

FATES OF THE HETZERIN: THE HETZERIN ARCHETYPE IN *BEOWULF*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the women in *Beowulf* are constructed as hetzerin, or women who provoke their will, an archetype originating in Norse myth, though *Beowulf*'s hetzerinnen differ from their Norse analogues due to a more Christianized outlook on fate in *Beowulf*. The initial section examines the tripartite technique of provocation- the clever manipulation of location, reputation, and a tool of insult – utilized by hetzerin in Norse literature. I argue that these women always use the same technique, are successful, and suffer death for their actions. This repetition is based in a pagan model of fate, or the idea that the future is predictable due to its similarity to the past. The next section focuses on Wealhtheow and argues that her provocation of Beowulf and Hrothgar displays the hetzerin tripartite provocation form, but in a revised way due to Christianity's emphasis on a future that is fundamentally inexplicable and, therefore, difficult to manipulate. Wealhtheow provokes Beowulf to kill Grendel in front of the thanes (a public location) using a mead cup (a tool of insult) that, should he fail, will show that Beowulf only acts heroically when inebriated (manipulation of reputation). However, her taunt's effectiveness is questionable as it hinges on an insult (that Beowulf is only a hero in his cups) occurring in a future clearly coded as predicated not by her, but by a fundamentally unknowable God, a modification that robs the archetype of its effectiveness, leaving Wealhtheow in an uncomfortable limbo in the text. Afterwards, I examine how Grendel's Mother, though not constructed as a hetzerin, is punished as one due to a cultural longing for certainty in the face of a mysterious Christian deity. Finally, I argue that Thryth represents a new fate for the archetype that does not result in unnerving mystery or death: marriage. By focusing on one archetype in

Beowulf, this study advances the research into female character types begun by Damico with her focus on the Valkyrie figure and Nietzsche in her research on the Mary / Eve contradistinction in the text.

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INTRODUCTION

The din in the hall is loud. Laughter starts as the scop again begins to weave songs appropriate to the brave *solempne*.¹ The moments prior have been tense. The *pyle*, Unferth, has played his role well when recounting the embarrassment Beowulf faced in his sea contest with Breca. He has managed to elicit a *beot*, a boast from the hero, though not a formal *gilp*, after this series of insults. The poet tells us that after this Beowulf swears Grendel will find him different from the craven Danes (Heaney 601).² However, this statement does not feel quite complete as a vow. Beowulf, after all, has not unequivocally stated that he *will* kill the monster even if he implies such intent. The oath will not reach full fruition until moments later, when Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's "gold-rhoden" wife as the poet describes her, enters the hall to pass the cup and hear the warrior's clearly termed oath (614). Then, the hall can settle for the night. Only then does the monster approach.

The scene above has entranced scholars interested in the role of women in *Beowulf* since modern scholarship about the text began. What is Wealhtheow doing in this scene? Why does she enter at exactly this moment? How does her scene relate to the Finnsburg Episode recounted only moments before? How does she relate to the other women in the text? In fact, how can we

¹ In his *Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis describes the word *solempne* by saying that "[l]ike *solemn* it implies the opposite of what is familiar, free and easy, or ordinary...The *solempne* is the festal which is also the stately and the ceremonial, the proper occasion for *pomp*" (15-16 emphasis Lewis's).

²Tolkien describes the Anglo-Saxon word "gilp" as "proud vows" in his "Commentary" in *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary Together with Sellic Spell* (213). A *pyle* (sometimes alternately spelled *thyle*), whose function is described in full in Enright's *Lady with a Mead Cup*, functioned to elicit such a vow for future action from a warrior. This vow was usually elicited through the use of well-aimed insults to arouse the warrior's pride. Tolkien mentions this court role as well. The *pyle* utilizes a purely verbal method to elicit results, unlike the hetzerin who uses a tripartite method, as will be discussed in more detail in the second section of this text.

tell the role of any of the even lesser defined women of the text when we cannot even definitively pin down the significance of this one?

Of course, questions this pointed took time to arise in the world of *Beowulfiana*, though it may be argued they arose quickly in the field given how little time the poem in question has been available to scholars.³ According to Baker, a certain labelling of the women of the text, particularly Wealhtheow, started with the earliest editorial work. He notes that John Mitchell Kemble's 1837 translation set off a trend of seeing all women in the text as domestic matriarchs (Baker 104). In fact, Kemble went so far as to reinforce this trend by applying a term popular in his own age (and completely anachronistic to Anglo-Saxon culture) to these women: angels of the household. Kemble strengthened this connection through his translation of a word that continues to plague scholars: *freoduwebbe* (Baker 104). Kemble glossed the word as "peace-weaver," an idea that links nicely to that conventional wisdom circulating in nineteenth-century England about the vital role of wives in maintaining peace within their household (104).⁴

Through this one translation, the women of the poem became associated with motherhood and

³ After its composition circa 700-1000, the manuscript was lost for over half a millennium. *Beowulf* reappeared in the library of Old English historian Laurence Nowell in 1563 ("Manuscript" par. 10). Nowell passed the manuscript, in a transaction now vague, into the hands of Sir Robert Cotton. *Beowulf*, along with *Judith* and the other texts in Cotton Vitellius A. XV. remained the property of the Cotton family until 1712, when Cotton's library was placed in the keeping of the government, in trust until the founding of the British Library (Kennedy XII). From 1712-1730, the collection was housed at Essex House, being moved in that final year to the newly purchased Ashburnham House (XII). Disaster struck the manuscript there on the night of October 23, 1731 ("Manuscript" par.11). A fire broke out, consuming 200 of the approximately 988 manuscripts in the collection (Kennedy XII). The *Beowulf* manuscript survived, but was badly singed, with some portions previous to the hero's fights with the dragon and words on the edges of each page burned beyond recognition. Unfortunately, no scholarly transcript had been made of the text prior to this date, and fire damage paired with water damage continued the already critical disintegration process. Finally, in 1787, Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, an Icelandic-Danish scholar who later became the National Archivist in Denmark and Professor of Antiquities at Copenhagen University, created a transcription of the text. He quickly thereafter began a translation as well. However, even now, the *Beowulf* manuscript was to be kept from scholarly attention. Remarkably, this delay was again the result of a fire. In 1807, the year that Thorkelin had the manuscript ready for publication, his house and the translated manuscript were burned during the Battle of Copenhagen. Luckily, his and his British assistant's transcriptions of the original manuscript survived, but it would not be until 1815 that he would have both the transcription and a translation prepared to release. Scholarly criticism on the manuscript could finally begin.

⁴ Baker believes much of this trend (as well as its inverse of linking malicious women with war) was began by Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem "The Angel in the House" (115).

beauty and, most importantly, the societally lauded duty of wedding to ensure peace. Jacob Grimm agreed with this translation, though he admitted that when applied to Thryth the word must be misused (Baker 106).⁵ Through this one translation, any political power wielded by these women was effectively neutralized by the prevailing ideology associated with the angel of the house. Mothers, and hence peace-weavers, were confined to the domestic sphere, which they were seen to beautify and make comfortable, while the true work of influencing society was left to the men who routinely left this softened domain.

A similar trend is evident in the work of the great editor of the text, Frederick Klaeber. Klaeber's edition of the text was first published in 1922, though he had been writing about the various issues, mostly linguistic at this early point, surrounding the manuscript since roughly 1905. This translation, now in its fourth edition, was acknowledged the authoritative text by the scholarly consensus. However, viewed through the lens of today's emphasis on scholarly detachment in translations, this work leaves something to be desired. Josephine Bloomfield noted this in a 1994 article on Klaeber's background in which she explored how the ideologies instilled by that background affected his work as a scholar. Klaeber, influenced by the trappings of the "late nineteenth-century Germany" where he grew up "seems to have imposed concepts and relationships on the text particularly in the areas of kingship, family, and gender roles that cannot be found in the source text or the source culture" (Bloomfield 183). Through his subtle, and indeed probably subliminal, reworking of the text, Wealhtheow becomes overwhelmingly "kind" despite certain textual indicators (the most significant being the word *ides*) that hint that there is more to this queenly figure than her sweet nature (184).

⁵ This observation was rather ironic given that Thryth is the only woman referred to explicitly by the term *freoduwebbe* in the text. Wealhtheow is called by a related, but dissimilar term: *frithusibb*.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the trend of seeing the women of *Beowulf* as *freoduwebbe* continued unabated. This trend contributed to two main, and possibly intertwined, phenomena in the study of the women of the text. The first trend was a shift from seeing these figures not as noble and glorious but as unfortunate and condemned by their grim positions (Baker 119). One of the field's early scholars, Kemp Malone, writing on the topic of the Finnsburg digression noted that the poet's main role in the first portion of the episode is to "present sympathetically the tragedy of Queen Hildeburg" (265). He continues by observing that Hildeburh allegorically exemplified mourning and that this bereavement is the driving focus of the first three sections of the digression (he notes five total) (272). Chambers, likewise noting the pathos of the text's women, made sure that his one solid textual interpretation of Wealhtheow in his eight-hundred-plus-page companion to the text mentioned how her position was "heavy with foreboding" (25). Baker is clearly correct in his assessment that:

"Nineteenth-century writers celebrated the peaceweaver as an ideal figure of womanhood, scarcely ever mentioning the word without exclaiming at its beauty. Though she was less often spoken of in the succeeding era... she was not forgotten, but modernism transformed her from an object of desire to one of pity" (119).

By modern scholars, many of whom still follow this pathos-imbuing interpretation, the women of the text are often known by the epithet "wailing women." The term (whose roots are ambiguous) possibly originates in Jeremiah 9:17, in which women are entreated to come and wail over Zion. Whether or not this is actually the case, the idea that each woman of *Beowulf* presides in her respective hall simply to mourn its imminent demise remains an attractive one to many scholars.

The second trend to note in this still relatively early era of feminist interpretation is perhaps the most baffling; some critics simply ignore the female characters. J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of “The Monsters and the Critics,” is the most exemplary of this group. The omission is evidenced in his exclusion of Grendel’s Mother from the series of monsters Beowulf faces in the course of the poem:

“But there is so much that might still be said even under these limitations that I shall confine myself mainly to the *monsters* – Grendel and the Dragon, as they appear in what seems to me the best and most authoritative general criticism in English – and to certain considerations of the structure and conduct of the poem that arise from this theme” (6).

In short, Tolkien will find that the tragedy of a man, Beowulf himself, is the preeminent theme of the text. Even the monsters give the poem a tone of “high seriousness,” but the women of the text merit no mention at all despite the fact that one of them is sometimes labelled as one of the three monsters of the text (19). Thus, Tolkien set up a trend among the early scholars of simply not engaging with the feminine in the text, monstrous or otherwise.

Truthfully, it would be hard to pinpoint which of these two trends – the wailing woman or the invisible one – most influenced the next wave of *Beowulf* criticism.⁶ However, the more recent round of critics, many of them women in the 1980s and 1990s, found much of the previous scholarship on the text insulting to women as a whole. As such, they launched a major shift in considerations of female motive, analogue, and purpose in *Beowulf*. The shift, I would argue, began with L. John Sklute’s observation that “freothuwebb/frithuwebbe- and, relatedly, frithusibb- does not necessarily reflect a Germanic custom of giving a woman in marriage to a

⁶ In the spirit of fairness, certain debates about matrilineaty in the poem and its historical analogues, particularly for Thryth, were occurring at this time as well, but they were definitely the outliers. See Chambers 40. A certain philological debate, unabated to this day, also began concerning the meaning of female names in the text. For a clear timeline and summary of these various debates, see Olsen, “Gender Roles.”

hostile tribe in order to secure peace” (208). He finds instead that the three instances of the word “freothuwebbe” refer to those who practice diplomacy in Anglo-Saxon culture.⁷ Shockingly, he also noted that the word was not gender-specific. In other words, one did not have to be a woman to act as Wealhtheow does in the mead hall; men could perform the consular role.⁸ If that fact were true, scholars hypothesized that the inverse could also be true: perhaps women could fulfil roles perceived as exclusive to men. This realization led to a landslide of critical literature re-evaluating the roles of the women in the text.

1984 saw the publication of the next behemoth in the field: Helen Damico’s *Beowulf’s Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*. In this work, Damico, undoubtedly influenced by Gilbert and Gubar, links Wealhtheow, the seemingly calm matriarch of the mead hall, with the Valkyries in Norse legend. These powerful mythological figures were known for visiting the battlefield after a fight to choose the best slain warriors to dine at Odin’s hall, Valhalla. Damico specifically argues for a link between Wealhtheow and an incestuous exemplar of the Valkyrie, Yrsa, based on similarities in family structure and name etymology. Though now perceived in the scholarly world as “somewhat strained” due to its overextended attempts to make details in the Norse myth and *Beowulf* clearly align, Damico’s book went a long way toward dispelling the myth of the forgotten peace-pledge trapped in the mead hall (Enright 39). Wealhtheow may not be a Valkyrie, but scholars were quickly realizing that she was not an angel of the house either.

Shortly after Damico’s contribution, the most-cited book in the field made its debut. Jane Chance Nitzsche’s *Women as Hero in Old English Literature* was much more restrained in tone than Damico’s *Wealhtheow*. Damico’s examination of Wealhtheow was pointed, crafted with the

⁷ The other two instances in which the word is used include the description of the angel who appears to Constantine in Cynewulf’s *Elene* and the description of Ealhild in the anonymous *Widsith*.

⁸ Indeed, some have argued that Beowulf himself does. See Morey.

aim of drawing a direct connection between the matriarch and Yrsa. Nietzsche's book was also interested in analogues, but she avoided the mistake of trying to connect the women of *Beowulf* to other, *specific* mythological entities. Instead, Nietzsche, with a wider focus, established a well-known dichotomy in the field (along the lines of the typology emphasized in American literature studies): Mary and Eve. Every woman in the text, she argued, could be understood in terms of these two women, one the savior of mankind, the other its damnation. Mary, she thought, exemplified the passive ideal to which all women were encouraged to aspire. However, because of the nature of the sinful world in which they lived, and usually through no fault of their own, most women were doomed to become "failed peace-weavers" (a term now used *ad nauseum* in criticism).

Nietzsche's work, concerned mainly with these two archetypes, can seem somewhat limiting today in light of the later research into the women of the text. Scholars today focus on issues of translation and historical (as opposed to mythological) analogue in the text. Alfano, Hennequin, and others have established that the text does not actually construct Grendel's Mother as monstrous, but that scholars from Klaeber onward have translated her as such.⁹ Damico and North, picking up a thread left by Chambers in the 1920s, have attempted to place the women of the text in the historical milieu of Anglo-Saxon England, using their findings about similarities between characters and political figures to attempt to bolster an argument for a later dating of the text than previously thought.

⁹ This argument raises the interesting question of whether Tolkien was justified in not including Grendel's Mother in his list of monsters. The scholars listed above do not address this question, though my opinion would be that, though Tolkien might be justified in not including Grendel's Mother in the list of the text's monstrosities, the women of *Beowulf* should have earned some place in this landmark essay considering that Grendel's Mother takes up such a substantial portion of the text. Moreover, even if she is not a monster, she is certainly a worthy adversary and, as such, cannot be ignored in a study of the poem as the life journey of a warrior.

This study contributes to the debates about the significance of female characters in the poem, building in particular upon Damico and Nietzsche's critical framework. I take a more moderate approach than Damico in that I do not seek to draw direct analogues between mythical characters, though I do refer continuously to Norse myth as she does in her study. Instead, I, like Nietzsche, seek to argue for a recurring pattern of female characterization in the poem. I seek to ground a reinterpretation of a few of the main women in the text- Wealhtheow, Hildeburh, Grendel's Mother, Freawaru, and Thryth- in light of a widely mentioned but little understood trope: the hetzerin. The hetzerin, defined as "the woman who provokes conflict," has been most carefully defined in the American academy by Michael Enright in his landmark study *Lady with a Mead Cup* (42).¹⁰ The hetzerin as literary archetype appeared first in the Icelandic / Scandinavian sagas, with Enright noting that this figure may have appeared as early as the first century (42).¹¹

¹⁰ The trope itself began to be studied in 1958 with the appearance of Rolf Heller's *Die Literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Isländersagas*, a work that has never been translated into English. Loftur Bjarnason's review of Heller's work, however, quite succinctly summarizes why Enright's study is to be preferred over Heller's in an examination of the women in *Beowulf*. Bjarnason writes: "in each division the author [Heller] finds that the saga writer is interested in the activities of the men, not those of the women, except as they motivate or stimulate the actions of the men. He comes to the conclusion that the women of the sagas were necessary elements in the story, but that they served merely as props. A woman is of interest to the saga teller only to the degree that with her help he can create the necessary conditions for incidents worthy of his attention" (512). Bjarnason disagrees with this observation of Heller's when it comes to major figures such as Gudrun, but otherwise he agrees with this assessment. I completely disagree (due to a multitude of reasons, not the least of which is that the women of these texts are the reason that any action occurs at all) with this outlook, and, as such, prefer Enright's more gender-balanced approach.

¹¹ Throughout this study, I refer to the hetzerin as an "archetype," a word that benefits from further elucidation as it is used abundantly and rather loosely in the field of medieval literature. In Jungian psychology, an "archetype" is "a pervasive idea, image, or symbol that forms part of the collective unconscious" (*OED* def. 1c). Such images often conveyed subliminal anxieties of a culture. Jung's archetypal images, though fallen out of favor in psychology, have been of great use in literary studies. The trend in today's research is to define recurring tropes, or character types that constantly recur in literature, as archetypes. These character types are so common in a culture, so totally engrained in the psyche, that an author perhaps does not even consciously craft their characters as such, though these trends are identifiable by scholars at a greater temporal remove. With these ideas in mind, when I refer to the hetzerin figure as an archetype in *Beowulf*, I am referring to a recurring character type in the text that the poet returned to again and again due to a need to deal with anxieties caused by the treatment of women in a culture in which the place of women seemed to be rapidly changing. I do not believe the poet consciously inserted this archetype into the text, but I do think that he was familiar enough with Norse myth to not only echo its character types in his own work, but to seamlessly modify these types when needed as well.

To be more specific, the hetzerin is a woman, somehow wronged by a man or an opposing family, who provokes a male in her immediate vicinity to take revenge for her. Wealhtheow, Enright argued, “might well fit this model,” as she elicits a vow from Beowulf, after he has drunk from the mead cup in the hall, that he will kill Grendel (42). I argue that Wealhtheow prompts this vow more concretely than Unferth due to the rhetorically powerful position in the hall accorded to her through the poet’s clear construction of her as a hetzerin. If Beowulf refuses her pleas, he marks himself in the eyes of this entire audience as no less cowardly than the Danes who have failed in the past to slay Grendel and, indeed, as unable to fulfill the will of a *mere* woman. For this reason, Wealhtheow’s provocation is ultimately more forceful than Unferth’s, requiring Beowulf to enact his host’s will if he wants to maintain his standing in the hall.

