female heroics hinges on the distinction between “risk-taking” heroism and “prosocial” heroism (163-164). It is oftentimes the case that the “male gender role includes the element of risk taking,” which entails a certain “bravado and a taste for danger” (164). In relation to our contemporary place in history, this could be exemplified in the behavior of firefighters, “who would come to your rescue and carry you out of burning buildings” like “cherished... ‘knights on white horses’ (Ericson 6). Mathias Ericson examines the relationship between firefighters and masculinity in his piece, delving into the perception of these rescuers in times of protest and rioting. Ericson's metaphor is striking for its nostalgia for medieval knighthood, as it equates modern firefighters to knights in terms of male heroics. Both

vocations require a willingness to put the self in danger, a feature of masculine heroism that has transcended the centuries, from plate mail to fire engines. The risk-taking of the firefighter or the knight is an easily recognizable characteristic of male heroism. When compared with the heroine, I would argue the valor of the hero is more easily recognized by others because of its aggressive, positive drama when compared with protective, subtle, “prosocial” feminine heroism.

Looking more specifically at Beowulfian heroism, the same male heroic values are respected. The comitatus of pre-Conquest England was one that rewarded “brave feats and specific codes of conduct” (Dogra 1). Within the code of conduct was the concept of *weregild* — a price paid for the loss of a kinsman, whether it’s paid in gold or blood (Sides 86). Weregilds were especially important in a community setting, as the king’s subjects were bound to avenge him if slain by an offending king and his kinsmen, placing a cycle of “blood vengeance” at the heart of most social spheres (Dogra 2). Heroes had to be warriors, and thus men, at the time in which *Beowulf* is set. This begs, practically pleads, the question of whether or not women could be heroic in pre-Conquest England.

Maintaining that the comitatus was male dominated, female heroism often took on what Becker and Eagly describe as “prosocial” features — or heroics in service of the general community. Prosocial heroism, or “helping behaviors” as the study says, often “do not involve much risk to the helper” and take the focus off the individual agent performing the act (Becker and Eagly 164). When applying this reading to the women of *Beowulf* — and female heroism in general — women become protectors of their communities. Naturally, it follows that the survival of their families was held to be the highest priority. Speaking about Anglo-Saxon culture in her book *The Sword of Judith*, Tracy-Anne Cooper describes the drive of Anglo-Saxon wives to

protect their communities when threatened. Cooper writes that when Viking invasions began taking the lives of Anglo-Saxon warriors, “widows and or married women had to step in to provide temporary ‘good lordship’... lordship meant many things — fairness, wisdom, constancy, leadership, but above all protection” (171-172). The concept of protection, when weighed with the vengeance innate in male heroism, creates a complex, tension-fraught dynamic between male and female heroes of Anglo-Saxon literature. I explore this tension further in my study of *Beowulf* and its accompanying retellings.

To return to Campbell’s heroic journey for a moment, there comes a time in the journey when the hero encounters “The Meeting with the Goddess.” In this phase of the heroic cycle the hero meets with a powerful female form, whether human or spirit, that is often a representation of both life and death (Campbell 110). The goddess’ entrance into the heroic journey is “the promise of perfection; the soul’s assurance that, at the conclusion of its exile in a world of organized inadequacies, the bliss that was once known will be known again” (111). Campbell connects this “bliss” with “the ‘good’ mother” — namely the female presence and comfort that was once known by all humans and is wished for again. I would like to advance this reading of female presence further in *Beowulf*. My intervention is that all the women of the tale embody two things: first, a synthesis of life and death, as many exist as the buffer between peace and war for the Anglo-Saxons or as figures of fertility or literal death; and second, a chance for a reexamination of male heroism in the text, whether that be by existing within the patriarchal system, or by undermining it in some way. The heroines of *Beowulf*, and the reasons why these women are heroic, are lenses through which heroism in general can be examined. How the “risk-taking” behavior of heroes and the protective behavior of heroines can exist side-by-side is

something I would like to address. By forwarding this “meeting with the goddess” into *Beowulf*’s cast of women I hope to allow the conversation about female heroics to continue, especially in spaces where women don’t seem to belong.

It’s important to make a note on translations, as the *Beowulf* story is one that has been recreated and retold through them. I am using both Seamus Heaney and E. Talbot Donaldson’s translations for my textual analysis of the epic. As will be demonstrated in my analysis, Heaney’s translation takes some artistic liberties with the *Beowulf* text, allowing for a more poetic version of the epic. I will be using Donaldson’s prose translation of *Beowulf* to balance Heaney’s artistry, as Donaldson’s is a highly literal translation. Also important to note is the language used by both Heaney and Donaldson is not the same as that of the *Beowulf* poet. In fact, at the time when *Beowulf* was written, the words “hero” and “heroine” did not exist yet. The word “hero” appeared for the first time in 1522 in a translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. “Heroine” first appeared in 1587 in John Bridges’ “A defense of the government established in the Church of Englande” (OED). Despite this gap in time, both the translations in this thesis make use of “hero” to describe Beowulf and other male characters of the epic. This poses a bit of a difficulty. Beowulf himself *does* come to embody the tropes of heroism common for his time — despite the nonexistence of the word. This disconnect makes the hero moniker applicable to Beowulf through the perspective of the modern reader. I would go as far as to say that because the word “hero” did not exist in pre-Conquest England, women might have had more of a chance to be heroic, as the title and its exact discriminations had yet to be defined. Nevertheless, to keep my discussion of heroism straightforward, I will be using the words “hero” and “heroine” to describe

some of the characters of *Beowulf*. While it did not exist at the time, many men and women of the text have come to embody these words by their own standards.

Chapter One: Heroism in *Beowulf*

Building the Hero

Word association games are telling. Perhaps one of the first words that pops into a person's head when I say 'hero' is 'Superman.' The "Man of Steel" is "an archetypal representative of the nation's highest ideals" — much like Beowulf is a representation of Anglo-Saxon ideals (Andrae 85). Superman protects Earth, taking on challenge after challenge to defend the planet from threats. If Beowulf is the Superman of his story, my goal is to parse out the deeper meanings of his heroic feats. Does he jump into a burning building to save someone? Is he blocking the train from certain collision? Or is he just posing in his cape? I hope to use the construction of Beowulf in the epic to outline what exactly makes him 'the hero pre-Conquest England needs.'

Beowulf, unlike modern Superman, protector of Earth, acts mostly in "risk-taking" manners in his epic. As Becker and Eagly say, this behavior is often characterized by "a taste for danger" and "bravado" (164). His introduction to the story is marked by this willingness to assume bodily threat. By way of introducing himself to Hrothgar, Beowulf offers up a list of his previous bloody achievements that the elders of Hygelac have witnessed:

*... all knew of my awesome strength
 [The elders] had seen me boltered in the blood of enemies
 when I battled and bound five beasts,
 raided a troll-nest and in the night-sea
 slaughtered sea-brutes...
 [...]
 Now I mean to be a match for Grendel,
 settle the outcome in single combat.
 [...]
 ... I hereby renounce
 sword and the shelter of the broad shield.*

Heaney l. 418-437¹

Beowulf's heroic boast is noteworthy for the bodily harm that could have befallen him. Being "boltered in the blood of enemies" suggests the proximity of Beowulf to battle, as he returns to his elders drenched in blood. He is therefore presenting himself to Hrothgar as comfortable and willing to approach battle, especially considering that he returns home covered in gore. The list then goes into more detail about the exact nature of these slain villains, describing "beasts," "a troll nest," and "slaughtered sea-brutes." It is interesting to note that these villains are all inhuman, further qualifying Beowulf to kill Grendel, as he has already encountered creatures of a similar caliber. The nonhuman enemies Beowulf faces also intensify the risk he is assuming, as he must fight them in their "nests" or at "sea" — places that humans are not inclined to go. Moreover, by telling Hrothgar about the non-human beasts he has slain, Beowulf can place himself in the position of hero *before* killing Grendel — as his stories align him meticulously with the heroic and the creatures with evil, as Hrothgar sees the situation. From the moment he lands in Heorot, Beowulf is carefully crafting his heroic persona.

Beowulf's choice to fight Grendel "in single combat" also helps solidify his masculinity and the story of his individuality. This again implicates the concept of the wergild, as Beowulf has come to Heorot to murder Grendel because he has been killing the Danes. Heaney's use of the word "match" when discussing Beowulf's fight with Grendel is telling of the justice being sought, as Beowulf must bring order and balance back to Heorot. It could be argued that Beowulf is enacting elements of prosocial heroism by protecting the Danes from Grendel; however, I would offer that the focus of Beowulf's fight with Grendel is on the bodily. This is evident in

¹ I will be using line numbers for in-text citations of Heaney's translation ("l. 437") and page numbers for Donaldson's translation ("37").

Beowulf's choice to fight Grendel "hand-to-hand" without weapons. He chooses this despite bringing fellow warriors and weaponry with him — thereby reducing the salvation of Heorot to a fistfight between a man and a beast, as echoed earlier in his previous battle-experience. The drama added by Beowulf's renunciation of weapons heightens the stakes of the battle, and thus his own heroic narrative.

The curated heroic narrative Beowulf is trying to maintain is dependent upon the perception of others. When his persona is threatened by Unferth and the retelling of Beowulf's swimming match with Breca, Beowulf counters with the shock value of a *more* dramatic retelling. Unferth at first attacks Beowulf, saying "it was sheer vanity made you venture out / on the main deep," quickly predicting from his failure against Breca that Beowulf too will be "worsted" by Grendel, as "no one has ever / outlasted an entire night against Grendel" (Heaney l. 509-528). In Donaldson's translation "vanity" is traded for "pride" and "foolish boast" (7). Beowulf's answer is noteworthy for its grandiosity, turning what Unferth called a vain boast into a purely entertaining story. By exaggerating the nature of his swim with Breca, Beowulf is able to knock Unferth's accusations aside in favor of a hyperbolic but beguiling tale.

Beowulf first undermines Unferth's accusation by accusing him of being "drunk," and that "the beer / ... was doing the talking" before jumping into his story (Donaldson 7; Heaney 531-532). The Geat warrior describes the swimming match in the following manner:

Each of us swam holding a sword
 ...
Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on
for five nights...
 ...
My armour helped me to hold out;
my hard-ringed chain-mail...
 ...
... my sword had killed
nine sea-monsters.

This snippet of Beowulf's boast is outright hyperbolic. The image Beowulf paints of himself involves both him and Breca swimming one-handed, in heavy chainmail, for days and nights on end. These feats are superhuman, yet he delivers the boast as if it is factual, not fiction. Whether or not the gathered Danes believe Beowulf, the tale itself is convincing in its heroic magnitude. The reaction of the Danes confirms this, as "the laughter started, the din got louder / and the crowd was happy" (Heaney l. 611-612). The laughter of the feast is directed at Unferth's attempt to belittle Beowulf, which is quickly overtaken by the glorious tale and boast. Important to note is that the sound of the hall is described as a "din" by Heaney, which is sound without words. This echoes the nature of Beowulf's story, as his narrative is entertaining without being truthful, much like the resulting "din" is sound without words. In fact, Beowulf never even addresses whether or not he won the contest with Breca; he simply insists that "neither [Unferth] nor Breca were ever much / celebrated for swordsmanship" before reminding the crowd that Unferth killed his own "kith and kin" to make the gloomy warrior the new target (l. 585-587). By deflecting the truth with hyperbole and glory, Beowulf is able to maintain his heroic image. That the assembled crowd in the meadhall accepts this approach — one that places more value in how many beasts were said to have been slain than in the actual truth of the claim. This acceptance is revealing, for it suggests that the *Beowulf* poet has few qualms about this kind of heroism being heralded by the characters of the story. Heroism becomes highly dependent upon its shock value and communal support, making Beowulf a character focused on constructing himself properly under the comitatus.

A preliminary reading of the epic would advance Beowulf as a wholly unflawed character. In other words, he appears to be the hero that Heorot needs. This is a valid reading, but I would add that Beowulf is highly aware of how he is presented to the Danes, and often makes use of that to better secure his reputation and glory. What appears at first to be altruistic heroism is actually a glory-seeking urge sparked by his obligation to the weregild. For example, Beowulf maintains that he has come to Heorot as a favor to Hrothgar, which situates him as a hero who has literally ‘come to save the day.’ However, this is not the whole truth — and Hrothgar subtly reveals this gap in Beowulf’s heroic armor. After being approached by Wulfgar, Hrothgar’s hall-guard, Beowulf is told that Hrothgar “knows [his] ancestry” and is welcome to approach the throne (l. 392). Hrothgar, while speaking to Beowulf directly, says that he has come “‘here to follow up an old friendship’” (Heaney l. 376) or in Donaldson’s translation that he has “‘sought a fast friend’” (7). By describing Beowulf’s visit as essentially ‘visiting a friend,’ Hrothgar is being slightly flippant. Shortly after this remark, he tells the gathered court the story of Ecgtheow, Beowulf’s father, who sought refuge in Heorot after murdering a Wulfing named Heatholaf. Hrothgar demystifies Beowulf’s reasons for coming to their aid, as the Geat has really come out of obligation to Hrothgar because the king paid Heatholaf’s weregild for Ecgtheow (Heaney l. 459-472). Hrothgar simultaneously unveils Beowulf’s *modus operandi* and welcomes the Geat to Heorot, thereby complicating the heroics Beowulf was trying to showcase. Beowulf’s heroic perfection, after some in depth examination, is revealed to be a delicate tapestry of fabricated threads. These threads include risk-taking, heroic obligation, and the communal witnessing of his behavior. By performing his heroism, Beowulf places himself as the tapestry’s focal point, despite its frayed edges and missing threads.

The *Beowulf* poet himself also weighs in on what the idealized attributes of the masculinized hero should be — oftentimes focusing on the community around the hero, as well as the hero himself. Although the poet is unknown, he does seem to be bolstering certain masculine social values throughout the text. His idealizing appears at the outset of the poem in his discussion of Hrothgar’s patriarchal lineage. It seems that gaining support is crucial to each male figure’s success as a leader. Heaney’s translation recalls that Beow, Hrothgar’s grandfather, was remembered for “giving freely while his father lives / so that afterwards in age when fighting starts / steadfast companions will stand by him / and hold the line” (l. 21-24). The importance of gathering a community is an overt message of Beow’s story, and it reappears frequently in Shield Sheafson’s — “each clan... had to yield to him” (l. 9-10) — and Hrothgar’s too — “friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks” (l. 65). The community becomes the indicator of each king’s power, as Sheafson is revered as “one good king” (l. 11) immediately following his conquering of the clans, and Hrothgar’s society too is described as “a mighty army” (l. 67). The speech about Beow’s rise to power includes this feature as well, as the line that follows the passage above reads: “Behavior that’s admired / is the path to *power* among people everywhere” (l. 24-25, emphasis mine). From these three examples it seems that the poet locates the locus of the hero’s power with those that support his heroics. In other words, one must be buttressed by a community of supporters in order to be deemed heroic. As a character that *leaves* his community to help the people of Heorot, Beowulf complexifies this ideal presented by the text. In the examination that follows I will explore his individual might and his connection to a larger community — both simultaneously suggested by the epic.

In terms of heroic character, the *Beowulf* poet seems to be playing with several binaries in order to form the stereotypical hero. Returning to Beowulf's character for example, he implements the importance of the hero's community, as well as the unstoppable nature of Beowulf's individual actions. These two features help clue the poet's audience into who is the protagonist, as Beowulf is both loved by his people, but has gained enough of their respect to do as he pleases. By examining the dynamics between Beowulf's individual agency and communal support, his heroic traits become enmeshed with and defined by those that witness him. Put differently, Beowulf's heroism is not all *his* doing.

Looking first to Beowulf's decision to sail to Heorot, the first heroic marker appears in his interaction with the people in his community. The text first highlights Beowulf's individual power by saying "Nobody tried to keep him from going, / no elder denied him, dear as he was to them" (l. 202-203). By placing Beowulf syntactically before his people and elders, the text leads with the Geat's individual significance. However, reading further into Beowulf's planning reveals the ways his community bolsters his strength. For example, the elders, despite their wishes he would stay, "Instead... inspected omens and spurred / his ambition to go" (l. 204-205). The significance of the elders' support rests heavily on the use of "Instead" to describe the final decision of the council. The use of "instead" is a translational freedom taken by Heaney, as it dramatizes the heroics of the scene by implicating a hierarchy of needs within the community. Donaldson's translation also advances the priority of Beowulf's needs before communal needs, for "though he was dear to them," the elders still plan for Beowulf's journey (5). "Instead" and "though" suggest a change in plans on the part of the elders, advancing that the needs of the Geats, as overseen by the elders, have been momentarily placed aside to favor Beowulf's

journey. For as much that Beowulf is a fixture of his community, the foundation of his heroics can be found in those that support him.

The tension between the hero and his community is further fleshed out as Beowulf moves about his people. The implied motion of the section specifically highlights Beowulf's agency, as the narrator chronicles his unswayed plan to visit Hrothgar. Beginning with the elders' inability to change Beowulf's mind, the warrior seems to cut through the next few images of his preparation, as he is seen as he "moved about... / enlisting men" and then finally as he "boarded the boat" (Heaney l. 205-208). While the verbs describing Beowulf single him out for his impressiveness, they too are informed by the community around him. Beowulf's ability to "move about" or "enlist men" is dependent upon those around him, as he is witnessed doing these tasks rather than speaking directly for himself. Beowulf's status in the story thus far is one entirely dependent upon others' perception of him, especially the narrator. Thus far in the epic Beowulf has yet to speak, limiting his characterization as a hero to just his actions alone. When synthesized with his preparations, the people that surround him become crucial to his heroics, as they bear witness and create his heroic image.

