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Female Characters in *Beowulf*

B.A. Major Thesis

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Beowulf is the longest and most the most outstanding epic poem in the Old English literature. In accordance with the principles of heroic poetry, the *Beowulf*-poet primarily focuses on the deeds of the male hero. The society depicted in the poem reflects heroic values – especially courage, loyalty and generosity. The primary relationship, which concerns the poet most, exists between men – between a lord and his loyal retainers. The poet does not describe those aspects of the Anglo-Saxon society which are beyond the scope of the epic poetry such as peasants or slaves. He is absorbed in the world of warriors. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the poem also contains several female characters. My thesis argues that even though they are not of primary concern, they are integral and substantial part of the poem.

In the first chapter, I analyse the values of the heroic world in order to demonstrate the primary emphasis on male characters. I also summarize the critical reception of female figures – on the one hand, they have often been viewed as too passive and suffering. The poet has been criticised for condemning them to the roles of helpless victims of the society they live in. On the other hand, however, the influence of feminist and gender theories have prompted a new approach, which presents female characters as equal counterparts to the male heroes. In this respect, scholars have focused especially on the analysis of the term "peace weaver".

Therefore, the next chapter is devoted to the roles of female characters in general. I analyse various aspects of peace weaving as well as the roles associated with the mead-hall such as the "passer-of-the-cup" and the "gift-giver".

Then, I proceed to the analysis of the individual female figures, their functions within the story and their place in the poetic structure. I focus on their individual traits as well as on parallels existing between them. Some obscure points arising from the *Beowulf* manuscript are mentioned, as well.

First of all, Queen Wealhtheow, who is the most fully depicted woman in *Beowulf*, is analysed especially in connection with her role in the mead-hall. She is also compared with Hildeburh, who figures in the *Finnsburg Episode*. Subsequently, Hildeburh and Freawaru are treated mainly as examples of tragic peace weaving figures. In the "Geatish part" of the poem, the most important female characters are Hygd and Modthryth. It is especially Modthryth, who has raised a critical discussion due to her behaviour which is improper for a queen. Finally, I focus on the significance of the unnamed female mourner at Beowulf's funeral.

The next chapter deals with one of the most obscure characters of the whole poem – Grendel's mother. Even though she is Beowulf's opponent rather than a female character as such, I focus on those traits which link her to the human queens, drawing comparisons and contrasts. I also summarize a discussion which treats Grendel's mother as an embodiment of a mythical female archetype.

The analysis demonstrates that the female characters are important for the poetic structure as well as the story itself. They are neither passive nor powerless – they are actively struggling to define their place in the heroic world and their efforts are in many respects successful.

2. THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN THE HEROIC SOCIETY OF *BEOWULF*

Epic narratives such as *Beowulf* are based on the principles of heroic society. The world of *Beowulf* is full of "heroic campaigns" (3), which are accomplished with daring courage and bravery. Beowulf has to go through many dangerous situations in order to win his glory. To live and die bravely is a matter of honour for him. Personal fame and courage are among the main values of the society depicted in the poem. Beowulf is *lof-geornost* ("keenest to win fame", 3182) because the only thing he seems to be afraid of is oblivion. There is a way for him to become "immortal" – as a part of a scop's song. He strives for the glory because he does not want to be forgotten and that is why he tells Hrothgar: "For every one of us, living in this world / means waiting for our end. Let whoever can / win glory before death. When a warrior is gone, / that will be his best and only bulwark" (1386-1389).

In fact, the whole poem can be described as a story about Beowulf's winning of the immortal glory. The actions of a male epic hero constitute the centre of the epic poetry. Subsequently, the society depicted in these poems is "quintessentially male" (Rochester), focusing on a relationship between men. A primary relationship – which is described even as "a bond of love" – exists between a king and his retainers, whose main duty is to be loyal to their lord (Irving 22). This relationship was described already by the Roman historian Tacitus in his account of German society called *Germania* (written in 98 AD): "(...) it is a lifelong infamy and reproach to survive the chief and withdraw from the battle. To defend him, to protect him, even to ascribe to his glory their own exploits, is the essence of their sworn of allegiance: the chiefs fight for victory, the followers for their chief" (qtd. in Köberl 2).

In Anglo-Saxon literature, the same ideas are expressed for example in *The Battle of Maldon* from the 10th century. According to Kevin Crossley-Holland, the speech of one of the characters called Byrhtwold should be "regarded as the supreme statement of the Germanic heroic code" (5):

Mind must be the firmer, heart the more fierce,
courage the greater, as our strength diminishes.

Here lies our leader, hewn down,
an heroic man in the dust.

He who now longs to escape will lament for ever.

I am old. I will not go from here,
but I mean to lie by the side of my lord,
lie in the dust with the man I loved so dearly. (309-316)

A brief mention of these values can be found even in the opening lines of *Beowulf*:

"So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by / and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness" (1-2).

However, Edvard Irving comments that modern readers may find a society based on these principles "strange and even unattractive" because it seems to be barbaric and obsessed with violence (20). It is true that even Beowulf himself claims that "[i]t is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning" (1384b-1385). According to Irving, murder and anarchy were common in a society devoted to personal achievement through the use of violence. "Since law in our sense scarcely existed, private vengeance usually had the task of dealing with such crises. As we see often in *Beowulf*, such private vengeance had a way of leading to a long-lasting and bloody feud or vendetta" (Irving 23).

Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that the poem reflects reality only partially. It is a "product of a single aristocratic class of warriors and it is directed exclusively to the interests of such an audience" (Irving 20). That is why many aspect of the real Anglo-Saxon society were deliberately excluded. As Irving continues, "[t]he characters feast constantly but we never see peasants engaged in growing their food or brewing their ale. (...) If [the

warriors] are not fighting they are drinking, boasting or listening to a scop's replay of some of the fights of old" (20-21).

Female characters, as well, seem to be inconspicuous at first sight. However, at closer look we realize that the *Beowulf*-poet did not neglect them entirely. In the main story line, we encounter Wealhtheow, Hygd, Grendel's mother and the mourner at Beowulf's funeral. The narrative digressions are even more associated with women – there are Hildeburh, Freawaru and Modthryth. Nevertheless, the primary focus on the male hero and his actions has led many scholars to underestimate their roles or wrongly classify them as too passive and suffering.

For example, Gillian R. Overing writes that "[t]he women in *Beowulf*, whether illegitimate monsters or pedigreed peaceweaving queens, are all marginal, excluded figures (. . .)" (qtd. in Carr Porter). According to her, "women have no place in the death-centered, masculine economy of *Beowulf*; they have no space to occupy, to speak from (...) they must be continually translated by and into the male economy" (qtd. in Andrade 3). Scholars such as Gillian Overing, Edvard Irving, Michael Enright and Johann Köberl classify women in *Beowulf* as helpless victims of the society they live in. They point out that they are dependent on men, being mere "instruments of the kings" and "extensions of their husbands" (Carr Porter). Subsequently, all their roles are said to be doomed to failure or futile.

However, the influence of gender studies and feminist theories have incited scholars like Dorothy Carr Porter, Marijane Osborn or Brian McFadden to assign women a more significant position. It was especially the role of a peace weaver, which became a crucial term in their analysis since basically all the queens in *Beowulf* are shown to function in this role. The discussion of peace weaving has brought a new insight into the question of feminine power in *Beowulf*.

The character of Grendel's mother, as well, has acquired a new significance. In the overall scheme of the poem, she is primarily another monster for the hero to fight. Under the influence of the feminist theories, however, she has been analysed as an example of a strong and autonomous woman or as a feminine archetype on the mythical level.