In addition to bringing to bear the archetypal figure of the hetzerin on my analysis of the poem, I will also trace the ways in which the representation of women in *Beowulf* is affected by the religious transition occurring in Anglo-Saxon England during this time. Scholars have long known that the religious connotations of *Beowulf* can be successfully interpreted as both pagan and Christian. Blackburn argued for the latter as early as 1897 while Kennedy was arguing for the former in 1940 (and they are not even the earliest proponents, just the most eloquent). In truth, I believe that to exclude the continuing influence of pagan rites in the newly Christianized England even until the early 1000s would be a mistake. As Niles has pointed out, the genealogies of the West Saxon kings continued to include the Norse God Odin well into the tenth century to placate their new Viking citizenry (132). That evidence is reinforced by the fact that after the massacre at Lindisfarne in 797, regular invasions of the English Isle continued until the reign of

Harold Godwinson and the Battle of Stamford Hill in 1066.¹² The Scandinavian peninsula, due in part to sheer rurality, was one of the last regions to be effectively Christianized. The idea that they would bring with them a religion not quite Christian is likely; their exogamy with the women of the English isle could have spread heretical belief in the same way that we know that it spread folktale.¹³

I argue that the trope of the hetzerin found in Icelandic saga can be found in *Beowulf*, though altered into a new form due to that very religious transformation occurring at the time. The main facet of religion under consideration in my argument is the concept of fate. In Norse literature, the existence of predetermined fate is unquestioned. Due to texts like “The Seeress’s Prophecy” and “Saying of the High One,” individuals in the Scandinavian peninsula knew how the world would end or what to expect after death. Ragnarök, the end of the world in Norse context, was well-laid out in “The Seeress’s Prophecy,” which one scholar speculates is “a kind of sacred text of the Scandinavian religion, composed shortly before the beliefs were to be eradicated by Christianity” (Larrington 3). In this text, the eponymous Seeress describes how the chain of events leading to Ragnarök will begin. The main event that will cause the Twilight of the Gods is described in this short statement: “for Baldr...there stood grown...the mistletoe” (32p8). The Seeress knows, before it occurs, that “a captive...unmistakable as Loki” will set in motion the death of the gods by insuring that Baldr, Odin’s favorite son, is killed by contact with

¹² This is not to mention the fact as late as 665 Bede describes how the East Saxons, “[w]hile the plague was causing a heavy death-roll in the province...abandoned the mysteries of the Christian Faith and relapsed into paganism” (200). Bede also provides evidence that pagan practice continued on the continent into the eighth century when he writes of Willibrord’s 692 mission to “convert many folk in a short while from idolatry to belief in Christ” in Frisia, a region mentioned in *Beowulf* (280). See the Finnsburg Episode starting at line 1070.

¹³ Stitt’s *Beowulf and the Bear’s Son* grounds a good analysis of this transference of folk-tale from one culture to another. He focuses on the narrative of the “Bear’s Son,” the story of the younger son who conquers a monster (and occasionally that monster’s mother) in order to win the love of a beautiful princess. This narrative can be found concurrently in Indian myth and Celtic pointing to a continuous trade circuit of these legends in the early medieval ages. *Beowulf*’s fight with Grendel’s Mother also fits this folkloric pattern.

his one weakness: mistletoe (35p8). All of this and more is made unmistakably clear in the text and the fact that her foreknowledge is absolute is referenced repeatedly by the seeress's question: "do you want to know more: and what?" (35p8).

The fact that the Seeress knows the Twilight of the Gods so well and relates it to her readers so openly can only lead to the conclusion that fate is unchangeable. Loki will break free after he has insured Baldr's death. He will lead a troop of monsters to Valhalla to sack the seat of the Gods. In this confrontation, all the gods will die and the world will end. Nothing Odin or Thor does will prevent this doom; events have already been planned out. The lives of the humans in Norse society is no less laid out. The Norns, the Norse goddesses of fate equivalent to the Greek Fates, determine the lives of every human. Each will be a warrior or rule a farmstead. Each will die in battle and earn a seat in Valhalla or die in bed and go to Hel, the eternally dark afterlife for those who die a peaceful death. Fate, in this milieu, is no mystery. The repercussions for one's actions are well-known and can be anticipated.

This maxim applies equally to that section of Norse literary women known as hetzerin. These Norse women depended on insult to provoke male actors to bring about their desired objectives, which were that their enemies would meet violent ends. Their insult was always effective because of the tripartite structure through which it functioned: namely through a reliance on appearance, honor, and an item of insult. Through these three elements, the man provoked would *always* act on the provocateur's will. However, at the same time, it should be noted that this violence never occurred without consequence. Through an identifiable chain of events stemming from the woman's initial insult, the woman in question almost always meets with a violent end herself.¹⁴ If not met with death, these women are abandoned and or

¹⁴ It is also worth noting that these women always seem to act against the will of a male protector- whether this be a husband, a spouse, or a brother- when seeking their way.

repudiated, left to the whims of their enemies. In short, the character identified as a hetzerin, though seemingly autonomous, is bound by a fate inextricable from the trope as a whole.

Wealhtheow in *Beowulf* demonstrates the insult structure outlined above, which I argue marks her as constructed along the lines of the archetype. However, in the Anglo-Saxon cultural milieu, the concept of fate as knowable and certain has changed quite drastically with the shift from paganism towards an increasingly Christian religious model. In this model, the future is controlled by an unknowable God, ones whose dictates are prescribed in the Bible, but whose wrath is known to be unpredictable. This God, unlike the Norse Odin, has no face. One cannot expect to see him wandering in the forest as an old man or guiding warriors on the battlefield. Indeed, one cannot expect to see him at all. The mysterious nature of this deity makes the futures he will allow equally mysterious.¹⁵ True, the Bible foretells the rapture, Judgement Day. However, the time in between that time and today and, indeed, the length of time that will pass between now and then is left open. The mysterious nature of a future created by this unknowable divinity, this realm of multiple possible but ultimately unknowable outcomes, I term potentiality.

Potentiality affects the hetzerin archetype's role and impact in *Beowulf*. When Wealhtheow elicits a vow from Beowulf, she does so through a careful manipulation of public space, reputation, and an item of insult just as the Norse hetzerinnen did. However, whether she

¹⁵ In Bede's story on the conversion of King Edwin, the king's chief's metaphor of the sparrow flying through the hall gives some indication of the search for existential comfort in this culture. The chief says, "when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thegns and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through on door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came" (Bede 129-130). In other words, the moments of life in the mead hall are known, comforting. However, the minute one departs from such a life, the fundamental mystery of what comes next is terrifying. This quote is made from the perspective of a pagan considering Christianity; however, Bede's later description of the various returns to pagan worship in times of plague and invasion make clear that Christianity was not as safely explicative as first thought.

could hold him to his vow should he renege on his promise to defeat Grendel seems questionable. This strange ambiguity is due to the fact that we are given no indication in the text that Wealhtheow could actually make the ranks do *anything*. Her power hinges on an insult (based in her tools of insult- the mead cup and the Finnsburg episode) that is based in a future controlled not by her, but by that mysterious Christian God mentioned earlier. Whether this God would reinforce her will and allow to insult to ostracize those who failed her is questionable. This ambiguity stands in stark contrast to the Norse hetzerin whose provocation always elicited definitive results in a predictable order. Fate, in Norse context, insured the provocation's efficiency while also insuring the end of the hetzerin woman.

In *Beowulf*, the poet's description of Wealhtheow's provocation intimates that a shift is occurring both in the archetype and the archetype's fate. Wealhtheow says that she has *prayed* for Beowulf to appear (Heaney 626). She invokes the presence of an omniscient protector to enforce her words. She does not, in fact, have to depend on worldly agents or a predetermined fate to enforce her will: she depends on a heavenly, mysterious protector. The only problem with this dependence on futurity and, indeed on potentiality, is that we receive no indication in the text that God actually backs her will. In the more Christianized culture, the guaranteed fate that accompanied the hetzerin archetype is no longer present. Such alteration of expected outcome due to differing religious stance leaves this hetzerin in an ambivalent space that is characterized more by weakness than strength. In short, the provocation is still present, but in an altered, potentially weakened form due to the fact that a certain ambivalence about female effectiveness prevails in the poem due to religious transition.

After analyzing how variations on the theme of fate in this culture affect Wealhtheow as hetzerin, I will move into a broader discussion of how other women in the text, though not

clearly identifiable as hetzerin, are affected by this trope's presence in their culture. Grendel's Mother, I argue, becomes an unintentional hetzerin due to her frighteningly enigmatic nature. She represents, to speak broadly, what occurs when one replaces the comforting notion of a set and knowable future with sheer potentiality. Grendel's Mother is inarguably violent; she kills Aeschere in retribution for Grendel's death. However, that exaction of "retribution" is precisely what, in the context of this culture, justifies the murder. Her incursion is not an instance of malicious bloodlust as is her son's, but a carefully coordinated enactment of *wergild*, or payment of the blood-price. However, again in a culture in which the future appears more and more sinister in its unknowability, comfort will be sought in extreme situations by turning to more traditional models of behavior. Grendel's Mother does not speak, but in her violence she most closely resembles that older archetype: the hetzerin. As I will show, in the case of Grendel's Mother the thanes interpret her based on the pagan model of the hetzerin: she is a malicious female that should be and will be punished. They treat her accordingly, killing her, though we receive no indication in the text that she actually acts the part.

The last section of this paper discusses a potential way out of this pattern -volition and death- for the women in *Beowulf* through an analysis of the role of the Thryth digression in the text. This digression's format leads the reader to believe that Hygd, the young queen in Hygelac's court, is contemplating the story of Thryth. Her tale, I argue, represents a hopeful model to the young queen, a model in which a queen may be violent in youth yet may escape punishment via death or repudiation in future. Marriage is that future, no longer shrouded in clouded future made threatening by its potentiality. By reworking the hetzerin form, at this point only recognizable as an instance of a "violent woman," the shadow of the Norse hetzerin with all its attendant violent fates can finally be escaped.

In short, representations of the women in *Beowulf* are informed by the hetzerin archetype, though this archetype is gradually losing both its effectiveness and its definition due to changing religious ideas surrounding the concept of fate in Anglo-Saxon culture and literature. In order to explicate the nature of the hetzerin archetype, the first section of this paper will devote several pages to examining the figure's foundations in Norse myth. The conclusion drawn from these pages is simple: that in this literature, the hetzerin utilizes a tripartite method of insult to achieve her desires, is always effective at this provocation, and is not, as Enright has speculated, a safe role, but instead one fraught with peril (54). The second section will argue that Wealhtheow is crafted with the hetzerin archetype in mind as her words, her presence, and strategic use of items reflects the archetype's tripartite structure. However, I will argue that her effectiveness in this role is diminished by a worldview that sees fate as uncertain. Stemming from that argument, I will look at the ways that that hetzerin form, once it becomes untethered from its original grounding in fate, can result in inadvertent provocation – as in the case of Grendel's Mother – with disastrous effects. Finally, I will argue that Thryth, though often discounted as a superfluous figure in the text, actually represents a new, more encouraging future for this archetype and for the potential storylines of women as a whole.

“WHY SHOULD OTHER MEN DRINK YOUR ALE FOR YOU?”: THE HETZERIN IN NORSE CONTEXT

In the *Volsunga Saga*, Queen Borghild delivers the line above in an act of calculated malice typical of the hetzerin figure. She utters it at a great banquet similar to the one to the one in which we first view Wealhtheow. Indeed, the discussion in the hall revolves around unrequited *wergild* even as it does in *Beowulf*. There is even a cup involved, though this cup must bring to mind a quote from *The Poetic Edda*, that one should “be most wary of ale, and of another’s wife,” more than it does the atmosphere of communion apparently at work in the Anglo-Saxon text (Larrington 131p30). Most importantly, however, a distinguished and politic queen also roams this hall.

Borghild and her companion women in the *Volsunga Saga*, *The Poetic Edda*, and the various family sagas, represent the most stereotypical version of the hetzerin archetype. This archetype, in a world in which ideas crossed the water with the procession of trade and enemy raiders, quickly flowed to other nations involved in this pan-Nordic environment, though certain facets of the archetype seemed to have shifted with location (and that location’s cultural milieu).¹⁶ In *Beowulf*, Wealhtheow is the most recognizable example of the archetype, fitting almost exactly the pattern that the Norse women exemplify. Therefore, a minute examination of Borghild’s behavior, as well as the behavior of two of her cohorts in this literature, is essential for laying the groundwork of a discussion of the hetzerin archetype. Particular attention reveals a

¹⁶ Damico writes that “[b]oth the fictive and the contemporary landscapes appeal to and reflect the traditions and values of a pan-Nordic world that includes the nations of the Scandinavian peninsula and the northern continental borderland” (15). This line illustrates well the scholarly consensus today that the European climate in the early medieval ages was one of continuity instead of national isolation.

tripartite method of provocation in the hetzerin form, a technique that hinges on keen, almost omniscient attention to location, reputation, and an entity with insulting connotations for whomever sees it. This attention also reveals another, more disturbing fact: these outwardly formidable figures always earn death or repudiation for their actions. This definitive outcome, I argue, provides the basis for how this figure shifts according to the culture in which it finds itself.

Discussion of the trope's potential for alteration in differing cultural milieux must begin with a discussion and breakdown of its most iconic form. Though not the most famous iteration,¹⁷ Borghild, the queen mentioned above, is the most straightforward example of the archetype. During the scene described above, she has gathered in the hall with her husband, King Sigmund, and his son, Sinfjotli. She holds a grudge against the latter because in a fight over a prospective bride, Sinfjotli killed her brother.¹⁸ On hearing the cause of brother's death, Borghild "demands that Sinfjotli leave the kingdom, making it clear that she has no wish to see him again" (Grimstad 111). Sigmund naturally refuses to banish his first-born son, instead offering to "pay wergild" (111). Borghild is not consoled, though she feigns contentment for the time being – "You shall decide, my lord, as is proper" – while plotting her revenge (113).

¹⁷ The most famous and widely discussed example the hetzerin is Gudrun. Found in the same sections of *The Poetic Edda* as Brynhild, she is known for her Medea or *Titus Andronicus*-like murder and baking of her two sons. David Clark has recently questioned her status as a truly autonomous figure in his 2012 monograph, *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga*.

¹⁸ Indeed, one can imagine that Borghild already rages because Sinfjotli, not her own son Helgi, fills the seat of family honor in Sigmund's hall. Sinfjotli, in both *The Poetic Edda* and the *Volsunga Saga*, is the son of Sigmund and his sister, Signy. The story goes that Signy was ashamed of her sons by her husband, the cowardly King Siggeir, who had slain her and Sigmund's father shortly after Signy's wedding feast. The sons, she felt, were as cowardly as the father because they refused to face down a mysterious creature in a flour bag (it turned out to be a venomous serpent). To bear a child worthy of the Volsung line, she slept with Sigmund, shortly thereafter giving birth to Sinfjotli, who made bread from the flour, grinding the serpent to dust in his hands. Sinfjotli also appears in *Beowulf*, where he is known as "Fitela" (Heaney 888). Of course, in this scene, the detail about his incestuous origins has been veiled. He is simply Sigmund's nephew.

This vengeance comes to fruition at her brother's funeral feast. Here, as per ancient custom, she carries the drinking horn from retainer to retainer, all the while keeping a special horn in store for Sinfjotli¹⁹. When she comes to him, however, he refuses to drink, claiming "[t]he drink is contaminated" (113). His assessment is correct: Borghild has poisoned the drink. Hearing his son's anxiety, Sigmund, impervious to poisons, quaffs the liquid, inadvertently putting his son to shame. The entire hall sees it; the unavoidable question must soon arise: what kind of Volsung will not drink his own mead? At this point, Borghild looks to Sinfjotli and gives the quotation headlining this section: "Why should other men drink your ale for you?" (113). Though ostensibly addressed to Sinfjotli himself, the taunt is meant to be heard by all who witness the scene in the hall: this is a public shaming. Sinfjotli holds out for another round of this mocking, but on the ritualistic third rendition, he drinks. He dies shortly thereafter. Borghild has fulfilled the function of the hetzerin perfectly: she provokes action through taunting to get revenge for a perceived wrong.

A survey of two more paradigmatic figures demonstrates how the hetzerin always closely echoes this same pattern. One of these figures can be found in the life story of Sigmund's second-born son, Helgi Hundingsbani. After his battle against King Hunding and his sons, Helgi encounters a group of women, "all of whom were noble in appearance, but one so in particular," very near to the edge of the battlefield (105). The "one...in particular" is Sigrun, though all the women are probably Valkyries or swan-maidens.²⁰ When Helgi invites her to dine with him, she

¹⁹ The accounts are vague as to how she keeps this horn separate from the one that she would have passed around to the other retainers in the hall. The *Volsunga saga* simply states: "Borghild was waiting on the men as they drank and brings a large drinking horn to Sinfjotli" (113). The most likely possibility seems to be, since she was moving amongst the thanes continuously to quench their thirst, that she had to step aside to refill the horn, giving her the perfect opportunity to poison it prior to serving her stepson.

²⁰ These two supernatural groups are almost synonymous in Norse literature. Valkyries serve the Norse All-Father of the Gods, Odin, by choosing the slain from the battlefield for him to feast in his hall, Valhalla. Valkyries are often described as "swan-maidens," an epithet that refers to their possession of a piece of clothing that allows them to fly. Both groups also constantly watch for a worthy husband to marry. Sigrun is no different.

refuses, already humiliating the great warrior who is still standing in front of his troop. This refusal is not because of any antipathy she bears the warrior; indeed, she has already decided at this point that she wants to marry Helgi. Her refusal stems from the fact that her father, King Hogni, has pledged her in marriage to Hodbrodd. Sigrun scorns Hodbrodd, calling this suitor an “old buzzard” or a “kitten” to Helgi in front of Helgi’s men (107; Larrington, *Edda* 18p113).²¹ The incitement here is veiled, but detectable. If, after finding Sigrun attractive and marriageable, Helgi does not help her to extricate herself from an aged and pitifully weak suitor, the implication is that he is equally feeble. In a culture ruled by an honor system as unavoidable (though certainly different) as the one prevailing at the Arthurian court, Helgi’s course is now unavoidable. After her provocation, he will kill Hodbrodd and take Sigrun to wife.

The final episode worthy of consideration in a discussion of the Norse hetzerin is found in that cycle of stories about Sigurd so beloved by Wagner. The storyline of this cycle is convoluted, confused by the transcribers of the tale and lost in places. The main point to know is that Sigurd, another son of Sigmund, pledges to marry Brynhild. However, before he can do so, he goes to the court of the Gjukungs and sees Gudrun. At this point, Gudrun’s mother, a powerful sorceress, gives Sigurd a potion of forgetfulness. Under its sway, he forgets Brynhild and marries Gudrun. Eventually, Brynhild is tricked by the Gjukungs herself, this time into marrying Gudrun’s brother, Gunnar. The incident relevant to my argument here occurs once they are all living together under the same roof.

²¹ Quotes from *The Poetic Edda* require a special system of citation. The document is in verse, but in a special Icelandic verse form known as the strophe. The strophe count begins anew with each new chapter of the *Edda*. For example, “Sayings of the High One” has a strophe 13 as does *Lokasenna*. To avoid this inevitable confusion, I will quote from the *Edda* giving first the strophe number (18 above) followed by the page number on which that strophe is found in Larrington’s translation (113 above). For clarity’s sake, I have also divided the numbers with a “p” to indicate the secondary page number. The few sections of prose quoted from this text will be indicated by the page number followed by the word “prose.”

Sigurd now admits to Brynhild that he remembers his vow to her, even offering to repudiate Gudrun and her son in favor of Brynhild (189). However, his offer does not appease her. Brynhild answers, quite simply: “I don’t want you...or any other man” (189). She refuses to break the oath she made to Gunnar when marrying him. Instead, she plots violence. Prior to this, the poet has informed the reader that she “refuses to share her wealth” with Gunnar (185). This reference to “wealth” could be interpreted in two ways. Brynhild could be refusing to share actual physical bullion with Gunnar, starving him if he has no wealth of his own. Gunnar would be shamed if controlled by such a woman. On the other hand, Brynhild could be denying Gunnar access to her bed, since a long tradition exists of equating a woman’s sexuality with her treasure.²² For Gunnar to admit to Sigurd (this is how the reader is let in on the detail) that his wife refuses to lie with him immediately calls into question his manhood in a literary culture already markedly anxious about male virility. To be unable to control one’s wife in this way was to open oneself up to *nið*, or the accusations of passivity and effeminacy (even homoeroticism) lethal to a warrior’s reputation (Clark 52).

As such, Brynhild has primed Gunnar to do anything she bids that allows him to regain both his former stature and his aura of masculinity. Her most iconic words to him, found without much emendation in both the saga and the *Edda*, clinch the deal:

You will lose your power, your fortune, your life, and me, and I will return home to my kinsmen and remain there in sorrow unless you kill Sigurd and his son. Don’t raise a wolf cub (191).

²² One need turn no further than Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath* to see that this is the case, as Laurie Finke discusses her essay “‘All is for to selle’: Breeding Capital in the *Wife of Bath’s* Prologue and Tale.” Enright discusses the connection with women and household wealth in Celtic and Anglo-Saxon context, though he does not link such wealth with female sexuality (28-29). Andrew McGillivray takes an opposite stance on this episode in his article “The Best Kept Secret: Ransom, Wealth, and Power in *Volsunga saga*,” arguing that the Rhine gold possessed by Sigurd, not Brynhild’s provocation, leads to his death.

