

## Gender Roles between Defiance and Compliance: Peace-weavers and Vindictive Women in *Beowulf*

Tariq Jameel Alsoud<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This essay investigates the portrayal of different feminine traits, stereotypes, and expectations in *Beowulf*, focusing mainly on the performance and concerns of Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother. The poem exemplifies two incompatible images of women whose conduct and aspirations range between conformity and transgression concerning the interaction with the conventions of Anglo-Saxon society. Grendel's mother epitomizes a powerful adversarial force that threatens order in a male-dominated society and undermines peace achievements. In contrast, Wealhtheow, by virtue of her sociopolitical status, incarnates a strong personality but still circulates within the domestic sphere since she accepts a traditional gender role, which is a peace-fostering mission between feuding tribes through institutionalized marriage. The poem gives prominence to their origin, status, shape, and mood, so it correlates Wealhtheow, as a "land-dweller," with exquisite feminine beauty which manifests through her gold-adorned figure and her aesthetic reason; whereas it connects Grendel's mother, as an "alien spirit" who dwells on moors, with repulsive images and spiteful connotations whose sole role is to terrorize peaceful civilians through aggression and vengeance. Finally, the essay helps the Anglo-Saxon literature reader comprehend some essential women's issues by explicating the poet's projection of feminine attitudes, expected social codes and norms, and gender stereotyping, all of which are highlighted through the depiction of these characters and multifaceted events.

**Keywords:** mission, transgression, conformity, archetype, norms, power

### 1. Introduction

*Beowulf* exposes internally and externally motivated characteristics and behavioral attitudes of female characters who either correspond to or deviate from the stereotypical gender roles in Anglo-Saxon literature. In the poem, women are usually committed to progressing within the private domain, while one powerful woman exhibits some behavioral transgression that blurs gender boundaries and causes physical damage and emotional repercussions to others. In this context, this essay juxtaposes two incompatible images of women who exist at the opposite ends of the spectrum, and whose stories both consolidate and deconstruct the metaphysics of social structure. In the first instance, "Grendlesmódor" [Grendel's mother] (line 1258)<sup>2</sup> is a transgressive woman who has a desire for murder and vengeance, and who does not yield to the countering forces of resistance and destruction. On the other hand, Queen Wealhþéow [Wealhtheow], King Hróðgáres [Hrothgar's] wife, assumes a peace-fostering vocation that pledges to restore order after stamping out the chaos that results from different antagonistic sources, mainly from Grendel's mother. Performing such tasks among Anglo-Saxon tribes entails a strong personality that has power and competency in expressing opinions although the source of this authority emanates from Wealhtheow's sociopolitical position as queen. Her moral support and philological eloquence ensure a stable succession of the throne, power, and wealth to her descendants. She initially accepts circulating within the stereotypical framework of the domestic sphere, exclusively when she originally performs a "freoðuwebbe" [peace-weaving] (line 1942) role all along when Grendel's mother demonstrates her power and fierceness that threaten an entire patriarchal society. However, her meek nature emanates from self-esteem, not from imposed external forces, so she later develops a strong personality that manifests in supporting the administration of state and family affairs. Both women have prominent roles in the epic, and the poet spends considerable lines describing them and their conduct more than other female characters such as Freawaru, Hildeburh, and Hygd whose missions are typically restricted to supporting and subsidiary roles.

<sup>1</sup>English Department, Tafila Technical University, Jordan

<sup>2</sup>This poem is cited in *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, and I use my own translation, relying on Klaeber's notes and the facilitation at: <https://heorot.dk/beowulf-rede-text.html>.

Thus, the essay investigates how the poet projects their lifestyles, social practices, and cultural attitudes, and how he handles their cases with necessary details that highlight some essential women's issues in Anglo-Saxon literature.