Dorothy Carr Porter focused on not only on the role of female characters in *Beowulf* but also on their place in the poetic structure. As she concludes:

(...) the presentation of these women is purposefully symmetrical, inviting comparisons and contrasts. Those women who act as hostesses and peaceweavers, even while looking out for their own interests, are central to the poem, and an understanding of the functions of the women in *Beowulf* assists the comprehension of a complex poem. Those women presented as monsters, the hostile hostesses and strife-weavers, are interesting in themselves, and also serve as counter-examples to the other female characters. (...) Though they are all defined by the men that they are close to, either sons, fathers, or brothers, none of the women in *Beowulf* are marginal or excluded.

My thesis argues for these ideas and presents female figures in *Beowulf* as indispensable components of the poetic structure. However, before the analysis of the individual characters, it is necessary to focus on their roles in general.

3. THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN *BEOWULF*

As noted above, the most important role of female figures in *Beowulf* is that of a "peace weaver" (*freothuwebbe* in Old English). This term refers to a woman married from one tribe into another in order to secure peace between the two groups. Interestingly, the term is also used for angels in Old English poems such as *Judith*, because "they serve the same function as intermediaries – for women between one tribe and another, for angels between God and Mankind" (Maxwell). However, the term *freothuwebbe* is used only once in *Beowulf* – about Modthryth in 1942. In 2017, Queen Wealhtheow is referred to by a similar term, *frithu-sibb folca*, which means "peace-pledge between nations". John Hill argues that these terms differ in meaning – according to him, the term *freothuwebbe* implies that a peace weaving person holds importance within the group into which she was married (for example, as a "passer-of-the-cup"), whereas the latter term explicitly suggests a link between the two rival groups. To the contrary, Larry M. Sklute does not see any distinction between both words, claiming that they are used as synonyms (both in Carr Porter).

However, the scarce occurrence of both terms has led Sklute to suggest that they are used only as metaphors restricted to poetry. Nevertheless, he points out that arranged marriages – no matter how the woman functioning as "peace weaver" was actually referred to – were a widespread practice in German societies (in Carr Porter).

According to Edward Irving, this practice evolved from the effort to find a satisfactory solution to long-lasting feuds between clans, tribes, nations and other groups (24). Laura Maxwell specifies that the peace weaver was offered – "though there's not a clear distinction between being offered or being taken hostage – as a pledge of good faith between tribes (...)". Similarly, precious items such as jewellery and battle gear were often exchanged as "seals of good faith – physical objects in place of (non-existent) written contracts. They are markers of agreements which, without writing, have no other physical representation" (Maxwell). In this

respect, Johann Köberl remarks that it seems as if women were treated as commodity. However, whether a woman could influence her relatives' decision about her marriage remains doubtful (12).

In *Beowulf*, Hildeburh and Freawaru most clearly act as intermediaries between two tribes. The poet considers this role appropriate for a woman – in 1942a, he explicitly states: "[a] queen should weave peace". On the other hand, *Beowulf* contains two outstanding examples of female characters who function as foils to peace weavers – Modthryth and Grendel's mother. Both of them use violence and their behaviour is viewed as unacceptable.

The most important duty of every peace weaving woman was to bear children because "child-bearing mingles the bloodlines between the two or more tribes involved in the peace pledge and hence becomes a physical means of achieving peace" (Andrade 4). The queens in *Beowulf* as well as Grendel's mother draw their importance from their sons – they are either proud of them or mourn their death.

What is more, the queens in *Beowulf* function in a number of social roles, the most important of them being the "passer-of-the-cup". Both Wealhtheow and Hygd act as "hostesses" – they carry the cup round the mead-hall and offer it to warriors. As Dorothy Carr Porter points out, "[t]his appears to be a relatively unimportant function until one reads carefully and examines how this duty is carried out". The importance of it lies especially in the order according to which a queen approaches the warriors. In Anglo-Saxon *Maxims*, we are told that a woman should "(...) always, everywhere, greet first at the mead-drinking the protector of the nobles before the band of retainers, give the first cup promptly into her lord's hand (...)" (qtd. in Köberl 13). Thus, the woman shows that the utmost power lies in the hands of the leader. Then, her task is to approach the retainers according to their prominence – it is an active role, which enables her to indicate the power structure of the hall, as will be shown in the discussion on Wealhtheow.

While distributing the cup, Wealhtheow is also shown to perform other functions – she converses with warriors, praises them and politely reminds them of their loyalty to each other and to their king. She functions as an intermediary between the king and warriors, which strengthens the ties of the war band. Besides it, she also incites Beowulf to action. In fact, a queen was supposed to act in a diplomatic way – to speak wisely and to counsel "through her lightheartedness, gentleness and constructive eloquence" (Chance qtd. in Andrade 1).

Another important function of a queen is gift-giving. Women in Anglo-Saxon times owned property and could distribute it at will (in Coone-McRary). Subsequently, one of the most important duties of a queen was to be generous. In *Beowulf*, it is especially Hygd who is praised for this quality.

However, when discussing the female characters in *Beowulf*, some scholars focus only on the tragic aspects of their roles. For example, Gillian Overing asserts that the most outstanding aspect of any peace weaving figure in *Beowulf* is "(...) her inevitable failure to be a peace-weaver; the task is never accomplished the role is never fully assumed, the woman is never identified (...)" (qtd. in Andrade 3). Both Edward Irving and Johann Köberl characterize women in *Beowulf* as "victims" (24 and 20, respectively). Similarly, Victoria Wodzak states that the peace weaver has no chance of being successful because the peace ultimately depends on the heroic world of men (in Andrade 8). Overing, as well, agrees that a peace weaver is "an unacceptable solution to the chaos in Anglo-Saxon warfare" (qtd. in Andrade 3).

It is true that the stories of some (though not all) female characters end in tragedy. For example, Hildeburh loses her beloved ones and Freawaru is not able to avert war. However, we should bear in mind that tragic overtones are deeply embedded in Old English literature – according to Christine Fell,

Much of Old English poetry is concerned with the vulnerability of the individual, whether this is a man who has lost his lord, an exile, a poet out of favor, a woman separated from her husband, or some other unfortunate. Heroic poetry in particular is much concerned with the vulnerability of the woman cast in the role of *freothuwebbe*, 'peace-weaver', where it is hoped that a peace-settlement between two hostile tribes or families may be made firmer by a marriage-bond. The emphasis is on the isolation of such an individual in a society where the protection of her own family has been replaced by the dislike and distrust of those in her new environment. (in Pfile)

Beowulf, as well, contains tragic themes. As Anthea Andrade points out, "[a]ll kingdoms mentioned within the poem are ultimately destroyed regardless of how tactful the queen is" (3). On the other hand, however, not all the women in *Beowulf* are entirely tragic – Wealhtheow copes with her duties in the hall and Modthryth becomes the wife of the famous King Offa and the mother of the hero Eomer. According to Andrade, "(...) peace-weaving is productive – if only temporarily. Both childbirth and diplomacy (even if short-lived) are creative acts: the peace-weaver produces a 'text' that rewrites history, either her own or that of the two tribes" (9). Above all, none of the women in *Beowulf* is passive – every one seeks to achieve her own goals and tries to cope with the society she lives in.

4. THE QUEENS IN *BEOWULF*

Wealhtheow, Queen of the Danes and wife of Hrothgar, is the most fully depicted female character in *Beowulf*. She appears in two scenes (612b-641 and 1162-1232a) and considerable space is devoted to her direct speech. It will be shown that her presence in the story is indispensable because she directly affects the events of Beowulf's adventure in Denmark. Thus, she is of substantial importance to the whole poem. Her character is a fully integrated part of the poetic structure. What is more, she is by no means passive or helpless. To the contrary, she actively struggles to fulfill her duties of a peace weaver and achieve her own goals. Neither her words nor her actions are futile because she is evidently reputable and her efforts are at least partially successful.