The titles assigned to Beowulf further play with the dynamics between individual and community. Heaney's translation describes him as a "leader," "warrior," "captain," and "pilot" — four titles in five lines. E. Talbot Donaldson's translation names Beowulf as "the brave one," "the good man," "the warrior," and "the sea-skilled one" (5). Each term paints Beowulf as a figure that stands apart, as a leader would stand out from his followers or a captain might order around his troops. However, keeping the complexities of designing a hero in mind, this language again recalls the social dynamics at work between the hero and his community. For Beowulf to

inhabit the position of “the brave one” or the “leader” he must have a group to bear witness to him. In other words, a leader, warrior, captain, or pilot *needs* a community in order to receive and fulfill their title. The leader needs followers, the warrior allies, the captain a crew, and the pilot a vessel. The relationship between the hero and his community is one that is co-dependent, like a subject and an object need each other in a sentence. With the subject and object oriented, the meaning of the sentence as a whole becomes clear.

With regard to the ‘witnessing’ of a hero, Beowulf’s above designations place him firmly in the eyesight of the male gaze. Heaney’s translation especially implicates this masculine viewing of Beowulf. The titles assigned to Beowulf by the poet are those derivative of a patriarchal vision of the hero — as the monikers are explicitly linked to male heroics. In the case of Heaney’s translation, especially his designation of Beowulf as “captain” and “pilot,” male dominant vocations are evoked to convey Beowulf’s heroic qualities. Poetically, Heaney’s choice to use captain and pilot is probably linked to Beowulf’s planned journey to Heorot, as the jobs are connected to navigating the ocean. However minor, it is important to note the masculinity of the roles, as well as the potential liberties Heaney is taking with his more interpretive, poetic translation from the Old English. While it is not a major focus of my work, the different translations of *Beowulf* also have a large effect on how the hero’s bravery is nuanced and designed, all the way down to the word choice. Beowulf, as a man viewed by others, is placed as part and representative of his community through his motivations, actions, and the word choice of the poet.

Looking ahead to the discussion of the heroine, the role of community will also have significance in creating her persona. In many ways, community is one thing that unites the

gendered definitions of heroism in *Beowulf*. The hero is built by his community, as he requires a witness to his glory and conquest. The heroine — as will be examined in the next section — protects this community, despite the fact that the homosocial structure is not built for her.

Building the Heroine

The *Beowulf* poet includes exactly eleven female characters in the epic. Of these eleven, five are named and one, Queen Wealhtheow, speaks. By these numbers alone, the epic can be deemed a highly male-centric piece of Anglo-Saxon literature. As scholar Robert Morey writes in “Beowulf’s Androgynous Heroism,” “at first glance, [*Beowulf*] appears to relegate all things feminine to the relatively forgettable margins” (486). Morey’s metaphor of the feminine as the margins of *Beowulf* leaves the main bulk of the page left to be ruled by the men of the text. In this section I demonstrate the power the marginalized heroines maintain, despite being peripheral when compared to their male counterparts. As secondary figures, women are given little space within the comitatus of *Beowulf*, yet, by adhering to the female heroic standards of the time, they are able to reclaim limited agency. Much like the margins of a page, the women of *Beowulf* still provide structure to the social and political systems of *Beowulf*.

I will largely be examining Wealhtheow in this section. It is important to note that, along with Modthyrth, Hildeburh, Freawaru, and Hygd, all of the named women in *Beowulf* are aristocratic. While this does not represent a complete account of the experiences of all Anglo-Saxon women of the time, what is presented by the poet provides enough information to define the standards of behavior considered heroic of women.

The first normatively female heroine I'll be examining, and the one with the most dialogue, is Queen Wealhtheow. Her role in the epic as Hrothgar's queen places her directly up against and within masculine power structures. Her entrance into the epic quickly confirms this, as Heaney and Donaldson translate her as "Hrothgar's queen" (Heaney l. 613; Donaldson 11). Wealhtheow's description in terms of her male partner is not uncommon in Anglo-Saxon literature, as sometimes women are left unnamed or are named in terms of "male kin, most of whom are either prospective or former heroes" (Klein 87). This common structure amongst Anglo-Saxon kinsfolk pervades *Beowulf*, already relegating the women of the epic to an auxiliary position inside the patriarchal system.

Furthermore, Wealhtheow's name advances her as a possession or supplement. In *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, author Helen Damico provides an etymology of the queen's moniker. She points out that while "wealh" does have "primary meanings of 'Celt' and 'foreigner,'" it also has a secondary meaning of 'slave,' and in its derived forms conveys the idea of 'servile,' 'not free,' or 'in bondage'" (Damico 59). Damico draws directly from this secondary meaning of 'Wealhtheow,' projecting the connotations onto the queen's position in the epic — i.e. that she is partially slave to a higher patriarchal regime. While the connotations of a name are important, I'd like to nuance Damico's etymological analysis slightly. While Wealhtheow's social status is not remotely similar to that of a slave, the subsidiary qualities of servitude are applicable to her station within Heorot. As Damico argues, Wealhtheow is situated inside and perhaps even "bound" to her husband's male dominant regime; however, there does seem to be more to the queen than servitude.

The poet has already placed Wealhtheow firmly inside the male dominant power structures of *Beowulf*, even before examining her actions. This dynamic, namely of an individualized queen inside a patriarchy, creates tension between Wealhtheow's self-preservation and the desires of her community. This tension is exhibited in Wealhtheow's movements within the community, as she simultaneously relies on a male dominant society for protection while occasionally exercising control over it. After her entrance into the epic as what appears to be an extension of Hrothgar, her specific job within the meadhall is exhibited. She observes "the courtesies. / Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted / the men in the hall" (Heaney l. 613-615). Donaldson's translation portrays her as "mindful of custom" and "gold-adorned" as well, confirming that Wealhtheow is adhering to social norms (11). Notably, Donaldson's translation, when compared to Heaney's, swaps "courtesies" for the singular and more overarching word, "custom." "Custom" invokes a feeling of permanence, of a system that is more substantial than smaller, individual gestures or "courtesies." The difference in Heaney and Donaldson's word choice has large implications for the behavior Wealhtheow exhibits in the meadhall — as "courtesies" seems plural and perhaps trivial when compared to the consolidated guidance of known "custom." The inclusion of "courtesies" and "custom" harkens back to the idea of the preexisting system which Wealhtheow must navigate, as there are certain aspects of behavior that are accepted by the community of Heorot. Given that she "observes" and is "mindful" of these rules, it can also be reasoned that the enforcement of the rules is two-fold: first, by the pressure of a male dominated group, and second, by Wealhtheow herself — as evidenced by her "mindful" nature amongst the men. The controlled nature of her actions upon

entering the epic hints at the larger power structure at work over Wealhtheow, as well as her place as an actress in it.

However, Wealhtheow's mindfulness is doubly important and indicative of her position amongst the Danes. Her preliminary movements through the meadhall, especially her "peaceweaving" amongst the men, is telling of her own power within her clan. Within the patriarchal society at Heorot Wealhtheow maintains order through a ritualistic passing of a cup of mead. She presents a meadbowl to the company, moving from the top of the social hierarchy, King Hrothgar, down to Beowulf, as he is a guest. The poet describes her "offering the goblet to all ranks, / treating the household and the assembled troop / until it was Beowulf's turn to take it from her hand" (Heaney l. 616-624). While a small aspect of her responsibilities as a queen, Wealhtheow's role as the goblet-passer allows her a great deal of social power, as she selects and enforces the order in which the men get to drink. In allowing "Beowulf's turn" with the goblet last, Wealhtheow designates the Geat as an outsider, a highly political maneuver that is meant to serve her community in Heorot. Wealhtheow's political sway is noteworthy in this feast scene and, as Stacy Klein suggests in *Ruling Women*, makes "Wealhtheow's power and authority within the court... in some measure comparable to Hrothgar's" (5). This power given to Wealhtheow is not readily apparent in Heaney's translation at first, as the queen just seems to be playing a subservient, perhaps decorative role. However, in conjunction with her first speech to Beowulf (which I will examine below) the queen's initially servile position at Heorot reveals more power than previously bestowed upon her in the patriarchy. Wealhtheow's ability to utilize the preexisting social structures around her to consolidate her own power, while not outright

attacks on her masculine world, are indicators that there are alternative heroics in *Beowulf* besides the repetitively violent rule of the male hero.

As she is not spurred by vengeance or glory, Wealhtheow's motivations for accumulating political power must be derived elsewhere. As a mother, it becomes clear that her *modus operandi* is often guided by the need to protect and preserve her family. This end is one that she does not share with her male counterparts, as even Hrothgar himself is more focused on victories and wergilds than on his two sons with Wealhtheow. Her motives for maintaining her status in Heorot's patriarchy are revealed after Grendel is slain by Beowulf. Hrothgar, recognizing the valor of the Geat, is ready to accept Beowulf into his family with open arms. Wealhtheow, seeing that Beowulf would be receiving a position of power equivalent with her sons, moves quickly to prevent this:

*“And now the word is you want to adopt
this warrior as a son. So, while you may,
bask in your fortune, and then bequeath
kingdom and nation to your kith and kin,
before your decease.”*

Heaney l. 1175-1179

She begins her speech to Hrothgar by appealing to his pride; however, it is certainly tinged with hints at his mortality at the same time. The language of “bask in your fortune” is preceded by the ominous “while you may” and followed with “before your decease” — practically bookending Hrothgar's life with language of death. This medley of flattery and warning is telling of Wealhtheow's dual status in Heorot; she simultaneously needs to secure herself *and* control her male counterparts. Heaney's alliteration in the line that reads “bequeath / kingdom and nation to your kith and kin” further advances Wealhtheow's motivations, as “kingdom” is linked to “kith” and “kin” by cacophonous ‘k’ alliteration. Wealhtheow, because

she needs to intervene in Hrothgar's impulses, appears to be motivated to protect the safety of her young sons, while Hrothgar seems more inclined to add another warrior to his clan. In this way, Wealhtheow takes on "heroic" traits that are different from her husband's. Hers is a more prosocial heroic fortitude. It is often the case, according to Klein's *Ruling Women*, that "Anglo-Saxon writers used legendary royal wives to model cultural ideals of queenship... and to participate in the creation of ideologies of gender, family, spirituality, and politics" (4). If Wealhtheow can be counted amongst "legendary royal wives," as Klein argues, then what she stands for would be more aligned with family and politics, rather than violence and glory. Family becomes a polarizing topic for male and female characters of *Beowulf*; as the hero seeks individualized glory in his lifetime, and the heroine is focused on communal peaceweaving for the betterment of her kin.

Wealhtheow's protective nature is especially apparent in her hopes for the community before and after Grendel is defeated. She accomplishes her motherly manipulations through the newcomer Beowulf specifically. Before the bloody brawl she "thanked God for granting her wish / that a deliverer [Beowulf] ... would arrive / to ease their afflictions" as she passes the meadbowl amongst the men in the court (Heaney l. 626-628). By offering her thanks to God in such a public manner for a victory that *has not yet happened*, Wealhtheow essentially holds Beowulf accountable to not only the safety of Heorot but also to God Himself. The result of her bold prediction of the future provokes Beowulf into a formal boast, outlining his plan to "fulfil that purpose / ... or meet my death here in the mead-hall" (l. 636-638). Again, Wealhtheow exercises her political influence in this instance, as she first allows Beowulf into the meadbowl ritual and then places Grendel's execution on the Geat's shoulders, nearly prophetically. In the

case of both her children, Hrethric and Hrothmund, and her community, Wealhtheow takes on a protective role — placing her in a heroic position over her people. Although she is not the one swinging a sword, Wealhtheow's version of heroism still maintains peace for Heorot, making her indirectly a heroine.

Wealhtheow's formal speeches are indicative of further heroism hidden in her character, for she is the one, however indirectly, that gets Beowulf to give his ultimatum against Grendel. Using Gillian Overing's understanding of Beowulf as a character "aware of the often agonizing circumstances of coming to a decision," a power shift becomes apparent between Wealhtheow and Beowulf (84). Overing finds that death in Beowulf sustains "a continual need for resolution... and the notion that choice is heroic, inescapable, and reducible to simple binary oppositions" (84). Beowulf inhabits this space three times; once with Grendel, again with his mother in the mere, and — perhaps most dramatically — in his old age with the dragon. However, alongside Wealhtheow's instigating speech about Grendel, the queen becomes implicated in the 'do or die' attitudes of Anglo-Saxon heroes (84). In other words, Wealhtheow, in her prophesying about Beowulf's battle, is the catalyst that pushes him to make formal promises to vanquish Grendel. Overing describes what Beowulf's heroic attitude towards death looks like, one that includes "a continual need for resolution — the hero says, I will do *x* or I will die" (xxiii). Wealhtheow, as a precursor and instigator of the Geat's boast, destabilizes Beowulf's vow by essentially making the decision for him. Through her involvement in Beowulf's fight with Grendel, Wealhtheow exhibits not only the lengths she will go to preserve her family, but her own ability to recognize her influence in heroic systems. Her awareness of

male heroism and violence, especially as an outsider to this order, allows her to steer its impulses to better suit her needs.

Synthesizing Wealhtheow's appearance with her control over Heorot's patriarchy advances the possibility of a feminine brand of heroism. Do Wealhtheow's positions as a queen, host, and mother — as far as they are included in the epic — qualify her as a heroine? According to Helen Damico, through the queen's awareness of political schema and by "inciting Beowulf to battle, she does instigate turbulent and destructive activity," which is often a "characterizing feature" of the valkyrie figure in Old Norse literature (Damico 19; 24). However — and to challenge Damico's valkyrie-warrior depiction of Wealhtheow — the queen herself does not partake in violence with her own hands. Instead, Wealhtheow plays with her position as an outsider to the patriarchy of Heorot, doling out mead *to socially stabilize* and inciting violence when *beneficial*. I'd like to advance that Wealhtheow's position in *Beowulf* is not one that seeks to destabilize the patriarchy. In fact, a coup d'état would jeopardize her own security. Rather — and to play with Morey's marginalized woman metaphor — the queen writes herself into her male dominant world, carefully walking the lines of her text.

Complicating the Hero/ine: Modthryth and Grendel's Mother

With some normative male and female conceptions of heroism established, it is important to look at characters of *Beowulf* that fall outside these distinct categories. I will be looking at two individuals: Queen Modthryth (sometimes referred to as Thryth in other translations), and Grendel's mother. Both women inhabit complex positions, as neither fits into the normative "peaceweaving" role associated with women. Modthryth appears female to the poet, but kills and

slaughters men with vengeance in mind, like a king. Grendel's mother, while assumed female by the poet, is more animal than human. She too, like Modthryth, enacts vengeance after her only child is killed. How Modthryth and Grendel's mother's stories are resolved is telling of how their actions are perceived by the epic; each represents a moment for moralizing, as they are dismissed from the pages of *Beowulf* either through conforming to marriage or death.

Modthryth's story interrupts the *Beowulf* tale as the hero arrives home to Geatland. The narrator breaks off his praise of Queen Hygd, who is newly married to Beowulf's king Hygelac, to deliver the tale. Modthryth — considering the poet's positive, yet very brief, description of Queen Hygd — is presented as the foil to Hygelac's bride. This interjected story, while seemingly random, complicates the perception of women in *Beowulf*. Modthryth's story acts as a sort of warning to women who press the boundaries of their 'proper' place; the queen at the start of the anecdote inhabits some characteristics of male heroism, and then transitions into the more accepted position of women as part, parcel, and token of the community. This movement from a warrior or kingly position to a domestic one suggests that the weregild ethos does not translate to the women of the *Beowulf* tale. By marrying Modthryth to Offa, the poet effectively eliminates her from the possibility of achieving heroic status under male terms, regulating her back to the peaceweaving role.

The poet begins by first placing Modthryth in a position of individualistic power, albeit bloody and vicious. Modthryth's queenly power comes from the "dreadful deeds" she commits against her retainers — chief among them her tendency to kill any man bold enough to look upon her. She, like many women in *Beowulf*, is eventually married off to a man named Offa who quells her explosively murderous nature and makes her "famous for her generosity" (Donaldson

34). Heaney's translation of the epic breaks with the conventions of the original text's alliteration, stating that Modthryth "perpetrated terrible wrongs" (Heaney l. 1933). Donaldson's literal translation, on the other hand, maintains the alliteration by describing Modthryth's cruelties, as she "did dreadful deeds" (Donaldson 34). Each translation has its merits; however, Heaney's offers important stylistic differences. By breaking with the conventions of his translation with a three-word, non-alliterated line, Heaney places heavy emphasis on the "wrongs" of Modthryth by making the line stand out — much like the evil queen herself breaks with the conventions that Hygd and other women uphold. Heaney continues to align Modthryth with the unnatural and individual, developing the origins of the crimes she commits. Dropping back into the alliterative style Heaney translates, "If any retainer ever made bold / to look her in the face, if an eye not her lord's / stared at her directly during daylight, / the outcome was sealed..." (Heaney l. 1934-1937). This description is significant for two reasons: Modthryth is placed in opposition to daylight, and she is depicted as possibly defending herself from proposals of marriage. In terms of light imagery, darkness is indirectly associated with Modthryth, as the poet's work is translated in both Heaney and Donaldson's versions as either "during daylight" or "in daylight" (Heaney l. 1936; Donaldson 34). This links Modthryth indirectly to darkness, as the poet includes the important distinction that none may look at her during the day. Darkness, as was examined in terms of Grendel's existence, is associated with evil, solitude, and the unknown — thereby linking Modthryth and Cain's brood to a degree.

With regards to the possibility of suitors, Modthryth's violent behavior further perpetuates her solitude. The fact that retainers that "look her in the face" and "stared at her" are bothersome is suggestive, according to Donaldson, and "may reflect the folk motif of the

princess whose unsuccessful suitors are executed” (Donaldson 34, note 2). This is made possible further by the poet’s inclusion of Modthryth’s beauty, as she is “outstanding in beauty” or “peerless” (Heaney l. 1942; Donaldson 34), alongside her violence. Modthryth’s embodiment of the untouchable princess, when coupled with her unrivaled appearance, serve as further indicators of her individuality. The poet begins Modthryth’s story by aligning her with the unusual and unique, beginning his development of the queen as an intriguing and deviant case of womanhood.