*Beowulf* has been the focus of critical attention that tries to decipher social norms and whether gender performance meets social expectations. For instance, Temple investigates the possible meanings of the phrase “idesagleacwif” (line 1259) which the poet uses to introduce Grendel's mother on her first appearance for retaliation. Temple (1986) provides multiple feasible meanings that the phrase could mean monster woman, powerful woman, or virgin woman (p. 11). The unfortunate woman who is not evil could be “ides” as well; it could also be a synonym for wife, maid, or widow (Temple, 1986, p. 11), but she tends toward “monster woman” after a thorough study of the signification of these words in Old English. Menzer (1996) explores varied interpretations, such as Klaeber and Toller's translations, and decides that “agleacwif denotes a woman, a human female, who is also aglaeca” (p. 2). Temple's study is more concerned with examining the origin and ancestry of Grendel's mother as well as the semantics of words. Burdorff debates Gang's argument who thinks that monstrous women and dragons are part of the chaos and evil in the poem by generalizing the exclusive function of Grendel's mother. Burdorff (2014) broaches how Gang neglects the major roles of other female characters who generally tend to restore peace and order; she also suggests that Grendel himself represents the outer darkness with its malevolence (p. 101). Hennequin (2008) argues that there is no single sign that refers to Grendel's mother as a monster, and a monster's mother does not exactly mean that she is a monster herself (p. 504). On the contrary, Grendel's mother is always addressed with the word “móðor” [mother] to reveal her humanity (Hennequin, 2008, p. 504). Hennequin's conclusion emulates Taylor's argument (1994) that “*Beowulf*-poet clearly establishes that Grendel's mother must be a *wif*, for only as a *wif* or ‘woman’ would she be capable of bearing a child” (p. 16). Finally, Olesiejko (2014) thinks that Wealhtheow reveals her femininity by wearing jewelry, rings, and golds, and this practice connotes voluntary acceptance of this gender role and indicates a symbol of submission to the patriarchal power that objectifies and enslaves her (p. 105). In this regard, Taranu (2020) expresses deep anxiety about the epic's multicultural-background audiences who “translate a range of words with loosely connected meanings” (p. 192). Taranu's anxieties emerge from clues in *Beowulf* and pieces of evidence from various societal perspectives and textual constellations from which the poem was interpreted. The previous arguments constitute divergent opinions and jurisprudence that try to frame the females' conduct and characteristics within certain frameworks. Differently, I argue that the roles of these two women, Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother, are complementary to each other, in which one causes disorder and the other restores discipline; eliminating one of them weakens the plot, dissolves the suspense element, and creates disorder in the narrative. The poet emphasizes the importance of some women like Wealhtheow to the stability and consolidation of social relations; he likewise warns against irritating others by assault or acts of provoking since this friction can lead to compromising security and spoiling the serenity of social ties.

## 2. Discussion

One of the dominant archetypal roles for women in Anglo-Saxon literature is the vocation of peace-weaving, and *Beowulf* stresses the importance of this mission that serves the amicable coexistence between the warring tribes. Sebo and Schilling (2021) argue that it is unclear if *Beowulf*'s poet depicts peace-weaving as a diplomatically passive tradition or just a normal practice or a category of women (p. 638). However, their study emphasizes the negative emotional and psychological aspects that marginalize and dehumanize women through this habit. Although the apparent goals of this tradition seem noble in ceasing feuds and wars, they are achieved at the expense of the queens' choices and safety. According to Jamison (2004), the custom of marital exchange commodifies Germanic women and renders it a practice of trafficking women in order to bind men together peacefully (p. 13). For instance, Wealhtheow, who descends from the Helmings and Wulfings, was offered as a wife to Hrothgar, the king of Danes, so her marriage promotes peace by kinship and maternity between “Helmings” (line 620) and “Scyldinga” (line 30) tribes. In contrast, other female characters' marriages, such as Hildeburh and Freawaru, failed to perform this role and could not restore peace between feuding tribes and kingdoms. Hildeburh, the daughter of the Danish king Hoc, married off to Finn, the king of the Frisians, to act as a peace-weaver as well; however, peace was not kept longer between the two nations. She lost her husband Finn, her son, and her brother lord Hnæf in the war-feud between the Danish and the Frisians. Jamison (2004) raises another topic which is a different function of peace-weaving women, stating that “[w]hen traffic in women fails to preserve peace, another of the women's duties is to grieve over the destruction. Thus, Hildeburh orders a funeral pyre, upon which are placed together the corpses of her son and brother” (p. 23). *Beowulf*'s poet describes her loss: “belorenléofumætþámhildplegan / bearnumondbróðrumhíc on gebyrdhruon / gárewundþæt wæs geómuru ides” [She becomes bereft of her dear people in the war game; her son and her brother fall in accordance with fate after

being wounded by a spear. That is the story of a mournful woman] (lines 1073-1075). Similarly, Freawaru, the daughter of King Hrothgar and Queen Wealhtheow, married Ingeld, the king of the "Heaðo-Beardna" [Heathobards] (line 2032), as a peace-weaver. Her marriage becomes another unsuccessful attempt to end the antagonism between the two kingdoms after the murder of Froda.

