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## **A secret cunning in the fens: Subversive female identity and the plight of Grendel's mother**

Candice Rae Sequine Roark

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A SECRET CUNNING IN THE FENS: SUBVERSIVE FEMALE  
IDENTITY AND THE PLIGHT OF GREDEL'S MOTHER

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English Composition

---

by  
Candice Rae Sequine Roark  
June 2012

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Candice Rae Sequine Roark

June 2012

Approved by:

  
David Marshall, Ph.D., Chair, English

  
Chad Luck, Ph.D.

  
David Carlson, Ph.D., Graduate Coordinator

June 5, 2012  
Date

## ABSTRACT

Readings built upon the foundation of traditional gender studies and structural binaries have consistently influenced how scholars understand female identity in Early Medieval Germanic texts such as *Maxims I and II*, *Saga of the Völsungs*, and *Beowulf*. This thesis endeavors to dismantle these traditional readings and consider ways in which female identity can be reexamined within a post-structural framework. The thesis highlights their ambiguity and their extra-textual positioning alongside a rich historical context of social practices and traditions. This work therefore concludes that female identity remains a fluid, unfixed construction that must be examined beyond the use of binaries and hierarchal gender relations that have dominated much of the scholarship of Anglo-Saxon literature.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE FEMALE ROLE IN GNOMIC POETRY

Gnomic poetry, a genre of literature in medieval England, comprises the sententious sayings and aphoristic verse of Anglo-Saxon culture. As the Anglo-Saxons exhibited a yearning to question and understand the essence of life, this wisdom literature proverbially provided answers and moral instruction for both man and woman. As this genre proves to be a source of great tension, for example the strain of attempting to bridge a pagan culture with that of a developing awareness of Christianity, one area in particular speaks directly to the gender roles function in the Anglo-Saxon society. Through a closer examination of the function of gender in the gnomic poetry I would like to argue that there exists a manifestation of a cultural and literary structure that clearly defines the social expectations for the female, thus playing a significant role in shaping the female identity and its subsequent reception by both the audience and academics. These social expectations of the female include the practice of propriety and asexual femininity. This chapter in particular will explore the variety of didactic ways in which the Maxims function as the framework around which the gender roles are structured, specifically that of the queen and the Frisian wife as complementing the male role and the punitive consequences therein of invoking an identity that in any way resembles a carnal sexuality.

It proves a lengthy and arduous academic venture to study and analyze the Anglo-Saxon corpus particularly because of its entangled history of unknown authors, unascertained dates of production, numerous translations, and marked cultural and religious transformations over a substantial amount of time. In regards to the Maxims, I concur with many academics regarding the characteristics unique to the collection of this specific genre. Academics of Anglo-Saxon poetry agree that the genre of Maxims, or gnomic poetry, exhibits an understanding and awareness of an adjusting society. All agree on the presence of an overwhelming didacticism and prescriptivism. All agree that the works speak to the specific roles of the Anglo-Saxon people and their specific cultural mindset. However, despite an extant and substantial body of Anglo-Saxon poetry and its respective scholarly work there remains sufficient exploration of the construction of the female identity and its ambiguous poetic crevices embedded deep within the multiple translations, which beg to be revisited.

Peter Hunter Blair's *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* showcases the secondary status that many academics have relegated gnomic poetry to. However, Blair also highlights what remains increasingly important to the genre, its prescriptivism and contribution to the communal wisdom of the Anglo-Saxon people. He writes, "Among the other minor poems in the *Exeter Book* are a number of variously didactic, homiletic, or aphoristic in purpose...These last [Maxims] are in the form of brief, aphoristic sayings sometimes setting forth the



proverbial wisdom of folklore, sometimes defining the properties of things, and sometimes defining virtues or vices” (Blair 345). Aside from Blair’s limiting discourse of ‘minor’ and ‘sometimes’ in referencing the Maxims, the assertion that the poetry ‘defines’ ultimately prevails here. Therefore, reading and understanding the Maxims as the principles by which Anglo-Saxon communities define and regulate themselves inherently demands acknowledgement due to their unique social and historical context. With this in mind, this chapter will closely examine Maxims I and II and dismantle readily accepted stereotypes and culturally assumed roles of female identity that are complementarily constructed to that of the male, not only in order to call attention to a problematic academic practice of reading the Maxims, but also to shed a reinvigorated light on how this affects the ambiguous spaces of female identity in both *Saga of the Völsungs* (chapter two) and *Beowulf* (chapter 3), the characters of Brynhild and Grendel’s mother particularly.

More recently scholars have recognized a need to reexamine our basic assumptions of female identity within the Anglo-Saxon framework. For example, Dolores Warwick Frese’s “Wulf and Eadwacer: The Adulterous Woman Reconsidered” highlights the discrepancies between the façade of supposed equality between men and women and the existent reality of inequality. Frese cleverly quips of the promoted neutrality, “But for women who participate fully in the terrestrial, secular experience of the Anglo-Saxon world they inhabit, the universal refrain might well be *Ungelic is us* ‘It is otherwise for us; our destiny

different” (Frese 273). Extending Frese’s discussion to the Maxims highlights the textual moments of deviation from and subversion of the assumed female role, while also considering the effects on female identity. More specifically an impartial emphasis fixates predominately on female sexuality causing it to become a tangible attribute that the male complement both yearns for and fears.

While the Maxims proffered advice and wisdom through sententious sayings for a medieval audience, caution must be taken when tending to them. Our 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural perspective has been accustomed to a different lens and value system. In that case, if a certain level of cultural awareness and sensitivity cannot be garnered then any resulting scholarship will be severely discredited. However, these niches of intrigue and ambiguity result in a conversation regarding how we read and understand subsequent literature. According to Loren C. Gruber a task of setting apart the Anglo-Saxon value system from ours remains within reach, but requires that “we must likewise attend to the words and their contexts in the older manuscripts before we draw any more intuitional inferences concerning their epistemological strata” (Gruber 25). Gruber continues that even this can be problematic because translation from Old English to Modern English affects meaning and context, while disagreement continues to persist in the scholarly community regarding what exactly the aphoristic verse of the Exeter Gnomes (Maxims I) and the Cotton Maxims (Maxims II) achieves or speaks to (Gruber 26).

Examining the textual role of female identity in the Maxims unveils both a literary and cultural structure upon which the foundation for the complementary nature of both men's and women's roles rests. This foundation proves to include a wide spectrum of topics relating to gender construction within the Maxims. For example S.A.J. Bradley explains as a preface to his translation, "The prescriptive statements of Maxims do indeed cover a wide and broadly coherent range of circumstances...[one of which being] the propriety of station according to social rank, sex, and virtue" (Bradley 345). Ranging from the participation in vice to the differing roles of, say, a queen and a wife there certainly exists a space in which the discussion of female identity can more fully develop. That being said both S.A.J. Bradley's and Louis J. Rodrigues' translations share a general consensus that the texts have a broad range and do address the roles of the Anglo-Saxon male and female roles.

There are two significant themes prevalent throughout the discussion of societal roles and, more specifically, gender-centered roles: Nature and Religion. A more pragmatic explanation would recognize two separate, but colliding philosophical worlds of the Anglo-Saxon people, one being Christianity and the other Pagan. While obviously true, the poetic implications foster a tone of inevitability and natural order. "Two are mates. / Man and wife shall bring into the world / children through birth" (Rodrigues 23-25). The wife, the female, functions biologically as the counterpart of the male and the discussion of progeny and procreation establishes the natural order of things in the likeness of God. In

addition to creation, through the vehicle of the male and the female, death also has a natural order, completed at the hand of God. "The ordaining Lord alone knows where death will go when it departs hence out of our ken. / New-born complements when disease first takes away.../ Foolhardy is the man who does not know his Lord, so often does death come unpremeditated" (Bradley 25-35). The phases of human life and death can now be seen as addressing Christian propriety and regard. As seen in its reverence of the omnipotent knowledge of the Lord and the doubt cast on those who do not follow this newer faith of the Anglo-Saxons, ignorance and a lack of enlightenment absorbs the non-believer. Striking this balance of life and death, creation and nurture, the women's role thus comes to instantiate living as a Christian and accepting the unpredictability of the human life created by God, and as correlating with the role of the male.

Examining the roles as individual of one another provides an even clearer perspective on the construction of identity. The male identity becomes one associated with all that the Anglo-Saxons hold as courageous and honorable in their community. The young male evolves and cognitively develops into the model Anglo-Saxon man, complemented by that of the ideal female. Rodrigues translates:

One shall teach a young man,  
encourage and urge him to know well, until one has subdued him.  
Let him be given food and clothing till he be brought to  
understanding.

He shall not be rebuked as a child before he can reveal himself;  
he shall then prosper among people because he will be bold and  
brave. (Rodrigues 45-49)

The male's role in society functions as a warrior in some capacity and thus requires a great deal of courage and steadfast respect by others in the community. Asserted by the speaker of the poem, this consistent instruction and 'subduing' of the young male will result in that respect and bravery. The notion of being "brought to understanding" strikes an intriguing chord here. Nowhere else do the poems emphasize encouragement and understanding on behalf of the female; the male remains to be the only societal member who can actively participate in his functioning and developing identity upon achieving a particular level of perception of his own cultural societal significance. Bradley, in fact, produces a selfsame translation, utilizing the word *understanding*. Subsequent to the young man, the male king or warrior too will experience trials and tribulations throughout, but the comparison with Nature used by the speaker implies that order will be restored and the male will overcome any impediments. Rodrigues translates:

As the sea is serene  
when the wind wakes it not,  
so are tribes tranquil when they come to terms.  
They settle in safety, and then amid comrades,  
brave men hold a natural sovereignty. (Rodrigues 54-58)

The concept of 'natural sovereignty' betwixt the male warriors and tribes creates a significant disruption to the assumed balance and equality of the male and female, as the role of God seems now immediately inconsequential, shifting a great deal of reverence to the natural, supreme power of the Anglo-Saxon male.