We know very little of her origin, which sets her in contrast with the other queens in the poem, whose royal genealogies – with the exception of Modthryth – are clear enough. We might trace a clue in 620, where the poet denotes her as "the Helming woman". However, Jan Čermák notes that the Helmings cannot be historically identified for certain (91). A possible elucidation is suggested by Sam Newton, who argues that the Helmings was an alternative name for the Wulfings (in Hill). The Wulfings are a clan that figures not only in *Beowulf* but also in *Widsith* and in the Norse sagas, which identify them a ruling clan of the Eastern Geats (in "Wulfing"). In *Beowulf*, they are mentioned as a clan of Heatholaf, a man who was slain by Beowulf's father Ecgtheow. This might account why Hrothgar paid wergild for Ecgtheow – the settlement of this feud would concern him if his wife's kindred was involved in it. Further, Newton states that the East Anglian Wuffing dynasty was derived from the Wulfing clan, which would link *Beowulf* with England (in Hill).

However, the question of Wealhtheow's origin is further complicated by her name, which was analysed as a compound of "*wealh* meaning Celt, foreign, slave, or servant and *theow* meaning in bondage, servile, or not free, though her name can also be translated as

'servant of the chosen'" (Damico and Hill qtd. in Gardner 9). Indeed, it is a strange name for a queen. Does it suggest that her background is not noble? In contrast to this speculation, she is described as *frithu-sibb folca*, "peace-pledge between nations", by Beowulf himself (2017) – a role typically destined for women of noble origin. Nevertheless, it is not clear what kind of hostility she was supposed to pacify. Despite being a "peace-pledge between nations", she is always shown acting only among the Danes.

Unlike Hildeburh, who holds importance both among the Danes and the Frisians, Wealhtheow remains identified only in relation to her husband's kindred. When discussing this issue, William A. Chaney notes that in a "kin-centered society such as that of the Anglo-Saxons and other Germanic peoples (...) common descent bound the social group together and provided the basis of unity" (qtd. in Pfile). It means that every person had to identify themselves by their lineage, which also implies that by not having the support of blood relatives, one's own identity was threatened. Subsequently, such a person was viewed with distrust.

Nevertheless, even if this might potentially apply to Wealhtheow, the poet always describes her in the best way. He uses such epithets as "queenly" and "dignified" (621). She is shown as "a representation of Hrothgar's hall" (Gardner 11) with her jewells and her costly attire standing for power. In fact, her character fulfills the role of a model queen who sets an example of queenly behavior in the mead-hall in two feasting scenes.

The poet introduces her to the story after a violent verbal exchange between Beowulf and Unferth – Beowulf has just accused him of killing his brothers and hinted at Danish inability to cope with Grendel. Even though these words are actually expected of him as a part of formal boasting, "it may be that the harmony of the community has been put to severe restraint in this exchange (...)" (Irving 45). Therefore, the poet shifts attention to the queen, whom he associates with peace and tranquility.

She is shown in her foremost role of a peace weaver in the hall – as a passer-of-the-cup. The poet tells us that she hands the cup to the king first, underlining his utmost power as noted above. After Hrothgar's ceremonial toast, she goes on her rounds, offering the cup to retainers according to their prominence. "One might say, crudely, that she keeps the score and awards the points in the competition for public prestige, while at the same time ensuring, by constant 'circulation', that no deserving person is entirely left out" (Shippey). In this scene, Wealhtheow reaches Beowulf in the end. Even if it might seem a bit impolite of her, we must bear in mind that Beowulf is a stranger in the hall and that he is also probably too young to have a more prominent position (he is sitting between Wealhtheow's young sons). On the other hand – as Jennifer Gardner notes – the Danes are served first in order to drink a toast to the newly arrived guests (6). However, in the second feasting scene, Beowulf is offered the cup immediately because he has meanwhile acquired higher status by keeping his promise to kill Grendel.

At the same time, by handing the cup from warrior to warrior, the queen reminds them of their loyalty to each other and to their king. Thus, the cup symbolizes "an invisible web of peace, reflecting the dependent relationship each warrior had on another" (Andrade 14). In this respect, Wealhtheow's cup contrasts with the cup from the dragon's hoard, which can be perceived as an ominous symbol of disintegration and violence. It had been lying there uselessly for ages and the theft of it incited the dragon's fury.

The second scene where Wealhtheow acts takes place after the fight with Grendel. Edvard Irving notes that "(...) at this point, many traditional images of order and harmony flood into poem, the most significant of them being the great victory feast held in Heorot" (52). Again, the queen appears after a disturbing passage. This time, she not only passes the cup but also gives treasure. As a model queen, Wealhtheow is – according to Helen Damico – an embodiment of generosity (in Andrade 15). She gives Beowulf a precious necklace known

as Brisingamen (1198). It not only demonstrates her power but it also gives Beowulf social prestige. Generally, gift-giving stands for social interaction. Here again arises a contrast with the dragon's untouched hoard – "(...) human societies engaged in free dispensing and receiving of treasure are consistently presented as spiritually healthy, as living in a way God intends. A hoarded treasure is spiritual death or damnation" (Lee 216).

In both scenes, the poet praises Wealhtheow for behaving and speaking in a polite and diplomatic way. She is evidently aware of her public role consisting in giving advice to warriors and reminding them of their loyalty and duties to the king. She is in all circumstances supportive of her husband – in fact, she functions as an extension of his power (in Carr Porter). She proves to be "(...) sophisticated enough to produce speeches appropriate to the joyous occasion while also nuancing them politically" (Osborn).

On the other hand, she is not a mere king's instrument because she speaks freely and expresses her own opinion. She evidently acts of her own free will when she criticises Hrothgar's intention to "adopt" Beowulf. According to Johann Köberl, she does it "(...) in a very face-saving manner, avoiding conflict with the Geats (...)" (19). Beowulf himself does not express his opinion on this issue because he probably understands that the queen's task is to promote her own offspring. Since the question of adoption is never raised again, Wealhtheow's reproaches must have been accepted by Hrothgar, as well. Her final words indicate her own self-confidence: "The thanes have one purpose, the people are ready: / having drunk and pledged, the ranks do as I bid" (1230-1231).

Somewhat surprisingly, Wealhtheow is no longer mentioned after the fight with Grendel's mother. The feast is described only briefly. It apparently contradicts the structural pattern we have seen – so far, the poet twice described a dangerous situation and then introduced a scene focusing on the queen as a symbol of peace and tranquility. However, after the fight with Grendel's mother the poem gradually acquires tragic overtones as it draws

towards the end and Beowulf's death (in *Bonjour* 41-42). Therefore the soothing element is no longer appropriate.

All in all, Wealhtheow proves to be very competent. She actively fulfills her role of a peace-weaver and she is in many respects successful. However, I have not yet discussed the poet's dark allusions concerning the fate of her sons and the future of Heorot. It is hinted at mainly by means of a parallel between Wealhtheow and the Frisian queen Hildeburh.

Therefore, it is necessary to focus on the *Finnsburg Episode* at first.

The *Finnsburg Episode* belongs among digressions from the main story line. Hans Jürgen Diller defines a digression as "(...) a piece of text which interrupts the chronological progress of the surrounding story or argument by telling or summarizing sequences of events outside the main story. Their topic is not identical with that of the surrounding text" (73).