While Modthryth’s tale follows that of Hygd, the two women are very different in their actions. Modthryth’s story more closely resembles that of heroic male figures in *Beowulf*, as she can be found killing her (perceived) enemies and relishing in the same cycles of revenge. Her love of retribution begins with her execution of staring retainers, as Heaney’s translation describes the peering men’s fates as “sealed” and their “doom... pronounced” when the queen catches their looks (Heaney l. 1937; 1938). The inevitable nature of Modthryth’s commands is reflective of kingly power, as the verbs “sealed” and “pronounced” have both declarative and solemn connotations. Moreover, the fate of the offenders for their crime is not unlike the ancient practice of wronged warriors collecting a wergild, whether in gold or blood. Modthryth’s repeated executions of her retainers mimic this unending feature of male heroism — for to truly be a hero one is obligated to participate in this ancient practice.

The gritty details of the queen’s torture take the grotesque, unfeminine practice of wergild to the extreme. By including vivid description, the poet forces a reconciliation of queenly attributes — like those seen in Wealhtheow — with Modthryth’s character, creating a discordant and disturbing image of the queen’s reign. The cacophony of Heaney’s translation

accomplishes this shock, as the sounds of “hand-tightened shackles,” “racked,” and “tortured” ring with violence and gore. Sharp, biting ‘t’ and ‘k’ sounds mimic the clanking of shackles, as the *Beowulf* poet forces the reader to experience, to a degree, the same sounds the prisoners might. These sounds are followed with the “death by the sword, / slash of blade, blood-gush and death qualms / in an evil display” that represents the end of life for the retainers (Heaney l. 1999-2001). ‘S’ alliteration across these lines bolster the final slicing sounds prisoners might hear before they die by the sword. Given that the *Beowulf* poem was most likely orally presented, these moments of Modthryth’s cruelty would be especially disturbing to the senses. Both of these gory examples align Modthryth with violent retribution, something that drives the male characters of *Beowulf* throughout the epic. She, by killing those that have wronged her, however minor the offense, approaches the heroism of her male counterparts, however critically the poet casts her actions.

The disapproval that the *Beowulf* poet has for Modthryth’s masculinized violence is also present in the story of Grendel’s mother. The obligation the monster feels to avenge her son’s life — much like the weregild system that Beowulf or Hrothgar are obligated to follow — is the action that gets her killed. I will argue that Grendel’s mother complicates the binaries of risk-taking and prosocial heroics. To put this differently, Grendel’s mother becomes a character that embodies both male and female heroic traits, labelling her as deviant from the gendered heroics in *Beowulf*. How her story ends reveals the *Beowulf* poet’s ideas of masculine heroines, namely that they cannot exist.

It seems important to address the sex of Grendel's mother first. The poet uses female pronouns to refer to her, establishing her sex as soon as she stomps into the story. She is also referred to as "Grendel's mother" or "woman" by both Heaney and Donaldson's translations respectively (l. 1258, etc.; 23, 24). Though I will be complicating how exactly the poet presents the gender of Grendel's mother, I find it pertinent to confirm her sex before I discuss her how her gender is advanced in *Beowulf*. Grendel's mother is female, but does not 'act' female by Anglo-Saxon standards. In terms of gender, I will be making use of both masculine and feminine concepts to describe her, as she is a figure that embodies both gender traits.

Grendel's mother is first designated as a female character by the *Beowulf* poet, but there is little conversation of her gender amongst the actual characters of the epic. This makes for a somewhat murky understanding of her gender. In fact, the first time both Heaney and Donaldson refer to Grendel's mother they each use the moniker "avenger," which, given the patriarchy of pre-Conquest England, would most likely conjure up the image of a man for the reader (l. 1257; 23). The word "avenger" also sets the precedent for the gender presentation of Grendel's mother, as she exhibits highly masculine tendencies towards revenge when her son is killed. Another complexity that is added to the monster's femininity is that her son's birth is not immediately attributed to her. Instead of Grendel being born to his mother, Heaney's translation designates Cain as Grendel's father: "... And from Cain there sprang / misbegotten spirits, among them Grendel" (Heaney l. 1265-1266). In Donaldson's translation, Grendel is "one of them" that "sprang" from Cain as well (23). By not including a section about the involvement of Grendel's mother in Grendel's birth the poet destabilizes the motherhood of the "hell-bride," thereby eliminating childbirth from her life as a woman. The attribution of Grendel's birth to Cain is the

first ambiguity of her gender performance, for if Grendel “sprang” from Cain, the title “Grendel’s mother” is left partially unexplained. The dissonance between her sex and her gender presentation makes Grendel’s mother a complex character as soon as she appears in the epic.

While the *Beowulf* poet is willing to label Grendel’s mother immediately, his characters do not share the same perception of her gender. In fact, when it comes to her interaction with other characters in *Beowulf*, the gender of Grendel’s mother is barely discussed. Rather, it appears in dialogue once, in Hrothgar’s speech regarding the monsters that plague Heorot. Heaney’s translation of the speech reads, ““as far as anyone can discern, / [one monster] looks like a woman; the other, warped / in the shape of a man”” (Heaney l. 1350-1352). Donaldson’s translation also involves the ability of others to “discern” the gender of Grendel’s mother (24). Not only does the vagueness of her gender make Grendel’s mother more monstrous, but how she is known as female is somewhat perplexing. The words “anyone can discern” are important to the creation of Grendel’s mother as a character, as there is some feature of her presence that can be *observed* that makes the Danes believe she is female. This nebulous feminine feature or quality is not included by the poet, though it seems visible and important enough to allow other characters to see her as a woman. That the reader does not know how the monster’s femininity is identified is also crucial, as it makes for an even more destabilized experience of her gender as well. This gendered ambiguity of Grendel’s mother is threatening to the humans of the story, especially as her character takes on vengeful and sinister qualities. Much of the language used to describe Grendel’s mother links her femininity to evil, as she is described as, “hell-bride” and “monster-wife” (Heaney l. 1259; Donaldson p. 23). These designations situate her as simultaneously monster and woman. The language of marriage is significant as well. Despite her

monstrous appearance, Heaney and Donaldson's use of "bride" and "wife" respectively link Grendel's mother to the same patriarchal system as Wealhtheow and Modthryth. To call Grendel's mother a "bride" or "wife" necessitates that there be a 'groom' or 'husband' — placing the monster *still* within a gendered hierarchy as a female figure. Her label as "Grendel's mother" also makes her derivative of male kin, much like Wealhtheow is "Hrothgar's queen." By being unwed and unpossessed by male characters, Grendel's mother is deemed an outsider to pre-Conquest forms of social hierarchy.

Grendel's mother, as both a monstrosity *and* a mother, is a character that inhabits an indeterminate in terms of both society and gender. This is a unique feature of her character in *Beowulf*, but her intermediary status also makes her vulnerable to pressure from the heavily entrenched gender structures of the epic as well. This pressure forces an ultimatum: take on your sex's gender role or die. In her book *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf*, Gillian Overing suggests this same dilemma for both Grendel and his mother:

Grendel's unnamed mother; barely identifiable as human, she also makes a doubtful female... Her son, too, is a doubtful male... These fatherless monsters and nameless women have no place, no condition for entry into the symbolic order.

Overing 73

The importance of fatherhood and patriarchy, as well as kinship, is highly dominant in the homosocial society created through the comitatus. With these important factors in mind, Overing suggests in detail how exactly Grendel and his mother are labelled outsiders; her analysis pointing out the exclusionary qualities of risk-taking and prosocial heroism. Grendel and his mother cannot live at Heorot because of their deviance from these gender roles. Grendel's "fatherless-ness" disqualifies him from the "symbolic order" on the grounds that he has no heroic lineage to precede him. For example, Hrothgar was preceded by Beow and Shield, while

Grendel, in contrast, has no father. Additionally, the “nameless” nature of Grendel’s mother disqualifies her from the “symbolic order” on the basis of not being possessed by any husband or man. Wealhtheow is Hrothgar’s, Modthryth is Offa’s. She instead is *Grendel’s* mother, connected to her son who is just as isolated from the patriarchy as she is. This socially exiled and outsider existence of Grendel’s mother is another feature of her intermediary existence.

I would like to nuance Overing’s reading of the Grendel family slightly, specifically focusing back on Grendel’s mother. Overing asserts that Grendel’s mother is both “barely identifiable as human” and a “doubtful female.” The latter designation I can agree with, as even the Danes that do get a glimpse of Grendel’s mother seem to have doubts about her gender. The only individual that seems to commit to and confirm her womanhood is the poet, who produces her naming as a female character. However, Overing also places the humanity of Grendel’s mother on the same level of ambiguity as her gender, which I find problematic. While she might emulate the codes of conduct placed on men and women in *Beowulf*, Grendel’s mother is far from human. She dwells “among wolves on the hills” and her ancestry is “hidden in a past of demons and ghosts,” according to the poet (Heaney l. 1356-1359). This distinction, alongside her disruption of gendered heroism, is what will eventually lead to her death. As a character that is deemed female *and* non-human, Grendel’s mother is relegated further from the margins of *Beowulf* than Wealhtheow and Modthryth, placing her outside the patriarchy entirely.

The tension between the sex of Grendel’s mother and how she acts in *Beowulf* makes her a complex character, especially if she is examined through the prosocial/risk-taking binary. Specifically, looking at her actions in the text, she breaks from the feminine gender role frequently. By avenging her son, Grendel’s mother performs one of the major tenets of

masculine heroism: the wergild. Both Heaney and Donaldson set up this dynamic as Grendel's mother attacks Heorot. She is described as having "brooded on her wrongs ... / sallied forth on a savage journey, / grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for *revenge*" and "mindful of her misery... greedy and gallows-grim, would go on a sorrowful venture, *avenge* her son's death" (1257-1278; 23, emphasis mine). The first clause of each translation addresses the motives of Grendel's mother. To Heaney, the death of her son is lumped into the larger category of her "wrongs" on which she must "brood" and then act. This contrasts starkly with Donaldson's "mindful of her misery" — which not only is a more sympathetic reading of the lines, but suggests that Grendel's mother can be thoughtful of her son. If the literality of Donaldson's translation is taken into account, it would follow that Grendel's mother is acutely aware of sorrow and loss, rather than "brooding" on a multitude of "wrongs." However, I find that both these translations are important to the character of Grendel's mother. She in one sense is the mourning mother, but in another is the angry, plotting killer too. Heaney's translation continues, as the monstrous woman goes "forth on a savage journey, / grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge." The equating of her grief to a "ravenous" desperation "for revenge" transforms the mother's choice to avenge Grendel into an instinctual, base urge that's as foundational to the body as hunger. Heaney's translation, by allowing the ire-fueled future actions of Grendel's mother to take precedence over the sorrow of Grendel's actual death, aligns her with the masculine wergild obligation.

Other characters are also privy to the motives of Grendel's mother. One feature of her story that solidifies the message of vengeance is the reclamation of Grendel's arm. The limb is described as a "trophy" (l. 1303) by Heaney, making the choice by Grendel's mother to take it

one that partially reclaims the life of her son. Of the witnesses to this act, Hrothgar seems the most aware of its significance. He speaks to the surviving Danes after her attack: ““She has avenged the feud — that last night you killed Grendel”” (Donaldson 24). Heaney substitutes “avenged” with “taken up” — perhaps to mimic the snatching up of the arm itself (l. 1333-1334). In any case, Hrothgar is the first to identify the revenge of Grendel’s mother. It seems most fitting that a male character that lives within the comitatus is able to recognize weregild-related vengeance outside the comitatus. In other words, that Hrothgar is able to accurately label the actions of Grendel’s mother as revenge reveals that she is in fact operating on masculine principles of heroism. Moreover, the concept of vengeance is advanced into the battle scene between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother too. The poet imbues the unsheathing of the hell-bride’s knife with emotion, as Heaney translates, “now she would avenge / her only child” (l. 1546-1547). Donaldson’s is also translationally faithful to the vengeful goal of killing Beowulf for “her only son” (27). By including the concept of revenge before, during, and at the end of her story, the *Beowulf* poet seems to be connecting the entirety of Grendel’s mother’s story to the weregild. This orients her as a female character with masculine heroic ideals.

While the creation of such a complex female character brings closer the possibility of a heroine that fits masculine heroism, the actions of Grendel’s mother are not celebrated by the epic. She is killed by Beowulf and her “doomed body” falls “lifeless” in the mere (Donaldson 28). Why this was the “doomed” fate of Grendel’s mother is advanced by the structure of the epic itself. As Jane Chance points out in her article “The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*,” the story of docile Hildeburh is given just “a mere a hundred lines” before Grendel’s mother attacks Heorot (255). Hildeburh is a woman that loses both a brother and son in battle between the

Danes and the Frisians. The most she can do after her family is killed is “wail” and “sing keens” before her countrymen “bore that lady home” (Heaney l. 1166). Hildebruh passively suffers this tragedy, which contrasts sharply with the revenge of Grendel’s mother. Chance notes how placing Hildeburh’s story before that of Grendel’s mother allows the poet to make a commentary on how each woman reacts to the loss of a son. She says that through this structural feature “the idea is stressed that a kinswoman or mother must passively accept and not actively avenge the loss of her son” (Chance 255). I would second Chance’s point, namely because the outcomes of each woman’s section are so very different: one is taken home, the other is killed in her home. Chance also goes on to say that the poem seems to be claiming that “it is monstrous for a mother to avenge her son as if she were a retainer, he were her lord, and avenging more important than peacemaking” (Chance 257). Chance’s implication of homosocial relations within the context of Grendel and his mother’s relationship is significant, as the “hell-bride” does seek the equivalent kind of vengeance a retainer would for a lord. By understanding Grendel’s mother metaphorically through the structures of Anglo-Saxon patriarchy, Chance demonstrates that although the monster is not part of the social structures of *Beowulf*, she still acts upon them.

As if to maintain the structured boundaries of gender in *Beowulf*, the comitatus is directly implicated and utilized in the death scene of Grendel’s mother. Beowulf kills her with an “ancient” sword that she had “in her armoury,” “one that any warrior would envy” (Heaney l. 1558-1560). The sword, an “heirloom” and “glory of warriors” is representative of the patriarchal hierarchies present in *Beowulf* (Donaldson 28). Swords are especially important to family lineages in the epic, as they are frequently passed from father to son — such as Wiglaf’s sword that he “inherited from his father before him” (Heaney l. 2608). The network of

homosocial relations imbued in a blade makes the death of the “hell-dam” by an “ancient” sword doubly potent, as she is murdered with a masculine symbol. Beowulf swings this “blade in an arc, a resolute blow... / ... toppling the doomed / house of her flesh” (l. 1565-1568). The image of the blade slicing through the “house” of Grendel’s mother’s body is disturbing, as the connotations of peace and family that are associated with a “house” are decimated by the sword. Despite how much Grendel’s mother emulates the warrior code, her death reveals that her embodiment of male heroism will not be accepted by the standards of pre-Conquest England.

Returning to the scholarship of Jane Chance for a moment reveals the deeper implications of the battle between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother. In her essay, “Grendel’s Mother as Epic Anti-Type of the Virgin and Queen,” Chance presents the social and sexual significance of this fight. She divides her interpretation of Grendel’s mother into two sections: the “avenging monster” and the “hall-ruler.” She equates Beowulf and Grendel’s mother in this second distinction, as both “protect” and act as “host” under the threat of a visitor (Chance 257). By delineating Grendel’s mother as a “guardian” or “hall-ruler” Chance presents another masculine role for Grendel’s mother, further portraying the monster as a figure operating on the tenets of Anglo-Saxon patriarchy. To connect to the language of Heaney’s translation, the description of Grendel’s mother as a “house of flesh” advances the “host and guest” relationship Chance unpacks.

Chance continues her discussion of gender into an analysis of the battle scene between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother — comparing the affair itself to sexual intercourse. By exposing the sexual undertones of the event Chance is able to demonstrate when Grendel’s mother breaks from the tropes of her gender. She describes this as “the inversion of the feminine role of the

queen or hall-ruler” — which is the opposite of the peaceweaving and custom-heeding Wealhtheow (Chance 258). Chance identifies three methods used by the *Beowulf* poet to achieve the gendered inversion: first, language of “clutching, grasping, and embracing;” second, each trying to take “the dominant position astride each other;” and third, the penetration of “clothing or body” with a weapon (258). Heaney’s translation contains all three, as Grendel’s mother “grappled him tightly in her grim embrace,” “she pounced upon him” and stabbed at his chain-mail (l. 1542; 1545; 1547). The sexual dominance that Grendel’s mother is trying to take over Beowulf in their battle scene, as pointed out by Chance, deviates from traditional gender roles, as well as the gender roles outlined at the outset of this thesis. In this way I second Chance’s argument. I agree that Grendel’s mother is attempting to be dominant, but most importantly that this aggression is also because she is trying to avenge the life of her son. By straddling and stabbing at Beowulf, Grendel’s mother is deviating from the peacemaking expected of her as a woman to protect the memory of her son — a masculinized tendency associated with the *comitatus*.