As the male's role assumes power and control the female's role bears a shift to terms of mere propriety, "It befits a wife to sit at her embroidery; / a gadding woman generates gossip, she often defames herself with vice; / men speak of her with contempt; her cheek often fades." (Rodrigues 62-4). The Maxims facilitate a full-fledged commentary on female propriety and the resulting perception of mistaken sexual promiscuity, but most emphatically proffers the first mentioned implications due to deviation from the assumed roles of the male and female. Both Bradley's and Rodrigues' translations coincide on the text's description of female impropriety and punitive consequences thereof. The result reading as: the *gadding/roving* female who *defames herself/gives rise to talk* directly resulting from her participation with *vice/sordid things* which causes men to *speak with contempt* or *insultingly* and the female's *fading cheek* and her *complexion decays* (Bradley and Rodrigues). In either creating a promiscuous perception or having that perception actualized the female becomes subjected to the long-term punitive consequences influenced by the male population's conjectures of her behavior. Under the assumption of elicited shame, the female will be forced to "walk in the shade" (Rodrigues 66) and, therefore, be without the

support of other individuals or Nature's light. This construction of the assumed roles prevails all-throughout the Maxims.

How then can we begin to better understand the assumed role of the female in light of these significant differences and punitive consequences? How does her sexuality begin to solely constitute her identity within the parameters of society, as illustrated above? A sexually-centered female identity allows the speaker of the poem to leverage and achieve the desirable characteristics of propriety and peace weaving, a complement to the Anglo-Saxon male role, through specific reference to and reverence of the implications for subversion. In other words the punitive framework surrounding indecent or unacceptable behavior will inherently manifest itself in a discursive practice of female identity. The attention paid to punitive consequences for the female highlights the reality of her possible deviance. No longer strictly limited to biological functionality, a female's sexual role can sever her individual agency while calling attention to the male's combined fear and desire of that role. Eventually, in instances of deviation and subversion, the female's identity must then be constructed in the metaphorical fens of society.

The sections focusing on the roles of the queen and the Frisian wife are an ideal place to further the discussion of the binary of womanhood and the complications therein. Of the queen Rodrigues translates:

A king shall buy his queen with goods,  
with beakers and bracelets. First they must both

be generous with gifts. Warlike valour grown  
strong in an *eorl*, the woman shall thrive,  
loved by the tribe. She shall be cheerful,  
keep counsel, and be liberal  
with horses and treasures. At the mead-drinking  
always everywhere before the band of comrades  
she shall greet the protector of *æthelings* first;  
quickly offer the first cup to the prince's hand  
and know wise counsel for the two of them  
together in their household. (Rodrigues 11-22)

At first glance the passage provides details regarding the appropriate behavior customary of a queen. These behaviors are exemplified in the bestowal of valued treasures to warriors, e.g., horses or jewels, having a disposition of resilient cheerfulness, and offering counsel and guidance best suiting the king, the princes, and the warriors. However, it is worth noting that the role of a royal female at this time was a precarious and ambiguous one. For many years leading up to the Norman Conquest, predominantly that between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the historical records are inconsistent and bleak at best regarding the role of queens. Pauline Stafford builds upon this absence in her work entitled, "The King's Wife in Wessex, 800-1066," and calls attention to the emphasis placed on tradition and personality during a time when the Anglo Saxon queen lacked complete political sway. Stafford writes of notable Mercian queens, "The



unique position of Æthelflæd of Mercia was a product of personality acting upon traditions which had their origins in dynastic insecurity and succession strategies...Royal marriage practices were conducive neither to individual security nor importance for the king's wife" (Stafford 58). For the Queen her role as peace-weaver thus bears such importance because of its stringent necessity to reinforce and nurture the kingdom and its respective alliances and prosperity; specifically the male role benefits from this reinforcement. For our specific passage of the queen, the tradition and role of peace-weaver therefore reigns supreme.

Beyond the façade of a power or individual agency the queen's role as peace-weaver, or *Freoðuwebbe* in the Old English vernacular, in this specific passage serves as a traditional and dependent substructure to the role of the male king. L. John Skulte, in "Freoðuwebbe in Old English Poetry," best defines the weaver of peace, "she gives jewels to honor her guests and to enhance the reputation for magnanimity at her particular court. Like the angel, she speaks words of friendship and words of prophesy although she herself may not realize fully the implications of her admonitions" (Skulte 208). The role then of peace-weaving serves more of a diplomatic function, entirely dependent upon the political actions and violent tendencies of the male. The terrestrial trope of the male warrior and the diplomatic, peaceful female appears in Anglo-Saxon literature as Skulte and countless other scholars have pointed out. However, emphasis must be placed on the workings of poetic metaphor rather than

historical reality. Skulte insists, "Freoðuwebbe does not necessarily reflect a Germanic custom of giving a woman in marriage to a hostile tribe in order to secure peace. Rather it resembles a poetic metaphor referring to the person whose function it seems to be to perform openly the action of making peace by weaving to the best of her art a tapestry of friendship and amnesty" (Skulte 208). Extending the desirable activity of the Anglo-Saxon female, embroidery, to the social customs of queens beautifully illustrates the construction of identity. The queen brings the feminine skill of weaving to the political sector to weave together the 'friendship and amnesty' required in the tapestry of Anglo-Saxon society. Female queens are thus seen as encouraging the embrace and practice of the generous and wise attributes as to fortify the assumed roles of the male and female.

Bearing a much more domestic and erotic undertone the text dedicated to that of the Frisian wife addresses specific societal expectations of her:

His vessel has come, and her man is at home,  
her own provider; and she bids him come in,  
washes his sea-stained gear, gives him fresh weeds.  
grants him on land what his love demands.

A wife shall keep faith with her man. Woman is often accused of vice. (Rodrigues 26-30)

In all of its simplicity, this passage bears a straightforward description of a Frisian wife. Supplementing the role of the male warrior whom we understand as

returning from war or battle, the wife's identity exists primarily in her domestic and sexual behaviors. In addition to washing and clothing her husband, she submits entirely to the male's eroticized demands. The Frisian wife submits entirely to the male's eroticized demands; '[she] grants him on land what his love demands' (Rodrigues 29). Her complementary role revolves around catering to that of the established male role. The punitive consequence for betraying or deviating from the female role deserves attention here. Recalling the aforementioned embroidery passage, once the female moves beyond her boundary of propriety, here situated domestically while her husband remains away, can give rise to talk through any inappropriate actions or behaviors, thus being "accused of vice" (Rodrigues 30).

This specific passage provides insight into the cultural and literary construction of the Anglo-Saxon female. However, while the text asserts a queen's long-standing power struggle and a Frisian wife subject to the rule of her husband, the Anglo-Saxon female in general actually experienced a freedom roughly equal to that of the male up until the Norman Conquest. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen explain, "Women [generally speaking] could own property and inherit and dispose of it at their will; they could free slaves; and they had the power of naming land they owned. One deleterious effect of the Norman Conquest was the weakening of their 'independent status,' a status, as Lady Stenton argues, women were never fully to regain" (Damico and Olsen 14). This must be kept in mind insofar that the medieval view and socio-economic

position of the Anglo-Saxon female remains unclear and troubling. Furthermore the Anglo-Saxon female functions as the domestic foundation upon which the male society operates. In this regard we can reexamine how the sexual identity of that female constitutes her whole identity in this passage, further speaking to the deviation thereof.

Though functioning still quite differently publicly, the queen and Frisian wife as females are not differentiated beyond immediate acts suiting their societal role. Both females must serve as peace weavers: publicly as the queen exemplifies and privately (erotically) as shown by the Frisian wife. The immediate context of the male-centered instruction surrounding this comparison reads as multifaceted and highlights the creation of a disadvantaged and limited female identity. Rodrigues translates:

Long is the sailor away on voyage, yet one shall ever await a  
beloved,  
await what he cannot hasten for. When he is given the chance,  
he will come home again, if he lives unharmed, unless the sea  
stays him,  
the ocean has him in its clutches. A maid is the joy of her  
possessor.  
A wealthy man will sell his goods, and the king quarters  
to a man when he comes sailing in.  
He has use of wood and water when a dwelling is granted him;

he buys food, if he need more, ere he grow too faint.

He who eats too seldom will be ill. Though he be led into the sun,  
he cannot endure the open air; though it be warm in summer,  
he is overcome ere he die, if he knows no one to keep him alive  
with food.

Strength shall be nourished with meat; murder be laid underground,  
down beneath the earth, by him who thinks to hide it.

That is no seemly death when it is kept secret.

The humble shall bow down, sickness languish,  
justice flourish. Good counsel is most useful;  
evil most harmful, which the hapless man takes.

Good is powerful and pertains to God.

The mind shall be ruled, the hand controlled;  
sight shall be in the eye, wisdom in the breast  
where man's thoughts are.

Every mouth craves meat; meals shall come on time.

(Rodrigues 33-54)

Understanding the aphoristic instruction of the male remains flexible and open-ended, for beyond the unclear ramifications of "evil most harmful; which the hapless man takes" the punitive guidelines are expressly non-existent. While the passage objectifies the female's identity to that of being possessed by the male, Nature asserts its dominating power by holding the male in its "clutches" while

the king has a unique, terrestrial influence over the survival of those sailing in. The role of the female remains dependent upon the male survival and nourishment beyond her sexual identity or domestic tasks. Maxims offer a unique, yet implicit choice for the female to await the return of her husband, here posited as a circumstance far from the influence of the male himself to change. This characteristic of the social structure becomes reinforced, as the male possesses the female and whose identities are constructed as complementary to one another. The tension becomes palpable; as the female's societal expectations remain unrealized or thwarted.

