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Title: The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel's Mother

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[(essay date 1980) In the excerpt that follows, Nitzsche discusses the contrast between Grendel's mother and the feminine ideal and also analyzes her fight with Beowulf as a transitional link between Beowulf's battle with Grendel and with the dragon.]

The episode in *Beowulf* involving Grendel's mother has been viewed as largely extraneous, a blot upon the thematic and structural unity of the poem. If the poem is regarded as two-part in structure, balancing contrasts between the hero's youth and old age, his rise as a retainer and his fall as a king, his battles with the Grendel family and his battle with the dragon, then her episode (which includes Hrothgar's sermon and Hygelac's welcoming court celebration with its recapitulation of earlier events) lengthens the first "half" focusing on his youth to two-thirds of the poem (lines 1-2199). [The edition of *Beowulf* used throughout is Frederick Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnesburg*, 3rd, ed. (Boston, 1936, with 1941 and 1950 supplements).] If the poem is regarded as three-part in structure, with each part centering on one of the three monsters or the three fights, then the brevity of her episode again mars the structural balance: her section, roughly 500 lines (1251-1784), is not as long as Grendel's, roughly 1100-1200 lines (86-1250), or the dragon's, 1000 lines (2200-3182). Even if her episode is lengthened to a thousand lines (from line 1251 to 2199) so as to include Hrothgar's sermon and Hygelac's court celebration, still Grendel's mother hardly dominates these events literally or symbolically as do Grendel and the dragon the events in their sections.

But her battle with Beowulf (and this middle section of the poem) is more than merely a "transition between two great crises," even though it is "linked with both the Grendel fight and the Dragon fight." The key to her significance may indeed derive from her links with the other two monsters in a way Bonjour did not envision when he made these statements [in "Grendel's Dam and the Composition of *Beowulf*," *English Studies* 30 (1949)].

Grendel and the dragon have been interpreted recently as monstrous projections of flaws in Germanic civilization portrayed by the poet as "Negative Men." Grendel is introduced as a mock "hall-retainer" (*renweard*, 770; *healoeagn*, 142) who envies the men of Heorot their joy of

community; he subsequently attacks the hall in a raid that is described through the parodic hall ceremonies of feasting, ale-drinking, gift-receiving, and singing. The dragon is introduced as a mock “gold-king” or *hordweard* (2293, 2303, 2554, 2593) who avariciously guards his barrow or “ring-hall” (*hringsele*, 3053), and attacks Beowulf’s kingdom after he discovers the loss of a single cup. The envy of the evil hall-retainer and the avarice of the evil gold-king antithesize the Germanic *comitatus* ideal first enunciated in Tacitus’ *Germania* and pervading heroic and elegiac Anglo-Saxon literature: the *comitatus*’ well-being depended upon the retainer’s valor in battle and loyalty to his lord and the lord’s protection and treasure-giving in return.

Like these monsters, Grendel’s mother is also described in human and social terms. She is specifically called a *w_f unhyre* (2120), a “monstrous woman,” and an *ides _glocw_f* (1259), a “lady monster- woman.” “Ides” elsewhere in *Beowulf* denotes “lady” and connotes either a queen or a woman of high social rank; outside *Beowulf*, primarily in Latin and Old English glosses, *ides* pairs with *virgo* to suggest maidenhood, as when on *idesan* equals *in virgunculam*. In addition, as if the poet wished to stress her maternal role she is characterized usually as Grendel’s *m_dor* or kinswoman (*m_ge*, 1391), the former a word almost exclusively reserved for her, although other mothers appear in the poem. It seems clear from these epithets that Grendel’s mother inverts the Germanic roles of the mother and queen, or lady. She has the form of a woman (*idese onl_cnes*, 1351) and is weaker than a man (1282ff) and more cowardly, for she flees in fear for her life when, discovered in Heorot (1292-93). But unlike most mothers and queens, she fights her own battles. *Maxims I* testifies that, “Battle, war, must develop in the man, and the woman must flourish beloved among her people, must be light-hearted.”