With Chance’s argument in mind, the death of Grendel’s mother is symbolic of the ‘correct’ order being reinstated over the deviant one. Grendel’s mother is aligned with “female sexuality run rampant” as she tries to conquer Beowulf, and Beowulf is aligned with a “natural” sexuality. Even the place in which these two sides fight, the mere, is representative of a woman’s sexuality through its imagery of “bloody waters... and the strange battle-hall which remains hidden... winding passageways, slopes, and paths” (Chance 259). That Beowulf “pitched his killer opponent to the floor,” in Chance’s interpretation, is “the triumph of a right and natural sexual order over the perverse and unnatural one” (Heaney l. 1540; Chance 260). Again, to refine

this analysis, the existence of a gendered order is substantiated further by the two categories of heroism present in the *Beowulf* text. To put this differently, the order Chance sees being corrected is one created by the poet through repeated categorization of risk-taking behavior as masculine and prosocial behavior as feminine. Under this structure in the epic, it is no surprise that Grendel's mother is doomed to die at the hands of a patriarchal, homosocial structure that cannot account for her difference.

At this point in examining deviant forms of female heroism I think it's important to include figures outside, but close in proximity, to the *Beowulf* text. Found in the same manuscript as *Beowulf* is the story of Judith, a Jewish woman who escapes rape and harm by beheading a foreign army general named Holofernes. Judith is a heroine. She saves herself from certain abuse and saves her people from the tyranny of Holofernes too. The scenes from Judith's story were popular during the Renaissance, as many artists such as Gentileschi, Lucas Cranach the Elder, and Botticelli created renditions of the heroine killing the tyrant Holofernes. She is a woman — in both the Nowell Codex, in and the Biblical version of her story, and indeed, in the Western tradition — who is gifted with the agency to alter her situation, something not found often in stories of ancient women. As an example of the masculine heroine, I will be using Judith's story in juxtaposition with those of Modthryth and Grendel's mother. Judith's story epitomizes and celebrates a woman that is masculinely heroic.

Judith's feats of heroism include behaviors that are risk-taking *and* prosocial, aligning her in some ways with characters like Modthryth and Grendel's mother. As we have seen in *Beowulf*, masculine women like Modthryth and Grendel's mother have unsuccessful existences

in a patriarchy — as their actions make them deviant from “normal” womanhood, although they might be acting heroically by male standards. Using her story, I would like to present Judith’s heroics as a successful example of the heroine, as she embodies both kinds of heroism *and* is also heralded by her people.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Judith’s heroism is the violence she perpetrates against Holofernes. This violence is warranted, however gory and brutal, as Holofernes sought Judith out to do harm to her as well. That Judith is violent towards Holofernes *because* he was going to be violent to her is reminiscent of weregild culture in Anglo-Saxon societies. From the moment Holofernes’ retainers grab her, Judith knows the general’s bad intentions, as “he intended to defile / that bright lady with pollution and with stain (*Judith* l. 58-59). The imagery of “defiling” immediately connects to Judith’s sexual purity, which is what Holofernes wants to destroy. The general’s wish to harm her virginity acts as the offending event from which Judith’s revenge stems. She even directly asks the Lord for help with this vengeance, she says: “*Avenge now, mighty Lord, illustrious Dispenser of Glory, / what is thus miserable in my mind, blazing in my heart*” (93-94a, emphasis mine). Her invocation of vengeance aligns her further with the weregild and the risk-taking behaviors of masculine heroism, as she seeks revenge for the intended harm planned for her. The concept of potential sexual harm is also reflected in the story of Modthryth, the Beowulfian queen who killed her retainers “for imagined insults” (Heaney l. 1944). As examined before, Modthryth is protecting herself from potential suitors, but more generally the male gaze. The same follows from Judith’s story. The potential, yet imminent sexual assault that both women face — I would argue — is an attack on the kingdom of their bodies, which is why they must collect a weregild for the crime.

In the Biblical account of Judith's story, her attack on Holofernes is entirely premeditated. This aligns the heroine with the actions of Grendel's mother, as Judith becomes a justice-seeking avenger of her people. She differs from Grendel's mother in that her plot begins with sexual deception. According to the Bible, Judith was already "very beautiful, charming to see" (*The Book of Judith* ch. 8, l. 7). She uses this beauty and sensuality knowingly, putting on "all her jewellery" before travelling to Holofernes' camp, so that she would be "beautiful enough to beguile the eye of any man who saw her" (ch. 10, l. 4). By weaponizing the feminine aspects of her appearance to kill Holofernes Judith is quite literally becoming a femme fatale. If the standards for Anglo-Saxon women are superimposed onto her plot, it would follow that she is synthesizing the sexual elements of the female gender role with masculine tendencies for revenge. Through her premeditated action she becomes an avenging temptress. Her plan to seduce Holofernes works and he is "seized with a violent desire to sleep with her" (ch. 12, l. 16). Important to note is that Holofernes' language nearly foreshadows the fate that will befall him, as he is "seized" by a "violent desire" much like Judith will seize and kill him violently. The Biblical account makes Judith's attack on Holofernes all the more masculinized, as she aggressively seeks out vengeance for the crimes against her community. By synthesizing my gendered analysis with the text of the Nowell Codex, Judith's heroism becomes highly similar to that of Grendel's mother, as both women seek out their revenge.

In the Nowell Codex, Judith's vengeance against Holofernes originates from a place of masculine codes of conduct — namely, that she seeks justice for a crime against her (her rape) or her people (their suffering). The stylistic elements of the actual murder maintain Judith's incorporation of masculine ideals. In the death scene there is heavy emphasis on the image of the

sword, a symbol of Anglo-Saxon warriors. When Judith sees that Holofernes has fallen into a drunken stupor, she “seized / the sharpened sword, hardened in battle-showers, / and tugged it from its sheath with her right hand” (*Judith* 76-78). It’s not clear in the Nowell Codex’s version to whom the sword originally belongs, however, Judith’s act of grabbing the sword — especially considering that Holofernes was planning to rape her — is representative of her taking back dominance over her situation. When considering that the sword is often a phallic symbol, this interaction has two readings that can be synthesized to convey Judith’s masculinity. The first is that she is to some degree taking control over Holofernes’ manhood and sexual prowess in order to redirect it and kill him. The second reading is more literal; she is simply taking hold of a historically male weapon, and thus for a moment embodying the warrior-hero position. I think both are applicable, as Judith is in both senses using a stereotypically masculine item to kill a man. The biblical account of Judith would probably confirm the secondary reading of the sword as Holofernes’ literal manhood, as the sword, or “scimitar,” belongs to him (*The Book of Judith* ch. 13, l. 6). Through the imagery of the sword, Judith comes to be associated with the violence and risk-taking of male heroism.

The image of the sword, important to Judith’s story, is significant in the *Beowulf* epic as well. The language Heaney uses when discussing Grendel’s mother in battle is highly similar to the language of Judith’s initial interaction with the sword — namely that Judith “seized / the sharpened sword, hardened in battle-showers.” Comparably, when Grendel’s mother is plotting her attack on Heorot, the *Beowulf* poet describes her strength in terms of an “amazon woman’s” and that the monster’s power was less than “the hefted sword, its hammered edge / and gleaming blade slathered in blood, / razes the sturdy boar-ridge off a helmet” (Heaney l. 1285-1287). The

descriptions are strikingly similar, as both focus on the sword's edges that are "hardened" and "hammered" as well as the blades being soaked from "battle-showers" and being "slathered in blood." As was examined in the discussion of Grendel's mother earlier, vengeance also plays a key role in the dam's attack on Beowulf, much like Judith's on Holofernes. Both these women — one human and one monster — are oriented as masculine heroines. This is furthered by the importance of the sword and revenge in both cases.

Just as Jane Chance explicates the battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother, so too does she discuss the importance of Judith's beheading of Holofernes. She begins by orienting the battles' relationships to each other, that "as in *Beowulf* a warrior battles a monster: the blessed maiden grapples with the 'drunken vicious monster' (l. 28 a) Holofernes" (260). Chance associates Beowulf and Judith as the "warriors" and Grendel's mother and Holofernes as the "monsters" — designating them on the basis of the "blessed" and cursed, rather than gender. By reading the battle scene between Judith and Holofernes in this manner the "sexual role behavior in *Beowulf* occurs in reverse in *Judith*" with Holofernes being "penetrated by the virgin's sharp sword" (260). In the case of Judith, she is deemed the "right and natural sexual order" which is meant to "triumph... over the perverse and unnatural one" (260). Holofernes' sexual impurity and drunkenness orient him as the monster of their story, while Judith is holy and virtuous. Judith — unlike Grendel's mother — is human, beautiful, and part of a community. This makes her representative of the 'good' heroine, despite her bloody and vengeful killing of Holofernes, and thus she is permitted to live by the social structures of her text. Looking at action alone, there is minimal difference between the vengeance of Grendel's mother and Judith. However, Judith's

feminine beauty and pre-established community allow her to be more successful as a masculine heroine.

In addition to her masculine attributes, Judith embodies the feminine conception of heroism laid out by Becker and Eagly earlier as well. This prosocial heroism is represented — like Wealhtheow who is “*mindful of custom*” in *Beowulf* (Donaldson 11, emphasis mine) — by an emphasis on thought and intellect in *Judith*. For example, General Holofernes, who negatively embodies the male ideals of heroism, lacks a “mindful” nature: “the powerful man fell / so drunk with wine in the middle of his bed / so that he knew no counsel in his mind-lock” (*Judith* 68-70). The lack of action in the “mind-lock” is something that cannot be found in the character of Judith, as her moniker is often preceded by “spirit-wise,” “prudent,” and “clever-thoughted” (l. 42; 134; 143). Oftentimes, the mindfulness of Judith is directly linked to her heavenly nature; in other words that her thoughtful nature is a sign of her morality. In her prayer to the Lord before killing Holofernes this distinct connection between mindfulness and heavenly morality can be more easily seen:

*I wish to ask you, God of Origins
and Spirit of Comfort, Son of the All-Wielding,
Glorious Trinity for your mercy to a needy me.
Severely is my heart inflamed now
and my mind is troubled, greatly afflicted with sorrows.*

...
*I have never had more need for your grace than now.
Avenge now, mighty Lord, illustrious Dispenser of Glory,
what is thus miserable in my mind, blazing in my heart.*

Judith l. 83-94a

I would like to explicate Judith’s prayer using three elements: mindfulness, affliction, and action. Judith, as her descriptions suggest, is a mindful character relative to Holofernes and others in her story. The biblical Book of Judith underscores this point with a conversation between Judith and

Uzziah. Uzziah says: ““Everything you have just said comes from an honest heart... from your earliest years all the people have known how shrewd you are and of how sound a heart”” (ch. 8. l. 28-29). This awareness of others outside herself is crucial to the preceding two elements of Judith’s story, as it knits her prosocial and risk-taking heroics together. The ability to “empathize,” say Becker and Eagly, is attributed to women “more than men... because women are more likely to occupy social roles that require caring for others” (Becker and Eagly 166). Judith’s mindfulness, or empathy, allows her to feel the suffering of her community. She is “troubled” by the oppression of her people, and their suffering “afflicts” her with “sorrows.” Judith’s affliction acts as a catalyst for her action. This transition from affliction to action is present in the line “avenge now... / what is thus miserable in my mind, blazing in my heart.” The structure of the line moves syntactically from Judith’s “mindful” nature to what she describes as a “blazing in my heart” — much like Judith’s misery moves from thought to actuality in the death of Holofernes. The adjectives of this passage convey Judith’s movement to action, as her original sorrow is merely “inflamed” at the beginning of the speech, but is soon “blazing” by the end. Judith’s sorrow for the fate of her people eventually rises up like her hand on Holofernes’ sword, allowing her to behead him in an act of “blazing” heroism.

The fallout after Holofernes’ beheading is striking for its immediate positive effect on Judith’s community, seemingly out of place in such a bloody situation. At this point in the story it becomes evident how Judith’s actions are prosocially heroic, as she does protect her community. The gory murder of Holofernes is connected to the sustaining a community through what Judith does with his head. The “mindful maiden quickly placed / the warrior’s head so bloody into her foodsack which her attendant / ... in her ways had brought / food for them both”

(l. 124-127). Again, Judith's "mindful" nature is referred to in this passage, linking her ability to think of others to her social sphere at home, as she is clearly bringing Holofernes' head back with her as evidence of their collective freedom. The use of the "foodsack" for this task connects the safety of Judith's people to nourishment, making her return as promising as a strong harvest or good hunt. By returning with Holofernes' head Judith becomes a figure of sustenance, nourishment, and growth and thus holds a highly prosocial role amongst her people.

The reactions of Judith's community to her return also further her characterization as a prosocial heroine. When they see her returning to the city gates "the hearts of every man /in the mead-city became gladdened ... / ... Judith had returned to her homeland, / and then hastily and reverently they let her inside (l. 167-170). Those that see her approaching are immediately "gladdened" as they recognize and bear witness to Judith's return. This echoes Beowulf's own role in his community, as his heroics are witnessed by his fellow Geats as well. That Judith is recognized in the same way as Beowulf situates her as both a risk-taking hero and a prosocial hero. She is both warrior and peacemaker for the Jewish people. Her masculine heroics are also bolstered by the fact that those who recognize her first are men, as if they are recognizing the valor of another. Judith's people then "reverently" let her back inside the gates, a kind of acceptance that was not afforded by Modthryth or Grendel's mother. The reverence and respect they have for her deeds position her as a masculine heroine, for the beheading of Holofernes was an act of "bravado," as Becker and Eagly would say (164). Her final return home marks Judith as a character that successfully inhabits both heroic gender roles, as she is both protector and avenger of her community.

Judith's heralding as a heroine is something that the women of *Beowulf* do not get to experience. Wealhtheow is confined to her limited heroics as a peaceweaver in Heorot, a small but non-subversive role in the epic; Modthryth is married off, something she herself was actively trying to prevent; and finally Grendel's mother, in trying to seek some control over the legacy of her child, is murdered by Beowulf. The story of Judith and *Beowulf* exist in the same manuscript, yet are completely different representations of the heroine. While the situation for the women of *Beowulf* looks bleak in comparison to Judith's, their presence in the text allows for a critique of male heroism. Each woman's prosocial heroics conflict with the glory-seeking tendencies of male heroism, creating a dynamic interplay between genders. The value of this critique has yet to come to full fruition, but it will be examined in the following chapters of this thesis. Fortunately, *Beowulf* is a story that refuses a single narrator or poet, as its retellings have taken on important cultural and social significance in the modern literary tradition under a multitude of translators and writers. By turning to two modern retellings of *Beowulf*, I hope to challenge the gender roles laid out by the epic's poet.

Chapter Two: Heroism in *Grendel*

The Male Matrix

The first retelling of the *Beowulf* poem I will be examining is John Gardner's *Grendel*. This is perhaps the most well-known retelling, taught in countless high school and college English classes. I was first introduced to *Grendel* in high school as the culminating text in our *Beowulf* unit. My teacher wanted to complicate the class's understanding of *Beowulf* and its presentation of heroism, which is quite direct in defining who is hero and who is villain. *Grendel* reverses the roles of good and evil, making "the monster seem human and the hero a cold-blooded fanatic" (Detweiler 60). Absolutely enraptured by Gardner's deft twisting of the epic, I read *Grendel* in a single sitting. Gardner certainly succeeds in challenging the idea of heroism, as his anti-hero Grendel is easy to simultaneously despise and love. Even after we had finished the unit and plunged into Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* the monster's voice rang in my ears: "I create the whole universe, blink by blink (Gardner 22)." I remember being simultaneously irritated and compelled by the novel, feeling as if Gardner had slighted me in some way.

This feeling has not subsided. Gardner's text proves difficult to even the most advanced *Beowulf* scholars or postmodernist readers. Robert Detweiler puts the slippery nature of *Grendel* best in his "Games and Play in Modern American Fiction," in which he elaborates on the metanarratives of modern fiction. Detweiler describes the "strategy" of *Grendel* as one in which the reader is "provoked into discovering its alienating rules... of this game played between author and reader" which "are the same as those played by the individual and society. The point of the game is to discover the rules of the game" (56). Using Detweiler's metaphor of the

author-reader game, *Grendel* becomes a narrative that asks the reader to exercise their intellect in order to ‘play,’ rather than ‘follow the directions’ of Campbell’s heroic arc in *Beowulf*. In this way, Gardner redefines the very nature of heroism in his story as well. Rather than be quantified in the number of beasts slain or meadhalls wrecked, heroism becomes an intellectual sport in *Grendel*, which is perhaps the most important of Gardner’s reversals. When compared with the “static” Beowulfian Grendel, who “appears to require little motivation for his malicious activity,” Gardner’s Grendel is “anything but a static character. He grows..., evolving more than many a modern hero” (Milosh 49). As Milosh suggests, these are the attributes that make Gardner’s Grendel more relatable than the original text’s monster. Gardner’s retelling is further intellectualized by making use of Grendel’s emotional depth and personal conflict, creating a realistic and sympathetic ‘hero.’

Unfortunately, Gardner and his monster are not satisfied with a simple inversion of traditional heroic traits. As I will argue, the intellectual heroism of Grendel is also susceptible to failure, especially when forced to undergo introspection. Despite all his searching and questioning, Grendel is unable to connect to anything in his life, including love and meaning. Heroism, in both the traditional “risk-taking” sense and Gardner’s intellectual sense — i.e. that Grendel goes on an existential, *mental* journey — both become empty constructs in *Grendel*. This is one of the features I most grappled with in this retelling: that heroism does not appear to exist in *Grendel*, yet the reader still perceives the monster as heroic. Grendel’s version of intellectual heroism, as I call it above, is a heroism that champions the mental over physical or actionable kinds of heroism. To superimpose this onto Joseph Campbell’s heroic journey, Grendel’s heroism derives from his arduous, intellectual quest for truth — rather than an actual

journey from battle to battle. So why include *Grendel* in my thesis? What could its daunting structure possibly offer? Or, in the words of Jerome Klinkowitz, “what happens to a myth’s morality when its structure is diametrically reversed, turned inside out and given a completely new voice?” (63-64).

