

Merge:

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The Pagan and the Christian Queen: An Examination of the Role of Wealhtheow in *Beowulf*

Old English literature is the product of a country in religious flux. *Beowulf* and its women are creations of this religiously transformative time, and juxtapositions of this work's women with the women of more Pagan and, alternatively, more Christian works reveals exactly how the roles of women were transforming alongside the shifting of religious belief. For example, comparing *Beowulf*'s women with the blatantly Pagan women of *The Poetic Edda* reveals that *Beowulf*'s women fulfill strikingly Pagan roles. On the other hand, a look at a hagiographical work like Cynewulf's *Elene* suggests that these women are strikingly Christianized in their conduct. Clearly then, the roles of these women must have been evolving during this time period, and nowhere in the text is this development seen more clearly than in the episodes concerning Hrothgar's queen, Wealhtheow. Through this queenly figure, I trace the transformation of the openly cunning and often malicious Norse *hetzerin* into the equally discrete, but obviously restrained hall peace-bond and finally into the independent, assertive, and itinerant queen of the Christian order.

When we first see Wealhtheow, she is entering the mead hall of Heorot following the *flyting* between Unferth and Beowulf. This is the first mark of her peace-making because, as Enright notes, her entrance soothes tensions in the hall through its perfect timing, the trademark of the woman who "weave[s] peace" (15; *Beowulf* 1942). As Enright remarks, the poet suggests that this timely entrance was not made through her social acumen; in fact, she may be responding to a cue from Hrothgar, not acting through her own intuition. Furthermore, Enright notes that her entrance have the purpose of soothing Beowulf after Unferth's caustic commentary of his youth, but I would suggest that Wealhtheow, being familiar to the hall thanes, is there more to soothe

the thanes' tempers than their foreign guest's perceived insult. After all, directly prior to her entrance, Beowulf voices a dangerous comment, saying that Grendel knows that "'he can trample down'" the Danes "'to his heart's content'," basically demonstrating the hall thanes' cravenness, an insult seemingly more serious because wider in scope than Unferth's previous commentary (599, 600). It is no coincidence that it is noted directly after this incident that Hrothgar "was glad" and that "[s]o [as in *because* of this fact] the laughter started" (607, 611 emphasis / explanation added). Only then, after Hrothgar's delayed approval, does Wealhtheow enter because, as Enright observes, she is the king's tool for the smoothing of ruffled tempers, though not exclusively perhaps, as Enright would state, of their guest's injured ego. It sounds as if she has been waiting to gauge Hrothgar's decision, using his visible reaction to determine the propriety of entering as a sign of his pleasure.

Enright also suggests that this scene evokes a scene in "*Lokasenna*," which is a poem found in the anonymously written 13th century collection of Norse-Icelandic poetry known as *The Poetic Edda*¹. Wealhtheow, like Sif in that poem, also known as "Loki's Quarrel," is simply following a cue from her lord when she enters the hall to distribute mead (15). In this story, Loki, like Unferth, antagonizes the gathered number of gods in Aegir's (a giant) hall. He calls the men "'bench-ornament[s]'" and the women "'man-mad'" (Larrington 83, 85). It is at this moment that Sif, Thor's wife, comes to Loki and "pours out mead" for him and wishes him "'[w]elcome'" (89). Before her entrance, the other female gods, each interestingly with husbands present, threaten to bind Loki with his "'son's guts'" (89). However, Sif chooses peace. She acts not on Thor's cue, as Enright would suggest, as he is absent. I suggest that this absence makes the

¹ Some scholars argue, including Carolyne Larrington, the editor of the text used here, that many of the poems found in the *Edda* date to an earlier period than the 13th century (11). The mythological poems, like "*Lokasenna*," I use to build my argument are particularly thought to date to a much earlier epoch.

difference. The other wives must defend their husbands' honor; they must act or Loki's accusations of promiscuity will seem true. Sif eludes this issue, so she can act on her own accord. She attempts peace because she observes the other women's failed aggression. She offers Loki the cup only after saying "you should rather admit...that Sif alone is blameless" (88). She chooses the personally advantageous action (or inaction) because the option is open to her through Thor's absence. It is only after this ploy fails that her husband (ironically reversing the Wealhtheow scene) arrives to remove Loki. Enright's comparison seems less apt in this light. This scene suggests that Sif *chooses* not to act, unlike Wealhtheow, who is forced not to.