Punitive implications or societal criticism of the male are quite generalized as seen above while those consequences for the female stem directly and solely from her sexually-based identity, most importantly fueled by an unsupported defamation of the female identity. Thus serving as a cautionary tale for the female and, in turn, the survival of her character Maxims reads, "Many are constant, many are curious, / loving strange men when the other fares afar" (Rodrigues 31-32). Dually noted, Bradley's translation concurs with that of Rodrigues, "Often they will be accused of shameful things. There are many constant ones; there are many promiscuous ones, and they entertain strange men with the other is travelling far away" (Bradley 102). The cautionary qualities, in this sense, become an established discourse of the punitive framework for female agency. As the translations describe, once outward appearances no

longer coincide with the expectations of gender then there will be consequences or questioning of character.

With such severe consequences established and with translations significantly impacting our conventional understanding of the Anglo-Saxon female it proves a worthwhile task to reexamine the literal translations of the texts that we are working with. For example, diction can generate and perpetuate an alternate reading amongst the audience with or without the cultural and/or historical context as support. The flexibility and license of translation can certainly foster the creation of a particular context. Countless scholars have broached the work of Maxims and their analyses have no doubt been constructed through the practice of translation. Provoking an extended look at the look at the construction of female identity, my following translations highlight significant differences and possible interpretations. Though chapter III will discuss Grendel's mother in far great detail, Jane Chance utilizes this same depth of translation in her discussion of "The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*." Chance writes:

Grendel's Mother is also described in human and social terms. She is specifically called a *wif unhýre* 'a monstrous woman, and an *ides ágláécwif* '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. (Chance 249)

Chance's scholarly move here showcases a critical understanding of etymology and its prevalence in translating specific medieval texts such as the Maxims and *Beowulf*. Therefore, I suggest that specific translations have affected our conventional understanding of the text, more specifically the construction and treatment of female identity.

Maxims II houses a unique and troubling example to turn to. In its variable possibilities confront the reader, albeit contradicting possibilities. In its original Old English:

...Ides sceal dyrne cræfte,  
fæmne hire freond gesecean, gif heo nelle on folce gepeon  
þæt hi man beagum gebicge... (Rodrigues 43-45)

A tension exists here insofar that the diction while translating provides a wide range of possibilities for understanding the Anglo-Saxon female. *Ides* can be defined as noblewoman, lady, virgin, or queen; from this the author addresses the female gender. The female *sceal* (43) (shall or must) utilize or associate herself with a level of *dyrne* (43) (hidden, secret, obscure, remote, deceitful, or evil) craft. This type of craft must be used to *gesecean* (44) (strive for, visit, wish for, or look for) her *freond* (44) (friend or lover) when the noblewoman, lady, virgin or queen *nelle* (44) (will not) *gepeon* (44) (prosper, thrive, receive, take, flourish), the end goal being so that someone will purchase her with rings. Read



with the historicity of marriage in mind, this passage does not seem troubling in the least. In many instances a female's pending marriage remained a significant part of her social and financial security and it remained of the utmost importance to do nothing that would threaten her ability to be married off. Thus, this passage's first layer reading as that of the nature of and inevitability of the female's role in marriage and social standing.

Complicating the simplistic reference to marriage, the secret cunning and/or craft called upon for the female sparks an entirely different level of intrigue. As I discovered a variety of definitions for *dyrne*, it seems prevalent that many scholars favor the translation as *secret*. S.A.J. Bradley translates, "The female, the woman, must...with secret cunning..." (Bradley 514). Similarly, Rodrigues translates, "With secret craft a girl, a woman..." (Rodrigues 43-45). As the adjectival use of *secret* has its implications, so does the translation of what the female actively does with the secret cunning and/or craft. *Gescean* translates as "to strive for, to go to, to look for, to visit, or to wish for." Furthermore, *freond* can be translated as friend or lover, whom the female will be addressing with said secret cunning and/or craft. Bradley translates this line as lover while Rodrigues sides with friend. Either way, the notion that the sexuality of the female must be addressed develops throughout the Maxims and culminates here. The inevitability of female sexuality being out of the bounds of the control, through marriage and the purchasing of with rings, results in additional measures to be taken. As seen elsewhere throughout the Maxims, there are punitive

consequences when fundamental values and ideals are thwarted and challenged. This punitive framework establishes a gender-specific discourse for the female identity; female agency of identity thus becomes relegated to secrecy so as to avoid entire social abjection. The entire concept of agency becomes a delicate and precarious state of self-determination coming at the price of societal rejection. The female who does not wish to marry and fulfill her female role within the parameters of acceptable social practice must result to constructing her own unique identity and behaviors secretly.

Though the Maxims largely address both the male and female roles, both together and individually, the punitive consequences and context here are still quite unique for the female role in particular. References to Nature contextually surround the passage, as seen in Rodrigues' translation, "The wood on earth...The hill on the land...The bird shall sport...The salmon...The shower in the skies...The sea must surge with salt...Cattle on the earth..." (Rodrigues 33-46). The immediate context of Nature reinforces a thematic structure of inevitability and certainty, as Nature can be understood as a steady and constant force free from the control of mortal man and far more formidable as such. Furthermore, the passage of secret craft immediately follows references to evil and wrongdoing, Rodrigues translates, "A felon go forth in murky weather. A demon dwell in the fen, / alone in his realm. With secret craft a girl..." (Rodrigues 42-43); Bradley makes use of the words *thief* and *monster* in place of *felon* and *demon*. Keeping historicity and translation in mind thwarting the societally-

expected female role results in a severe lack of agency towards the construction of the female's own identity. The female role, subsumed by its complementary significance to that of the male role, remains too constricted and inflexible creating a female marginalization and disenfranchisement that largely stems from the reception of her sexual identity. With the punitive framework again reinforced, any agency, especially in regards to sexuality for the female, must be relegated to secret cunning. With a 'secret craft' an agency of sorts can be realized as the societal expectations are challenged.

How are specific moments of deviation from the assumed female role addressed? What significance does female sexuality have in the punitive consequences and implications? Lastly, where does this leave the construction of female identity and the notion of individual agency both textually and contextually? These are the specific questions to keep in mind as we turn to the following examples of *Saga of the Völsungs'* Brynhild and *Beowulf's* Grendel's mother. Though Brynhild's subversion of the assumed female role drastically differs from that of Grendel's mother, a glimpse into the specific textual treatment of female identity in the Icelandic prose saga, *Saga of the Völsungs*, will prove invaluable. Brynhild assumes an oft-regarded ambiguous and troubling female role, not uncommonly proliferate within the larger tapestry of early medieval Germanic literature.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BRYNHILD'S VALKYRIE RECLAMATION

“Brynhild took up helmet and mail coat and went to battle. Thus she was called Brynhild” (Skulte 73).

*Saga of the Völsungs'* Brynhild has enjoyed a literary history steeped in intrigue and fascination. This noteworthy female character, unique and powerful in her own right, has repeatedly captivated readers and puzzled academics. Brynhild seemingly controls who she will be married to, yet remains held captive behind a great wall of fire only Sigurd can surpass. Who is this Valkyrie-bride who takes up helmet and mail coat, but also is revered for her fine embroidery? This tradition of study includes Virginia Gildersleeve writing, “Among the characters in the old Volsung legend Brynhild is perhaps the most striking figure. Certainly none of the others has been the source of more disputes among scholars or of the greater inspiration to poets” (Gildersleeve 343). The disputes that Gildersleeve mentions are still continuing today; where does Brynhild fit? Ranging from a Valkyrie-bride to an unrequited lover, Brynhild’s subtle nuances are reason enough to question the traditional assessments of her, for they involve examining the construction of her identity as a female in the text.

Written by an unknown Icelandic author in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, *Saga of the Völsungs* boasts a lineage to Old Norse poetry and tales far preceding it, while being a key source for Richard Wagner’s 19<sup>th</sup> century *Ring des Nibelungen* and

J.R.R. Tolkien's 20<sup>th</sup> century *Lord of the Rings*. As the Valkyrie counterpart of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer, Brynhild at second glance appears as a much more of a contradictory and complicated character. For example, Gail Newman explores in, "The Two Brunhilds," the significant shift of character that Brynhild experiences from Islant to Worms, independent to subservient. Other academics, such as Helen Damico, assert that Brynhild embodies the classic Valkyrie-bride literary figure while Virginia Gildersleeve's work holds steadfastly to the unrequited lover trope. Reassessing Brynhild as one of the narrative's principle female characters provides a clearer understanding of the construction of her identity, her individual role as the agent, and the structural contradictions of her character that continue to puzzle readers of the text. As the punitive framework discussed in chapter 1 most certainly exists here for Brynhild her individual agency undergoes a significant transformation in order to stay intact. She must navigate through the societal expectations and consequences of the dominant male identity to discover the means by which she can actively construct her own identity in the text. I want to argue that though Brynhild's uniquely constructed female identity becomes threatened upon arriving at court she maintains her individual agency, while also escaping complete social abjection, by ultimately taking on the role of the mourning female. Understanding why one of the most assertive and forthright characters in the text eventually assumes a much more passive female role remains a looming question not only because many see this as Brynhild's

acceptance of societal expectations, but because it remains the vehicle with which Brynhild organically dictates her own female identity.

The perplexing nature surrounding Brynhild's character becomes apparent immediately upon her appearance in the text. All that the audience knows at this point amounts to the glorified reputation of Brynhild's wisdom. Nature counsels Sigurd that he, "would be wise to follow their advice. Afterward he should ride to Fafnir's den and take the magnificent hoard of gold which is there, and then ride up to Hindarfell, where Brynhild sleeps. There he will find great wisdom" (Byock 66). Beyond this reference one can only note Brynhild's place as a Valkyrie in Norse mythology. However, Sigurd's discover of Brynhild becomes shrouded with intrigue rather than being the encounter with immediate enlightenment. Sigurd experiences a particular difficulty in placing her gender. As the text reads, "Sigurd went into the rampart and saw a man lying there asleep, dressed in armor. First he removed the helmet from the man's head and saw that it was a woman. She was in a coat of mail so tight that it seemed to have grown into her flesh" (Byock 67). The trouble here does not arise from questioning whether or not Sigurd has in fact found Brynhild at Hindarfell, but rather of Brynhild's dual performances of the societal male and female roles becoming physically entangled and ambiguous. For the narrative to proceed, Sigurd must forcibly cut away her masculine performance to reveal another and rouse Brynhild from her sleep, "He sliced through the armor, down from the neck opening and out through the sleeves, and it cut like cloth" (Byock 67). A Valkyrie, female identity

thus emerges from this metaphorical wrapping to reveal Brynhild. With Brynhild thus awake she recounts her history with Odin, supporting the claim of her being a shield-maiden or Valkyrie.