This is where I would like to intervene, maintaining my focus on gender and heroism. While Gardner is heralded for his postmodern adaptation of *Beowulf*, there are several challenges the book presents to a modern audience. The major problems I will focus on are first the exclusion, silencing, and sexualizing of women; and second, the related abhorrence of the feminine that’s present in the text. For the character Grendel the combination of these factors proves to be his downfall, as removing the feminine from philosophical understandings of the world creates the nihilism which ultimately consumes him. In this section of my thesis I will be critically examining Gardner’s retelling and how it builds, or detracts, from the standards of gendered heroism laid out in *Beowulf*.

Grendel lurks in a world dominated by male thought. His story is a bildungsroman, chronicling the monster’s quest to uncover the guiding philosophical structures of his life. He lives with his mother in a cave, occasionally picking fights with the people of a nearby meadhall called Hart. Grendel, like Beowulf, faces three major challenges in his life. The majority of his heroic quest exists within these three relationships: first with the Shaper, the scop of Hart; then with the dragon; and finally his nemesis Beowulf. Each male character presents Grendel with a new philosophy, whether that’s the meaning-weaving of the Shaper, the nihilism of the dragon, or the mechanistic attitude of Beowulf. While my thesis will not dissect each of the conflicting

philosophies of young Grendel, I find it important to note the all-male matrix in which Grendel operates. No matter the philosophy, elevated thought appears to be relegated only to the men of *Grendel*.

Unlike female characters in the novel, men seem more able to redefine and reimagine the worlds they inhabit through elevated thought and musing. The quote that initially drew me to *Grendel* encapsulates this well: “I alone exist. All the rest, I saw, is merely what pushes me, or what I push against... I create the whole universe, blink by blink” (Gardner 22). Grendel’s solipsistic attitude occurs to him while stuck in a tree, a revelation that begins his intellectual bildungsroman. His ability to realize his potentiality to “create the universe,” is an agency that he also shares with his counterparts, the Shaper, the dragon, and Beowulf. Maintaining my focus on gender, I would like to examine how each of these male characters are included in the larger, philosophical dialogue of *Grendel*.

Grendel sees the same ability to recreate and redefine the universe in the Shaper. After peering into the meadhall and listening to the Shaper tell stories of Hrothgar’s glorious reign Grendel suddenly sees that the scop “had made it [Hrothgar’s violent rise to power] all seem true and very fine... What was he? The man had changed the world, had torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots and had transmuted it, and they, who knew the truth, remembered it his way — and so did I” (43). First, the Shaper has the important ability to rewrite the Danes’ narrative, or in Grendel’s words tear “up the past by its thick, gnarled roots” and make it so “the truth” was exchanged for “his way.” It’s no stretch to see that storytelling has an important role in the scop’s art *and* Gardner’s novel overall. Gardner is presenting a rewritten *Beowulf* much like the Shaper presents a rewritten version of Hrothgar’s history. Storytelling becomes a male artform in

Grendel on several levels, giving each male speaker — whether Grendel, the Shaper, or Gardner himself — power over the overarching narrative. Another significant feature of this passage is how directly Grendel is affected by the Shaper, as if the Shaper speaks only to him. The scop’s “most enthralled listener is Grendel himself,” creating — at least in Grendel’s mind, which is all we see — a connection between him and the Shaper in their respective abilities to alter their realities (Klinkowitz 66). Grendel himself even readily admits to the Shaper’s influence after the monster’s language begins to wax “poetic.” Grendel says, “His manner of speaking was infecting me, making me pompous” (Gardner 49). The Shaper makes Grendel feel “pompous” or self-important, further perpetuating the dominance of male thought in the novel. That Grendel is influenced by the scop establishes a similarity between their minds, uniting the two men in their intellectual capabilities to “create the universe” — whether that occurs “blink by blink” or word by word.

Beowulf is another male character that influences Grendel in a manner similar to the Shaper. However, Grendel’s relationship to Beowulf is one in which the monster feels “mad with joy” and apprehension, a somewhat contradictory mix of emotions (151). Beowulf’s description and reception in the novel have markedly hypermasculine, even semi-homoerotic overtones, features that further substantiate Gardner’s heralding of the male mind in *Grendel*. The warrior and his retainers enter at the very end of the novel, described by the monster as “mechanical, terrible... never speaking, walking dead men” (152-153). Beowulf epitomizes the male form:

His chest was as wide as an oven. His arms were like beams... Staring at his grotesquely muscled shoulders — stooped, naked despite the cold, sleek as the belly of a shark and as rippled with power as the shoulders of a horse — I found my mind wandering. If I let myself, I could drop into a trance just looking at those shoulders... I was excited, suddenly alive.

Gardner 155

Removed from its context, this passage is highly sexualized. It's important to note the figurative language used to describe the warrior as well, for it simultaneously paints him as desirable *and* disturbing. Language used to describe Beowulf's chest and arms as "an oven" and "beams" draw up imagery of the hearth, perhaps even that of a meadhall. Opposite this is the simile comparing his shoulders to "the belly of a shark" and "the shoulders of a horse," two animals that are incredibly strong and dangerous. By synthesizing strength and power with possible threat, Beowulf could only be defined as hypermasculine. It could even be argued that Beowulf's "grotesque" form approaches that of a monster rather than man — especially given the comparisons to animals that punctuate his description. These combinations make the warrior all the more fascinating to Grendel, who feels himself become enraptured by Beowulf's form and "suddenly alive" with his presence. When added to Grendel's interactions with the Shaper, Beowulf becomes another element in the male-centric dialogues of the novel. Through the physicality of Beowulf and Grendel's reaction, Gardner elevates the influence of men on their environments through homosocial and homoerotic bonds.

The final aspect of the male matrix that I would like to address is Grendel's audience. While Grendel mostly uses the first person to either discuss his present circumstances or those of his childhood, there is an implication that he is addressing *someone* when he speaks. When reading, it seems as if Grendel knows we are listening — but that he posits a 20th or 21st century audience seems highly implausible. How did he know someone would read this? Did he write his thoughts down? The narration makes Grendel seem rather self-absorbed; however, it does relate further to Gardner's championing of male thinking. In his "John Gardner's *Grendel*," Jerome Klinkowitz traces the circumstances that led to *Grendel*'s publication. He also wonders about

Grendel's "us" audience, imagining that the monster could be speaking to "his mother," but as she is "unthinking and brutish, Grendel's dam is no audience, so the monster's narrative must be addressed to men" (Klinkowitz 65). While problematic, Klinkowitz's dismissal of Grendel's mother as a possible audience — which I will examine in subsequent sections — does point to the male matrix of *Grendel*. Another of Klinkowitz's approaches to *Grendel's* audience is to assume that the monster is speaking to his own creator, making the novel "a very private affair... which then makes Gardner Grendel's voice" (65). I would agree with Klinkowitz's line of reasoning that Grendel is speaking to Gardner, and thus Gardner is also the voice of Grendel. However, I would like to examine this connection in conjunction with the fact that *Grendel* is a 'male-minded' book. In an interview Gardner describes Grendel's intellectual journey as a product of "an annoying sometimes painful disharmony in *my own* mental experience" (Fawcett and Jones 634, emphasis mine). Synthesizing Klinkowitz and Gardner's discussion of *Grendel*, it seems that Gardner may well be ventriloquizing Grendel's voice. This adds a fourth male-to-male philosophical conversation to the male matrix, making for a book that focuses only on male-dominant pondering. Having laid out the male matrix of *Grendel*, I will assert that Gardner's choice to write about male thinking is indicative of exclusionary philosophical ethics on the basis of gender. In effect, *Grendel* was written by Gardner, about a network of patriarchal thinking, for Gardner's "own mental experience." In the case of Klinkowitz's analysis, I would say that "intimate" does not go far enough in describing the restrictive meta-thinking of Gardner's novel.

I find it important to discuss the nature of Gardner's intellectual heroism at this juncture of the project. Both traditional, Beowulfian heroism and Gardner's intellectual heroism are present in the novel. The former takes shape in the character Unferth, the latter in Grendel and his overall mental journey. Gardner critically examines heroism with Unferth and Grendel's encounters, using Grendel's nihilistic attitude to dismantle the traditional hero's glory and fame. In Unferth's first encounter with the monster, Unferth rather theatrically embodies the classic, macho, "risk-taking" hero. He circles (but does not approach) Grendel in the meadhall, saying "Monster, prepare to die!... Tell them in Hell that Unferth, son of Ecglaf sent you" while simultaneously "making sure he knew exactly where the window was" (Gardner 82). Grendel sees through the cracks in Unferth's heroic façade, calling him "ridiculous" before showering him with apples "red and innocent as smiles" (82; 85). Apples in literature are often connotative of knowledge, which makes Grendel's weaponizing of them a subtle way for Gardner to undermine Unferth's faith in the 'hero' type. The apples are a deceptive weapon, as they are "innocent" and perfectly "glossy," yet they represent a truth about heroism that Unferth has yet to understand — namely that Unferth's "glossy" understanding of heroism is flawed and false. When coupled with Grendel's previous association with Cain, this simile further situates the monster as the tempting snake, leading Unferth and his heroism towards their ultimate fall (51). The fact that Grendel pelts a sword-wielding 'hero' with apples until the man is crying like "a boy" or a "poor miserable virgin" denigrates heroism, even without a Biblical interpretation of the scene (85).

In addition to his belittling actions, Grendel also has conversations with Unferth about heroism that further undermine the traditional hero. The monster reduces the nobility and

“dignity” of Unferth’s heroism down to a few features, all of which — shockingly, and to the chagrin of Unferth — are true. Grendel at first examines the ““terrible burden”” of ““being a hero,”” namely that ““everybody [is] always watching you, weighing you, seeing if you’re still heroic”” (84). As was seen in *Beowulf*’s character, risk-taking heroism does require a ‘witness’ to some degree. In this case, Unferth is highly aware of the eyes on him in the meadhall, as his “noble language” and threats to Grendel suggest (84). Grendel, as an outsider to the heroic structures of humankind, is able to recognize and comment on this inconsistency, effectively subverting the goodness and purity of Unferth’s heroics by pointing to the truth. To further undermine Unferth, Grendel then suggests that ““there are compensations”” for such a taxing position, such as ““the pleasant feeling of vast superiority, the easy success with women—”” before Unferth cuts him off (84). Adding these demeaning ‘benefits’ of heroism to his speech enrages Unferth, suggesting that Grendel is not far from the truth. Even if the monster is incorrect, Unferth at least seems to recognize that his heroics have been shaken slightly through his emotional reactions. Gardner pits Unferth’s performative heroism against Grendel’s intellect, making it clear that Grendel’s nihilistic intelligence easily cuts through the outward showmanship of Unferth.

Grendel meets Unferth again in the mere shortly after this encounter. The Dane tracks Grendel back to his cave, furious for being so brutally embarrassed by the monster. Their conversation about the nature of heroism continues, further substantiating the importance placed on intellectual heroism in the novel. Unferth, having barely survived his journey to the mere, engages Grendel on the monster’s point that heroism is just “noble language, dignity.” Unferth argues that being a hero is “more than that, as my coming here has proved. No man above us will

ever know whether Unferth died here or fled the hills like a coward. Only you and I and God will know the truth. That's inner heroism" (88). With this statement Unferth, following the logic of his last conversation with Grendel, is trying to undermine the monster's point that heroism requires witnesses. That Unferth meets Grendel in Grendel's own cave and tries to debate with Grendel's own logic is revealing, as it suggests that Unferth is abandoning his sword — and thus traditional heroic violence — to fight Grendel rhetorically. Their mental footwork exposes each character's beliefs for what they are; Unferth represents “the great heroic ideals of mankind,” and Grendel the perversion of those ideals by what could be called “an ironic set of monster values” according to Gardner (Fawcett and Jones 634-635). By coming to Grendel's home and engaging in debate, Unferth stoops to these “monster values,” advancing intellectual heroism's dominance in the novel.

Grendel is given another opportunity to challenge Unferth when the Dane describes his final options in coming to the mere: either death or cowardice. The monster quickly takes advantage of this. Focusing on his mention of death, Grendel realizes that “he was waiting for me to kill him. I did nothing” (Gardner 87). Unferth even willingly reveals this motive himself just moments later in their conversation: “You think I came without a hope of winning — came to escape indignity by suicide” (89). Unlike their first conversation, Grendel speaks very little in the mere, allowing Unferth to pour forth his frustration and bare his soul to the silent monster. By allocating most of the dialogue to Unferth, Gardner is able to highlight just how empty the Dane's version of heroism is with the *hero's* own language. In fact, much of Unferth's understanding of heroism involves the death of the hero. He attributes to the hero an ability to see “values beyond what's possible. That's the *nature* of a hero” before determining that “it

kills him, of course... but it makes the whole struggle of humanity worthwhile (89). If reading quickly, what the Dane describes as heroism sounds plausible and glorious — oh, the men that die so that we may sing their praises! — but there are some problems in his speech. First, Unferth’s language still retains its performative qualities, especially in the case of ““values beyond what’s possible,”” which sounds noble, yet is an incredibly vague concept. Like the apples, the glossy outside of his heroism hides a more accurate truth — in the case of Unferth, that he wishes to die in order to secure his “glossy” legacy. Put differently, Unferth’s hollow core is that he cares more for recognition than the goodness of heroism itself. Moreover, Unferth directly links heroism to death, meaning that to be a hero *requires* that the person die. Grendel knows this and is still able to undermine Unferth using this knowledge as well. The monster tells Unferth he’s going to take him home to Hrothgar “safe and sound,” which prompts Unferth to threaten suicide — thereby confirming his own vain hollowness that the Dane tried to argue against in the first place. Grendel then “gently” carries the exhausted Unferth home and forces him to live, making his final rhetorical move against Beowulfian heroism (90). Unferth’s inability to intellectually parry Grendel’s challenges demonstrates the superiority of intellectual heroism to traditional, Beowulfian heroism in Gardner’s book.

Of Grendel’s heroic, intellectual encounters throughout the novel, none is more damaging than his meeting with the dragon. Grendel’s nihilism, as it stems from the philosophical matrix of the novel, is isolating and leads to his misogynistic understanding of the feminine. The dragon achieves this through disdain for any kind of meaning or value system, something that will destroy Grendel’s understanding of love. As a younger monster, Grendel’s mind came initially imbued with some dragon-like thinking, chiefly in his famous quote:

I understood that the world was nothing: a mechanical chaos of casual, brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears. I understood that, finally and absolutely, I alone exist. All the rest, I saw, is merely what pushes me, or what I push against, blindly — as blindly as all that is not myself pushes back. I create the whole universe, blink by blink.

Gardner 22

Grendel reduces the world to “nothing,” a fitting thing to say for a future nihilist. According to the OED, ‘nihilism’ includes the latin root *nihil* which means *nothing*. Grendel will later, after committing himself further to nihilism, comment that “*Nihil ex nihilo*” — translation: ‘nothing comes from nothing.’ Nihilism is also present in how he describes the world, especially in his bleak presentation of a world in which “we stupidly impose our hopes and fears” and that pushes him and he pushes back. Language of simultaneous isolation and agency can be found in the last line of this passage (“I create...blink”). Like Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, and John Hawkes, Gardner creates a solitary male character that “creates *his* whole universe” during his intellectual heroic journey. As was explored before, this is a unique feature of the male characters in *Grendel*. The realm of philosophy becomes exclusively a “boys’ game.” When synthesized with the dragon’s thoughts later, Grendel’s language at the outset of the novel primes him as a perfect candidate for a nihilistic life through his mental isolation.

Through the dragon’s nihilism Grendel becomes unable to see any meaning or love in his life, including that of the ‘mentally inferior’ woman. As the dragon tells Grendel, all of life is reduced to ““a brief pulsation in the black hole of eternity”” (Gardner 74). This philosophy, while as beguiling as the tendrils of smoke floating around Grendel’s face, allows for the monster’s death. As Robert Merrill suggests, “this nihilistic rationalism is what Gardner wants to caution us *against* by means of Grendel’s negative example” (170). Gardner himself attests to this,

describing the “real prison” of his novel as “intellect... We're locked into logical systems, unwilling to have faith in the things that count, like love” (Christian and Gardner 79). While Gardner does not outright name the “logical system” in which Grendel is trapped, it does follow that the intellect of *Grendel* is male-minded. By recasting heroism as intellectual, and by representing women as not ‘thinking’ beings, Gardner is able to exclude women entirely from any heroics on the basis that they are not ‘thinking’ beings. In fact, the love that Gardner refers to is derivative from the feminine and threatens the homosocial order.

The Silent Mother

Although Gardner’s *Grendel* — much like *Beowulf* — tends to focus on male-male relationships, Grendel’s life does include the presence of his mother in addition to the Shaper, Beowulf, and the dragon. The reader is introduced to her at the outset of the novel, just after Grendel has described the motions of human civilization as seeing “life without observing it... buried in it like crabs in mud” (8). Unlike this, albeit modest, consciousness that Grendel ascribes to animals and men, his own mother is accounted for as a

Life-bloated, baffled, long-suffering hag. Guilty, she imagines, of some unremembered, perhaps ancestral crime. (She must have some human in her.) Not that she thinks. Not that she dissects and ponders the dusty mechanical bits of her miserable life’s curse. She clutches at me in her sleep as if to crush me. I break away. ‘Why are we here?’ I used to ask her. ‘Why do we stand this putrid, stinking hole?’ She trembles at my words. Her fat lips shake. ‘Don’t ask!’ her wiggling claws implore. (She never speaks.)