Wealhtheow shows a continuation of this female inaction, but with a marked lack of Sif's self-conceit. She does not peace-weave for personal advantage, though an examination of the continuance of the scene proves that a Pagan past definitely left its traces on this heroine. The section that follows in *Beowulf* is concerned with the serving of the mead cup. This procession is no casual affair, no family matter like the gathering in Aegir's hall. This feast is a formal occasion meant to signify the supremacy of Hrothgar's court to his present thanes and his foreign guest. In other words, it is a ceremony imbued with political brawn, though its structure appears unassuming. The poet tells us that Wealhtheow, "observing the courtesies," carries the mead cup "first to Hrothgar," then to the "household and the assembled troop," and finally to Beowulf (*Beowulf* 613, 616, 623). The ceremony basically requires movement to three, perhaps four, differing sections of the hall. It seems simple, requiring little political dexterity.

Nevertheless, this seemingly artless procession is just that: a royal procession in which the king comes first, his family second, his sworn troops third, and his guests, always, last. In this view, the queen plays the literal trophy wife. Her epithet, "Helming woman," delineates her status as a spoil of war, as a foreign prize taken through martial prowess (620). She is a beautiful

emblem of the king's strength and the perfect instrument to exhibit his clout to guests, especially guests possessing dangerous potential. Because of her status as a representative of the king's martial aptitude, the queen "normally played a significant if subordinate role in the establishment of order and hierarchy among the members of the warband," through the omnipresent evidence of her own conquest (Enright 2). Through this political viewpoint, the queen assumes a pawn-like status and serves as a constant reminder to the thanes of what the king has achieved and can achieve.

However, another level of complexity resides in this simple scenario, a more mystical reality recalling Pagan superstitions. Considering the *comitatus* as a familial structure instead of a political dynamo reveals this reality. In this view, Hrothgar is the father of the hall. Naturally, the cup comes first to him because he is the elder, the life source for the rest of the hall. This familial structure is obviously not a reality, but the king nonetheless crafts this illusion through the passing of the communal mead cup, "which had the purpose of creating fictive kinship" (17). The mead becomes the metaphorical blood of common kinship, and Wealhtheow, the mother of the hall, cements the illusion. She, as a woman, holds the power to generate strands of mutual kinship through the birthing of heirs, the physical continuation of the bloodline. Through numinous reasoning, this also facilitates her passing along the fictional bloodline created through the sharing of mead. She is the vessel, the *ringgefasse*, through which the blood can pass naturally and believably. She sells the illusion.

This preternatural interpretation gives Wealhtheow a more dominant role, though she is still a tool in the king's arsenal of political propaganda. A deeper symbolism exists that adds to Wealhtheow's impact, however. It should be noted that each time Wealhtheow passes the cup to a retainer she "urg[es] him to drink deep and enjoy it" while also presumably giving him a

chance to speak to her (*Beowulf* 617). Flashing back to the political viewpoint, Wealhtheow creates an effective funnel through which the king can measure his thanes' loyalty seeing as how she hears his thanes' words and oaths. For example, when she reaches Beowulf, he swears to kill Grendel. However, the bandying of words over the mead cup assumes darker tones when a line of Odinic wisdom from the *Edda* is considered in conjunction with this scene.