It must be noted that here Brynhild occupies dual identities as both a mortal female and one of Odin's Valkyrie. As she explains her relegation to Sigurd's immediate environment, the audience can better understand her plight of conflicting roles and identities. This comes to fruition towards the close of the saga as she reclaims her role as Valkyrie and, thus, abandons her role as a mortal female. Upon meeting Sigurd and recounting her history with Odin, any initial impressions of Brynhild become questioned as her punishment at the hand of Odin undermines her status as an immortal Valkyrie. Many academics are in agreement here, as her recounted history in deciding the fate of a battle under the watch of Odin and her imparting wisdom unto Sigurd, and his fate as a great warrior, are made known. Brynhild recounts:

“that two kings had fought. One, called Hjalmgunnar, was old and was a great warrior, and Odin had promised him the victory. The other was Agnar or Audabrodir. ‘I struck down Hjalmgunnar in battle, and Odin stabbed me with a sleeping thorn in revenge. He said I should never afterward have the victory. He also said that I must marry. And I made a countervow that I would marry no one who knew fear.’” (Byock 67)

Brynhild thus supports the claim of her acquired wisdom and identity as a shield-maiden, or Valkyrie. However, knowing the actions of Odin and her relegation to mortal femininity forces a reexamination of Brynhild. Essentially no longer a Valkyrie, Brynhild continues to reassert her agency as such. This can be seen, for example, in her offering of wisdom in the form of maxims and runes to the male protagonist, Sigurd. Brynhild's motives are thus made clear yet again as she explains her insistence at choosing whom she will be married to. It was at this point in Norse mythology that Odin relegates Brynhild to the life of a mortal woman because of her defiance of the social norm for her specific female identity, which the audience observes throughout *Saga of the Völsungs*. Here, Brynhild foretells her resistance to entirely abandon the role of Valkyrie.

As discussed in chapter 1, the genre of gnomic poetry (e.g. Maxims I and II) constitutes a medium through which the value system of the larger society prevails. Those attributes and behaviors addressed in a series of maxims include, but are not limited to, kinship, education, propriety, battle, honor, and gender-specific expectations. Another custom of maxims manifests as one of the principle characteristics of the Norse battle maidens, also known as the Valkyries. At Sigurd's request for wisdom and counsel, one of Brynhild's maxims warns:

It is better to fight with your enemies than to be  
burned at home. And do not swear a false oath,  
because hard vengeance follows the breaking of



truce. Do the right thing by dead men, be they dead from disease, by drowning, or by a weapon. Prepare their bodies with care. And do not trust any man, even though he is young, whose father or brother or close kinsman has been killed by you; often a wolf lies in a young son. Beware of the wives of friends. I see only a little of your future life, yet it would be better if the hate of your in-laws did not descend upon you. (Byock 71)

While immediately before Brynhild warns of even the wives of woman, she ends her refrain here primarily emphasizing the faults of man and Sigurd's impending doom. The prophetic wisdom not only textually functions as a foreshadowing, but also functions as a medium through which Brynhild can continue to exercise her own agency as a Valkyrie. She enlightens Sigurd of the honorable traits and concerns of the ideal warrior: kinship, pride, oaths, funerals, and courage in the face of death. Elsewhere, Brynhild counsels, "Do well by your kinsmen and take little revenge for their wrongdoings. Endure with patience and you will win long-lasting praise. Beware of ill dealings, both of a maid's love and a man's wife" (Byock 71). Elaborating on the propriety of the ideal warrior, Brynhild here discusses legacy and, again, foreshadows Sigurd's death by referencing "a maid's love and a man's wife" (Byock 71). As we later find, Brynhild, as the mortal wife of Gunnar, brings about the demise of Sigurd. She again, reinforces her Valkyrie wisdom and knowledge by sharing the hidden lore of runes with

Sigurd. Simply put, Brynhild prevails in her role as a Valkyrie as seen in her adherence of the customs and expectations of the shield-maiden. Reexamining the textual moments in which Brynhild performs the role of Valkyrie ultimately highlights the conflict that she experiences while attempting to assume the role of mortal wife to Gunnar.

Brynhild's runes offer aphoristic wisdom while nodding to her privileged knowledge as a Valkyrie of the origin and significance of the hidden lore. She exhibits a thorough and considerable understanding of the ways of man and his surrounding environment. These runes, as Brynhild describes, go on:

Beer I give you,  
Battlefield's ruler,  
With strength blended  
And with much glory.  
It is full of charmed verse  
And runes of healing,  
Of seemly spells  
And of pleasing speech. (Byock 67-68)

This first runes dispelled by Brynhild evoke the culture surrounding the Norse warrior. Explained in greater detail momentarily, Brynhild here glorifies the battlefield and the beauty surrounding it by constructing herself as much more of the benevolent Valkyrie. Her runes "of pleasing speech" foster a joyful discussion with Sigurd, explaining the ways to healing and knowledge. She goes on:

Mind runes shall you learn  
If you would be  
Wiser than all men.  
They were solved,  
They were carved out,  
They were heeded by Hropt. (Byock 69)

This particular section establishes the authority of Brynhild here while also providing the origin of the Scandinavian runes. The promise of Sigurd's surpassing the knowledge of many also works in Brynhild's favor. Customary of the Valkyrie tradition, she can then choose the most fearless, desirable warrior as her chosen slain warrior to be guided to Odin and his Valhalla. Making known the maxims and interpreting runes solidifies for Brynhild her identity as the wisest vessel of counsel and a supreme Valkyrie. In all, this intimate exchange of words between Sigurd and Brynhild works on multiple levels. Firstly, it establishes the series of events for Sigurd's future and foreshadows his impending death, up to and including his turbulent and mortal relationship with Brynhild. Secondly, it creates a trust and admiration on Sigurd's part of Brynhild because of her prowess in all things concerning an admirable warrior and man while grooming Sigurd as a choice candidate for Valhalla. Finally, it becomes a singular moment in which we see Brynhild participating as an active participant in shaping her identity, this latter characteristic primarily influencing her newly relegated agency.

With this in mind it proves insightful to note Helen Damico's research of the literary Valkyrie in her work entitled "The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature." Damico writes, "The Valkyries of the Eddic heroic lays are distinctly different in kind. The heroines of these poems—Sigrún, Sváva, Brynhildr, and Guðrún (referentially)—are figures of the royal court, with ties and obligations to a worldly environment...They are wise, keen-witted, and articulate" (Damico 181). When considering this alone, Brynhild undeniably embodies what Damico defines to be the "benevolent Valkyrie" (Damico 176), mortal guardian to the heroic warrior, Sigurd, and peacefully sharing wisdom and offering immortal guidance. Yet Brynhild becomes inextricably involved in Sigurd's earthly exploits and she asserts herself as the mortal and erotic counterpart to Sigurd. Upon receiving the wise counsel of Brynhild Sigurd states, "'No one is wiser than you. And I swear that I shall marry you, for you are to my liking.' She replied: 'I would most prefer to marry you, even should I choose from among all men'" (Byock 71-2). In this light, the complications surrounding Brynhild seem irrelevant and unnecessary insofar that she seemingly does not necessarily subvert the societal expectations of her gender in the text thus far. However, being relegated to mortal femininity drastically affects her participation in an immortal practice; Brynhild begins to exhibit, as the text progresses, an inability to self-identify in a mortal, male-dominated society. The Valkyrie role most certainly can be seen as complementary to that of the male gods and warriors. The shield maiden provides the critical passageway between the terrestrial life of the male warrior

and the immortal, revered mead hall of Valhalla and the Gods. The correlation between the maxims of chapter 1 and the history of Brynhild and Odin clearly support a punitive framework that exists and prevails in the text; Brynhild faces the consequences of her male counterpart upon her rejection of societal expectations. Though Odin does not strip Brynhild of her role as Valkyrie for her benefit, Brynhild's decision to interfere with the fate of the gods affects the constructions of her mortal, female identity thereafter in a way that allows her to assume complete agency in reclaiming her Valkyrie identity.

How then can one explain the Brynhild we encounter towards the close of the text? The same one who shares with Sigurd towards the close of the text, "It is the most grievous of all my sorrows that I cannot bring it about that a sharp blade be reddened with your blood...You do not altogether know my character. You surpass all men, yet no woman has become more loathsome to you than I" (Byock 87) seems a far cry from the patient, "benevolent" Valkyrie of late. I, therefore, am reluctant to leave Brynhild without further considering how her agency as a female character, Valkyrie to mortal woman, becomes so ambiguously entangled, what she ultimately does to resolve it, and how other females in the text differ.