Gardner 11

There are several features of Grendel’s mother that are noteworthy in this passage, such as her association with guilt of an “ancestral crime” or that her “suffering” is the long-standing result of a mysterious “curse.” However, I’d like to focus on Grendel’s perception of her as a

non-thinking, non-pondering being. Gardner frames the mental insufficiencies of Grendel's mother by beginning with her physical deformity. While Grendel himself remains a nebulous, physically indescribable character, his mother seems to only be defined by her physicality — such as her “fat, foul bulk,” her “limp” breasts, scratching at her nipple, and being “humpbacked” to name a few descriptors (9; 17; 55; 102). Grendel, through the grotesquely bodily presentation of his mother, becomes more closely associated with the intellectual, and she with the physical. In her “Mothers, Monsters, and Machines,” Rosi Braidotti theorizes that the feminine body is linked to the monstrous, in that both “share the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror” (65). Grendel's mother, as Gardner seems to focus on her female genitalia in his descriptions, is not exempt from this “blend” — even from the perspective of her son. Grendel first focalizes on his mother's “life-bloated” body before condemning her mental abilities, almost as if he is surveying her form and taking stock of her flaws. The simile above comparing the mother monster's life to “dusty mechanical bits” suggests her mental incapacity, as even rote routine remains an unconsidered aspect of her life. It is revealing that Grendel perceives his mother as mentally inferior to the mechanized actions of humans and animals, as even they are allowed a somewhat higher intellect in *Grendel*. The movements of the passage also suggest the differences between Grendel's mother and her son, for as she tries to “clutch” and “crush” Grendel closer he “breaks away” from her physically. The mental and physical distance between mother and son culminates in a final, devastating linguistic barrier as well. Grendel — noting that he “used to ask her” this, presumably before he came to grips with her lack of intellect — asks his mother the burning metaphysical questions he will later grapple with and fail to answer. Again, Grendel focuses on his mother's physical form

before assuming the worst of her intellect. Her “trembling” and “shaking” are enough for Grendel to conclude her unspoken answer: stupidity and fear. Her “wiggling claws implore” her son to give up his pondering.

Using these three platforms — the body, mind, and speech — Gardner continues to place as much distance between the mother and son as possible. Grendel’s encounters with his mother become increasingly frustrating as he tries to fill in the gaps of their relationship. After exploring the world outside the mere and making revelations about his solipsism Grendel tries to share his discovery with his mother. He recalls that “she only stared... But I talked on, trying to smash through the walls of her unconsciousness” (28). The tension of this encounter is reflected in the repeated ‘s’ sounds of the sentence, mirroring Grendel’s slowly mounting anger at his mother’s stupidity. Grendel does still try to provoke his mother’s intellect, this time with figurative language markedly more violent. His drive to “smash” through his mother’s silence varies from the earlier description of her merely “dusty,” unused consciousness. Grendel has made the shift from wielding mental power over his mother to threatening physical domination.

His attempt to “smash through” to his mother’s thoughts fails, yet Grendel does provoke a reaction from her. Grendel’s mother attempts again to pull her son to her, as if feeling her son’s mental distance from her. Grendel recalls her tight embrace, “as if some current is tearing us apart... she hurls herself across the void and buries me in her bristly fur and fat... I hear from the walls and floor of the cave the booming, booming, of her heart” (28-29). The “current” Grendel references could be interpreted as his philosophical progression thus far in the novel, which makes his inclusion of a “void” between him and his mother all the more poignant, as mentally they share very little. The “void” also calls up the lack of thought Grendel perceives in his

mother's mind. As if to contrast with her son's mental capabilities, the presence of Grendel's mother is defined solely in terms of the physical. Grendel notes the feeling of "her bristly fur and fat" as well as the "booming, booming" of her heart that dominates their cave. By including such a visceral physical description of Grendel's mother, Gardner is able to further distinguish the perceived ineptitude of the mother from the musings of the son. The differences between the two Grendels are like those between two different species; one human, one animal.

The disparity between Grendel's mental ability and his mother's culminates in Grendel's dismissal of his mother entirely. Gardner accomplishes this final subordination of Grendel's mother by highlighting both her desperation and Grendel's indifference to her pain. Grendel's mother tries to speak and warn her son about the impending danger, which Grendel interprets as the disintegration of her "sanity" (145). He hears her strange attempts at speech, "'Dool-dool,' she moans. She drools and weeps. 'Warovvish,' she whimpers, tears at herself" (145-146). Although Grendel does not listen to the garbled words of his mother, her language could be interpreted as 'doom-doom' and 'beware the fish'— an aquatic creature to which Beowulf is frequently compared (Fawcett and Jones 638). That she makes an attempt at speech — however mangled the final result is — is all the more striking for the fact that Grendel seemed highly convinced of her muteness (Gardner 11). While her speech is inarticulate, Gardner includes the fact that Grendel's mother tears at her own fur and skin in her desperation to protect her son — bodily imagery that conveys her fear as much as her yelling 'Please, don't go!' might. Grendel, as distant from her both physically and mentally, does not understand the heart-wrenching warnings of his mother.

The physicality of Grendel's mother is crucial to her son's dismissal. In fact, Gardner has used the body of Grendel's mother as her defining characteristic — often taking an abhorrent and unsympathetic tact in describing her body. As was examined earlier, Grendel's mother becomes wholly captured by her body, as she has no voice in the novel — making the manner in which Grendel dismisses her all the more heartbreaking. All her attempts to dissuade Grendel from attending the Shaper's funeral fail, as he “lift[s] her by the armpits as though she were a child and, gently... set[s] her aside” (147). Grendel answers his mother in her own language: the body. His actions, especially when his mother is compared to “a child,” show how he considers himself superior to her. Not only does picking up his mother require impressive physical strength, but it is literally representative of Grendel putting her to the side of his life.

While Grendel's mother is allowed to be present in *Grendel* only to be dismissed, there are some important feminine aspects of her character worth parsing out. One of these — which Grendel seems slightly aware of but unaffected by — is motherly love. Her son frequently experiences waves of his mother's love, but Gardner never allows him to see their meaning and the subsequent value with which they imbue him. This disconnection marks the beginning of Grendel's intellectual failure and thus death, as feminine love would present him with the meaning he so desperately strips from his surroundings. In other words, intellectual heroism's shortcoming is that it splits the ‘hero’ from empathy, connection, and love.

Grendel was closest to perceiving his worth in his youth. He recalls his mother's affection simply, without the touch of nihilism that pervades his adulthood. Much of his language draws attention to the distance between him and his mother, and how that is increased or diminished.

Of all the creatures I knew, in those days, only my mother really looked at me. — Stared at me as if to consume me, like a troll. She loved me, in some mysterious sense I understood without her speaking it. I was her creation. We were one thing, like the wall and the rock growing out from it. — Or so I ardently, desperately affirmed... I was intensely aware of where I sat, the volume of darkness I displaced, the shiny-smooth span of packed dirt between us, and the shocking separateness from me in my mama's eyes. I would feel, all at once, alone and ugly, almost — as if I'd dirtied myself — obscene... Being young, unable to face these things, I would bawl and hurl myself at my mother... she would smash me to her fat, limp breast as if to make me a part of her flesh again.

Gardner 17

Temporally, Grendel is speaking about his past from the present, tinging this passage with a reflective attitude. Grendel's retrospectivity brings an element of melancholy to his younger self's understanding of love, as he *was* "loved" by his mother, he *was* "her creation," and they *were* "one thing" — implicitly suggesting that these relationships are no longer. Grendel's "mysterious" ability to perceive this love "without [his mother] speaking" furthers the feeling of loss in this passage, as the reader knows that the monster no longer allocates much mental activity to his mother presently. Returning to the concept of physicality, Gardner plays with the literal distance between the Grendels to augment the tension between the son being simultaneously 'of' and 'from' his mother as well. Grendel describes his relationship to his mother as "like the wall and the rock growing out of it" — a semi-flawed simile that reflects the monster's youthful assumption that rocks can actually grow out of walls. The fact that the comparison is somewhat illogical foreshadows Grendel's eventual misunderstanding of his mother, as the rock and the wall are intrinsically separate things, yet can be bound together under 'wallness.' Put differently, Grendel's being separate from his mother (rock) creates his ability to dismiss her (wall), when really mother-child love should be an amalgamation between difference and sameness (wallness).

Grendel chooses to focus on differences, especially physically between him and his mother. He recalls where he “sat,” the space he takes up, and the “packed dirt” between him and his mother. These features signal the literal distance between the Grendels, as well as the burgeoning opportunity for emotional and intellectual separation. The final image in the series, of “the shocking separateness from me in my mama’s eyes” is more ambiguous, for “separateness” is not as tangible as the “packed dirt” Grendel sits on. This image accounts for the possibility of an intellectual rift forming between them in both its ambiguity and relation to intellect. That Grendel reads this idea from his mother’s expression means either; first, that *she* is capable of higher ordered thinking and can see Grendel’s eventual dismissal of her, or second, that *Grendel* is the one projecting the “shocking separateness” onto her, which would mean he is already — whether consciously or not — pulling away from his mother’s affections. I would be more inclined to support the latter, as Grendel tries to remedy his dark thoughts by “hurling” himself at his mother in fear. In either case, Grendel cannot see his connection to his mother, a damaging feature of his mindfulness that will ultimately be his downfall.

As Grendel delves further into nihilism, his fear of separateness transitions to an objective, spectator-like perspective on his own life. Put differently, the anti hero is so enraptured by the intellectually driven matrix of the Shaper, the dragon, and (eventually) Beowulf, that he forfeits any kind of emotional closeness with his mother. In later descriptions of his mother, this spectator perspective becomes more apparent. Again, Grendel’s mother acts to warn her son of his impending doom, but Grendel recalls watching “*the* trembling; it’s as if all *the* muscles are locked to the charge of an eel. Then I push her away. *The* face shatters, she whoops” (147 emphasis mine). The repetition of “the” to describe his mother harkens back to the

distance Grendel felt in his youth — this time it's solidified into the observatory "the" vantage point. Grendel no longer recognizes the emotion of his mother as *her* fear; it's reduced to "the trembling" of "the muscles" in a clinical way. Grendel pushes his mother, leading to the equally distant observation that "the face shatters." By replacing the possessiveness of "her" with "the," Gardner eliminates the intimacy of emotion from the Grendel family's interactions.

Unfortunately, this lack of intimacy is forwarded into Grendel's other encounters with love. He speaks to this belief after meeting Wealhtheow, uniting his mother and the queen isometrically in that he cannot accept the love of either. He reflects on his mother first: "she would have gladly given her life to end my suffering — horrible, humpbacked, carp-toothed creature, eyes on fire with useless, mindless love" (102). The caesura of the sentence balances the passion of motherly love with Grendel's own description of "mindless" love, placing the two at odds syntactically in the sentence. Grendel's description also returns to the physicality of his mother, painting an image of her as deformed monster. When situated with the first clause of this thought, this description of Grendel's mother buries the pure altruism of maternal love that Grendel points out. This reflects the monster's own mental status thus far in the novel, as he is intelligent enough to understand the concept of love, but too calculated to receive it.

Grendel's thoughts then turn to Wealhtheow. In this moment Grendel projects the feminine weakness he sees in his mother onto Wealhtheow and all other women — making for a sweeping dismissal of what Grendel thinks is a threat to his intellectualism. He sees the "grim parallel" between his mother and Wealhtheow, in that either "would give, had given, her life for those she loved" (102). He extrapolates beyond Wealhtheow: "so would any simpering, eyelash-batting female in her court, given the proper setup, the minimal conditions. The smell of

the dragon lay around me like sulphurous smoke” (102). Again, Grendel recognizes the sacrifices of the women, but fails to comprehend the deeper meaning of love. He follows the same pattern of thought as before, physically minimizing women to “simpering, eyelash-batting” beings in order to undermine their sacrifice. He suggests that their motives, like the motives of Unferth, are hollow and based on “minimal conditions.” The “sulphurous” smell of the dragon is the largest giveaway of Grendel’s inability to connect emotionally, as it wafts in mysteriously after he condemns womankind. The dragon’s nihilism, it seems, dominates Grendel’s mental state and bars any possibility for meaningful connection. As a feature of the intellectual male matrix of *Grendel*, the dragon’s philosophies strip the world of meaning and deem emotional vulnerability a threat, ascribing abhorrence to the female in the novel.

The Abhorrence of the Feminine

Wealhtheow enters the novel as a token of peace between Hrothgar’s people and the Helmings. However, unlike the Wealhtheow of *Beowulf*, Gardner’s version of the queen is less heroine and more dutiful wife. There are several features of her description that minimize her agency, instead elevating the importance of her physical body. Grendel is first mesmerized by her form, as he sees her “... moving slowly, as if walking in a dream... Her smooth long hair was as red as fire and soft as the ruddy sheen on dragon’s gold” (100). Interesting to note is that Grendel initially describes Wealhtheow relative to the dragon, equating her hair color to dragon’s gold. When explicated alongside the dragon’s mantra to “seek out gold and sit on it,” Wealhtheow’s threat to Grendel’s nihilistic worldview becomes more apparent (74). If Wealhtheow is associated with gold in Grendel’s eyes then he should covet her, following the

logic of the dragon's thinking, yet she obviously is not gold. That Grendel views gold as an apt comparison is telling of the wrench Wealhtheow will throw into his nihilistic system, as it seems that the monster is already quantifying her value.

Wealhtheow is frequently diminished through these figurative descriptions as well. Oftentimes her beauty is likened to that of youth and virginity through Grendel's eyes. He describes her as "beautiful, as innocent as dawn on winter hills" and "like a child, her sweet face paler than the moon" (100; 101). By connecting Wealhtheow to youth Grendel can infantilize her, rendering the queen into the equivalent of a beautiful doll. Youth suggests a lack of agency, something that Gardner substantiates by including that Wealhtheow is given away by her brother in return for peace with the Danes. Grendel also brings up Wealhtheow's virginity when she's passed to the Danes, saying "I leered in the rattling darkness of my tree... she surrendered herself with the dignity of a sacrificial virgin... my eyes smarted, and I was afraid — O monstrous trick against reason — I was afraid I was about to sob" (100). First, Wealhtheow is compared to a "sacrificial virgin," which briefly shows that Grendel is considering her physically and noticing the emotional stakes of the situation. He sees her "dignity" and "surrender," language reminiscent of the Wealhtheow of *Beowulf* too, as the queen must "observe the courtesies" of the court (Heaney l. 613). Interestingly, Grendel says that he "leered" in his tree at her as he observed her "virginal" attitude. The OED associates the verb "to leer" with "threatening" or "lascivious" intentions, the latter of which makes Grendel into a semi-predator. When synthesized with the child-like descriptions earlier, Grendel's observations of the queen, even from his safe distance, become sexually charged.

Yet through her “dignity,” Wealhtheow challenges Grendel’s rational worldview. After watching Wealhtheow become Hrothgar’s property, Grendel’s “eyes smarted” and “[he] was afraid [he] was about to sob,” calling the whole ordeal a “monstrous trick against reason” (Gardner 100). Here Grendel’s sexualized emotions surrounding Wealhtheow collide with the nihilism he has absorbed from the dragon — in other words, the love (however voyeuristic) he has for Wealhtheow begins to threaten his conception of the world as meaningless. His stifled sobs hint at his inability to reconcile the two forces; he embodies cold reason and Wealhtheow represents faith, love, and meaning. Associating femininity with the irrational or emotional and masculinity with elevated reason is a common trope of literature, both new and old. In her influential “The Laugh of the Medusa” Hélène Cixous explores these tropes of male and female thought. Cixous calls for more female writers in her essay, seeking out what she calls the “the antilogos weapon” (880). By using this “weapon” of full force emotion, living and breathing, women must reclaim their bodies, Cixous argues, and accordingly find a representational space in literature (880). Wealhtheow represents this kind of challenge to Grendel’s male matrix, as she provokes pain and love in the unfeeling, nihilistic monster. She becomes, in effect, the “monstrous trick against reason” to which Grendel refers. Grendel is moved beyond rationality by Wealhtheow’s physical beauty and dignity, imagining himself “leaping from my high tree and running on all fours... throwing myself down, drooling and groveling at her small, fur-booted feet. ‘Mercy!’ I would howl” (101). The movement from a “high tree” to “all fours” shows Grendel’s transition from a literally elevated thought to instinctual, bodily reactions. This is followed by his imagined “groveling at her small, fur booting feet” — another instance in which Wealhtheow’s power is diminished through a feature of her body. In this case, her petite, furry

feet are juxtaposed with Grendel's monstrously hairy form fallen before her. At first, Wealhtheow's influence on the monster is staggering, bringing about yet another schism in Grendel's philosophy.

While Gardner elects not to focus on the value of feminine love, there are small instances in which he demonstrates it. This is by no means the focus of his novel, yet the feminine does seem to momentarily benefit those who encounter it — with the exception of Grendel. Once Wealhtheow becomes slightly more comfortable in the meadhall Gardner allows her some influence over Hrothgar's men. She walks amongst them, solving disagreements: "When drunken men argued, pitting theory against theory, bludgeoning each other's absurdities, she came between them, wordless, condemning, pouring out mead *like a mother's love*, and they were *softened*" (103 emphasis mine). Gardner's choice to make the men argue about "theories" and "absurdities" is one that connects to Grendel's intellectual heroism directly, as he himself deals in nihilistic theories and absurdities. Wealhtheow's presence also dissolves the Danes' fights with "mead like a mother's love" in Grendel's eyes — possibly connecting to his own mother's love, for he has no other referent for a simile like this. Even without Grendel's thoughts as a filter, Wealhtheow's love has a major effect on the quarreling men. They are described as "softened," a trait that lies outside the reason-dominant male matrix of the text, yet benefits them on the whole. The same is reflected in Wealhtheow's encounter with Unferth, who has been steeping in his shame since his last encounter with Grendel. She absolves him of his crimes and cowardice: "impossibly, like roses blooming in the heart of December, she said, 'That's past.' And it was. The demon was exorcised" (104). The roses are overtly a feminine symbol, and here they are painted as resilient even in the winter. Again, the tension between reason and "blind

love” is drawn into Grendel’s language, as he chooses to focus on the facts by pointing out the impossibility of roses blooming in winter. Opposite this, Grendel’s language waxes highly poetic — a perhaps “softened” aspect of his cold nihilism. The meter of his phrase, “like roses blooming in the heart of December,” is iambic, creating a kind of heartbeat within the monster’s language. Wealhtheow’s influence over male characters is presented with positive potential, creating room for vulnerability and love in an otherwise purely intellectual space.