Wealhtheow blesses this marriage as a patriotic duty and never considers it an injustice against her daughter; conversely, she perceives it as a national mission and interest of the nation, which should take precedence over personal interests even if it happens at the expense of women's freedom of choice. She once accepts this procedure for herself and denies breaking this tradition. The narrative gives prominence to Wealhtheow and highlights the importance of her marriage in achieving the desired peace goals that have been challenged later by a different type of hostile force which is Grendel and his mother's feud.

Contrary to portraying Grendel's mother as a source of a hostile power, Wealhtheow dissociates herself from the transgressive feminine antitype that breaks conventions and transcends boundaries through compliance with traditions. She enthusiastically accepts conformity to social standards, while Grendel's mother shows her potential and exceptional power all the time, particularly during the fight with Beowulf. Again, the conception of peace-weaving results from an institutionalized practice when women marry rulers or warriors from other hostile tribes to promote and sustain peace through forming kinship relationships. In this regard, Neidorf investigates the etymology of the Old English proper noun "Wealhtheow," trying to decide her social function. He learns that one interpretation of this name is a "foreign slave" as her name consists "of wealh-, 'foreigner,' and -þēow, 'slave'" (Neidorf, 2017, p. 75). This analysis tries to call attention to her personal history and origins, but it sabotages her individual and social achievements and undermines her social role in binding nations together. Jurasinski (2007) excludes the idea that Wealhtheow is a slave since Hrothgar's sociopolitical status does not allow such a concession that would lead to a voluntary or compulsory act of abdicating the throne (p. 705). *Beowulf* poet exposes this prevailing norm of Anglo-Saxons by referring to the many marriages that consolidate this tradition. Hall (2006) contends that Wealhtheow felicitously represents this role when her coming "from a people other than the Danes is suggested by her identification at her first appearance as 'ides helminga' (line 620), though it might in theory be that the Helmingas were a scion of the Danish people" (p. 85). Sometimes peace-weaving does not yield the designated desired results, such as in the case of Hildeburh and Freawaru. On the contrary, it misstates women's agency as they do not feel their individual and social value; their existence represents immolation that serves certain goals such as ceasing wars among rival factions. Moreover, maintaining peace among tribes sometimes does not persist for a long time, so this procedure objectifies women when they are exploited for achieving temporary goals and some political gain; this habit obscures their destiny by living with hostile tribes. Peace-weaving could happen within the kingdom itself as Hall's study shows regarding the origin of the Helminga. Wealhtheow's peace-weaving expedition and cup-bearing tradition establish her conventional femininity since her debut. Her sociopolitical role consolidates relationships among the king, his retainers, and Beowulf regardless of the submissive image associated with this vocation. This depiction sheds light only on a one-sided mission that she performs for her nation but neglects the individual and psychological aspects.

The poetic description which identifies each of Grendel's mother and Wealhtheow reveals their social and political situations according to the stereotypical images of women in Anglo-Saxon society. It also provides the reader with a comprehensive conception of their exact roles when the poet straightforwardly introduces them for the first time. Wealhtheow's first appearance indicates a typical image of women in that community when the poet characterizes her as adorned with gold and caring about etiquette and courtesy to others. The poet describes her: "Éode Wealhþéow forð / cwén Hrōðgáres cynnagemyndig / grétt goldhroden guman on healle" [Wealhtheow proceeded forward, Hrothgar's queen, mindful of courtesy, adorned with gold, greeted the men in the hall] (lines 612-614). Then, in her second appearance, "Þá cwóm Wealhþéow forð / gán under gyldnum béage / þær þá góðantwégen / sæton" [Wealhtheow then came forth (and) went with a precious ring to where the good twain sat] (lines 1162-1164). In both cases, the poet focuses on describing her jewelry and kind etiquette when dealing with others and her interest in her new social status and people. In this context, Olesiejko (2014) states that "the peace-weaver, or peace-pledge, is an iconic representation of the masculine economy of exchange, as the gold adorned queen bears the signs of masculine royal power that reifies her" (p. 105). For example, the bracelets she wears allude to shackles that suggest conformity with the standards and submission to King Hrothgar; however, she adapts the new situation to her aspirations and interests and develops a strong personality to discuss public issues with the king and retainers. On the other side, Grendel's mother's first appearance is accompanied by a dreadful image of the person who only exists to undertake vengeance. The poet describes: "Grendles módor / ides ágláécwífyr mþegemunde" [Grendel's mother, the feuding woman, bears in mind misery] (lines 1258-1259).