Whereas there is consideration for the benevolent/malevolent Valkyrie binary, the text goes on to highlight a binary of womanhood as exemplified in Brynhild and her sister, Bekkhild. Heimir, the chieftain Sigurd travels to, "was married to the sister of Brynhild, called Bekkhild, because she had stayed at

home and learned needlework and other feminine skills. But Brynhild took up helmet and mail coat and went to battle. Thus she was called Brynhild" (Byock 73). Jesse L. Byock, translator of the *Saga of the Völsungs*, notes, "*Hild* (battle) is a common element in women's names in Old Norse. The element *bekk* literally means bench...*Bryn*, from *brynja*, means mail coat" (Byock 119). Brynhild showcases her ability to also possess skill at 'womanly' characteristics through her embroidery; the text states, "More skilled in handicraft than other women, she embroidered her tapestry with gold and on it stitched stories of the noble deeds that Sigurd had wrought..." (Byock 73). Though taking on much more of the societally expected female duties (e.g. embroidering) than the physical manifestation of a male warrior in their first encounter, Brynhild's ability to perform the Old Norse female identity attracts Sigurd even more. The text describes Sigurd's reaction, "Then he saw a fair woman and realized that it was Brynhild. Both her beauty and her work affected him deeply" (Byock 74). Brynhild does not champion her more feminine qualities, as seen in the eyes of the audience, reasserting her loyalty to being a shield-maiden while others reference her strength and desire for glory over her beauty (Byock 74-75), Brynhild's ambiguity and fluidity of character begins to become thematically problematic. Accepting Sigurd's renewal of betrothal, knowing full well she and Sigurd could never truly be together in the terrestrial sense, marks a pivotal point in Brynhild's own agency because she subjects herself to the will of the male identity which will later decide to whom she will be married. This initial binary of Brynhild and

Bekkhild thus distinguishes the different female identities present in the saga at this point.

Brynhild, at this point seemingly unaware of the consequences of her relegation to terrestrial and mortal femininity, continues to embrace the freedom of being unbound to the control of the male role. By name and by behaviors Brynhild differentiates herself from the societal expectations for a female identity. Once married to Gunnar and transitioning to court, Brynhild's identity shifts leading the text to reveal a character made aware of her boundaries as a female identity. Later as a courtly wife Brynhild's reclamation of her Valkyrie identity must be achieved without risking the punitive consequences of the king and his sons, as she would abandon her implied duty to serve in that capacity by doing so.

Whereas the narrative boasts the performativity of female expectations and identity throughout, Brynhild, as seen, stands alone. Signy's more or less incestuous and monstrous behaviors remain overlooked as her biggest fault remains her overzealousness for vengeance. Signy confesses her deeds to her brother, Sigmund, "In everything I have worked toward the killing of King Siggeir. I have worked so hard to bring about vengeance that I am by no means fit to live. Willingly I shall now die with King Siggeir, although I married him reluctantly. Then she kissed her brother Sigmund and Sinfjotli, walked into the fire, and wished them farewell" (Byock 47). Signy worked to strengthen the Volsung line

and to assist Sigmund in avenging their father's death. She can still be revered as a fine example of femininity, in her immediate context, because of her devotion to the male legacy of the Volsung line and, furthermore, to the critical character traits of courage and strength. Her birth of Sinfjotli can be seen as her material production and participation in those values. She also actively participates in the punitive framework by asserting that her behaviors do not befit her socially.

Turning to Hjordis we again find "acceptable" femininity. As her husband King Sigmund dies, Hjordis performs the role of mourning female. She explains as King Sigmund dies, "I would lack nothing, if you were healed and took revenge for my father" and Sigmund responds, "That is intended for another. You are carrying a son. Raise him well and carefully, for he will be an excellent boy, the foremost of our line" (Byock 54). Hjordis does not actively pursue any vengeance aside from her raising the prodigal son of the Volsung line. Therefore, she does not avenge her husband's death as this remains the duty of Sigurd, or any male kin for that matter; just so long as it is not the female. Gudrun becomes a much more ambiguous and complicated figure as the narrative unfolds. She begins as the ideal female, marrying Sigurd and honoring her King's wishes. In this way she most closely resembles Hjordis, fulfilling the expectations of the female identity. As King Gjuki suggests marriage between Sigurd and his daughter, Gudrun, the text describes her:



One evening...served the drink. Sigurd noticed that she was a beautiful woman and most courtly in all things. Sigurd stayed there for five seasons and they lived in friendship and fame...Sigurd now wed Gudrun. There were all sorts of festivities and entertainments to be seen and each day's feasting proved better than the one before. (Byock 79)

Gudrun embodies the courtly female identity and performs well the complementary role to the male warrior. She prospers in her identification as a wife to Sigurd. However, soon after Sigurd's death Gudrun marries King Atli and the text highlights her seemingly unworthy traits and behaviors.

Because of Gudrun's inability to conform no longer to any of the aforementioned female roles, she faces the consequences that unfold throughout the text including a male lineage damned by Odin. Her perversion of the female role most closely resembles that of Signy, as both women here attempt in their own ways to maintain their adherence to the customs of their identity. This, however, leads to infanticide in both of their cases while they believe they are killing in a justified and legitimized way. Gudrun's son, Hamdir, argues, "Little did you praise Gunnar and Hogni when they killed Sigurd and you were reddened with his blood. Vile was the vengeance for you brothers when you killed your sons by Atli. We might better kill King Jormunrek if we were all together. But we cannot endure your taunts; so persistently are we being urged" (Byock 107). The

text solidifies here that Gudrun no longer has fulfilled societal expectations, for her agency manifested in secret cunning and manipulation. Reddened, vile, and taunting describe the abhorring behavior of a rejected female performativity. Turning to Brynhild, the text proves her escape from the punitive framework as seen evident in the cases of Gudrun and Signy largely in part to the significant shift that comes with Gjuki's family and Brynhild's transition to mortal femininity. For with this shift in identity comes the opportunity for Brynhild to reclaim her agency and identity as Valkyrie.

The introduction of King Gjuki and his family can be viewed as a substantial literary transition for Brynhild's identity, and for substantial reason. Not only do the plots of others derail Sigurd's narrative, but, more importantly, the introduction of Gjuki represents the space in which Brynhild's agency becomes altogether reconstructed. Sigurd and Brynhild's betrothal remains unrealized as King Gjuki's queen, Grimhild, gives Sigurd the ale of forgetfulness. The text states, "Sigurd received this well and because of that drink he could not remember Brynhild. He stayed there for a while" (Byock 78-9). During this time Sigurd then marries Gjuki's only daughter, Gudrun, and stays with his in-laws for two and a half years. Harking back to the prophetic wisdom given by Brynhild earlier in the text, Sigurd's woes materialize upon his fateful introduction to the kin of King Gjuki. At this point Byock introduces a fascinating fact about medieval Germanic customs, contemporarily relevant with the text, "Germanic societies tended to be patrilocal: that is, a man married a woman outside his group and

brought her to live with his family instead of their living with hers. Sigurd breaks the usual social pattern after marrying the Burgundian princess Gudrun by settling among his in-laws at Worms” (Byock 11). This historical context highlights the significant shift in Brynhild's forthcoming arrival to their court. The highly uncommon and non-traditional move of Sigurd arriving at the court of his new wife and the patrilocal practices function as an effective contrast to Brynhild's complete devotion to the custom. In an attempt to mediate her precarious identity, she begins to exhibit what appears to be conformity to the expectations of mortal femininity. In this way Brynhild can identify with the other textual females such as Hjordis and Grimhild.

Befitting a female of this particular historical and social context, Brynhild seems to absorb herself into the performance of a courtly wife. Gail Newman's "The Two Brunhilds" argues, too, that Brynhild does in fact transform. Newman writes:

Brunhild's attitude changes after she has become Gunther's wife, however. She, the personification of charismatic leadership (even more than Siegfried<sup>1</sup>, who after all fits himself into the courtly system rather well), is very upset that her sister-in-law is to marry a vassal. This preoccupation with courtly social hierarchy seems to appear quite suddenly; Brunhild switches her allegiance from the charismatic to the

tradition system apparently from one moment to the next. (Newman 72)

While Newman highlight the courtly transformation of Brynhild and supports the claim that she undergoes a shift in identity, "switching her allegiance" between courtly and Valkyrie leadership frequently, Newman's argument falls short of discussing Brynhild beyond her transition to court. This for me fosters a dialogue to consider Brynhild's agency and discovery as to why and how her allegiance to courtly, terrestrial femininity becomes severed.

So how does Brynhild, so riddled with a complex domestic situation, resolve her newfound identity? Can her individual agency be restored in light of a mortal marriage to Gunnar, of the interference of a king's kin, and of reinforcement of female expectations? To do so, Brynhild must resort to a secret cunning; her agency must be realized in the recesses of the mainstream ideals. Outright thwarting of the status quo would not only be utterly unacceptable to her community practice, but would also risk Brynhild's further participation and acceptance in the immediate social context. By assuming the role of the mourning female, Brynhild escapes social persecution. This becomes the only way in which Brynhild can mediate her immortal and mortal selves having been confronted with the inability to entirely control the fateful outcome.

One difficulty for Brynhild, which comes early on at her introduction into the text, involves her swearing oaths to the mortal man she will choose to marry. As accurate as the dream interpretations and prophetic maxims she shares with

others, so is the reality that her oaths mean little. The mortal reality seen as court dispels her countervow to Odin of marrying whom she would choose. She adamantly states in the text, "I swore an oath to marry that man who would ride through my wavering flames, and that oath I would hold to or else die...I do not want to live...because you let him [Sigurd] come into my bed. Now I do not want to have two husbands at the same time in one hall. This shall be Sigurd's death or yours or mine" (Byock 88). Brynhild begins creating here an environment in which the foretelling of Sigurd's death will be actualized. Though she suggests the death of Sigurd, she does not abandon her courtly, female identity, for doing so would accomplish nothing more than disgrace and banishment from society. Typically academics have read Brynhild's instigation of Sigurd's death and her suicide as akin to madness, revenge, or malevolence. I argue that her pending culpability rather exemplifies the fulfillment of her duty to Odin as a Valkyrie and her desire to reunite with Sigurd in that capacity. In this way Brynhild establishes her agency while avoiding social banishment by being directly involved and to blame. At this point she begins the critical move of knowingly manipulating the ideals of the male identity in order to further her move to restoring what remains of her Valkyrie identity and guide her chosen slain to Odin.