Brynhild clearly possesses the capability to strip every valuable away from Gunnar and an equal willingness to do so. The “wolf cub” in question is Sigurd’s young son by Gudrun, and at this moment Brynhild references the association between wolves and the Volsung. Because Sigurd’s father Sigmund actually has the power to transform into this beast, the wolf becomes the main sign of Sigmund’s, and hence the Volsung’s, inimitable will and savage strength. In a way, the wolf is the family sigil. To refuse to raise a wolf is to refuse to continue the Volsung line; it is basically to relegate the once-great clan to the shadows. Brynhild’s threat also anticipates what should happen if Gunnar killed the father and left the son. Eventually, the grown son, like the savage animal, would bite the hand that fed him. As such, to raise the child, to not end its life with its father’s, would mark Gunnar as the stupidest of men. In this moment, Brynhild single-handedly makes the most famous of the living Icelandic tribes into yet another blot in a dusty history book.

From the three accounts above, it should be clear that the hetzerin figure can differ from tale to tale. When examining such a figure, one does not look for a Brynhild in every text. Indeed, if one did dominate each and every text, there would not be much text to examine. If family lines were snuffed out each time a woman was angered, the *Volsunga Saga* itself would not have made it to a description of Brynhild, ending instead with the indignation of Signy about one hundred pages earlier. To make the equation “Brynhild equals hetzerin” would be to reduce the figure to a cipher in the texts. A more moderate path must be taken. I have found that there are three differing manifestations of the hetzerin figure in the source texts: she is public and enforcing, deferential and indirect, or manipulative and staging. Each achieves her will through a tripartite pattern of insult which hinges on appearance, reputation, and a demonstrative item or symbol, more on which will be said in a moment.

The first subset of the hetzerin / provocateur figure – public and enforcing - can be found in Borghild, the poisoner of Sinfjotli mentioned earlier. To achieve her desires, she, like each of the other hetzerin, carefully considers the location of her provocation, the reputation of the warrior she provokes, and an item with which to illustrate the warrior’s impending loss of honor. The choice of provocation location by this character could not be better. Borghild, as I tried to highlight in my earlier rendition of the tale, has chosen a place to act that is markedly exposed to the public eye. This area is a funeral feast for her brother, the brother of a famous queen; the crowd in the hall, the famous hall of the Volsungs to boot, will have metastasized beyond even its usual grandness. Dozens, if not hundreds, of retainers will be closely watching the behavior of the royal family at this very public feast, seeking signs of weakness. In such a scenario, Sigmund cannot allow his son and heir, Sinfjotli, to publicly embarrass the family line as such could have drastic consequences.

In that context, one can see why the second aspect of the hetzerin’s taunt, appearance, is also key at such events to ensure effectiveness. If a great king does not drink the draughts a woman offers him, what Stafford calls the “dignity” of the hall will be at stake (99). The ostentation and show of strength the thanes need to see in order to feel secure in the patently insecure world of the warband can be corrupted by the slightest flaw on the part of the royal actors. The third portion of the hetzerin’s taunt, the item or tool of insult, is what most threatens this majesty, and the position of the family as a whole. In this case, that tool of insult is none other than the mead cup in Borghild’s hand.

The quote from *The Poetic Edda* given at the beginning of this section reveals why such a simple object, the cup in a woman’s hand, can wield such great reputational sway in the eyes of the warrior masses. In “The Sayings of the High One,” the mead cup offered by a woman is

gravely feared. Odin tells Loddafnir, his chosen mentee in the text, to “be most wary of ale, and of another’s wife,” both of which are a threat here (Larrington 131p30). If the All-Father, the pagan deity most known for wisdom in this cultural milieu, himself admits fear of the cup proffered by a woman; the most fearsome warrior would be wise to do the same. The fact that Odin does not see fit to explain his logic for this warning perhaps only adds to the mystique of danger. We get the idea that even the All-Father cannot quite explain why women are quite as dangerous as they are, that perhaps they control a portion of the world that even he cannot reach with his runic gaze.

Odinic mystery aside, however, on a more mundane level, for a member of the Volsung tribe to refuse to take the cup from a *mere woman* would show an inherent lack of courage. The Volsungs are known for outsmarting the gods and sorceresses and for defeating mythic beasts. For them to refuse to drink, even under the excuse of attention of Odinic wisdom, is not a viable possibility. Then, in that public moment, the cup in Borghild’s hands has metamorphosed into a representation of a trial that even the gods fear to take. If Sinfjotli, a boy of Volsung stock on both sides, cannot drink a cup of mead, the Volsungs are cowards.

The provocation is perfect, hinging on an insult not only to the recipient, but to his entire house. Moreover, Borghild knows that she can enforce her words and her will. Remember the king has already quaffed the first two cups offered to his son. Sigmund can and does order his son to drink (to save the family’s honor in the public eye). Borghild knows Sigmund, always mindful of his glory, will do exactly this. By knowing this and ensuring the drinking, she also knows that she will be able to avenge her brother herself. Her plans to have Sinfjotli ingest poison were known to only her, after all. She kept her own counsel and was able to achieve her own will through no outside help.

Public and enforcing Borghild represents the most violent extreme of the hetzerin spectrum, though the poet never actively condemns her actions in either account of the text. She brings to life Damico's idea that "[a]n association with violence is apparently an attribute of the drink-bearing female. In Old Norse literature, for example, the motif of a female offering the festive cup often has a malevolent aspect" (Damico *Wealththeow* 18). The other side of the spectrum is occupied by Sigrun, the Valkyrie bride of Helgi, who can be best described as representative of the deferential and indirect side of the hetzerin form. Sigrun's taunt contains the grain of the insult needed to spur Helgi to action; however, her words are discreet enough to be disregarded as well. Despite this apparent difference from Borghild, however, the tripartite method of provocation is still present in her words and actions.

A consideration of the first two aspects of the taunting process – location and reputation – demonstrate how this is the case. Both her choice of setting and phrasing deferentially save Helgi's reputation should he ignore her. In the saga account, this location is the edge of a battlefield where Helgi will presumably only be surrounded by a few of his weary men, not the most attentive lot nor the most perceptive to insult considering the king has just won a battle great enough to endow him with his name ("Bane of the Hundings"). The version in the Eddic account is even more private. We get no indication that there is anyone with the couple at all. Indeed, the scene seems almost private: "[s]he said she'd already loved with all her heart / Sigmund's son before she'd seen him" (Larrington 15p131). This location likewise gives Helgi the means to ignore (warriors never refuse) the taunt while retaining his honor in his hall's eyes. This discussion is no public denouncement like the one Unferth made to Beowulf, but a gentle push in the direction this lady requires. The aspect of reputation, as already said, is saved by the timing of this taunt: no one will question the honor of a king who has just destroyed a great clan.

Likewise the symbolic item involved is much more discreet and indirectly insulting than that disgraceful cup in Borghild's hands, though still endowed with a powerful impetus. In this episode, the item on which the taunt centers is actually absent: the buzzard or the kitten. These are two insulting analogs: a buzzard feasts on the flesh of the dead (as opposed to the fine food of the mead hall) while a kitten, then as now, is only fit to fight yarn. However, the immediacy of the items is negated by their absence. Sigrun does not bring a kitten with her to the battlefield to demonstrate exactly how unmanly Helgi would be should he fear to face Hodbrodd. The poisonous cup in Borghild's hands is not to be found in this scene, nor the combative nature of the public and engaging hetzerin. The potential insult should Helgi refuse echoes in Sigrun's choice of metaphors- "Helgi is more of a kitten than Hodbrodd" or some such- but the immediacy found in Borghild's offering of the fatal mead cup has been mediated by absence. Fortunately, despite this mediation by time and place, Helgi's appreciation of Sigrun's beauty will only allow him to acknowledge her plea.

On the other hand, Brynhild, like Borghild, tends to be placed on the violent end of the hetzerin spectrum. She certainly does not require a man's adoration to have her way; she does not subtly and intimately woo Gunnar so that he will work her will and slay Sigurd. However, at the same time, Brynhild also does not have the immediate means to meet her ends herself should Gunnar refuse to kill Sigurd for his abandonment of Brynhild.²³ She does not seem prepared to murder Sigurd in his bed herself; she is no Grendel's Mother with a broad whetted knife. In other words, she is not truly an example of the public and enforcing hetzerin. Certainly, the three elements of provocation are present, but present in a way that consigns Brynhild to the middle of

²³ Of course, Sigurd also slept with Brynhild – admittedly with a sword between them – but still enough to impugn Gunnar's honor.

our spectrum, somewhere between the most aggressive Borghild and the imminently passive Sigrun. She, as a hetzerin, can best be categorized as manipulative and staging.

As the treasure scene above illustrates, Brynhild's words destroy Gunnar's reputation in a way that leaves no room for its recovery *sans* violence. However, she makes that statement to her husband in private; the reader gets no intimation that others are around. Gunnar is the one who tells Sigurd of his wife's cruelty. In other words, Brynhild's taunt hinges on her husband predicating his own shame, setting the provocation process in motion for her by making her taunt public. Therefore, the same aspect of publicity found in every single hetzerin taunt remains prevalent in this scene, but the method by which the insult is made known indicates a cleverer ability to manipulate on Brynhild's part. She has an eerily prophetic sense of what effect her provocation will have on her husband's psyche.

From that initial prompt and Gunnar's publishing of it, events progress rapidly, though always through Brynhild's more evident manipulation. She remains in bed for seven days, which her husband can only interpret as a "portent" of something monstrous to come (177). At this point, after carefully showing Gunnar the ominous effects to be expected from her anger, she gives her final threat: that he will be deprived of everything, even his life (191). This threat to his honor, typical of the hetzerin archetype, is insufferable and, clearly, in Brynhild's power to control. Cleverly, Brynhild has taken the one item that means life, wealth, and bloodline to him – herself - and turned it into her item of provocation. She, Brynhild, having been intimate with Sigurd, is the insult by which Gunnar's honor can be destroyed. The immediacy found in Borghild's taunting of Sinfjotli is again present – Gunnar seems to have no choice at this point but to act – but the difference still remains in the fact that, if in the most miniscule possibility he

failed to do so, we see no sign that Brynhild would kill Sigurd herself. Crafty though she may be and manipulative in the extreme, Brynhild will not kill the party that injured her.

From the discussion above, it becomes apparent that the hetzerin figures, though differing in degree, never differ in method. In the scenes in which they appear, there is always a consideration of location that is intimately connected with the implicated party's honor. Moreover, there is always an item or representative entity (though not always physical as shall be examined in my *Wealhtheow* section) that serves to fuel the passion of the situation. The taunt, as such, always reads like a well-choreographed but ancient and utterly predictable dance. Because of this rote formula, these scenes can become monotonous to the reader.

Paradoxically, however, this monotony only serves to heighten the reader's appreciation of these women's cunning. An amplified awareness of time as well as cause and effect are necessary to choose a place that will best impugn a warrior's honor. Moreover, to craft words effectively insulting requires an intimacy with the potential audience of the insult, a sociological as well as psychological knowledge not stated blatantly in this literature written long before the invention of the human, or the literary portrayal of internal consciousness usually first noted in Renaissance literature. Psychological knowledge paired with a great mythical and rhetorical knowledge is needed to pick an effective item of insult. The hetzerin must consider the cultural resonances of each particular item, place, and warrior as well as the how these items will affect that warrior's reputation in the eyes of his underlings, or the folk that might spread his name abroad, to make her taunt effective. The tripartite structure is constantly effective, though its appearance differs slightly depending on the gradation of hetzerin figure – either public and enforcing, indirect and deferential, or manipulative and staging- utilizing it.

However, the hetzerin not only considers each of these strategic components of her insult in isolation; she considers how they will work in conjunction. Borghild's cup could not be an effective tool of insult if past mythical models did not also imbue it with cultural significance, nor could it be effective if the weight of Volsung history did not add to its impact on the crowd in Sigmund's court. Sigrun's choice of feline insult would not be as effective to Helgi if he did not stand on a battlefield bloodied enough with his conquests to endow him with a name. In short, the hetzerin's utterly predictable mode of provocation implies an underlying level of knowledge and puppeteering skill not ordinarily recognized by scholars. These considerations give the character a dangerous, mythic potential. Apart from these findings, however, two other aspects of the hetzerin need to be considered to further shed light on the archetype: namely, who she betrays when enacting her power and the ultimate result of her will being met.

All of these women achieve their goal when provoking their kinsmen to act, though, as I shall shortly show, with disastrous effect. Borghild will get Sinfjotli to drink. Sigrun will convince Helgi to kill Hodbrodd. Brynhild will insult Gunnar into killing his brother-in-law. However, when achieving their ends, each of these women thwarts the will of their current male protectors. Sigmund tells Borghild that "he will not order him [Sinfjotli] to go and offers to compensate her loss with gold and great riches," but her lying response, "[y]ou shall decide, my lord, as is proper," indicates that she will accept no compensation from him in this matter (111). Sigrun admits that, in prompting Helgi to kill her betrothed, "I've destroyed my father's favoured design" (Larrington 16p131). Finally, Brynhild goes against Gunnar's better judgment when inciting him to kill Sigurd. We are told that "Gunnar was angry and cast down, / wrapped in thought, and he sat all day; he did not know at all clearly, what would be honorable for him to

do” (13p179). She clearly acts against his will, though in the case a lie of omission would have been necessary to save his honor.

The consequences of these transgressions against the will of their male protectors are dire. Borghild, ironically, suffers the kindest fate. Sigmund banishes her, going on to marry Hjordis, who will become Sigurd’s mother. We are told that she “died soon afterward,” the fate of the typical repudiated queen (113). Sigrun, on the other hand, cannot escape her fate so easily. The secondary end of her provocation (after getting Hodbrodd killed), to marry Helgi, concludes in a nightmarish scenario.²⁴ From the very start of their relationship, Helgi had prophesied that for Sigrun “it was fated that you’d be cause of strife among powerful men” (28p133). Events spiral into destruction shortly after this, and that statement leaves no doubt that Sigrun is the cause for the further bloodshed. After the laconic statement that Helgi “did not live to old age,” we are told that Sigrun’s brother slew Helgi with a spear enchanted by Odin, leading to the idea that Sigrun’s actions were condemned by the gods themselves (133 prose). Sigrun, however, gets the mourning widow’s wish: she sees Helgi again. She discovers that the warrior occasionally visits his burial-mound. Even here, though, she only finds a repudiation of her actions; Helgi tells her that “[y]ou alone, Sigrun from Sefafell / cause Helgi to be soaked in sorrow-dew” (45p136).

Nor can Brynhild escape the savage punishment heaped on these women. She soon leaves on a “long journey,” a Scandinavian euphemism for suicide (45p183). After the amount of bloodshed she has caused, the poet condemns her actions: “her intention was not good” (47p183). The title of the following section offers the poet’s view of Brynhild’s afterlife. The

²⁴ It should probably be said that the *Volsunga Saga* does not include this strange denouement. Perhaps in an attempt to have some line of the Volsungs still living (potentially for political purposes), the poet writes: “King Helgi took possession of that kingdom and lived there for a long time. He married Sigrun and became a distinguished and famous ruler, but he does not appear again in this story” (111). This may be wishful thinking on this author’s part, but the words “in this story” hint at the wealth of detail of what occurred later found in the *Edda*. In any case, the detailed description of Helgi’s end in the *Edda* lends it an air of authenticity.

title simply reads “Brynhild’s Ride to Hell,” not Hel with one “l” which would indicate the Norse goddess of death or the eternally dark region she rules, but the Christianized location with two. Upon arrival there, she immediately encounters an ogress who says, echoing Helgi’s statement to Sigrun, that Brynhild was “the worst luck in the world” (4p187). The hetzerin women clearly find no solace once their drive for revenge has been satisfied.

Ultimately, it seems that the fate of the hetzerin figure is no less monotonous than the location, reputation, and item structure of her provocation. The hetzerin archetype undoubtedly offers an alternative future for these women. They are not confined by the will of a father or husband should that will disagree with their own designs. In this regard, they show an almost unprecedented level of agency. However, that agency, that disobedience to an overarching paternal will, has a set, predictable outcome. Indeed, above I illustrated how these women seem to possess an almost uncanny knowledge of location, myth, legend, and psychology. With such a knowledge in mind, how can they be unaware of the results of their dealings? In all the cases outlined above, the women *must* be cognizant of the repercussions of their actions. Helgi tells Sigrun, explicitly, that she is fated to doom men. Borghild knows how much her husband loves (and owes) his son. Brynhild has purposely plotted Sigurd’s death so that she might kill herself with a mind appeased by vengeance. These women *know* before they provoke their will what the outcome of that will shall be, yet they choose that secondary path, no matter how disastrous it may be, over the one on which they currently tread.

The monotony of this fact (as well as the suicidal implications) perhaps is not really that surprising in a culture strongly adherent to the concept of fate. Any member of a Scandinavian nation in the early-to-mid-medieval age would have been conversant with the story of Ragnarök, of the Twilight of the Gods. They would have been aware of the stories of Odin’s multitudinous,

failed attempts to prevent it (and the fact that those attempts *must* fail). They would have been aware that, though it had not happened yet, Loki *would* trick Baldur into touching the mistletoe, leading to the god's death and the war between the gods. In short, in such a culture, fate was an unavoidable reality. Such an ideology surely became suffocating at times, the idea that one was placed in a position not of one's own choosing horrifying. The monotony prevalent in the movements of the hetzerin was present in many facets of life in such a world scheme.

As such, is it really surprising that, in a culture shaped by the concept of fate, that the hetzerin women would make a choice to walk a different path than the one originally laid down for them? This path was a *different* fate than the one originally set down for them; it allowed them to *make* a choice even if the aftereffects of that choice were not auspicious. These women have two choices in a way that most individuals in this worldview do not. The choice to pursue her own path instead of the path laid down by her father offered the tiniest portion of agency to these women in a world where one's fate was set. That agential moment perhaps made the repercussions of that moment, the knowledge that one would bring the temple down upon oneself, completely worth it even if, in choosing this option, one's fate seemed ordained tragic.

As I said previously, these women must have known in advance about the tragedy inherent in their choice. The events cited above occur in *one* family, the Volsungs, and this study has not covered half of the hetzerin women in that text. To think that the descendants of each successive generation would remain ignorant of their forebear's ultimate fate seems ludicrous. Added to this fact is the pervasiveness of the blood-feud in Norse mythology. Every saga has an instance of such conflict, making the idea that a member of this literary universe could remain innocent of it, again, ridiculous. In a way, the fact that they must have known about the consequences of their choice, that slight switch in fate, before they ever made their decision

answers an age-old question about these figures: why are they so magnetic in the text's in which they move? Why can one not look away from them the moment they enter the text? The answer might be found in another, slightly inverted question: how can one not look away from a figure who, in full knowledge of the terrible events to ensue, chooses to whet the knife that will kill her and her kin? These figures, in full cognizance of what they are choosing, sacrifice life and well-being for one moment of volition.

With this conversation in mind, the hetzerin archetype in its tripartite form was almost certainly closely bound with the idea of fate in this culture. Such a pattern gave the hetzerin archetype what can only be called, in a term defamed by modern scholars, an essential form. This essential form, the barebones literary structure without the spectrum of hetzerin behavior outlined above in the public and engaging, indirect and deferential, or manipulative and staging forms, is what would be transferred cross-culturally. However, as I will illustrate in the next section examining *Beowulf*, the form had to shift somewhat in accord with religious shift and, particularly, with shift in thought concerning the function of fate in human life. The hetzerin form would have been a recognizable trope to a literarily conversant member of the Anglo-Saxon culture due to the tripartite structure of it so easily identifiable in the *Eddas*, the sagas, and presumably oral culture as a whole. However, at least one of the three parts had to transform slightly to allow room for a new outcome for the form, an outcome more compatible with a culture increasingly adherent, not to Odin or the Norns, but to the Christian deity instead.²⁵

²⁵ The idea that the hetzerin figure was created by the church fathers in a warning to Pagan women to hold their peace as Jochens argues seems unlikely given the readers' ability to sympathize with them. Nevertheless, Jochens's comment on the possible ecclesiastical genesis of the hetzerin figure is worth quoting at length: "It might be too far-fetched to make the clerical authors solely responsible for creating the *Hetzerin* type, but the image of the evil, cunning woman who goaded men to barbarous deeds of revenge, thereby destroying the male order of society, did have resonance with the long-established ecclesiastical view of Eve, the first woman and the vehicle for the entrance of sin and misfortune into the world" (124).