When speaking to Loddafnir in an Eddic poem known as "Sayings of the High One," Odin gives two separate, but indelibly linked pieces of wisdom. First, he advises Loddafnir to "be most wary of ale, and of another's wife," both of which apply to Beowulf's situation (Larrington 30). There is a hint of danger here, a hint that perhaps the wives of rulers are malicious. This hint is brought to fruition later on in the same poem when Odin tells Loddafnir of the charms he knows. He tells Loddafnir that he knows "those spells which a ruler's wife does not know," the implication apparently being that a ruler's wife knows a wide conglomeration of spells (33). The implication here is that mead, when in connection with a ruler's wife, is a deleterious combination. When Beowulf speaks his words of promise to Wealhtheow, "'to perform to the uttermost / what your people wanted'," he is, according to this old tradition, sealing his fate (*Beowulf* 34-35).

The identification of words with fate and the queen as mother links Wealhtheow to the ancient Germanic entities, the *disir*. The *disir* were spirits who protected women in childbirth and decided men's fate in battle (Larrington 304, 311). They also allied to individual kin groups; the *Edda* hints that each man has a guardian *disir*. If men fell in battle, it was often said their *disir* despised them (311). If the words spoken over the mead reflect a magical praxis, and if the words spoken over the mead become fate, Wealhtheow, as the symbolic mother of the clan is undeniably related to these entities and, as such, should pose a more obvious threat to Beowulf if

this archetype continues in the modern day of Hrothgar's court. However, Wealhtheow, though arguably retaining many *disir* attributes, does not hold any of their sway.

An example of the *disir*'s actions can be found in the "Greenlandic Lay of Atli" among other places in the *Edda*. In this poem, Glaumvor is trying to convince her husband, Gunnar, not to ride to the court of Atli, fearing that he will die while there. When he does not listen to her, she shouts, "'I declare that your *disir* are powerless to help you'," with the clear inference here and in the other sections of the *Edda* being that the *disir* accompany their favored men into battle to insure their success (214). Their absence is clearly a horrible fate. Certainly, Wealhtheow's absence is not. While she does retain the clear link of the *disir* as guardians of lineages and perhaps even their role in coordinating fate if the mead is taken to possess prophetic strength, she most certainly does not remain with Beowulf to fight Grendel. The motions are there, but the effects of the *disir* are lacking. The only epitaph in the least supernatural accorded to her is *ides* (which appears in lines 620, 1168, and 1649), and *ides*, while hinting at the supernatural, does not concretely infer Otherness. Instead, the *ides* are simply women who stand out, which Wealhtheow undeniably does, but not in a supernatural or perceptibly fate-shaping way (Meaney 159).

There is one more ancient role resonance in this scene that gives Wealhtheow an added level of complexity: the role of the *hetzerin*. The *hetzerin* in Norse literature was the female who provoked the men of her family to act for her (Enright 42). She would do this through insult, or, conversely and as I would suggest, by outlining a man's virtues. By doing this, she essentially shames him into exhibiting these delineated merits. Though Wealhtheow does not outline Beowulf's heroic qualities, she does listen to him recount his deeds, becoming the witness of his troth and obtaining the ability to hold him to his words through ridicule. As such, Wealhtheow is

a diminished form of the *hetzerin*. She no longer initiates male action, but she does become the potentially active witness of heroic promise. The provocations and the menace of the mead cup bearer of Pagan times are absent. Hints remain, but the role of the female in this scene is largely the place of the link between real power (Hrothgar) and servility (Beowulf and the thanes). She is the peace-bond.

After this scene, our heroine is absent from the poem for a time, appearing after Beowulf's fight when it is time to again carry the cup. However, she has heard a disturbing rumor, that Hrothgar wants to adopt Beowulf "as a son," raising him above her sons, the culmination of her role as carrier of the royal blood, in effect negating her claim to effectiveness as a peace-weaver (1176). If this weaving is undone, the natural order, the dependable web of fate, has also been eradicated and the weaver bereft of her role. She cannot allow her sons to be displaced, or she will be displaced. Again, this scenario is reminiscent of one in the *Edda*.