Unfortunately, Wealhtheow’s ability to destabilize the male matrix is fleeting. She ultimately is subjected to the same nihilistic devaluation that Grendel applies to all of the meaning in his life. Under Grendel’s nihilism, Wealhtheow becomes a sexualized, animalistic object that operates on the same meaningless patterns of the rest of nature. In what is perhaps the most misogynistic passage of the novel, Grendel attacks the queen, recalling her “deafening” “unqueenly shrieks” that were “exactly like the sounds of a pig” (109). He then grabs her by her ankles and — in the interest of respect I will paraphrase — pulls her legs apart, revealing Wealhtheow’s genitalia. The monster then threatens to hold her lower half to the fire, burning “the ugly hole between her legs... nothing dead or alive could change my mind!” (109). Gardner uses several images to reduce the queen’s significance, first by comparing her cries to a pig and then by minimizing her to her vagina alone. By diminishing the queen to a barnyard animal or body part, Gardner effectively translates Grendel’s nihilism onto her character, subverting her vulnerability and sacrifice in previous scenes.

However, Gardner does not stop there. Grendel after assuring his readers that he is “firmly committed... to killing her” immediately backs down:

I changed my mind. It would be meaningless, killing her... I had wrecked another theory... I concentrated on the memory of the ugliness between her legs (bright tears of blood)... I hung

balanced, a creature of two minds; and one of them said — unreasonable, stubborn as the mountains — that she was beautiful.

Gardner 110

Grendel first reasons that it would be “meaningless” to kill Wealhtheow, in other words he has “wrecked” the “theory” that killing her would be a meaningful experience for him. These clauses are the nihilistic aspect of his mind at play, as he is using reason to devalue his attempted murder of Wealhtheow. In order to solidify this belief for himself, Grendel “concentrates” on Wealhtheow’s genitals — again, Gardner is using the seemingly “ugly” female body as the locus for Grendel’s hatred and anger. The monster reminds himself of this image to substantiate his belief in Wealhtheow’s meaninglessness; he “exposes her as merely a bare, forked animal... gloating with disgust over the obscenity of the flesh” (Fawcett and Jones 645). In this way the rift between the male-intellectual and female-bodily is widened, as Grendel relegates Wealhtheow back to a merely physical form by attacking her. Perhaps most telling of Grendel’s misunderstanding of the feminine is his commentary that follows this assault. He describes his inner turmoil as being “balanced” and “of two minds,” and the more dominant mind wins ownership of the sentence’s end: “unreasonable, stubborn as the mountains — [it said] that she was beautiful.” That this conclusion follows from sexual assault and degradation is problematic alone, but that Grendel expresses this love through such a violent act is perhaps more terrifying. What is he calling beautiful? And why does this beauty occur to him now? Grendel’s inner conflict is both caused by and could be solved by accepting feminine virtues into his musings — such as love, faith, and meaning. However, the monster instead wrestles between extremes of violence and apathy. By lowering Wealhtheow to the “ugliness” of her sexual organs, Gardner demonstrates how much Grendel comes to loathe and despise feminine love.

Grendel is not the only character to abhor the feminine in the novel. Wealhtheow's husband Hrothgar also perpetuates this dynamic through his understanding of women. The old king uses much of the same strategies as the monster himself to illustrate the threat of the feminine. Through Grendel's perspective peeping in the window, Hrothgar appears to harbor some mixed feelings about his "beautiful" wife. Grendel describes the king as "like a man chained in a cave... gazing with sad, absent-minded eyes at Wealhtheow, chained beside him" (122). The uneasiness of Hrothgar's situation is established with imagery of chains and caves, a physical illustration that mirrors how Grendel often describes the feminine. Grendel continues with the theme of entrapment and dis-ease, calling Wealhtheow herself "one more trap [for Hrothgar], the worst. She's young, could have served a more vigorous man... need not have withered her nights and wasted her body on a bony, shivering wretch" (122). Grendel projects the dungeon-like setting in which he imagines Hrothgar onto his wife, associating her with a "trap" much worse than the one the couple already figuratively appears to be in. Additionally, Wealhtheow's physical body is described; "she's young" and appears to have "wasted her body" on Hrothgar's age. 'W' alliteration in the next sentence makes the reader's mouth turn down, frowning along with Grendel and Hrothgar at the king's dismal situation. The alliteration also connects directly to Wealhtheow's name. By setting up this hypothetical, yet detailed "trap" Gardner can make the leap from Wealhtheow's physical appearance to the philosophical implications of her womanhood for Hrothgar.

Overall, the feminine in *Grendel* is represented as a mentally inferior, physically bound, sexualized creature. The male characters, as governed by philosophy, thought, and duty, seem to revile the female half of the gender binary, consistently casting aside vulnerability and love as

weak. This is Grendel's downfall. His unwillingness to accept meaning and vulnerability into his existential journey is the exact reason he cannot feel satisfied by his 'philosophies,' so he fails and consequently leaps from the cliff after fighting Beowulf. With such exclusionary themes present in the intellectual dialogue of *Grendel*, I find it valuable to briefly add some lingering questions to my discussion of Gardner's novel. As a book that presents, shockingly, more misogynistic differences between genders than its source text *Beowulf*, what is the value in reading this alongside the original epic? Are Gardner's philosophical musings on existence so valuable that they allow a reader to overlook the silenced and sexualized women of the story? Or should readers approach *Grendel* more warily, perhaps suspicious of the book's abhorrence for femininity?

A counterargument to my approach might argue that *Grendel* can be read without needing to acknowledge gender. In other words, Gardner's existentialism can be preserved if we suspend gender roles and read Grendel as a 'bodiless mind' that is simply seeking a place in the universe. My answer to this would depend on whether or not that's a feasible task. First, if the argument could be made that *Grendel* does not necessarily require gender to be read coherently — i.e. if the monster's gender and those of other characters do not affect the meta-thinking of the novel — then I would see the importance of focusing on the philosophical conversations of the novel. However, that is not the case. In fact, this reading would further perpetrate the exclusionary politics Gardner has established. By neglecting the grotesque bodily account of Grendel's mother or Wealhtheow's influence on Grendel, the reader seems to nod along to *Grendel's* male matrix. Like Grendel himself, the reader is coaxed into accepting that women are bound to the physical, relegated to shadowy, periphery shapes for the main character to push

against in his ‘heroic’ development. This reading suggests that by committing the small, negligent sin of overlooking gender irregularities in *Grendel*, a reader can elevate themselves towards their own existential journey and the intellectualism of Gardner. This is illogical given that this ‘intellectual journey’ begins with an oversight. Because gender is implicated in how Grendel perceives his mother and Wealhtheow, Gardner’s book cannot be read by ‘suspending gender.’

While I am condemning *Grendel* on its exclusionary philosophical framework, I do see the value of including it in my thesis. Its presence as the second text in this project reflects my own encounters with *Beowulf* and its retellings, as I read *Beowulf* first and *Grendel* immediately after in high school. Had I read *Grendel* more critically as a student — rather than rip through it like a beach-read — I would hope that the silence of Grendel’s mother, or the abuse of Wealhtheow would give me more pause than it did initially. By including it in my thesis, I hope to allow others a moment to contemplate their own experience of the text. Luckily, the next text in this triad of *Beowulf* sources afforded me that moment of reflection.

Chapter Three: Heroism in *The Mere Wife*

Given the dominance of masculinity in both the original epic and *Grendel*, it makes some sense to be leery of a feminist retelling of *Beowulf*. At first I was one of the skeptics too. How could such a patriarchal epic be turned into feminist literature? Or to take a more pessimistic position, why bother rewriting it at all?

I chose to include Maria Dahvana Headley's novel for three major reasons. First, Headley's decision to meet this challenge head-on strikes me as uniquely important. If I've learned anything during this project, it's that oppositions are crucial in order to have intelligent conversations about gender and heroism. *The Mere Wife* is compelling because of its willingness to create this feminine space in *Beowulf* and argue it to its outer limits. By placing this novel alongside its source I hope to employ the notion that "beauty requires contrast" to its fullest extent (Gardner 133). In other words, by placing these texts in conversation with each other, each becomes more valuable for its respective differences on the feminine.

In a similar vein to my first reason, *The Mere Wife* also showcases the importance of creativity. Headley's book is an amalgamation of suburbia, racism, sexism, classism, the veteran experience, motherhood, heroism, homophobia, and storytelling, to name some of her focuses. To take up each of these concepts in the space of 300 pages takes a monumental amount of imaginative thought. *The Mere Wife* is a retelling of *Beowulf*, but it does much more than recreate the plot. To me, reading literature that deconstructs and complicates well-known stories is the equivalent of mental weightlifting. Headley asks her readers to partake in this intellectual

fitness, perhaps in order to spark more literature, which is one of the reasons I've included it in my thesis as well.

Finally, and most importantly, *The Mere Wife* is a piece of reclamation literature. *Beowulf* has long been canonized, and has even been rewritten back into popular culture by imitations like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Dungeons and Dragons*. Through these copycats the plot and subsequent gender roles of *Beowulf* have, with minor differences, been widely accepted and promoted socially. Headley's book takes on these problematic representations of gender full force. In fact, the inspiration for Headley's book came from the translational differences of the word *aglæca*. In an interview Headley offered her thoughts on the differences: "It's the same word used for Beowulf, Grendel, and Grendel's mother. The feminine version of it is usually translated as hag or monster; the masculine version, for Beowulf, is translated as hero, but it's the same word" (Carroll 37). From this gendered inconsistency Headley began the process of creating *The Mere Wife*, a book that tells the Beowulf story from the point of view of Grendel's mother.

I will be examining the major heroine of *The Mere Wife*. Her name is Dana Mills and she represents Grendel's mother in the original tale. I will channel most of my attention into Dana's story, as she is the only character given first person perspective in the story. I will also be looking at the general female perspective in *The Mere Wife* as well, often presented through a collectivized 'mother' perspective. Through Dana, Headley presents a nuanced version of female heroics. She accomplishes this by uniting the maternal and the heroic — two categories that are mutually exclusive in the stories of *Beowulf* and *Grendel*. In my explication of Dana I will focus on the body and language, as both are used to develop her presence as a radical mother whose

heroics stem from her gender. Dana becomes the heroine that is missing from the majority of heroic literature — a heroine that accurately represents womanhood, while simultaneously dominating her own narrative.

Dana Mills the Heroine

As *The Mere Wife* is a relatively new novel, it's helpful to include a brief summary of the novel's premise. The story is told from the perspective of Dana Mills, a soldier situated someplace in the Middle East. She is captured and given cue-cards for a public execution, which is broadcast on American television. Luckily for Dana, the affair is interrupted by an explosion and she wakes up months later, scarred and visibly pregnant. After being interrogated at an American hospital about her pregnancy she escapes and goes to her childhood home — which has been buried under a brand new settlement called Herot while she was deployed abroad. Seeing that she is unwelcome inside the pristine gates and glass homes, Dana hides up in a mountain abutting the town, where she gives birth to her son Gren in a cave. They spend most of Grenel's childhood and adolescence in relative safety, but eventually Dana's son becomes too curious about their suburban neighbors, and he befriends a boy his age named Dylan Herot, the heir to Herot. The plot is driven by Dana's misperception and misunderstanding of her son, as she believes he will be cast as an 'outsider' and monster by Herot's residents. The mother-son duo have a few close encounters with Herotians; Gren initiating them and Dana trying to prevent them. Not wanting to reveal too much, I will say that the plot culminates in a final battle between police officer Ben Woolf (aptly named), Dana and her son, and Dylan Herot, who eventually

becomes Gren's lover. Headley plays with her characters' original roles in the *Beowulf* text, carefully keeping and altering their destinies as she sees fit.

The reader is introduced to Dana in the middle of the Gulf War, just shortly before she becomes pregnant with her son Gren, Grendel's analogue. The timing of these two aspects of Dana's life is highly intentional on the part of Headley, as Dana's life as a soldier *and* a mother overlap when the reader encounters her. I will focus first on how Headley creates Dana's 'warrior' persona, but it's important to note that this aspect of her character is not exclusive from her motherhood — even from the beginning.

Dana recalls her choice to join the army, saying that she “signed up right after people stopped volunteering, in the middle of a war that went on forever” (Headley 4). Dana also recalls all of the friends she's lost in her journey as a soldier, thinking “living is luck, not anything special... You're just lucky” (4). Immediately, her resiliency and rationality are emphasized, clueing the reader into the thought processes of a warrior's brain. She's joined a war that “went on forever” and lost a multitude of close friends, yet she feels called to her duty despite the reluctance of others. However, Dana's language is anything but hopeful. She recalls the propaganda that brought her to Iraq: “They made me think it was about heroes... Instead, you march in and roll down roads, close your eyes and shoot” (4). Here, Headley juxtaposes the heroic benevolence with Dana's harsh, retrospective tone — the main figure sounds tired in recounting her heroism abroad, and incredibly jaded about her reasons for going to war in the first place. Dana's narration becomes what Grendel's in *Grendel* is not; she is a blunt, unromantic narrator who knows the world's meanings and accepts them, however cruel they are. She was “made” to “think [war] was about heroes” yet recognizes the random brutality of it all,

that her thoughts and perceptions (“close your eyes”) are secondary to the main goal (“shoot”). At the outset of the story Dana unceremoniously embodies the warrior position — she receives orders, can perceive the injustices, and still shoots. Consistent with the gender roles of *Beowulf*, Dana inhabits a highly masculine space. Joining the army is enough to align Dana with the risk-taking behavior of the Danes, who are similarly bound by a wergild. Both the Danes and Dana make use of violence to protect and retaliate against threats. By situating her retelling first around Dana’s masculinity, Headley begins to subvert the Beowulfian tropes about violence and masculinity by making Dana the embodiment of both.

In what can only be interpreted as a figurative rebirth, Dana survives being captured and nearly executed, waking up “underneath sand” after being held hostage by an enemy group and apparently impregnated (6). Dana accounts for this bluntly: “I move sand with my fingertips, then with my whole body... I push myself out... I don’t know who the father is. I’m the mother” (6). While the story of Gren’s conception remains unclear for another 180 pages, Dana’s reaction is calm and uncomplicated: first and foremost, she has become a mother. Much of her experience as a new mother is recorded in her body — she digs herself free of sand, becomes “a tent in the middle of a desert,” and recounts her torturous experience hairless, bootless in the army hospital (6-8). As was seen in *Grendel*, the feminine is often associated with the body and physicality — especially in the case of Grendel’s mother and Wealhtheow. Headley seems to be toying with this idea here, as Dana’s time as a soldier has left impressions on her body, whether those literal impressions are her swollen stomach, scars on her face, or the damage to her memory. To use Hélène Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” as a guiding feminist text, Dana Mills becomes a body in which the female voice resonates. Dana Mills’ existence, specifically her body and

language, is comprised of both her voice as a soldier and mother. Cixous would argue that Dana is an example of “l’écriture féminine”: she “doesn’t ‘speak,’ she throws her trembling body forward;... all of her passes into her voice, and it’s with her body that she vitally supports the ‘logic’ of her speech. Her flesh speaks true... she physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body” (Cixous 881). I will be using “The Laugh of the Medusa” to guide my analysis of Dana Mills, as she is a character that is radically and unforgivingly maternal.

A feature of Dana’s character that makes her heroic is her innate ability to see the problematic nature of the ‘us versus them’ mentality. While this mentality is one that a traditional hero like Beowulf flourishes on, Headley complicates her heroine, making her into a dynamic and thoughtful figure. In many dangerous situations — like her recollection of war, in which heroism boils down to “close your eyes and shoot” — she undermines established lines of conflict with her language. She frequently imagines both sides of a conflict, allowing her to shift from her own perspective into those of others. Instead of immediately joining the ‘good guys,’ Dana presents the complexities of conflict. When pregnant and trapped in the army hospital she is interrogated about her pregnancy, giving her a chance to demonstrate her analytical nature, especially as she is questioned about her body:

‘Whose child is this?’

‘Mine.’ I don’t expect to say that, but it’s what I say.

‘Rape? Or consensual?’

One answer means I’m a victim, and the other means I’m a collaborator, and I don’t know, so I don’t answer.

Headley 8

Dana is highly aware of the danger inherent in the questions “‘Rape? Or consensual?’” and paints this danger like options from which she can choose. She cuts to the real meaning of the question — namely that one answer makes her ‘us’ (“victim”), and one answer makes her ‘them’

(“collaborator”), neither are positive outcomes for her. Her answer is one that reflects feminist thought, as she presents the options for her female body and then chooses to not answer, thus undermining the patriarchal protocol in place by revealing its flaws. That her interview occurs in the presence of “five men... making themselves at home, feet on the bed frame, one or two looming over me” also heightens the ‘us/them’ dynamic in terms of gender. Dana chooses her pregnancy, and thus herself, despite these “looming” warnings that she will be alienated by the foreignness of her body. She claims “mine” in the face of danger. Cixous discusses the suppression of the female body, even in “little girls and their ‘ill-mannered’ bodies immured... frigidified. But are they ever seething underneath! What an effort it takes — there's no end to it — for the sex cops to bar their threatening return” (877). In the case of Dana, Cixous’ concept of “frigidified” female bodies could be read onto her pregnancy as a soldier. She begins the story in fatigues, amongst her squad, existing in a male-dominant realm. Her body in a sense is “immured” in her uniform — it’s only when she becomes pregnant that her own “guys” become hostile to her and she feels the need to escape. By fleeing this space and its “sex cops,” Dana effectively allows her body to continue its narrative by reclaiming her agency. In this way, Dana’s strength as a soldier is synthesized with her “seething” motherhood, creating a nuanced heroine in Headley’s novel. To preserve her life and that of her son, Dana flees the American camp and settles herself in the woods outside Herot, a suburban town.