The *Finnsburg Episode* is presented as a scop's song performed at the feast after Beowulf's victory over Grendel (1065-1158). "Unfortunately for us, this story is told so elliptically and allusively, evidently to an audience capable of responding to slight hints by reconstructing the familiar story, that it offers serious problems in interpretation" (Irving 52).

The sequence of events could be reconstructed only by means of comparison with a badly damaged and incomplete manuscript known as the *Finnsburg Fragment*. We gather that it is a tragic story about the outbreak of violence between the Frisian king Finn and his brother-in-law Hnaef, who is from Denmark. The actual cause of their dispute is not clear but it is probable that the Danes and the Frisians are involved in a long-lasting feud. That is why Hnaef's sister Hildeburh was married to Finn. Hnaef and Finn's son are killed during the night attack. Hildeburh learns it in the morning and burns their dead bodies on a funeral pyre. Command of the Danes is subsequently taken over by Hengest, who swears loyalty to Finn. After the winter spent at Finnsburg, Hengest is worried by thoughts of vengeance. The fight breaks out again, Finn is killed and Hengest takes the queen back to Denmark.

At least, this is the interpretation which is accepted by most scholars. It is based on the assumption that the battle described in the *Fragment* chronologically precedes the events of the *Episode*. There have been attempts to place it elsewhere – for example Möller's theory discussed in Chambers' *Beowulf: An Introduction* argues that the battle in the *Fragment* is not that one in which Hildeburh's son and brother are killed. According to him, this battle takes place later on and describes a Frisian attack on Hengest, who is planning to revenge Hnaef's death (254-257).

The attempts to harmonize the *Fragment* and the *Episode* are complicated by incongruous tones of both passages. As far as the *Fragment* is concerned, it is "(...) a superbly exciting narrative, with full stress on reckless unthinking action and the absolute courage of the heroic defenders of the hall" (Irving 53). On the other hand, the *Episode* in *Beowulf* rather portrays the effects of violence on unfortunate and innocent victims. As Chambers points out, "[t]he tone (...) is quite different. Whereas the *Fragment* is inspired by the lust and joy of battle, the theme of the *Episode*, as told in *Beowulf*, is rather the pity of it all, the legacy of mourning and vengeance which is left to survivors" (248).

Thus, the *Episode* begins with the figure of Hildeburh, "the woman in shock, waylaid by grief", "bereft and blameless" (1073-75). It is not clear who started the fight. Nor do we know whether her son fought with the Danes or with the Frisians. Tolkien claims that he joined his uncle (in Osborn) whereas Irving argues for his father's side (53). Nevertheless, whatever has happened, Hildeburh ends up as a "certain loser" (Irving 53) – her beloved ones are slain.

Of all the queens in *Beowulf*, only Hildeburh and Freawaru can be perceived as entirely tragic. Hildeburh demonstrates a conflict of a peace weaver who is trapped between loyalty to her husband and to her brother. Significantly, the poet does not mention Hildeburh's mourning for her husband's death, implying that she prefers her blood relatives. Nevertheless,

"Hildeburh does what is expected of her. She weaves peace in her marriage to Finn, bears him a son, but is still unable to prevent the battle between her brother and Finn, and then she grieves over the total devastation" (Andrade 20). Hildeburh certainly does not exercise so much influence as Wealhtheow, but she is not entirely passive:

Then Hildeburh ordered her own
son's body be burnt with Hnaef's,
the flesh on his bones to sputter and blaze
beside his uncle's. (1115-1118a)

No matter whose side her son fought for, Hildeburgh wants him to join his uncle at least on the funeral pyre – they become companions in death. It can be perceived as a "gesture of conciliation, a kind of peace-weaving in the face of death" (Overing qtd. in Andrade 19). There is an impressive scene when Hildeburh sings a dirge while the smoke from the dead bodies rises to heaven. It is just this focus on human passions, this expressivity and density of images, which makes the *Episode* so unique. "In such a context of grief and loss, the fire is at once part of Hildeburh's agony and part of the poet's unspoken judgement on the feud as cause of such suffering and waste" (Irving 54).

However, to return to the context of the *Episode* in the structure of *Beowulf*, is a story about suffering (no matter how brilliantly designed) appropriate for a feast celebrating Beowulf's heroic deed? In fact, the point of view presented in the *Fragment* seems to be far more appropriate. Marijane Osborn remarks that this "(...) jarring inappropriateness (...) makes one wonder what the scop in Heorot, or for that matter the *Beowulf*-poet, was thinking of".

When dealing with this issue, William Lawrence proposed: "May it not be, too, that the story of Queen Hildeburh was here designedly brought into connection with the tragedy in store for Queen Wealhtheow, which must have been well-known to the people for whom the

poet of *Beowulf* wrote?" The answer was pertinently supplied by Adrien Bonjour: "Asking the question is already solving it; the parallel between Hildeburh and Wealhtheow is unmistakable" (both qtd. in Osborn).

As Osborn explains, "Wealhtheow's situation is potentially parallel to Hildeburh's, because Hrothgar's nephew Hrothulf (Old Norse Hrolf) will eventually use violence, perhaps murdering Hrothgar and probably murdering Wealhtheow's sons, in order to usurp the throne". Jan Čermák notes that the majority of scholars support the theory that Hrothulf will eventually betray Hrothgar, even though it is never stated explicitly in *Beowulf* (237). However, Hrothulf is certainly not portrayed as a trustworthy figure:

Hrothgar and Hrothulf, were in high spirits
in the raftered hall. Inside Heorot
there was nothing but friendship. The Shielding nation
was not yet familiar with feud and betrayal. (1015-18)

According to Čermák, this passage should be interpreted as a dark allusion to Hrothulf's future treachery. Čermák also claims that it is probable that he will eventually murder Hrothgar's sons Hrethric and Hrothmund and usurp the throne (241). Brian McFaden, who adopts the same interpretation, states that Wealhtheow will therefore end up like unfortunate Hildeburh – her relatives will fight on opposing sides and she will have to watch the tragedy (638).

This theory is implicitly supported by several facts in the poem itself. Hrothulf belongs to the youngest generation of the family but he is clearly older than Hrothgar's sons Hrethric and Hrothmund, who are surprisingly young considering the age of their father. At the feasts, Hrothulf occupies the seat of honour next to Hrothgar, while Hrothgar's own sons sit among the youth. However, Hrothgar and Wealhtheow want Hrethric to succeed to the throne. What is more, the system of primogeniture was not yet established at that time, there was a "free

election from the royal family" (Shippey). Even Hrothgar himself succeeded his brother Heorogar at the expense Heorogar's son Heorowearð (in Gardner 24). Also note that the Danish part of the story contains many examples of kin violence (for example, we are told that Unferth murdered his own brothers). Under these circumstances, Hrothulf's ambitions to claim the throne for himself seem very probable.

The poet apparently implies that Wealhtheow is already afraid that it might happen. According to Brian McFadden, "she knows – or at least strongly suspects – that she will not be able to prevent violence against her sons when Hrothgar dies" (631). The story about Finnsburg has offered her "special reflexive mechanisms" (Turner qtd. in Osborn) – she identifies herself with Hildeburh because she has realized that a similar tragedy might befall her, as well. Osborn even argues that the *Finnsburg Episode* does not represent the actual words of a scop but the way Wealhtheow grasps the story and appropriates it for herself. In any case, she clearly tries to take steps in order to avert the tragedy.

In a scene which follows the *Finnsburg Episode*, she reproves Hrothgar, who intends to adopt Beowulf. It seems that she prefers Hrothulf, when she tells Hrothgar:

I am certain of Hrothulf.

He is noble and will use the young ones well.