By suggesting the death of Sigurd to Gunnar, Brynhild sets into motion the manipulation of the male ideals. For one, she provides Gunnar the ultimatum to protect his honor and murder Sigurd or risk public defamation for having a wife leave his side and return home. Gunnar responds to his brothers of the choice,

“Gunnar now became very distressed. He though he did not know the best course to pursue, for he was bound by oath to Sigurd. And various thoughts shifted in his mind, but he thought the worse dishonor would be if his wife left him” (Byock 89). As Gunnar considers fraternal oath to his brother-in-law and his matrimonial oath to his wife, the situation devolves to a socially acceptable justification of bringing about Sigurd’s death. Though Gunnar and Sigurd knowingly “exchanged shapes, as Grimhild had taught them” (Byock 80) and Sigurd laid with Brynhild “for three nights and they slept in one bed” (Byock 81), Gunnar uses this information now as fodder to manipulate the law. As a way of goading younger brother, Guttorm, to commit the murder he states, “He is young, knows little, and is not bound by any oath” and the text notes, “Gunnard said it is a valid felony punishable by death for having taken Brynhild’s maidenhead” (Byock 89). By manipulating and playing upon the values revered by the male role, Brynhild accomplishes the commencement of resolving her misplaced identity. Take, for instance, the place of vows and oaths. The structure of the immediate society’s justice system depends on the active role of oaths binding some while others, like the young Guttorm, can in some cases literally get away with murder. The use of the value system, coupled with a more auxiliary role allows Brynhild to reestablish herself as a Valkyrie at the immediate hand of Gunnar and his brothers, resulting in Brynhild’s ability to perform the mourning female and maintain her innocence in the eyes of others. Brynhild, though not actively involved has commenced the resolve of her misplaced identity.

As the final action of Brynhild she takes her own life upon knowing that Sigurd, too, has died and makes a final request to Gunnar. Thought seemingly contrary to a notion of success for Brynhild, her suicide illustrates her physical manifestation of the Valkyrie role as her punitive and mortal ties no longer bind her to an expected identity. What can be understood of the monologue here speaks volumes as to the outcome of Brynhild's identity relegated to mortal femininity from being a Valkyrie of Odin. "Then she took a sword and stabbed herself under the arm, sank back into the pillows...Brynhild continued: 'Now, Gunnar, I ask a final request of you: let one huge funeral pyre be raised on the level field for all of us: for me and Sigurd and for those who were killed with him...Lay there between us a drawn sword, as before, when we entered one bed and vowed to become man and wife. The door will not close on his heels if I follow him" (Byock 92). The insistence at being by Sigurd's side as they thus die reveals Brynhild's success at escaping defamation of her reestablished identity. From their first encounter to their deaths, Brynhild actively chose Sigurd. In the most benevolent of ways, Brynhild protects Sigurd and accomplishes the necessary task of guiding him from his theoretical battlefield in his mortal life to that of Valhalla. Without entirely disrupting the social accord, Brynhild can only achieve success and reestablish herself as Valkyrie by performing the role of the mourning female. Instigating Sigurd's death at the hand of his wife's family and taking her own life allows her escape from the punitive consequences of thwarting acceptable female behavior. Rather than taking on the insubstantial

role of revenge, as exemplified in Signy and the later Gudrun, Brynhild manipulates the very foundation of values she is subjected to. In her reunion with Sigurd, there resides a palpable tension that culminates in her identity's eventual reconfiguration and proffers an enriched discussion of her role as a Valkyrie in the saga.



## CHAPTER THREE

### THE PLIGHT OF GRENDEL'S MOTHER

Ranging from its 1,000-year-old origins nestled in the Anglo-Saxon oral tradition to its resurrection in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and then culminating in its 20<sup>th</sup> century academic interest and scholarly intrigue, the epic poem *Beowulf* remains a source of fascination steeped in long-standing cultural beliefs. As of late scholars have examined the historical context of the Anglo-Saxons, argued the poem's validity as a work of literature, and assessed its formal qualities as a literary piece. Over time, translations, such as that of Seamus Heaney, have provided newfound ground to peer into the text's meaning and importance. However, one particular discussion continues to intrigue academics: the role of the female within the immediate context of the poem, Grendel's Mother more specifically. This controversial character raises a great deal of speculation and interest because of her ambiguity as a signifier and her position within the community of the Danes.

Translations of a text play a significant role in directing the conclusions a reader will reach. Those translations are indirectly affected by the social influences and climate in which they are written. In "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother," Christine Alfano introduces Jane Tompkins' assessment of the *Beowulf* text's fluidity, "[the text is] essentially rewritten by the cultural context of each new interpretation" (Alfano 1). The

ideologies and biases are going to go into each word being translated. The meanings and definitions will never be stable and concrete, but will flow through each changing translation. This textual fluidity, Alfano argues, transforms "Grendel's Mother, an avenging mother, into a blood thirsty monster" and this leaves the reader with a biased characterization. One error in the translations of the poem centers on the most basic of lexical translation. The said error encompasses descriptors of Grendel's Mother, *ides* and *áglæcwíf*. These have also been known to stand as 'lady' and 'warrior woman'; however, for Grendel's Mother, in Seamus Heaney's well-revered translation, they stand to mean "monstrous hell bride" (Heaney 1259). Translations of the original text deserve a degree of skepticism because of this inevitable fluidity. As David Donoghue writes of text translations, "In most cases the readers remain unaware of the specific changes. Presumably, they turn to the translation because they do not know the original language, and they trust that the rhetorical embellishments will not obscure the essential continuity with the source text." (Donoghue 237). Problematic translations are but one way in which Grendel's Mother is affected. It is absolutely critical to examine the societal place Grendel's Mother holds to see her as anything other than a monster.

Though not the only mother represented in the text, Grendel's Mother herself has an identity comprised of lexical bias, societal abjection, and feminine expectation. In this chapter, I will argue that Grendel's Mother embodies the identities of both a male warrior and a marginalized female, and as a result

experiences the punitive consequences for thwarting the societal expectations constructed around her. Much like the female of secret cunning in chapter one, Grendel's Mother has been relegated to the fens of society both physically and figuratively speaking. In revisiting the specific areas and ways in which both male and female identity functions in the text, similarly to that of Brynhild and her individual ambiguity and agency of the female role, I suggest that there can develop a more informed understanding of how the female role can both complement and challenge the male role. Much like Brynhild's overall shift in identity to a benevolent Valkyrie, I will look at Grendel's Mother in a three-step transformation beginning as a mourning mother and ending as an embattled warrior. This will result in a far less reductive reading of Grendel's Mother as merely a monster, thus challenging the limited classification of her individual agency as a female in the text.

As elaborated in both chapters one and two, the use of maxims in medieval texts allow for insight into the construction of a society's identity and the gender roles therein. *Beowulf* is no exception. The use of maxims and lays litter the poem with tales of duty, honor, bravery, and loyalty, this concerning males and females alike. While not only functioning as a literary device, pushing the narrative forward, these textual moments provide a clearer context of the immediate society and their specific roles. Hrothgar's Sermon clearly lays out not only the societal expectations, but also the punitive consequences for those individual choosing to stray from their gendered duty and characteristics.

Though not explicitly addressing Grendel's Mother, Hrothgar's Sermon highlights the societal framework upon which a warrior-king's tribe builds itself and gender roles are constructed. Beginning with Hrothgar's Sermon provides insight into the values revered by the Anglo-Saxon community, including: honor, bravery, lineage, and tradition. Told in a series of maxims, Hrothgar articulates the desired traits of the Anglo-Saxon male and warns against any defiance.

A protector of his people, pledged to uphold  
truth and justice and to respect tradition,  
is entitled to affirm that this man  
was born to distinction. Beowulf, my friend,  
your fame has gone far and wide,  
you are known everywhere. In all things you are  
even-tempered,  
prudent and resolute. (Heaney 1700-1706)

Here the qualities of temperance, prudence, truth, and justice are rejoiced through the distinction of Beowulf and his exploits at Heorot. The text provides numerous examples of the aforementioned characteristics, supporting the desirable traits of the Anglo-Saxon male warrior. Temperance prevails, for example, when another challenges the validity of the tales of Beowulf's strength in Hrothgar's mead hall, Heorot. As Beowulf demonstrates patience with the challenger, he also showcases his supreme strength telling of his swimming with Brecca for days unending. He battles all deemed as threats to the social fabric,

ranging from Grendel to the dragon at the close of the poem. The ultimate protector in the eyes of Hrothgar, Beowulf eventually takes on the task of being king of the Geats until his death. Hrothgar not only positively recognizes the characteristics of Beowulf, but encourages them as what ought to be desired by fellow members, the male role in particular, of the community.

In the latter half of the sermon Hrothgar speaks of Heremod's demise. Unlike those of Beowulf, Heremod's qualities carry severe consequences and the disapproval of his people. The sermon goes on to warn of the disagreeable traits.

Heremod was different,  
the way he behaved to Ecgwela's sons.  
His rise in the world brought little joy  
to the Danish people, only death and destruction.  
He vented his rage on men he caroused with,  
killed his own comrades, a pariah king  
who cut himself off from his own kind,  
even though Almighty God had made him  
eminent and powerful and marked him from the start  
for a happy life. But a change happened,  
he grew bloodthirsty, gave no more rings,  
to honor the Danes. He suffered in the end  
for having plagued his people for so long:  
his life lost happiness.

So learn from this  
and understand true values. I who tell you  
have wintered into wisdom. (Heaney 1709-1723)

Rejecting the societal ideals here results in isolation. Rage, misery, and greed sever the necessary connection with the values of kinship within the community. Not only does Heremod actively reject the custom of ring-giving to his trusted warriors, but Heremod also resorts to murdering his own people. Heremod alienates himself from the expectations of a warrior-king, therefore subjecting himself to the punitive framework for spurning the societal roles. Conversely, Beowulf's fulfillment of the role aids in his success as a warrior-king later in the text. In projected harmony the female role complements the male role. Seen through the acts of peace-weaving, mourning, or facing social abjection, respectively, the female identity depends entirely upon the customs and values of the warrior-male identity exemplified here in Hrothgar's Sermon. Hrothgar's Sermon, in conveying the values of the community and warrior-kings, instigates a further examination of the female roles within the text and their correlation to that of the male role respectively.