She emerges in the narrative to satisfy her desire for vindictiveness and to restore the chaotic situation and the lack of peace prevalent before Grendel's death. Her role in the epic substitutes a previous fierce masculine function and extends it violently, such as in the missions of soldiers on battlefields. The poet in different situations introduces women with varied powerful physical and mental abilities. After the national marriage of convenience, Wealhtheow plays a serious political role due to her position as a queen, in which her efforts promote the nationalistic spirit and maintain peace in the kingdom at large.

She advises Hrothgar, "þínummágum leaf/ folcond rice þonneðúforðscyle/ methodscaftséön" [Leave the kingdom to your people and kinsmen when you must go forth to meet your fate] (lines 1178-1180). In this context, she calls for rewarding Beowulf with treasures for cleansing Heorot, the mead-hall, but not with inheriting the throne because she plans for her son to ascend the throne. Such demands denote that she becomes politically seasoned and possesses farsightedness in her future views. In managing personal and public affairs, Wealhtheow employs the power of words while Grendel's mother uses the power of muscles. Grendel's mother possesses tremendous physical abilities, so she remains outside the peace-weaving sphere. Ganguly (2013) believes that women in Old English literature accept submission when they marry for the sake of peace-weaving. He explains, in "this general drama of enforced feminine mediocrity, very few names stand out to prove the fighting spirit of women, giving readers the impression that women in Anglo-Saxon England were by-and-large passive who ... let themselves be dominated by men" (Ganguly, 2013, p. 161). As an exception, Grendel's mother resists the female dependent and passive role and constitutes a huge risk and considerable threat to the people and warriors of Heorot.

Beowulf functions to eliminate sources of threat and evil, such as Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon, to restore order and win the approbation of a different nation. Price (2020) debates Moray's argument in "Beowulf's Androgynous Heroism" that in the expedition of making peace for the Danes, "Beowulf engages in a feminized, peace-weaving marriage-act by performing heroic deeds for Hroðgar and sealing the peace between Danes and Geats" (p. 406). In tracing the previous criticism of the poem, Price points out that Beowulf's mission represents a queer desire that is non-normative and blurs his gender boundaries because he aligns himself with the feminine gender roles prevalent in the poem. In fact, Beowulf's injuries and physical lacerations are traditional motifs and patterns familiar to the Anglo-Saxon reader. His moral values and symbolic heroism as a great warrior and national hero emerge clearly in the poem as the poet sets them as heroic codes for generations to come. He demonstrates more chivalry and heroism than other heroes, in which his struggles and triumphs are only against human beasts, enemies of peace, and evil forces of destruction. He dedicates himself to serving others, not for personal gains or interests, so he sets a dignified model of the leader's sacrifice who only seeks the prosperity of his country, and who prioritizes the interest of his nation above any personal benefits or purposes that serve foreign agendas. After Beowulf cleanses Heorot from destructive evilness, Hrothgar adopts a forward-looking vision that is depicted in the second part of the poem; it includes future scenes that revive Beowulf's youth and previous heroism compared to his fight against the dragon. The general mood becomes increasingly gloomy as Beowulf approaches death; however, his death, which is not depicted tragically, indicates the poet's hope for the rebirth of his personality and the repetition of his deeds among the new generation whose heroic codes should be similar to Beowulf's in terms of ambitions, morals, and achievements.

On another level, Grendel's mother's conduct identifies with the other gender roles, so she forms the main threat and challenge that might undermine Beowulf's power, achievements, and confidence to earn favor with the Danes. Hennequin (2008) acknowledges that "she crosses gender lines and performs the functions of warrior, avenger, and king, all generally associated only with men...; rather, she is presented as a noble and brave opponent and even as a somewhat sympathetic character" (p. 504). She remains excluded from society, and the poet addresses her with some abnormal characteristics that subvert gender roles and violate stereo typicality. The poet introduces two prominent functions for women in the poem: Wealhtheow who represents the strong personality but still revolves within the realm of the peace-weaving sphere, and Grendel's mother who forms a source of menace in defending her rights that creates a considerable distraction and breaks peace in society. Butler debates gender performativity as an oriented act of people's social conduct. She argues that "gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex" (Butler, 1990, p.6). According to Butler, gender is a cultural production, but Grendel's mother's conduct defies the binary opposition of gender construction and is not consistent with the performativity that Butler states when depicting her transgression. Some critics deny the monstrous characteristic of Grendel's mother although they agree on her exceptional physical strength. For instance, Temple focuses some of the discussion on explaining the word "ides" and its negative connotation and expands its meaning to include the representation of Eve and her lineage in literature. She explains, "*Ides* is most strikingly associated with Cain, his descendants' wives, his own wife, and his mother. Eve, the mother of Cain, is, like Grendel's mother, an *ides* who bore a murderer" (Temple, 1986, p.15).