He will not let you down. Should you die before him,

he will treat our children truly and fairly.

He will honour, I am sure, our two sons,

repay them in kind when he recollects

all the good things we gave him once,

the favour and respect he found in his childhood. (1179-86)

However, it might be that she has no other choice than to politely remind the king of the necessity to promote his kin. On the other hand, even this passage can be interpreted as an

indirect warning against Hrothulf. It is confirmed later on, when she directly asks Beowulf to protect her sons: "Treat my sons / with tender care, be strong and kind" (1226b-1227). Also her following remark can be interpreted as containing another warning: "Here each comrade is true to each other, / loyal to lord, loving in spirit" (1228-29) – i.e. "so far they are but I am afraid that they will be not".

According to Jan Čermák, the *Beowulf*-poet could afford to use this kind of implicit hints and allusions because his audience must have known the rest of the story well (66). Thus, the passage where Wealhtheow anxiously seeks protection for her sons is based upon "intense dramatic irony" (Irving 56) simply because the audience must have known that her effort is doomed to fail.

Therefore, there arises a pattern in which the tragedy at Finnsburg is represented through Hildeburh and the looming tragedy at Heorot is hinted at through Wealhtheow. The fact that the *Beowulf*-poet represents the events of the story and links them together by means of these female characters proves that they are indispensable components of the poetic structure. Both queens act as peace weavers and actively pursue their own interests. What is more, both can be compared and contrasted with other female characters. The motif of a bereaved mother is repeated once again in the following passage – in the case of Grendel's mother. According to Jane Chance, "the sequence of women concerned about their sons magnificently builds to a climax: Hildeburh, Wealhtheow, Grendel's Mother" (qtd. in Osborn).

A close parallel can be drawn between Hildeburh and Wealhtheow's daughter Freawaru. Hrothgar plans to marry her as a peace weaver to Ingeld, King of the Heathobards. He hopes that this marriage will end the feud, which broke out due to the murder of Ingeld's father Froda. Even though Freawaru herself is of minor importance to the poem, being only briefly mentioned in Beowulf's report to Hygelac, she functions as a means to introduce the

conflict between the Scyldings and the Heathobards. Likewise, the conflict between the Danes and the Frisians was introduced by means of Hildeburh.

Beowulf describes that he had seen Freawaru distributing ale in the hall and then he predicts that her marriage will be a failure – an old warrior will eventually urge Ingeld to renew the old hostility and revenge his father's death. According to Bohumil Trnka, the necessity to choose between love for Freawaru and duty to avenge his father's death makes Ingeld the most dynamic character of the whole poem. His character is also said to be highly individualized whereas the other characters are mainly based on literary conventions (13).

Even though the poet does not further elaborate on Ingeld's story, Beowulf's prediction is confirmed in *Widsith* and in the Norse Sagas (in Irving 12). These various sources reveal that Ingeld was eventually defeated in the battle by Hrothgar and Hrothulf. It seems that it was only later that Hrothulf turned against his uncle. It leads Tom Shippey to suggest that marrying Freawaru to her first cousin Hrothulf might have been a more successful strategy. As he explains, "marrying a paternal cousin might be a good 'defensive' strategy, designed to ward off the kind of trouble which paternal cousins could be expected to provide". Nevertheless, at the time of the events described in *Beowulf*, the Heathobards simply must have been a more immediate threat.

Beowulf's speech to Hygelac not only reveals his distrust of the Heathobards, but also "his lack of faith in the lone peace weaver being able to settle the chaos between two nations" (Andrade 25). It is evident when Beowulf says: "But generally the spear / is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed, / no matter how admirable the bride may be" (2020b-32).

In that case – as Anthea Andrade continues – *Beowulf* contains an "underlying critique" of peace weaving because it cannot resolve constant feuding and warfare, it is only a temporary solution to it. However, "[b]y the end of the poem, the problem of finding other

ways to resolve conflict in this masculine arena is still not resolved" (Andrade 26). A lone peace weaver may try to keep peace but the outbreak of violence ultimately depends on men.

Neither Hildeburh nor Freawaru can avert violence. Both function as an "effective illustration of the theme of the precarious peace" (Bonjour qtd. in Osborn). Osborn further claims that the theme of kin violence links the first part of the poem to the second where feuding starts again after Beowulf's death.

In the "Geatish part" of the story, we encounter Queen Hygd, the daughter of Haereth, even though this figure is not as elaborate as that of the Danish queen. The poet describes that she passes the cup but the order in which she distributes it is not mentioned. Above all, she is praised for excellent manners, wisdom (in spite of her youth) and generosity (1928-29) – quite noticeably, all these qualities are typical of Wealhtheow, as well. The exchange of gifts is a joyous and festive occasion, which underlines Beowulf's triumph. Hygd herself is given three horses and the famous Broosingamen necklace, which Beowulf received from Wealhtheow (2172-74).

Like Wealhtheow, Hygd holds considerable power. She is able to influence such matters as a choice of successor to the throne. After Hygelac's death, she offers the throne to Beowulf at the expense of her own son Heardred. Dorothy Carr Porter suggests that it might have been Hygelac's will and that she might act only as an extension of his power. However, she dismisses this theory because the poet explicitly states that Hygd "(...) had no belief in her son's ability / to defend their homeland against foreign invaders" (2371-2372). Therefore, she does not stand for anyone's authority but her own – "(...) apparently it is Hygd and Hygd alone who does not believe her son is strong enough to hold the kingdom" (Carr Porter). Even though queens are expected to promote their sons, Hygd knows that Heardred is not able to save the kingdom from the Swedes. Her decision to prefer Beowulf proves her devotion to the

Geatish people, whose welfare is more important for her than her own son. However, Beowulf supports Heardred and convinces her to proclaim him king. It is only after Heardred's death that Beowulf himself succeeds to the throne. According to Jan Čermák, she was married to Beowulf when he became king. Subsequently, Beowulf leaves no heir because Hygd was already too old to have children. There have also been attempts to prove that the mysterious female figure at Beowulf's funeral is actually Hygd as a mourning widow (273). Also Francis Gummere believes that Beowulf was married (13). Nevertheless, neither of these theories can be proved for certain (in Morgan). In fact, Beowulf is more often described as unmarried – his independence is seen as a significant feature of his uniqueness.

Carr Porter further elaborates on the question of Beowulf's succession. She admits that the fact that Hygd prefers him instead of Heardred actually might not be a mere symbol of her self-sacrifice to the Geatish nation. In fact, it can be the proof that *Beowulf* contains traces of the "totemic system" which existed in early Germanic society. In this system, "[t]he lineage is traced through the women: a man belongs to his mother's line and his son belongs to 'his' mother's line and not his father's" (Carr Porter). It is further reflected in the system of inheritance because "if the father bequeathed his ancestral wealth and status upon his son, this patrimony would pass out of his own natal clan and into the matriclan of his affines" (Glosecki qtd. in Carr Porter). Therefore, to avoid losing ancestral wealth from his family, a man had to choose someone related to his mother – his sister's son would be the closest relative. Since Beowulf is the son of Hygelac's sister, his succession to the Geatish throne confirms this theory.

What is more, many characters in the poem are denoted through their maternal kin, i.e. in relation to their uncles rather than to their fathers – "Heardred is identified as the 'nephew of Hereric' even before he is mentioned as the son of Hygelac (line 2206) (...). Hygelac himself is identified as the nephew of Swerting (line 1203), and Eomer as the nephew of

Garmund (line 1962)" (Shippey). Also note that Hildeburh associated her son with her brother rather than with her husband. According to Tom Shippey, maternal relationships in *Beowulf* are always depicted as co-operative and supportive. For example, Wiglaf, the son of Beowulf's sister, remains faithful to his uncle even in the moment of the greatest danger. On the other hand, relationships through paternal side are in many cases depicted as problematic or at least ominous since these relatives belong to different matrilineal clans. The most obvious example is Hrothulf, who eventually turns against his paternal cousins Hrethric and Hrothmund.