Keeping in mind the values conveyed in Hrothgar's Sermon, the text offers a variety of female roles that can better inform an understanding of identity and agency. In what ways are the females of *Beowulf* expected to complement the male role? Ranging from the peace weaver to the mourning female, each female role must come into agreement with the larger social framework at play.

Modthryth stands as an example of a female who, upon rejecting societal expectation, faces the punitive consequences and becomes a cautionary tale told to all. The punished complement to Heremod, Modthryth also attempts to sever ties with her immediate social context through violent, aggressive, and essentially non-feminine behaviors. The narrator recounts, "Great Queen Modthryth perpetrated terrible wrongs...Even a queen outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that. A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent with loss of life for imagined insults" (Heaney 1931-1943). The narrator goes on to explain that Modthryth can only be "restored" by participating in the accustomed duties of an Anglo-Saxon queen. Unlike the unchanging behaviors of Heremod, Modthryth manages to reestablish her identity as a queen. The text states, "But Hemming's Kinsman put a halt to her ways and drinkers round the table had another tale: she was less of a bane to people's lives, less cruel-minded after she was married to the brave Offa" (Heaney 1944-48). The restoration of order so to speak, comes in Modthryth's embrace of the complementary role to that of male kingship. In this she soon reclaims glory and honor whereas she previously experienced disdain and shame, accepting the role of peace weaver.

Assuming one of the most revered and prevalent roles amongst Anglo-Saxon women, Wealhtheow as peace weaver remains the most revered throughout the text. In praising and reiterating the values mentioned in the sermon, Wealhtheow reinforces the male role as central to the community. The text describes her speaking, "Enjoy this drink, my most generous lord; raise up

your goblet, entertain the Geats duly and gently, discourse with them, be open-handed, happy and fond" (Heaney 1168-1171). Wealhtheow emphasizes the characteristics paramount to succeeding as a warrior-king. Wealhtheow goes on to weave the ties of kinship between her sons and Beowulf, fortifying a future relationship within the male role. She states, "You have won renown; you are known to all men far and near, now and forever...Treat my sons with tender care, be strong and kind. Here each comrade is true to the other, loyal to lord, loving in spirit" (Heaney 1221-1229). As exemplified in Wealhtheow's dialogue, the peace weaver maintains a complementary role to that of the male. Jane Chance's "Structural Unity in Beowulf" discusses one role most prevalent amongst Anglo-Saxon women, that of the peace weaver. This role, "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 with a hall" (Chance 250). Wealhtheow as the dominant, societally abiding female character in the poem creates a tension of identities with Grendel's Mother. As the latter thwarts the female identity that Wealhtheow embraces entirely. This creates a barrier between society and Grendel's Mother, in regards to an expected female sense of duty. As Helen Damico points out in her extensive study of Wealhtheow's position in society:

Wealhtheow's power and authority within the court are in some measure comparable to Hrothgar's, an implication that subsequently is reinforced textually and substantiated extratextually



the position of the aristocratic female in Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic courts. (Damico 5-6)

Damico goes on to position Wealhtheow not just as a peace-weaver, but also a warrior woman of Anglo-Saxon epic and tradition. Grendel's Mother never fully embraces the expectations serving as complementary to that of the male warrior or king role and, thus, results in being cast as the other. Without further consideration Grendel's Mother occupies the same chastised role as Modthryth. However, unlike Modthryth, Grendel's Mother's narrative allows for a more detailed reading of her individual role in the kingdom of Hrothgar and her path to battling Beowulf.

Read with this context, it becomes clear that Grendel's Mother does occupy any one accepted role. Neither the regal and courtly peace-weaver nor the tamed rebellion of Modthryth, Grendel's Mother requires further clarification to resolve her textual ambiguity as a female character. Her lineage can speak volumes to the ambiguity of her character later in the text. Seamus Heaney's translation briefly describes Grendel's Mother and her history.

Grendel's Mother,  
Monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.  
She had been forced down into fearful waters,  
the cold depths, after Cain had killed  
his father's son, felled his own  
brother with a sword. Branded an outlaw,

marked by having murdered, he moved into the wilds,  
shunned company and joy. And from Cain there sprang  
misbegotten spirits, among them Grendel,  
the banished and accursed. (Heaney 1258-1267)

The ancestral connection to Cain and the killing of Abel creates a tension with Grendel's Mother. Having been sentenced to the confinement of societal aspersions, Grendel's Mother subsequently becomes associated with Cain's notorious fratricide and doomed offspring including Grendel. Acknowledging the tension of societal beliefs present in the Maxims, the precarious emphasis on religion exists here also. Though the *Beowulf* text continues to fortify its pagan ties and belief system, the fundamental points of Christianity become inherent to their cultural practices, for it is in her lineage to Cain that influences any subsequent reading of Grendel's Mother.

As this connection to Cain remains the minimal amount of knowledge that Hrothgar, Beowulf, and others have of Grendel's Mother it comes as no surprise that the attack on Heoreot reads as quite jarring, because she assumes a role relegated to the male warriors, while women are relegated to qualities of propriety and peace weaving. Jane Chance touches upon one facet of Grendel's Mother's complication she does not choose to leave active aggression to the males. Chance notes of the community's women and their roles, "the idea is stressed that a kinswoman or mother must passively accept and not actively avenge the loss of her son" (Chance 251). Hildeburh, of the text's Finnsburg

episode, exemplifies this dichotomy of passive and aggressive behaviors. This character, in particular, loses both her brother and her son and cannot avenge either death. Rather the text states of Hildeburh, "The woman wailed / and sang keens" (Heaney 1118). Grendel's Mother's rejection of the mourning female calls attention to the more active and aggressive way in which she confronts the loss of her kin. In this move she asserts the agency to forge her new identity as a female warrior, battling the punitive control as exemplified in Beowulf. To stop here does not entirely explain the trajectory of Grendel's Mother.

In chapter 2, I discussed Brynhild's threefold change as a character. Beginning as Odin's Valkyrie she soon after assumes the role of a "mortal" and "earthly" wife. By the poem's end Brynhild succeeds in restoring her role as a benevolent Valkyrie through the deaths of both herself and Sigurd through assuming the societally-accepted role of the mourning female and symbolically guiding Sigurd to Valhalla. Grendel's Mother, too, undergoes a transformation in three stages: the mourning mother, the frightened outsider, and the embattled warrior. Seeing Grendel's Mother as a mourning mother allows the reader to identify the origins out of which she differentiates herself and begins to recreate her identity as a female warrior. The observation of her mortal terror upon being discovered in the mead hall reconfigures the level of monstrosity actually occurring, as she demonstrates a fear that Grendel and the text's final monster, the dragon, do not possess. With a newfound air of humanity, Grendel's Mother assumes the role of embattled warrior against the expectations of society,

avenging her son's death and illustrating the precarious dynamic upon which gender relations are constructed. Examining each moment individually can better inform our reading of Grendel's Mother beyond that of monster.

Beginning with Grendel's Mother as a mourning mother provides the foundation upon which the narrator tells her story. She has a very clear objective upon entering the narrative and this is to avenge Grendel's death, as she is "grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge." (Heaney 1278) Our author does not provide any steadfast evidence of superficial malevolence on the part of Grendel's Mother. Rather the poet provides an opportunity to view Grendel's Mother as a human. The text states, "But now his mother had sallied forth on a savage journey" (Heaney 1276-77). This example of human emotion and reason constitutes all we have to describe her initial mourning the death of her son. Grendel's Mother decides to avenge her son's death and retrieve the hand of Grendel. The text notes, "She had snatched their trophy, Grendel's bloodied hand" (Heaney 1302-1303). The varied entrances of Grendel and Grendel's Mother to Heorot represent sharp contrast of reason and emotion between Grendel's Mother and Grendel, for the text describes Grendel in length as killing multiple times and not feeling a shred of remorse or guilt.

The arrival of Grendel's Mother presents the audience with a changed character as she begins to shift from an absent mourner to the role of an avenger traveling from the outskirts, experiencing fright while in Heorot. We are not given, as we are with Grendel, a long-standing and informative history of inflicting

violence in the society. In fact, Grendel's Mother limits her onslaught to one man, Aeschere. George Clark similarly argues in "The Hero and the Theme" that the "narrator does not identify Grendel's Mother as a figure of evil, nor does he explicitly link her to Cain" (Clark 287). This fact becomes even more developed as the text illustrates her mortal fear while at Heorot. The text states:

She came to Heorot. There, inside the hall,  
Danes lay asleep, earls who would soon endure  
a great reversal, once Grendel's Mother  
attacked and entered. Her onslaught was less  
only by as much as an amazon warrior's  
strength is less than armed man's  
when the hefted sword, its hammered edge  
and gleaming blade slathered in blood,  
razes the sturdy boar ridge off a helmet...  
The hell-dam was in panic, desperate to get out,  
in mortal terror the moment she was found.  
She had pounced and taken one of the retainers  
in a tight hold, then headed for the fen. (Heaney 1279-1295)

Grendel's Mother does not attack Heorot for the sake of senselessly harming it, but rather as the expected avenger of Grendel's death. Grendel's Mother appears to be in "mortal terror" and "desperate to get out" once in Heorot. In addition, Grendel's Mother does not partake in killing several men at Heorot; she

kills one, a life for a life. A monster, like Grendel, does not seem to embody the mortal fear that Grendel's Mother feels. One can say that a certain level of empathy develops, for she seems much more human to the reader and displays moral feelings. Her reasoning and restraint speak volumes. Grendel's Mother does not deem it necessary to kill as many as physically possible, but rather sets out with a clear objective; that in and of itself makes it difficult to categorize Grendel's Mother as a relentless, reasonless monster. Examining the minor shifts from mourner to frightened outsider does not account for the significant role that Grendel's Mother assumes as embattled warrior. Considering such a shift requires completely understanding how Grendel's Mother becomes the female abject, cast aside in the poem so to speak.