Temple extends the negative sense to Cain's mother and his descendants' wives in a mismatched comparison as Eve never advocates nor promotes Cain's faults. Grendel's mother's main fault is vindictiveness and irresponsible murder, but the poet shows some sympathy toward her when she has become a source of danger only after the murder of her son.

Grendel's mother derives her emotional and physical strength from the anguish she suffers after the death of her son. She progresses through the maternal bond and love or duty that is generally effaced in other spaces by prioritizing heroic ethos. Her heart bears misery and becomes full of hatred toward the people in Heorot as responsible for Grendel's perishability. Therefore, insisting on vengeance is the main reason for her emergence that only serves this goal. By noticing the immediate context for her motives and reasonings, Acker (2006) confirms that "Grendel's mother thus appears on the scene as a kind of feminine antitype" (p. 704). Indeed, the fight with Beowulf shows her extraordinary powerful strength that demands him to prepare at great length before the confrontation. Burdorff examines Beowulf's preparation for the battle with Grendel and compares it to his prudent readiness for confronting Grendel's mother. In fact, "Beowulf forgoes weapons against Grendel, the poem spends over twenty lines describing the hero's arming himself against the woman" (Burdorff, 2014, p.99). Beowulf reveals the battle techniques and strategies, but he does not guarantee the results or victory; therefore, he gives many commandments on how to distribute his treasures in case he dies in the fight. Beowulf proclaims in a solemn and emphatic manner, "gif mechildnime/ swylceþúðámádmás, þéþúmésealdest" [If the war takes me, so to you is the precious treasures that you gave me] (lines 1481-1482). In confronting Grendel's mother, he discloses his concerns and uncertainty about winning the battle or killing her; conversely, he expects defeat and death. When analyzing the poem from line 1441 to line 1454 that describe Beowulf's arming himself against Grendel's mother with three pieces of armor which are chainmail shirt, his helmet, and Hrunting, Reynolds (2015) thinks that the "focus in this passage is not on the active warrior but on the armor, a moment of defeated expectation" (p. 49). In addition, the text indicates that "Beowulf recedes into the background, implying uncertainty about his ability to confront the monster" (Reynolds, 2015, p. 49). On the other hand, the poet neither touches upon Grendel's mother's preparation and readiness for the combat nor exposes her fears of the encounter or death expectancy. In discussing the preparations for the fight, Cavell (2014) states that Grendel and his mother as "monsters come equipped with an inherent defence that aligns their bodies with the manmade world of constructed objects" (p. 163). Although Grendel's mother is introduced as fierce in combat and determined to achieve goals regardless of the results, she does not expect the fight in her den underwater, so perhaps this method of surprise is the main reason for her loss.

Beowulf experiences a fierce battle with Grendel's mother, in which he barely survives before exterminating her. She has a good reason for the fight, a fact that creates a general feeling of sympathy for her as she becomes mad after the death of her son. His death forms the main reason for her appearance in the events, so her function is to resume his obligation as a source of disturbance and chaos. Oswald (2009) thinks that "Grendel's mother is the genesis for Grendel; without her, Heorot would not have suffered Grendel's constant attacks" (p.64). Oswald indicates that Grendel's mother is the main supporter of her son's feud even throughout her initial disappearance from the scene before his death. She substitutes her son's role, but she only chooses to kill elite people, such as the counselor of the king, whereas Grendel manages to snatch and murder anyone he finds for twelve years. The poet maintains a constant equation where her son's absence entails her advent to events while his initial existence does not require her presence. Overall, the poet keeps this source of killing and chaos constant over a considerable part of the poem by replacing and supplementing different gender roles. Hennequin (2008) argues that "Grendel's mother is assumed to be a poor warrior because war is not a proper activity for women. But in the encounter at Heorot, her formidable skill is obliquely implied" (p. 506). When she invades Heorot, her choices of murder are excruciating; she chooses to murder Æschere, one of Hrothgar's loyal warriors and one of the most important statesmen. Hrothgar announces, "sorh is geniwod/ Denigealéodumdeád is Æschere/ ... mínrúnwitaondmínraédbora" [Sorrow is renewed to the Danish inhabitants; Æschere is dead, ... my confidant and my trusted counselor] (lines 1322-1323, 1325). Paz (2013) investigates the reasons behind killing Æschere precisely and thinks that in this incident "herein lies her agency — an agency that is linked to her killing of Æschere" (pp. 236-237). She validates the agency when she proves her strength and capability to the community of Heorot as a technique by choosing the most powerful warrior to instill a spirit of fear in them for more killing and revenge. Moreover, she selects a man who is similar to her in one way that he does not have a name because "perhaps Æschere is not a name at all" (Paz, 2013, p.234). As a result, Grendel's mother manages to unweave all peace efforts that are achieved by Wealhtheow and Beowulf for the Danes, so the desperate situation is restored, and their future turns gloomy anew.