Because the poet wishes to stress this specific inversion of the Anglo-Saxon ideal of woman as both monstrous and masculine he labels her domain a “battle-hall” (*n_osele*, 1513; *g_osele*, 2139). (The dragon’s barrow he describes equally appropriately, given the monster’s avaricious symbolic nature, as a “ring-hall,” as we saw previously.) In addition, he occasionally uses a masculine pronoun in referring to her (*s_þe* instead of *s_o þe* in 1260, 1497; *h_* instead of *h_o* in 1392, 1394). Such a change in pronoun occurs elsewhere in the poem only in reference to abstract feminine nouns used as personifications and to concrete feminine nouns used as synecdoches. Other epithets applied to her are usually applied to male figures: warrior, *sinnige secg*, in 1379; destroyer, *mihtig m_nscœa*, in 1339; and [male] guardian, “*gryrel_cne grundhyrde*, in 2136. Indeed, in the phrase *ides _glocw_f* applied to Grendel’s mother as a “lady monster-woman” the *_gloca* not only means “monster,” as it does when directed at Grendel (159, 425, 433, 556, 592, 646, 732, 739, 816, 989, 1000, 1269) or the water monsters (1512), but also “fierce combatant” or “strong adversary,” as when directed at Sigemund in line 893 and Beowulf and the dragon in line 2592. Such a woman might be wretched or monstrous because she insists on arrogating the masculine role of the warrior or lord.

Her episode is thus appropriately divided like her monstrous but human nature and her female but male behavior into two parts to illustrate the various feminine roles—of the mother or kinswoman (*m_dor*) and queen or lady (*ides _glocw_f*)—she inverts. The poet constantly contrasts the unnatural behavior of Grendel’s dam with that of the feminine ideal by presenting human examples as foils in each of the two parts. We turn first to an examination of the female ideal in *Beowulf*, then to a detailed analysis of the episode involving Grendel’s mother and its two parts, and finally to some conclusions regarding the structural unity of the entire poem.

The role of woman in *Beowulf* primarily depends upon “peace-making,” either biologically through her marital ties with foreign kings as a peace-pledge or mother of sons, or socially and psychologically as a cup-passing and peace-weaving queen within a hall. Wealhtheow becomes a peace-pledge or *friousibb folca* (2017) to unite the Danes and Helmings; Hildeburh similarly unites the Danes and Frisians through her marriage; and Freawaru at least intends to pledge peace between the Danes and Heathobards. Such a role is predicated upon the woman's ability to bear children, to create blood ties, bonds to weave a “peace kinship.”

In addition, woman functions domestically within the nation as a cup-passer during hall festivities of peace (*freoþo*) and joy (*dr_am*) after battle or contest. The mead-sharing ritual and the cup-passer herself come to symbolize peace-weaving and peace because they strengthen the societal and familial bonds between lord and retainers. First, the literal action of the *freoouwebbe* (peace-weaver, 1942) as she passes the cup from warrior to warrior weaves an invisible web of peace: the order in which each man is served, according to his social position, reveals each man's dependence upon and responsibility toward another. For example, after Wealhtheow gives the cup to Hrothgar she bids him to be joyful at drinking as well as loving to his people (615ff). Then she offers it to the *duguo* (old retainers), then to the *geoguu* (young retainers), and finally to the guest Beowulf. Second, her peace-weaving also takes a verbal form: her speeches accompanying the mead-sharing stress the peace and joy contingent upon the fulfillment of each man's duty to his nation. At the joyous celebration after Grendel's defeat Wealhtheow concludes her speeches with a tribute to the harmony of the present moment by reminding her tribe of its cause, that is, adherence to the *comitatus* ethic. Each man remains true to the other, each is loyal to the king, the nation is ready and alert, the drinking warriors attend to the ale-dispenser herself (1228-31). Yet minutes before she attempted to forestall future danger to her family and nation by preventive peace-weaving: she advised Hrothgar to leave his kingdom to his sons, and then, as if sensing the future, she reminded Hrothulf, his nephew, of his obligations to those sons (obligations he will later deny). Third, the peace-weaver herself emblemizes peace, for she appears in the poem with her mead-vessel only after a contest has been concluded. Thus Wealhtheow enters the hall only after the contest between Unferth and Beowulf (612); she does not appear again until after Beowulf has overcome Grendel, when the more elaborate feasting invites the peace-making speeches mentioned above. After Grendel's mother is defeated the poet preserves the integrity of the pattern of feminine cup-passing after masculine contest by describing the homecoming banquet at Hygelac's court, where Hygd conveys the mead-vessel. This structural pattern to which we shall return simultaneously weaves together the Danish part of the poem with its Geatish part.