In the Eddic poem "Grimnir's Sayings," Odin and his queen, Frigg, disguise themselves to raise the sons of King Hraudung. Odin favors the younger son, Geirrod, and helps him to achieve his father's throne through trickery, while Frigg favors the older son, Agnar. While the situation in this scenario is definitely not on the same scale as Wealhtheow's impending ontological crisis, there are certain points of authority at stake. There is also the implied testing of whether the ruler's wife possesses the intelligence that so many Norse epithets infer.

The challenge is set, and Frigg wins by falsely telling Odin that Geirrod is "so stingy with food that he tortures his guests if it seems to him that too many have come," affronting Norse notions of hospitality (Larrington 48). Then, Frigg insures that when Odin, disguised, arrives at Geirrod's court, the rumor is true. She sends her handmaid to inform Geirrod that a wizard approaches to "bewitch him" (48). Geirrod, naturally, strives to prevent this, binding

Odin and starving him, making the “greatest slander” fact (48). Odin escapes, curses him, and Geirrod’s son, Agnar, ascends. In effect, Frigg wins through cunning. She does not defer to Odin or relent despite the fact that victory is meaningless. She is determined to become the victor for bragging rights, and, from prior evidence about the perceptions of king’s wives, this was ordinary behavior.

Compared to this mythological situation, Wealhtheow has bountiful justification for influencing Hrothgar. Her place in the hall depends on it; but, again, the poem is permeated with hints that she must remain seemingly deferential to Hrothgar, that she retains power only as long as she does not overstep her diminished queenly role. Therefore, if she wants to affect change in her tiny sphere of influence (indeed she is without Frigg’s travelling women who can journey beyond the hall to affect her will) it must be done in a way that makes it seem as though her suggestions were actually his ideas.

She begins constructing this selective reality masterfully by inferring to Hrothgar that he lacks the capability to make decisions in his current state. For one, she infers, he is intoxicated. Her word order implies his condition discretely. “‘Enjoy this drink’,” she says first followed by “‘raise up your goblet’” (*Beowulf* 1168, 1169). Only then does she say “‘entertain the Geats’,” when, in theory, she could have said that first (1169). The ordering of the sentence is telling. Moreover, O’Pry-Reynolds gives reasoning that suggests Hrothgar would trust Wealhtheow’s opinion on this matter. She says that “[s]ince they served the mead and other drinks to the men, in some degree, they controlled the drunkenness and abilities of the men at a feast or celebration” (39). Hrothgar, being the one who gave her the keys to the storehouse, recognizes this even while intoxicated.

Wealhtheow also employs another tactic when cataloguing the night's events in this order. She invokes Norse wisdom, gnomic wisdom straight from Odin. She tells Hrothgar to “*recollect* as well / all of the boons that have been bestowed upon you” (*Beowulf* 1172-1173 emphasis added). In “Sayings of the High One,” Odin describes drink as the “forgetfulness-heron” and remarks that what is “best about ale-drinking” is “that afterwards / every man gets his mind back again” (Larrington 15). These stories were told orally in the Scandinavian countries until the fourteenth century; during *Beowulf*'s time, they were conventional wisdom.

Wealhtheow proves her cunning through her allusion. In a way, the scholar Joyce Hill is correct when she says, “Wealhtheow's comments about the future of the Danish kingdom are clear, but indirect and deferential, as if there are limits to a woman's public intervention” (240). However, Wealhtheow's constraint to being “[deferential]” does not exclude the possibility of her discretely battling verbally (240). She may not be able to influence individuals outside of the court or even inside without her husband's direct supervision, but she can always work in elusive ways. She is Frigg in a more confined atmosphere.