The mission of snatching fierce warriors constitutes a bold step to conduct a successful maneuver by threatening and attacking a place that is full of ferocious fighters. During the confrontations, Grendel's mother fights barehandedly, trusting herself and believing in her abilities. Beowulf as a "bewaépned men" [an armed man] (line 1284) suffers the most "wíggryrewifes" [war-violence of woman] (line 1284) who fights without weapons. The poet describes how the first round of fighting yields in Grendel's mother's triumph: "ofsætþáþoneselegystondhyreseaxgeteah" [then she bestrode the guest in her hall-visitor, and drew her one-edged sword] (line 1545).

Some criticism debates the sexual connotation implied in this line when she "bestrides" him, riding his chest, but I think it depicts her initial and temporary triumph. For example, Oswald (2009) contends that the fight between Beowulf and Grendel's mother has a sexual nature, and her performance as a phallic mother obliges him to conceal details from people in Heorot about the combat to distract attention from a woman fighter (p. 63). Furthermore, Taranu (2020) thinks that this position is both "dangerous and embarrassing, and ... uncomfortable" (p. 193) because she as a phallic mother symbolically castrates him even without inserting her sword into his body (Oswald, 2010, p. 96). In decisive moments during combat, every fighter thinks about his or her own survival and victory, where these priorities expel thinking lustfully of an enemy during warfare; what Grendel's mother conducts is an attack but not rape. Indeed, Beowulf jeopardizes his life during the raid, and the poet affirms his suffering: "HæfdeðáforsíðodsunuEcgbéowes" [Then he, the son of Edgetheow, could have perished] (line 1550). He comes back from the mere with a part of Grendel's dismembered corpse as evidence of defeating the monster, while his chivalry as a medieval knightly moral code prevents him from bringing any part of Grendel's mother's body as evidence of her death. Nevertheless, Oswald indicates that Beowulf intentionally covers details about his fight with her because he never wants to jeopardize his Anglo-Saxon masculinity by revealing details: "Beowulf reacts to the powerful figure of this archaic mother by covering her up both in the mere and with the reports he offers" (Oswald, 2009, p. 64). Therefore, she remains invisible and elusive in that she is always unseen when snatching fighters at night, living in the darkness of the pond, and fighting underwater. The description of her performance during the battle discloses the superpower that blurs her gender boundaries and transcends them to the other end and brings her close to supernatural forces.

The poet also identifies both Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother's idiosyncratic gender performativity in terms of dress and mannerism. Grendel's mother's appearance is accompanied by misery that marks her psychological and mental state, while Wealhtheow's semblance is associated with beauty and wearing gold. Their mental and physical states are connected with their roles in society, and the poet provides a solid background about the origin of Grendel's mother to justify any horror that she causes later. She "þewætereges anwunianscolde" [had to inhabit the dreadful water] (line 1260) since she is a descendant of a cursed ancestor. Therefore, she first "yrmþegemunde" [remembered misery] (line 1259) and contemplates how to revenge for the death of her son. The poet introduces her with extraordinary power that she can live in a cold den underwater and considers her mission toward people's land as a sorrowful journey. Then Grendel's "módrþágýt/ gífreondgalgmóðgegánwolde/ sorhfulnesíð, sunudéodwrecan" [(his) mother now is greedy and gloomy in mind who wished to go forth in a sorrowful journey to revenge the death of her son] (lines 1276-1278). The image of horror accompanies her since she has left the mere, and this portrayal foreshadows chaos and disorder that entertain her. People in Heorot are surprised by her presence after the victory celebration and pessimistically realize that forces of evil are constant and renewed. Thus, the poet generates a sense of hatred against her and her son through their physical description and the way they live underwater as "ellorgaéstas" [alien or mysterious spirits] (line 1349) that strip them of their humanistic features.