“THE RANKS DO AS I BID”: SHIFTS IN THE HETZERIN TROPE IN *BEOWULF*

Wealhtheow is the only woman in *Beowulf* who speaks. Her counterparts- Hildeburh, Grendel’s Mother, Hygd, Thryth – all display a remarkable lack of voice. That facet of her character alone makes her more relatable to the readerly eye; her motives, because they are given voice, are more understandable than those of the silent woman of the mere or the wailing woman of the Episode. However, I argue that her character would have been recognizable (and therefore relatable) on a broader, archetypal level to a medieval audience. In this woman, more so than in any other in the poem, the traits of the hetzerin- the clever utilization of place, honor, and a tool of provocation to are obtain one’s will- are recognizable. Wealhtheow taunts Hrothgar to obtain her desire (that he should not disinherit his own sons) when he considers adopting Beowulf. Earlier in the text, she taunts Beowulf into swearing to kill Grendel after Unferth has failed to elicit an ironbound oath from the warrior. However, a close examination reveals that the hetzerin figure *has* subtly changed in the transition from Norse myth to Anglo-Saxon poetry, and that shift, I argue, is the direct result of the religious shift from paganism to Christianity.

As shown above, taunts alone do not make a hetzerin; also fundamental to the archetype is the mechanism utilized by the taunting woman to incite her will. The shifts in the archetype affected by religious shift must be traced on the level of these mechanisms, and, in particular, at the level of the tools of provocation utilized by the hetzerin. I argue that these tools in *Beowulf* only have questionable effectiveness due to a shifting perception of fate, an essential element of any religious credo. Unlike the Norse hetzerin, who could pick a tool that was insulting to the

person she chose to goad due to that person's past connections with said object, Wealhtheow chooses entities, corporeal and incorporeal, that, in the modern-day of the poem, are not *yet* insulting. These tools of insult, namely the mead cup and the Finnsburg Episode, have the potential to be insulting in future depending on how Hrothgar and Beowulf react to her provocation. However, that dependence on a future that, due to shifting outlooks on theology, remains murkily shrouded in potentiality, strips Wealhtheow of that very effectiveness so characteristic of the hetzerin. This weakening occurs because in a Christian world where the future is recognized as fundamentally mysterious, reactions to objects from the past no longer provide reliable reference points. The essential schema of cause and effect has been discounted, confounding wits even as perceptive as that of the hetzerin.

In order to show more specifically where the change in the archetype is occurring, it is perhaps beneficial to first note the places in which it has not changed. The location of both of Wealhtheow's main appearances echoes that of the Norse hetzerin. As with Borghild, Wealhtheow presides in an especially public sphere: her husband's mead hall. However, in Wealhtheow's episodes the tone in the hall is markedly more tempered than in Borghild's episodes. In Borghild's short limelight in the *Volsunga saga*, the author repeatedly emphasizes her malevolence. Instead of first giving us a scene of pure and unadulterated rejoicing in Sigmund's hall after his many triumphs, the chronicler decides instead to immediately open the episode with news of Sinfjotli's slaying of Borghild's brother and Borghild's immediate wrath. That detail is the first impression the reader receives of this hall's beautiful queen, and the scene can only function to endow the entire episode with a sense of disharmony, of shattered hall peace.

In *Beowulf*, the same foreboding exists due to past stories about women in mead halls, but the modern-day of the text shifts such foreboding to the background. As I mentioned earlier, the Eddic poetry constantly assigns a malevolent aspect to those women who serve mead. Odin specifically tells Loddafafnir to “be most wary of ale, and of another’s wife” (Larrington 131p30). To ignore this wisdom is inevitably to face the fate assigned to such folly: death by poison. Such past wisdom surely cannot be forgotten in this Beowulfian scene. Indeed, the idea that the woman entering the mead hall commands a reverent, if not fearful gaze from the hall’s inhabitants seems reinforced by the *Beowulf* poet. The moment Wealhtheow enters the hall, it is as if the poet can focus on no other subject, and, indeed, that remains the case every time she enters the hall. This woman entralls our poet in a way that can only intimate her power.

However, the poet downplays these expectations of hetzerin malevolence by writing, even in the feasting episode prior to the Grendel fight, “the crowd was happy” and “the din got louder” (Heaney 612, 611). Wealhtheow’s entrance should abruptly dampen such rejoicing if she is truly a hetzerin-esque figure. However, this happiness can be explained by another facet of life in the mead hall, one separate from, though, as we shall see, perhaps dominant over this hetzerin. Indeed, the cause of this greater harmony must rest in the personality of the leaders of the hall. In the *Volsunga Saga* and *The Poetic Edda*, the heroes are markedly self-interested. Helgi, Sigmund, and Sigurd are all out for the personal glory that will insure their place in Valhalla. Collateral damage (like, for instance, how their families will be harmed by their actions) gives no qualms to the participants in this glorious quest. Indeed, in this pagan context, the poets often make clear that the greater the sacrifice made, the greater the heroism of the one who made said sacrifice. Coincidentally, such great sacrifices, especially in the case of the Volsung men, were often the direct result of hetzerin intervention.

Beowulf's aged ring-giver, Hrothgar, could not present a more well-defined opposition to this older, more self-inclined heroic model. He is "far-famed in battle," but we never hear what those battles were, and, indeed, do not usually stop to give them much thought (608). Clearly, no great sacrifice or horrible familial mutilation occurred to heighten his fame. Unlike, Sigurd, for instance, who hoards the ring he earns from slaying the dragon Fafnir, Hrothgar is open-handed, earning the epithet "treasure-giver" for obvious reasons (607). This seeming selflessness, a more Christianized attitude from that of the older pagan warrior, creates a different aura in his hall, one capable of counteracting the myths surrounding his queen. In short, the location is one of harmony, a concord one would be loath to destroy, and, most importantly, a clearly Christian harmony.

The location gives Wealhtheow a certain kind of leverage in her taunting even if such leverage differs from that of the hetzerin in the hall in Norse myth. In Norse myth, as intimated above, the mead hall functions through a sort of paranoid masculinity.²⁶ Each man must do whatever necessary to assure that he is not emasculated, through cowardice, in the eyes of the mead hall. This culture is surely on the wane in *Beowulf* (the Danes calmly allow themselves to be denigrated by their Geatish guest), but the culture that replaces it is no less paranoid in another, equitable way. Hrothgar, as the aging king of a kindly court, will strive to keep the peace and to uphold that image of his court as a paradise of calm and munificence. This peace, as Enright has noted, is maintained through a keen and again, almost obsessive, attention to hierarchy. Wealhtheow has a major role to play in this order. The father, during this time, is

²⁶ Mark Breitenberg has recognized a similar trend in Early Modern England in his book *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*. However, as the title of his book shows, he labels this male fear as "anxious" instead of paranoid, due to the fact that this Renaissance fear seems to have no central locus or evoking factor (3). In *Beowulf* and the Norse texts, we can identify the rationale for the fear over masculinity pervading the hall: namely the eyes of the hall thanes. As such, this fear of someone watching, someone who could potentially question one's masculinity, seems more appropriately labelled paranoia than anxiety.

indisputably the paterfamilias, while the sons or nephews, as the future ring-givers, hold high rank as well. The thanes in the hall also possess a sort of leverage over outsiders. If Hrothgar is the father of the hall, Wealhtheow is the mother, a role admittedly subservient during the period. However, as Enright writes, the queen “normally played a significant if subordinate role in the establishment of order and hierarchy among the members of the warband” (2). Through Enright’s reasoning, this role is not insignificant in a hall that conceives of itself as a family; one does not need Foucault’s panopticon to know that order makes each individual feel secure on a primordial level.

In short, when Wealhtheow enters the hall she is working as an extension of Hrothgar’s desire to establish his favored hierarchy of individuals in the hall, the hierarchy that maintains the Christian peace. In an order originally noted by Enright, Wealhtheow, “observing the courtesies,” carries the mead cup “first to Hrothgar,” then to the “household and the assembled troop,” and finally to Beowulf (*Beowulf* 613, 616, 623). The ceremony basically requires movement to three, perhaps four, differing sections of the hall. However, these three simple moves establish the ranks as follows: king, sons / nephew, retainers, and only then visitors. Her movement through the ranks preserves harmony. For a king to move between the ranks to greet each rank in turn, he would have to leave his location at the focal point of the hall, weakening the aura of authority created by this location. For his sons to do so would in turn weaken them. Only the queen, outside, yet somehow intricately bound to this structure can weave the bonds between the men. Location is everything in this sense. If Wealhtheow was to refuse to carry the cup or the treasure, disorder would ensue. Moreover, Wealhtheow’s control of status recognition in the hall gives her a unique position in which to work, one not as lethally effective as Borghild’s, but similar enough to allow the effective functioning of the hetzerin mode of insult.

Stafford has studied the household duties of medieval queens at length in her acclaimed study *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*. At the end a discussion of the function of the mead hall as location, a quote from her on the role of the medieval queen in the court setting is appropriate:

“Her especial responsibilities were the management and day-to-day running of the household, the maintenance of the royal dignity- covering the whole area of the outward appearance and estate of royalty- and the annual provision of gifts for the highest officials. Throughout the description of palace government, the giving and receiving of gifts appears as the way in which friends were made, obligations created, and the whole system of personal rule cemented. It was also the affair of the queen and the great officers to isolate the king from the minutiae of administration, to preserve the essential distance and impartiality of royalty. This left them with favor to bestow, solving the problems of lesser officials, and controlling crucial access to the king, the fount of patronage and justice” (Stafford 99).

We have already seen the way in which the queen can use location to control the king’s rank as well as the ranks of the other thanes in the hall. However, Stafford’s mention of the “appearance... of royalty” must be considered in conjunction with a queen known for being “[a]dorned in her gold” and “decked out in rings” (Stafford 99; Heaney 614, 621).

Indeed, Wealhtheow’s position as hetzerin hinges on appearance as her subservient yet elegant appearance is necessary to upholding Hrothgar’s status in the hall. As mentioned above, Hrothgar creates the sensation of “festive cheer” in his hall through his amazing generosity (619). When Beowulf has won the fight with Grendel, Hrothgar gifts him abundantly with armor, horses, and gold. Therefore, the implication becomes that, should his own thanes achieve such

grand feats in the defense of their hall, he will reward them equally. Indeed, Hrothgar has already done so as he allows them to participate in the cheer surrounding Beowulf's victory despite their absence from the conflict.

Wealththeow, who can accomplish the king's will, serves as a constant reminder of this abundance through sheer appearance. When the thanes see her wearing the Brosings' neck-chain, they remember Hrothgar's munificence and the power that makes him capable of such munificence (Heaney 1198). Indeed, if the interpretations of Wealththeow's name and the implications of her epithet "Helming woman" are to be believed, her presence alone is enough to remind the hall of Hrothgar's martial might (620).²⁷ He can bring home such a glorious woman as a spoil of war, after all. The gold still ranks uppermost in a society that, though evolving towards a more Christianized concern with charity, is clearly still concerned with personal wealth. As Wright noted in his study of light in the text, "[l]ight, therefore, is predominantly that of the sun or of the metal which approaches most closely to it in the appeal to the eye. Certainly, after Grendel has vanished, there is a repeated emphasis on gold" (Wright 260). Light catches the eye most easily; gold reflects light. Wealththeow, quite literally, is the light of the poem, a constant reminder, through appearance, of Hrothgar's might. His reputation in the hall, his appearance to his thanes, depends on her appearance.

However, it should also be noted at this point that these riches that bedeck Hrothgar's queen, that ensure his own reputation as a powerful ring-giver, are always seen by the aging monarch as "good things / that the Heavenly Powers" sent him (Heaney 1750-1751). Indeed, Hrothgar himself states that to forget the markedly divine origin of worldly riches is to allow

²⁷ Fee notes how Wealththeow's name, which means "foreign slave," connects her to objects and particularly to spoils of war. However, he also goes on to note that the women of the text have little to no autonomy due to this link with mere things. I disagree with this stance mainly due to the fact that, if Wealththeow were to act against Hrothgar's political schema, the effects could be disastrous for the aging monarch.

“the devious promptings of the demon [to] start,” a loaded statement considering that Hrothgar had been plagued by a literal demon before Beowulf’s arrival (1747). When seen in this light, the protection of his personal appearance as rich ring-giver may also be an attempt to protect his appearance as a blessed, Christian patriarch. Wealhtheow, it seems, must maintain the appearance of wealth and subservience for several reasons, all crucial to Hrothgar’s standing in the hall.

When seen in this way, Hrothgar’s court displays as much paranoia about appearances as Sigmund’s. True, in this case it is Hrothgar’s munificence that shapes his authority in his thanes’ eyes instead of pure martial prowess as in the case of Sigmund. However, the danger inherent in a regime that depends on appearances is still present. Just as with Borghild and Brynhild, Wealhtheow wields the ability to make a great king bow to her will to protect his own reputation. This danger has gone unnoticed in Beowulfian scholarship simply because to detect it one must look at what is *not* in the text. One must ask what would happen if Wealhtheow deviated from her script even slightly, if she showed contempt towards Hrothgar or decided to favor Beowulf first. In such a case, Hrothgar immediately becomes unable to control his own hall, with all the attendant connotations of weakness.

In a hall so intricately bound by a familial structure, the insult that would occur should Wealhtheow serve Beowulf first would be worse than the insult that would have occurred if Sinfjotli had refused Borghild’s cup. In that case, at least, Sinfjotli would have had hundreds of years of pagan wisdom to reinforce the intelligence of that choice. He would still appear weak, cowed by a woman, but such a woman could still be recognized as a mighty opponent. Were Hrothgar to be defied by Wealhtheow, however, he would have no such justification in a land newly dominated by Christian patriarchy. He would simply be the brow-beaten spouse (one

thinks of Noah at the hands of his wife in the medieval plays) who cannot control his own household. Rich or not, he would not seem much of a patriarch if that was the case. In other words, Wealhtheow has a power in the hall that, despite its façade of subservience, cannot be completely controlled by Hrothgar.

Then, these two traditional methods of hetzerin insult, the location and the appearance, are still markedly present in the cultural milieu of *Beowulf*. Indeed, though the atmosphere in the hall is different and the mode of hierarchy is slightly revised, the mead hall in this text fundamentally follows an honor code equally important to the one found in the Norse literature. In such a similar model of society, the hetzerin figure surely is readily recognizable as she assumes her traditional position in hall politics. However, the reader conversant with the previous portion of my argument will remember the finality that awaits the hetzerin role: the hetzerin must die. There is no escaping her, admittedly chosen, fate. The reader will equally know that Wealhtheow faces no such disaster. Something, therefore, *must differ*. To change the fate of the recognizable archetypal figure, one must change one of its constituent parts to make the change logical, more in keeping with a new religious ethos. This shift comes, I argue, with the analysis of Wealhtheow's tools of insult.

It will be remembered from the previous section that an item or tool of provocation is the fulcrum on which the hetzerin insult hinges. In Norse myth, this item is always somehow linked to the past, to a potentially shameful event that came previously in the life of the male that the hetzerin woman provokes. Wealhtheow's tools follow the same general pattern, with one key difference that will be noted shortly. However, this hetzerin actually wields two tools of provocation, both of which, at first glance, seem rather mundane and unchanged from their traditional role in the process of insult.

The first of these items must be that utterly famous and emphasized mead cup. Wealhtheow's first scene with the cup reveals the item's significance as twofold. The most arcane significance connects to the family metaphor embedded in the structure of the hall first noted by Enright. Considering the *comitatus* as a familial structure instead of a political faction suggests an embedded ritualism, perhaps a hangover from a more pagan time. In this view, Hrothgar is again the father of the hall. Naturally, the cup comes first to him because he is the elder, the life source for the rest of the hall. His blood is the fountainhead through which will flow the blood of his sons and family in general. This familial structure is not a reality, but the king nonetheless crafts this illusion through the passing of the communal mead cup, "which had the purpose of creating fictive kinship" (Enright 17). The mead becomes the metaphorical blood of common kinship, flowing from the king's veins as an extension of his will, and Wealhtheow, the mother of the hall, cements the illusion. She, as a woman, holds the power to generate strands of mutual kinship through the birthing of heirs, the physical continuation of the bloodline. Through mystical reasoning, this also facilitates her passing along the fictional bloodline created through the sharing of mead. She is the vessel, the *ringgefasse*, through which the blood can pass naturally and believably (Enright 109). She sells the illusion.

Unless, of course, she chooses *not* to forward her spouse's political agenda. This potentiality hangs heavy in the air around Wealhtheow. What if she chooses instead to disrupt the harmony of the hall by serving, say, Hrothulf first? To do so would establish a new order in the hall and indicate that the previous king was not strong enough to control the vessel, the representation of order, in the hall. If one cannot control Wealhtheow who is the representation, the specter of honor, then one surely cannot control the reality. By withholding the cup from Hrothgar or by simply hinting at its misuse, Wealhtheow could call into question many aspects

of his rule. Indeed, one could argue that this potential makes her to be a constant threat during the present-day of the poem and in the days that must follow Beowulf's return to Geatland.

The implications behind this first item do not stop there, however, as the mead cup has an earthier significance as well. When the mead is not a metaphysical substance, it can only revert to the liquid of Dionysian potential. Drunkenness clearly offers no strangeness to the Danes (though the 2007 production starring Anthony Hopkins and Angelina Jolie undoubtedly overstressed its centrality somewhat). Beowulf, after all, pledges to take down Grendel for the express purpose of allowing "whoever wants to / go bravely to mead" (Heaney 603-604). What then could a cup, the symbolic equivalent of such carousing, offer to the hetzerin figure in a culture deeply concerned with the festivity after the fight?

The Poetic Edda, as already evidenced above, offers a slew of advice about mead, almost all of which concerns the woman offering the cup. Indeed, before a woman is brought into the picture (and indeed she always is), Odin advises Loddafnir that "[b]y the fire one should drink ale, one should slide over the ice," a statement that seems to both condone the drinking and its ensuing recklessness (83p23). However, in *Beowulf* the tone has notably changed. The men in this hall, other than on one final occasion, can never drink in peace. Grendel and Grendel's Mother give immediate cause to regret such behavior. The threat is not even solely centered in the female offering of the drink, but in the act of drinking itself. The cup, in such an environment, must symbolize a lethal irresponsibility.

Indeed, this shift from seeing the cup as a common though irresponsible mode of refreshment to seeing drink as a potentially lethal outlet of release demonstrates a shift in religious mentality from the pagan literature. Alcuin, the eighth-century religious scholar from York, was known to stress the damnation awaiting those who drank deeply in a mead hall that

echoed with a scop's heathen tales.²⁸ Indeed, as Bolton writes, “[t]he identification of drunkenness with the pit of hell echoes and reechoes throughout Alcuin’s letters; ‘Be not followers of drunkenness but lovers of sobriety’” (113). A matriarch incensed for whatever reason by what she saw in her mead hall could quote Alcuin, or, in Wealhtheow’s case, show the results of such drinking in the past to invoke a stigma that would help her obtain her will. Lady Macbeth’s “[w]as the hope drunk / [w]herein you dressed yourself?” was just as relevant in the Danish mead hall as it was in Shakespeare’s Scottish setting (1.7.35-36). To emphasize the woes accompanying drunkenness during this this time period, therefore, was an utterly Christian move, and is indicative of the way the new religion was influencing the hetzerin figure at a structural level.