Of course, there is the slight matter of her trust in Hrothulf and his “honour” being completely misplaced, which seems to discount her prior sagacity (*Beowulf* 1184). The reader knows that Hrothulf will not “recollect / all the good things” given to him (1185-1186). This doomed state of Heorot could be attributed to what Damico calls the “Valkyrie Reflex,” in which powerful women in Old English literature inevitably assume the roles attributed to the Old Norse conception of the Valkyrie women (176). The Valkyrie, or the Valkyrie archetype in this case, would intermarry with human beings. However, it always spelled out disaster for these men. The usual story is that the relatives of the Valkyrie woman would come and kill the man and his

entire family. If Wealhtheow is supposed to be modeled on this archetype the familial “barbarous burning” of Heorot is a fact of her existence in the hall (*Beowulf* 83).

An alternative explanation for this doomed state is found in the fact that, once again, this poem represents a culture that is in religious flux. Wealhtheow is immersed in a culture based on the warrior ethos. She is depending on the gifts given to Hrothulf to insure his favor when, in the Christian theology, man’s greed far outweighs his reasoning. In short, she depends on Pagan concepts to protect her sons in a Christian world. However, the poet does not criticize her perhaps because of the emerging mentality that “a Christian wife...has a duty to soften and inflame the king’s heart, to pour knowledge of the mysteries of her faith into his mind, to fulfill the testimony of scripture that ‘the unbelieving husband shall be saved by the believing wife’” (Leyser 22). Wealhtheow is “certain,” she truly has “faith” in Hrothulf, and so she shares this faith with her spouse as is her Christian “duty” (*Beowulf* 1179; Leyser 22). In this light, the downfall is not the fault of the woman so much as it is the fault of the warrior ethos.

Moreover, the religious flux of the period can be demonstrated in her lack of foreknowledge in one other way. I have spent much of this paper outlining the magical and prophetic tendencies exhibited by women in the Norse myth and how Wealhtheow shares many of these tendencies, though on a more implicit level. The author of *Beowulf*, in robbing her of the foresight that would have been a woman’s natural gift in Pagan literature, is, in many ways, reacting against past literature. The place and acceptable practices of women may not yet be clearly established in the poem, but the author does seem to make an effort to establish what these practices are *not*.

After this hushed conference with her husband, Wealhtheow again embarks on her rounds. This time, she distributes the spoils of victory to Beowulf as a sign of her, and hence the

king's, favor. "[A] wealth of wrought gold" is given to Beowulf by Wealhtheow (*Beowulf* 1192). This bestowal links back to the mystical dimension of the woman as mother. Gold had intimate connotations during this period. Procopius noted "that in German eyes" when a wedding contract was solemnized "taking the gold" that was the bride's dowry "counted morally and legally as having sexual intercourse with the bridegroom" (Herbert 9). In other words, once the gold was given, the relationship could not be reneged upon. Without hinting that Wealhtheow is having metaphorical sexual relationships with Beowulf, this observation clarifies that the bestowing of gold created links equal to the links of family. Wealhtheow, in her capacity as mother, has accepted Beowulf into their ranks.

Wealhtheow's last major appearance and one of the poem's most critically problematic speeches follow. It is also where the depiction of Wealhtheow takes a conspicuously Christian turn. She opens her speech with the typical wishes for good health and "'luck'" that even the most static woman in the *Edda* makes, but then she digresses into an account of the dynamics of the hall (1219). She says that in Heorot "'each comrade is true to the other / loyal to lord'" and that the "'ranks do as I bid,'" in a passage that reads like a threat (1228-1229, 1231). She may have just metaphorically inducted Beowulf into the family, but he is still not considered one of Hrothgar's thanes, or the ones that she describes as having "'one purpose'" (1230). When reading the end of the speech, "'the ranks do as I bid,'" the last passage must be referred to, when she outlined to Hrothgar exactly what she wanted, namely that he not adopt Beowulf. Her biddings, therefore, do not bode well for Beowulf. Yet, she is a "desperately wish[ing]" woman, basically "evok[ing] the dream" she wants at this point (Shippey as qtd. by Herbert 31). By delivering the speech in front of the hall, she is reversing much of the earlier peace-weaving by imitating Beowulf's prior taunting of the Danes. She, in effect, points out Beowulf's foreignness,

exactly how different he is from the hall thanes. The previous part of the speech was a farewell to such a foreign guest- “I wish you a lifetime’s luck and blessings”- but this part is a tacit threat, one hidden so that she cannot be accused of ill will towards her lord’s guest (*Beowulf* 1219). Again, there is the reduced form of the *hetzerin*’s provocation.