Compared to Grendel's mother's underwater den, Wealhtheow as one of "foldbúende" [earth-dwellers] (line 1355) lives in a palace, respected and beloved by her people for her prudence and kind qualities that lead to political stability and social prosperity. She gives powerful speeches that aspire to maintain peace around the kingdom, and her wise words express soberness and aim at reconciliation and rejection of segregation. Wealhtheow substitutes the role of the king in addressing the public and the retinue. So, similar to her body which is adorned with jewelry and gold, her mind is anointed with reason and wisdom. Giving a speech to the public was not an easy task, especially for women in the Anglo-Saxon era when the society was extremely patriarchal that followed male leaders and rulers. Overing and Bennett (1990) state, "Most studies explore Anglo-Saxon women's relation to power. Of course, there is no question of equality or near equality between the sexes" (p. 16). However, when Wealhtheow gives a speech, the whole retinue of the sovereign listens eagerly to her words because she performs a supporting role in managing the kingdom's issues, especially in the struggles against Grendel and his mother later due to the exceptional power that King Hrothgar vested in her. On one occasion, "Heal swégeonféng / Wealhðeomaþelodehéo fore þaémweredespræc" [The hall becomes full of sound again and noise (Everyone cheers for her entry). Wealhtheow spoke, and spoke in front of the retinue] (lines 1214-1215).

Indeed, Wealhtheow “spræc /mildumwordum swá sceal man dóön” [speaks with gentle words, as a man should do] (lines 1171-1172) to her people; in return, the nation needs such gentility of words and wisdom during times of turmoil and fierce wars. Olesiejko (2014) states, “Judith Butler’s gender theory makes it possible to deconstruct Wealhtheow’s speech, carrying a diegetic interpretation of Hildeburh’s story, as veiling a genealogy of gender politics in the heroic world” (p. 106). Olesiejko thinks that Wealhtheow’s speech is heroic, but it marginalizes her as a female speech-giver. It also implies a story that entails a heroic masculine world. Wealhtheow’s rhetoric solidifies the social relationships between the ruler and his nation. Therefore, as a cup-bearer and peace-weaver, it is not necessary to get married to a foreign king to make peace; this sociopolitical function can take place within the society itself by making the retinue and noblemen gather around the king through the power of words, not the power of muscles such as the efforts of chivalrous warriors and kings.

Contrary to Grendel’s mother whose role is to take lives, Wealhtheow functions to enhance and guard lives through peace promotion and cup-bearing custom which implies food provision and supplies. As a tradition, sometimes she provides nourishment and beverages to the inhabitants of the hall who gather for feasts, celebrations, and purposeful meetings. Neidorf (2017) finds out that one of the interpretations of “Wealhtheow’s name is ... beloved servant” (p. 78) who serves food and drinks to others in formal situations and victory celebrations. In contemplating the relationship between domestic labor and mentioning explicit names of servers in the poem, Ferhatović (2019) affirms that “[n]on-aristocratic characters do not figure importantly in the plot” (p. 67), and they remain nameless. Based on this observation, “Wealhtheow’s famous serving the hero with drink appears more ritualistic than vocational” (Ferhatović, 2019. p. 67). Therefore, her services to people do not align her with an inferior position, and cup-bearing is a ceremonial task that honors those who perform it. Sebo and Schilling (2021) state that “the intermediary social position of the peace-weaver [is] a position usually fulfilled by aristocratic women in political marriages” (p. 638). Apart from performing these multiple duties, Wealhtheow gives donations and treasures where these procedures supersede the king’s function either in his presence or absence. Implementing this task and pursuing it add more to her responsibilities and require her to remain alert to the equitable distribution according to different occasions. This deed of benevolence reveals her philanthropy and goodwill for others, where her generosity implicates shrewdness and practical knowledge of politics. Donating to needy people helps the king in maintaining the monarchy and extending the legacy he gets from his ancestors. She favors giving treasures to Beowulf as rewards for eliminating the sources of evil rather than adopting him since she plans to maintain the monarchy in her offspring. In the Anglo-Saxon period, it was not acceptable for someone to rule over another kingdom regardless of the efforts he puts forth. Olesiejko (2014) documents, “When Beowulf has defeated Grendel, not only does Hrothgar express his gratitude, but, expressing deep affection, he adopts Beowulf. Hrothgar wants Beowulf, the best of men, to become his son” (p. 107). If this resolution was passed officially, it would complicate the social structure and political situation in the kingdom and foreshadow internal struggle or civil disobedience. Wealhtheow, in return, expresses her fears regarding this decision that threatens the stability of the royal family. She condemns her husband’s decision to take Beowulf as a son and hand him the command of the army. She angrily wonders, “Me man sægde þæt þu ðe for sunu wolde / hererinchabban” [It is said to me that you wished to have this warrior as a son and a leader of the army] (lines 1175-1176). This decision would forfeit the throne of his ancestors and descendants and create political upheaval in the kingdom, so it would also squander all her attempts of peace weaving.