When considered in terms of the hetzerin item of provocation, then, the mead cup has a significance in the text exceeding the one generally accorded to it by scholars. However, the cup is not the only tool of Wealhtheow’s manipulation. The second is even more obscure, harder to grasp by an audience separated from the insult culture: namely, the Finnsburg Episode recited by the scop in Hrothgar’s court. The episode tells the story of Hildeburh and Hengest. Hildeburh, after a vague conflict that occurs at her husband Finn’s court while her brother Hnaef visits, burns her son and brother on the same funeral pyre. After this fight, Hnaef’s Danish men, now led by Hengest, are forced to winter with Finn as the sea-lanes between Finn’s court and Denmark are apparently impassable. This cohabitation of course ends violently: Hengest kills Finn and takes Hildeburh back to Denmark.

²⁸ I refer here to Alcuin’s 797 CE letter to Higbald of Lindisfarne, advising him to stop the recitation of poems related to the heathen king Ingeld (the same Heathobard found in *Beowulf*) during meal times. The fuller quote, in the original Latin, may be found here: msuweb.montclair.edu/~furg/mel/quidhinieldus.html. Bede, Alcuin’s predecessor, shares a similar piece of advice in his letter to Egbert (339).

Many scholars have interpreted this digression over the years, though the primary focus has been on how the two women involved in its telling – Hildeburh and Wealhtheow- relate to each other. Recently, Olesiejko has discussed the ways in which Wealhtheow acts as an “intradiegetic reader” of this scene because she constantly reinterprets it for herself (105). He finds that she ultimately becomes an “icon” of peace-weaving by forming a bridge between the past heroine and herself (105). Contrarily, Horner has argued that “[t]he Finn episode, then, draws attention to itself by both enclosing (framing) and being enclosed by (framed by) Hildeburh; this complex structural enclosure is further framed by the two appearances of Wealhtheow, which...overlap and guide our interpretation of Hildeburh’s story” (473). This female story in such a masculine text, she argues, becomes “the foundation (the fortified place) of feminine textuality in the poem.” This place is created because every woman seems to be constantly reinterpreting the story for herself using the Episode as a starting point for crafting their own life narratives, an idea that is much more agential and active than Olesiejko’s (478).

To play off this point, I argue that Wealhtheow could use the tale’s tragedy as yet another chess piece to gain her favored outcome in the mead hall. Beowulf is an outsider to the court. Granted, because of his father’s previous presence there, he is a welcome outsider, but that does not completely change his status as a potential threat. The Finnsburg Episode makes apparent what can ensue from allowing an armed troop to visit your hall. Finn and his son lose their lives from such a misstep, though apparently also with the outside provocation of the Jutes (1072).²⁹ Moreover, the episode shows how a woman can choose to side, not with her husband, but with

²⁹ Niles argues that the Jutes were actually synonymous with the Geats (147-148). His reasoning for this is found in Bede’s statement that the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes (spelled Iuti or Iutae) were the three most powerful Germanic tribes (147). Including them in a national epic (he believes *Beowulf* was just such an epic) would thus provide an illustrious beginning for the English people. The interchangeability, though speculative, of the Jutes with the Geats offers an interesting undertone to the already tense reception (by Unferth particularly) of the Geats in the hall. If their people were known for hall treachery, the Finnsburg Episode would highlight such a flaw.

the family of her birth.³⁰ Finn's son is burned, not with the other retainers of his nation, but with his uncle Hnaef. At the end of the passage, Hildeburh does not seem distressed at the prospect of returning to her home nation. Her loyalties, though critics have disputed them, are in no way ambivalent. Wealhtheow, though she probably did not order their performance, could wield such tales to her advantage should she wish to provoke action in one way or another. The fact that in all probability Hrothgar, and not her, ordered the performance of the episode would even more easily facilitate her manipulation of it as she could point out that he, a lover of the tales, did not even know the meaning behind them. The attack on Finn's troops could be a constant reminder that guests, though sacred in this society, cannot be entirely trusted, especially by heirs to the throne.³¹ Likewise, the image of a woman choosing to favor her birth family and ensuring that family's subsequent victory, offers a striking image of where a woman's true loyalties lie: namely in the place of her choosing. Hrothgar's ordering of such a performance should mean that he is familiar with its content. If Wealhtheow were to move against him at this point, it would be quite simple for her to insult him by simply pointing out his own stupidity in not listening to his own performers.

Only one problem exists in a consideration of Wealhtheow's tools of insult. These two entities, the cup and the Finnsburg Episode, actually *never* become devices of insult in the time period of the text. Wealhtheow's provocation hinges on tools that, though they could be insulting, currently have no link to anything in the past of the two men she is trying to provoke. In the text's present-day, Wealhtheow never actually has the means needed to create a true tool

³⁰ Despite Malone's claim that Hildeburh's woe indicates the happiness of her formerly peaceful marriage to Finn, the text offers no indication that this was the case (265). Her choice of funeral arrangements would actually seem to indicate the opposite.

³¹ The sacred nature of guests can be gleaned from the fourth strophe of "Sayings of the High One" in *The Poetic Edda*. The author writes here: "[w]ater is needful for someone who comes to a meal, / a towel and a warm welcome, / a friendly disposition, if he could get it, / speech and silence in return" (Larrington 4p13). Literally, everything is to be purveyed for the comfort of a guest.

of insult to spur Beowulf to action. She is no Sigrun who can watch and note that Helgi has just stepped off a battlefield, nor a Borghild who knows the Volsungs's long history with poison. As an examination of Wealhtheow's scenes of provocation will illustrate, the potentiality that the cup and the episode will be used to impose her will is there, but the reality in which they do so never materializes. In short, the mead cup could be insulting to Beowulf *should* he fail to defeat Grendel or it could be insulting to Hrothgar *should* he be wrong in his choice of Beowulf as his heir. However, these possible outcomes never pan out in the text.

The first scene in which Wealhtheow appears illustrates this strange lack of fruition in the insult potential of Wealhtheow's chosen tools. Her first appearance, as already mentioned, comes directly after Unferth's insulting of Beowulf over the Breca competition. Tolkien says of the first part of this scene that "[i]n the economy of the tale it has, of course, a narrative function: Unferth touches off the spark of Beowulf's passionate (but not savage!) nature, and brings him to the point of a public vow to challenge Grendel at once. From that he cannot recede... He speaks *gilp* (proud vows) in the heat of his heart but he performs his vow- even to his last day, when it cost him his life" (213). The *gilp* that apparently comes after Beowulf's returning insult, however, is less than clear-cut. He simply says that Grendel "will find me different / I will show him how Geats shape to kill / in the heat of battle" (Heaney 601-603). This remark, clearly made in temper, actually seems rather incoherent compared to the lucidity of the rest of Beowulf's account. The functionality of this insulting statement as a binding vow to be used against him later should he fail is questionable. However, as I will show in a moment, that binding vow made succinctly and clearly by the hero must be present for the hetzerin to function effectively.

No, Unferth does not provoke the true vow to kill Grendel from Beowulf as Beowulf's words in his response are not clear enough to be binding. Calling the Danes cowardly and saying

that he is not so does not equal an unquestionable vow to slay the monster. The flyting mechanism found in some Norse poetry (Atli's flyting with Hrimgerd in the *Edda* being a good example) and employed by Unferth here fails to incite the needed results in this culture. The real *gilp* only occurs once Wealhtheow has made her way through the ranks to Beowulf. The first thing she does is give him the cup, that potential hetzerin-esque item, with "measured words" that "thanked God for granting her wish / that a deliverer she could believe in would arrive to ease their afflictions," lines important as they indicate precisely the Christian nature of her hope (Heaney 625-628). Before launching into an examination of those rich words, it is worth noting how Beowulf replies:

I had a fixed purpose when I put to sea.
As I sat in the boat with my band of men,
I meant to perform to the uttermost
what your people wanted or perish in the attempt,
in the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfill that purpose,
prove myself with a proud deed
or meet my death here in the mead-hall (632-638).

Only now does the poet declare that Beowulf has made a "gilp," or, in translation, a "formal boast" (640 in Old English; 639 in translation).

Something in Wealhtheow's calm words have clearly done what Unferth's insults could not.³² Damico says of the scene that "when Wealhtheow expresses her wish that Beowulf rid Heorot of Grendel's ravages, she is in an oblique way exhorting him to battle, a characteristic

³² Enright discusses how the *phyle*, Unferth's role, often coordinated with the priestess, Wealhtheow's role, in order to bolster a warrior's resolve with sweetness after the necessary insult. However, in this scene, the poet makes quite clear that it is Wealhtheow, not Unferth with his drunken slurs, that provokes the needed reaction from Beowulf. Enright's Civilis / Valeda / phyle construction is a historically interesting, but not literarily accurate model.

action of the Germanic warrior-woman who, in both historical and fictional writings, appears as an inciter and instigator of turbulent activity, whether in the court or on the battlefield” (*Wealhtheow* 8). Acker, in reaction to that statement, states that in *Beowulf*, “we find the role of Hetzerin scarcely represented, unless we consider that, as Helen Damico has argued, Wealhtheow's presenting a cup to Beowulf (620-30) is a symbolic incitement and a reflex of typical Valkyrie behavior” (Acker 706).³³ I find Damico’s assessment of the scene as an “oblique” incitement more informative than Acker’s dismissal as Beowulf does actually perform what Wealhtheow wishes directly after her provocation. There is also the fact that her provocation uses a mechanism that I have demonstrated is an essential construction of the hetzerin archetype. Murphy is definitely correct when he writes, “Queen Waltheow plays a small if very dignified part in this epic, but she seems to achieve a significant amount in her brief appearances at the feasts where Beowulf is honored,” though I must disagree with his assessment that “[i]t would be extending the facts too far to say that in her first appearance she functions as a ‘taunter’, but it is noticeable that only after she has spoken publicly to Beowulf and he has vowed to her publicly is she certain of his acceptance as a functionary of the Danes” (111). My examination of Wealhtheow in terms of the three constituent elements of the hetzerin archetype proves that she is a “taunter” along the lines of the Norse women discussed earlier. Certainly, the archetype has changed from the more violent Norse alternative, but the same elements are present albeit in a slightly revised form.

The final aspect of the provocation process, the tool (or, in this case, the cup), sees the most significant revision from its Norse analogues. This tool’s effectiveness hinges on something completely absent from hetzerin provocations in the Scandinavian works: futurity. In the Norse

³³ Despite Acker’s equation of the two in this quote, there is no evidence of a constant correlation between the Valkyrie figure and the hetzerin in Norse texts. Indeed, most hetzerin figures are explicitly defined as human.

saga, provocation always, without exception, occurs because an individual has wronged a woman in the past. Sinfjotli killed Borghild's brother in the past; Sigurd failed to marry Brynhild in the past. In short, the circumstances which started the feud are unavoidable because they have already occurred. The past has both made tools of insult effective and made the hetzerin into the violence avenger that she is.

For example, Sinfjotli's slaying of Borghild's brother causes his hall reputation to increase. Reputation for him, in that moment, creates a potentiality for insult. The cup, as I explained earlier, was a trial that even the gods feared to take, yet Sinfjotli is a Volsung, a clan known for now and again bettering the gods. Because of this past history, the cup Borghild offers him tidily embodies his one true weakness: his and his family's reputation. On the other hand, Sigrun's item of provocation for Helgi hinges on the hero's past as a conqueror of men. Buzzards are carrion that feed off the great feats of other men; kittens are too weak to conquer anything at all. Again, Sigrun knows exactly what item to choose to most effectively evoke Helgi's wrath. Brynhild, finally, became an item of insult the minute that her affair with Sigurd became known, past actions being reinterpreted in a new light by her spouse.

All of these entities gained their significance and capability for provocation through past action in the mechanistic fashion prevalent in Norse literature. On the other hand, Wealhtheow's taunt hinges on no such past event; indeed, by Norse standards, her tool of insult is no insult at all. The event that would provoke her wrath has not yet occurred, and she, therefore, will not yet

impugn Beowulf's honor.³⁴ However, this argument centers around Wealhtheow's role as a hetzerin, which means she must be able to harm the hero's reputation in some way. After all, "especially in epic, because it is a genre demanding dramatic action, the taunter moves even beyond that revelation of bitter truth and performs the more important function of deliberately provoking cruel actions and encounters" (Feldman 4). How can Wealhtheow's provocation, hinging on no past action and having no true tool of provocation, be as effective as those of a heroine who can use a steer's leg to get her way?³⁵ The answer, I argue, is founded on a futurity, not a pastness, typical of Christianity.

As illustrated earlier, any words spoken while drinking from the mead cup, that potential tool of provocation, allow the passer of the cup to question the speaker's lucidity. That question, "were you drunk when you said that," could easily occur in a future that transcends the text of *Beowulf*. Beowulf's failure to uphold his vow to slay Grendel would allow Wealhtheow to say that Beowulf was only a hero while in his cups. Paradoxically, though, this threat-in-future promises that Beowulf actually will live to see such a future. The hero seems to be promised a future should he fail to fight Grendel or, conversely, should he fight Grendel and fail. He must

³⁴ Overing argues that Wealhtheow's words actually encourage Beowulf to break from the warrior mode, or what she calls the "Beowulfian mode," and not use violence, though she does not make clear how Grendel's menace will be stopped without at least some action on the hero's part (93). She moves from this claim of avoidance of violence to make the argument that: "Although we certainly do not need feminist theory to tell us that *Beowulf* is a profoundly masculine poem, examining the systematic exclusion of women has a number of surprising and illuminating consequences for interpretation, revealing how the women of the poem contribute to the poem's dynamism - here employed in a more literal sense: they deflect or redirect desire away from death and thus affirm its life-related qualities" (xxiii). The entire issue with this interpretation hinges on the fact that most of the actions associated with women in the text, and indeed all of the words they speak, clearly provoke violence. Indeed, Wealhtheow *intentionally* incites Beowulf to violence, and possibly, though the poem makes this seem very unlikely, death.

³⁵ The steer's leg appears in *Heidarviga Saga*. Thurid prompts her son to avenge the death of his brother by serving him and his companions steer's legs cut into three portions (huge pieces). She caps this strangeness by saying, "You needn't be so surprised. It's not really so strange. Your brother Hall, was cut up in even bigger pieces, and I didn't hear you say that was strange" (Bachman 48).

live to be insulted either way. Wealhtheow's threat promises a future for the warrior that, though dishonored, is infused with life.³⁶

The futurity implicit in the taunt is explained by Wealhtheow's initial words to Beowulf. We are told that "she welcomed the Geat / and thanked God for granting her wish / that a deliverer she could believe in would arrive / to appease their afflictions" (Heaney 625-628). This alluded-to prayer emphasizes that the future she has in mind for Beowulf and for the hall as a whole is a Christian future presumably ordained and superseded by the Christian God (as none of the pagan deities would have been referred to in this singular way). Wealhtheow's words, given above, invoke this deity specifically (Heaney 625-628). Of course, the Christian God judges an individual's actions (or lack thereof) in life in the afterlife, after the fighting is done and also, following the teachings of Boethius, lives always in the past, present, and future simultaneously. In short, what happened before is just as important as what will happen after in God's eye.

When Wealhtheow invokes God, then, she removes the taunt from her hands. In doing so, she removes the device of provocation from the timeline of the poem, placing it in the hands of a deity who could fulfill her will should she no longer be around to do so. Wealhtheow has set up the hetzerin three- the location, the appearance, even the item / tool- but she will never be able to truly make her tool of insult concrete. In other words, she can get Beowulf to act, she can provoke him to an initial action, but she cannot punish him should he fail in future because the force behind her words, that one representative tool, has been put in the hands of the other.³⁷ Should Beowulf fail he will not be able to escape a broken *gilp* on Judgement Day, though he might escape it at the Danish court, which we know from the text will not long survive the events

³⁶ Beowulf, after all, has lived while insulted before. We are told in the text that the elders in Geatland have never thought highly of him.

³⁷ I mean other, in the Derridean sense of "infinite alterity, one who regards without being seen" (Derrida 3).

recited. In short, shame will find the warrior that breaks his vow, though this shame might have an eternal, not earthly source.

In fact, because of this Christian nature of the future in question, should Wealhtheow attempt to enforce her own will after her invocation of the other, she would actually be disavowing her earlier provocation. To attempt to punish Beowulf through insult would be to doubt the Christian God to whom she gave control of the situation, of the insult of her crafting. To do so would make her earlier provocation meaningless, repercussion-less since we receive no indication in the text that Wealhtheow by herself could effectively shame Beowulf. Of course, this interpretation emphasizes Wealhtheow's powerlessness to enforce her provocation; however, it does emphasize that this provocation, this hetzerin structure, exists in the first place. Moreover, it intimates exactly how powerful – and threatening – Wealhtheow's presence in the hall actually is if we are assuming that she always acts in accord with the will of the divine.

If Wealhtheow's words must be finely parsed to uncover their effective force in this first scene, the second scene offers no such interpretative difficulty. This second scene occurs after Beowulf has slain Grendel; Hrothgar has foolishly promised to adopt him as a son, an action which displaces Wealhtheow's own sons as well as his nephew, Hrothulf. After that grave insult, Wealhtheow, suddenly halts in her progression around the hall, taking time to specifically address her husband. That mead cup that spelled cheer in the previous scene, when combined with the Finnsburg episode, now offers Hrothgar a vision he must fear. Wealhtheow turns to Hrothgar during the "pleasant murmur" to speak her piece (1159):

*Enjoy this cup, my most generous lord;
raise up your goblet, entertain the Geats
duly and gently, discourse with them,*

be open-handed, happy and fond.

Relish their company, but *recollect* as well

all of the boons that have been bestowed on you.

The bright court of Heorot has been cleansed

and now the word is that you want to adopt

this warrior as a son. So, *while you may*,

bask in your fortune, and then bequeath

kingdom and nation to your kith and kin” (1168-1178 emphasis added).

The threat of futurity pervades this section. Wealhtheow’s continued exhortations to “enjoy” the drink and “raise up” the cup emphasize the amount Hrothgar has drunk at the time of her speech (1168; 1169). In turn, she, so reasonable, emphasizes that this revelry has its place. He can enjoy the Geats, but he must do so “gently” (1170). He must do this because of those very sons he already has, the sons that Wealhtheow clearly favors.³⁸ Should he fail to “recollect” his “kith and kin,” her words intimate that she will shame the entire house (1172-1178). As Fee has shown, “Wealhtheow’s social function includes reminding lord and thane of their responsibilities, but does not extend to actual ring-giving itself; that, as she has just reminded him, is Hrothgar’s function” (289). She does not state explicitly that he fails in his duty or state directly how she wishes him to gift the Danes, but her words carry an edge, a veiled threat as with Beowulf.

The hint of futurity pervades this statement. That “while you may” has an ominous ring that cannot be ignored (Heaney 1176). I should state from the start that I see no evidence that

³⁸ Damico argues at this point that Wealhtheow, who, in her interpretation is actually Hrothgar’s incestuous sister Yrsa, “opposes Hrothgar’s wish to adopt Beowulf by making a counterproposal and sponsoring his nephew, Hrothulf, as successor to the Danish throne” (Damico *Wealhtheow* 127). By her logic, this is because Wealhtheow / Yrsa is actually Hrothulf’s mother, this from another incestuous union with her brother Halga. Most scholars agree that Wealhtheow simply voices her faith in Hrothulf to protect her sons until their majority should Hrothgar die before him. She actually voices this in the poem at line 1181-1182.

Wealhtheow herself will physically harm Hrothgar and enforce her threat as Baker does. Indeed, the mere idea seems ridiculous for a queen who is said to think Grendel's head "a horror...to behold" (1649). However, the hint is that, somehow, Hrothgar will have time to regret his adoption of Beowulf after the feasting has ceased. The provocative process here is the same as elsewhere. The entire hall watches this exchange between the ring-giver and his wife; such a public exchange puts everyone's honor on the line. However, again, the tool of insult active in the former part of the speech, as the mead cup was in the latter, is not presently an insult as such. Hrothgar, like Beowulf, seems to fear an insult that will come in future, not one begun in the past.