Most of the other female characters figure as well in this middle section so that the female monster's adventures are framed by descriptions of other women for ironic contrast. The role of mother highlights the first half of the middle section with the scop's mention of Hildeburh (1071ff) and the entrance of Wealhtheow, both of whom preface the first appearance of Grendel's dam (1258) in her role as avenging mother. Then the introduction of Hygd, Thryth, and Freawaru after the female monster's death (1590) stresses the role of queen as peace-weaver and cup-passer to preface Beowulf's final narration of the female monster's downfall (2143). The

actual adventures of Grendel's mother cluster then at the middle of the middle section of the poem.

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In the first part of the female monster's section, the idea is stressed that a kinswoman or mother must passively accept and not actively avenge the loss of her son. The story of the mother Hildeburh is recited by the scop early on the evening Grendel's mother will visit Heorot. The lay ends at line 1159; Grendel's mother enters the poem a mere hundred lines later when she attacks the Danish hall, as the Frisian contingent attacked the hall lodging Hildeburh's Danish brother in the *Finnsburh Fragment*. The *Beowulf* poet alters the focus of the fragment: he stresses the consequences of the surprise attack rather than the attack itself in order to reveal Hildeburh's maternal reactions to them.

Hildeburh is unjustly (*unsynnnum*, 1072) deprived of her Danish brother and Finnish son, but all she does, this sad woman (*ge_muru ides*, 1075), is to mourn her loss with dirges and stoically place her son on the pyre. In fact, she can do nothing, caught in the very web she has woven as peace-pledge: her husband's men have killed her brother, her brother's men have killed her son. Later the Danish Hengest will avenge the feud with her husband Finn, whether she approves or not, by overwhelming the Frisians and returning Hildeburh to her original tribe. The point remains: the peace-pledge must accept a passive role precisely because the ties she knots bind *her*—she *is* the knot, the pledge of peace. Her fate interlaces with that of her husband and brothers through her role as a mother bearing a son: thus Hildeburh appropriately mourns the loss of her symbolic tie at the pyre, the failure of her self as peace-pledge, the loss of her identity. Like Hildeburh Grendel's dam will also lose her identity as mother, never having had an identity as peace-pledge to lose.

As if reminded of her own role as mother by hearing of Hildeburh's plight, Wealhtheow demonstrates her maternal concern in an address to Hrothgar immediately after the scop sings this lay. In it she first alludes to Hrothgar's adoption of Beowulf as a son: apparently troubled by this, she insists that Hrothgar leave his kingdom only to his actual kinsmen or descendants when he dies (1178-79). Then she urges her foster “son” Hrothulf (actually a nephew) to remember his obligations to them so that he will “repay our sons with liberality” (1184-85). Finally, she moves to the mead-bench where the adopted Beowulf sits, rather symbolically, next to her sons Hrethric and Hrothmund (1188-91). The *past* helplessness of the first mother, Hildeburh, to requite the death of her son counterpoints the anxiously maternal Wealhtheow's attempts to weave the ties of kinship and obligation, thereby forestalling *future* danger to her sons. Later that night, Grendel's mother intent on avenging the loss of her son in the *present* attacks Heorot, her masculine aggression contrasting with the feminine passivity of both Hildeburh and Wealhtheow. Indeed, she resembles a grieving human mother: like Hildeburh she is guiltless and *galgm_d* (“gloomy-minded,” 1277); her journey to Heorot must be sorrowful (1278) for she “remembered her misery” (1259). But a woman's primary loyalty as peace-pledge was reserved for her husband, not for her son, according to the Danish history of Saxo Grammaticus. Perhaps for this reason Grendel's mother is presented as husbandless and son-obsessed—to suggest to an Anglo-Saxon audience the dangers inherent in woman's function as *friousibb*.