Her insightful visions deepen political and social stability, where she reminds the king of his obligations and duty toward his kinsmen. She safeguards her son’s inheritance and secures his future and her nation’s prosperity by disapproving of adopting Beowulf as a leader. In the moment of great happiness after Beowulf has ensured the safety of the kingdom, Hrothgar needs this reminder not to be reckless in making an unsound decision. In fact, Wealhtheow also protects the legacy of Hrothulf, Hrothgar’s nephew, that if Hrothgar dies before Hrethric reaches the legal age to ascend to the throne, it is Hrothulf’s right to claim the throne according to the Anglo-Saxon’s political laws and traditions. Drout analyzes Wealhtheow’s suggestion about the possibility of Hrothulf succeeding king Hrothgar, relying on Klaeber’s interpretations that Hrothulf maybe usurped the throne. Drout (2007) states, “Wealhtheow’s insistence upon him as protector for her sons seems at the least ill fated, if not foolish” (p. 220). In addition, Dockray-Miller (2000) thinks that Wealhtheow as a good mother, and in a similar way to Hygd’s realization, “wants to keep her sons off the throne in order to keep them safe” (p. 106) from possible political turmoil and then the specter of wars and death. Conversely, I think that she suggests Hrothulf as a protector for the sons, not as a permanent ruler because she knows that the bond of blood alone is insufficient for inheriting the throne. Her sons are too young for ruling the kingdom and still lack wisdom and experience. Drout (2007) thinks that her diplomacy is confusing and renders it not easy to speculate if her first loyalty is to her sons or to their cousin (p. 221), but I think that she becomes well-versed in politics and manipulates the system to maintain power in her sons ultimately. She demands a peaceful transition of power; this mission requires wisdom

and prudence as high mental skills that are not less important than the physical strength and combat skills that Grendel's mother has shown and proven all along. In spite of her exceptional roles and superior qualities on multiple levels, Wealhtheow does not violate gender norms in that patriarchal society in the same way that Grendel's mother does. She sometimes circulates within the domestic sphere, in which despite being a queen, she cannot make a decision without the approval of the king although she is capable to.

Hrothgar as a king and as a husband possesses power in making decisions, so she is aware of these possibilities and constraints. She brilliantly balances duties and aspirations within the privileges and limitations of traditional gender roles.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the poet of *Beowulf* introduces two types of women whose gender roles in society exist at opposite far ends on multiple levels. Wealhtheow's character is meant to bring peace and order to society, whereas Grendel's mother disrupts this function and causes violence, terror, and disorder. Wealhtheow represents a woman with multiple capabilities, that she is a faithful wife, caring mother, skillful queen, speech giver, and peace-weaver. Her personality demonstrates the beauty of the shape and mind, unlike Grendel's mother who represents disgust through her physical description or behavior. Wealhtheow exemplifies an archetypal example of noble femininity who takes an advantage of her social role to the fullest extent but within the limits of the patriarchal system and its authoritarianism. In contrast, Grendel's mother unbridles social limitations on gender performativity to exist at any possible end for the sake of satisfying her desire for vindictiveness. The poem touches on some other female characters who have secondary roles in performing similar tasks such as Hygd and Hildeburh who also have daughters but do not interact with. However, the focus is not on the significance of the social bonds among these women as much as the poet prioritizes other prevailing subjects such as focalizing fighting and heroic spirit. Therefore, Dockray-Miller (2000) notes, "There is no social world in *Beowulf* outside the hall and the heroic ethos, so there is no space for mothers and daughters to create a female community" (p. 100). As for Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother's stereotypical and atypical roles, the poet constructs these two prototypes in order to create a balanced environment in the epic, in which one's behavior contradicts and covers the transgression and the conflicting attitude of the other. The poet spends a considerable part of the poem discussing their conduct and performance to lay down the features of women's roles in Anglo-Saxon society.

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