Nevertheless, since these theories exceed the scope of this paper, let me return to Hygd. It is important to note that her character fits into the poetic structure mainly because she sets a counter example for the "evil" queen Modthryth. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on the latter, at first.

However, both Modthryth and the *Episode* in which she figures (1931b-1962) are among the most obscure points of the whole poem because the relevant pages of the manuscript are badly damaged (in Shippey). In fact, even her name cannot be deciphered satisfactorily – "[t]he first half-line with which she is introduced, *mod þryðo wæg*, has been read in at least five different ways to produce the names Modthrytho, Thrytho, or Thryth" (Shippey). I use Heaney's version Modthryth. However, as Shippey continues, "(...) the simplest if at the same time least attractive solution to the crux would be to take *modþryðo* as not a name at all, being instead a compound noun exactly parallel to *Genesis* 2238b, *hygeþryðe wæg*, 'showed violence of character'". Jan Čermák, who uses the name Thryth in his translation, argues that this name means "power"(254).

The digression about Modthryth breaks the main story-line abruptly. Without introducing her properly, the poet suddenly states: "Great Queen Modthryth / perpetrated terrible wrongs" (1931b-1932). These "terrible wrongs" are explained in the following lines:

If any retainer ever made bold

to look her in the face, if an eye not her lord's
 stared at her directly during daylight,
 the outcome was sealed: he was kept bound
 in hand-tightened shackles, racked, tortured
 until doom was pronounced – death by the sword,
 slash of blade, blood-gush and death qualms
 in an evil display. (1933-40a)

The poet's judgement of such behaviour is unmistakable: "Even a queen / outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that. / A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent" (1940b-1942). Modthryth changes her ways only after she is married to King Offa. From that time, she becomes famous for her behaviour and her devotion to her husband. Quite noticeably, she is the only woman in the whole poem who is said to love someone.

The whole passage puzzles scholars in many respects. Above all, who is the lord who is allowed to look at her directly? And why is she denoted as a queen and as a peace weaver even before she is married to Offa? According to Tom Shippey, the most natural explanation is that she was married twice. In that case, the "lord" must be her husband and it is because of his jealousy that Modthryth punishes other men. Later on, her husband either dies or repudiates her. In both cases, she is sent abroad where the environment is less threatening so that she can change her ways, "(...) though it was Offa who gained the credit for the miraculous conversion (...)" (Shippey).

On the other hand, Klaeber, who also considered this possibility, finally dismisses it, claiming that she was married only once. The "lord" then must be her father and she is denoted as a queen simply because she was known to the audience as "Queen Modthryth". According to Klaeber, Modthryth is a maiden testing her suitors like Brunhild of the *Nibelungenlied* and Offa is the only one who can "tame" her (in Shippey). "If Klaeber's view

were accepted, we would have a Beowulfian version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, with Offa taking the role of Petruchio" (Shippey).

However, what is clear from the poem but what equally puzzles scholars is her involvement in violence. She resents being looked at and succeeds in punishing all those who dare it. The poet implies that she is vain, proud and vengeful – these qualities are condemnable and inappropriate for a queen, no matter how beautiful she is. Her behaviour is even more striking if we consider that no other queen in the poem has any of her bad qualities. To the contrary, all the other queens (Wealhtheow and Hildeburh, in particular) act as peace weavers and their task is to secure peace between men. The poet clearly considers violence to be a male domain. Thus, Modthryth becomes through her participation in it – with the exception of Grendel's mother – "the most unwomanly, unqueenly female in the poem" (Overing qtd. in Andrade 22). In fact, she is in many respects even more disturbing than Grendel's mother because she is not an outcast of human society (in Rochester). Grendel's mother attacks from outside but Modthryth threatens her own people. However, Gillian Overing claims that even Modthryth herself is an outcast. According to her, she has no place in a male-dominated society and that is why she tries to define herself through the very principle on which this society is based – through violence (in Rochester). A parallel between Modthryth and Grendel's mother is drawn also by Dorothy Carr Porter, who calls both of them "strife-weavers" and analyses them as counter examples of peace-weaving characters.

All these examples demonstrate that Modthryth is a very disturbing character, who deviates from the other queens. Why is she introduced in the poem then? What is more, the whole digression seems to be inconsistent with its context – it breaks the main-story line and then simply stops, which made Klaeber judge it as "far-fetched and out of place" (qtd. in Osborn). On the contrary, the *Finnsburg Episode* was linked with the main story line in a logical way.

Therefore, the "*Modthryth Episode*" was considered to be some later interpolation. Another theory accounting for the incongruity of this *Episode* was proposed by Hans Jürgen Diller, who points out that the *Beowulf* manuscript is written by two scribes and that the change of scripts takes place in the line 1942, which is just in this *Episode*. Diller argues that "the last textual unit which [Scribe A] copied (...) betrays symptoms of being unfinished, of being (to say the least) less than fully integrated into its text" (78), which leads him to speculate that "[a]uthor and scribe, we may conclude, were working at this point under the same pressure of time. This would lend support to the theory recently advanced by Kiernan that scribes and authors were identical and that the *Beowulf* poem as we have it is a joint product of two authors" (78).

On the other hand, other scholars argue that the *Episode* has not an accidental place in the text. There must be some reason why it is told. Tom Shippey explains that "(...) the post-Tolkienian conviction of the poem's essential unity and tightness of construction has led to a search for some contrastive principle (...)", which would integrate the *Episode* into the poetic structure. The most obvious solution is to contrast Modthryth with Queen Hygd, who is described just before the *Episode* starts. In fact, it was proposed as early as 1861 by Nikolai Grundvig (in Shippey).

Whereas Modthryth's name derives from a word for "power", the name of Queen Hygd stands for "thought" (Čermák 254). It is especially Hygd's generosity, which evokes the contrast: "Haereth's daughter behaved generously / and stinted nothing when she distributed / bounty to the Geats. Great Queen Modthryth / perpetrated terrible wrongs" (1929-1932) – almost as if the poet implied that Modthryth is stingy. Instead of distributing wealth to her father's/husband's retainers, she has them executed. Marijane Osborn, who also accepts the contrast between them, links Modthryth into the story by means of linguistic analysis of 1931b-32: *Modþryðo wæg, / fremu folces cwen, firen' ondrysne*. According to her, the phrase

fremu folces cwen, "the good queen of the people", does not refer to Modthryth but back to Hygd. Thus, she also solves the above mentioned inconsistency because Modthryth is no longer called the queen. She further proposes that *Modþryðo* should not be taken as one name but as two words, where *mod* means "pride" and *þryðo* is the name Thryth with grammatical ending. Osborn's translation then looks like this: "The people's good queen / weighed Thryth's pride, her appalling crime". In that case, Hygd is able to learn the importance of generosity through Modthryth's example.