However, her attempts to avenge her son's death could be justified if she were human and male, for no *wergild* has been offered to her by the homicide Beowulf. The role of the masculine avenger is emphasized throughout the passage (1255-78) in defining her motivation to attack: she performs the role of avenger (*wrecend*, 1256) “to avenge the death of her son” (1278). Whatever her maternal feelings, she actually fulfills the duty of the kinsman. Unlike Hildeburh, she cannot wait for a Hengest to resolve the feud in some way; unlike Freawaru, she cannot act as a peace-pledge to settle the feud. Tribeless, now kinless, forced to rely on her own might, she seizes and kills Aeschere, Hrothgar's most beloved retainer, in an appropriate retribution for the loss of her own most beloved “retainer” and “lord”—her son.

The monstrosity of her action is at first not evident. Hrothgar suspects she has carried the “feud” too far (1339-40). And from the Danish and human point of view she possesses no legal right to exact compensation for her kinsman's loss because Grendel is himself a homicide. However, Beowulf later implies that the two feuds must remain separate, as she desires her own “revenge for injury” (*gyrnwraacu*, 2118). Because she is legally justified in pursuing her own feud given the tribal duty of the retainer to avenge the death of his lord, regardless of the acts he has committed, she behaves monstrously then in only one way. For a mother to “avenge” her son (2121) as if she were a retainer, he were her lord, and avenging more important than peace-making, is monstrous. An analogy conveying her effect on the men in Heorot when she first appears suggests how unusual are her actions in human terms. Her horror “is as much less as is the skill (strength) of maidens, the war-horror of a woman, in comparison to a (weaponed) man, when the bound sword shears the one standing opposite” (“Was se gryre l_assa / efne sw_ micle, swa bio magpa craft, / w_ggryre w_fes be wapnedmen, /ponne heoru bunden . . . andweard scireo,” 1282-87). In their eyes recognizably female, she threatens them physically less than her son. But because female “peacemakers” do not wage war, the analogy implies, by litotes, that her unnatural behavior seems *more* horrible.

In the second part of her adventure she no longer behaves solely as an avenging monster, antitype of Hildeburh and Wealhtheow, who are both through marriage “visitors” to a hall like Grendel and his dam. Such hall-visitors contrast with the hall-rulers of this second part: the *merew_f* as queen or guardian (*grundhyrde*, 2136) protects her “battle-hall,” the cave-like lair, from the visiting hero like the regal dragon guarding his ring-hall, and like King Beowulf his kingdom, in the last section of the poem. Accordingly, the stress on the relationship between mother and son delineated in the first part of her adventure changes to a stress on the relationship between host and guest.

As a tribeless queen or lady (*ides _glocw_f*) she rudely receives her “hall-guest” Beowulf (*selegyst*, 1545, *gist*, 1522) by “embracing” him and then “repaying him” for his valor not with treasure but with “grim grips” (“H_o him eft hraþe andlean forgeald / grimman gr_pum,” 1541-42) just as the dragon will “entertain” him in the future. Indeed, the parody of the hall-ceremony of treasure-giving is complete when a “scop” (Beowulf's sword, acting as bard) sings a fierce “war song” off the side of her head (“hire on hafelan hringmal _g_l/ gra_dig g_ol_oo,” 1521-22). It is interesting to note that this “hall-celebration” of the mock peace-weaver to welcome her valorous guest Beowulf following her attack on Heorot and her curiously listless “contest” with Aeschere duplicates the pattern of mead-sharing ceremonies involving peacemakers which follow masculine contests throughout the poem.