From the opening of the poem to the closing, a tremendous amount of significance has been placed upon the male role. Out of approximately seventy-one characters referenced, or cross-referenced, in the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* manuscript, only five characters are of female gender. Mathematically speaking, this is less than ten percent of the total characters. The narrative provides a wealth of information regarding paternal lineage, male dominance and leadership, and the heroic triumphs of, yes, male warriors. Alexandra Hennessey Olsen asserts that, traditionally, "since men were responsible for public functions like king, warrior, and avenger, they also held the power in the world of the poem" (Olsen 313). These male roles are forced upon the society and are expected to be the aggressive and powerful counterparts complementing the role

of society's women. The male role of a powerful and aggressive nature provides the much needed, and controversial, outlet for Grendel's Mother to behave as she does in the poem. She is, though, ultimately chastised for it because it distorts the societal order betwixt the genders. The text's consequential punishment for such rejection resides in her physical and figurative abjection within the poem. Renee Trilling's work, influenced by Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, remains a lens with which to conceptualize the marginalization of Grendel's Mother. Trilling defines the abject as, "that which is expelled from within a society in order to define cultural boundaries" (Trilling). The abject must be expelled because of the threat they potentially pose to the natural order of things. Once banished it becomes much easier to notice future deviation from what is expected. Grendel's Mother cannot conveniently fit into what ought to be a mother's appearance, behavior, and position. Grendel's Mother provides a vast amount of confusion because her actions are much more aggressive than the other mothers of the text, yet she has redeeming human qualities as a character. This ambiguity of Grendel's Mother creates panic and a need to justify displaced violence and fear on the part of the community.

Beowulf's approach to fighting is telling of how not only he, but how the entire community and audience views the opponent. When preparing to fight Grendel, Beowulf asserts:

When it comes to fighting, I count myself  
as dangerous any day as Grendel.

So it won't be a cutting edge I'll wield  
to mow him down, easily as I might.  
He has no idea of the arts of war,  
of shield or sword-play, although he does possess  
a wild strength. No weapons, therefore,  
for either this night: unarmed he shall face me  
if face me he dares. (Heaney 677-685)

Beowulf certainly does not go to any great lengths to prepare or protect himself for the fight with Grendel; he faces him with "no weapons." Grendel's Mother, however, does not receive the same treatment. Beowulf comes not alone, but with a troop of men and he is geared with the mightiest of protective equipment. "Everyone of that noble company" (Heaney 1420) and "the whole party" (Heaney 1424) assist Beowulf as he approaches Grendel's Mother's territory. Beowulf's preparation gives more indication that this battle with Grendel's Mother requires a difference in preparation and approach on his part. Her stark contrast to expected maternal and female roles creates an ambiguity and different type of threat for our heroic male warrior, while her intentions are to simply avenge her son's death.

Beowulf got ready,  
donned his war-gear, indifferent to death;  
his might, hand-forged, fine-webbed mail  
would soon meet with the menace underwater.



It would keep the bone-cage of his body safe:  
no enemy's clasp could crush him in it,  
no vicious armlock choke his life out. (Heaney 1442-1447)

Beowulf must also wear a "glittering helmet" (Heaney 1448) of great craftsmanship and resistance to harm. He is also given a weapon, "a rare and ancient sword named Hrunting" (Heaney 1457-1458). Beowulf prepares with a sense of precaution and extra measure to fight the ambiguous character in a way that he does not feel necessary with Grendel, though Grendel harms many more men at the hall while the mother figure takes one. These lengths Beowulf has gone to illustrate the hold that Grendel's Mother has on the members of this society. The controversial nature of her character generates a new type of confrontation not in sync with what is expected from a female, a mother, or a monster for those who interact with her.

No longer the mourner or frightened outsider, Grendel's Mother assumes the role of embattled warrior. As a female warrior, and on her own turn so to speak, she can physically reveal the social construction of gender roles in the Anglo-Saxon society and for a moment constitute a self-appointed agency in her identity. Already experiencing the punitive consequences of being cast to the fens, Grendel's Mother removes any doubt from the audience that she will flee in terror or panic. Soon after Beowulf's arrival, Grendel's Mother "sensed a human / observing her outlandish lair from above. / So she lunged and clutched and managed to catch him" (Heaney 1499-1501). Beowulf enters Grendel's Mother's

territory and she actively protects it. Grendel's Mother has no kinsman now that her son is dead and she must protect herself single-handedly. Assuming her own authority with Beowulf, Grendel's Mother "carried the ring-mailed prince to her court / so that for all his courage he could never use the weapons he carried" (Heaney 1507-1509). The fight between Beowulf and Grendel's Mother is equal insofar that each gains advantage in turn throughout the battle. At one point, Grendel's Mother is physically above Beowulf and "now she would avenge / her only child" (Heaney 1546-1547) by taking the life of the man who has taken her son's life. Beowulf's gear protects him, but it is intriguing, the way in which the Geatish warrior triumphs over our grief-stricken mother and ambiguous woman:

The he saw a blade that boded well,  
a sword in her armory, an ancient heirloom  
from the days of the giants, an ideal weapon,  
one that any warrior would envy,  
but so huge and heavy of itself  
only Beowulf could wield it in a battle. (Heaney 1557-1562)

Grendel's Mother possesses the weapon, relegated to the use of a warrior as renowned as Beowulf, that ultimately ends her life. This battle between two characters, despite ambiguity and open disregard for social rule, remains evenly matched. This brings about a great deal of information of Grendel's Mother as a female in this society, while it also fosters the notion of Grendel's Mother being critically accepted as a revolutionary character. Why then is the fight with

Grendel's Mother seen as a mere complement to the fight with Grendel? The specific encounters illustrated in the text provide ample opportunity to understand who Grendel's Mother is and her objective for entering the text. Barriers are unfortunately created because of her ambiguity that ultimately prevent accepting her as a mother over a monster.

The death of Grendel's Mother is the ultimate punishment for not adhering to the aforementioned female roles of peace weaver and mourner. The role of avenger is to be left for another male within the household. However, in an unyielding situation, she has no males in her household to carry out the necessity of vengeance. Jane Chance acknowledges that the two attacks, of Grendel and Grendel's Mother, should be analyzed as two distinctly separate events. The two separate incidences are with characters of contrasting importance and significance and through blending the two as one, that significance is sacrificed. Chance claims that her act ought to be judged separate from that of Grendel by quoting Beowulf saying that Grendel's Mother desired her own "revenge for injury" (Chance 252) to avenge her son's death. She must ultimately switch her performance of genders to achieve this goal of vengeance. Here, the majority of critics classify her behaviors as monstrous and idiosyncratic for a woman in society.

Dismissing the appropriated female roles and assuming the position as warrior, Grendel's Mother is an example of a woman who refuses to identify herself as a mere complement of the male role within the community of the

Danes. As such, she resembles Brynhild, whose ambivalent position I discussed in chapter two. Brynhild and Grendel's Mother are both of a Valkyrie nature. While Brynhild's reclamation serves to instantiate her identity as a benevolent Valkyrie guiding her slain to Valhalla, Grendel's Mother moves far beyond mere monstrosity and rather assumes the role of a more necessary evil, the malevolent Valkyrie. Suggesting the aforementioned signifier of *ides* as similar to *dis*, Frank Battaglia suggests in his article "The Germanic Earth Goddess?" that Grendel's Mother manifests as much more than a monster. Battaglia states:

"A *dis* was usually female, and possessed conflicting aspects, sometimes acting like what is called in Christian legend a guardian angel, but also having power over the dead and choosing who would die. In this capacity she might be feared, and it is an expansion of this aspect, merged with other types of feminine power, which is exemplified in Grendel's Mother. (Battaglia 433)

Malevolent Valkyries by nature would have an inherent control over the mortality of man, choosing their slain yet inciting fear and a level of looming threat to terrestrial customs. In addition the Malevolent Valkyrie was believed to possess supernatural strength. Beowulf recognizes Grendel's Mother's supreme level of strength, as seen in his thorough preparation to combat her, and this power remains uncanny and unlike any other opponent he faces. Leslie Donovan, in

discussing J.R.R. Tolkien's academic work as a medievalist, defines the malevolent Valkyries as those, "who live in geographically liminal spaces, are associated firmly with darkness, and are begotten from ancient races of beings" (Donovan 119). Given her rejection of the peace-weaving values, the subsumption of active male vengeance, and the dark and unknown physical dwelling, Grendel's Mother becomes a fixated point of curiosity and fear within her society. Arguments like Battaglia's point to Grendel's Mother's physical and lexical positioning within the text suggesting a far more sophisticated and complex female role than mere monster.

When her powerful and destructive behaviors are juxtaposed with Battaglia's reading of feminine power and Donovan's description of the Malevolent Valkyrie, Grendel's Mother's emerges as a just such a malevolent Valkyrie. She contrasts to the courtly observances and customs of the society, manifests the fierce customs of the shield maiden, and lacks benevolence. As a malevolent Valkyrie Grendel's Mother demonstrates skill and fortitude that incites fear in the masculine culture. In disrupting her immediate surroundings, Grendel's Mother challenges the roles in which female identity originate. This particular reexamination fosters both a newfound traction and significance of Grendel's Mother within the text, reconsidering the ways in which female identity functions alongside the male complementary role and an established punitive framework. Repositioning her as a malevolent Valkyrie also promotes rethinking the ways in which Grendel's Mother can be significantly detached from Grendel

and the dragon, gaining a new textual identity. A method and craft exist here that do not prevail in Grendel or the dragon, a secret cunning that comes to fruition in the physical fens of Grendel's Mother's lair beneath the water.

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