As discussed earlier, the Finnsburg Episode is a tool of provocation and also at play in this scene. As already discussed above, Hildeburh does not support her husband. Indeed, she seems to back the opposing side. Her order that "*her own / son's body / be burnt with Hnaef's*" is suggestive of this fact (1111-1114 emphasis Heaney's). Bremner has reason to suspect the loyalty even of Finn's son in this conflict:

"Although we are not told how the Dane Hnaef and his SiSo [Sister's Son, in this case Hildeburh's son, Hnaef's nephew] fall in the battle, critics have usually assumed that they were fighting on different sides, but there is no indication whatsoever in the text for this assumption. The probability should not be dismissed therefore, that Hildeburh's son was a member of Hnaef's comitatus. The latter case would have placed him in the popular heroic theme of a father versus son confrontation" (33).

Could Wealhtheow possibly be threatening Hrothgar with the same eventuality? Nietzsche's observation about the section concerning Hildeburh is that "the idea is stressed that a kinswoman or mother must passively accept and not actively avenge the loss of her son" (251). However,

Wealhtheow seems to suggest that she would favor her sons should they choose to avenge their disinheritance at Beowulf's hands. If this domestic conflict occurred, Wealhtheow could easily recall that Lay of Finnsburg sung on the night on which it all began. She could emphasize that Hrothgar could not hear the lessons in his own commissioned song.

Hrothgar's concession to his wife, and he must concede as Beowulf travels home, is telling of the power she wields. As with the mead cup, the Finnsburg Episode has not yet had a chance to function as insult, yet Hrothgar must believe that it could do so. The futurity in this scene perhaps has one other aspect, however, one that would make Hrothgar's rethinking less a gesture of weakness under a woman's sway than a symbol of holiness. Hrothgar is an elder, a man who we are told has ruled fifty years, and who, as such, must consider the legacy that he will leave behind him. Other scenes in the text, particularly his "sermon" at lines 1700-1784 indicate a certain religiosity present in the old man (Heaney 1770). Hrothgar's age and his attendant attentions to his mortality give Wealhtheow greater leverage. Hrothgar will soon have to account for the crimes he committed in life when the guardian of his soul slept.³⁹ He does not want one of those crimes to be an episode when he, forewarned by moral tales sung in his own court as well as by his own wife, allowed an outsider to destroy the Christian peace of his munificent court.

Her use of words backed by the force of an omnipotent God would seem to secure Wealhtheow a place among that violent sect of the hetzerin I outlined in my section on Norse hetzerin: the public and enforcing. Problems exist with this equation, however. Despite her clearly elevated speech (elevated to a divine level with her acknowledgement in lines 625-628 that God answered her prayers for a protector), she does not enforce her threats, nor do we get

³⁹ Indeed, Hrothgar already considers this future as lines 1724-1757 with their emphasis on "the soul's guard, its sentry" illustrate (1742).

the idea that she *could* do so. Due to the ambivalent religious state of the poem (one need only consider the pagan quest for glory, heathen shrines, and the giants) the question remains as to whether anyone other than Hrothgar, who we have some evidence to conclude is a religious man, would actually be provoked by the religious flavor of Wealhtheow's words at all. Finally, and most consequentially, Wealhtheow never comes out and blatantly insults Hrothgar or Beowulf. Her threats are veiled to the point of obfuscation should the listening party not be paying close attention. As Hill has observed, "Wealhtheow's comments about the future of the Danish kingdom are clear but indirect and deferential, as if there are limits to a woman's public intervention" (Hill 240). As such, Wealhtheow resembles Sigrun more than any other of our three prototypical hetzerin, though even here the Norse hetzerin voices an insult impossible for her Beowulfian counterpart. Wealhtheow's place, though clearly influenced by the hetzerin archetype, presents a clear rewriting of what is acceptable for such an archetype in accord with the cultural demands of Anglo-Saxon England, where the poem was transcribed.

The detail that perhaps most radically breaks Wealhtheow from the original hetzerin mold is her *future*. Heorot we know will face "a barbarous burning" (Heaney 83). Hrothgar's kith and kin will betray him, their "blood-lust rampant" (85). None of these futures explicitly affects Wealhtheow, however, nor does the poet ever try to make the link between her and these events. She seems amazingly free of this disaster, an inimitable piece of beauty in a savage world. Compare this to Brynhild who must die by her own hand or to Borghild who dies in repudiation. Wealhtheow will not be accused by Hrothgar in the afterlife of destroying the happiness of men forever. In fact, she seems immune from any accusation at all. The only difference between her and these other women is the fact that her tool of provocation will only

become truly insulting if her will should not be fulfilled. That is the one difference between her, Borghild, Sigrun, and Brynhild.

As shown above, the choice to become hetzerin offered these women a limited modicum of agency through which they could challenge their patriarch's will for them, but that choice came with an insufferable cost. If one provoked someone using location, reputation, and an item, one would die for this exercising agency. This outcome was *fated*. The way to break this fate while also keeping the hetzerin figure recognizable in the text is to manipulate the structure's parts. This manipulation came in the form of an item of provocation becoming a future instead of a past matter. Of course, a thing set in a future time can only be controlled by God, not by the one insulting, so to hinge one's provocation on such a tool is to, in essence, put your fate into the hands of the divine. This yielding, a sort of agential passivity in itself, renders the future uncertain and breaks the cycle of fate, as no one can know exactly what God will enact in future.

If not evident from the discussion above, Wealhtheow's "Christianity" may compromise her effectiveness as a hetzerin. Her inability to either conclusively condemn or laud Beowulf leaves her in a liminal place that renders the hetzerin archetype ineffective in the text. Is her presence in the mead hall ominous? Certainly, she is ominous when we consider the close resemblance of this scene to the hall in which Borghild strides. Moreover, she is ominous in that she can provoke any action that she wants and do so repeatedly, though whether such provocations would be effective remains to be seen as does the will of God. However, the response to the more direct question, "is Wealhtheow frightening?" must be "no." In short, we do not know what could happen because of Wealhtheow just as we do not know what ultimately happens to Wealhtheow. We can prove that she elicits the main vow from Beowulf. We cannot prove what would happen to Beowulf's reputation should he break that vow.

The most readily available conclusion then is that when an earthly chronology in the process of insult is broken, the hetzerin archetype fails in its efficiency. Christian futurity, in the sense of God's control of future events, relieves Wealhtheow of a pre-programmed structural doom, but it also relieves her of satisfaction. The hetzerin figure, though recognizable in a text, has started to slip from its original significance by the time of *Beowulf*. By the time the text considers Grendel's Mother, the "hetzerin" as such has come to be synonymous with "violent woman."

“THAT WOLFISH SWIMMER / CARRIED THE RING-MAILED PRINCE TO HER
COURT”: THE UNINTENTIONAL HETZERIN

In this section, the effects of the hetzerin archetype must be examined with a broader lens. The goal of this wider focus is to evaluate what happens to women who, though they reside in a culture where the hetzerin archetype plays a major role in myth and story, do not display the characteristics of the archetype (the typical utilization of location, reputation, and a tool) aside from an unquestionable tendency towards violence. My answer to this inquiry, paradoxically, is that the fate of these women echoes intimately that of their hetzerin counterparts. That unfettered potentiality examined in Wealhtheow’s character in the previous section creates a void-in-future, a strangely liminal space where the path forward is unclear. Such unfettered potentiality understandably creates anxiety amongst the inhabitants of a culture used to the rigidly laid out fate of humans and deities at Ragnarök. We, and the people of Norse culture, knew when and how every single inhabitant of the divine and human realms would die, at whose hand and in what manner.

Christianity, on the other hand, offers no such set, expected, and, therefore, reassuringly predictable future. Instead, there is the looming possibility of judgment at the hands of an unknowable God, who, going from Old Testament example, tends to be relatively arbitrary in his conferral of reward or punishment. At the level of the human, the anxiety created by the cosmic rearrangement also appears. Though a generality, it is true that humanity hates a void and will seek to fill it with knowledge whenever possible. Norse context offered a solution to the problem of the hetzerin archetype: death. When no other option for dealing with violent women presents

itself, I argue that the men in *Beowulf* revert to this old model to fill a void left by Christianity's increasing prominence. In short, when confronted by the ominous void of a woman whose fate has not yet been determined, the men of the poem enact the fate of the hetzerin on violent women simply because this fate is more comforting than the anxiety that accompanies potentiality. Grendel's Mother provides the most salient example of this phenomenon. I argue that an examination of her characterization marks her out as an explicitly pagan and violent character. However, neither her pagan analogues nor her violence truly establish her as a hetzerin figure; only her treatment at the hands of Beowulf and Hrothgar marks her as such.

However, a few main points from the previous section are worthy of further re-iteration before moving into a discussion of this other woman in *Beowulf*. The first, quite simply, is that the hetzerin archetype with its attendant tripartite structure is identifiable in the Beowulfian queen, Wealhtheow. In her respective comments to Beowulf and Hrothgar, she displays a keen attention to the effects of location and reputation as well as an astonishing ability to morph entities of everyday use and entertainment into tools useful for achieving her will.

However, as noted above, these chosen tools of provocation are not entirely in this hetzerin's control. Due to the poem's ambivalent religious climate, certain ideologies that gave the hetzerin figure its utter effectiveness in Norse mythology have fallen to the wayside. The most prevalent of these for this argument is the concept of fate. The provocation of Norse women was always effective, but these women could also always anticipate death for their provocation, both of which phenomenon I argue are explicitly linked to their placement in a locked-in, and therefore predictable, system of fate. On the other hand, in *Beowulf*, the Christian ethos pervading the text negates the predictability of the future. Instead of a mechanical

knowledge of the effects deriving from certain choices, this culture emphasized a mysterious God, one who would judge in the afterlife and not in a predictable fashion even then.

For Wealhtheow, the most salient hetzerin figure of the text, that means several things. The first is simply that, if she chooses to work her will through provocation, she does not have to expect a shameful death for seizing her moment of volition as did the Norse women. Second, Wealhtheow may not have to expect a violent death, but, then again, she exists in a culture that emphasizes God's constant control while at the same time emphasizing God's mystery. If such is the case, Wealhtheow cannot really know the best way to provoke Beowulf and Hrothgar to her will, as the emphasis on the past as exemplar has been reduced. Nor can she faithfully predict whether her actions will cause the intended effect because most of those effects hinge on an unknowable future. In other words, when the provocation is put into the hands of a mysterious God and taken out of this world, the hetzerin figure (though still clearly recognizable as such) is robbed of its effectiveness due to the multifarious potentialities, none of which can be faithfully predicted, of a shrouded future.

Of course, in this view, the hetzerin can go through the ritual motions of provocation. She can insult her chosen warrior through a perceptive knowledge of location and reputation. However, that entity of insult, the device given significance by something in the warrior's past in Norse literature, when placed in God's hands, loses the immediacy of impact found in Norse literature. The questionable status of women in this culture surely ties into this as well, but the religious ideology present in the time is the entity that deprives the hetzerin taunt of its efficiency.

This slippage of the main parts of the role is perhaps what has caused many *Beowulf* scholars to report that no evidence of the hetzerin archetype exists in the text.⁴⁰ Through this outlook, the hetzerin figure seems to become an image with a present but no clear future, a strangely uncomfortable feature of the text for readers. We cannot say for certain what will happen to Wealhtheow as we can with Heorot or with Beowulf; we can only sense the strangely malevolent tone that seems a ghost from the Norse archetype. Of course, in a culture well acquainted with the ideal of the hetzerin from Norse mythology, the need to interpret this figure, to prescribe it an end and a meaning, easily becomes overwhelming. Uncertainty, after all, is too worrisome a state to remain in for long.

This need to accord meaning and a definite end to an archetype increasingly untethered by the cause and effect sequence of earthly bounds leads to a second type of the hetzerin figure to be found in *Beowulf*: namely the unintentional hetzerin. The main exemplar is Grendel's Mother, who Beowulf pursues and defeats after she comes to Hrothgar's hall to avenge Beowulf's slaying of her son, Grendel. I argue that the Danes and Geats that see Grendel's Mother infer from her fierce actions that she is a hetzerin. As such, they treat her as a malicious entity that will be and should be punished, simply due to the fact that she is a violent woman. Those who see her treat her as they would a true hetzerin, though their extremely Christian rationale for doing so helps to reveal that Grendel's Mother is more representative of the barely transcended pagan past than of the hetzerin archetype specifically.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Acker's quote on page forty-nine of this paper provides one of the clearest indications of this doubt. Unfortunately, it seems Acker conflated the hetzerin and the Valkyrie figure in Norse myth, which perhaps contributed to his doubt as the Valkyrie figure does seem markedly absent from *Beowulf*.

⁴¹ The ironic facet of this discussion is that Grendel's Mother could never be identified by the three main facets of the hetzerin structure; we simply do not see enough of her in the text. However, the thanes' interpretation of her seems to fit no model so well as that of the hetzerin archetype.

Grendel's Mother's place as an unintentional hetzerin is established by the subtitle I use above. Directly before Beowulf's fight with this woman in her underwater hall, the poet writes, "that wolfish swimmer / carried the ring-mailed prince to her court" (Heaney 1506-1507). Alfano speculates that the Mother is known by this epithet because "[i]t... does not imply Grendel's mother's literal resemblance to a female water-wolf; it could function as an epithet such as those applied to warriors and figures in battle" (8). I think Alfano's assessment is largely correct as the Mother is portrayed as a skilled fighter, while not being described as entirely animalistic. However, I would argue that a deeper analysis of the word "wolfish" sheds light on how Danish society, again in an age of religious flux, dealt with the ominous presence of women who suddenly lacked a clear future despite their clearly violent present (Heaney 1506).

A discussion of this ominous futurity must begin with the observation, simple though true, that wolves have a long history in Anglo-Saxon and Norse literature. I say this because Grendel's Mother's canine epithet makes clear that she is a paganized figure, though the poet's depiction of her as violent, pagan, and female does not automatically make her a hetzerin. Many will be familiar with the wolf as one of the prototypical animals of the epic battlefield. As Larrington so succinctly puts it, the wolf and the eagle "along with the raven, are Germanic beasts of battle; their appearance signals a fight is impending" or indeed one has already been fought (289n10). These animals are the bottom-feeders, the metaphorical end of the world for warriors, as they eat the dead. In *Beowulf*, they appear in this aspect in the messenger's grim warning to the cowardly Geats after Beowulf's death:

Many a spear
dawn-cold to the touch will be taken down
and waved on high; the swept harp

won't waken warriors, but the raven winging
darkly over the doomed will have news,
tidings for the eagle of how he hoked and ate,
how the wolf and he made short work of the dead (Heaney 3021-3027).

As even this passage illustrates, there is the idea that what has constantly befallen in the past will again occur in the future. In previous dynasties, when a ruler died, the land was overrun by invaders and the beasts of battle sated. In other words, this grim messenger fills the frightening future with a reiteration of the past. Beowulf's death has just occurred in this moment. The Swedes have not yet made good and come to claim their Geatish prize, nor can the messenger that relays this vision to the Geatish thanes *really* know that such will be the case (though he certainly has good reason to expect it). The passage rings with the prescience that the Norse mythological figures displayed in their intimate knowledge of the future; the wolves will feed again.

In the Scandinavian sagas, this intimation of a certain foreknowledge associated with the wolf becomes even clearer. The typical significance displayed in *Beowulf* remains of course. We are told in *The Poetic Edda* that in Odin's hall, the final haunt of warriors, "a wolf hangs west of the door / and an eagle hovers above," symbolizing that place, the battlefield, which earned the warriors their rest in Valhalla (10p50). More detailed analysis of the canine, however, reveals their malevolence in this literature. Fenrir the wolf, son of Loki, is known to be the future slayer of Odin, father of the Gods, at Ragnarök (Larrington 53p45). In slaying Odin, he metaphorically annihilates all earthly wisdom due to the All-Father's association with the charms and the runes.⁴² In his other form, Garm, he will kill Tyr, the god of war, an action that signals the

⁴² "Sayings of the High One" in the *Edda* details these different facets of Odin's wisdom in the most detail.

hopelessness of the gods' martial cause at Ragnarök.⁴³ Either way, the wolf is a grave threat to the golden age of divinity marked by the reign of the Aesir and the Vanir. The wolf destroys cosmic order, and, even when the wolf does not participate in the destruction of the gods, it evidently does the handiwork of witches and trolls.

The *Volsunga Saga* contains numerous wolf references, but none so memorable as the tale surrounding Siggeir's mother.⁴⁴ Siggeir, it might be remembered, was the husband of Signy who slayed Signy's father, King Volsung, and attempted to slay her brother, Sigmund. Before this, however, he took Sigmund hostage and tied him and his nine brothers to trees in the woods outside his castle. Night after night, a "she-wolf" would arrive "at midnight," ripping out the throats of each brother one-by-one (Grimstad 91). On the tenth night, Sigmund's turn arrived. However, he, due to Signy's aid, knew that if he slathered his mouth in honey, he could defeat the wolf. The she-wolf stuck her tongue into Sigurd's mouth at which point the hero bit down on her tongue so hard that the wolf, in her retreat, pulled him free of his stocks. He also pulled her tongue free of her mouth, killing her instantly. The story ends on an interesting note: "[s]ome say that this beast was the mother of King Siggeir and that she resorted to foul witchcraft to take on this guise" (91).

The use of magic to change shape has a long tradition in Norse mythology. At the very beginning of the world, a witch, Gullveig, arrived among the Aesir (one house of the Norse Gods, ruled by Odin). This witch, who appears randomly, is responsible for "first war in the world" (Larrington 22p6). The gods burn her three times "yet she lives still" (22p6). Gullveig's

⁴³ A triple refrain in "The Seeress's Prophecy," the portion of the *Edda* predicting Ragnarök, is "[n]ow Garm bays loudly before Gnipa-cave / the fetter will break and the ravener run free" (43p9; 46p10; 55p11). The releasing of Garm signals the beginning of Ragnarök; this triple chant certainly leads to the inference that he holds some special significance in the coming conflict. Garm, who will slay Tyr in the final battle with the gods, is possibly also equivalent to "Fenrir's offspring; / one of them in trollish shape / shall be snatcher of the moon" (39p9). However, Larrington simply argues that Garm is equivalent to Fenrir (284n43).

⁴⁴ The tale that follows can be found in chapter five of Grimstad's translation.

powers are even more intriguing: “the seer with pleasing prophecies, she practised spirit-magic; / she knew *seid*, *seid* she performed as she liked, / she was always a wicked woman’s favourite” (23p6). *Seid* is a type of magic practiced elsewhere by Odin and Freyja (the Norse Goddess of Love). At the least, the practice included cross-dressing (Larrington 295n24). At the most extreme, however, the practice seems to involve actual shape-shifting. In *Lokasenna* (found in the *Edda*), Loki accuses Odin of practicing “*seid* on Samsey, / and you beat on the drum as seeresses do, / in the likeness of a wizard you journeyed over mankind” (24p85). The inference here is that Odin, whom Loki concludes is a “pervert,” physically changed his shape to that of a woman and later either shifted or crafted the powerful illusion of a wizard (24p85). Gullveig practiced this same magic; perhaps she could take on the form of a wolf if she wished. Clearly, Siggeir’s mother practiced the magic too. This magic, “always a wicked woman’s favorite,” brought war into the world (23p6).

Clearly, there is much to be inferred, most of it negative, about a woman who is described as a wolf. Equally clear is the need to rid the world of such a woman, who, if she gets her will, could potentially destroy everything. When Grendel’s Mother is considered with these details in mind, the fact that this “wolfish swimmer” “looks like a woman” does not seem so remarkable (Heaney 1506).⁴⁵ Of course, if Grendel’s Mother is linked to the Norse models of magical practice, she also becomes linked with the stereotypical misogyny that women brought war into the world. However, one important link differentiates her from Gullveig: Grendel’s Mother dies at Beowulf’s hand. Gullveig, though punished for her actions against the gods,

⁴⁵ The potential of a link between Grendel’s Mother and magic has already been discussed by Burdoff. Burdoff argues that common language between the metrical charms protecting against illness and *Beowulf*’s description of Grendel’s Mother indicates that early readers of the text may have seen Grendel’s Mother as a force of nature. This interpretation makes Beowulf’s heroic stature even greater, though it is perhaps too broad to be useful in a discussion of literary analogues.

survives a triple burning. Therefore, the echoes of the *seid*-practicing female may resonate in the background of Grendel's Mother's character and one may hear the faint echo of the fate of the purposelessly malicious woman though the connection remains incomplete.