It is also interesting to note that the contest between this apparently lordless “queen” and her “guest” contrasts in its mock-sensual embracing and grasping with the other two major battles of the hero—the briefly described arm-wrestling between Grendel and Beowulf, and the conventional sword-wielding of Beowulf against the fire-breathing dragon. Indeed, before Beowulf arrives at the “battle-hall” Hrothgar introduces the possibility of a Grendel's father in addition to the mother, even though they do not know of such a father (1355), and of possible additional progeny of such a father or even of Grendel himself (through an incestuous union with his mother?): “hwaþer him anig was ar_cenned / dynnra g_sta” (1356-57). His ostensible point is to warn Beowulf of additional monsters lurking nearby, but it serves as well to remind the reader that Grendel's mother has an animal nature very different from that of a human lady. For during the passage describing their battle the poet exploits the basic resemblance between sexual intercourse and battle to emphasize the inversion of the feminine role of the queen or hall-ruler by Grendel's mother. This is achieved in three steps: first, the emphasis upon clutching, grasping, and embracing while they fight; second, the contest for a dominant position astride the other; and third, the use of fingers, knife, or sword to penetrate clothing or the body, the latter always accompanied by the implied figurative kinship between the sword and the phallus and between decapitation and castration.

First, she welcomes him to the *mere* with an almost fatal embrace similar to the “embrace” (*foom*, 2128) to which Aeschere has succumbed. She “grasped then towards him” (1501), seizing him with “horrible grips” (1502) envisioned earlier by the hero as a “battle-grip” (1446) and a “malicious grasp” (1447). Second, inside the “castle” (*hof*, 1507) where she has transported him both grapple for a superior position over the other. After his sword fails him, for example, he “grasped her by the shoulder,” hurling her to the ground. The poet, conscious of the monster's sex and Beowulf's definitely unchivalrous behavior, drily protests that in this case “the lord of the Battle-Geats did not at all lament the hostile act” (1537-38). Then, as “reward for his valor, this lady “repaid” him with the treasure of her “grimman gr_pum,” forcing him to stumble and fall (1541-1544), after which she climbs, rather ludicrously, on top of her “hall-guest” (*selegyst*, 1545), intent on stabbing him and thereby (again) avenging her only off-spring (1546-47). Third, the battle culminates in very suggestive swordplay, and wordplay too. Earlier her “hostile fingers” (1505) tried to “penetrate” (“ourhf_n,” 1504) his locked coat-of-mail; now she tries unsuccessfully to pierce the woven breast-net with her knife. Previously Beowulf discovered his own weapon was impotent against the charm or spell of the “sword-greedy” woman (*heorog_fre*, 1498), who collects the swords of giants. Now the “sword-grim” hero substitutes one of these swords, an appropriate tool to quell such a woman. The “sword entirely penetrated [ourhw_d] the doomed-to-die body” (1567-68). After this final “embrace” of the “grasping” of her neck, the sword was sw_tig secg weorce gefeh” (“the sword was bloody, the warrior rejoiced in the work,” 1569). The alliteration links *sweord* and *secg*, to identify the bloody sword with the rejoicing, laboring “man-sword” (*secg*); the “battle” appropriately evokes erotic undertones. The equation of the sword and warrior, with the subsequent sexual connotations, resembles the synecdoche controlling Riddle Twenty, “The Sword,” in which the sword becomes a retainer who serves his lord through celibacy, foregoing the “joy-game” of marriage and the “treasure” of children, and whose only unpleasant battle occurs with a woman, because he must overcome her desire while she voices her terror, claps her hands, rebukes him with words, and cries out “ungod.” Similarly in *Beowulf* once the sword finally penetrates the body its blade miraculously melts—like ice into water—either from the poison of Grendel's blood or of his mother's, the

poem does not specify which (1601). And even the *mere* itself, approached through winding passageways, slopes, and paths, and in whose stirred-up and bloody waters sea monsters lurk and the strange battle-hall remains hidden, almost projects the mystery and danger of female sexuality run rampant.