Another parallel is offered by contrasting Modthryth with Heremod, who is mentioned in the so called "Hrothgar's sermon" (1699-1784) as a warning example. He was a Danish king, who became corrupted by his power, "even though Almighty God had made him eminent and powerful and marked him from the start for a happy life" (1716-1718a). Gradually, "he grew bloodthirsty, gave no more rings to honour the Danes" (1719-1720a), which finally brought about his end. On the contrary, Modthryth abuses her power at the beginning and then goes through successful redemption. Another possibility is to conclude that both Modthryth and Heremod are mentioned only as examples of vicious "baddies", who can be set against "the virtuous pair" Beowulf and Hygd (Bonjour qtd. in Shippey). However, by claiming it, we would have to ignore the point of the whole *Episode*, which apparently lies in Modthryth's redemption. Irving claims that it was her husband Offa, who made her change her ways (in Osborn). A similar view proposed by Klaeber was already mentioned above. The *Episode* then should be perceived as a compliment to him. It is true that the poet focuses on praising him – "[he] was the best king, it has been said, / between the two seas or anywhere else / on the face of the earth" (1955-1957a).

A king known as Offa appears in Anglo-Saxon tradition twice. The first one was a ruler of the continental Angles in the fourth century (Offa I), the second one ruled in Mercia (Offa II, 757-796) (in Čermák 254). They are described in *Vitae Duorum Offarum* (*the Lives*

of the Two Offas) by Matthew of Paris (in Chambers 34). We are also told about their wives there. Especially Offa II's wife is strikingly similar to Modthryth in that she also perpetrated crimes. As Chambers retells her story, a beautiful but wicked maiden called Drida (another way of spelling of Thryth) "(...) was condemned to death on account of her crimes, but, from respect for her birth, was exposed instead in a boat without sails or tackle, and driven ashore on the coast of King Offa's land" (36) . She succeeded in marrying him but she did not mend her wicked ways. Finally, she was murdered by robbers and Offa built the Abbey of St. Albans as a symbol of his gratitude for her death. However, how can be Modthryth's redemption accounted for? Chamber explains, that it is probably a reflection of Offa I's wife, who was to the contrary depicted as very virtuous (37).

On the other hand, Marijane Osborn argues that Modthryth's redemption should not be viewed as Offa's credit. It was only Modthryth herself, who could realize the importance of a peace weaver. Therefore, she demonstrates the necessity of the peace-weaving figure – at the beginning, she was entangled in violence so there was no one to secure peace. Her redemption brings peace to many people and the poet praises her for it.

The last female character in the poem is a mourning woman at Beowulf's funeral. The poet describes that Beowulf's body is burnt on the pyre, which is surrounded by grieving Geats:

They were disconsolate
and wailed aloud for their lord's decease.
A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
of her worst fears, a wild litany
of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,

enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
slavery and abasement. (3148b-3155a)

Unfortunately, the original passage is badly damaged with some words completely missing. For example, the very phrase "a Geat woman" had to be added because the relevant phrase in the manuscript is not legible (in Rochester). Subsequently, the mourning woman was interpreted "as being Beowulf's wife (...), a professional lament leader, or a woman about to be burned with Beowulf as a companion in death" (Bennett qtd. in Rochester). There is at least a little clue in 3151 "with hair bound up", which implies that it is a married woman (in Čermák 273). The suggestion that it might be Queen Hygd was already mentioned above.

Even though it is not possible to determine this question, her importance lies just in the act of mourning. Since women were not able to participate in heroic actions directly, they could only influence men through their advice and praise them or lament afterwards – they actually "surround the action with their words" (Bennett qtd. in Rochester). In this respect, the mourner is related to the other female characters, especially Wealhtheow, who gives advice, and Hildeburh, who grieves over devastation.

At the end of the poem, Beowulf dies childless and leaves no one to secure peace. His lineage ends, which brings about the end of the whole Geatland because a nation without a king loses its identity (in Andrade 28). The mourner foretells chaos, death, destruction and subjugation. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, the Germans believed that women possessed special prophetic qualities. That is why men adhered to women's advice – they believed that women's ideas were inspired by gods (in Gardner 11). Even though the poet does not state explicitly what happened with the Geats, we do not doubt that the mourner's prediction is right. After Beowulf's death, the Geats are helpless. In fact, the mourner demonstrates the frailty of the earthly world after the death of the hero.

5. GRENDEL'S MOTHER

In this chapter, I would like to discuss one of the most obscure characters of the whole poem – Grendel's mother. Even though she is primarily a monster for the hero to fight, she deviates from the other two Beowulf's opponents in that she apparently incorporates both human and monstrous elements. Thus, she can be interpreted from two points of view: under the influence of the second-wave feminism of the 1970s, her monstrous aspects were interpreted as a reflection of dark feminine archetypes or as a symbol of feminine deity (in "Grendel's Mother"). As Gwendolyn Morgan points out "[a]lthough Tolkien denied Grendel's Mother any significance, indeed any mention, in his discussion, the *merewif mihtig* ["mighty mere-wife"] has become a major focus with the growth of feminist criticism". On the other hand, we may focus on her human side and compare and contrast her with the other female characters in the poem. Thus, she offers new parallels and insights.

In fact, there are many hints which link her with human beings rather than with supernatural monsters or animals. Above all, she is related to the female characters by being referred to by the same term – *ides* ("lady"). This term is always used to describe a noble woman. Dorothy Carr Porter claims that it "(...) indicates that Grendel's mother, though she is in some way cursed by God, and monstrous, is nevertheless a human".

Grendel's mother is introduced to the poem in 1258. She is denoted as *ides aglaecwif* in the next line. This phrase has raised a critical discussion since the word *aglaeca/aeglaeca* was interpreted both as "a monster" and as "a fighter, warrior or hero" (in "Grendel's Mother"). Heaney follows the first interpretation, translating the phrase as a "monstrous hell-bride". However, Sherman Kuhn argues for the latter meaning (i.e. *aglaeca/aeglaeca* = "warrior") and claims that the correct translation should be "an amazon", i.e. female warrior.

This idea was supported by Christine Alfano, who claims that "it is time to relieve Grendel's mother from her burden of monstrosity and reinstate her in her deserved position as *ides*, *aglaecwif*: 'lady, warrior-woman'" (both qtd. in "Grendel's Mother").

The fact, that she participates in violence and fighting as a "warrior woman" is very surprising and even shocking. However, unlike Grendel, who was probably attacking Heorot only because of his own wicked nature, his mother has a real motive to come – she has to avenge her son. This brings her closer to humans – all the more so if we realize that vendetta was not only acceptable but also unavoidable way of dealing with crimes in Anglo-Saxon world. It makes her action less evil because it was obligatory of her. Thus, she becomes entangled in the cycle of human violence which is constantly demonstrated in *Beowulf*. As contemporary readers, we even might feel sympathy for her because she seems to show affection for her child.

Despite being female, she is apparently even more dangerous than her son. Her attack on Heorot is surprising – we have not known of her existence before her sudden raid. After the initial shock, the poet tries to convince us that she can be easily done away with – she grabs only one man and quickly retreats: "The hall-dam was in panic, desperate to get out, / in mortal terror the moment she was found. / She had pounced and taken one of the retainers / in a tight hold, then headed for the fen" (1292-1295). However, the poet surprises us again by the fierceness of her attack on Beowulf in the mere – "So she lunged and clutched and managed to catch him / in her brutal grip" (1501-1502a). The outcome of the fight is not told until the middle of the scene – Grendel's mother draws Beowulf into the mere in 1501 and it is not until 1553 that the poet states "holy God decided the victory". To the contrary, the outcome of the fight with Grendel was revealed even before Grendel's attack on the hall. Unlike Grendel, his mother also has to be killed with a weapon – Beowulf would be lost without a magic sword.

The fact that Grendel's mother is a more powerful antagonist enables the poet to create gradation of meaning, which was noticed already by Klaeber (in *Bonjour* 33). As Adrien Bonjour points out, Beowulf has to encounter three enemies, whose power gradually rises. The fights with Grendel and his mother prepare the audience for the most difficult encounter with the dragon, which eventually ends with Beowulf's death.