Wolves in the Norse saga also have another vital link to women, however. Specifically, they are often the companions of "troll-women." The "troll-woman's mount" who "feast[s] on raven-fodder" is the wolf (Larrington 54p118). As such these women are associated with feasting on human flesh in a way familiar to the readers of *Beowulf*, Grendel being the most well-known cannibal in the Anglo-Saxon corpus. The link between wolfish women and war only grows stronger when considering that these women are almost always included as an element when someone prognosticates the outcome of a war. Troll-women are even abroad on the field at Ragnarök, leading to the idea that they somehow play a part in the end of the world (50p10). The wickedness associated with this role perhaps led to the idea that "[t]he outlaw, like the wolf, is an outcast and may be hunted down and killed with impunity" (Grimstad 77n1).

Grendel and his Mother epitomize the outcast in *Beowulf* with all that state of being's attendant lack of rights. When Grendel is slain, the Mother possesses no bargaining chip that would ever convince Hrothgar to enter her court to discuss fair *wergild* for her only son. Indeed, we are told in fewer words that Hrothgar at first does not even consider her capable of having motives. He says to Beowulf, "this *roaming* killer came in a fury / and slaughtered him in Heorot" (1330 emphasis mine). That word "roaming" makes Grendel's Mother sound even more like her canine epithet and implies that she, like her son, makes a habit of this motiveless killing, though in reality this is far from the case. Only later in the conversation does he concede that she might have come "driven to avenge her kinsman's death," but this logic is immediately called into question by the added stipulation "[o]r so it seems to the thanes in their grief" (1340;1341).

In other words, Hrothgar seems to think that his thanes would have to be crazed by grief to understand the logic of such an animal; no logical human would make such a mistake.

However, again, the poet does not ever give us a clear indication that she is an animal. When she comes to Heorot, she chooses to assassinate one and only one man: the dear Aeschere, an advisor to Hrothgar. Then, she is “desperate to get out” (1292). In fact, by choosing Aeschere, she picks a thane who is by the laws of *wergild*, worth the same amount as her own son. As Trilling has stated: “[i]n most cases, her actions, like her titles, are similarly devoid of inherent monstrosity; as most of the critics acknowledge, and as even the Danes admit, she attacks Heorot only to perform the necessary act of vengeance for her kinsman’s death” (6). The logic in her actions is clear. Despite Hrothgar’s comments to the contrary, she is no roaming killer, but undeniably a mother enraged at her son’s death. In short, Grendel’s Mother evidences none of the remorseless battlefield jollity of the troll-women.

The symbolism inherent to the wolf from a Norse perspective, with all its connotations of cannibalism and demonic glee, has been demonstrated above. When one views the significance of the wolf through a more Christian ethos, a different, though related, significance before concealed becomes evident. At the very least, even before considering this new significance, the same references to the animals of the battlefield reside in the Christian texts. In *Judith*, the saint’s life appended to *Beowulf*, once the eponymous woman has commanded the troops of Bethulia to the battlefield, the poet proclaims that “[t]he lean wolf rejoiced” (Simpson 205). As with the Norse wolves, though, these animals do not remain simple beasts in the Christian texts.

In *Genesis A*, wolves appear in a similar context to the epithet describing Grendel’s Mother. This context comes when King Orlahomar, King of the Elamites, conquers Sodom, in the process abducting Abraham’s brother Lot (“Loth” in Mason’s translation). Abraham

eventually defeats the king and retakes his brother and his possessions. The poet opens this victorious ending with this introduction: “We may now relate this true history further, as to what was the fate of the war-wolves after the battle, who carried off Loth and the goods of the people, the treasures of the southlanders, [and] exulted in victory” (Mason 35). In this situation, the foes of the text’s main patriarch, Abraham, are described as “war-wolves” just as the enemy of the patriarch in *Beowulf* is described as *brimwylf*. The inference in the Hebrew case, however, is that these war-wolves, by acting against God’s chosen people, are also acting against God himself. They are both damned and doomed to failure against Abraham in this scenario; through this antagonism, they are also coded as both outlaws and pagans.

The connection between wolves and the enemies of God does not have to remain so speculative, however. In the Old English poem “Advent,” the speaker cries out to God for mercy in what he sees as a wicked world: “The cursed wolf, / the fierce agent of darkness, has driven your flock apart, / Lord, and scattered it far and wide” (Clayton 256-258). The link between Satan and this creature is now made clear. The wolf is yet another representation of mankind’s worse adversary, the archangel who strove against God, while also signaling residual paganism. The link makes sense when examining Grendel’s Mother background. She, as her son, comes from “Cain’s clan, whom the Creator had outlawed / and condemned as outcasts” (Heaney 106-107). The Almighty made Cain “anathema / and out of the curse of his exile there sprang / ogres” among other creatures (110-112). When Beowulf arms himself against Grendel’s Mother, he arms himself against an adversary of God; indeed, keeping the Norse myth in mind, he arms himself against an enemy more atrocious than Grendel.

Now, it is possible to move into a discussion of how this silent woman acts as a hetzerin or, more accurately, is treated as one though characterization of her as one is starkly absent. The

Christian interpretation of the Grendel's Mother's description, made evident by that one obscure epithet "wolfish," adds a new dimension to the discussion of appearance and reputation (as do the pagan interpretations which I will discuss momentarily). Admittedly, those traditional hetzerin traits obliquely function here to provoke Beowulf. Indeed, for appearance's sake, Beowulf must conquer the mother as he destroyed the son. To not do so would be to allow a Satanic entity free rein on the earth.⁴⁶ Therefore, Grendel's Mother has a cultural significance, that clear linkage to the demonic (though not the monstrous as some editors claim), which makes her a worthy opponent. However, all of these interpretations of how Grendel's Mother taunts Beowulf and the Danes are *imposed* on her from the outside. We get no indication (she is speechless) of what the Mother actually wants. What exactly is Grendel's Mother trying to provoke?

The answer to the last question is, in a word, *nothing*. As noted above, she may simply be trying to obtain the death-price that no one thought to pay her. As the examples above of the locational and reputational elements of provocation make clear, Beowulf is the one provoked by Grendel's Mother's actions. However, he is provoked based on, first, a residual pagan fear, and, second, on a Christian interpretation of both that pagan fear and of those accorded outsider status. In short, neither of these reasons for his provocation stem from Grendel's Mother originally. She is only trying to exact *wergild* for Grendel. Unfortunately, by doing so she is doing two other things as well.

The first is she is taking revenge as a woman without the help of a male relative in a way constantly punished in the Icelandic saga. True, she does not seem to have a thane or relative to

⁴⁶ Satan is a worthy adversary during the medieval ages, as the differing accounts of saints wrestling with him or his minions will attest. Cynewulf's *Juliana* is a notable version of this genre. A later version can be found in Christine de Pizan's *The City of Ladies*.

turn to since “her only child” is gone (1547); the water-demons in her mere court hardly seem to qualify. However, a second route of masculine justice is also perhaps avoided by her. The mere lies close enough to Heorot that Hrothgar knows the details of it intimately. He can describe the “frost-stiffened wood” and burning water in a way a mere stranger in the land could not (1666). The idea that he is lord over this land does not seem remarkably far-fetched. As such, Grendel’s Mother should come to him for justice. This was the ordinary procedure in cases of *wergild*.

Instead, however, the Mother decides to take matters into her own hands, indeed acting as though she rules a hall in her own right (perhaps due to her knowledge of her status as an outsider). In doing so, as Nietzsche writes, “[s]uch a woman might be wretched or monstrous because she insists on arrogating the masculine role of the warrior or lord” (“Structural” 249). In short, Grendel’s Mother may present a greater form of menace than her son simply because she, who so clearly has the right to exact a legal retribution for her child, avoids the path of legal justice. She is no Wealhtheow calmly seeking peace in her court in a way more heavenly than earthly.⁴⁷ Instead, she is a female wielding a strength that harkens back to a “darker” time, a time associated with witches who, motiveless, first brought war into the world. Grendel’s Mother is a disorder threatening to the entire society, though she clearly does not intend to be such.

That disorder also encompasses the second cultural issue she incarnates by taking vengeance for her son: a continuation of the blood-feud. These blood-feuds present a frightening reality in *Beowulf*. They turn symbols of friendship and peace into icons of affront. In the case of women, they turn actions abundantly peaceful into signs of provocation. The story of Freawaru

⁴⁷ Baker discusses such an idea at length in Chapter 4 of his *Honour*. In this discussion of what *freoduwebbe* (peace-weaver) means, he dismisses the critics who think that marrying off women would bring peace. In offering his own definition for peace-weaver, he notes that worldly peace would be thought to differ from heavenly peace by Old English authors and that Wealhtheow might be aiming for the former rather than the latter. He reinforces this opinion by discussing how medieval queens were thought to be as the church was to Christ in their relationship to their spouse. Baker concludes by discussing how such a thought might provide us with a reference frame for Wealhtheow. Her duty, in this view, was to advise her husband like the biblical matriarchs.

offers the most memorable example of such a catastrophe. Hrothgar gives this single daughter in marriage to the Heathobard Ingeld to “heal old wounds / and grievous feuds” (2031-2032).

However, *Beowulf* predicts- and twentieth-century scholars in love with the trope of the failed peace-weaver do as well - that the marriage will not work out as planned. An old retainer will see his ancient comrade’s armor in the new queen’s escort and will provoke a young one to violence. Why does a typical display of exogamy result in a new war when it intended the opposite?⁴⁸

The trouble lies in the unintended side effects that can follow a woman into her new bridal home and in the meanings that accompany her. The women in *Beowulf* who are portrayed as glittering with a sort of gold of righteousness in their respective mead halls, Freawaru included, never seem to endow themselves with their own significance. Their meanings come from without. Hrothgar intends for Wealhtheow to make his might known among the mead benches. Likewise, he intends his daughter to bring a retainer king into submission. Such a past significance can be hard to scrub away in a culture that has been inundated with images of an archetype who utilizes just such past events as a fulcrum of insult. The archetypal resonances related to women catalyze reactions to the archetype long after the archetype has lost the efficiency displayed by it in the past. In a word, women were once hetzerin, once provocateurs of unending blood-feuds. When shifting religious worldviews make the future of women mysterious and, therefore, uncomfortable, members of a culture will go by what they have believed in the past: namely, that violent women are hetzerinnen and should be punished as such.

⁴⁸ I borrow the word “exogamy” from Overing’s *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf* where she summarizes a section of the duties of a peace-weaver as: “part of this role involves the giving of the peaceweaver in marriage outside her tribe, through the custom of exogamy” (Olsen 316). Tom Shippey has discussed the difficulties in overcoming the barrier of mistrust these women face in his article, “Wicked Queens and Cousin Strategies in *Beowulf* and Elsewhere.”

This cultural memory leads to the punishment of harmless women as it does in the case of Freawaru.

Freawaru, we are told is adorned with the same “gold-rimmed attire” and “gem-studded bowl” of her mother (2025, 2024). In Hrothgar’s court, this, as in the case of Wealhtheow, could be a constant reminder of his military prowess and his benevolence in ring-giving. The problem with that trait following his daughter into her new home is that it means the same thing there as well but is taken in a different light. In a culture saturated with the legends of the hetzerin, of the masculine paranoia preyed upon and played upon by the taunting woman, innocent women become unable to escape their archetypal fellows’ punishment. Those very jewels that enriched Hrothgar’s fame remind the Heathobards of what they owe him. As Baker has established, marriages like Freawaru’s linked a dominant king to a lesser one through the giving of the dominant king’s daughter to the lesser king in marriage. It functioned as other gift exchanges did during the time to create a relationship between two parties (Baker 160-162). The king gifting the queen created a relationship of sponsorship. Therefore, Freawaru is a constant reminder of what the Heathobards owe Hrothgar, creating hatred. Freawaru can be understood as an example of the hetzerin trope gone wrong. We can presume that her desire was the same as Hrothgar’s: peace. She even acted with the consent of her male protector unlike other hetzerin, yet she still provoked violence through presence, acting as a symbol of more than herself. As Beowulf so perfectly puts it: “generally the spear / is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed, / no matter how admirable the bride may be” (Heaney 2029-2031).⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Overing says of this scene, “[a]s these female peace-weavers are taken and given, stolen or discarded, their potential currency, their function, their power to signify is removed” (Overing 85). However, given the reaction inspired by Freawaru’s arrival in the Heathobard court, her power to signify, though admittedly not with a significance of her own choosing, seems to be in no way hindered. She signifies Hrothgar’s power in her lovely attire; she signifies the fate of the losers in war.

Grendel's Mother of course is no Freawaru, not even close. However, the fact that she does not mean to become a signification of anything beyond a grieving mother links her closely with this other woman. Grendel's Mother does not mean to become a representation of the blood-feud, yet that is what she comes to represent in the Danish mind simply because she is a violent woman. To Hrothgar, her actions are merely a "fresh blow," implying that she was taken as yet another evil action in a string of them began by her son (1303). Even when he admits that she might be exacting the death-price, he still categorizes her actions as her "tak[ing] up the feud," words that again hinge on her son's former action more than any original action or intent of her own (1333). The ring-giver ignores the fact that she is "desperate to get out" after taking only one thane (1292). In short, Acker states the case perfectly when he writes, "the text projects the anxieties it cannot otherwise adequately voice concerning the inherent weaknesses in the system of feuding and revenge. Killing off one opponent will only trigger the appearance of another as long as the system of revenge by kin is in place" (704-705).

The blood-feud in *Beowulf* is clearly no longer the glorious enterprise it once was. The glory of a revenge war found in the *Heidarviga Saga* or *Volsunga Saga* only makes Hrothgar "heart sore and weary" in the Anglo-Saxon text (Heaney 1307). For a culture that values so much the story of the initial murder that brought death into the world (the story of Cain and Abel), the idea of a slew of unending murders obviously holds no appeal. As such, when Grendel's Mother unintentionally becomes the figure representative of this way of life, she must be eliminated. As Kiernan writes of her function in the text: "She *is* a blood-feud, the consequences of the first murder, just as Grendel is the mindless envy of Cain, the first murderer" (Kiernan par. 15).

The reins of her revenge slip completely out of her hands as they do for so many of the violent hetzerin in both this literature and the Icelandic saga. The most she may have wanted to

provoke in the men of the hall was a recognition of what they had done to her. Instead of simply receiving compensation for her wrongs, she is shut down by this culture, portrayed as something demonic and clearly wrong.⁵⁰ Nowhere is this fact more evident than in the Mother's death. The poet writes that, once the giant's "sword dripped blood," "[a] light appeared and the place brightened / the way the sky does when heaven's candle / is shining clearly" (Heaney 1569, 1570-1572). One does not have to reach far for the religiosity present in the scene; after all, the sun is "heaven's candle" (1571). However, Bolton has added another level of importance to this scene. His *Alcuin and Beowulf: An Eighth-Century View* he observes that Alcuin, reading the scene in the mere, would have noticed the re-emergence of the light and interpreted it as the light of righteousness returning after the depths of sin had been purged (Bolton 127).⁵¹

In short, Grendel's Mother shows that the fate of the non-hetzerin violent women in predominantly Christian culture can be just as drastic as that of the archetype in Norse myth simply due to a cultural inability to move beyond that myth. The hetzerin figure seems to take on a life of its own in the minds of the men of *Beowulf*. The idea that the future might not resemble

⁵⁰ My argument is opposed to that of the newer translators of the text in that these translators see no sign of Grendel's Mother's abjection in the text itself, only in the word choice of translators. Hennequin summarizes these scholars' arguments when she writes: "Grendel's mother certainly is constructed as Beowulf's antagonist, but the poem does not depict her as a monster or even a villain in the modern sense of the word. True, she crosses gender lines and performs the functions of warrior, avenger, and king, all generally associated only with men, and she is certainly depicted as supernatural. Despite these qualities, however, neither the poem nor its characters demonize her or even criticize her actions; rather, she is presented as a noble and brave opponent and even as a somewhat sympathetic character. Far from calling her words for monsters, the poem calls her normal Old English words used for women, such as *wif* and *ides*. But translators and critics of the poem have consistently interpreted Grendel's mother as demonic, monstrous, and horrible" (504). Admittedly, the words themselves offer no indication of Grendel's Mother as monstrous, and I would maintain that she is not physically monstrous. However, the poet insists on categorizing her as Satanic as her lineage through Cain illustrates. She is monstrous by allusion, if not by translation.

⁵¹ This scene has been interpreted in a multitude of ways. In a mythological reading, one might note, that Grendel's Mother dies in light in the same manner as the troll-women of the *Edda*, which suggests a certain genealogy implicit in the tales (those folklorists find this disastrously hard to prove). Playing off this idea of genealogy, Chambers has noted that the light after a monster's death is a key element of folktales based on the "Bear's son" model. "After slaying his foe, the hero rekindles the magic lamp, in the Scheldt [he is the hero of the tale] fairy tale, just as he kindles a light in the Grettis Saga, and as the light flashes up in *Beowulf* after the hero has smitten Grendel's mother" (Chambers 380).

the past, that women can be violent without being hetzerin, seems to have no impact even in this rapidly Christianizing culture. Unfettered potentiality, a future with so many unforeseeable possibilities due to the mysterious nature of the God controlling it, creates anxiety. Anxiety is quieted through a return to the known, to traditional forms that, however much they are reinterpreted through a new religious lens, are haunted by their initial pagan format. That pagan allusion that creeps into the most Christian of texts unfortunately can only end in an outcome markedly pagan. In the case of the hetzerin, this is that stereotypical punishment for those who act against male will: death. Grendel's Mother, through cultural heritage and cultural anxiety, becomes an unintentional hetzerin.

“EVEN A QUEEN / OUTSTANDING IN BEAUTY MUST NOT OVERSTEP LIKE THAT”:
CONCLUSION

In the previous section, I strove to answer the question of what happens to literary women, and particularly the women of *Beowulf*, in a culture whose literature has seen the likes of a Borghild or a Brynhild. Though the women in *Beowulf* are not traditionally considered as examples of the hetzerin archetype, I tried to conceive of how such a literary archetype, omnipresent in much of the literature that a Beowulfian audience would have been familiar with, could provide a new outlook on the text’s treatment of Grendel’s Mother. My conclusion at the end of the section, though bleak, is that the women of the text cannot seem to escape the archetype with all of its connotations of future despair no matter how dramatically their behavior might differ from that of their Norse counterparts. Grendel’s Mother, despite her lack of words, cannot escape being treated similarly to Borghild with her infamous taunts over the mead cup. This labelling occurs despite the Mother’s clear lack of intentional use of location, reputation, or an item of provocation.

Indeed, Grendel’s Mother appears to only become exemplary of the “hetzerin” archetype unintentionally, a paradox considering that the hetzerin is a woman who *chooses* to enact a fate contrary to the one originally allotted her. The only reason, I argue, that this occurs is that a culture in which religious ideologies are changing at a rapid pace, as is the case in *Beowulf*, cannot always acclimate as quickly to new forms as the religious fathers stressing these forms would like. The shift from a world in which fate would determine all things and in which fate

was a hand of cards never hidden from its holder to a worldview in which the outcomes of actions are never known and in the hands of a dealer absent from human sight could only be anxiety-ridden for the members of this culture. The natural reaction to such anxiety would be to react in traditional ways, ways that, though ridden with pagan fate, were dependable and comfortable. In the case of Grendel's Mother that comfortable form with a known fate is the hetzerin archetype. As such, Beowulf punishes the Mother in the manner prescribed for the archetype despite no indication that she actually belongs to such a category. If the text were to leave its women in this state, not quite Christian, not quite pagan, the outlook for future literature would be rather dour. The ghost of the Norse archetype would limit women from avenues of power forevermore.