Such erotic overtones in descriptions of battles between a male and female adversary are not especially common in Anglo-Saxon literature but can be found in various saints' lives in the Old English *Martyrology* (ca. 850) and in Aelfric's *Lives of the Saints* (ca. 994-early eleventh century), and in another epic poem also contained in the same manuscript as *Beowulf*, *Judith*. In the saints' lives a large group of thirty-four portrays a physical conflict between a Christian woman and a pagan man wishing to seduce her physically or spiritually. The description of the torture the saint undergoes to preserve her chastity often veils with obvious sexual symbolism the act of intercourse, or else it lovingly lingers over the description of the virgin's rape (see, for example, the life of St. Lucia). The reason for such descriptions should be clear to those acquainted with the Canticum Canticorum and its celebration of the love of the Sponsa for the Sponsus (of man's soul for God, of the Church for Christ), providing an analogous basis for the holy sacrament of marriage. The woman saint as a type of the soul longs to be joined, as in intercourse, with her spouse Christ; the threat of seduction by a human male must be read as an assault on the soul by the Devil.

In *Judith*, a work like *Beowulf* contained in Ms. Cotton Vitellius A.xv, the fragmentary epic portrays similar sexual overtones in Judith's "battle" with Holofernes. As in *Beowulf* a warrior battles a monster: the blessed maiden grapples with the "drunken, vicious monster" (*se inwidda*, 28) Holofernes. However, the sexual role behavior of *Beowulf* occurs in reverse in *Judith*: Holofernes parallels Grendel's dam, but whereas the *w_f* is aggressive and sword-greedy, Holofernes seems slightly effete (his bed enclosed by gold curtains, for example) and impotent from mead-drinking: "The lord fell, the powerful one so drunken, in the middle of his bed, as if he knew no reason in his mind" (67-69). These hypermetrical lines heighten the irony of his situation, for the warrior swoons on the very bed upon which he intended to rape the maiden. Having lost his head to drink in a double sense he himself is penetrated by the virgin's sharp sword, "hard in the storm of battle" (79), thereafter literally losing his head. But first Judith draws the sword from its sheath in her right hand, seizes him by the hair in a mock loving gesture (98-99), then pulls him toward her "shamefully" ("teah hyne folmum wio hyre weard / *bysmerlice*," 99b- 100a). The "b" alliteration in line 100 ("bysmerlice, ond þone bealofullan") draws attention to *bysmerlice*, which as a verb (*bysmrian*) elsewhere suggests the act of "defiling" (intercourse). In this line what seems shameful is apparently her embrace of the warrior's body while she moves it to a supine position. As in *Beowulf*, the female assumes the superior position; she lays him down so that she may control (*gewealdan*, 103) him more easily in cutting off his head. The ironic embrace and mock intercourse of this couple parallels that of Beowulf and the *ides_glocw_f*: the aggressive and sword-bearing "virgin" contrasts with the passive and swordless man (Holofernes, Aeschere, and even Beowulf are all momentarily or permanently swordless). The poet's point in each case is that a perversion of the sexual roles signals an equally perverse spiritual state. Holofernes' impotence is as unnatural in the male as the *w_f*'s aggression is unnatural in the female; so the battle with the heroine or hero in each case is described with erotic overtones to suggest the triumph of a right and natural sexual (and social and spiritual) order over the perverse and unnatural one. In the latter case Grendel's dam and her

son pose a heathen threat to Germanic society (the macrocosm) and to the individual (Beowulf the microcosm) as Holofernes and the Assyrians pose a heathen threat to Israelite society (the macrocosm) and to the individual (Judith the microcosm).