Wealhtheow’s speech predicts the later literature of the female saints, namely that of the poem *Elene* by the late tenth century Old English poet, Cynewulf, though the speeches of this Christian queen are necessarily more forceful than her semi-Pagan counterpart. Wealhtheow, after all, is from a culture in flux, a culture in which Christianity is still emerging and exhibiting a variety of uncertainties in a number of areas of which sexuality and gender politics are only one. In Wealhtheow’s court, the need for female supervision is clearly still predominant. As such, all female influence must remain, even in public speeches, of a subliminal nature.

Elene, like Wealhtheow, is often at the forefront of her hall thanes, but she has obviously broken this mold of female caution in politics. The difference between the women is that Wealhtheow is constantly under the supervision of her lord and constrained to timidity by a culture that does not know yet how women fit into the new religious worldview. In Wealhtheow’s court, room for female heroism has not yet been established in an acceptably Christian manner. Elene, conversely, is a Christian widow, meaning that she has the constant supervision of one that knows no boundaries: God. Moreover, Elene is part of a culture that has created a form of power for women that, like the *hetzerin*, keeps them from violence while at the same time allowing them to work their will in the world.

Elene has been sent by her son, the Emperor Constantine, to the Holy Land to find the true cross. The necessity of the imploration of the hero to do heroic deeds has been transcended. She has been sent with many thanes, becoming, in effect, a “battle-queen,” taking on the role of

the hall king who would have dictated her actions in past literature (*Elene* 8). Upon reaching the Holy Land, she calls a council of all of the wise men of the land, even “cull[ing]” them further depending on their level of “learning” when they attend her, not requiring any tacit demonstrations of what intelligence really is as Wealhtheow does (7). When the ranks are assembled, she makes the exact statement that Wealhtheow does at the end of her speech, only in new words. She orders the men, the virtual strangers that she has assembled at her command, to “‘contrive an answer for every question that I may ask’,” which the citizens correctly interpret as doing “whatsoever things she might seek of them whether good or evil” (8). She has the power to work her will in the world independently because of her placement within the new dominant culture, a culture in which women have a place to be heroic.

Despite this obvious independence, the poet still persists (as does *Beowulf*’s poet on the occasion of other women in the text) in defining her status as completely dependent on her prince. However, his statement that “Elene was steadfastly heedful of her prince’s will” rings decidedly untrue, unless Cynewulf refers to God as “her prince” (highly unlikely in this context) in which case it is easy to see how she could constantly comply with the will of God (which is highly dependent on who is speaking). Indeed, Elene’s “behaviour is not socially patterned in the manner of Wealhtheow’s” and if held up to the standards by which Wealhtheow is judged “is not in any literal sense exemplary” (Leyser 57). Supplication by women to their male counterparts is no longer the norm.

Then, by examining Wealhtheow as well as her predecessors in Norse myth and successors in Christian hagiography, it becomes clear that while women remained integral figures in their society, the nature of their roles shifted significantly with the advent of Christianity. Wealhtheow is not the malicious and proud Norse goddess, nor is she the

autonomous, world-shaping Christian queen. Instead, she occupies a liminal space in which roles for women were still being defined. Clearly some constants persist throughout this spectrum of literature. Olsen notes, for example, that “Elene resembles the women of Germanic tradition who admonish their male kinsmen to act in accordance with the heroic code,” but this continuity only serves to demonstrate the evolution of a space for women within heroic literature seeing as religious paradigm shifts are gradual, not instantaneous processes (225). Wealhtheow and the other women of *Beowulf*’s were gradually becoming the models for our literary women of today.

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