The poem, however, does not leave its women in such dire straits. Grendel's Mother, it must be remembered, presents an episode occurring in the "present-day" of the text. She, affected so negatively by the floating archetype of the hetzerin, is the victim of society's treatment of forceful women in the now. However, the text does not only depict current society. *Beowulf* also has a notable example of a story that circulates in the mead halls concurrently with pagan tales, and, I argue provides the key to rewriting the hetzerin archetype, and hence the fates of all women in the text, in a more hopeful strain. This redemptive tale is the Thryth digression.

This section of the text tells of a queen who "perpetrated terrible wrongs," apparently killing her thanes for simply looking her in the eye (Heaney 1933). The only thing that stops her violence is her marriage to "brave Offa," "Hemming's kinsman" (1948, 1944). Thryth's story is set in a legendary past, which could perhaps be used to argue that she represents a time past, a time that can have little impact on the present. However, a major point of folk tale and mythologizing seems to be not only explaining the world as it currently is but portraying the

world as one wishes it to be. The fact that another great queen in the text, Hygd, considers the story of Thryth, indicates that such could be the case here; the tale seems to still have some sort of use value for our young queen. Thryth, in Hygd's mind, potentially represents a model for which to strive.⁵² Thryth's removal from the modern-day of the text simply illustrates that Beowulfian society as it is does not resemble Thryth's. This chronological remove allows for a rewriting of the fate of an archetype that hitherto has been haunted by its previous iterations. If Hygd, a queen with the potential to control the mythology recited in her court, believes the story worthy of consideration, then it can be assumed that her underlings, even if only to please her, will desire the same outcome. In short, by removing the hetzerin archetype one step further from the present-day of the text, we can see the ways in which this society is gradually reworking the form and establishing a more optimistic fate for the archetype and the women in *Beowulf* as a whole.

Before moving into a deeper consideration of the role of Thryth-as-hetzerin, however, it should be noted that this queen has remained one of the most contentious figures in *Beowulf* since the time of Tolkien's revival of the text. Indeed, scholars in the late twentieth century seem just as concerned with the issue that concerned J.R.R. Tolkien in 1936.⁵³ At that early date, Tolkien, in his commentary, translated *mod thrydo waeg* as "the temper of Thryth" (314-315).

Translating the term in this way makes the line in which it appears read something like: Hygd

⁵² Lewis makes a slightly different, but related point when discussing *solempne*, or the solemn nature of epic poetry. He writes: "[e]pic does not mean simply what was sung in hall. It is one of the possible entertainments, marked off from the others... in both Homer and *Beowulf* by tragic quality, by supposed historical truth, and by the gravity that goes with true 'true tragedy' (15). The tragedy of man as such acts a model for the courtly environment in Lewis's sense. As the language is heightened, so should the court culture. The story of Thryth, I argue, acts as a similar model, though not of solemnity. Instead, she acts as a model of what a forward-thinking queen should be in a country increasingly Christian. As such, her story would be a natural one to perform at *solempne*, which is probably where Hygd first heard it.

⁵³ Though it should be noted again at this point that Thryth is the only woman in the text actually referred to by the term "peace-weaver," a fact that led Sklute to think her description ironic. See "Freothuwebbe in Old English Poetry."

minded the temper of Thryth. That construction makes this queen the exemplar of everything that Hygd should avoid. Malone echoes this thought, though probably writing at the same time as Tolkien, by saying that Hygd's "treatment of the retainers was just what it should be, and the rightness of her conduct seems to be attributed to her wisdom, for the poet represents her as weighing the conduct of Thryth. He does not add in so many words that she rejected Thryth as a model of behavior, but the necessary implication is that she not only weighed Thryth but also found her wanting" (356).⁵⁴ Osborn, as recently as 1999, contributed to this debate by observing that "since Thryth is not at all a good queen- not yet even a queen, in fact- it makes better sense to retain manuscript *mod Pryðo* as two separate words and take "the people's good queen" of line 1932...as the subject clause referring back to Hygd rather than to Thryth" (61).

As the above paragraph illustrates, the scholarly debate surrounding this particular woman has been trapped in monotonous circularity about the correct translation of Thryth or Modthryth's name and purpose in the text for some time. Considering Thryth in terms of the hetzerin archetype potentially offers a way out of this scholarly mire. In truth, no woman in the text resembles the more violent, or public and enforcing Norse hetzerin quite so clearly, a fact that may seem strange considering how little detail about Thryth we actually get. Clearly, the poet censures her early life. The initial announcement that "Great Queen Modthryth / perpetrated terrible wrongs" can only prepare readers for the worst (Heaney 1932-1933). The poet clearly disapproves of Thryth's choice to execute every thane in her court who made bold to look her in the eye. Perhaps the poet disapproves even more of the fact that these thanes were not killed immediately but "kept bound / in hand-tightened shackles, racked, tortured / until doom was pronounced" (1936-1938). The poet cannot let this description stand alone. The poet must end

⁵⁴ My interpretation takes the opposite tact by arguing that Hygd, in thinking of Thryth, is keeping in mind an archetype that guarantees her a prosperous future in spite of potentially odious past actions.

this description with yet another censure: “[e]ven a queen / outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that” (1941-1942). The constant moralizing of the poet in this section gives the whole the tone of a children’s tale. One can imagine such a story being told to a young Hygd as she was brought up in a royal household.

Perhaps adding to idea of the story as somehow mythologic or folkloric, the material for Thryth’s story, and particularly her concern over the masculine gaze, highly resembles a tale from Norse myth. In “The Poem of Volund” (or *Volundarkvida*) in *The Poetic Edda*, another queen despises all potentially subversive looks. Her name, in the same manner as Grendel’s Mother, is simply Nidud’s Wife. Volund was the semi-divine Norse smith renowned for his work with gold. In this early text, we meet him after he has recently been abandoned by his lover, the swan-maiden Strange-Creature. We are told that he sits in his hall “[striking] red gold about a firm-set gem” and “[closing] up serpent-rings” as well (Larrington 4p99).

These last items attract the attention of King Nidud, who craves the treasure secreted away by Volund. He kidnaps Volund after his wife, who has accompanied him to Volund’s hall says, “[h]e is not very friendly, this one who came out of the forest” (16p100). The king ultimately gives Volund’s favorite ring to Bodvild, his daughter. Apparently, Nidud’s Wife then parades Bodvild, with the ring, in front of Volund to gauge his reaction. Though her initial comment about Volund’s not being “friendly” may have seemed soft-spoken, her next reaction shows this reticence is not her true character.

Nidud’s Wife dislikes what she sees as Bodvild showcases her new ring to Volund. The smith’s eyes flash fire. “He bares his teeth when the sword is shown before him,” Nidud’s wife relates, “and he recognizes Bodvild’s ring; his eyes are like those of a shining serpent” (17p101). That look of arrogance insults the great lady, who is quick to quiet this rebellion. She tells her

guard to “[c]ut from him the might of his sinews” (17p101). For Nidud’s wife, the looks she receives from Volund spell insubordination, a refusal to bow to her will, which apparently was for him to work his gold-craft for her pleasure alone. After his mutilation, she places Volund on an island with the accoutrement of his craft. However, in the pattern of the Norse hetzerin, her provocation is not without consequences. Volund captures her two sons, kills them, and makes their skulls into polished silver and their eyes into precious stones. This last work he has sent especially to the wife (Larrington 35p103). Volund, however, is not finished. On the island of his exile, he seduces Bodvild, leaving her pregnant when he makes his escape via flight. The children Nidud’s Wife valued enough to incense a god have been killed and despoiled, the fate that can only be expected for a woman who chose to live by the hetzerin example.

The idea that the story of Thryth stems in some way from this ancient tale seems likely given how many of *Beowulf*’s digressions originate elsewhere in *The Poetic Edda*.⁵⁵ Even if a direct link is not thought likely, however, given the other instances I have given in which a woman in the present-day of *Beowulf* finds herself judged by a Norse standard, Thryth’s actions would seem guaranteed to occasion violent rewards. The ending of her story, if she echoes Nidud’s Wife or if she follows the hetzerin archetype, must be terrible. We expect abandonment, dismemberment, any of the horrible fates accompanying these other violent women. Contrary to expectation, however, we are told that “Hemming’s kinsman put a half to her ways” (1944). Marriage, not physical violence, tames the great queen.

As North perfectly states, “[t]he motif in this case is that of Kate and Petruchio” (228). The cruel woman in this instance receives another chance. Thryth, though hetzerin, does not suffer the fate of Nidud’s Wife or Borghild. She is not consigned to the fate of those from Norse

⁵⁵ The story of Sigmund and Fitela offering only one example of such origination. The story of Scyld Scefing also finds its origins in the Norse sagas.

myth whom she resembles. Instead, Thryth becomes “famous / for her good deeds and conduct of life” (1953). This description even suggests that, just as she once decided to act violently, she later on decided to modify her own behavior. After all, “taming” a wife in the manner of *The Taming of the Shrew* may lead to domestic subservience but its ability to insure wifely fame seems doubtful. The choice to be continuously good would seem to be Thryth’s alone. This description of Thryth’s fate does not fit the description of any hetzerin figure described inside this paper or in the larger body of Norse literature. In fact, when Thryth’s future is described in this way, she seems to be coming to represent a new future for violent women, a new storyline, so to speak.

I stated at an earlier point in this paper that hetzerin archetype seemed inescapable. The fate of the hetzerin, from the perspective of my research, was a recurring storyline in both Anglo-Saxon literature (exemplified by *Beowulf*) and the Norse literature that in some small way inspired the poem. However, Thryth, by not fitting the stereotypical trends of the archetype actively carves out a new storyline in this culture, a fact that indicates that new stories and, hence, new ideals of behavior were coming into circulation at the time of *Beowulf*’s composition. To call these new storylines properly Christian would be to step onto the same obstacle-ridden path followed by scholars since Blackburn broached the topic of the text’s religious outlook in the nineteenth century. However, reference to a later writer from the medieval ages indicates that, to some extent at least, Thryth’s tale is more clearly demonstrative of a hopeful future for literary women in Christian context than that of Wealhtheow or Grendel’s Mother.

The author of which I speak, and whose advice for specifically Christian women mirrors the later behavior of Thryth, is Christine de Pisan. Though writing in 1405, Pisan provides one of the clearest examples of what fame (and a memorable storyline) for women in a Christian

context looks like in her *The Book of the City of Ladies*. She advises: “may none of you [the women] be forced into holding frivolous opinions nor be hardened in them, lacking all basis in reason, nor be jealous or disturbed in mind, nor haughty in speech, nor outrageous in your acts...Such behavior is unbecoming and unfitting for women” (Pisan 255-256 explanation mine). The *Beowulf* poet’s words “[e]ven a queen / outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that, not punish the innocent / with loss of life for imagined insults” bear a striking resemblance to Pisan’s (Heaney 1940-1943). The words seem to imply that Thryth does indeed bear “frivolous opinions” and is “hardened in them, lacking all basis in reason” (Pisan 255-256). These frivolous opinions must have been that violence so prototypical of the hetzerin figure given that the poet gives us no other information about Thryth’s character, no other behavior to explicitly avoid.

When Thryth rejects such a life path at the hands of a new male protector, the storyline can only be described as *redemptive*, with the inferred reference to Christ intended. The obvious takeaway from her story is that, if one also reforms their behavior, despite all violent beginnings, one can attain a life as resplendent as Thryth’s. She is a model for the more Christianized woman. Indeed, Thryth’s apparent espousal of what seems to be a Christianized wisdom leads me to reject Nietzsche’s time-honored model of the chronology of the women of the text found in this paragraph:

Unlike Thryth, the monstrous *wif* remains husbandless, having lost her son, “wife” only to the *mere* she inhabits both in life and in death. At this moment in the poem, both Thryth and Grendel’s Mother belong to the past. If they represent *previous* inversions of the peace-weaver and cup-passer, and Hygd who is passing the mead-cup to Beowulf’s weary men in celebration signifies a *present* cup-passer, so the poet introduces a final

queen, this time a cup-passer of the *future* who will fail in her role just as Hildeburh, the first woman, failed in hers” (*Woman* 106).

Thryth is not the past of these women, a model to be rejected and assiduously avoided, but the future. She does not even constantly remain an “inversion” of the peace-weaver as we know that later in her life she became just that figure despite her apparently rocky start (106). For Hygd, she is a model of ideal behavior, again going on the example of a children’s story, to memorize and to imitate *in future*. Thryth may commit terrible wrongs. However, those wrongs, no matter their extent, can later be thought of as the frivolity of youth. Thryth was “outrageous in [her] acts” and apparently saw many “imagined insults,” but those transgressions did not determine her end, or, indeed, the reason why she is remembered by young queens like Hygd (Pisan 256, Heaney 1943). Instead, Thryth is remembered for her ability to make an advantageous marriage despite this past. After all, “Hemming’s kinsmen,” the famous Offa, “put a halt to her ways” (1944). She, in a word, lives despite having made, in the poet’s and society’s eyes, horrendous mistakes in the past.

Though the ending of the digression offers an alternative potentially repellant to the modern feminist eye, the tale of Thryth offers a future for women who have acted violently to achieve their will in the past. She killed, but she will not be killed by a Volund or a Beowulf. Thryth is no Grendel’s Mother to be hunted into the marshes and then stabbed with her own sword in an ultimate display of poetic justice. Instead, she is a paragon of queenly excellence as well as a cautionary tale in a young queen’s mind. She represents an alternative to the set fate of the hetzerin archetype, yet another choice offered to women who once had only one: death in exchange for one moment of volition. Moreover, her marriage is a happy one, ending in love. As Osborn has reasoned: “It is notable that Thryth is the only woman in *Beowulf* reported to ‘love’

someone. In any case, it seems that, through her own choice of roles once she is queen, she has forced “drinkers at ale” to tell a different story about her. She takes control of her own life story” (63).

Then, when Hygd considers the “temper of Thryth,” she might simply be keeping a hopeful archetype in mind. She may be thinking of a woman, who provoked her will, but who also made an advantageous marriage in the end as well. This option may not be as encouraging as one would like, but Thryth’s fate does gesture towards a wider future for women trapped under the shade of an archetype not of their choosing. Hygd could make a mistake in the mead hall and not be fatally judged for that transgression. The potential that this heroine meets a violent end is still marginally present somewhere in between the lines of the text, but, overall, the last portrayal of a woman of considerable length in *Beowulf* leaves the reader with an optimistic impression. The future of the archetype, that death and repudiation so often stressed in this paper, seems set in stone no longer.

The goal of this paper has been to utilize a well-known but little explicated archetype, the hetzerin, to shed light on the portrayal of women in the religiously liminal world of *Beowulf*. To achieve this, I have had to pull away the layers of meaning found in each female word, in each female action to reveal resonances of an archetype that few have noted before. Indeed, to do so has been to move against the flow of the bulk of twentieth century criticism on the women of the text. Overing’s oft-quoted statement perhaps exemplifies this prevailing opinion like no other: “[t]here is no place for women in the masculine economy of *Beowulf*; they have no space to occupy, to claim, to speak from” (72).

However, such a place *does* exist. That place is the hetzerin archetype, that archetype of the woman who successfully works her will through an uncanny attention to location, reputation, and the connotations of items. Wealhtheow *does* speak and *does* provoke Beowulf to work her will in killing Grendel when she tells him, in front of the hall, that she has prayed for the presence of such a warrior. Beowulf, to avoid the insult that must come with ignoring the pleas of a *mere* woman, slays the demon.

The place from which these women speak, though, seems inescapably linked to the fate of the hetzerin archetype in Norse myth. The women in this myth, after choosing to embrace their one moment of volition in a world bound by pagan concepts of fate, must pay for those sparse moments of power. Borghild dies in repudiation. Brynhild takes her own life. Sigrun is known for being the bane of men. These women's ultimate fate is unchangeable from story-to-story. The provocateur of violence in Norse myth will meet a disgraceful end.

With this facet of the archetype recognized, the ominous tone of *Beowulf's* sections on women perhaps is no mystery. A reader or listener well acquainted with the archetype must feel they know how the story will end. Wealhtheow, by provoking her will, seems guaranteed the fate of a Brynhild or Borghild. However, such is not the case in the text. Wealhtheow does provoke Beowulf, but she does so without repercussion. The shift, I have argued, is due to the monumental shift occurring in religious ideology at the time of *Beowulf's* composition. The shift from paganism to Christianity came with one particular transformation key to the hetzerin archetype: the shift from a world controlled by unchangeable fate to a world controlled by an unknowable God. In other words, the mechanical idea that the woman who provokes violence will meet a violent end is a concept rooted in fate, in a worldview in which every individual's future is more or less locked in. However, when the hetzerin archetype moves from the Norse

culture that believed such into a Christian milieu that stressed the mysterious nature of the future, the archetype also had to shift.

The shift occurred in the facet of hetzerin provocation that I have called the item of provocation. This item was generally imbued with some sort of significance by a past event. For example, in the case of Sigrun and Helgi, the image of a buzzard was particularly useful because Helgi had just come from a victory on the battlefield, a place where only the losers became food for the buzzards. For Sigrun to call Helgi a buzzard, therefore, was to take an item with significance rooted in the hero's past in order to provoke him to prove his worth in the future. In the case of Wealhtheow, however, we see no such item rooted in past significance. She taunts Beowulf using the mead cup. The mead cup would only become an item of provocation should Beowulf not uphold his promise to slay Grendel. In theory, Wealhtheow could not then do anything to uphold Beowulf to his vow. He would be gone, so she in actuality could make him suffer no repercussions for his oath-breaking. However, she, at the same time as she provokes him, also mentions the fact that she has prayed to God for such a hero to arrive at her court. This prayer takes the enforcement of the taunt out of her hands, placing it in the hands of an entity beyond human perception. The removal of this item from her true control makes Wealhtheow's taunt only questionably effective. However, this removal also offers the one slight break with the pagan hetzerin model that allows our heroine to escape the hetzerin fate. Indeed, Wealhtheow's fate remains as mysterious, as full of potential, in the text as that of the deity to whom she accords her plea.

However, the fate of the original hetzerin archetype does not seem so simple to escape for other women of the text. The absence left by a removal of the concept of fate from a culture must make the future a source of anxiety. The way to fill this absence (and so remove this anxiety) is

to recontinue with a pagan religious and disciplinary model, which offered more reassuringly known future. For the hetzerin archetype, this future was always spelled death for their transgressions against the patriarchy surrounding them, a move that put an end to the progenitor of the blood-feuds that almost always accompanied hetzerin provocation. In the case of Grendel's Mother, then, the violent end of the hetzerin archetype gives the men of the text a course of action to pursue. Killing the Mother is a course of action much more congenial to a society pervaded by warrior ethic than sitting idly by waiting for divine intervention. Such attention to past models, however, offers no clear future for literary women who might wish to show some volition.

Thryth, I have argued above, represents this way forward. The poet does berate her and caution other queens to never act as she does. However, the poet also gives this woman the quintessential fairy tale ending. Moreover, the poet does this despite the fact that Thryth, like Grendel's Mother and the troll-women, has a clear link to hetzerin myths from the past. In other words, the poet takes what should be a straightforward story of transgression and punishment and rewrites it to provide a more hopeful outlook for women living under the shadow of an archetype. Thryth's life is clearly removed from the timeline of the *Beowulf* text. We get no indication that she lives contemporaneously with Wealhtheow or across the ocean from Geatland. However, by removing her to the realm of myth, the poet has made her into a model to look to, a paragon of behavior that can guide the society which hears her tale. In short, by offering her a future, even if that future is only in marriage, the poet has shown the reader the way to evade the hetzerin end.

The hetzerin figure, then, is intricately interwoven into all the major women of *Beowulf*. Wealhtheow is a hetzerin. Grendel's Mother is made into a hetzerin through no intention of her

own. Thryth escapes the fate- death- of the hetzerin archetype, though she, like the hetzerin, was the quintessential violent women, derided by society and poet alike. Moreover, the archetype did not die with this religiously liminal text. The works of Cynewulf, particularly *Juliana* and *Elene*, as well as the anonymous *Judith* keep the major facets of the figure while continuously rewriting its end. *Beowulf*, however, provides the key to understanding where the shift began for the archetype and, by doing so, shows us how the shift to Christianity affected the pagan literary universe one small step at a time.

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