In this second part of her adventure, Hygd and Freawaru contrast with the *w_f* as queen or cup-passer as Hildeburh and Wealhtheow contrasted with Grendel's dam as mother in the first. Hygd, the first woman encountered after the defeat of Grendel's mother, as truly fulfills the feminine ideal of *Maxims I* as does Wealhtheow. Her name, which means "Thought" or "Deliberation," contrasts her nature with that of the bellicose *w_f* and possibly that of the war-like Thryth, whose actions, if not her name, suggest "Strength" (only in a physical sense; the alternate form of her name, "Modthrytho" or "Mind-Force," implies in a more spiritual sense stubbornness or pride). Although Hygd like the *w_f* and Thryth will be lordless after Hygelac's death, she does not desire to usurp the role of king for herself: doubting her son's ability to prevent tribal wars she offers the throne to Beowulf (2369ff). In addition, this gracious queen bestows treasure generously (1929-31), unlike the *w_f* and Thryth, the latter of whom dispense only "grim grips" and sword blows upon their "retainers."

The Thryth digression is inserted after Hygd enters to pass the cup upon Beowulf's return to Hygelac. Its structural position invites a comparison of this stubborn princess and the other two "queens," Hygd and the *w_f*. She appears to combine features of both: she begins as a type of the female monster, but upon marriage to Offa changes her nature and becomes a much loved queen. According to the poet, Thryth commits a "terrible crime"; she condemns to death any retainer at court caught staring at her regal beauty. That she abrogates her responsibilities as a queen and as a woman the poet makes clear: "Such a custom—that the peace-weaver after a pretended injury deprive the dear man of life—is not queenly for a woman to do, although she be beautiful" (Ne bio swylc cw_nlic þ_aw / idese t_efnanne, þ_ah oe h_o anlicu sy, / þatte freoouwebbe f_ores onsace / after ligetorne l_ofne mannan," 1940-43). The label "peace-weaver" (*freoouwebbe*) seems ironic in this context, especially as she does not weave but instead severs the ties of kinship binding her to her people and the bonds of life tying the accused man to this world. That is, for any man caught looking at her "the deadly bonds, hand-woven, were in store; after his arrest it was quickly determined that the sword, the damascened sword, must shear, make known death-bale" ("ac him walbende weotode tealde / handgewriþene; hraþe seoþ \ ?? \ an was / after mundgripe m_ce gepinged, / þat hit sce_denm \ ??\lsc\d?\yran m_ste / cwealmbealu c\d?\y\??\an," 1936-40). If she weaves at all then she weaves only "deadly hand-woven bonds" binding him to a grisly end. The "peace-weaver" cuts these bonds—imprisoning ropes—with a sword, simultaneously shearing the bonds of life to "make known death-bale." She resembles that other ironic peace-weaver, the *w_f*, who tried to penetrate the braided breast-net of Beowulf with her knife.

Both antitypes of the peace-weaving queen behave like kings, using the sword to rid their halls of intruders or unwanted "hall-guests." Unlike Thryth, the monstrous *w_f* remains husbandless, having lost her son, "wife" only to the *mere* she inhabits both in life and in death. At this moment in the poem, both Thryth and Grendel's mother belong to the past. If they represent *previous* inversions of the peace-weaver and cup-passer, and Hygd who is now passing the mead-cup to Beowulf's weary men in celebration signifies a *present* cup-passer, so the poet

introduces a final queen, this time a cup-passer of the *future* who will fail in her role as the first woman, Hildeburh, failed in hers.

Freawaru, like Hildeburh, seems innocent of any crime. She is envisioned by Beowulf as a queen married to Ingeld of the Heathobards in a digression (2032-69) immediately preceding his summary of the battles with Grendel and with his mother. She will fail in her role as peace-weaver because of an underlying hostility—an old Heathobard warrior's bitterness over ancient Heathobard treasure acquired through previous wars and worn by a young Danish man accompanying the new queen. The fragility of this role is heightened even further when, in the third section involving the dragon, Beowulf inhabits a queenless kingdom and when Wiglaf must become the cup-passer, pouring water from the “cup” of Beowulf's helmet in a futile attempt to revive his wounded lord.