Grendel's mother's involvement in violence was also discussed by Carolyn Anderson, who interprets her as a mirror image for Beowulf himself. She points out that both are referred to by the same term *gaest*, which means "guest" or "host" but also "stranger", "enemy" or "spirit". In fact, both of them come to Heorot as "guests" – however, while Beowulf is a "stranger" at first, who may or may not have hostile intentions, Grendel's mother immediately proves to be an evil "spirit" and "enemy". The fact that this single term describes them both links them together as mirror images. According to Anderson, "[t]he identity between the Grendel clan and Beowulf is the unacknowledged threat in the text".

Grendel's mother's true nature "escapes definition" (Anderson), she is both human and inhuman, female and monstrous. She has the ability to transgress boundaries, shifting between "the ever moving monster and the man" (Anderson). However, she is not so frightening because of her monstrous side, it is her likeness to human beings, which presents a greater threat. Anderson claims that if she were completely monstrous, she would be threatening only at physical level. However, her affinity to humans involves a psychological threat, as well. Thus, she comes to represent the monstrous element within each of us.

According to Anderson:

Critics have discussed Grendel's Mother as a peculiar brand of monster and have generally been uneasy with her femininity. The association between the categories of monster and woman developed, broadly speaking, into criticism of Grendel's Mother

as a hyper-masculine female, who is really an extension of Grendel, and criticism of her as a representative of the threatening archaic feminine.

Gwendolyn Morgan, who focuses on her association with feminine archetypes, suggests that "the horror of Grendel's mother stems from her most outstanding trait – motherhood itself". She is always denoted only as a "mother" – the poet never names her, which denies her identity, committing her to the role of an outcast. Grendel and his mother live outside social order and – except for the fact that they are "Cain's descents" – have no kin.

Under these circumstances, even her motherhood becomes monstrous, she comes to represent the archaic feminine deity – the Great Mother and especially her dark aspect, which Morgan calls "the Terrible Mother". Reflections of the Terrible Mother in Anglo-Saxon poetry were analysed by Audrey Meany, who concludes that "the evidence seems to show that women – especially, perhaps, if they were outstanding in any respect – were regarded as dangerous by the good men of Anglo-Saxon England, because they were suspected of possessing dark powers not so readily tapped by the masculine genius" (qtd. in Morgan). Subsequently, Morgan interprets Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother as a symbol of male maturation and his victory as a victory over the Terrible Mother, who tries to dominate men. Morgan also points out that the whole scene is underlined by the use of earth and water symbolism, which is closely linked with the Great Mother – for example, Beowulf's rising to the surface of the mere is a symbol of rebirth, whereas the subterranean hall stands for the suffocating womb. The idea that Grendel's mother reflects a mother goddess was supported also by Helen Damico, who focuses on her connection with the Valkyrie figures and further contrasts her with the human queens (in Morgan).

As for Grendel's mother's connection to the queens, she offers parallels based on both comparison or contrast. The most obvious parallel can be drawn with Wealhtheow – in contrast to her, Grendel's mother can be perceived as a "perverted queen", who rules in a

parody of the hall where "cannibalistic banqueting" takes place (Lee 203). Thus, she reverses the role of a peace-weaver because she strives for disintegration of Heorot. Unlike peace-weaving figures, she uses violence and that is why Dorothy Carr-Porter described her as a "strife-weaver". A similar view was adopted also by Gwendolyn Morgan, who points out that "Beowulf's warnings against trust in peace-bonds (...) thus acquires new significance".

The contrast between Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother is underlined by the description of the world where they live. Interestingly, both Heorot and Grendel's mother's subterranean dwelling are described with the term "hall" (in Lee 203). Grendel's mother is closely linked to her mere through such epithets as "she-wolf of the sea", "accursed creature of the depths" or "mighty mere-woman" (in Irving 58). Even though she is able to leave her mere and enter Heorot, she represents the outer world and has to retreat quickly. On the other hand, Wealhtheow is never shown to act anywhere else than in Heorot, which leads Jennifer Gardner to describe her as a "representation of Hrothgar's hall" (11). Heorot symbolizes "civilization and culture, as well as the power and majesty of the Danish kings" ("Heorot"). It is a place of feasting, music and friendship. On the contrary, the outer world is a haunted and desolate place, which stands for darkness, solitude, evil and chaos. Therefore the atmosphere of Heorot contrasts with the outside world – just as the gentle queen Wealhtheow contrasts with the fierceness of Grendel's mother. Unlike Wealhtheow, who represents light and order, Grendel's mother also fulfills the archetypal belief that female elements are connected to darkness and chaos.

On the other hand, there are also things that they have in common – both of them are concerned for the welfare of their offspring. What is more, they "draw much of their importance from the fates of their sons" (Morgan). After all, these traits link Grendel's mother to all women in the poem. For example, we can draw a parallel with Hildeburh, who loses her

son like Grendel's mother. In contrast to her, however, Hildeburh does not seek revenge and only mourns.

The passage with Grendel's mother is situated between the *Finnsburg Episode* and the scene where Wealhtheow seeks protection for her sons – interestingly, in all these passages features a heroine who has lost – or may lose – her son. Jane Chance suggests that, "the three women characters appear (...) to convey dialectically the idea that woman cannot assure peace in this world" (qtd. in Morgan). Morgan adds that the fact that Grendel's mother stands at the centre of this argument means that she is not here in contrast with the two queens "but a nightmarish culmination of their function gone awry".

Another parallel arises between Grendel's mother and the character of Modthryth – it was already noted above that Modthryth (before her redemption) also acts as a counter-example of the peace-weaving figures. Both of them accordingly behave in a more masculine way than the other women. Somewhat surprisingly, it is Grendel's mother, not Modthryth, who has a clear reason for the use of violence (or at least, Modthryth's motives are too obscure for modern readers). The biggest difference between them, however, is that Modthryth functions within society whereas Grendel's mother lives as an outcast. What is more, Modthryth is able to change herself, as opposed to Grendel's mother, who is doomed to be cursed by God forever. Thus, "[b]oth women are finally tamed, Thryth by her marriage to Offa, and Grendel's mother by the death inflicted upon her by Beowulf" (Carr Porter).

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis has argued for the importance of female characters in the Old English epic *Beowulf*. The analysis of their roles has showed that they possess a number of functions which have an impact on the heroic world of men. The queens, who function as peace weavers or passers of the cup, are not mere victims of the male-defined society – they are able to influence the decisions of their male relatives and they are actively struggling to achieve their own goals.

As for the poetic structure of *Beowulf*, the female figures are represented symmetrically, offering parallels based on both comparisons and contrasts. These parallels contribute to the better understanding of them. The *Beowulf*-poet accentuates women especially in the narrative digressions – Hildeburh functions as a means to introduce the *Finnsburg Episode*, Modthryth stands at the beginning of the reference to King Offa and similarly, Freawaru introduces the conflict between the Scyldings and the Heathobards. The female presence makes all these stories more complex and more interesting.

Also the character of Grendel's mother has brought a new insight into the discussion of female figures in *Beowulf*. Although her own nature is fluid, being both human and monstrous, I have focused on the feminine aspects of her, which link her with the human queens. Although she mainly functions as their counter example, there are even some traits that they have in common. Thus, she underlines the difficult position of women in the heroic society. What is more, she functions as a reflection of the dark aspect of the archetypal feminine deity.

Even though the *Beowulf*-poet primarily focuses on the deeds of male heroes, female figures contribute to the complexity of the poem. They have an indispensable place in the poetic structure as well as in the story itself.

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