Headley, in her creation of a feminine hero, is making active attempts to synthesize the maternal with the heroic. Within the scope of my research, these two characteristics of a woman are usually incompatible. For instance, in *Beowulf* Wealhtheow is prosocially heroic for her

family, but never outright heroic in the same way as Beowulf. Wealhtheow, rather than swing a sword over her head like the epic's namesake, uses the preexisting patriarchal structures to insulate herself and effect small changes for the preservation of her family. In contrast to Wealhtheow's matronly qualities, Grendel's mother and Modthryth are attempts on the part of the Beowulf poet towards a 'radical motherhood' or 'womanhood,' yet one is killed and the other is subdued by the primarily male forces of the epic. If Grendel's mother had been more successful in her vengeance, she would more closely resemble the heroine Headley creates in *The Mere Wife*. Dana simultaneously adheres to and breaks from this image of the peaceweaving, cup-bearing woman while approaching a version of feminized heroism — as she both protects her child and hefts a sword of her own to do it.

Dana Mills challenges this division in a complex manner: her violent heroism derives from her maternal instincts, making the two features intrinsically linked. Approaching this with Becker and Eagly's vocabulary in mind — the same researchers that were used to establish the differences between "risk-taking" and "prosocial" heroism earlier in this project — Gren's mother becomes a radically prosocial hero, or a 'radical mother' (163-164). Headley accomplishes this heroic shift by combining imagery of war and love. After giving birth to her son and seeing his physical differences, Dana imagines "his body categorized as an enemy body, and I couldn't breathe... I held him tighter" (Headley 28). Dana's language is markedly martial, as she refers to her son as "an enemy body" in the eyes of others. However, her bodily response to this categorization is maternal — her breathing changes and she holds her child "tighter." These two pillars of her character continue to motivate her to protect her son. When Gren was still a baby Dana recalls that "you figure out what you can do for love, and the answer, it turns

out, is anything” (27). She visits an Army surplus store near her mountain and the cashier bends to peek at Gren, making “all the worst things blast into [Dana’s] head” as the woman’s expression mirrors that of “soldiers bending to admire babies, knowing that in a week, a day, and hour those babies might be dead” (28). Consequently, Dana and Gren hide from the world for six years. Important to note is that Dana’s experience in the store could be examined as a PTSD episode. As a veteran and former prisoner of war, it follows that Dana has internalized trauma that continues to reoccur. In terms of Dana’s specific trauma, I find Shelley Rambo’s *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* highly applicable. In her book Rambo explains that post-trauma, a survivor’s “relationship between life and death is more of a mixed one. Death is not an event that is concluded. Neither is life a victorious event” (Rambo 16). Instead the trauma victim hovers in between these two, unable to separate the death-like event from her life. If this is translated to Dana’s experience, her execution seems to be “recurrent” like “an open wound” in the sense that she sees her son dying as “an enemy” of the world (7). Said differently, Dana’s traumatic past “recurs” in her imagining Gren’s death. This projection of her violent experience onto her son is another way that Dana’s motherhood and military history are linked, as her trauma lives on in the imagined future of her son. Dana’s army experience is superimposed onto her new life as a mother, making the two indistinguishable from one another. Dana’s idea of motherhood becomes a battle to preserve Gren, which at first means insulating him from the world entirely.

After Gren comes in contact with the people of Herot, specifically Dylan, Dana’s radical motherhood takes another shift. Knowing that threat is imminent, Dana’s maternal instincts are provoked to violence. She goes to the Herots’ home during a dinner party, breaking her

separation from society to find her son. The resulting shootout in the woods makes her fear the worst — that Gren has been shot, alone and without her. Preparing to take her vengeance on the man that shot her son (Roger Herot), Dana condemns her enemies:

I call death onto those who don't know a child when they see a child. Men who think they made the world out of clay and turned it into their safe place, men who think a woman wouldn't flip the universe over and flatten them beneath it. I have enough bullets for all of them.

Headley 117

The violence in her language is shocking. Dana, although she is targeting one man for his actions, is ready to take on the patriarchy in its entirety. Her language is Cixousian, as the man's world made of "clay" could be compared to the "phallogocentric," modern one made of literature in which Headley is writing (Cixous 879). By describing the man's world as "clay" Dana seems to be alluding to Genesis and God's creation of Adam from clay. Headley calls attention to this primary male-male relationship in her condemnation of patriarchal systems, pointing out that even Eve was secondary to Adam in the beginning. Dana calls for the "death" of this complacent male system, seemingly sermonizing that any "woman" would do the same for her child. By moving her character's speech from first person to the perspective of "a woman," Headley is also able to generalize Dana's statement to all women — mirroring Cixous' own argument that women need to "write themselves" (Cixous 876). Put differently, Headley is able to address two existing patriarchal structures in this section: the first is the fictional, Dana's address to those who villainize her child; and the second is more broad, an attack on the problematic complacency of men in creating a world that excludes women — something that could be applied outside the pages of this novel. By making her language relevant to both her story and the world more generally, Headley examines the preexisting challenges for women on both a micro and macro level. Returning to the violence of Dana's language again, she says that she has

“enough bullets for all of them,” calling up her history in the Gulf War. That her new enemies are the people who threaten Gren’s life links her martial experience to her motherhood again. Her militant motherhood is one in which she holds a “love that obliterates... This is the love you die for... I’m ready to die” (Headley 118).” These stakes echo the commitment of a soldier, either neutralize the enemy or die trying. Dana becomes proportionally more violent as she sees the threats against her son increase, making her willingness to commit acts of violence stem from a place of love for her son.

When Gren is thirteen it becomes impossible for Dana to shield her son from Herot, especially when Gren begins wondering about Dylan again (216). The fallout from Gren and Dana’s existence on the mountain has become more violent: Roger Herot is dead (124), Dylan is kidnapped by Gren and then found by Ben Woolf (181), and Dana has lost her arm fighting for Gren (213). While trapped in the mere recovering from the loss of her arm, Dana reflects on her motherhood, equating military preparedness with Gren’s own ability to survive. She thinks about nursery rhymes she told him: “*here’s the sound a dog makes / here’s the sound a hound makes / here’s the sound a round makes...* I tried to teach him about danger... I didn’t do a good enough job” (104). The little rhyme she muses on is telling of Headley’s commentary on feminine heroics, as the words progress from those of childhood to those of violence (“*dog... hound... round*”). This reflects Dana’s complex heroine status, as she is maternal but will commit typically masculinized acts of violence to protect Gren. Perhaps the most overtly masculine attribute aspect of her violence is her use of a sword against her enemies. She finds it in the mere, “the hilt rough and crude, the blade as long as my arm,” it’s condition telling her it could be “Civil War, maybe, that old? It feels that old” (100). Using the objects of the original *Beowulf*

tale for reference, Headley is most likely associating Dana's sword with the one Beowulf finds in the mere and uses to kill Grendel's mother. That Headley places this masculinized, often phallically linked object in Dana's hands is telling of the mother's position as the heroine of the tale. The fact that the mother, whose Anglo-Saxon analogue is killed by this blade, is now going to hold it to the throats of men is a dramatic reversal of gender roles.

However, Dana's use of the blade separates her from Beowulf and other masculine characters. When Headley depicts her with the blade she often represents the weapon as an extension of Dana's motherhood or a means to fulfill it. When Gren goes to find Dylan and leaves his mother behind, Dana worries like any mother would, and this worry fuels how she handles the blade:

I sharpen my sword. Sharper, sharper... until my knife and sword could kill someone without them even noticing they were dying... Keep them sharp, I think, because at least I can do that thing... The world is the world and my child will go into it... I have metal. I have to think it's something, even if it's not enough.

Headley 218

Because she cannot control how Gren acts, or how the world will react to him, Dana pours that energy into her sword. This image could be read a few ways. First, that her motherly love for Gren acts as a whetstone to sharpen the blade, making the blade itself her willingness to be violent. An alternate view could be that Dana's fears and anxieties for her son are the whetstone — namely that “the world is the world” — making her radical motherhood the blade itself. I would be inclined to accept the latter interpretation, as it follows Headley's general tactic of synthesizing motherhood with heroics. Dana's weapon, a historically male wielded object, has become a symbol of her maternal instincts through her love for her son.

Masculine and feminine objects are crucial to forming Dana's radical motherhood. In fact, *The Mere Wife* includes the same male and female coded objects that are found in *Beowulf*.

Specifically, the image of the sword — as examined earlier — and the goblet are ways for Headley to imbue Dana with masculine and feminine heroics respectively. The sword becomes her way to protect Grendel, a masculine object now fulfilling a maternal role. The same reversal occurs with Dana's family goblet. The goblet was her mother's drinking glass and became Dana's inheritance when her mother passed away, although it was later buried in the coffin (235). The same goblet is present in *Beowulf*, often carried by Wealhtheow amongst the Danes in times of peaceweaving — a symbol of the feminine heroic ideal in the epic. Dana rediscovers her own goblet on display in the *Herot Heritage Museum* and smashes its display, retrieving it making her “feel the warmth of my mother's hand on it, feel the way I'm back here again, with her again” (239). Like the sword, Headley maintains the gendered connotations of the chalice, as she associates it with Dana's memories of her mother in several temporal layers. However, the manner in which Dana uses the goblet breaks from the archetypal femininity of the artifact. When she and Ben Woolf confront each other, the goblet is weaponized: Dana “raise[s] the goblet, and swing[s] it hard, hitting him in the side of the skull” (256). By using a feminized object to injure Beowulf's analogue (Ben Woolf = Beowulf), Headley is challenging the normalized role of the chalice — especially as it's in the hands of her heroine. The goblet is used for violence, thereby breaking from its traditional function as a vessel of peace in the same way that Dana breaks from traditional femininity and motherhood in her willingness to be violent. Headley's use of these symbolic objects mimics the trajectory of her heroine, as Dana embodies aspects of the masculinized hero and feminine mother.

Womanhood and Violence: Complicating Beowulfian Gender Roles

In her creation of a feminist *Beowulf*, Headley complicates other female characters besides her heroine as well. In fact, all of her female characters share the touch of violence with which Dana is imbued. By doing this, Headley is making a commentary on the usual depiction of womanhood in literature and asserting her own version — one that includes darker and more realistic features of being a modern woman.

Headley's feminized presentation of womanhood is most readily found in the Mothers' perspective of *The Mere Wife*. This perspective is that of Willa's mother, Roger's mother, and other mothers of Herot collectivized into a single thinking "we" that appears in certain selections of the book. The perspective speaks with one voice about the experiences of these older women, as mothers themselves, as aging women, and as influencers of their community's legacy. Headley seems to take the inspiration for this chorus from *Grendel*, in which a collectivized cave-voice is created by Gardner (Gardner 54, 156). This cave-voice watches Grendel as a child, but does not intervene in his life as Headley's mother-voice does. By collectivizing the Mothers into a single voice that also acts, the women are given more agency in the novel, something that separates Headley's "we" perspectives from Gardner's. Upon their entrance into the novel, the Mothers are briefly described: "The mothers count calories like *kills*. Beneath their sweater sleeves are *arms* made *muscular* by *boxing*. Three have become *karate black belts* out of boredom, and the rest *train* on the Pilates reformer daily" (53, emphasis mine). The language used to introduce these women, especially when placed alongside Dana's military background, is connotative of war. Words like "kills," "arms," "muscular," and "train" are all suggestive of stereotypically masculine attributes, yet Headley deliberately describes this feminine collective with them. At the outset of *The Mere Wife*, this juxtaposition between things like the trivialized

“Pilates” classes and hardcore military “training” creates a somewhat humorous tone. Headley quickly shifts her tone in later pages, perhaps showing her readers their own willingness to dismiss the feminine when it’s placed against its counterpart.

The violence of the Mothers’ perspective becomes more solidified as the action of the novel unfolds. Put differently, Headley seems less like she’s trivializing the violence of womanhood, and more as if she sees violence as intrinsic to being female. The Mothers’ perspective continues to be representative of this connection, as it asks the reader at one point, “did you know you could kill someone with a stiletto heel? Our daggers travel with us, underfoot, capable of being removed and jammed into an eye socket” (96). The symbol of a dagger or sword is fused to femininity through the image of a heel, shifting the uncomfortable stiletto from a symbol of feminine beauty to feminine strength. By presenting this image within a rhetorical question, Headley asks for the mental participation of the reader, as she directly engages him/her through the second person “did you know.” Headley seals this fusion of force and femininity with the image of a stiletto being “jammed into an eye socket,” which makes the reader both recoil and remember her argument.

So why does Headley link violence to all of the women of *The Mere Wife*? I would argue that she is offering her own version of a heroine to counter *Beowulf*’s subdued heroines. For example, if Dana Mills were to meet Queen Wealhtheow from the original epic, both women would probably be shocked by the other’s character. Dana would see Wealhtheow as beautiful yet ineffectual, allowing the soldier to dismiss her; Wealhtheow would probably be terrified of Dana’s brutish appearance, perhaps shrieking and running to her chamber. However, if the two could get to know each other, they would both probably admire the other’s love for her

child(ren). This seems to be the uniting force across all these texts — *Beowulf*, *Grendel*, and *The Mere Wife* — that womanhood is heroic when it acts prosocially for the sake of others. That Headley nuances this trope of womanhood is what makes *The Mere Wife* a compelling voice to add to Beowulfian chorus. She presents a version of femininity that includes prosocial tendencies, yet does *not* exclude women from the valor and bravery for which Beowulf is usually recognized. By pushing on the boundary between a beautiful mother and a brave hero, Headley is able to create real women with real challenges rather than characters polarized by gender roles.

Continuing the Conversation

The Mere Wife, in addition to its advancement of radical motherhood, also offers commentary on the nature of storytelling. Headley's retrospection on her own book offers a kind of meta-reading experience — one that forces her reader to reflect on *Beowulf* as a source as well as on her own tale. How do we read *The Mere Wife* given *Beowulf*? How should we read *Beowulf* given *The Mere Wife*'s existence? To provoke this hyperconscious mode of reading Headley disrupts her heroine's story with reminders that Dana exists within a larger tapestry. Dana's story is interrupted by what seems to be a female prophet, often depicted as homeless on the street or on a Greyhound bus (4; 5; 304). At the beginning of Dana's narrative the woman comments on history:

'This is the thing about history,' she said... 'You never understand the whole story until you're at the end of it. If you're the last one standing, you're the one who sings for everyone else's funeral. But at least you get to be the one who tells it. You tell it for the rest of us.'

Headley 5

The woman attributes the power of storytelling solely to Dana, which is a highly individualizing and arguably heroic position for the radical mother to occupy. It also echoes the keening of the Geat woman at the conclusion of *Beowulf*, as she too sings of the future for her people, despite it being an overwhelmingly negative image (Heaney l. 3150-3155). Cixous calls for the same writing of the "self" for women in "The Laugh of the Medusa." If Cixous were to speak about Headley's examination of storytelling, she would assert that "woman must put herself into the text — as into the world and into history — by her own movement" (875). This self-writing is evident in Dana's character, as the story itself — through the recurrent image of the elderly woman — is pushing her to be the voice "for the rest of us." Headley is effectively placing all the potential of the *Beowulf* retelling (and Dana's personal story) in Dana's hands, a

dramatic change from the source text and *Grendel*. Dana has effectively become the prosocial heroine responsible for the entire retelling, for through her body she will carry this story. This female centrality is evident in the reutilization of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ language from the outset of the novel. Instead of serving as a wedge between the two, Dana becomes the figure through which the ‘us’ perspective gets to have a legacy — or in the prophet’s words, Dana “sings for everyone else’s funeral.” Important to add is that this interrupting voice is always a female one, sometimes a very old one, making it reasonable to imagine Dana as a modern voice for the oppressed woman that has existed in literature. The fact that the prophetic woman references a funeral does tinge her speech with melancholy; however, her language changes again by the end of *The Mere Wife*. She is markedly more optimistic about “the whole story,” saying “None of us are the last of us. The story is all of the voices, not just the voice of the one who tells it at the end” (Headley 304). I would like to take this quote and apply it to the *Beowulf* epic and its legacy. Headley seems to be taking the previous burden she rested on Dana’s shoulders and spreading it more evenly amongst “all of the voices” of this ambiguous story, both past and future. By making this final rhetorical move, Headley shifts the story’s agency from the individual heroine to a collective, further complicating the traditional form of a single-hero story. Usually the hero/ine is the one with the ability to change their surroundings for the better, not the audience. However, Headley places this importance on her readership as well as her heroine, making both prosocial heroes responsible for a larger tapestry. By challenging the individualism of a hero/ine’s voice with a communal story, Headley further expands the possibilities of the heroic.

Returning to the importance of communal storytelling, I would also like to advance that the *Beowulf* tale is far from a concluded story, especially because of the epic's presence in popular culture. The fact that a single story with clear gender expectations and a relatively — dare I say it — flat hero has inspired the body of work that exists today is impressive. *Beowulf*, in all its forms, has penetrated deep into modern culture. How people choose to interact with the epic says a lot about how this culture and its own story is evolving. So while the original story might be overlooked as a text that will tick the 'Anglo-Saxon literature' box in a student's academic record, the subsequent body of literature it has created — and still is creating — is anything but easy to overlook. The evolution of *Beowulf*-related content reveals the importance and power of retelling, especially for the heroine. In the words of Hélène Cixous, "[women] must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes" (886). Throughout the course of this project I have found *Beowulf* to be an ideal place for the "impregnable language" of femininity to be uncovered and allowed its proper breathing-room. I hope that research, especially on the dynamic figure of the heroine, continues with respect to *Beowulf* and elsewhere.

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