Indeed, three women characters appear outside this middle section to convey dialectically the idea that woman cannot ensure peace in this world. First, Wealhtheow, unlike other female figures, appears in the first (or Grendel) section of the poem to pour mead after Grendel's challenge has been answered by the hero. This first entrance symbolizes the ideal role of Germanic woman as a personification of peace, as we have seen. In antithesis, Beowulf's account of the fall of the *wifunhd?yfe* appropriately ends the poem's second (Grendel's mother) section which has centered on this role: the personification of discord, the antitype of the feminine ideal, has been destroyed. But in the poem's third section a synthesis emerges. The nameless and unidentified Geat woman who appears, like the other female characters, after a battle—this one between Beowulf and the dragon—mourns at the pyre. That is, the efforts of the peacemaker, while valuable in worldly and social terms, ultimately must fail because of the nature of this world. True peace exists not in woman's but in God's “embrace” (*faeþm*, 188).

iii

This idea is implied in Hrothgar's sermon (1700-84), like the court celebration of Hygelac a part of the middle section belonging to Grendel's mother but apparently unrelated to it. In it Hrothgar describes three Christian vices in distinctly Germanic terms. Impelled by envy like Grendel, Heremod kills his “table-companions” (1713-14). Next the wealthy hall-ruler in his pride is attacked by the Adversary while his guardian conscience sleeps within the hall of his soul (1740-44). So the monster that specifically epitomizes pride in *Beowulf*, as in Genesis, is female—Grendel's mother—thematically related to Thryth or Modthrytho, whose name (if it can be said to exist in manuscript in that form) means “pride.” Grendel's mother substitutes war-making for the peace-weaving of the queen out of a kind of selfish pride—if she were capable of recognizing it as such. Finally, this same hall-ruler “covets angry-minded” (“g\dd?ytsa gromh\dd?ydig,” 1749) the ornamented treasures God has previously given him by refusing to dispense any to his warriors. So the mock gold-king dragon avariciously guards his treasure. Although the poet portrays the monsters as antitypes of Germanic ideals, his integument conceals a Christian idea. The city of man, whether located in a Germanic or Christian society, is always threatened by sin and failure.

Such sin alienates Christian man from self, neighbor, and God; it alienates Germanic man primarily from other men. Note that although in *Beowulf* each of the three monsters is described

as guarding or possessing a hall, whether Heorot, a watery cavern, or a barrow, each remains isolated from humanity (and from each other—Grendel and his mother live together, but they never appear together in the poem until he is dead). Ideally when the retainer, the queen, and the gold-lord cooperate they constitute a viable nucleus of Germanic society: a retainer must have a gold-lord from whom to receive gold for his loyalty in battle; the peace-weaver must have a “loom”—the band of retainers and their lord, or two nations—upon which to weave peace.

Despite the poet's realization that these roles cannot be fulfilled in this world, this Germanic ideal provides structural and thematic unity for *Beowulf*. Grendel's mother does occupy a transitional position in the poem: as a “retainer” attacking Heorot she resembles Grendel, but as an “attacked ruler” of her own “hall” she resembles the dragon. As a monstrous mother and queen she perverts a role more important socially and symbolically than that of Grendel, just as the queen as peace-pledge or peace-weaver ultimately becomes more valuable than the retainer but less valuable than the gold-giver himself.

If it seems ironic that a Germanic ideal that cannot exist in this world *can* exist in art, unifying the theme and structure of the poem, then Grendel's mother, warring antitype of harmony and peace, must seem doubly ironic. The structural position of her episode in the poem, like woman's position as cup-passer among members of the nation, or as a peace-pledge between two nations, is similarly medial and transitional, but successfully so.

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